



The Road



(...as you trudge the Road of Happy Destiny)

Volume 1, Issue 6

York Area Intergroup

November 2003

Is A.A. RELIGIOUS?

ANONYMOUS

I have been a subscriber to "The Grapevine" for over twelve years and in that time I have read a number of articles and letters to the editor dealing with the thorny question "Is A.A. religious?" In most cases, the authors of these pieces concentrate their arguments on the use of the Lord's Prayer by many groups. The main thrust of the argument seems to be that the Lord's Prayer is a Christian document and its use at meetings implies A.A. affiliation with the Christian church. This in turn violates the fourth, sixth and tenth traditions. These well-intentioned members express great concern for the newcomer who might be offended by what they perceive as a uniquely Christian brand of A.A. and choose not to stay long enough to hear the real message of recovery that the program has to offer. They correctly point out that anything that stands in the way of the all-inclusiveness of the fellowship must be discarded. They go on to suggest, however, that Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist, Islamic, atheist, agnostic and other newcomers will feel threatened by confusing or contradictory messages coming from the more religiously inclined members.

I have read enough of these articles to begin to notice a pattern in their structure. After paying a fine tribute to A.A. for saving them from alcoholic destruction and bringing them into a way of life beyond their wildest imaginings they proceed to express very deep forebodings for the future of the program if it continues down its obviously Christian path. Some even border on hostility toward those members and groups that fail to see the error of their ways and vote, by group conscience, to eliminate the controversial prayer from group proceedings. In the October 2003 issue of "The Grapevine" one author writes how a group member suggested he bring up his objections to the prayer at a business meeting and let the group decide whether to keep it. The author decided not to do this since he felt certain his objections would be voted down and, in any case, was concerned about what the other members' reaction toward him would be. I think I know how the author feels.

I was an agnostic when I came into A.A. and
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Elements of Recovery

ANONYMOUS

1. You must find and develop your own answers. Your values are yours and yours alone. Things will change over time, but you have to live with you. We can help you to learn HOW things work, but you must do your own work.

2. What goes around comes around. Karma, The Golden Rule: As ye do unto others, so shall it be done unto you. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. As ye give, so shall ye receive. It doesn't matter how you've heard it; it's true. You want people to respect you, be kind to you; be understanding of you; give you another chance. Well, all of the things you want FROM others can be yours by GIVING those things TO others. If you give good; you get good. If you give bad; you get bad. It is your choice.

3. Values are what you do and the reasons why you do what you do. Your values are your attitudes, your beliefs. Your feelings are directly tied to your values. You can change how you feel by changing your values. After being around A.A. for some 35 years, there is only one thing that has changed in my life: my values. But that has changed everything.

4. Feelings are tied, in part, to your values. They are also affected by your body chemistry. You may have a mental health diagnosis that can also directly impact your feelings. If you think that your feelings are beyond your control, please speak directly to a physician or a mental health professional. Many of us in A.A. have more troubles than our deep friendship with John Barleycorn. What YOU need to know are two things: A. it's not your fault and B. things can change with some help from someone --- your sponsor, your doctor or a MH professional.

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EVENTS CALENDER

NOVEMBER

7th-9th

45th Annual EPGSA

Split Rock Lake Resort,
Harmony PA 18624

10th District 45

Visitation @
Phoenix Study
Group 8PM

1907 Hollywood Dr. York

26th ALCATHON

Otterbein UM

4PM-12AM

301 W. Phila. St. York

27th ALCATHON

Otterbein UM

7AM-12AM

meetings 8AM-10PM on
the even hours

DECEMBER

6th Dover Group

Christmas Party

6th District 45

Visitation @ 8AM
Group

301 W. Phila. St. York

14th Area 59 Meeting

Thomasville Fire
Co.

8AM-5PM

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I have never belonged to any church. My religious upbringing was virtually nonexistent. Full of intellectual pride, I had developed a hatred of organized religion that had more to do with my need to show off my knowledge of history than any deeply held convictions I claimed to have. My views on religious tolerance, such as they were, followed a very American style separation of church and state doctrine. I was so anti-religious that I vowed to walk out of my first meeting if anyone should try to get me to conform to any kind of fixed belief whatsoever. Just about all I remember from that first meeting is joining hands in a circle at the end and reciting the Lord's Prayer. Curiously, with all my religious prejudice, I was not in the least offended. In fact, the experience had the opposite affect on me. This was not like a church service at all. The prayer could have been from any religion and I believe the affect on me would have been the same. The obvious sincerity of the group was what grabbed my attention and left me wanting more. I remember telling my wife how favorably impressed I was by the meeting's total democracy. "No one is in charge," I told her. "Each week one of the members chairs the meeting. There's no one to tell us what to do or believe," I remember saying.

Since then I've been to thousands of meetings in several states. In some the Lord's Prayer is recited at the closing while in others the Serenity Prayer is used. At every meeting in my experience the recitation of either prayer is entirely up to each member. I suppose it could be argued that the way everyone stands in a circle and joins hands could lead a shaky newcomer to conclude they have to go along or be excluded but the facts of every meeting I've ever attended do not support this. I have seen members remain silent during the prayer. I have seen others stand with their hands at their sides. I have never seen anyone criticized for such behavior and certainly no one was asked not to come back.

And yet the Lord's Prayer remains the focus of the divisive question is A.A. religious? Why should this be when our program is a patchwork of elements borrowed liberally from not only religion but medicine and psychiatry as well? I have read in "As Bill Sees It" that the twelve steps were once presented to a group of Buddhist monks who were favorably impressed with them. They remarked that they would have substituted the word 'good' for God, however, since step three offered the qualification of God "as we understood him" this would certainly allow for their point of view. I also read in either "Pass It On" or "A.A. Comes of Age" (I can never remember which) that Bill's spiritual adviser, Father Ed Dowling, first heard of Bill after reading an early copy of the Big Book and noting how similar the twelve steps were to the guiding principles of his particular Catholic order; the Jesuits. Bill, of course, had no detailed knowledge when he wrote the steps of either Buddhism or Saint Ignatius, yet our twelve steps, the very cornerstone of Alcoholics Anonymous, conform to the basic tenets of each faith. Still, I have never heard anyone suggest the steps are too Buddhist or too Catholic. The idea is ludicrous. Speaking of saints, on page 99 of "Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions" we find a prayer written by one. Yet, I have never heard that such an obviously Christian document as the Saint Francis Prayer, appearing in our second most important book, should be removed lest it ruin a newcomer's chances. Does the fact that this prayer has been published in a piece of conference-approved literature lend it legitimacy whereas the informal use of the Lord's Prayer by many groups somehow cause a perversion of our tradition?

If the logic of the argument against the use of the Lord's Prayer were to be taken to the extreme, we should also object to the medical as well as the religious views implicit in our program. For

example, the "Doctor's Opinion" in the Big Book certainly could be taken to imply affiliation with medicine. Yet, no general service conference has ever voted to remove it from our basic text.

Simply put, in this writer's opinion, the Lord's Prayer is like everything else in A.A. It is borrowed. The fact that it was borrowed from the Christian religion should not mean much beyond the fact that the first members of the infant society that would become Alcoholics Anonymous came from a Western Christian tradition. Had A.A. arisen in Tibet, it would probably have a distinctive Tibetan flavor. If we had sprung up in the Middle East no doubt elements of the Koran would have found their way into our program. Let's not forget that when the Big Book was being written by the pioneers of this fellowship, not just by Bill, there was intense debate over whether it should be chiefly religious, psychological, or spiritual. An early atheist contributed the words in parentheses (God as we understood him) found in the third and eleventh steps. This writer owes his life to that atheist. The fact that many groups use a prayer borrowed from one of the world's major religions should have no more significance than the fact the Big Book was originally written in one of the world's major languages; English.

These things are all elements in the mix of ingredients that make up the whole of our program. The power to inflame our emotions that we give them is evidence we still have much work to do on ourselves; and working the steps is our guide to emotional sobriety. Those who view with alarm and feel a need to protect the rest of us from ourselves are giving in to a very human need to be right. Forgive me if I speak bluntly but I believe we alcoholics are childish, grandiose and overly sensitive. We want what we want when we want it. We have spent much of our lives trying to be either on top of the heap or safely hidden underneath. At no time have we sought "to be a part of" despite how desperately we wanted to belong. When we get sober our early jubilation is likely to turn a little dull after a year or two. If we aren't careful we may stagnate and cease to grow spiritually. One symptom of this is a tendency to find fault with meetings, to compare others with a fixed ideal in our minds and find them always wanting. As our discomfort increases we return to the old worn out idea of control. We'll fix what's wrong and then we'll be happy or, fearing failure, we sit on the sidelines and complain. We become "bleeding deacons" and sadly shake our heads at the sorry state to which A.A. has fallen.

I suppose we AA's will always debate such matters mainly because each of us holds this program and the fellowship in the very highest regard. We owe our lives to it. Speaking for myself, I also owe my relationship with my higher power to it. I take comfort in Bill's writing, which seemed to cover every conceivable issue that A.A. could face. He once wrote that our petty rows don't do the fellowship a particle of harm. In most cases these arguments are all about how to do the most good for the still suffering alcoholic. I also remember Bill's advice to someone having trouble with the "spiritual angle" of the program. He admitted that A.A. certainly owed him tolerance for his views; however, turnabout was just as certainly fair play. The new member must develop equal tolerance of others in the program. We each owe it to ourselves to cultivate honesty, open-mindedness and willingness. This can never begin too soon.

Let's quit the debating society. A.A. is not religious; it is spiritual. It is quick to borrow from religious people when they appear to be right and it has a unique way of making what it borrows it's own. I hope this healthy practice continues. After all, this alcoholic needs all the help he can get.

We all want to "feel better". That's why we did everything we ever did in life. We all STILL want to "feel better". I think that will never change for any of us. What we try to change are the SYMBOLS of happiness. What we WANT is love, but what we SETTLE FOR is the excitement of sex. What we WANT is to be safe, but what we GO AFTER is power over others. We chose the wrong symbols, and they never satisfied us. Changing our values based on what we think is right and wrong is a more successful method of choosing our symbols and a much more satisfying way to meet our emotional needs.

5. The Slogans. We use the slogans because they work. They are just reminders of what we are supposed to do. Using reminders is effective in helping us change how we do things and in changing what we believe and how we act.

6. The Steps. Strenuous work on the Steps is the only known cure for what ails us. Each Step prepares us for the next Step. Taking the Steps out of order has resulted in LONG delays in recovery and has even resulted in relapse. The Steps are essential for personal recovery.

7. The Traditions. We alcoholics are known for trying to change things to suit ourselves. This was probably the primary reason that the Traditions were crafted--- to keep us from messing things up when we first came in. The Traditions keep the group strong and safe. They are our protection from us. They teach us to think of others and the good of the group, instead of just what we want.

8. The Concepts are all about service to our fellows, in every way that we can think of. It is supporting our outreach at the local, district, regional, national and international levels. It is volunteering to be elected to service positions within your Group --- GSR, intergroup Rep, secretary, P.I. Rep, coffee person, clean-up person. It is cleaning up after yourself. It is learning to become responsible and accepting that responsibility. It is becoming accountable for your actions and inactions. It is learning to make a difference.

9. Unity, Service, and Recovery. Unity is the Traditions. It's all about the welfare of the group. The group is where we get good information, not just somebody's opinion. The Traditions point out things that could help or harm the group and limit any potential damage we could do with our wrong thinking. Service is trying to help others in every way that we find appropriate. There is self-respect and healing and attitude changes and compassion inherent in service. We desperately need this aspect of the recovery program. The skills we learn here will ensure our sobriety for many years to come. Finally, Recovery is the Steps. This is the actual program that is specific to YOU, because each of us needs something a little different at the same time (or the same things at different times). **IF WE NEGLECT ANY OF THESE THREE, WE ARE ON VERY DANGEROUS GROUND.** A three-legged stool is a solid foundation, but a two-legged stool is much less reliable.

10. Sponsorship. This is a two-way street. We not only need to HAVE a Sponsor, but we also need to prepare

ourselves to BECOME a Sponsor. The first engenders trust. The second sets a goal and develops dedication. We floundered around for too much of our lives to continue wasting it. Goals and purpose help us to focus and to mature and to experience all that we need for our growth into the person we always hoped we could become. A Sponsor is a Spiritual guide through the Steps, and "spiritual" doesn't mean "religious". It just means "how it works". A Sponsor does not make decisions for you, but does help you examine consequences of some choices. A sponsor is not a loan company, a taxi service, a food bank, a dating service, or a self-justification system. A sponsor simply helps you develop options and come to see consequences, as he continues to provide a role model and to encourage you in your efforts to grow and understand how it works.

11. Laughter. There is healing in laughter. It even beats cancer! Doctors have demonstrated that about 75% of illnesses are induced psychosomatically - that is, brought on by what we believe or how we think. We feel bad, we get sick. We feel better when we laugh. We become more relaxed, friendlier. We breathe deeper. Our body may shake. We warm up. Physically and psychologically, we are vastly different when we laugh. Laughter has nothing to do with our disease, but it has a LOT to do with our recovery! Laugh, play, enjoy, share, encourage each other, be encouraged, look for the good, try to become a part of the solution instead of a part of the problem. Laugh in the face of difficulty and it loses its power over you. Stop feeling sorry for yourself and laugh at troubles. Your life WILL get better if you do. I promise.

12. Prayer and Meditation.

A. For the believer Step eleven speaks directly to this phenomenon. It tells us WHAT TO PRAY FOR. It encourages us to LISTEN FOR THE ANSWER in meditation. We are able to draw closer to God's will for us and develop a deeper understanding about how things work. When things start working out better for us, we begin to relax more and trust the process more. Through practice, we become better able to utilize this resource.

B. For the agnostic or atheist Step eleven speaks directly to this phenomenon. It tells us TO CONSIDER PROBLEMS AND THEN STOP. It encourages us to LISTEN FOR THE ANSWER in meditation. We are able to develop a deeper understanding about how things work. When things start working out better for us, we begin to relax more and trust the process more. Through practice, we come better able to utilize this resource.

As you can see, the spiritual principle is the same. It just works! For everyone! I believe in God, and I understand that God is not going to force anyone to believe in Him. He also is not going to withhold help from anyone trying to do the right thing. Maybe nobody cares what I believe, but one thing is CERTAIN: EITHER GOD IS EVERYTHING OR HE IS NOTHING. YES OR NO, IT DOESN'T MATTER. BUT YOU MUST CHOOSE EVERY DAY.

Am I a Real Alcoholic?

ANONYMOUS

How many of us have ever asks ourselves this question? What are the criteria for diagnosis? We appear to be just like “normal” folks in everyway. We have jobs, families and cars too. Some of us are politically active, socially active and some couch potatoes just like “normal” folks. So how do I know that I’m a real alcoholic and just a “wannabe” or misplaced as the result of a huge misunderstanding?

In the Big Book an alcoholic is described on page 30 as “men or women that have lost control of our drinking.” “Over any considerable period we get worse, never better.” Here is a major difference between me and my neighbor. He may drink on occasion and lose control of his actions. When I drink I will lose control of my actions and the loss of control has gotten progressively worse and like the Big Book states “leading to pitiful and incomprehensible demoralization.” *continued next column*

So on the surface I may appear to be “normal” but put alcohol into the equation and all resemblance of normalness vanishes.

The problem was that I could never see the difference between myself and the “normal” folk when I was drinking. I considered my drinking habits and actions as a result of all a part of “normal” things. It wasn’t until I stepped into the rooms of AA that I realized that I belonged. I soon found people that did the same thing I did and felt the same ways that I felt and they claimed to be real alcoholics. They also showed me how to control my drinking; don’t drink things with alcohol. I can drink a case today any time I want but if I want to live it will need to be a case of water, diet Pepsi, lemon-aid or something “of the such”. The idea of that sounds stupid but I never thought drinking a case of beer sounded stupid. That is delusional thought. I don’t need a medical opinion to tell me I’m a real alcoholic. I know I am because I’m just like all of you “normal” alcoholic folks.

**IT MIGHT SEEM AWFULLY CLOUDY,
YOU MIGHT ONLY SEE THE STORM,
TAKE MY HAND, I WILL WALK WITH YOU,
YOU NEVER HAVE TO BE ALONE.
AA HAS GIVEN ME THE STEPPING STONES TO A SOBER
WAY OF LIFE,
GOD HAS GIVEN ME THE FOUNDATION**

Thank you to those who submitted material for this issue!

The opinions expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of AA or York Area Intergroup. All submissions are greatly appreciated but sometimes editing must be to accommodate the format. Articles can be hand written, typed or emailed. Submissions can be any length; a page or two or a paragraph or two. To submit articles for the December issue I can be reached at:

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Share your experience, strength, hope & wisdom with a pen.