12 Step Language – is there an expression of AA for everyone in their own, authentic native tongue?

Very, very soon, some of us will meet in Sedona Arizona for “Beyond Belief: A Secular Journey through the Twelve Steps” (October 27 – 29). I’m excited; New data/research is waiting to be shared; I’m looking forward to a sober and multi-cultural conversation about expressing AA in everyone’s native tongue. This includes a growing need for AA in unbeliever-ease. For not-so-sure-agnostic or adamant atheist, does “By ‘God,’ we mean your conception of God” really create a level playing field for everyone? “No,” in my experience. But can the Steps be articulated in the authentic, plain language for anyone, regardless of one’s worldview? In my experience, “Yes.” The suggested process can be translated to truly authentic languages that speaks each AA’s sincerely held beliefs. “Meet people where there at,” in my view, is more inviting than asking them to speak back to us using G.O.D. acronyms. It’s like wearing clothes that just don’t fit. It covers a woman or man up but you can see the solution wasn’t tailored to her or him.

Yes, you can access age-old wisdom without having to parrot dated language. Instead of focusing on how the first 100 got sober; emulate how the most recent 100 AA’s journeyed through the Twelve Step process. Plain, contemporary language is more conducive to deeply personal experience; it fits better.

This past weekend, I was getting ready, including getting inspired.

Renascent House (Toronto) teamed up with Hazelden—Betty Ford, Friday afternoon and Saturday to treat people to Fred H., author of Drop the Rock… The Ripple Effect (2016). Nearly forty years in addiction treatment, Fred (pictured) is the director of “The Lodge,” a retreat center on the Hazelden Minneapolis
campus¹ that some of my best Toronto AA friends rave about. Threatening retirement, Fred continues international speaking events on The Big Book and the principles of the Twelve Steps; he cares deeply about the Steps. His conviction is contagious.

Fred’s Friday following was mostly addiction/recovery professionals. The focus was Twelve-Step Facilitation between counselor and client. Saturday was the general recovery community. People could attend for free. There was a suggested donation to the Renascent Foundation but no one was turned away.

**Here are some highlights:**

Twelve Step Facilitation is better understood—not as an “Evidence Based Practice,” but—as, “Practice Based Evidence.”

This twist is more than witty; I think it’s a meaningful distinction. This idea coat-tails off other thoughtful advocates, such as Ward Ewing (AA General Service Board Chair emeritus)’s, “Experience trumps explanation,” and the Kurtz/Ketcham wisdom of Experiencing Spirituality and that book’s predecessor, The Spirituality of Imperfection. One great Kurtz/Ketcham-ism from Spirituality of Imperfection is, “Humor, humility, humanity … we cannot work on one without working on the others.” More Kurtz/Ketcham later; back to Fred H.

There are six things Alcoholics Anonymous (The Big Book) teaches us hundreds of times…

1. Alcoholism is an illness of the body
2. Alcoholism is an illness of the mind
3. The solution is spiritual
4. Overreliance on self, blocks us from the solution
5. We need to follow directions to bet unblocked
6. We need to continue to follow directions to stay unblocked

Fred describes one and two as, “The body can’t handle what the mind can’t leave alone.” That’s a conundrum.

The word “sin” is a Hebrew word, whose origin means “off the mark,” an archer’s term, not the popular moralizing idea widely held, today.

Times for renewal in sobriety or times to be mindful of relapse-prevention are when we are in a state of “emotional inebriety,” the opposite of what Bill wrote about in The Grapevine — "emotional sobriety.”
In January 1958 Bill wrote about …

“the development of much more real maturity and balance (which is to say, humility) in our relations… Those adolescent urges that so many of us have for top approval, perfect security, and perfect romance — urges quite appropriate to age seventeen — prove to be an impossible way of life when we are at age forty-seven or fifty-seven. Since AA began, I’ve taken immense wallops in all these areas because of my failure to grow up, emotionally and spiritually…”

Fred H’s, *Drop the Rock… The Ripple Effect: Using Step 10 to Work 6 and 7 Every Day* (2016) is the natural follow up to Hazelden best-seller, *Drop the Rock: Removing Character Defects* (1993) by Bill P., Todd W., and Sara S. Steps Six and Seven get about a paragraph each in *The Big Book*. Our maladaptive coping techniques, as the cool-kids call them, are the rocks that the 1993 book helped hundreds-of-thousands let go of.

*The Ripple Effect* is about how our incompleteness affects others and that’s where Step Ten comes into play — periodic inventory and making corrections.

From *Drop the Rock… The Ripple Effect*:

“On any given day, most of us make hundreds of small and large decisions, act in hundreds of different ways, and say hundreds of different things to a wide range of people. Each interaction and conversation has its own Ripple Effect, and we can't control them all. What we can do is — after having cleaned house with Steps Four through Nine — relax, knowing that we now have the insight and tools with Step Ten to face each day and moment with openness and serenity.”
Looking ahead to Sedona October 27 – 29 and the challenges of AA language

Did you know there is no word for “sober” in French?

Our home group, Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers Group (Toronto Canada), decided to devote room on our literature table to other-than-English AA literature. In Toronto, 911 calls are answered in 150 languages and we have members whose native tongue in Polish, Spanish, Russian, Punjabi, French or other. So, we got some Living Sober and pamphlets in other languages.

The French Living Sober is Vivre… Sans Alcool! (directly translated as living without alcohol; they don’t have a word for “sober”). It makes me wonder how many AA-isms, commonplace in English speaking meetings, don’t translate due to cultural or linguistic variations in our more exotic AA homegroups. While “God as you understand Him” was an open invitation for everyone in 1939, has it stood the test of time? “God” alienates many who either do not culturally identify with the Judeo/Christian traditions so ubiquitous in 1939 or the 2017 member has reasons for rejecting said indoctrination.

What’s the atheist’s word for “God?” Just as the French don’t have a word, for “sober,” is it fine to say, “That word isn’t in my vocabulary and that construct isn’t How It Works for me?” Or do we want our AA atheist to talk in G.O.D. acronyms? Does that help “our more religious members” feel assured that in AA, atheism is permitted—not accommodated?

I hope everyone whose worldview doesn’t include a prayer-answering, sobriety-granting higher power can find an integral language to articulate their addiction/recovery experience AND feel equal, valued, and part of AA—without an asterisk. But it’s not unusual for AA’s who reject speaking in theism-ese to be met with stigma, dismissiveness and hostility.

This isn’t obvious to everyone, but when newcomers object to the Twelve Steps on religious grounds, they get met with the knee-jerk—say it with me—“But AA is spiritual, not religious” and the newcomer says nothing... their silence doesn’t always mean, “You know you’re right, sorry for my close-mindedness.” Some of us find any talk of reliance on supernatural forces to be a very religious notion. AA isn’t an organized religion but for many, our practices and language are small-r religious.

This just in: Ipsos just released the Global View on Religion 2017. This data reveals some strained relations between nonbelievers and their more religious neighbors. While I suspect these findings aren’t exactly analogous to Main Street AA, let’s just see what
clues this latest poll offers. The term “religious beliefs” is used in the Ipsos poll. For the record, if you want to understand AA non-theists, an example of AA’s religious beliefs would include, “God could and would if He were sought,” or “Became entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.”

Much of the Global View on Religion poll is eye-opening. Of note, poll respondents were presented with the statement, “I lose respect for people when I find out that they are not religious.” While 60% “strongly disagree,” why isn’t it 100%? That’s 4 out of ten who “somewhat disagree” or more concerning, “somewhat agree” or “strongly agree.”

We’ve talked before about “secularphobia” – the irrational fear or distrust of people who don’t believe in God. That isn’t everyone in AA and maybe it isn’t most.

Today, when a white, heterosexual middle-aged male of privilege says, “everyone is equal and has the same opportunity,” that can frustrate women, African Americans and the LGBTQ membership. Similarly, nonbelievers watch our backs and pay attention to how people are reacting to us in a way that other members need not do. Like 1960s LGBTQ members, some 2017 agnostics and atheist are “in the closet” to feel safe.
AAs who don’t believe in an AA higher-power have reported to me that they were told:

- You must be more open-minded,
- You will relapse if you don’t find God, and
- AA never intended to be for everyone and maybe you will be happier starting your own secular fellowship down the street.

The Ipsos poll looks at country by country comparisons. Great Britain had ½ the number of people who lose respect for nonreligious people, compared to the USA. Maybe it is no coincidence that the UK General Service Conference approved and published The ‘God’ Word: Agnostics and Atheists in AA. Meanwhile, the GSO located in the USA has been inundated with double-digit requests since 1975 for a pamphlet for unbelievers. These requests came from individuals, groups, districts and area delegates. Each time, it’s been a variation on the refrain, “Sorry, not at this time.”

So, if we can agree that not all agnostics and atheist feel equal in AA, then a discussion in the desert about Twelve Step language for non-theists is timely. GSO isn’t AA’s boss. October 27 – 29 we take our concerns to the top of the AA hierarchy, you and me, your home group and my home group. How can you and I be more accommodating to ensure that AA is for everyone, regardless of their belief or lack of belief?

**Better communicating: We don’t need to be told; we need to feel heard**

To take credit for solving the communication breakdown issue, I will remind you of what you already know. From *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling* by Ernie Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham:

> “Humility and obedience are two painfully misunderstood virtues that are really the arts of listening. Humility involves the refusal to coerce, the rejection of all attempts to control others. … Spirituality is experienced in our Listening.”

In the role of counselor, sponsor or friend, we try to inspire Twelve-Step creativity and fearless self-expression. Dismissing someone by telling them they are closed-minded is a pretty good way to do just the opposite.

Instead of rebutting someone with, “Higher Power can be anything you want it to be,” why not listen more deeply? Why not empathize? Ask another question instead; invite your subject to elaborate. We fear open-ended questions because we can’t control what happens next. As Kurtz and Ketcham reminds, “humility involves the refusal to coerce, the rejection of all attempts to control others.”
To hear where people are coming from, I find it easier to picture them in a place instead of holding a position. If we are in the same cabin at the peak of a mountain, and they can only see out of a North-East window and I only see out of the South-West window, we experience the world differently. To empathize, I listen more to what they see.

The one-dimensional idea of atheists at one end of a line and theists at the other end, with agnostics teetering in the middle, doesn't work for me.

Our worldview comes about from a combination of reason and intuition. A one-dimensional line offers degrees; we can have true believers and ardent non-theists at ends of the spectrum and moderates closer to the center. Linear thinking is black and white… maybe with some agnostic grey in the middle. Can we think instead of worldviews like “blue?” We don’t just have dark blue or light blue. Blue with a yellow influence has a whole spectrum of green influence. Blue with a red influence also has a wide spectrum of purple. Like purple is a blend of blue and red, I see worldview as a blend of intuition and reason. First, we intuitively lean towards a supernatural worldview or a natural worldview (Gods or no gods). This puts our intuitive-brain to work. But complementary to that is our reasoning style that colors how we articulate our gut-feeling intuition. We all reason. Some of us reason concretely. Some of us are abstract reasoners.

This linear way to categorize people suits the concrete thinkers only. Binary or reductionist thinking finds this to be satisfactory, maybe even scientific. But if we think...
abstractly about how the universe operates, then the nature of the question is equally or more important than the answer to that question. An abstract thinker doesn’t see philosophical or existential questions in ones and zeros.

So, to divide people into worldviews, I prefer to plot worldviews two-dimensionally—on a quadrilateral graph—instead of a line. I’ve seen this paradigm illustrated before and it resonates more with me. Integrating both intuition (Y-axis) and reason (X-axis) feels holistic in understanding a more complicated question that, “Want a coffee?”

**A Quadrilateral Look at Worldviews (Four—not three—types)**

Quadrilateral graphs have a North/South Y-axis and a West/East X-axis. On the Y-axis let’s look at intuitive predisposition. Is it gods or is it nature? What is our visceral, gut feeling? Is the supernatural our personal experience or an outdated superstition? Forget for a minute what your rational is; how do you feel about it?

Let’s consider terminology for our North and South of the Y-axis. I like Natural (worldview) for North, Supernatural (worldview) for South. Yes, it’s true that I really like that N is short for both North and Natural (or Naturalism) and the same for “S”. But I also have issues with other ways of defining these hemispheres. Believer vs. non-believer implies that some people can’t or won’t hold beliefs of any kind; we all believe something. The same problem comes up with theist vs. atheist. The a-theist does not believe in intervening deities but who wants to be identified by what one does not believe? It’s no better if we identify atheists as rationalists; what would we call the other hemisphere? Non-rationalist? That’s hardly fair or accurate. I like natural/supernatural because, like pro-choice and pro-life, no one is against something; they each believe something to be true for themselves. Please use whatever labels you like; encourage others to use their language. I’m not trying to control the conversation.

For Naturalism, I borrow the definition from Skeptic Magazine editor Michael Shermer who wrote an article in a peer-reviewed journal, Theology and Science, Volume 15, 2017 – Issue 3. It’s called “Scientific Naturalism: A Manifesto for Enlightenment Humanism” and his definition of holding a naturalism worldview is...

“"The belief that the world is governed by natural laws and forces that can be understood, and that all phenomena are part of nature and can be explained by natural causes, including human cognitive, moral and social phenomena. The application of scientific naturalism in the human realm led to the widespread adoption of Enlightenment humanism, a cosmopolitan worldview that places
supreme value on science and reason, eschews the supernatural entirely and relies exclusively on nature and nature’s laws, including human nature.”

There are plenty more definitions for supernaturalism and feel free to use your favorite for either. For me, a supernatural worldview recognizes a universe or life governed, not only by material forces but also, by non-material (spiritual) forces. Feel free to add to that gods, higher powers or any ideas you hold about a supernatural worldview.

With Naturalism to the North and Supernaturalism in the Southern hemisphere, that invites a cross-section of East/West hemispheres as well — our reasoning style to collaborate with our intuition. This West/East difference could be expressed as concrete vs. abstract, binary vs. complex, reductionism vs, relativism.

Earlier I used Bill Wilson’s “We Agnostics,” challenge: God is or He is not; it can’t be both; what is our answer to be? That’s a concrete (binary) language. But if you are of the Eastern hemisphere, abstract or relativism style or reasoner, the question is a fool’s errand. The answer is unknown and unknowable. “I don’t know and you don’t either.”

Recently, YouTube has been flush with new debates about the existence of god(s) and only Western X-axis speakers were invited to the debate. New atheists line up to match wits against the greatest theologians of our time, also excited to match wits. University Halls would sell out and YouTube hits would be the envy of any pop star recording artist. People love these cage-match debates. While they’re entertaining, do they help us understand each other?

What we’ve learned from gender identity is that we don’t label others based on our perceived criteria; everyone gets to self-identify, now. Even if we perceive another as being of a distinct gender identity, it’s not up to us to label anyone other than ourselves. Like someone looking out only a North-East Window she, will draw conclusions that you or I would not, based on the inescapable realities we draw from our limited South-East, North-West or South-West window. We don’t only color our definitions but we want you to use our definitions for labels, too. How many times have I had a theist tell me what it means to be an atheist? Frustrating. In these worldview debates, each side
wanted to dominate how each term must be defined for all. Just as we now invite people to gender-identify without imposing another’s criteria, it’s better to allow each of us to choose and define our worldview labels. It doesn’t require consensus.

I don’t ask someone what their conception of God is? That’s pigeonholing someone into 1940s AA language. Vikings would use the term Oden; Muslims and Sikhs discourage descriptive narration for the almighty. I ask a fellow member how they see the world working? Is there outside agency at play, from their vantagepoint? Do they believe we’re here to figure life out on our own or is there a source or anther dimension?

People can tell if they’re being tested or if I really want to know how they feel about things. People love to talk about themselves, if they feel safe. I can meet them where they are. If they believe in outside agency, I ask them about it. If they believe that such a belief is superstitious, I ask them to tell me how they believe life and the universe works.

This existential question, or the answer to it, isn’t superficially arrived at and isn’t easily moved from. People might have a strong feeling or a slight hint. AA can work for them regardless. In how others explain their position I might get a sense if they are more concrete or abstract in how they reason. If I’m not sure, I can just ask, “Do you think it’s a black and white thing?” I find people who hold concrete reasoning styles are easier to identify that those who hold abstract views.

Abstract thinkers aren’t so concerned with absolutes. **Abstract supernaturalism** might be in the form of *somethingism*: “I don’t think the only reality of life is what we sense or measure. It makes sense to me that there is something.” Even “higher power” might be too restrictive for an Abstract Supernaturalist.

Some in this quadrant might identify with Ietsism. This is a belief system that might relate to “spiritual but not religious” but maybe not “God of our understanding.” Ietsists beliefs are unspecified and the transcendent force is undefined or undetermined. Ietsists might think the ability to understand Him, Her, It or They is beyond human capacity. To try or to lay claim to an understanding—to an Abstract Supernaturalist—seems either arrogant or delusional.

You might never find someone in this SW, Abstract Supernaturalism quadrant talking about the will of the gods for them. They may or may not have a defined sense of what this immaterial force is or how concerned it is with our day to day decisions or our values. Abstract Supernaturalists may balk at the idea of understanding the unknowable. If angered, they may retort that claims of “understanding,” is the
simplicity of an under-developed mind. Who are we to “understand” that which is greater than us. It can’t be both a higher power and a comprehensible power, can it? And don’t answer that question; it’s rhetorical. Empathize with their unwillingness to try to capture the unknowable in mortal terms.

Abstract Naturalists might be quick to jump to, “Because it’s unknown or unknowable, how helpful is it to talk about, pretend, or worry about it? I get on with life, satisfied that somethings are unknowable and I don’t worry myself much about it.” Some people call themselves *apa-theists*. “I don’t know and I don’t care; can we talk about something more interesting, now?” The futility of seeking is endless and a natural world is awesome enough without supernatural explanation for the unknown.

Either supernatural or natural abstract thinkers may lose respect for anyone who argues for or against creation, a parking-spot-finding higher power or any of the concrete arguments and language that seem to amuse so many in AA.

If you subscribe to Concrete Supernaturalism, you’ve won the Twelve-Step lottery. Most of the *Big Book* or other Twelve-Step literature is written in your language: “When, therefore, we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God. This applies, too, to other spiritual expressions which you find in this book.” If you’re a Concrete Supernaturalist, you’ll wonder why everyone doesn’t feel included by this language.

But we don’t all feel “This book gets me!” For many in the naturalism hemisphere, “spirituality” is a woo-woo word for the superstitious. It is a projection from the ego of man, an inescapable tendency to see patterns even when there are none, to feel thinks that are not categorically real.

But that isn’t universally true. Sam Harris talks about the spiritual life of atheists. Some AA’s do, too. I have met AA atheist who pray. They no longer believe in god(s) they were taught to pray to as kids; but the ritual of prayer (to nothing), still gives comfort.
Concrete Naturalists might be anti-religion, they might roll their eyes during the reading of “How It Works,” and blurt out, “Nobody here believes this shit, do they?!?” This might be stereotypical of other’s conceptions of non-theists. Some will be activists and fight for separation of church and state. Some might argue that religion is more harmful than good. But Concrete Naturalists aren’t mad at God; how can you be mad at something you don’t believe exists? Some are frustrated that others (in their view) are so weak that they make things up to cope with their finite, chaotic life.

On the other hand, many Concrete Naturalists just never give the idea of a supernatural realm the slightest thought. The world is awesome and wonderful as a natural phenomenon. They just don’t think of god during a sunrise and no—they don’t pray in a foxhole; atheist are the soldiers returning fire while others fall to their knees in prayer.

In a secular environment you rarely see an angry Concrete Naturalist. They have no religion to react to and they are content in their awesome natural and finite world. With no belief in an intervening deity, someone from this quadrant might make peace with a secular power greater than themselves. It could be a power of example, a higher purpose, the power of inspiration or persuasion. But there is no need for Naturalists to talk in Supernatural constructs. For example, an atheist might not believe “God could and would if He were sought,” but she or he may volunteer that the power of fellowship or the power of program is keeping her or him clean and sober.

On the other hand, they might wonder why others would demonize will, self-will, freethought. It isn’t willpower that’s to be avoided, it’s self-will-run-riot. One is healthy, one is not. It’s not “our best thinking” that caused our downfall; it was impulsive thinking. Reason or sanity may be a naturalist’s higher power but don’t expect all of them to talk in this theistically biased language.

The more we exercise empathy, the more empathic we become. If you’re a believer, you suffer doubt. If you’re a naturalist, you wonder about infinite possibilities. Consider that each person, from each quadrant has a distinct personality, too. Extroverts will communicate different than introverts, for example. Highly conscientious people will have strict boundaries around the language we use, but if conscientiousness is something you rank lower in, you won’t be so rigid. Every quadrant has personality traits, beyond what they believe.

Do you know about the Big Five in psychology or the Five Factor Model that influence our personality? There are two acronyms: CANOE or OCEAN and the five characteristics—depending how high or low you score—effects how you relate to your worldview and others.

How someone ranks in these five factors will weigh on how they express themselves or if they express themselves about worldview. Someone ranking high on “agreeableness” might be difficult to get talking candidly, especially if they are concerned that their view isn’t the popular view. An extroverted abstract person might loudly dismiss concrete thinkers as infantile thinkers. Extroverted concrete thinkers will call abstracts “indecisive fence-sitters.” Introverts might not say anything during a debate; even if they have a clear view about the topic.

If you or I score low on our openness to new experiences it will be hard to listen to opposing views. We would interrupt with rebuttals or try to persuade them that ours is the more enlightened point of view. If you want to know how you rank on the Five Factor Model (FFM), Psychology Today has one of many of the self-tests on the internet:

If you’re joining us in Sedona Arizona, come for a discussion—not a lecture. I have some prepared material but we will be breaking into smaller workshops and sharing our own concerns or experiences with the language of addiction/recovery.

Even AA’s Big Book—with its theistic bias—has some all-inclusive language. “We found we tapped an unsuspecting inner resource.”vi Newer fellowships have more contemporary language and less reification.

For fun, I’ve borrowed some newer (than 1939) Steps. Some are from 21st century fellowship and some have been around a surprisingly long time, helping addicts with alternative language to express the same universal process. Hopefully, these suggestions open our minds to alternative ways of seeing and articulating the process. None of these Steps (see next page) in this list are theoretical; they are all being used somewhere with success. Many of them can be found in a helpful reference for anyone working with others who are working the Steps: The Little Book: A Collection of Alternative 12 Steps, by Roger C, AA-Agnostica. This 70-page booklet can be found on RebellionDogsPublishing.com bookstore page, AAagnostica.org, Amazon or anywhere you buy books.
Let’s keep this discussion going…”

Twelve Suggested Steps from Twelve Alternative Sources

1) Admit that you are powerless to overcome your addictions and that your life has become unmanageable. (Internet and Technology Addiction Anonymous).

2) Dare to believe that there lies within us the power to restore balance to our lives. (Online Gamers Anonymous 2001).

3) Made a decision to change our lives by committing to this simple program of recovery. (We Agnostics Gr. Kansas City).

4) I will make a fearless and honest review of my life, my values, and my goals. (Teen Addiction Anonymous 2007).


6) I am entirely ready to allow realistic and rational thinking to reveal my destructive patterns of addictive thinking and behavior (Realistic Recovery, Mike H, 2009).

7) With humility and openness, sought to eliminate our shortcomings (San Francisco Agnostics www.agnostics.org).

8) I will consider those that I have harmed and those that have harmed me. I will become willing to explore my feelings regarding those harms (Secular Organizations for Sobriety – SOS).

9) We shall do what we can to make amends, in a way that will not cause further harm (Humanist Twelve Steps, B. F. Skinner, 1987).

10) We continue to think about our strengths and weaknesses, and when we are wrong we say we are wrong (Young Warriors Network, Umatilla Tribal Alcohol Program).

11) Sought through mindful inquiry and meditation to improve our spiritual awareness, seeking only for knowledge of our rightful path in life and the power to carry that out (Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers AA Group, Toronto).


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[1] The Lodge Program, Dan Anderson Renewal Center, Hazelden-Betty Ford, Minnesota