

THE GOD CONCEPT IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS

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About the Author

In January 1940, Rev. George A. Little, D.D., then a fifty-six year old Minister of The United Church of Canada in Toronto, Ontario, happened to read a review of the book Alcoholics Anonymous written by Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick. Dr. Little ordered a copy of the Big Book and then six more copies. He attended the Yale School of Alcohol Studies in 1941. As it was difficult to import books into Canada, Dr. Little was granted the distribution rights to the book Alcoholics Anonymous in Canada. On January 13, 1943, Rev. Little and a friend, Rev. Price gathered six alcoholics at the Little Denmark Restaurant on Bay Street in Toronto and held a meeting. It was successful and a second meeting was held the following week. On January 28, 1943 the group moved into the Metropolitan United Church and meetings have continued at this site on and off up to the present.

This is how A.A. came to Canada and how a non-alcoholic assisted in the starting of the fellowship.

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Alcoholics Anonymous, which now has 1,700 groups with 70,000 members and influence far beyond its membership, is a spiritual movement, a faith cure for alcoholism. Men and women find that they have been trying to live without God, and then they discover how to live with God. That gives a different set to the sails. Or, as one expressed it, the roots of his mind reached down and grasped a new soil. It is a leap of faith to be able to believe that there is a God personal to oneself. The distinctive novelty is that each alcoholic is allowed to choose his own concept of God. There is full liberty of belief and no end to the varieties of belief. Therein Alcoholics Anonymous differs from the churches that require belief in certain sets of dogma. An alcoholic refuses to accept these ready-made: he wants to make his own. In A.A. he is encouraged to do so, with this rider, that he obey the Higher Power, as he understands it.

That is intriguing. That places the responsibility on the alcoholic. He is on trial, not an organization, a book, a creed, or a sacrament. Can he act according to his own faith? Every person has some belief, more or less vague, in a creative, life-giving force, a universal mind or oversoul. Alcoholics Anonymous begins by thinking of this as a Power rather than a Person. It works unseen as electricity, may be thought of as gravitation, evolution, or growth. Thought is a power, good will is a power, and trust is a power. Trying to visualize the Higher Power is a hindrance rather than a help. Formulas are of little value. Like the wind, the spirit can be felt but not seen. Instead of expecting ecstasies, visions, trances, one finds God in what is; contact may be made through gratitude.

Surrender to the Higher Power is not difficult for alcoholics, because for years they have surrendered to a lower power. It gives a lift, euphoria, escape, release, and cessation from fear and worry, a lightening of reality, forgetfulness, stupor, and sleep. In time, however, there are craving and compulsion, memory blanks, shakes, sweats, headaches, and hangovers. One man after a bout felt as though he had seven skulls. In devotion to this autocratic tyrant alcoholics will surrender thought, time, money, health, friends, and vocation. To surrender to the Higher Power involves no more exacting a demand than the surrender they have made to alcohol, perhaps over a drinking period of twenty years.

Experienced A.A. practitioners, while admitting that they are only amateur psychologists, are wise enough not to begin by demanding beliefs. They work on thoughts, desires, attitudes, relationships, purposes, and habits. They are agreed that the root trouble is in the thinking, not the drinking. At one meeting of a rather intellectual group the drink problem was not directly mentioned. Half a dozen speakers rang the changes on freedom from fears, surrender of resentments, cultivation of good will, positive help to others, building up a sense of dependence upon the Higher Power. When the inner life is brought under discipline the outer conduct is largely self-regulated.

The program of recovery is absorbed rather than learned, caught rather than taught. Listening to the speakers, private conversations with alcoholics who are now happily and contentedly sober, reading the book Alcoholics Anonymous and pamphlet literature, and picking up fragments of truth will produce a transforming change. This may be sudden or gradual, and there is little concern as to which. Often the slow recoveries prove to be very sure, but the ladder of rehabilitation has these rungs, not necessarily in this order:

Honesty, humility, tolerance, concern for others, inner contentment, radiant happiness, a new standard of values, faith. Religious people would describe this as conversion: A.A. 's are content to speak of a personality change. No one is more surprised at the transformation than the alcoholic himself. Like the lady in the fairy tale he is inclined to say, "This is none of I." An army man, a heavy drinker for thirty-five years, had the temperament of a sergeant major even after he became a colonel. Now he is mellow, tender, and as sacrificial as once severe. Before a group of medical men he said, "I have had a personality change." A psychiatrist checked him by saying, "My dear fellow, you can't have a personality change." "Well, at least I'm under new management," replied the A.A.

Spiritual power is frequently found on the lower levels of mysticism. The inner voice is really a mentor. An inebriate who had panhandled all over North America had an obsession against religion, fearing that it meant letters of fire in the sky, voices from the clouds, or a dramatic emotional upheaval. It was suggested to him that he spend five minutes each morning planning his day with his conscience, how he would use his time and spend his money, the mood in which he would meet his family, the sense of responsibility he would have in his work. He discovered that as soon as he listened, the inner voice spoke. He found he could be spiritual in a very practical way without seeing visions or dreaming dreams.

A high-strung man with perplexing business cares took liquor to get to sleep at night. In time he would go to sleep with a full jug of wine at his bedside:

Later he would waken with an empty wine jug in bed with him. One morning he passed out. A friend said, "One tenth of the attention that you give to gin, if given to God could make you happy." The experiment was tried. Each day he lists the commonplace things for which he is thankful, the mistakes of yesterday he wishes to avoid today, the people whose friendship he ought to keep in repair, the duties which are "musts" for that day. With a gleeful grin he tells others "give God the first ten minutes of every day and he will give you back the whole twenty-four all different." This simple plan has freed hundreds.

At 2:30 A.M. a wise A.A. member was roused out of his sleep. A taxi driver had deposited a chronic at his door. The moment he came into the house the chronic shouted out: "I don't believe in God, or Bible, or church, or prayer. I am a free thinker." The reply was "O.K., nobody wants you to believe anything if you don't want to. That's your business." The two went to the kitchen drank coffee and talked. The A.A. said: "There is no use in discussing prayer. The only thing about prayer that is any good is praying. I am going to pray for you." Which he did, humbly, trustingly, and in colloquial terms. Then, the drunk was told he could pray, too, if he felt like it. His first petition was, "O God, help me have faith in this guy." He is still sober, back home again living with his wife.

It is this experimental, demonstration offer that is the key to A.A. Controversy, argument, and dogmatism are avoided. Everything is on a take-it-or-leave-it basis. "It worked for me, it might work for you." The goal is far greater than to merely stop drinking. In itself that may not be of very much help. To be conscious of not drinking and still wanting to drink is just about as distracting a state of mind as being under the influence of alcohol. The big positive goal is happy and contented sobriety, a rewarding and satisfying way of living. It is a distinct privilege to be an alcoholic if it leads to twenty-four hours at a time without fear and in good will toward people and in humble dependence upon God. Restoration to sanity is abundant proof of the working of a Higher Power.

Prayer becomes a reality, usually in everyday forms of speech. Rhetorical demands, purple-patch phrases, snatches of liturgies are replaced by simple but earnest desires. One man says each evening, "Thank you, God, for a sober day." Next morning he prays, "Please God, another day like yesterday." Even a spot of prayer like that is an anchor by which to hold. An A.A. sober for six months went into a sudden panic. He found himself entering his favorite bar. Involuntarily he ejaculated, "O God, save me." In five seconds he was walking down the street cool and collected,

every butterfly gone from his stomach. Another man hearing his stepdaughter in hysterics cried for help as to what to do. He was given the right words to say and soon the child was out skating. His verdict is that "the Higher Power works fast." To hear the AA's recite the Lord's Prayer is an experience in worship. "Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil." That is a life and death matter. Our desires are our real prayers, not what we say with our lips.

One helpful approach is to think of God as the truth-making Power. The typical alcoholic insists on making his own interpretation of the universe and he anticipates the Day of Judgement by pronouncing condemnation on all and sundry. His dislikes are stronger than his likes. Criticism is his mental habit rather than appreciation. It is an initial step in humility to admit that truth is ordained of God. Mathematicians did not decree the multiplication table, nor musicians the octave, astronomers the calendar, orators the alphabet, mariners the magnetic compass. When truth is accepted as from God, intellectual conceit begins to vanish. The alcoholic learns to work with the laws of God instead of against them. Curiously enough the mind starts to discover new truth and to act upon it until every day becomes a voyage of discovery into the many-sided truths of God. Mind and mortality thus have a constant interplay.

In simple, even primitive fashion, members of Alcoholics Anonymous come to think of the Higher Power as the Hero of Eternity. Long before we were born the Higher Power was governing and ordaining: long after we are gone that same Power will be ruling and overruling. Do not be fussed, little man. Today is all you need to think about. The rhythm of the day and night becomes a contact with God. Living one day at a time can be an act of faith, a response of trust. One man returning from a five thousand mile selling trip states: "To travel without fear is a new experience. I cannot become accustomed to it. I never will become accustomed to it." On a long, cold bus trip over an icy road, the one other passenger produced a bottle and offered a drink that was refused. The ability to refuse a drink offered in kindness and in the desire to help, to refuse graciously but finally, was the high light of the whole trip. To him it was the grace of God. It is in such experiences of protection and deliverance that AA's become aware of the Living God.

The thought of the Higher Power is usually quite individual and may be decidedly unconventional. One man took his idea from a picture of flowers and birds. Just as the sun sends light and warmth, so he conceives of the Higher Power sending truth and love to him. One man, cursing himself as he shaved, heard a little bird singing outside his window. The bird was adjusted to his environment, but he, a university graduate was not. Now he is. Another learned faith by seeing an engineer take five hundred passengers out of a railway station on one green light. There would be more signals as he went along. Another saw a bay freeze over. At first the ice was paper-thin, by midwinter it was three feet thick, making ice from underneath. Could his soul grow imperceptibly like that? Another was told that big doors swing on little hinges. A.A. is the little hinge on which his future sobriety now swings.

The personality change can be sudden, unexpected, and involuntary. A well-seasoned drinker, after two months of sobriety, was asked to speak at a meeting. He answered that as yet he had nothing to say. "Then just say that you have nothing to say," he was told. When called to speak he announced that for the sake of politeness he could not refuse but "actually I have nothing to say, for nothing has happened to me." Then he paused. After a somewhat painful silence he said quietly, "Something has happened to me," and sat down. Two months later an old friend asked what had happened. He replied: "As I was saying I had nothing to say, suddenly I knew that at long last I had surrendered to goodness. All my life I had been debating and holding back. I have been different ever since and I have not the slightest desire for a drink." Without conscious effort his personality has been unified. Rehabilitation may follow a Christian pattern. One man after thirty years of hard drinking made an inventory of what hard drink had cost him. He became convinced he was a fool, and he did not like being a fool. In his own words this is his story: "I decided to investigate religion. I read what the Apostles had to say about Jesus Christ. Christ came into my life and liquor stayed out. Nothing goes out until something else comes in."

The spiritual aspect of the program is by no means camouflaged but it is not made too obvious at first. The Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, sometimes described as the A.A. bible, has three hundred references to the Higher Power. One member spent a Christmas Day counting them. Six of the Twelve Steps refer to God. The official magazine, The Grapevine, unhesitatingly refers to the Higher Power as God. With increasing frequency at group meetings older members say quite

openly that they are staying sober only with the help of God. Surprising coincidences happen and the explanation naively offered is "Somebody Upstairs." The intimacy does not come from irreverence but from trust. However slight and vague the faith at first, progress is steadily made toward a more mature and adult thought of God.

In social life an alcoholic is regarded as a misfit. Medicine looks upon him as a non-cooperative patient, very often poor paying. The law deals with him as a criminal and sends him to jail. Psychiatry diagnoses him as a mental case and confines him in an institution. The church tells him that he is a sinner and must repent. His family has convinced him that he is hopeless. Against this background of despair, Alcoholics Anonymous comes along telling him that GOD is in him, that God can be in him as much as God can be anywhere, that if God is not in him then GOD is not everywhere and so cannot be God. By the witness of another alcoholic, now sober, the life is breathed into his soul. Without soul and spirit the body is only an empty shell. A few even go so far as to say that God himself may draw upon vital strength and increase of being from their fidelity. If so, they, each one of them, may be important in the whole scheme of things. A surrendered life, they hold, can be of use to God.

Strangely enough, no attempt is made to induce conviction of sin, awaken a sense of guilt, or lead to a period of remorse. It is quite unnecessary anyway. An alcoholic's conscience has told him all this a thousand times. Remorse weakens and is seldom redemptive. The better way is to live today. Yesterday is past; you cannot do much about it. You cannot undo what you have done. Waste no time on regret. Tomorrow is not here yet. Have no fears. The Higher Power has dealt with far harder cases than yours. A miracle might happen, if you will just take it easy. Live one day at a time. When you came into the world there was air for your lungs: has the Higher Power ceased to care for you? Restraint from condemning increases the chance of cure. Usually alcoholics are gun shy of religion. They may have tried it over and over and it has not worked, so they are more responsive to psychology. Fortunately there is enough psychology in the A.A. program for beginners to go on with. Some find that the psychology is sufficient to enable them to achieve sobriety; others keep seeking more than the laws of the mind, and by the practice of meditation advance to the laws of the spirit. It is a mistake to force growth. One man who has been instrumental in over three hundred recoveries says, "I have learned not to look for results too soon: I know they will come later." He himself is not content until he leads his protégés to definite faith, but he knows that time must be given for a seed of truth to germinate. If out of the Twelve Steps in the program the prospect is only ready for one or two, he is urged to work on these. The others will follow later.

Will power is discounted in A.A. "Use your will power" has been useless advice to them. They have the will but not the power. They do not have the won't power, let alone will power. Promises, pledges, prayers have not availed. Then they are told how to replace their puny wills by the will of God. The unit actually begins to lean on the strength of the All. It is found that the imagination governs the will. As one holds the picture of himself as a capable, controlled citizen, thoughts are focused in that direction, desires become conscious, emotions become strong, and the whole personality goes into action. Instead of trying to whip up a weak will into doing what it is unable to do, one finds will power restored by the use of thought, desire, emotion, creative imagination. In six months the will can become stronger to say "No" than formerly as routine it said, "Yes." Such restorations of the will power are frequent in A.A.

The changed attitude to life is indicated by new reading habits. Worthwhile magazines, thoughtful books, and devotional manuals often replace murder mysteries and sex novels. So eager is the mind for truth that serious reading is done. There is a special interest in psychology and psychiatry. Religious classics have a new vogue. Pamphlet literature is kept in circulation. The leader of a group of two hundred men and women said to a visitor, "They are a tough-looking bunch, but you would be surprised to know the amount of bible reading and prayer going on." Another evidence of spiritual experience is the number of newspaper articles and booklets being produced by members.

Men and women who have repeatedly had medical care, been sent to mental hospitals and sanitariums, been given conditioned reflex treatment, gone to alcoholic farms, or taken Reeley Cured, ask why these so often fail and Alcoholics Anonymous is having increasing success. One answer is that these treatments (for which we are thankful; they are much better than none) were only body cures; and in some degree fear was the motive for reform. They were also very

expensive. Alcoholics Anonymous is cheap: there are no membership dues or entrance fees. Instead of a receding memory, A.A. is a growing experience of fact, fellowship and faith. It is enlarged opportunity and cumulative happiness. The old has gone, the new has come and keeps coming. The unhappy past is forgotten in happiness and hope. "Re who rises quickly and continues his race is as if he has never fallen." There are great days ahead.

The movement is strictly nondenominational. Catholics, Protestants, and Jews work together as brothers, though very few Jews are alcoholics. No effort is made to win others to any particular faith. The organization seeks to be inclusive rather than exclusive. No one is barred by age, sex, race, or creed. The one condition is the sincere desire to stop drinking. Nearly every club has one or two evangelical atheists, usually born of Christian parents, who strangely have conserved a Christian spirit. After a few months they usually agree that they never were atheists and anyway it did not make much difference. They stood on the same earth, breathed the same air, and talked the same language as others. Atheism had never been much help in keeping sober. Atheism, in fine, requires too much credulity: it is rather difficult to believe that nothing made everything and is going nowhere.

How is it that denominational differences can be so completely submerged? One reason is that no one is asked to give up anything but is urged to use what he already has. In time it is found that the A.A. program of recovery is founded upon universal spiritual experiences. Jesuits affirm that it is similar to the principles of Ignatius of Loyola. Quakers say that it makes use of meditation and the group conscience. Moral Rearmament people detect the four absolutes. Salvation Army officers are reminded of their knee drill. Methodists say it resembles John Wesley's discipline. Christian Science says it is closely akin. Unity, New Thought, Mysticism all think their programs have been adopted and adapted. A.A. is a synthetic product with a pragmatic test. What does not work is discarded: what does work is retained.

Do AA's go back to church? Some do and some don't. Much depends upon early training. Some have a childhood belief to which they return with a deeper understanding. As a rule Roman Catholics resume their religious duties and observances - to them religion means their church. Some Protestants become active church workers; others go a time or two and report that "my minister doesn't know about God." Quite a few accept A.A. as their church. It gives faith and fellowship even though lacking much formal worship. Church relationships, like so much else in A.A., are left to individual preference and choice, without any overhead rulings. Those who attend church find new meaning in Scripture and sermon, hymns and prayers. AA's become spiritually sensitive and morally responsive.

The church will be wise not to try to control or guide this movement but to learn from it. Sympathetic co-operation is being shown by providing church halls as meeting places and by directing problem parishioners to A.A. The churches may learn something from the flexibility of A.A. organization, the power of fellowship, the possibility of lay evangelism, the transforming power of truth, the influence of common interest groups and the originality of nontechnical language and nondogmatic theology. This movement is of the people, by the people, for the people. But the new wine cannot be put into old bottles. It must find its own carriers.