



Rebellion Dogs Blog

Jan 2021

How the Big Book became sacred & the birth of AA fundamentalism

At the time of writing, the early days of 2021, how does one not drift from a one-day-at-a-time routine, and reflect on the year past and the year ahead? So, I reflect.

Reflecting on the past:

I have done primary historical research and reporting on atheists and agnostics and other underrepresented populations in AA.

At the dawn of 2021, we mark the 50th anniversary of AA being *founderless*: Bill W, the author of our most infamous literature, died January 21, 1971.

Reflection on the future:

I am now researching the roots of AA fundamentalism. Fundamentalism when looking for a broader (irreligious) definition describes, "strict adherence to the basic principles of any subject or discipline." Strictly speaking, fundamentalism is religious zealotry, "a form of a religion that upholds belief in the strict, literal interpretation of scripture."ⁱ Protestant Christianity and Islam are examples of religions that within the expanse of adherents, we find fundamentalism. Where there is fundamentalism, there is holy writ. And the only holy writ of AA has to be the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. There are those who rigidly decry that *Big Book*-AA is the only *real* AA. To a lesser extent, a zealous subculture yearns for a counter-narrative: a post-*Big Book* AA. This turning point will end dogma and reluctantly drag AA into the already 20-year-old 21st century. Both the "for" and "against" camps are book-based causes; one calling *Alcoholics Anonymous* sacred, the other camp calling it an outdated drag on AA growth.

Not everyone in AA pays any attention to the *Big Book*. Not everyone who reads and swears by the *Big Book* is a zealot or fundamentalist. Many AAs today, attribute their sobriety to following the *Big Book* "instructions" with the aid of a sponsor. The majority of *Big Book* lovers are just that. They credit the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* for their sobriety while recognizing that there are many paths to AA recovery some with or without the book, some with or without the 12-Steps. "Live and let Live", an *Alcoholics Anonymous* ditty ("To Wives", p. 118), is as much a part of their creed as "God could and would if He were sought" ("How It Works", p. 60). Not every *Big Book* lover is a fundamentalist. However the term Big-Book-thumper is associated with the most

common form of AA fundamentalism: Only God can relieve a “real” alcoholic from addiction and this vital relationship with said creator can only reliably be achieved, with the guidance of a sponsor, following the instructions, exactly as laid out in, *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

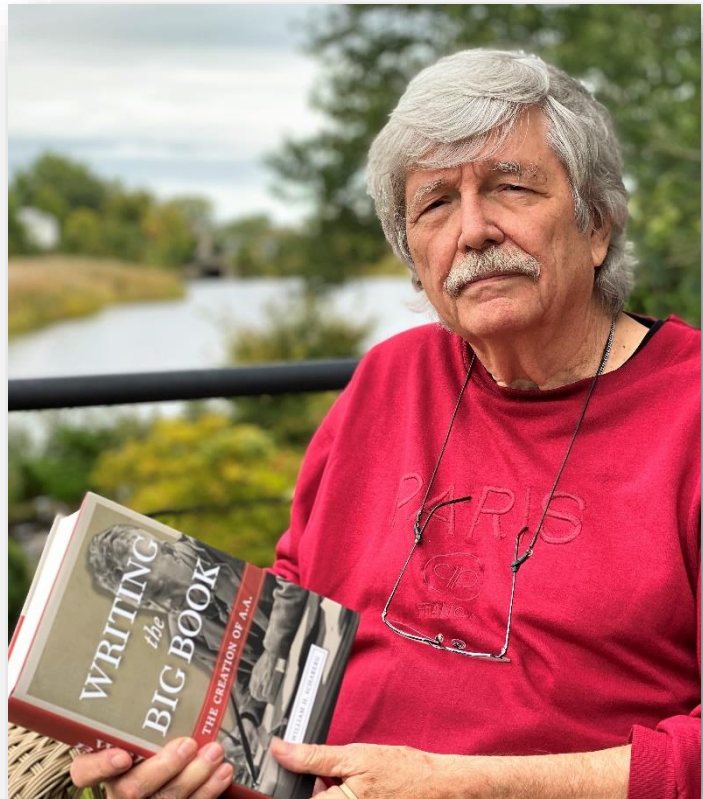
Our founder was no fundamentalist. Sure, we see signs of the righteousness of the recently converted informing Bill W, as he penned the good (AA) book. I had a little of that going on between two and five years sober; many of us do. Did I know what was what, back then? Bill Wilson evolved and matured after his first literary effort, modeling emotional growth, perspective, and open-mindedness. Bill’s later writings show a candor about the shortcomings of AA and his loved-by-thousands first book. Bill W lived to see our 35th anniversary as a fellowship and addressed us at the Miami World Convention in 1970. When all of us AAs reveled in the glory of reaching the 300,000-member mark, Bill was writing an essay about how many we let down, who never found sobriety, and how we could do better.

I do not discourage skeptics from questioning the integrity of AA record keeping – data management is not our *thing*. But AA has kept records of members and groups and I find that this annual tally – which I am sure has never once been 100% accurate – can at least be a means that I can compare, the counting of noses from 1971 to 50 years later in 2021. This imperfect data offers some way to observe trends such as increases or decreases in members and groups. Since 1950, AA has had a General Service Conference where AA’s around the world would gather to discuss the fellowship’s business. This is a reasonable record of the ebb and flow of issues of the day, through the years. Still, doubters have an abundance of persistent inaccuracies to draw our attention to; even June 10th, 1935 (AA’s anniversary) has been proven to be an incorrect marker of AA’s birth (the date of the second cofounder’s sobriety date). From what we can surmise that is to Wikipedia and google we can pin Dr. Bob’s last drink on or around June 17th. Only later, in retrospect did the meeting of these two drunks have nostalgic significance. As armchair-historians of the day, we did not have archives or internet to fact-check our memory like we have, today.

One history trap the gives birth to false memories and assumptions about our past is the “just as it has always been” fallacy.

A case in point is the folklore that past members all relied on the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* as being the instructions for finding and keeping sobriety. Recently debunked by William Schaberg in his 2019, *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*, is the myth that the twelve steps were widely followed by early AAs, as described in the book Bill W wrote. In other words, the idea that the Twelve Step process was a collective experience is a stretch. The Steps, we now know, were the last thing Bill wrote, the chapters before and after Chapter’s Five and Six (describing the Twelve

Steps) and all the stories recounting member's addiction and recovery, had been compiled before the Steps were created. Other than a vague similarity to Bill's final edit of his own story, where Schaberg identifies at least ten of the Twelve processes, none of the other 27 stories of AA members refer to either Twelve Steps or the mythological six-steps precursor that recent research finds no record of from the 1930s and 1940s. Twelve Steps evolving from a previous six-steps was first recorded, in past tense, around 1950. No contemporaneous notes about six-step use from the time before or during the writing of the *Big Book*, have been found. The first story about six steps comes from the second edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, which was not printed until AA's 20th year: 1955. It may have had some truth, it may have been an old-wives' tale. Schaberg reports:



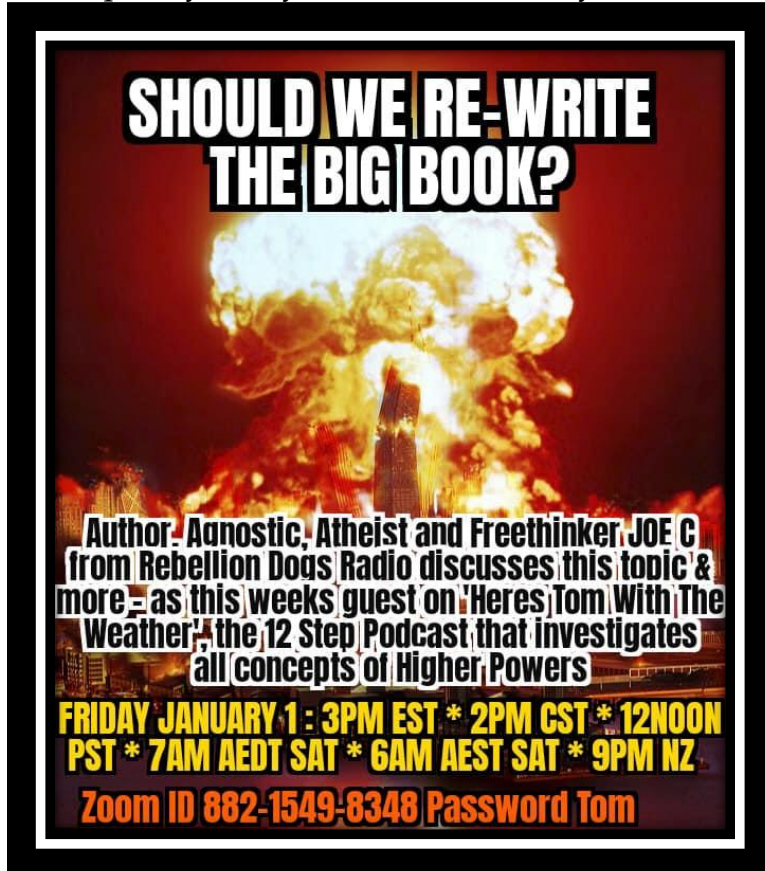
“As it has been noted here repeatedly, Bill Wilson was no great respecter of the actual facts when it came to A.A. history. When he wrote or talked, his purpose was not to deliver a precisely accurate accounting of what had actually happened. And, whenever inconvenient or messy details were encountered, 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 an audience.”ⁱⁱ

New Year's day 2021, I had the privilege of being a guest on [Here's Tom With The Weather](#) podcast.ⁱⁱⁱ I was asked to muse on the topic, “Should the AA *Big Book* be rewritten?”

I offered some context so we could assess how central the role of this book is in the past, present and future of AA. On January 1, I quipped that AA just entered our 86th year. So, half a fellowship ago, it was 1978. Any of us still alive who came to AA prior to

1978, have lived experience of the first half of AA history. Everyone (most of AA), sober after that, are part of the second half of the AA story (to date).

In the first ½ of AA's life-to-date, we were not a book adoring, passage quoting fellowship. This characteristic came to prominence in the second ½ of AA's history. Half of AA's today are sober under ten years; so most people aren't from the first 43 years. Consequently, many have this "it's always been as it is now" fallacy of AA.



When I tell my AA story, reporting that I never read the *Big Book* until I was sober over 10 years, some can't imagine how I got sober. Anyone from pre-1980 knows what I'm talking about because my case was not unique. I don't pretend to have a sense of AA everywhere, but in Montreal, I didn't actually know anyone who had read the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*. I was sure someone had and that it was a fine book; but it seemed irrelevant to overcoming addiction in the mid-1970s. Why would anyone refer to what members born in the Victorian era did during the

Great Depression, when I could draw on the collective wisdom of the thousands of AA member's alive and well, in Montreal? Maybe if I had a history question, I would ask about or read the book, but my questions were urgent, present-day problems like how did people muster the integrity to stay sober and would life still include sex and rock 'n' roll without the drugs? I was a teenager alcoholic/addict from the mid-1970s. How a stock-trader or proctologist with sketchy resumes could be the key to my woes was missed on me. Instead, I modeled the sober members that I observed and that I thought were cool.

We went to speaker meetings. There was the odd discussion meeting. If we read anything, *Living Sober* was just published and people were pretty excited about it, or *Came to Believe* or an article in Grapevine would do, fine. It just seemed more reasonable to draw on the relevant information from a living alcoholic, sober today.

No one had disrespect for the founders or the *Big Book*. We were indifferent to it. Who reads the *Final Report from the General Service Conference* or the minutes from the latest Area Assembly when they are three weeks or three months sober? No one, because it's not relevant. This isn't to say a record of AA's affairs is unimportant; it's just not urgent or helpful. AA sobriety was transmitted one alcoholic to another, through our experience, our stories. Sobriety came from listening and being listened to.

In the next Rebellion Dogs blog, I'll share more about my personal experience to illustrate AA life before fundamentalism; we had our more liberal and more conservative members, yes. But I don't recall anyone speaking to – especially putting down – another's approach to AA as “watered down AA.” Live and Let Live was a core value; not merely a sign on the meeting wall.

Post-founder AA and the rise of a book-based AA society

The primacy of this first book of our fellowship transformed the landscape of 2nd ½ AA and I'll be writing more about how these conservative influences reified the AA message for the majority of groups and members. Interestingly, much of my understanding of progressive AA – special purpose groups for atheists, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, and young people's AA – comes into play in this story. It is the progressive Yin to the fundamentalist Yang of AA. I will bring the hard evidence shortly, AA was no book-based society in the first ½ of AA history, but we have become that; or more accurately, this is a dominant meeting style. Is it a fad, or our finale? That is hard to tell; very little stays the same. I see great elasticity in AA's ability to evolve, despite our collective (more so than individual) resistance to change.

Here's how the Yin/Yang thing plays out. In the 1990s, the recovery world became saturated with books. *Alcoholics Anonymous* was everywhere. As we became book-based, in the way religions are, two subcultures emerge as they do in any book-based society: There is the “widening the gateway” camp and the “preserve the integrity of the message” camp.

Each camp's in-group eyes the other camp with suspicion or concern. Team-“preserve the message” sees neuroscience, positive psychology, a more secular society, medically assisted recovery and treatment infrastructure—anything that doesn't follow a strict 164-page diet – as, “watered down” AA, “confusing the newcomer,” the reason AA is failing, unlike the imaginary good-old-days, Like anyone's good ol' days revisionist history, ours is engineered from a bad memory and inattention to history.

Then from the progressive clan, who blame literalists for stalling AA evolution and promoting learned dependency on supernatural agency and sponsors. The liberals disparage our more conservative members as rigid, fearmongering, drunk on self-

righteousness and humorless. What is perceived as an aversion for 21st century reality is blamed for AA's reification of a message that is so five-minutes ago with the young or anti-intellectual to better educated newcomers. Muckers and thumpers are why AA membership hasn't grown for 30 years, and if you're not growing, you're dying. Bad thumpers – shame on you.

Both camps borrow authority from the words of Bill W to point the finger at the other's wrong-ness.

One polarized subgroup was a reaction to the other, or maybe they fueled each other. Coincidence? History shows that our first agnostic/atheist meetings started around the same time as our first *Big Book* study groups, catering to more liberal and more inclusive and more traditional views of AA. Both subcultures flourished. Some celebrated the diversity of our widening gateway. For others, an AA version of the narcissism of small differences found enablers on both sides, portraying themselves as the true AA heroes and scapegoating the other camp as the villains.

The phases of societal transformation:

How a thriving oral tradition-based society becomes book-based happens like sobriety, one day at a time. There is wisdom in codifying our legacy, recording our stories, for posterity. Yet, treating a book as authoritative AA and holding out those who quote and color-highlight the books words as gatekeepers of "the" AA way, will aid some and alienate others. During the life of the author, we had *Big Book* enthusiasts. These were legitimate AA practitioners, but they held no supremacy over "meeting makers make it" members or others who crafted their recovery according to their own learning style, taking advantage of sponsorship, guidance, reading and rituals as they saw fit.

The first thing a book-based society needs is many books; so *Big Book's* ubiquity symbolizes the primacy of this AA narrative. Herein lies a measurable difference between the first ½ of AA and the second ½. As we quickly forget, because *Big Books* are everywhere, it was not always this way. Our earlier years were very different than today.

Fun facts:

1. The *Big Book* was not a best-seller out of the gate. It took 34 years to sell one million copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. This milestone did not happen until the year 1974, after Bill – the book's author – died.
2. A Third edition launched in 1976 and four years from the one-million mark, we hit two million cumulative sales (1978).
3. By 1990 AA World Services was selling one million *Big Books* every year

4. At the turn of the century, the Library of Congress deemed 88 titles, “Books That Shaped America,” and *Alcoholics Anonymous* was one of them.
5. Originally planned as a ceremony at the Detroit World Convention of AA in 2020, Dr. George Koob, director of the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) was given the 40-millionth printed copy of the *Big Book* to commemorate the long-established cooperation between AA and the professional community.

So, Bill W had to die to sell a million books. Soon, thereafter we were selling a million copies every year. Lois W, having been by Bill’s side all his adult life, made more from AA royalties than Bill did. At the time of Bill’s death, \$633,000 in royalties were earned. At Lois’s death (1989), \$10 million was earned on Bill’s royalties (*Big Book, 12 & 12, AA Comes of Age, As Bill Sees It*).

I created a chart and graph just to visualize one method of what we could call *Big Book* saturation. Looking at sales per year and members per year, how many copies of the *Big Book* have been sold in a year for every member of the fellowship?

I hope this book-sales data can demonstrate, what I have tried to explain, by personal experience. I did not live everywhere, go to every meeting, and meet every member, so my own anecdotal experience is not universal. Now, this book copies-sold-per-member each year is no exacting measure. Many *Big Books* started being purchased by treatment centers. A treatment approach called Twelve Step Facilitation became a thing. The joke is “I didn’t stay sober but I now own a \$40,000 *Big Book*,” because the book was “free” at the very expensive 28-day in-patient program. And Cocaine Anonymous can out thump your average AA member. They love them some *Big Book* speakers and sponsors and meetings. Many other 12-step fellowship attendees are encouraged to read (or study) *Alcoholics Anonymous*, too.

Hopeful family members of people with alcohol use disorder buy the book too, looking for clues from reading the pages and carefully misplacing the book where their partner might find it, hoping it will have a healing effect. So before I make my flawed statistical correlation means causality argument, I want you to know that I share your concern about the limit of the helpfulness of drawing these connections.

From 1950 to 1970 AA’s population tripled. *Big Book* sales were steady. For those 20 years, there was one book bought for every five to nine members. In 1955 it spiked to over one in every five members – the novelty of the 2nd edition – but for most of these back-to-back decades, regardless of the number of growing members, the penetration of new books was between 13 and 18% of members. Less sales per capita for our *Big Book*

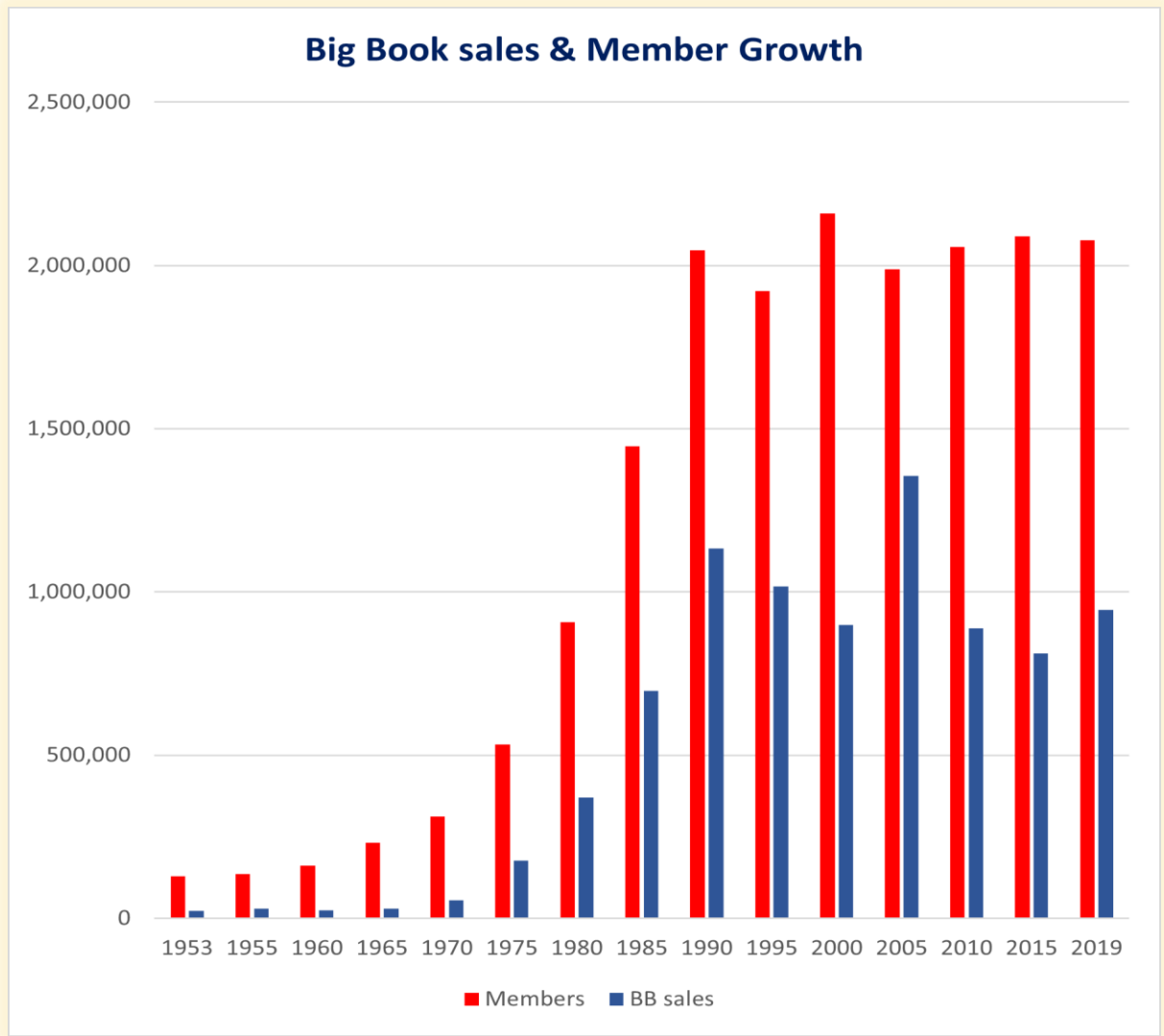
compared to recently, the first 20 years of this millennium. In 1975, book sales/member grew to one in three members and by 1990, a book sold yearly for every two AA members. For the first forty years, per capita sales averaged below one in five members. For the recent 40 years, per capita sales annually have been one book for every two members, year in – year out. In 2005 we peaked at unit sales equaling 68% of members. Imagine seven out of ten members with a 4th edition on their lap.

Big Book sales as a % of membership

Year	AA Members	BB sales	Cumulative BB sales	member purchases
1953	128,361	23,296		18%
1955	135,905	28,853	331,853	21%
1960	161,549	24,533	444,238	15%
1965	231,477	29,900	595,837	13%
1970	311,450	54,725	814,058	18%
1975	533,209	176,274	1,392,189	33%
1980	907,067	369,980	2,712,350	41%
1985	1,445,502	696,300	5,468,350	48%
1990	2,047,252	1,132,878	10,764,209	55%
1995	1,921,936	1,016,994	15,926,620	53%
2000	2,159,700	899,180	20,463,881	42%
2005	1,988,968	1,356,016	26,184,536	68%
2010	2,057,672	887,532	31,597,459	43%
2015	2,089,698	812,205	35,000,000	39%
2019	2,077,374	944,112	40,000,000	45%

When less members own a book, less members are quoting it. With more members owning *Alcoholics Anonymous* it stands to reason that would increase the chorus of *Big Book*-isms being parroted at each meeting. As we reach this saturation in the second 1/2 of AA history, a connection can be drawn by onlookers that, “AA is the book to which the fellowship is based upon.” How different that is from, “AA is a fellowship, sharing our experience, strength, and hope, oh, and we have a book (or two or three).” Today,

questions get asked, “What does AA believe?” There may be little on which every AA member would agree. But what is meant by “what AA believes,” one could argue, means, “What is printed in the book?”



Reification: the will to preserve Bill W’s writing exactly as written

It’s the 1993 General Service Conference. We had been selling one million copies of *Alcoholics Anonymous* for some time now. Long enough that for many members, this is all they’ve ever known. Population of our fellowship has stopped growing. Was the conference aware of it or concerned about it? I don’t know. Someone had brought up the idea of updating our first three chapters. Well, channeling Newton’s third law, for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. This effort to update *Alcoholics Anonymous* prompted the equal and opposite advisory action, which passed:

Because of strong sentiment against any changes in the first 164 pages of the Big Book, the request to rewrite the first three chapters of the Big Book not be implemented.

The 1977 Advisory Action pertaining to the production of a facsimile of the first edition of the Big Book be reaffirmed:

“The publication of a facsimile of the first edition of the Big Book should not be undertaken as it would destroy the sentimental value of the actual first edition.”

The (Conference Literature) committee further felt no need exists for such a book.

So, can conference actions be reversed? Yes. It takes the agreement of 2/3 of the conference attendees. But while AA doesn't consider ourselves old-fashioned, we (collectively) have rationalized that where the written words of Bill W are concern, no change will/should be made. *Living Sober*, pamphlets, other AA stuff is updated regularly. But there is a great wish about the *Big Book*, “It works; please do not fix it.”

This came to me on the fly while on the podcast: our book, it's like Shakespeare. Sure, *Hamlet* and *Much Ado About Nothing* would be more accessible to young people if it was translated to Hip Hop, but that's not happening – the original prose and verse language is being preserved. And Shakespeare's still here, still appealing to some who inflict it upon others.

I contend that *Big Book* AA should carry on as long as it serves it's members – period.

And, the preservation of a sacred text need not hold up the future of AA. Groups and members that read our 1939 version of what it was like, what happened and what it's like now should always have a supply of the book. While I will talk about how a more modern book would help more people, I don't see how that forces us to a binary choice of:

- A. a new book and therefor, banish the original vs.
- B. preserve the original, therefore forbidding anything new.

And the case for something new...

Many of us know we can have a perfectly good AA meeting without cracking a single book open or reading any passages from it. We AA held meetings before we had AA books and members found sobriety without written directions. For many of us, our preference and/or learning style is such that AA is one alcoholic, talking to another, no authority – not a book or a spirit or any hierarchy directing how our meetings are to be conducted. Our meeting is autonomous, and our own sharing/storytelling provides everything we need from our meeting to maintain and/or find sobriety.

And we've already talked about book-based AA meetings (*Big Book* or *12X12*, *Living Sober*, or other); going to an AA meeting, "is like a box of chocolates..."

A thought about the word "new" and "the General Service Conference of AA" in the same sentence... Technically, we put out a "new" book in 2019, if you want to call it that: *Our Great Responsibility: A Selection of Bill W.'s General Service Conference Talks, 1951-1970*. That's what's 'new' at AA in 2019. Here is our sales pitch on Amazon.com:

"Timeless and timely, these 16 talks give fresh perspectives on the A.A. Fellowship in our co-founder's own words. The first original title released by Alcoholics Anonymous in over thirty years since *Daily Reflections*..."

In thirty years, our one new idea is regurgitated talks from 50 to 70 years ago.

So, if you are asking, "Joe, you have some issues with the primacy of the *Big Book*. If you want to talk to us about AA's appetite for a new contemporary basic text, can I interest you in some swamp land in Florida at a great price?" – very funny, lol.

What I actually hope to convey today is:

1. Members of Alcoholics Anonymous who resign themselves to an idea that, our *Big Book* is the de facto AA narrative, may not see what others, including me, see going on in AA right now. While the book and program of AA work for many, why isn't our solution appealing to those outside our doors?
2. Discussed before on *Rebellion Dogs*, "conference approved" literature does not suggest that members and our groups are getting a nudge from our General Service Office about what we should/can or should not/cannot read. Many groups read from non-AA books in their meetings.
3. For members who decry that both they and newcomers are underserved by reliance of the writings by so few with so little recovery experience (the 1939, *Alcoholics Anonymous: How More than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism*) and that AA ought to update our collective experience, we did. In 1975, based on 40 years of 500,000 AA's collective experience, our General Service Conference approved and then published *Living Sober*. Maybe we already have what you're looking for in terms of an updated *Big Book*.

Don't worry *Big Book*-thumpers; we're not coming for your sacred text, but we're going to talk about underserved populations and how AA could meet more people's needs.

The state of addiction today:

- 15 Million Americans over the age of 18 live with alcohol use disorder.
- A dismal 6.7% of people who need treatment, get it.

- Alcoholism and alcohol related death is the third leading lifestyle-related cause of death in the United States.
- 40 % of all the hospital beds across the country are used to treat health conditions that develop from alcoholism.
- A person who succumbs to excessive alcohol use loses a potential of 30 years of life.^{iv}
- In 2012, 3,200,000 deaths (6% of all global deaths) were attributable to alcohol consumption.
- In the age group 20–39 years (scarcely more than potential alcoholics, we call them), approximately 25% of the total deaths are alcohol attributable.^v

This isn't to say that all this carnage – 25% of all deaths of 20 to 40-year-olds, 3.2 million deaths a year, worldwide – is AA's fault. Lifestyle related premature deaths from diet, smoking and other health problems demonstrate that we can't save everyone from self-inflicted wounds. But it's easy to say, we in AA, like Bill W before, could be asking (from 1965), "Without much doubt, a million alcoholics have approached AA during the last thirty years. We can soberly ask ourselves what became of the 600,000 who did not stay. How much and how often did we fail all these?"

So, if we can help more, even a few more, why wouldn't we try something – not recklessly of course, but courageously? It's not a stretch to say we (AA members) could do more. And I am not in the camp of burning all the *Big Books* and starting from scratch. But if some AA's feel inspired to write another AA book; I don't think Bill W would discourage them. Maybe we should try something new and judge the results later.

And we know a little about the people less likely to feel included in the *ye ole Big Book* story. It's not the 1939 intention, it's the 1939 language that arguably makes *Alcoholics Anonymous* less effective 82 years after it came off the printing press. It was a noble literary effort for its day; I give that a thumbs up. Can someone suffering from the wrath of addiction set aside the gender bias, heteronormative, antiquated, religiously bias narrative? Even if they can, should they need to? Many would say, set the *Big Book* aside to enjoy the rightful place in history it has earned, for historical perspective. For progressives, in search of recovery, today, give them something contemporary. And the harm comes, not from a benign book. The harm is something we know as systemic discrimination. This isn't to say members today are sexist, or secularphobic, or old-fashioned or homophobic. The discrimination is baked into rituals and process of reading a book, to which the language does not meet the standard of *cultural humility*.

The American Psychological Association defines cultural humility as:

“the ability to maintain an interpersonal stance that is other-oriented (or open to the other) in relation to aspects of cultural identity that are most important to the [person]”^{vi}

Cultural humility for groups and for AA World Services Publishing requires three disciplines, none of which break from AA philosophy, our Concepts or Traditions:

- fix power imbalances,
- work with groups that advocate for our underrepresented populations, and
- commit to regular self-inventory, critique our literature and our rituals.

Am I saying that the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* is antithetical to cultural humility? You're getting warm. A book is benign. It doesn't discriminate, or castigate, or alienate. My concern lies with the one who wield said book – beware the person who knows only this (Thomas Aquinas) – who casts the Bigga Booka as the rules of AA life, the text book of how real alcoholics are freed from the bondage of our addiction. Because if the book is a source, authoritative then, yes – that's what I mean – AA “the” book and some of our rituals fall short of a 21st century standard of cultural humility.

I understand why *Big Book* fans view of the book is as a – or the – center of AA life, philosophy, and recovery. They owe their second chance at life to an experience of going through the book with a trusted guide and then repeating the process with others. The book is soothing, familiar and anecdotally proven. The curious question is why, for those whom ye ole book does not strike a chord, why do we see it as an immovable influence on our AA practice or AA meeting? Maybe it's conditioning; maybe we lack imagination. For feminists, freethinkers, forward thinkers, there comes an unnaturalness with joining a conversation about a 1930's faith-based *Big Book* approach. Now I've found even atheist/agnostic meetings that cherry pick the book with great mastery, more secular passages from “More About Alcoholism,” “There Is a Solution,” “Working With Others,” Appendix II (Spiritual Experience), etc. Only one with distain for *Big Bookism* would deny there isn't some insights about the dilemma of addiction and the transformation and usefulness we feel from working with others.

But the goodness found in the *Big Book* is also found in our oral foundation of one alcoholic talking with and listening to another. There is maybe enough reading material already, written after the death of Bill W that is not out of place in our meetings or our AA way of life. And while I have framed AA in the first ½ and the second ½ of 43-year segments, you might want to prefer to think of the first ½ (an 85-year segment) ending and this being the start of our second ½ so let's see how we can alter or improve for the remaining journey. Can we think about the game in front of us with limitlessness and

not ruminate on the past? “It is as it’s always been” is a mindset and not a limit. More has been revealed and more will be written. By whom? When?

Secondly, AA members and groups have long borrowed from other literature and readings. AA didn’t invent the Serenity Prayer or other popular prayers adopted by some groups. Hazelden books and other AA experience of the Steps or daily reflections or biographies or collections of stories by alcoholics are currently used by AA groups^{vii}. *Back to Basics* is a book that some meetings are based upon. This Wally P book is not “instead of” AA literature but *Back to Basics: The Alcoholics Anonymous Beginner’s Meeting* (1997) is customary in many towns and cities. No one’s saying they are not real AA because their reading extends beyond the conference approved offerings.

Directing our energy from what AA as a whole should be doing and a little more looking for tools that improve outcome rates in our own groups, this is a way we can modernize our AA right now, in my home group or yours. Obviously, if we find something that works better, it will catch on organically.

Looking at the AA Twelve Traditions, ostensibly the “rules” by which we conduct our meetings and interact within the fellowship as a whole, it doesn’t mention the *Big Book* or any book. It doesn’t decree the Steps as sacred or describe or defend any program. Traditions leave these machinations of what to read or to get and live sober up to us. If we ever feel we need to justify the legitimacy of AA minus the *Big Book*, we can point to the Traditions. Another comparison with A-okay AA is reminding people of the first subculture of AA members who showed us how to get/stay sober without that book: the founders, the examples who are the original 100ish, they all got/stayed sober without AA Steps and a book. They did borrow from what was in fashion, *The Common Sense of Drinking*, by Richard Peabody^{viii}, the Oxford Group material, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, by William James.^{ix} So, in a way non-*Big Book* AA could be called, even more “traditional AA” than *Big Book* meetings.

And a third point; AA does keep reinventing ourselves in printed form. *A.A. for the Alcoholic with Mental Health Issues* (p-87), *The “God” Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA* (p-86) new pamphlets, *Safety Card for A.A. Groups* (f-211) are newly updated *Women in A.A.* (p-5) adapt to member demand and changing times. Pamphlets are living documents, updated as language and demographics dictate, always keeping cultural humility in mind.

Practicing cultural humility speak to specifics: creed, gender, age, sexual orientation, race, etc. But there is something hiding in plain view that may answer the question, “Why won’t AA re-write the *Big Book*?”

Maybe they did. Is the 1939 offering is as its subtitle suggests, the story of: *How More than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism* based on three or four years of trial and error and assessing best practices?

If the answer is, “Yes,” then hiding in plain sight is how more than ½ a million people, recovered from alcoholism based on our 40 years of collective, evolving experience from 1935 to 1975. And it’s not sacred. We update it. We continue to input new doctor’s opinions and make corrections. It is *Living Sober... How More than Two Million People Have Recovered from Alcoholism*.

It is secular, practical and contains little supernatural agency-talk as a requirement for getting or maintaining freedom from a “seemingly hopeless state of mind and body.” If you want the higher power stuff, read our companion piece: *Came to Believe*.(1973) This is “B-6- A 120-page collection of stories by A.A. members who write about what the phrase ‘spiritual awakening’ means to them.”^x

[Living Sober](#) is not just for atheists; [Came to Believe](#) is not strictly for faith-based AA. But each camp will have it’s preferences. What is 40-years of AA’s collective experience on how to stay sober, revised as needed? It opens with:

“There is no prescribed A.A. ‘right’ way or ‘wrong’ way. Each of us uses what is best for himself or herself – without closing the door to other kinds of help we may find valuable at another time. And each of us tries to respect others’ rights to do things differently.

Sometimes, an A.A. member will talk about taking the various parts of the program in cafeteria style – selecting what he likes and leaving alone what he does not want...”(p2)

And the last chapter is “Finding Your Own Way.” It’s easy to understand why there are no *Living Sober* fundamentalists. In between, these two zealotry-light suggestions, there is lots that we collectively know about one-day-at-a-time, staying away from the first drink, seeking professional help, sex and drugs, what to do when around alcohol consuming fellows, resentments, self-pity, gratitude, loneliness, insomnia and more; there are 31 chapters.

Living Sober quietly sells 30-50,000 copies a year, *Came to Believe*, not as many. Read John Lauritsen’s 2014 [A Freethinker in AA](#)^{xi}; this is an account of how to stay sober for 50 years in AA without the Twelve Steps. John L is a *Living Sober* fan. However, not all of AA is excited about it; we don’t even sell one *Living Sober* for every AA meeting per year. This is a great gift, newcomer’s tool or source of material to kick-off yours or my AA meeting.

Living Sober could use more of a going over. It could use more gender-neutral language and a freshening up, again. I can tell you that the booklet was compiled by Barry L who

gave his last talk, before he died, to the Gay and Lesbian meeting at the 1985 Montreal 50th anniversary of AA World Convention. So, it's not too 1930s middle-America.



Sure, if you can write a better book; do it—I'll read it. But I wonder if some of the concerns about members being thumped with *Big Book*-exceptionalism can't be set aside by starting more *Living Sober* meetings. Read it every meeting; read other books, lots of more liberal meetings just don't read anything at all. Hearing from the assembled members is every bit as wise or useful as something one of us wrote down one day.

It's being talked about right now by AA World Services. In its previous Yellow and Brown (rocking the '70's earth tones) cover it had a subtitle: *Some methods A.A. members use for not drinking*. Our General Service Conference is entertaining a new subtitle. I

don't think, "How millions of people have recovered from alcoholism since the first one hundred, without the superstitious stuff" would fly... maybe a bit too cheeky.

But I think this is a book worth rallying around. If you go to NA, there is [Living Clean](#)^{xii} a 2012 look at recovery in the light of modern-day issues. If I am in an NA meeting with break out rooms, you would find me in the *Living Clean* room.

Making *Living Sober* more accessible

For the sake of alcoholics, in and outside of AA, our books *Alcoholics Anonymous* and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* can be read in their entirety from our aa.org web page. You or I can also read AA's *Daily Reflections* (one page per day)

Wouldn't it be helpful for more secular-minded AA members and others to have *Living Sober* in PDF available to read for free right beside our other helpful AA literature? Whatever the reasons we have the *Big Book*, the *12&12* and all our pamphlets accessible to all, we should have *Living Sober* available as well.

I don't know how long you've been in AA but many in the secular community, once the British General Service Conference created an agnostic/atheist leaflet (*The "God" Word*), groups in Canada and the USA brought motions to our districts to ask our Area delegates to express our interest in the General Service Conference (USA/Canada) in adopting and adapting (English, French, Spanish) the pamphlet for use worldwide. By going through regular channels our need and our interest was heard and the conference voted to do so with substantial unanimity. We could do it again. We could ask our district to support our request that:

"We ask our Area delegate to recommend to this year's General Service Conference that *Living Sober* (in PDF) be made available on aa.org alongside *The Big Book* and our *12 & 12*. For the same reasons we make these two books and all of our pamphlets accessible to read online for the benefit of AA members and the still-suffering alcoholic, we feel deeply – for our own purposes, and those yet to join us – aa.org could be even more helpful by making *Living Sober* available also, in the same way."

How could they say, "No;" why would they say "No?"

The next conference meets in April and our Area assemblies are coming up, to talk about the 2021 General Service Conference agenda. We could express what role this booklet played in our recovery. I will go into more about how that has been game-changingly true for me in our next blog when I describe my experience of getting sober in first ½ AA. Our book *Living Sober*, while not the best-seller that the *Big Book* is, is a door opener for many – for secular-minded alcoholics and for sober-curious visitors.

Living Sober is a collection of practical AA experience that has helped millions of AA members, sober today.

Hear Bill Schaberg & Joe C talk about Writing the Big Book on [Rebellion Dogs Radio](#)

<https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/blogs/rebellion-dog-radio-episodes/posts/writing-the-big-book-talking-with-author-william-schaberg>

ⁱ <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/fundamentalism?s=t>

ⁱⁱ Schaberg, William, *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*, Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2019 (pp 440-441)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/should-alcoholics-anonymous-big-book-be-re-written/id1500933642>

^{iv} <https://www.alcohol.org/statistics-information/>

^v <https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/alcohol-facts-and-statistics>

^{vi} <https://www.apa.org/pi/families/resources/newsletter/2013/08/cultural-humility>

^{vii} [Alcoholics Anonymous Recovery Reading Books - Rebellion Dogs Publishing](#)

^{viii} <http://www.williamwhitepapers.com/pr/1930%20Peabody%20Common%20Sense%20of%20Drinking.pdf>

^{ix} <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/292359/the-varieties-of-religious-experience-by-william-james/>

^x https://www.amazon.com/Came-Believe-AA-Services/dp/0916856054/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=Came+to+Believe&qid=1610647754&sr=8-1

^{xi} <https://amzn.to/2XCxWqR>

^{xii} <https://amzn.to/3bG5ZX6>