



Rebellion Dogs Blog: New Ideas

Good for the individual, good for our society. Why ideas are hard to adopt and harder to sell?

October 2020: *In this blog, First, a shout-out to the AA silent majority - the 90% of middle-of-the-road AAs, unheard and overwhelmed by all the commotion from the impassioned edges, unabashed AA atheists and Big Book purists. We ignore you again today, but we're thinking of you :-); James Clear and Johnathan Haidt on Why Facts Don't Change Minds; Living Sober; The General Service Conference agenda for 2021; AA tribes; AA history' AA's future*



Rebellion Dogs has a voice. I feel heard. Philosophers muse over falling trees: do they only make a sound if the sound vibrations are received? The idea is that messages are not yet messages upon transmission. Messages become real if and when they are absorbed (received) by another, seeing or hearing the message.

It gets more complicated if the message from the voice is heard twice or more. Multiple receivers color the signal. While the message meant one thing leaving the voice, the message is interpreted uniquely by every individual receiver. And some law out there – Yin and Yang or the law of unintended consequences or some other “law” – dictated that if the message comforts one, the same message will disturb another. Can we empower the underdog without threatening the top dog?

That sounds like breaking even if, for everyone who is empowered by a message, one other perceives a personal loss. It gets more complicated when you aim to empower disenfranchised minorities of a society. A society (like AA or the larger recovery community) includes a majority and a minority creed-following constituency. So, if you empower one minority member, how many majority members hear the message, feel

disturbed or threatened by a message intended only to empower another? We see a delicate peace between 12-step recovery's under-served freethinkers and "our more religious" majority. Today, I'm not talking to, or about, zealotry. We can work with ignorance; combatting bigotry requires a bigger stick. Previously, we've blogged about secularphobic vitriol in the guise of AA stewardship.

Empowering ideas, in a pluralist society, are additive only; inclusivity is the right rebalance – not a zero-sum game. Sports are zero-sum games. The gain of one competitor is always at the expense of an adversary. If 12-Step communities were a zero-sum game, the empowering of the marginalized is subtracted from or taken away from the majority, or vice versa. AA's "always inclusive, never exclusive" mantra is additive only – one's gain is not at the cost of another. That's the idea behind AA's Traditions, anyway.

And also: we cannot transcend human instincts. Every time, legitimacy is proposed to marginalized members of our society, we – the majority – have reacted with fear and hostility. AA history reveals discrimination towards our first women, African American, LGBTQ and teenage members. Naturally, the same friction is experienced by AA's non-theistic minority in a society with a theistic bias. Previously we've blogged and podcasted that AA is rife with unconscious bias and systemic discrimination, more so than overt contempt. See previous blogs/[podcasts](#) for time-consuming detailsⁱ.

Rejecting a supernatural explanation of recovery and relying on a rational AA practice can and will create distress among some – not all – faith-based AAs. Natural and supernatural expressions of AA isn't a zero-sum game but our nature is to sometimes get triggered by the assertions of the other.

Early AA was expressed by Bill W, as a binary dilemma: "we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn't. What was our choice to be?"ⁱⁱ

Was the either/or proposition rhetorical? Because when we chose "Oh, that's an easy one, God is nothing. Superstitions like theism – irrational and unhelpful to me – are unhealthy and unnecessary," then we are often coached to be more open-minded. How can openness to divergent views be a one-way street in a pluralist society? Such an assumption, hides that theistic bias in plain view. It is why AA is called by critics, "A religion in denial." A refusal to confront our own bias is insincere and irrational.

The genesis of Rebellion Dogs was to unabashedly empower that natural choice – a godless AA recovery – as a rights-bearing equal choice in AA. Period. There is nothing that the theistic majority of AA is being asked to forfeit. Just share the space and let us all practice the unity and tolerance that is AA, to the best of our ability. If you, who hold a supernatural view, feel freethinkers are trying to marginalize you, some would go for

that, but reversing the tyranny is not the intention of most secular AAs. We encourage the same unabashed expression of skepticism as you unabashedly encourage faith in your daily meeting refrain, “God could and would if He were sought.” For us, it’s plain to see that “God could and would if He/She/It/They existed. And, having no experience or understanding of gods, our sobriety – our life – had to depend on more tangible supports. The legitimization of an atheist view to AA is not a war on faith. Breathing room for us is not going to limit the oxygen supply of the faithful.

The majority of AA members are not homophobic; yet our early literature is heteronormative. I have never heard anyone suggest that women are second-class citizens in AA; but our reified literature is bound by the sexist era from whence it came. Does anyone think that AAs in our teens and twenties are “scarcely more than potential alcoholics?” No, everyone with any empathy can see that we have real alcoholics in our midst who are younger than the legal drinking age. After all, people die of alcohol and other drug disorders before they reach the age of majority. Our newer literature isn’t sacred and no one guards are pamphlets from evolution. Hence, AA enjoys a defensible record, in how we make room for youth, LGBTQ+ humanists, visible minorities and non-male members. Minorities hear the message spoken by AA peers in their language. Nothing is taken away from the majority of AA. Secular AA literature is additive – not subtractive. Nontheistic AA is no more *watered down* than when we describe alcoholics as she/her/they. It doesn’t confuse or diminish the message.

This spirit of inclusion is assumed and obvious to the majority of AA. Our General Service gets dozens (not millions) of concerned calls and emails, weekly. Most correspondence GSO deals with is from the margins:

- “AA will wither and die if we don’t discontinue the *Big Book*,” or
- “AA will wither and die if we don’t discontinue all literature, except the *Big Book*.”

From both sides, we hear warnings about the other side causing the destruction of AA from within.

Recently we Rebellion Dogs spoke up about the value of *Living Sober’s* rational approach to sobriety in AA. We celebrated *One Big Tent* (Grapevine) and *The “God” Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA* as further legitimizing secular AA as recovery without an asterisk. You’ve never heard me suggest that AA heathen’s worldview is superior to dependence on the mercy of gods of AA members. Still, when we celebrate efforts to liberate nonbelievers, fearful and hostile anti-atheist/agnostic AA reactivity, our voice calls intolerance out of its closet. When Rebellion Dogs suggests, “If AA does not adapt, we run the risk of being marginalized by the larger, pluralistic society outside our meeting doors, that dismisses 12-Step approaches as old-fashioned and redundant,” you’d think we said, “God as you understand Him must be stricken

from the AA canon.” The predictable refrain starts once again: “Those agnostics are trying to destroy AA from within; AA wasn’t meant to be for everyone, you know!” The percent of atheists that want to ban praying or burn *Big Books* is small. Our interest is about providing enough for a growing appetite for secular AA; you don’t hear me advocating for creating less for faith-based AA.

It’s true, some members would like to see *Alcoholics Anonymous* re-written in a modern vernacular. Some AAs feel less praying would make AA attractive and more helpful to a larger percentage of those who suffer from alcohol use disorder (and other addictions). This progressive constituency is not strictly AA atheists; plenty of believers in a sobriety-granting, prayer answering higher power would vote “Yes,” for an updated *Big Book*.



We think every group’s rights are inalienable. The purpose, the membership requirement, it’s the same everywhere in AA. Freethinkers want more secular groups and more articulate literature that represents our broad AA community. We don’t want less for others. Back to Basics, Primary Purpose groups, keep doing what you do for the people you do it for; celebrate your *Big Book*, thump away. If you want a sponsor who has a sponsor to take you through the Twelve Steps the way their sponsor took them through,

precisely as outlined in the first 164 pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, go for it. If “no human power can relieve your alcoholism,” pray away. None of that should contradict or interfere with more meetings and literature for those of us who, unlike you, do not get what you get from the 1939 version of AA. We find our lifeline comes from one alcoholic talking to another in today’s language more helpful than reified language.

“*Live and Let Live*” and “*Easy Does It*.” Now, there’s some *Big Book* talk from page 135 and it’s important because it is in italics, right? In our own words, “Peace out!”

While we are on a book-quoting roll, let’s look at something from Chapter 27 of AA’s conference-approved booklet, *Living Sober*:

“We still don’t think it is very smart to keep trying to see in the dark if you can simply switch on a lamp and use its light. We didn’t get sober entirely on our

own. That isn't the way we learned to stay sober. And the full enjoyment of living sober isn't a one-person job, either.

When we could look, even temporarily, at just a few new ideas different from our old ones, we had already begun to make a sturdy start toward a happy, healthier new life. It happened just that way to thousands and thousands of us who deeply believed it never could."ⁱⁱⁱ

Being critical of ideas, even my own, and embracing change, has been essential to my AA wellness. Looking at new ideas or ways of seeing how (I think) things are, is a healthy, regular exercise for me. In early sobriety, I wrestled with the seemingly true idea that dope and booze were my truest friend, that sobriety was a provisional existence. I see-sawed between incongruent feelings about recovery. I was too cool for sobriety ... and I was undeserving of a wholesome life.

Addiction resists help. Call addiction a disease, or behavioral disorder, or whatever label rings true for you; but this characteristic of how we protect our self-destructive addiction from the threat of recovery is a bad idea and it was killing me. It was easier to resign myself to an inevitable, tragic addict's death than to envision a sober life of meaning and community. Only the community of fellow sufferers inspired this new idea that recovery was possible. Someone else – AA members – turned a light on to help me see.

At the time of writing I see I just passed the 16,000 days sober mark. Time for an oil change, maybe. And coming up on 45 years after I got clean and sober, I still have to let go of old ideas about what addiction is, what recovery is, or how life should go for me. Shifting my position, beliefs and habits in my recovery does not make me wrong about my older viewpoint. Sometimes my thinking and beliefs were right for the times. Some of these ideas/beliefs are like old skin that must be shed in order for me to flourish. Other beliefs and ideas that I let go of, I will return to.

My relationships with sponsorship, meetings, the 12-steps are all relationships in flux. I am dependent on these tools for a time; then, I am indifferent to them. One state is not superior or more mature than the other. Seasons of sobriety change and they also cycle back. Ideas I deemed no longer helpful or immature at one time, I have sometimes come to embrace them again at a future date. A winter coat is essential at one time of the year and taking up space in my closet a few months later. I don't throw out the coat during the sweltering heat and humidity of summer. What is obvious about seasonal clothes is not so obvious to me regarding different (seasonal) ways of seeing or navigating my world.

We can see by literature sales, you may not be a fan of *Living Sober*, I'm sure you're getting along fine without it. But why be against it? Are you so sure the passage and the collective wisdom it expresses is antithetical to what the *Big Book* suggests?

Why can't another way of explaining addiction and recovery be additive without threatening or "watering down" the AA's message? I never read *Alcoholics Anonymous* until I was over ten years sober. It wasn't unusual to have a Big Book-free sobriety in the 1970s where I got sober. Today, I hear people who swear by it – not my experience but no problem. I hear people who despise the *Big Book* – also no problem. Someone having access to *Living Sober* without burning all the *Big Books* first... that's an example of additive, not subtractive AA.

Living Sober drew upon "thousands and thousands of us." Not to knock our first attempt at a book *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which draws from the less tested experiences of the few, expressed in the writing of the one. We have learned more than we once knew about addiction and recovery. This newfound know-how, in no way, discounts the wisdom of the ages – the newer book is additive, not a competitor of early AA findings. We also know more about how the early ideas came to be recorded which, again, adds to – not threatens our narrative about early AA. The *Big Book*, and the promises within, was inspiring speculation about what the future could be:

"I know I must get along without liquor, but how can I? Have you a sufficient substitute?"

Yes, there is a substitute and it is vastly more than that. It is a fellowship in Alcoholics Anonymous. There you will find release from care, boredom and worry. Your imagination will be fired. Life will mean something at last. The most satisfactory years of your existence lie ahead. Thus we find the fellowship, and so will you."^{iv}

If two fledgling groups can be called a "fellowship," then that's what AA was, when this claim was expressed. But, two people wouldn't be a baseball team; could just a couple of meetings be called a fellowship? This idea of recovery and fellowship was not Bill's account of the reality at the time so much as his vision for a hopeful future.

Today, AA – the fellowship – is a household name in much of the Western world. As of January 1, 2020 we were 125,000+ separate AA groups that spans 180 countries. At the time the book was written, you could live in the only two places AA was--Akron or New York City – and you probably still would not know where to find AA or what it was. This 1930s bold assurance of a fellowship that would bestow the restless, irritable, and discontent alcoholic with "release from care, boredom and worry," was a figment of one author's vivid imagination. Great importance was put on this *fellowship* and its healing powers.

One reason for the credit given to fellowship was that the Twelve Steps were nonexistent when the quote above was written. This passage about fellowship's role in recovery is, if you read the book chronologically, from what we now call Chapter 11, "A Vision for You." Author Bill W, would later write and inserted what is now, Chapter 5 and 6, "How It Works," and "Into Action." From [Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA](#), it's December 1938, weeks before the book has to go to the editor. The stories are done, the "before" and "after" pictures are described, yet there's no *how* or *why* AA works.



"Wilson could not hold off any longer. He had to write something that described in precise detail 'how [the] program of recovery from alcoholism really worked.' Eight expositional chapters had already been drafted and edited providing more than 'enough background and window-dressing' for the book. Finally, he was going to have to put down in black and white and in simple declarative sentences, 'a definite statement of concrete principles,' telling the new man exactly what he had to do to get sober and then stay that way. It was the seemingly insoluble problem that he had been dodging for far too long, one that he later admitted 'had secretly worried the life out of me, for some time (p. 440)'^v

This is why none of the 28 *Big Book* stories of alcoholics finding sobriety, published in the first printing of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, mention or describe "the steps." The stories of AA recovery were also written before Steps had been created by Bill W. The first edition also didn't have any six-step program that AA folklore refers to as the precursor of the Twelve Steps. This six-step story first got legs 15 or 20 years after the first *Big Book* was published. I was told the story of how, pre-12 Steps, our members worked/shared a six-step approach, a skeleton of what would become our Twelve Steps; I've re-told this story and maybe you have too. It's in our account of early AA written in 1955 – 20 years after the fact. The document-informed research reported in *Writing the Big Book* does not support this myth. That doesn't make you, or me, or our founders liars.

But we now have a more accurate account of A) what actually happened and B) what the motivation of the members was in early AA. This more accurate account comes from research done from AA archives.

"Bill Wilson was no great respecter of the actual facts when it came to A.A. history. When he wrote or talked, his purpose was not to deliver a precisely accurate accounting of what had actually happened. And whenever inconvenient or messy details were encountered, Bill would modify them (sometimes

significantly) and then streamline the whole story for the dramatic impact he felt was necessary to underline the specific moral or inspirational message he was trying to deliver to his audience.”^{vi}

Written forty years after AA started, *Living Sober* is generations of experience – the collective wisdom that comes from decades of trial and error. Our wisdom, critically tested earlier theories and, with the advantage of experience, reports that ideas are not to be greedily held and codified. They are to be enjoyed, examined, and replaced. This is what we have found forges “a happy, healthier new life.”

And really, isn't it describing the same principles Bill describes about the healing power of fellowship? “a fellowship in Alcoholics Anonymous. There you will find release from care, boredom and worry. Your imagination will be fired. Life will mean something at last.” Is this a watering down or a reinforcement from 40 more years of AA experience, expressed in the *Living Sober* passage above: “We didn't get sober entirely on our own. That isn't the way we learned to stay sober. And the full enjoyment of living sober isn't a one-person job, either.

When we could look, even temporarily, at just a few new ideas different from our old ones, we had already begun to make a sturdy start toward a happy, healthier new life?” There's a case to be made that one doesn't threaten the other.

So, let's go back to a thesis of the *Living Sober* quote above: if we can look at new ideas, different from our most comfortable ideas, this leads to being happier. Maybe it can lead to being a more effective agent of change, too. Let's look at some new ideas about these views we've expressed above. If they are so easy for me to embrace these opinions as truths, why do these view (truths) threaten anyone? That's an important question and knowing the answer could make life easier.

Why proving that you are right is not very persuasive...

So, I've shared how the challenge of letting go of old ideas was and continues to be rewarding for me... challenging as change can be. Now what's my role in persuading others to test new ideas. Honestly, it could be none of my business. Be an example, not an agitator. But because to-persuade-is-to-be-human, let's explore this long and winding road, too. James Clear wrote *Atomic Habits: An Easy & Proven Way to Build Good Habits & Break Bad Ones*. In a blog, *Why Facts Don't Change Our Minds*, Clear reveals:

“Convincing someone to change their mind is really the process of convincing them to change their tribe. If they abandon their beliefs, they run the risk of losing social ties. You can't expect someone to change their mind if you take away their community too. You have to give them somewhere to go. Nobody wants their worldview torn apart if loneliness is the outcome.

The way to change people's minds is to become friends with them, to integrate them into your tribe, to bring them into your circle. Now, they can change their beliefs without the risk of being abandoned socially."^{vii}

I would add that we can model the receptiveness that we hope to influence. Why don't we join *their* circle? Why don't we reframe our idea of tribal differences – supernatural worldview vs. natural worldview. While Bill W did write the polarizing gods are or they are not line in (what we might call now) his early sobriety, he also at 30 years sober described all AAs as a fellowship of common suffering. So beliefs were not an insider/outsider issue as he went on to devise the Traditions, Concepts of World Service, Warrantees, and his expanded personal experience of AA diversity.

We all are influenced by the narcissism of small differences.^{viii} Most of us in our recovery community agree about our broader goals and care about the same sufferers and while we agree on 99%, we create a crisis over the 1%. How many process addiction or substance use disorder fellowships are there? So much in common; so much room for individuality, too.

Some of us are more open to new experiences than others – one of the big-5 personality traits: OCEAN:

1. Openness to experiences: routine/practical vs. spontaneity/imaginative,
2. Conscientiousness: discipline vs. impulse
3. Extroversion: sociable vs. reserved
4. Agreeableness: trusting vs. critical
5. Neuroticism: anxious/pessimistic vs. easy-going/confident

We can all change if we want to and none of us are zero or one-hundred in either of these scales (tests) but you can see how members of a group can easily cluster into infinite subgroups to find like-minded fellows. And as far as relatability to perceived "others," how we rank on this five-point scale, we see how we are more suited to the agitator or the ambassador role. Every healthy society needs both. But if we can do both, we can be more effective in our objectives.

A newer measure, a five-point measure of our morality, has been recently used and associated with predicting feeling on a political scale from progressives to fundamentalists. But I expect it speaks to our visceral connection to our feelings about our worldview vs. alternative worldviews or beliefs, too. These five (or more) moral foundations determine how quickly and deeply we stand our ground or perceive others with disgust. We have talked about the ideas before from Johnathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion*. The five factors here are:

1. Harm vs. Care
2. Reciprocity vs. Fairness
3. Ingroup/loyalty
4. Authority: respect or subversion
5. Purity/sanctity: how inclined we are to be disgusted over other's ways

In Munich, Haidt told an audience that from 27 years of studying morality as a social psychologist, he agrees that facts don't change minds – minds are more emotional than logical. Haidt finds stories not facts more compelling.

"The fact remains that for any policy dispute, for any debate within our society, you can find some experts that back you up. And the reason is, because in any society, on the left and the right, people have different visions... To understand those visions, you have to understand the stories that people are telling...

Human reasoning does not happen in a logical world, based on facts; it takes place in an emotional world, based on stories. And we don't even write these stories; we imbibe them, we drink them in as we grow up. We might not even be able to tell them ourselves; but when we see something, we hear something that fits with our stories, we get a feeling of familiarity. That tags it as 'true.' ... What we believe drives what we perceive.... We all have post-cognitive justification."^{ix}



[More about YourMorals.org](http://YourMorals.org) Why does a good salesperson or a good therapist never win an argument? Because they never get into one. Training and practice will prepare them for clients/patients that are emotionally – not logically – attached to their positions so they know better than to argue someone out of a position with the facts when they came to the position, emotionally.

People don't need to be told; we need to feel heard.

Some – salespeople and therapists for example – accommodate other’s need to feel heard. To persuade, they feed back the stories the other is telling; they mirror and ask for elaboration. This can flush out the flaws in a narrative that the teller now sees. It helps the subject start considering a new or more effective narrative. The best peer-support fellows have this same skill, not a knowledge skill, an empathic/emotional skill. One might ask the subject if it’s okay to relate their own personal story. The experience of the characters in the story are vehicles to emotionally resonate with the subject.

This differs from fighting the subject with attack-facts. Of course, to be effective, one has to be empathic, not domineering and the goal has to connect – not to one-up the other.

Have you ever heard, “Do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?” If my goal is to persuade another that they are wrong and I am right, conflict and hostility are the logical outcome. If I want communication and harmony, another stimulus is needed.

So what’s my goal? Is it the quick adrenaline hit of feeling better than another or am I aiming for “attraction rather than promotion”?

People who connect with me are more easily influenced – of course we are both influenced by each other. Agreement, peace, this is conducive to happiness as well as progress to policy or societal issues.

These are things we know already. Can I train myself to not giving in to my urge to retaliate at oppositional views? Can I, instead, step back and think about what is the most effective way to communicate? People don’t care how much we know until they know how much we care, right? We know that helping others is healing for both of us. We know the importance of storytelling from our mutual aid groups. Engagement in peer to peer groups for substance use disorder have better outcome rates than those who go it alone. Evidence reveals that exposure to this story-telling environment is one component that aids efficacy in overcoming substance use disorder. We are still debating the “why it works” but exposure to stories being told – AA, Women For Sobriety, NA, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous, Life Ring, SMART Recovery – improves outcome rates compared to other therapeutic interventions. The most recent Cochrane study of over 10,000 patients, including randomized controlled trials finds that even compared to less accessible (more expensive, regionally restricted, waiting lists) modalities like Cognitive Behavioral Therapy and Motivational Enhancement Therapy, people in 12-Step meetings (etc.) had better outcome rates at less cost.^x

It’s a moot point to argue what *the* message is; a group’s primary purpose is to carry *its* message. Scientific study of mutual aid groups (mostly AA) reveals that what matters more to the person we’re sharing *the* message with, is when they have a chance to share *their* story and the opportunity to be heard and consequently, to see their contribution

helping others. Telling the story offers relief. The identification and appreciation from others further helps us heal.

So this is all to say that I am thinking about new ideas in how I communicate. Making a point has some good effect, while triggering some resistance. A new idea would be, “one person talking isn’t a conversation.”

I don’t have an answer about how to express less and communicate more. Blogging or podcasting can be a conversation starter. This forum can report or express. Does it readily evoke what others need to say/add/express? I have to think about that. In the last blog, I reported that last year the General Service literature desk were asked by members to explore if discontinuing *Living Sober* and *The “God” Word: Agnostics & Atheists in AA* would better help the newcomer. So this anti-secular voice is loud and unabashed. Does Rebellion Dogs “reach across the aisle,” inviting this voice to share their side of our story or are we ridiculing the *Big-Book* fundamentalists back into their echo-chambers where they feel safe? Even that label I used sounds hostile... how about *Big Book* purists? Yeah, maybe that is better than “fundamentalist.”

It’s a whole other story, the paradox of tolerating intolerance but you can be against intolerance and still make it worse, so we don’t want to do that. Before I spin myself into the ground, I will leave it at that and invite your input. Help us out, here. All feedback is sincerely welcomed.

A word about our book, *Living Sober* and it’s role in AA’s future...

Rebellion Dogs has talked about *Living Sober* recently; it’s on the lips of many AAs, right now. It seems our ideas about this books place in our canon of knowledge around the globe varies from:

- A. wise and practical collective wisdom, to...
- B. watered down AA that distracts from the sacred “one true” AA message of the *Big Book*.

This book was the dawn of the second generation of AA, our post-founder era. Bill W died in 1971. Arguably, there were pre-book old-timers still very much alive upon Bill’s death. No offense to Jim B, Clarence S and others. While we’re in a post Bob and Bill AA, there were still stewards of early AA here to witness when, in 1973, *Living Sober* joined our conference – approved literature collection. But as Bill Schaberg’s *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA* verifies “the” founder or the founder with legitimate supremacy, Bill W, as documentary research supports, was gone once *Living Sober* came to print. It may have been in consideration for many years – it could have been Bill W’s idea; I do not know. But what is known is Bill is the sole architect responsible for our

Steps, Traditions, Concepts, he is the lone visionary of Alcoholics Anonymous, while others contributed to the pioneering workload.

As a tribute to these other pioneers, Bob K writes about, among others, Jim B the atheist that widened AA's gateway and also Clarence's influence on breaking away from the Oxford Group, "The Catholics had problems generally with participation in these Protestant services..." AAagnostica^{xi}

Barry L wrote *Living Sober* as one of AA's fulltime employees at the time. Barry wrote many of the conference reports, compiled and edited the stories of our 1976 pamphlet, *Do You Think You're Different?* Barry isn't credited in the book's title page. Barry L asked AA World Services to recognize his authorship by way of royalties as we had paid Bill W (and Bob S while he was living). AAWS didn't agree and the issue was pressed and litigated – all part of General Service Office archives. The courts ruled in favor of AA, dismissing Barry's claim, and finding that he – as a paid employee – wrote for AAWS and held no legal claim to authorship or the royalties that such a title would afford. This disagreement did not spoil Barry's otherwise loyal relationship to AA; he remained a spokesperson of AA and a confidant to widow Lois W until his death which occurred shortly after his 1985 AA's 50th Anniversary talk at the Montreal convention. Lois also spoke at the same conference and it wouldn't have been unusual for the two to be travelling together.

So the dawn of a new era for AA began and this *Living Sober* booklet's original look tells you a lot. It's artwork, color-scheme and font screams early-1970s. I was around at the time. The yellow and brown book cover depict how earth tones were all the rage for that era of Americana. Man landed on the freakin' moon in 1969 and we were all giddy with the infinite possibilities that lay ahead. *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) was a cinematic and dystopian science fiction warning about Artificial Intelligence; HAL 9000, the epitome of human engineering according to the story, reveals itself to be the sociopathic antagonist, as the story unfolds. In 1970 we all expected that, by today, we would have been travelling to Jupiter since 2001 and internal combustion engines and climate change would be barbaric relics of our past. HAL the imagined AI of the '60s, is now Alexa, Siri, and other HAL-like AI inside our phone's and guiding our web-surfing.

A booklet – not a book, not a pamphlet – spoke to hybrid approaches to carrying the AA message. *Living Sober* remains a living document, subject to changes with the times. In 1983, for instance, changes were prepared and agreed upon to Chapter 21: "Avoiding dangerous drugs and medications." Again in 1998, "The following sections from the pamphlet *The A.A. Member – Medications and Other Drugs* be added as an appendix to the booklet *Living Sober* ant it's next printing: the lead-in and 8 points on page 5& 6 in

the section entitled 'A report from a group of physicians in A.A.', Page 12, entitled, 'However, some alcoholics require medication...'"

Again in 2012 "outdated language and practices" were revised, in 2016 under "Reading the A.A. Message," that *The AA Service Manual/Twelve Concepts of World Service* be added, 2018 saw substantial change to the timely and topical, "Note to Medical Professionals," speaking to changing attitudes about AA members *playing doctor* and giving advice. The lengthy addition included:

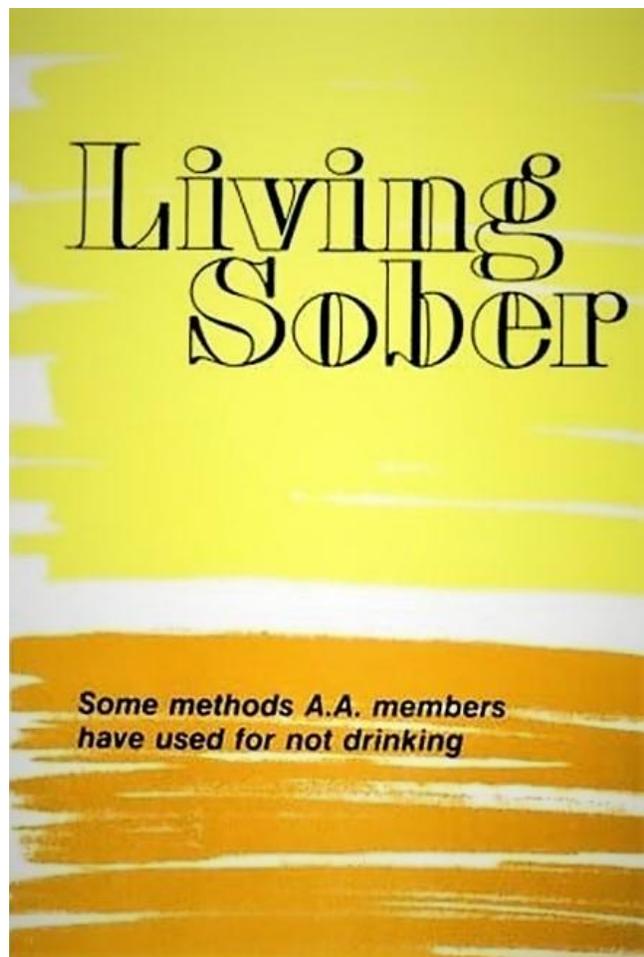
"Unfortunately, by following a layperson's advice, the sufferers find that their conditions can return with all their previous intensity. On top of that they feel guilty because they are convinced that 'AA is against pills.'

It becomes clear that just that it is wrong to enable or support any alcoholic to become readdicted to any drug, it's equally wrong to deprive any alcoholic of medications which can alleviate or control other disabling physical and/or emotional problems."

The original yellow and brown look was replaced by more traditional AA-blue with yellow lettering. At that time, the subtitle, *Some methods A.A. members have used for not drinking* was removed.

The 2020, 70th General Service Conference report notes that audiobooks of *Living Sober*, in three languages and "draft language regarding safety and A.A." be added.

In keeping with these transformational goings-on, the subtitle, once removed, is being revisited this year. GSO is talking about it in this conference cycle. Ask your delegate or General Service Rep for information or if you have an idea what the sub-title should be. What would you want us to tell newcomers to catch their eye, if this is something that might be up their alley. For instance, maybe they want the AA staying sober stuff without the praying for guidance



to an intervening higher power side of popular AA. Or maybe they like our recovery language to be more contemporary than 1939 literature affords.

So we ask you what should it be?

- Practical approaches to recovery being practiced by AA's today
- Common sense strategies to everyday challenges to getting and staying sober

Decades of tried and true practical methods to achieving long-term sobriety are found in this book that's been proven helpful to members alone and struggling or to groups looking for meeting starter ideas to spur conversation between members about AA recovery.

Is the old subtitle too long-in-the-tooth to go back to? How about:

- AA's secular way to long-term sobriety

Would "secular" be a provocative term? Thumpers? Belligerent atheists? And hey, all of you non-extreme moderates; do you even read this stuff? What do you think?

My definition of secular is "neither religious nor irreligious."

Doesn't that describe the *Living Sober* tone and language? If *Living Sober* is a book you like and/or means something to you, have your voice heard on these changes. Attend your Area Assembly or talk or write with the trustees' Literature Committee directly. I am sure the stewards of our literature would appreciate your input.

Let me share something I have written to the trustees' literature committee about:

"From aa.org you can read the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, cover to cover from the PDF book for free. You can read *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, all of it, at no cost. Why not offer the same free access to *Living Sober* to the sober-curious or new-to-AA visitor?"

I know the argument against it: "There is only one AA message it is found in the *Big Book*." Some of you are petitioning to get rid of the *Twelve & Twelve*, too – also, a watered-down confusion to the newcomer, right? I think I follow how zealously you feel about this. But I am curious, if you took the same, reading aloud, highlighters in hand approach to *Living Sober* as you do the *Big Book*, what do you think you'd find?

Could you show me how the message in *Living Sober* is undoing or counterintuitive to the experience of the *Big Book*?

What makes you sure it is a different message, based on different principles of AA?

Just because it does not speak to you, can you wrap your heart and mind around the idea that it speaks to me?

Books weren't really a turning point in my getting sober – talking to other AA members was the key to my indoctrination into AA life. However, when I read *Living Sober* it describes my AA sobriety more accurately than the primacy of the Twelve Steps idea. Doing the Steps was more a “check all the boxes” exercise than a path to sobriety. I was already sober when I worked the Steps (which I've done more than once). I did need some self-reflection, new practices and habits, bonding with other sober alcoholics – The Steps gave me all that. But I don't call that a “spiritual awakening.” The results were more practical for me. My natural – not supernatural – AA experience is awesome enough. I don't feel anything is missing in my life or sobriety.

We only have one book with a clear, contemporary message in a secular language. I have heard testimony from others who feel *Living Sober* was a game changer when they were one foot in – one foot out of AA. *Living Sober* assured them that all the supernatural stuff wasn't something pragmatists had to adopt or fake.

This booklet is a great resource for putting on our zoom meeting for atheist/agnostics. Should more of us ask our GSRs and/or delegates to direct GSO to offer online free access to *Living Sober* so that secular AA's get the same access to useful AA material as “our more religious members” enjoy from the *Big Book* and *12&12*?

Write to AA here:

https://www.aa.org/pages/en_us/contact-literature-desk

Where does *Living Sober* compare to this older and more popular AA literature? It's a 12-Step program so let's do a 12-year comparison of AA sales in 2019 and 2007.

Sales	2007	2019	Change
English			
<i>Big Books</i>	981,262	927,393	-5.5%
<i>12 & 12</i>	445,631	336,855	-25%
<i>Living Sober</i>	150,967	113,965	-25%
French			
<i>Big Books</i>	7,507	4,771	-44%
<i>12 & 12</i>	3,347	1,906	-43%
<i>Living Sober</i>	3,241	2,951	-9%
Spanish			
<i>Big Books</i>	38,700	24,407	-29%
<i>12 & 12</i>	10,167	9,046	-11%
<i>Living Sober</i>	15,026	10,569	-30%

Book sales are down in all languages. There are some interesting trends and stories within the data.

- The supremacy of the *Big Book* in English speaking USA/Canada is dramatic and growing more pronounced: 25% less *12&12* and *Living Sober* sales occurred in 2019 vs. 2007; the *Big Book* – already #1 by a long shot – has fallen off only 5 ½%.
- For every *Living Sober* sold, eight *Big Books* are sold.
- In French USA/Canada, only *Living Sober* is in single-digit decline. The French buy over 40% less of the other two books compared to 12 years ago.
- For Spanish Americans/Canadians the *12&12* is the least bought book but is losing less sales than *Living Sober* and the *Big Book*.

Outside of USA/Canada, our *2020 Conference Report* indicates that AAWS “holds and manages nearly 1,500 active registered copyrights in trust for worldwide Fellowship. In 2019, the trending surge in the volume of international requests continued and projects moved forward for several different language communities.” There are dozens of International General Service Offices and all of them have rights to publish “conference-approved” literature. I don’t know how many languages and offices are in this 1,500 copywrites or if it includes each pamphlet separately or just books.

The above table of sales is hardcopy books only. Digital sales in USA/Canada are through Apple, Amazon and Barnes and Noble. Some of what appears to be reduction of unit sales from 2007 to 2019 may be caused by an increase in digital sales.

Of course, AA, as an organizational structure doesn’t dictate what we should read or dismiss on our own or in a meeting, regardless of it being AA literature or other books/articles members and groups share formally or informally.

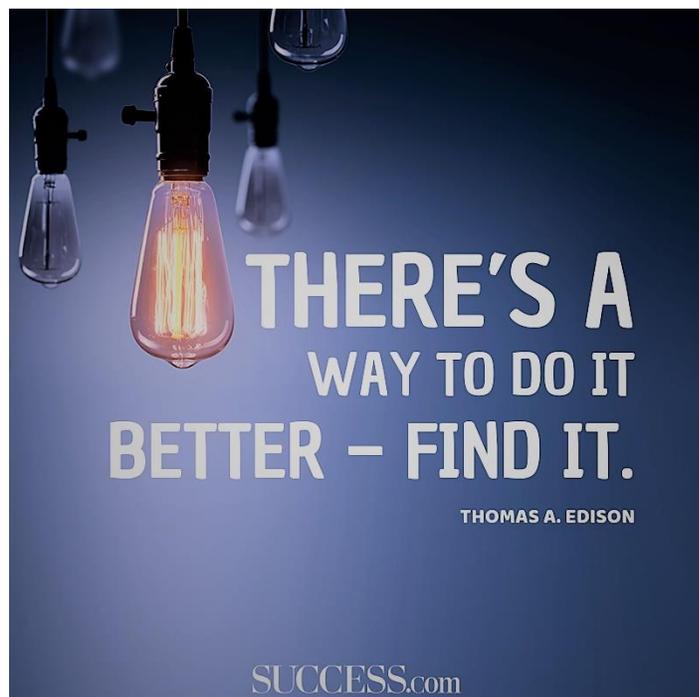
“Conference-approved material always deals with the recovery program of Alcoholics Anonymous or with information about the A.A. Fellowship.

The term has no relation to material not published by G.S.O. It does not imply Conference disapproval of other material about A.A. A great deal of literature helpful to alcoholics is published by others, and A.A. does not try to tell any individual member what he or she may or may not read(SMF-29)A.A. World Services.”^{xii}

So, some ideas I am thinking about ...

If we feel that *Living Sober* supports our view of AA life, let’s support it. Do you have a digital copy for your AA zoom meeting? It doesn’t have to be an every-day reading in meetings but how about trying it out periodically – a new idea as the book suggests?; I am going to encourage my group to lead with *Living Sober* in our outreach to new members and the professional community. Our district is determined to offer free *Big*

Books to prisoners and treatment center patients. Why don't we encourage them to offer *Living Sober* also and explain how this book was more inviting and more helpful to our own sobriety and how it may resonate better with certain newcomers; if we take *Living Sober* for granted, it might not always be there.



I am going to pay more attention to how I speak about theism in AA or the love of the *Big Book*. Even some people in freethinkers AA meetings may pray to a higher power they believe in. Why wouldn't I want them to feel respected and included in the way I want to feel respected and included? The most hateful of zealots can't be reasoned with but they aren't the majority of AA. If what I say rubs "our more religious members" the wrong way I can obnoxiously tell them to talk to their sponsor if they have a problem... that's my prerogative. Or I can reach out more and lessen hostilities.

Which would better realize my goals and my hopes for our recovery community in the future? I don't like it when others judge my views and practices. I will try not to make the situation worse by fighting fire with fire. Being a freethinker is exhausting at times. But I will try to challenge my own views and review how reactive I'm being in my communications.

Feel free to communicate about this – with us, among yourselves – and/or share, re-post this blog if you think it will be helpful. As I like to do, I quote Harry Tuttle (Robert De Niro's character in the dystopian fiction *Brazil*) says, "We're all in this together."^{xiii}

While almost no one gets the 1985 art-film reference, it brings back this message – for me – from a movie that when things appear to be bleak, we are no longer alone.

Notes and links...

ⁱ <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio>

ⁱⁱ Wilson, William, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA World Services, New York: 1939, from “We Agnostics” p 53

ⁱⁱⁱ Alcoholics Anonymous. *Living Sober* (pp. 72-73). AA World Services, Inc.. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Wilson, William, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, AA World Services, New York: 1939, from “A Vision for You,” p 152

^v Schaberg, William H, *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*, Central Recovery Press, Las Vegas, 2019

^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp 440-441

^{vii} <https://jamesclear.com/why-facts-dont-change-minds>

^{viii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcissism_of_small_differences

^{ix} https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=349&v=iOu_8yoqZoQ&feature=emb_logo Jonathan Haidt (2014 Munich Minds)

^x <https://www.cochranelibrary.com/cdsr/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD012880.pub2/full>

^{xi} <https://aaagnostica.org/2013/09/15/clarence-snyder-almost-co-founder/>

^{xii} https://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-29_en.pdf

^{xiii} <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olXUIcb80N0>