

“Does AA’s Third Step Exclude Agnostics and Atheists?”

April 12, 2015

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The Unitarian novelist, Kurt Vonnegut Jr. who died in 2007, was honorary president of the American Humanist Association. Vonnegut once wrote that America has created three great inventions:

- The first, according to Vonnegut, is the Bill of Rights in the United States Constitution, essential to our democratic system.
- The second is Robert’s Rules of Order, which an Army officer created in the 1860s. Major Robert was a member of the First Baptist Church in New Bedford, Massachusetts. He was asked to chair a meeting of the congregation. The meeting went on for many hours, and Major Robert vowed that he would never again chair a church meeting without a rule book to guide him.
- The third great American invention, according to Kurt Vonnegut, is the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. These steps, Vonnegut felt, rank right up there with the Bill of Rights and Robert’s Rules of Order as the three greatest inventions created by our nation.

The twelve steps are rooted in a meeting that occurred between two old friends back in 1934 when Bill Wilson received a phone call from an old friend named Ebby Thacher. Thacher told Wilson that he was in New York City and he would like to stop by and visit. Wilson was elated. He had always admired Thacher, a wealthy man who was always on the lookout for adventure. Because of Thacher’s playful attitude toward life, people had not only thrown him out of bars and hotels, police had asked him not to return to certain cities.

When Wilson opened the door for Thacher, he knew something about him was different, but it took several minutes to understand what it was. Thacher was sober.

Ebby Thacher was in New York and he was cold sober. Wilson poured Thacher a drink and pushed it across the table to his friend. Thacher refused it.

“Come on, what’s this all about?” Wilson asked.

“I got religion,” Thacher said with a smile.

Thacher explained that a man named Roland had rescued him from drinking. Roland was the son of a prominent Connecticut family. He had drunk his way through a fortune and in 1930 had wound up in Zurich, a patient of Carl Jung. For over a year he worked with the great psychoanalyst and had developed an intellectual understanding of the cause of his drinking. He left Zurich believing he could live a sober life. However, in a matter of weeks he was drunk again. When he returned to Zurich to see Jung, the doctor was frank. There was nothing more that medicine or psychiatry could do. When Roland pressed Jung, the doctor stated that he knew

of only one hope. Occasionally alcoholics had shown signs of recovery through religious conversion.

After leaving Jung the second time, Roland joined a fundamentalist religious group called the Oxford Group led by a Lutheran minister. Just as Jung predicted, the religious community succeeded where psychoanalysis failed. The support of a small religious group of ex-drunks helped Roland to keep sober. With the evangelical zeal typical of a fundamentalist, Roland carried the message to Thacher and now Thacher was passing it along to Wilson. The cure for alcoholism, Thacher told Wilson, was religion.

Over the next few days, Wilson began to experiment with the ideas of his friend Thacher. Wilson started attending the meetings of the Oxford Group in downtown New York City. Prayer and preaching filled the meetings. Afterward a small group of the ex-drunks would go to Stewart's Cafeteria and talk. Wilson felt a special communion among the little group. Because they were all drunks, he knew immediately and instinctively that in the small group of four or five people he could say anything to them. Around a little rear table, over mugs of coffee and too many cigarettes, they would talk for hours. They told one another the most horrendous accounts of their drinking, after which they would laugh unashamedly. In this community they could do something that none of them could do alone— stay sober.

In 1935 Bill Wilson left the Oxford group and took a trip to Akron, Ohio. A business deal that he was working on fell through and he found himself alone in the Mayflower Hotel with ten dollars in his pocket. For a long time he paced in the lobby, walking back and forth in front of the door to the hotel's bar. As he paced, he saw a glass-enclosed sign in the lobby next to the pay telephones. It was a local church directory. He studied the names of the churches, the ministers, and the times of services. Then, choosing one minister at random, a Rev. Walter Tunks, Bill Wilson stepped into the booth and made a call. Rev. Tunks answered and Wilson began his story. He was an alcoholic from New York and to keep from drinking it was vital that he find another alcoholic with whom to talk. Tunks seemed to understand and he gave Wilson the names of ten people. I find it interesting that this minister knew the names of ten people who were alcoholics.

The first nine phone calls got nowhere. A female voice answered the tenth call. After only a few sentences, the woman interrupted to tell Wilson that she understood perfectly and gave him instructions for getting to her home. The woman, Henrietta Seiberling, was not an alcoholic. However, she introduced Wilson to Dr. Robert Smith, a prominent Akron surgeon whose drinking had gotten so out of hand that none of his patients could trust him.

When Wilson met Smith, he explained immediately that he was not there to help Smith but to help himself. Bill Wilson needed to talk to someone who could understand his situation. He told his story, playing down the spiritual side. He described the obsession that had forced him to go on drinking. He talked about the progress of the illness of alcoholism and its obvious result, insanity or death.

They talked for hours. Soon Smith opened up and was speaking as frankly, as unashamedly, as Wilson. When they parted after eleven o'clock at night, they knew something had radically

changed in them both.

It was a turning point in Wilson's life. After admitting his need to share his problems with another drunk, he had not felt the slightest desire to preach or in any way judge the other man. With a sense of freedom, he had felt the two of them growing closer, their talk becoming a mutual thing. Two drunks had found a new, loving communication.

Although it would be four more years before Alcoholics Anonymous would have an official name, Alcoholics Anonymous began that day in 1935, in Akron, Ohio.

Wilson and Smith, working together at first and then separately, visited hospitals. They tried to talk drunks into joining their small group. They broke ties from the Oxford Group and began to emphasize the value of persons openly talking about their own drinking, without judging or others judging them. The only requirement to join their group was a desire to stop drinking.

In two years the group had about 100 members, mostly in Ohio and New York. To promote the growth of the group, Bill Wilson proposed that he write a book spelling out the principles of the organization. After much discussion the others gave him the go-ahead. Wilson would write during the day and bring what he had written to the evening meeting, where he would read it aloud, discuss it and rewrite it.

Theologically the small group was divided. About one third believed in God. Another third were atheists. The final third were agnostics. The theists felt that since the movement had grown out of the Christian doctrine of the Oxford Group, they should say so in the book Wilson was writing. However, the agnostics and atheists, argued for a strong ethical emphasis with no mention of God.

One night in December of 1937, Wilson brought the draft of chapter five to the group. In the chapter he had set out what he called The Twelve Steps. He had tried to break down the program into its components. The first three steps described the central core of Alcoholics Anonymous philosophy.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God.

The theists were delighted. They liked the steps exactly as written. On the other hand, the higher-power language greatly upset the atheists and agnostics. They felt that it was all right for Wilson to talk a little about spirituality, but this was going too far. They argued that all the God talk would only scare drunks away.

The debate went on for weeks. Finally, the theists, the atheists, and the agnostics arrived at a two-part agreement.

First they agreed that they should always label their steps as a “*Suggested Program of Recovery.*” None of the steps was to be a requirement for membership. Today there is still only one requirement for membership in AA, the desire to stop drinking.

Second, they agreed that **wherever** they used the word “God” in the steps, they would follow it by the phrase “as we understand Him.” The atheists and the agnostics hoped that this would open the door wide enough so that all drunks could pass through, even if they did not believe in God. The theists hoped that this would encourage persons to come to terms with what they understood God to be. With this compromise they approved the steps. Today there are about 400 AA meetings held in the Sarasota area each week. Tens of thousands of meetings are held across the world.

Over the thirty-seven years of my ministry, when appropriate, I have encouraged individuals in the churches I serve to attend twelve-step programs. However, the same problem that Bill Wilson struggled with years ago is still a problem today. The references to God are still a turn-off to some people, including some Unitarian Universalists.

One member of the first church I served told me:

The A.A. group does not have anything to offer us. It is just a bunch of drunks who have gotten religion. Unitarians have moved beyond all this stuff about turning ourselves over to a higher power. That fundamentalist dogma may work for uneducated people, but Unitarians are way beyond A.A. when it comes to understanding religion.

Others agree with this position. **Persons** who want to stop drinking but who do not like the theology they find in AA have established other groups as alternatives. One example is **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** or SOS which was established in the Los Angeles area in the 1980s to offer a nonreligious approach to recovering alcoholics. Their Suggested Guidelines for Sobriety emphasize rational decision-making and are not religious or spiritual in nature. SOS members may also attend AA meetings, but SOS does not view spirituality or surrender to a Higher Power as being necessary to maintain abstinence. It has over a thousand meetings across the United States. They have two meetings each week here in Sarasota.

Some who are active in AA will argue that groups like **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** are not effective in helping most people deal with alcoholism. Some are convinced that belief in God, a belief in a higher power is essential for recovery from addiction.

“In order for me to choose not to drink,” said one member of AA, “I must believe that a meaning, a purpose to life exists, beyond simply seeking short-term pleasure and avoiding short-term pain. My belief in God gives me that meaning, it gives me that sense of purpose. Because I believe in God, I have a reason to stay sober. If I did not believe in God, I would find it much harder to resist my desire for short-term pleasure.”

Another member of AA said, “Some people say that they don’t need a belief in a higher power to stay sober. They say it is the support that they receive from the group and the desire not to let down the others in the group that keeps them from drinking. However, I need to believe in God,

because the people in the meetings can have slips, they can disappoint me. It is my belief in a higher power that helps me stay sober during the hard times when my friends are not there for me.”

What is my own view? On the one hand, I believe that in trying to deal with a major stress in our lives—a stress such as stopping drinking—it helps most of us to be part of a community that shares a faith in a power higher than ourselves. My experience suggests that if people believe in a higher power, overcoming an addiction is often easier. We do not need to call this higher power God. We can call it “the creative force” or the “larger context” or the “relational web” or the “living, throbbing universe” or “The spirit of life.” The name does not matter. Whatever we call it, based on my unscientific experience a faith in a higher power helps most people to cope with a major stress in our life, a stress like stopping drinking.

On the other hand, I know committed atheists who have stopped drinking and stayed sober for many years. Based on my unscientific experience, I do not believe that a belief in God is always an essential element in overcoming an addiction. In the words of a Unitarian Universalist member of AA, the core element of the third step is this. “The only thing you have to know about God is that you are not God.”

I wish alternatives groups like Secular Organizations Sobriety had existed all over the United States in the 1970s. Back then I was in my first church. I was trying to work with the people in my congregation who were killing themselves drinking excessive amounts of alcoholic beverages. As atheist Unitarian Universalists, they resisted going to AA. Alternative groups like **Secular Organizations for Sobriety** might have helped some people in my first congregation.

I think of the man who told me that “AA was a group of drunks who got religion.” He died four years later, at the age of forty-two of alcohol abuse. I think of the couple who regularly smoked marijuana. They resisted my suggestion that they might want to look into a twelve-step program. Too much fundamentalist religion they told me. Their teenage son died in an auto accident while high on drugs.

Alcoholic Anonymous or Secular Organizations for Sobriety. Two approaches to dealing with the temptations of drug and alcohol abuse. If you need help in this important area, I encourage you to try what feels right and, if it works, stick with it.

If you do not have a problem with alcohol, I encourage you to enjoy yourself in moderation. At the same time I encourage you to remember that for some people drinking alcohol would be like drinking poison. They need our support.

The honorary president of the American Humanist Association, Kurt Vonnegut, was raised in Indianapolis where his parents took him to the Unitarian Church. During the economic depression of the 1930s his mother become addicted to alcohol and prescription drugs. Seeing his mother’s suffering led Vonnegut to his positive view of Alcoholic Anonymous. Near the end of his life he wrote, “What has been America's most nurturing contribution to the culture of this planet so far? Many would say Jazz. I, who love jazz, will say this instead: Alcoholics Anonymous.”

Vonnegut went on to say “I am not an alcoholic. If I was, I would go before the nearest A.A. meeting and say, ‘My name is Kurt Vonnegut. I am an alcoholic.’ God willing, that might be my first step down the long, hard road back to sobriety.”

America's most nurturing contribution to the culture of this planet so far – Alcoholics Anonymous.

Source *Bill W.: A Biography of Alcoholics Anonymous Cofounder Bill Wilson* by Francis Hartigan