



## A Rebellion Dogs Blog

March 2018

### The Program of Alcoholics Anonymous: Interpretive by Design

Just try to refute that *membership* in AA is based on individual interpretation of Tradition Three, “The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking.” Or if you like long-form Traditions:

“Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence, we may refuse none who wish to recover. Nor ought A.A. membership ever depend upon money or conformity. Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an A.A. group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation.” *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* pg. 189

The *program* of AA has always been suggested, i.e. optional, i.e. open to individualized re-wording.

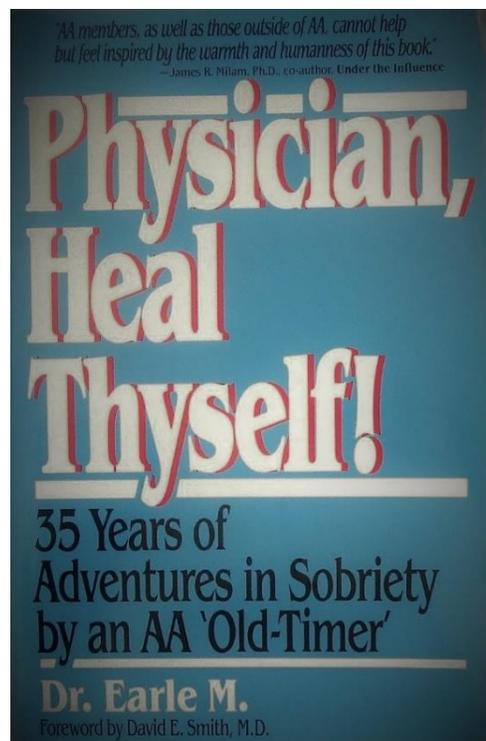


This rugged individualism extends to our groups, too – our groups being collective iterations of our individual inalienable rights as AA members.

To nurse anger at groups who interpret the

Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (re-write them), requires a lack of AA historical knowledge in order to get maximum indulgence in the dopamine-rush of righteous indignation. Rigid obedience to a literal interpretation of AA is permitted within any AA group – join such a group, form such a group – purge the demons, knock yourself out. However, such a literalist view cannot be imposed on other AA groups. At least, not by you or me. Only that group’s membership can judge that group’s rituals and practices; so it is written.

February 2<sup>nd</sup> at 11 AM I was presenting on special purpose gathering of AA. I keep researching these topics, I keep presenting and you – the people I present to – keep offering me new information, new books to read, new archival items to seek out. History in AA is a collective, ever-evolving document and my trip west was no different. I read this



book (pictured) which includes a story of 1965 San Francisco meeting which replaced the AA Twelve Steps with a ten-Step reading that is both secular and multi-substance (not alcohol only). My depth of knowledge continues to expand.

Central offices *serve* groups, “they do not *govern*.” From time to time, our attention is drawn to the drama of central offices that express a negative view or exercised punitive actions upon groups that “break Traditions.”

The Forum Group of AA. Founded in AA’s 30<sup>th</sup> year by Dr. Earle M., author of “Physician Heal Thyself!”, now pg. 301 in *Alcoholics Anonymous* Edition Four, 2001 and first printed in the Edition Two, 1955. The Forum Group founders found AA’s interpretation of higher power and the mono-focus on alcohol, unhelpful for their purposes; so, as I mentioned, they adapted.

Dr. Earle describes in his book, a journey through long-term sobriety. Something Earle heard from those who came before him, was the Four I's in his 1989 book, *Physician Heal Thyself: 35 Years of Adventure in Sobriety by an AA 'Old-Timer'*:

- Infatuation,
- Irritability,
- Inventiveness,
- Insight

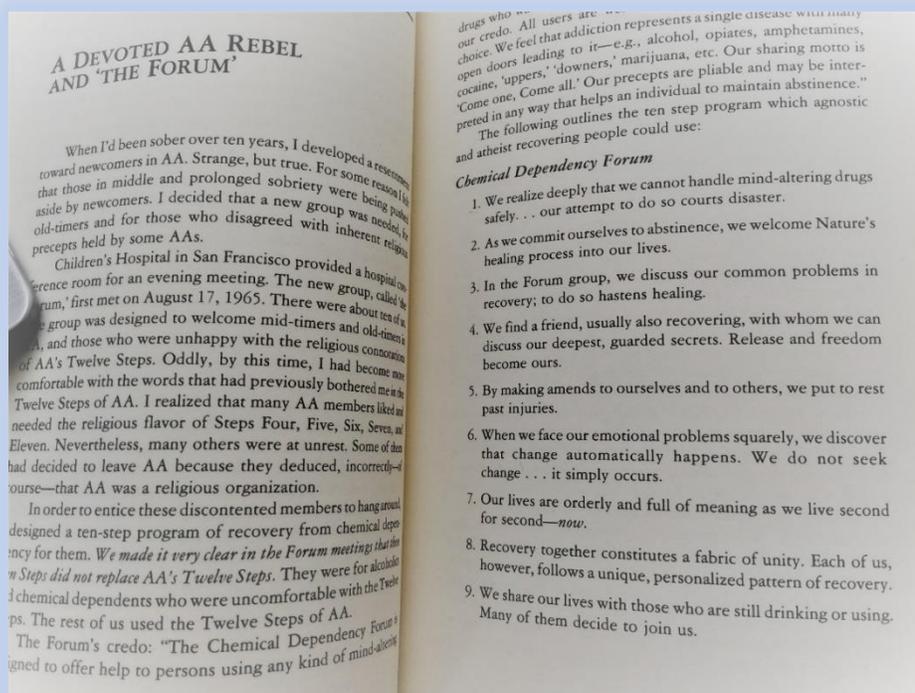
"I had my last drink on June 15, 1953," Earle writes. "I've experienced the joys as well as the struggles of a growing, long-term sobriety. The Four I's of Recovery have always intrigued me, and I have personally – and intensely – experienced each phase."

During his Inventiveness phase, Earle crafted a secular Ten Step version of the AA program focused on all addiction, not just alcohol use disorder. While it may have turned the odd eyebrow up, not only was this liberalism in keeping with 1960s San Francisco zeitgeist. It was Bill W who championed the idea of Earle's story going into the Second Edition. Bill and Earle were close for at least the ten years leading up to The Forum coming to be. Would AA's Twelve Step author disprove of someone taking artistic liberty with his Twelve Steps? Bill W's on the record accounts of groups that act autonomously, such as re-writing Steps or ignoring Traditions, was delight expressed by Bill for these group's pioneering spirit.

Here are the Ten Steps of the Forum Group of AA (1965):

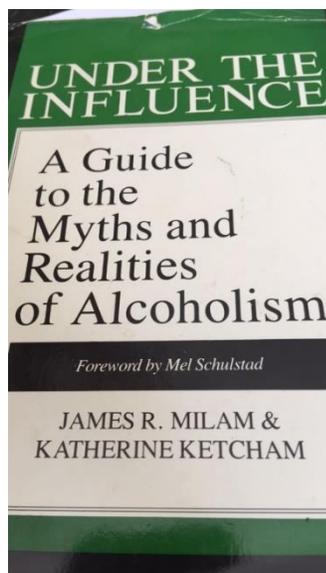
1. We realized deeply that we cannot handle mind-altering drugs safely ... our attempts to do so courts disaster.
2. As we commit ourselves to abstinence, we welcome Nature's healing process into our lives.
3. In the group, we discuss our common problems in recovery; to do so hastens healing.

4. We find a friend, usually also recovering, with whom we can discuss our deepest, guarded secrets. Release and freedom become ours.
5. By making amends to ourselves and to others, we put to rest past injuries.
6. When we face our emotional problems squarely, we discover that change automatically happens. We do not seek change . . . It simply occurs.
7. Our lives are orderly and full of meaning as we live second for second.
8. Recovery together constitutes a fabric of unity. Each of us, however, follows a unique, personalized pattern of recovery.
9. We share our lives with those who are still drinking or using. Many of them decide to join us.
10. Our meeting doors are open to all users of mind-altering substances. The welcome mat is in full view.



Twenty-five years after founding The Forum AA Group with fellow AAs, Earle recounts his pleasure with returning to the Bay-area to see his group still going strong. Earle M had other criticisms of our early writings. Earle didn't believe alcoholism was caused by underlying psychological issues. In his 1989 book, many original *AAisms* are refuted:

"Alcoholics have the same psychological and emotional problems as everyone else before they start drinking. these problems are aggravated by their addiction to alcohol. Alcoholism undermines and weakens the alcoholic's ability to cope with the normal problems of living. Furthermore, the alcoholic's emotions become inflamed both when [drinking] excessively and when [they stop] drinking. Thus, when drinking and when abstinent, [they] will feel angry, fearful, and depressed to exaggerated degrees."<sup>i</sup>



This biogenetic view was broadly introduced to professionals and the addiction/recovery community in 1981's *Under the Influence: A Guide to the Myths and Realities of Alcoholism* by James R. Millam and Katherine Ketcham.

“Myth: People become alcoholics because they have psychological or emotional problems which they try to relieve by drinking.

Reality: Alcoholics have the same psychological and emotional problems as everyone else. These problems are aggravated by their addiction to alcohol.”

I wouldn't be surprised if Doctors Earle M and James Millam knew each other; they certainly traveled in the same circles.

I don't believe addiction is strictly psychological or strictly physical. There is a case for alcoholism as a coping technique for managing trauma, loss, etc. Many identify with this correlation meaning causality.

Today, led in part by expanding neuroscience, the AA idea of addiction as symptom is back in vogue. In 1939 AA's how-it-works – "Our liquor was but a symptom. We had to get down to causes and conditions." *Alcoholics Anonymous*, pg. 64. Here's a couple of credible advocates of the environmental cause:

Johann Hari, 2015 Ted Talk, "I've been talking about how disconnection is a major driver of addiction... the opposite of addiction is not sobriety. The opposite of addiction is connection."<sup>ii</sup>

Dr. Gabor Mate *In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts*, "Don't ask 'Why the addiction?' Ask, 'Why the pain?'"<sup>iii</sup>

Personally, I'm agnostic about this chicken and egg question of what is cause and what is effect. I prefer an abstract vs. binary reasoning approach to such constructs.

My story? I had traumas/emotional turmoil before my drug use. Yes, I did medicate those uneasy feelings with drugs/booze. The medicating started once I experienced how being high made me feel more like a stud and less like a dud. But also, alcoholism is found in my family (another risk factor). So, were my environmental or genetic factors to blame?

I appreciate what I learned in my time in the rooms with Adult Children of Alcoholics. Many ACAs with my same environmental and genetic issues didn't develop addiction. Instead, ACA members developed other manipulative coping techniques: The Adult Child "Laundry List" articulates some of these: seeking approval, merciless self-criticism, difficulty having fun, hyper-responsible, lying, inability to see projects through to conclusion, etc.<sup>iv</sup>

Some of us in AA drank with impunity for decades as high-functioning alcohol users, never crossing *an invisible line* from copious consumption to self-destructive 'survival drinking' until our retirement years. These people seem to have become alcoholic from excessive long-term use.

It seems that many roads lead to addiction. I'm not married to the "disease" model of addiction, either. "Disease" is way better than the "moral-failing"

model but it's not perfect. We could spend a day on recovered vs. recovering and/or behavioral vs. biogenetic causal factors. These are great debates for a long drive.

*For those who come to San Francisco Summertime will be a love-in there  
In the streets of San Francisco Gentle people with flowers in their hair'*

Thanks for your hospitality, San Francisco. I spent a week on your west coast during the Symposium on AA History February 1-3, 2019. San Fran feels like a home away from home to a hippy-at-heart like me. To everyone who drove me around, housed me, sat and talked, invited me to their meeting, had coffee or tea, broke bread with me – thank you.

I'm really enjoying reading, re-reading and quoting *Physician Heal Thyself!* I know how great it is to share books and music with the people I love. While at a meeting, a member gave me their own cherished Thrift Books copy. How great is that?

With all due respect and appreciation for Johann Hari, the *connection* I've always felt to books and music didn't prevent or cure my addictions. But books and music are essential recovery capital builders in the treatment of said chronic conditions. Many a trouble time has been lessened by connecting to the right song or story.

April 2019 marks 80 years since the *Big Book* came off the printing presses. Is that a long time or a short time? I've heard 100 miles is a great distance to Europeans and 100 years is a long time to Americans. That said, I don't expect consensus on how long-in-the-tooth AA lore is. I can say this: AA has helped many and fell short for many, many more. But in 80-years, AA wasn't stopping others from finding a better way; were we? If you or your group finds a method that brings recovery to every addict, my home group and I will stop what we're doing and start doing what you do. Wouldn't that be a relief?

But until we find a way that works for everyone, *Vive la difference*. Let's celebrate the pioneering spirit and remember that to question is to be a freethinker. Being critical isn't being cynical. A beginner's mind, an open

heart and the right blend of cherishing the wisdom of ages and a willingness to test new things is still our best hope against a relentless, omnipresent addiction crisis.

Through a 2019 lens, a book about a Caucasian, hetro, professional male talking about infatuation, irritability, inventiveness and insight challenges today's attitudes about the privileged vs. marginalized classes. Earle's book was written thirty years ago. I remember 1989; things have changed; how does *Physician Heal Thyself!* hold up? Earle comes across as being as self-aware and sensitive as any white male could be from the late-1980s. It didn't read like misplaced entitlement to me. I say this as a reader fresh off my research and writing about underrepresented populations in AA navigating the unintended but undeniable systemic discrimination.

Our LGBTQ members, women, non-theists and youth look at irritability and inventiveness differently that those who hold the privilege of the majority. Infatuation, irritability, inventiveness and insight are described as phases. Being gay or atheist isn't a phase. The reaction to women, youth, visible minorities informs the irritability more so than a phase or recovery. The need for groups that speak our own language does inspire inventiveness but that's not best described as a phase either, but more of duty born of our responsibility (declaration).

If you're interested in the Symposium on [AA History presentation on The Debate Over Special Purpose Groups, click HERE](#) for the YouTube link.



I really enjoyed presenting at the Symposium. It was an honor to sit in all the other presentations.<sup>vi</sup> on AA. Thinking about early women or indigenous members in a white-man's Alcoholics Anonymous, gay men and lesbians in 20<sup>th</sup> century AA meetings, young people and

atheists/agnostics, in the case of these underrepresented members, irritability in AA, and the need for inventiveness are more acute. While systemic discrimination is rarely intentional, it still drives away more members even as we aim to widen our gateway.

In the same year Dr. Earle M. was finding sobriety, the April (1953) *A.A. Grapevine* published an article, "Women are only Tolerated in AA; they are the Orphans of AA." AA's *meeting in print* went on to say:

"I never dreamed there existed so much hostility toward women alcoholics until I started to attend AA meetings. I bless the woman member who steered me to a woman's discussion group in the hard first months of my sobriety, because without its guidance and intimate group therapy I might have dropped out as countless other women do.

The few women who have 'made' the program have done so despite the tremendous handicaps placed in their way by other women, by men members, and by non-alcoholics. I know for a fact that too many women AAs are suspicious of and hostile toward their own sex. The men, conditioned by their bar experiences, also view the female alcoholic with suspicion and hostility. There are many exceptions, of course, and my present group is one of them."

Again, what may be a *phase* for the privileged majority, is something more for underrepresented populations in AA. For women, indigenous peoples, youth, non-theists, LGBTQ members, The Four I's of Recovery ensure that "whenever someone reaches out, the hand of A.A. will be there." Long live infatuation, irritability, inventiveness and insight.

---

<sup>i</sup> Pronouns in [ ] replace male pronouns used in the day with gender-neutral terms.

<sup>ii</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/johann\\_hari\\_everything\\_you\\_think\\_you\\_know\\_about\\_addiction\\_is\\_wrong?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/johann_hari_everything_you_think_you_know_about_addiction_is_wrong?language=en)

<sup>iii</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARyq\\_BtCVMo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ARyq_BtCVMo)

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/common-traits-of-adult-children-of-alcoholics-66557>

<sup>v</sup> San Francisco by Scott McKenzie <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7I0vkKy504U>

<sup>vi</sup> Get the audio for the 2019 Symposium on AA History and hold the date for the 6<sup>th</sup> Symposium: <https://www.aahistorysymposium.org/>