
Ernest Kurtz, “‘Spiritual Rather Than Religious’: The Contribution of Alcoholics Anonymous,” pp. 51-62 of Ernest Kurtz, *The Collected Ernie Kurtz*, Hindsfoot Foundation Series on Treatment and Recovery (New York: Authors Choice, 2008; orig. pub. 1999).

Invited to offer a paper at the 35th Conference of the International Congress of Alcohol and Drug Dependence, held July 31st to August 6th, 1988 in Oslo, Norway, I chose to address what seems the largest problem professionals have with Alcoholics Anonymous – its spirituality. This difficulty is, if anything, greater in Europe than in the United States, and especially so in the Scandinavian countries.

Yet my own investigations (as well as the testimony of many, many A.A. friends) have convinced me that spirituality is the essence of Alcoholics Anonymous, wherever it flourishes, and so I keep trying to make that point, in one way or another. This paper represents one of those efforts. It was published with the collected papers from the Conference in Prevention and Control/ Realities and Aspirations: Volume II, ed. R. B. Waahlberg, pp. 678-86. Oslo, Norway: National Directorate for the Prevention of Alcohol and Drug Problems, 1989.

“Spiritual Rather Than Religious”: The Contribution of Alcoholics Anonymous

by Ernest Kurtz

Many people remain confused about the place of Alcoholics Anonymous in the process of recovery from alcoholism. Some of the confusion results from a tendency to view the fellowship and its program as a kind of religion.¹ Few examine A.A.’s own claim to be “spiritual rather than religious.” But that assertion, understood in the light of A.A.’s history, can help to clarify the qualities of a successful recovery from alcoholism.²

Alcoholics Anonymous came into existence in the late 1930s, an offshoot of what was then named the “Oxford Group,” which was an attempt to recapture what its participants thought to be first-century Christianity. The founding members of Alcoholics Anonymous departed the Group primarily because they found its adherents too religious for their taste. Although unconnected with any particular church or sect, devotees of the Oxford Group tended to be aggressively evangelical Protestant Christians who sought to convince especially the wealthy and the prominent that they possessed “the truth” in some unique way.³

From the dawn of independent existence, A.A. members interpreted their program as offering a type of universal spirituality that can cohere with any religion or with none. First motivated by the desire to make Alcoholics Anonymous available to all, that effort was further shaped by the secularization from which in fact derives the modern usage of the term *spirituality*.⁴ This emphasis has also been aided by A.A.’s self-consciousness of being influenced by the philosopher William James and the psychiatrist Carl Jung, two thinkers who reflected unconventional spirituality by their example of taking religious insight seriously without adhering to any specific theology.

But A.A.’s greatest self-awareness involves its members’ sense that their program derives especially from their own experience. That experience issued in both a “way of life” and a way of conveying that way of life – the telling of stories that “disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now.”⁵ What follows will examine the discoveries and the themes that emerge from that practice.

Discoveries

Four assumptions, each discovered by the earliest members’ experience, frame the A.A. understanding of spirituality and of its role in recovery from alcoholism.

The first discovery concerned the vital importance of “the spiritual,” properly understood. Newcomers to Alcoholics Anonymous, it was recognized, required a new understanding of “the spiritual” as much as they needed an understanding of alcoholism as disease or malady or obsession-compulsion. Their earliest endeavors taught the first A.A. members that the alcoholic, in order to recover, had to abandon *two* misconceptions: his old notion of alcoholism/alcoholic, which thwarted recognition of his condition; and his old notion of “the spiritual,” which impeded recovery from that condition. The stories told at meetings served to shatter *both* false stereotypes.⁶

Secondly, the earliest members of Alcoholics Anonymous soon came to realize that especially in the area of “the spiritual,” there existed a deep difference between “magic” and *miracle*. “Magic” involved the claim and the demand to control, to manipulate, and seeking the magical was recognized to be the antithesis of recovery spirituality, for it replicated the experience of alcoholic drinking. The early A.A.s thus came to see the spirituality necessary to recovery as involving not the seeking of the magical, but being open to *miracle* – accepting life as *mystery* to be lived rather than “problem” to be solved.⁷

Related to “miracle rather than magic” was the third discovery – the earliest members’ vivid experience of the *open-endedness* of “the spiritual.” This awareness issued in the fellowship’s emphasis on “progress rather than perfection” as well as in co-founder Bill W’s favorite image of “Pilgrim’s Progress.”⁸ Two manifestations of this third assumption have waxed and waned within A.A.’s story: the emphasis on being “teachable,” wherein a classic virtue – docility – is given a new name; and an understanding of the essence of A.A. spirituality as its being a “spirituality of not having all the answers.” Both preserve the original vision of Alcoholics Anonymous in establishing its own identity by leaving the Oxford Group.

Finally, those manifestations of open-endedness in turn bridge to the fourth experiential assumption concerning spirituality that the

earliest members discovered despite their own many efforts to deny it: “the spiritual” necessarily *pervades*. It is not some kind of separate category, but is rather the glue that *makes* “the whole.” As the stories in the “Into Action” and “Working With Others” chapters of the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* reveal, any attempt to segregate some aspect of one’s life from “the spiritual,” any failure of honest application of the whole of the A.A. program to the whole of one’s life, inevitably led to relapse.⁹

Yet language limps, and so members of Alcoholics Anonymous commonly speak of “the physical, the mental, and the spiritual” as if distinct. This is one reason why “the spiritual” in A.A. is less talked about directly than transmitted by *story*. Such unity, the unity inherent in “the spiritual,” is best conveyed by *story*. Only story can begin to reveal the connections between thinking and acting and willing and feeling, the unity that is at the core of the A.A. experience of sobriety.

A.A. storytelling, like all spirituality, involves not “talking about it” but the actual living of certain qualities. The practice of telling stories in the format of “what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now” actually elicits and reinforces those qualities – those thematic realities that we now turn to explore. Thus, storytelling is the primary way in which sobriety, spirituality, is not only transmitted but grown in. In the very telling of one’s own story, one sees/feels/acts – one *experiences* – those qualities: Release, Gratitude, Humility, and Tolerance.

Themes

RELEASE:

The first “theme” elicited even as it is described is that of freedom or, better, RELEASE. Its language may be of “weight lifted,” or “chains fallen away,” or perhaps of “a light turned on”: what predominates is the sense, the experience, of being freed. Note that the experience is of *being freed* rather than of “gaining freedom”—which is why the term RELEASE seems more appropriate. The

emphasis is on the sense of release rather than of any kind of control or triumph. RELEASE is not “gained”; rather, it *happens*.

Predominant in this first theme is the sense of *wonder*. The A.A. member does not tell his or her story in order to “attain” release; yet the experience of release does emerge from the practice of telling one’s story. As one philosopher has observed, “When we let the truth about ourselves be revealed, we experience a kind of release”¹⁰: note “let”, rather than some kind of exhibitionism. The sense of *wonder*, and therefore as we shall see of gratitude, arises in part because the experience is beyond one’s purpose.

Also noteworthy is how this language of “Release” reflects the core insight of the mystical tradition: the paradox that one attains the sense of “release” only if one oneself releases, *lets go*. This mystery of “surrender” is urged by the Pietist “Let go and let God,” which has become an A.A. axiom.

GRATITUDE:

GRATITUDE, the second theme, is the only one of the themes commonly mentioned by name within Alcoholics Anonymous. The significance of A.A.’s emphasis on *gratitude* may best be understood by borrowing words first spoken of a far more dire reality than alcoholism:

No one is as capable of gratitude as one who has emerged from the kingdom of night. . . . We know that every moment is a moment of grace, every hour an offering; not to share them would mean to betray them. Our lives no longer belong to us alone; they belong to all those who need us desperately.¹¹

Gratitude flows directly from the sense that “Release” is a *gift*: unearned, unmerited, not attained by being “deserved”; in fact, not “attained” at all. This sense of “gift” has been largely lost in our culture, with its ritual occasions of giving. We seem almost to need an excuse to give or to receive a gift!

For a true gift, a spontaneous boon such as “Release,” the only possible response is *gratitude*. What is “gratitude?” It is the only possible response to *gift*. And what is that “response”? Especially within a “way of life” that necessarily involves a way of thinking, that response, that gratitude, is not a “feeling” but rather a kind of *vision* that enables recognizing how “gifted” we are, how much we have received. “Spirituality” has been defined as the ability to see the hand of God at work in the world.¹² In such an understanding, gratitude is the foundation and linchpin of spirituality.

Like the *release* experienced “when we let the truth about ourselves be revealed,” gratitude connects in a special way with *story*. The concepts “think, thank, remember” are intimately related:

“Think” and “thank” are kindred roots, and the German word *an-denken* – literally, “to think on” – means to *remember*; hence, think, thank, and remembrance are related notions. Real thinking, thinking that is rooted in Being, is at once an act of thanking and remembrance.¹³

Or again, from a different source:

Thinking is a kind of thanking. In thanking, we accept the gift of existence. In accepting ourselves, we become ourselves. As released, we gratefully enter into the play of which we are already a part. Releasement means “homecoming.” Thinking as thanking means loving.¹⁴

Gratitude is that vision that enables recognizing – truly *seeing* – many such gifts. As the insight embodied in Japanese Naikan therapy attests, gratitude heals.¹⁵ Most stories told in Alcoholics Anonymous further suggest that perhaps the greatest gift is that of the ability *to give*, without any expectation of return, precisely because one has discovered the nature of *gift*. Profound connections thus exist between gratitude and A.A.’s Eleventh Step, wherein the member seeks to improve “conscious contact with God.”

HUMILITY:

The third theme, HUMILITY, refers to acceptance of the middleness, the *both-and-ness* of one's human condition. The spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous here most clearly reveals its inspiration in that tradition of wisdom that has informed mainline Western understanding. To be human, the ancients suggested, was to be "less than the gods, more than the beasts, yet somehow also both." Later ages captured the same insight in the vision that to be human was to be *both* "beast and angel," as Pascal's "He who would be an angel becomes a beast" cautioned.

Humility, according to this insight, involves accepting that being thus in the middle, being human, is "good enough." As this acceptance has been urged in terms that did not originate in A.A. but are surely true to A.A. spirituality: "You can do something, but not everything"; "You alone can do it, but you cannot do it alone." Some find this significance reflected in the classic prayer-posture of kneeling, which is interpreted as an embrace of this "half-way" position.

Within A.A., humility is less addressed directly than as related to *humor*, for the source of all humor resides precisely in the *incongruity* that is the essence of the human condition. To laugh at oneself signals the humility that accepts one's own imperfect humanity. A sense of humor bespeaks recognition that, at least at certain of life's moments, the most profound choice available is between fighting self and laughing at self. As the "Big Book," *Alcoholics Anonymous*, observes in italics: ". . . we have stopped fighting anybody or anything. We have to!"¹⁶

Humility issues also in the sense of belonging, of *fitting in*, the quest for which so many have suggested may be found at the root of alcoholism.¹⁷ Thus arise the "peace," "harmony," and sense of "being at home" – with one's alcoholism, with one's humanity, with larger reality – that differentiate sobriety from dryness and that characterize what Alcoholics Anonymous presents as "serenity,"

which is but a synonym for spirituality and indeed for what an earlier generation termed “sanctity.”

TOLERANCE:

A further note on the nature of “spirituality” affords an apt transition to the final theme of TOLERANCE. “The spiritual” is that which does not diminish as more participate in it. And it makes no difference whether they participate differently. Within A.A., the term *tolerance* sometimes passes under the aliases of “serenity” or “acceptance.”¹⁸

The root of tolerance within Alcoholics Anonymous is obvious. If one accepts one’s own both-and-ness -- and, perhaps even more importantly, the both-and-ness or imperfection of those whom one loves and respects -- one may become able to move toward accepting the imperfections of others of whom one is not so fond. This lesson did not come easily to early A.A., as many of co-founder Bill W’s letters reveal.

Nobody can cause more grief than a power-driven guy who thinks he has got it straight from God. These people cause more trouble than the harlots and drunkards. . . . I have had spells of that very thing, and so I ought to know.¹⁹

In the early days of A.A. I spent a lot of time trying to get people to agree with me, to practice A.A. principles as I did, and so forth. For so long as I did this, . . . A.A. grew very slowly.²⁰

As early as 1945, confronting a tendency in which he foresaw danger to Alcoholics Anonymous, Bill had observed in the newborn *A.A. Grapevine*:

The way our “worthy” alcoholics have sometimes tried to judge the “less worthy” is, as we look back on it, rather comical. Imagine, if you can, one alcoholic judging another!²¹

A bare month before, in a presentation to the Yale Summer School of Alcohol Studies, Bill responded to a somewhat truculent request for “a brief summary of how A.A. works” by quoting his fellow co-founder, Dr. Bob Smith: “Honesty gets us sober, but tolerance keeps us sober.”²²

The popular A.A. slogan, “Live and Let Live,” of course inculcates tolerance, but that quality is more effectively fostered within Alcoholics Anonymous by the *variety* of stories offered at each meeting. Members are encouraged, “Identify, don’t compare”; but they then hear many different examples of how different sober alcoholics implement A.A.’s simple Twelve-Step program. The stories told reveal both sameness and difference. But the sameness that is rooted in shared weakness allows the differences that arise from diverse strengths to be appreciated rather than resented, to be seen as enriching rather than threatening. This is not *mere* “tolerance” but active appreciation.

The world has known religious wars, but spirituality has historically been spread precisely by “heresy.” Perhaps the greatest proof that Alcoholics Anonymous is “spiritual rather than religious” may be found in the reality that A.A. grows by heresy. Probably half the A.A. groups in existence originated when some small number of sober alcoholics, dissatisfied with how their group conducted a meeting or whatever, split off and began holding their own meeting and eventually formed their own new group. The welcoming of that outcome is as common within Alcoholics Anonymous as it is rare outside its fellowship.

A Note on Conversion

Most spiritualities recognize as crucial some point at which an individual experiences a sense of fundamental change. This crisis is classically termed *conversion*. In the A.A. story format detailing “what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now,” *what happened* generally describes some kind of “turn around” or “about face.” This is “conversion” in the ancient sense

of *metanoia*: a sense of movement in a different direction. One way of understanding “the spiritual” is as that by which people believe they have been and are profoundly changed.

A classic formulation of the process of this conversion views its change as involving four stages. According to this insight, conversion begins with a “first awareness” of some defect or lack in oneself, and this awareness includes also the discovery of one’s own impotence, one’s inability to do anything about that flaw.

There follows the “first response,” which involves *acceptance* of self as flawed, which in its turn entails a “letting go,” a “turning over to,” an “asking for help.” This final dimension is the first “religious” act, the cry for help that is prayer.

Next, usually after some time, there follows the “second awareness”: one begins to notice the flaws and lacks of others, *and* that those others are as unable to rid themselves of those defects as one had oneself been.

This second awareness is thus succeeded by the “second response”, a sense of likeness to and of oneness with other humans *precisely as flawed*. So it is that one comes to experience pity and compassion, rather than blame and separation, when confronted by reality’s imperfection.

In the thought of Julian of Norwich, a recently rediscovered fourteenth-century mystic who reflected this understanding, a corollary followed—one profoundly appropriate to the experience of Alcoholics Anonymous: “What hinders our spiritual growth more than anything is our failure to believe that God will bring and is now bringing to completion in us the work he has begun.”

This classic understanding parallels the conversion actually experienced within Alcoholics Anonymous in three ways. For A.A. members, the difference between active alcoholism and sober recovery is (1) experiential rather than dogmatic, (2) involves essentially a movement from falseness to truth, and (3) comprises new understandings arrived at through a re-thinking and re-telling of one’s story.

Conclusion

This paper has examined, in historical context, nine topics that illuminate the claim of the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous that its program is “spiritual rather than religious.” From A.A.’s origins, most members have found in that claim an encouragement that has fostered a way of life and of thinking that has contributed to their recovery and sobriety. In some ways, for at least some individuals, A.A.’s revelation that and how one might be “spiritual” without being “religious” may be its greatest contribution. And I suspect that, given the opportunity, this may prove to be even more significant in nations other than the United States and Canada.

NOTES

1. *Cf.*, e.g. Robert Freed Bales, “Social Therapy for a Social Disorder,” *Journal of Social Issues* vol. 1, no. 3 (1945), 14-22; Margaret Bean, “A.A. and Religion,” *Psychiatric Annals*, vol. 5, no. 5 (1975), 52-55; more recently, James Christopher, *How to Stay Sober: Recovery Without Religion* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1988).

2. The analysis that follows derives from the research represented by my book, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* (Center City, MN: Hazelden, 1979), but also from continuing research in the monthly journal of Alcoholics Anonymous, *The A.A. Grapevine*, which has been published continuously since June 1944.

3. *Cf.* Walter Houston Clark, *The Oxford Group: Its History and Significance* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1951); Reinhold Niebuhr, “Hitler and Buchman,” *The Christian Century* (October 7, 1936), 1315-1316; Kurtz, *A.A.: The Story*, pp. 48-51.

4. *Cf.* Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (Springfield, IL: Templegate, 1985) pp. vii-ix; Richard Wightman Fox, “Putting Religion in Its (Pivotal) Place,” *Reviews in American History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (March 1988), 59-64.

5. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 3rd ed., (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1975), p. 58.

6. *Cf.*, for two very early and very clear statements of this discovery, Bill W. [A.A. co-founder] (New York) to Dorothy S., 8 January 1940; and to Ted P., 25 March 1940.

7. This emphasis first appears in *A.A. Grapevine* articles by two non-members important in A.A.’s earliest history, Rev. Samuel Shoemaker and Rev. Edward Dowling, S.J.; for an early use of these terms by members, *cf. AAGV*, February, 1948, page 5, reporting a discussion on the topic “What makes A.A. work?”

8. *Cf.* Kurtz, *Not-God*, pp. 244-247.

9. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, pp. 72-103.

10. Michael E. Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1981). p. 58.

11. Elie Wiesel, 1986 Nobel Peace Prize Acceptance Speech, as reported in *The New York Times*, 11 December 1986.
12. Paul V. Robb, "Conversion as a Human Experience," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, vol. 14, no. 3 (May 1982), *passim*.
13. William Barrett, *Irrational Man* (New York: Doubleday-Anchor, 1962), p. 235.
14. Zimmerman, *Eclipse of the Self*, p. 247.
15. David K. Reynolds, *Naikan Psychotherapy* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1983).
16. *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 103.
17. Cf., e.g., John E. Mack, "Alcoholism, A.A., and the Governance of the Self," and E. J. Khantzian, "Some Treatment Implications of the Ego and Self Disturbances in Alcoholism," in Margaret H. Bean and Norman E. Zinberg (eds.), *Dynamic Approaches to the Understanding and Treatment of Alcoholism* (New York: Free Press, 1981), pp. 128-162 and 163-188.
18. Bill W., "What Is Acceptance?" *A.A. Grapevine*, v.28, n. 10, (March 1962), 3-5.
19. Bill W. (New York) to Ollie J., 15 December 1950.
20. Bill W. (New York) to May M., 24 August 1964.
21. Bill W., "'Rules' Dangerous", *A.A. Grapevine*, vol. 2, no. 4, (September 1945), 2-3.
22. Bill W., "The Fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous," talk given at the Yale Summer School of Alcohol Studies, August, 1944, reprinted in *Alcohol, Science, and Society* (New Haven: Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol, 1945), pp. 461-473