

The Broad Highway
Alcoholics Anonymous and the Quest
to Restore the Sacred

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First Reader *Gloria Ferris*
Second Reader *Andy Resenthal*

In loving memory of Roy Clyde Mitchell III,
whose tragic death is a reminder
of what's at stake.

Alcohol gave me the wings to fly and then it took away the sky.
A Common AA Saying

...where you stumble, there your treasure is.
Joseph Campbell (*An Open Life*, 26)

But after some time in the tavern, a point comes, a memory of elsewhere, a longing for the source, and the drunks must set off from the tavern and begin the return. The Qur'an says, "We are all returning." The tavern is a kind of glorious hell that human beings enjoy and suffer and then push off from in their search for truth....A breaking apart, a crying out into the street, begins in the tavern, and the human soul turns to find its way home.

Coleman Barks (*The Essential Rumi*, 1)

Religion is for those who are afraid of hell. Spirituality is for those who have been there.

A Common AA Saying

Progressive politics lacks charisma today because it is literally dispirited.

Marianne Williamson (*The Healing of America*, 117)

Is it possible that the path of spiritual growth leads first out of superstition into agnosticism and then out of agnosticism toward an accurate knowledge of God?

M. Scott Peck (*The Road Less Traveled*, 223)

...if you wish, you can join us on the Broad Highway
Bill Wilson (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 55)

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Preface

Bill Wilson, chief architect of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), once wrote to a friend that "AA is an utter simplicity which encases a complete mystery."¹ This statement accurately suggests the difficulty in any attempt to understand AA. For starters, AA is spiritual, which is the reason, according to Ernest Kurtz, one of the leading experts on AA, that it "eludes capture."² AA is elusive by way of the paradox embodied in its spiritual principles, such as the idea that one wins through surrender. But AA is also eclectic. AA's eclecticism stems from its reliance on experience, as well as its pragmatic practice of borrowing at will from the fields of medicine, religion, psychology and good old common sense. Indeed, Kurtz contends that "it is doubtful that the world has ever seen a more consistent living-out of the pragmatism that so many have thought characterizes American culture."³ This eclecticism has led some to compare AA to the proverbial elephant, which when examined by blind-folded observers, each of whom touches a different part of the elephant, reach diverse conclusions as to the nature of the beast.⁴ And if this is not enough complexity, AA also embodies several rather glaring contradictions; it is at once both spiritual and religious, both feminist and sexist.

Mysterious and elusive, paradoxical, eclectic and contradictory, AA often confuses outside observers. This author has the advantage of nine years of AA membership. But I am also a social activist and it is the collision between these two aspects of myself—the recovering alcoholic and the Leftist activist—that initiated this investigation. Since my first days in AA, I have sought to reconcile my deepening

allegiance and trust in the philosophy and practice of AA with my progressive political views. It seemed to me that personal recovery work and social activism, or what the Dominican priest, Matthew Fox, refers to as "the struggle for personal justice" and "the struggle for social justice," are two diverse aspects of a larger endeavor aimed at common goals. My efforts at integration were hampered however by several common Leftist prejudices that I had internalized. Consistent with the Marxist dictate that religion is "the opiate of the masses," I regarded anything akin to religion as de-facto reactionary. I was also leery of a focus on personal, psychological issues, harboring the suspicion that AA, or for that matter the entire personal recovery movement, is at best irrelevant, if not counter, to progressive social change. Having investigated these prejudices in light of my experience in AA, I have not only discovered them to be false, but have arrived at some very different conclusions regarding both AA and the Left.

First among my insights is that AA is a legitimate agent of progressive social change. Part of the evidence I offer for AA's progressive nature is the profound personal transformations that occur in AA. Over the last six and a half decades, AA has been so effective in "reforming" alcoholics that M. Scott Peck, psychiatrist and best selling author, claims that AA is "without doubt the single most effective agency of human transformation in our society."⁵ Of course, it is not change per se, but the content of that change that determines AA's political essence. AA is progressive because it makes significant contributions towards the creation of a more just and equitable world. Despite the popular image of AA as devoid of

social analysis—a misconception fostered no doubt by AA's refusal to engage in social controversy—AA advances a rather elaborate critique of what Ken Wilber, a cutting edge contemporary philosopher, refers to as the "downsides" or the "disasters" of modernity. AA shares, in fact, much of the Left's critique of contemporary society and by offering effective antidotes to modernity's disasters, AA moves society in a direction congruent with progressive goals. Clearly, the Left and AA have much in common. Both seek to empower individuals and strive for greater democracy, equality and justice.

But having compared AA and the Left, and recognized all they share, I was also struck by the fact that AA appears stronger, wiser and more effective than the Left. I had come full circle, starting from the instinct to justify AA to the Left and ending up at the realization that not only does AA require no apologies, but as the healthier, it offers a wealth of invaluable lessons from which the Left could greatly benefit. These lessons can be grouped under the headings of community and spirituality. In these two arenas, the contrast between AA and the Left could hardly be more stark. Where the Left is organized along lines of identity in separatist groups that "preach to the choir" and remain isolated from the majority of Americans, AA successfully includes, and changes for the better, individuals from the entire spectrum of social status and political allegiance. AA's model of on-going, inclusive and vital community is so extraordinary that Peck, an expert on community, alleges that AA is "The most successful community in this nation—probably in the whole world."⁶

AA's effectiveness is largely attributable to its spiritual foundation. It is guided by the spiritual principles of self-responsibility, forgiveness, gratitude, compassion and a focus on the present. The Left, by contrast, appears stuck in an endless and bitter recital of past grievances. The Left is also severely weakened by the prejudices that for so long clouded my vision, namely its dismissal of the psychological and spiritual dimensions of social change. In neglecting these dimensions, the Left narrows its appeal and isolates itself from the majority of Americans who view *it* as irrelevant.

I advocate a reinvented Left based on a broader vision of social activism that recognizes the struggles for personal and social justice as intimately connected, such that neither struggle is complete or effective without the other. In making this critique, I find common ground with Michael Lerner's "politics of meaning,"⁷ Matthew Fox's "Creation Spirituality" and Marianne Williamson's "holistic politics,"⁸ all of which posit inclusive, democratic community as the proper vehicle for social activism and spiritual principles as the most effective guidelines for social change movements. I chose an interrogation of AA for this excursion into social theory because it was through my experience in AA that I discovered the nature of my own prejudices and gained insight into the changes we must bring about if we are to create an effective progressive movement. It is to this transformation that I offer this investigation of AA.

* * *

AA's Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, to which I will make frequent reference, are printed in full in Appendix A and B. The

steps are AA's program of recovery for the alcoholic, whereas the traditions are the principles that guide the organizational life of AA. I will be explicating throughout AA's two most important texts, which I will refer to by their AA nicknames; they are *Alcoholics Anonymous*, otherwise known as the "Big Book," and *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, which members refer to simply as the "12 & 12." AA members employ a large variety of mottoes and aphorisms, which I will designate by quotation marks. Unless I indicate a source for these quotes, they are sayings that I know from my own experience to be common to AA members.

* * *

This work is the culmination of a process to which many have contributed and to whom I am deeply indebted and wish to thank. First and foremost, Lois Rheame, without whose support and love this project would have been impossible. My brother Roy, whose death proved to be my salvation; I will forever cherish our friendship and hold dear my memories of his broad smile, keen wit and sheer exuberance for life. Pamela Clapp, whose brilliance and considerable skill served me so well. Professor Nora Faires, whose guidance has been invaluable and whose patience, as I worked out these ideas through numerous drafts, has been extraordinary. Professor Judy Rosenthal, both friend and teacher, who pushed me to ask the difficult questions that both prompted and propelled this inquiry. The wonderful group of alcoholics who attend AA at Clover School in Lapeer, Michigan, whose wisdom, compassion and humor have sustained and inspired me these last nine years. Jan Worth,

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Introduction

On any given day all across the United States of America, in every large city and in many small towns, hundreds of thousands of Americans gather together at their local meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). For an hour they talk, laugh and cry together, sharing their joys, hopes, sorrows, frustrations, failures and triumphs. People initially approach AA in various degrees of suffering, crisis and despair. Most have limited goals—an earnest desire to stop drinking or to get the spouse, judge, boss off their backs. Many have tried, and failed, to quit drinking on their own and are ready to seek help. Out of a multitude of various circumstances, they share one thing in common—the price exacted by their drinking has become unbearably high, thus driving them into the arms of AA. Of those who stick with AA, many attain sobriety using the tools and support offered. But sobriety, as it turns out, is the merest beginning of what AA offers. For years, even decades, after the urge to drink has long since disappeared, many people continue to attend AA. Clearly these individuals have found something other than sobriety that draws them. That something is the community that AA offers and a better way of living that AA, through the support of community, makes possible.

Even by the most superficial evaluation, AA would appear to provide an enormous social benefit. After all, much of the needless chaos, violence and suffering in our society is associated with the excess consumption of drugs and alcohol. When drunks get sober, their behavior improves. Men and women are less apt to physically abuse those they have power over. Parents are less apt to

emotionally abuse and neglect their children. Recovering alcoholics are less likely to kill or maim people with their cars or to lie, cheat, steal and engage in irresponsible behavior. Sober alcoholics, quite simply, make better citizens than active alcoholics. But under AA's guidance the changes undergone by the alcoholic are more profound than just sobriety and the cessation of one's most offensive behavior. AA's Twelve Step program entails a whole new way of life that alters thoughts, emotions and attitudes as well as behavior. AA members recognize this, with many claiming that "AA" is an acronym for Attitude Adjustment. Members also like to kid each other about the extent of the transformation fostered by AA—they tell each other "Oh well, you don't have to change much in AA...just everything."

AA's "way of life" is most accurately depicted as a spiritual way of living. Allow me to present my understanding of spirituality as the keen awareness and honoring of the underlying unity and oneness of all life and hence, of the fundamental interconnection of all human beings. While numerous religions also embody this awareness, spirituality differs from religion due to its lack of dogma and the absence of the institutional hierarchies through which many religions impose rules and obligations upon their followers. A spiritual way of living does however entail an ethical code of behavior. Clearly if we are all interconnected, then anything that harms one person also harms everyone and we are therefore obligated to act in ways that are mutually beneficial while avoiding behavior that harms others. Thus, there is a set of what we might refer to as "spiritual principles" that are congruous with a spiritual way of life. Among these principles are compassion for others, generosity, self-responsibility,

service to others and the willingness to let go of grievances and forgive. Gratitude is also intrinsic to a spiritual way of life because interconnection implies interdependence and the realization of how much we depend upon each other fosters gratitude for all that we receive, whether the source of those gifts be our fellow travelers (human as well as non-human), human ancestors or the very universe itself.

On the other hand, there are attitudes and behaviors that are antithetical to a spiritual way of life because they dishonor our basic connection. These include lack of compassion for others, greed, irresponsibility, self absorption, ingratitude and the resentment and self-pity that result from holding on to grievances and the failure to extend forgiveness to others. According to many AA members, the attributes of self-pity, resentment and irresponsibility are a fairly good description of their character before joining AA. Alcoholics who attempt to live by AA's spiritual principles are thus required to give up their old ways and, in effect, to recreate themselves. These changes are readily observed in AA members, who stop blaming others for their problems as they increasingly assume responsibility for themselves and their behavior. Self-pity, anger and resentment subside as members practice the directives outlined in the Twelve Steps of taking a personal inventory, making amends to those one has harmed and dedicating oneself to continuous improvement. And AA members experience gratitude as a natural response to the dramatic improvement in their lives; as suffering diminishes and hope flourishes, AA members can't help but appreciate those forces

outside themselves that facilitate the positive changes that they found themselves incapable of producing on their own.

Many social commentators acknowledge in the most flattering terms the enormous social good created by AA. Peck claims of AA that "no other phenomenon has had such an impact for good in the nation,"⁹ while the novelist Kurt Vonnegut maintains that AA is, above and beyond even jazz, "America's most nurturing contribution to the culture of this planet."¹⁰ Sociologist Robert Wuthnow views AA as an important part of a small group movement, which, he contends "has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society."¹¹ And Fox asserts that AA has launched a movement of base communities in the overdeveloped world that is analogous to the revolutionary, liberation theology movement of Latin America. Clearly, AA's influence is both widely acknowledged and appreciated. That AA is held in such high regard is not surprising because AA employs two of the practices that a growing collective of voices have determined to be essential to human survival and future prosperity—namely, community and spirituality.

The first of these trends is evident in the ubiquitous talk of community. Across the political spectrum, from the far-Right to the far-Left, and everywhere in-between, a growing number of social activists and political and spiritual leaders have identified lack of community as a central cause of the profound social crisis that envelopes America. Some of these same voices attest to the hunger for community felt by many Americans. Robert Bellah, in his best-seller, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), popularized discussion of this hunger, as did Peck in *The Different Drum* (1987). Peck writes that

on his lecture tours throughout the country "the one constant I have found wherever I go...is the lack of—and the thirst for—community."¹² More recently, Robert Wuthnow's, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (1994), presented extensive research on the numerous small communities that have sprouted up in recent decades to meet this hunger. Michael Lerner, in *The Politics of Meaning: Restoring Hope and Possibility in an Age of Cynicism*, contends that underlying our hunger for community is a quest for meaning. "The quest for meaning is the central hunger in advanced industrial societies,"¹³ Lerner maintains. And that quest involves community because, according to Lerner, "The self is in need of a meaning which it cannot furnish by itself."¹⁴

The importance, indeed necessity, of community for progressive social change is also widely acknowledged. Audre Lorde, the influential black, lesbian, feminist poet states simply that "Without community there is no liberation."¹⁵ Marianne Williamson, minister and author of *The Healing of America*, is among the spiritual leaders who, along with Fox, Lerner and Peck, have concluded that social change will come as a result of the communities we build. "The way to heal social disorder," Williamson declares, "is to reintroduce community."¹⁶ Lerner alleges that "Much of the work of building the kind of society that we seek will be done on the individual and community level...millions of little steps that we take in our personal lives, in our interactions with others, in what we insist upon."¹⁷ And Williamson asserts that "The fabric of American society must be rewoven one loving stitch at a time: one child read to, one sick

person prayed for, one elder given respect and made to feel needed, one prisoner rehabilitated, one mourner given comfort."¹⁸

The second trend—the call for a renewed spirituality—is closely related to the call for community. Clearly, if spirituality is the awareness and honoring of human interconnection, then community and spirituality are inextricably linked. Wuthnow witnessed first-hand this link being made in the hundreds of small groups that he researched. He concluded that "As people try to rediscover the sacred, they are led to ask questions about community. And as they seek community, they are led to ask questions about the sacred."¹⁹ As with community, the call for spirituality crosses the political spectrum, with perhaps one glaring absence. Many social activists on the Left, in their righteous opposition to the oppressive nature of organized religion, address community *without* reference to spirituality.

It is the disastrous consequences of this omission that Lerner sought to rectify in developing what he dubs the "politics of meaning." Lerner believes that many of the progressive activists that make up a loosely defined Left, dismiss anything akin to religion as reactionary. This dismissal leaves the Left, Lerner argues, incapable of addressing the widespread, elemental hunger for meaning that plagues America. The result, Lerner claims, is a Leftist politics that promotes "a narrow conception of human needs, [in which] the only kind of oppression that seems real...is the denial of economic security or political rights."²⁰ This narrow stance contributes to the failure of the Left to inspire large numbers of allies. In fact, Lerner contends that the Left actually enhances the success of the Right by allowing

the Right, with its articulate condemnation of the ethical and spiritual crisis of the contemporary society, to claim to be the sole representative of spiritual concerns. People turn to the Right, Lerner claims, because the Right appears to understand the hunger for community, connection and meaning that the Left dismisses as irrelevant.

The Left's narrow perspective is also being challenged from within the Left, with many feminists in particular insisting on the essential role of spirituality in political struggle. Lorde maintains that the separation of the political and the spiritual is another one of the false dichotomies that undermines our power to effect progressive change.²¹ And Gloria Anzaldúa, another prominent feminist, contends that political activism has a "spiritual, psychic component," such that it "requires the total person—body, soul, mind and spirit."²² While numerous Leftists are integrating spirituality into their political efforts, many spiritual leaders are becoming social activists. This confluence, according to Williamson, is revolutionary; "It is the balance and intersection of these two impulses—the political and the spiritual—that will foster the rebirth of American democracy and form the crux of a new revolutionary power."²³

The worldview emerging from this convergence of politics and spirituality is a holistic perspective that integrates spiritual and psychological concerns with political and economic issues into a broad comprehensive picture of contemporary human crisis. From this integrated perspective, AA is understood as an important part of the struggle for a more just and humane world. Unfortunately this holistic worldview is not widely endorsed and AA has detractors who

are every bit as effusive in their condemnation of AA as those who understand AA are in its praise. To AA's critics, AA and the recovery movement that it spawned, represent a social danger, not a social good. David Rieff, author of "Victims, All? Recovery, Co-dependency, and the Art of Blaming Somebody Else," depicts AA as a threat to Western civilization,²⁴ while historian John J. Rumbarger casts AA as "yet another retreat from a free society."²⁵ Interestingly, it is the most admired aspects of AA—community and spirituality—that AA's critics hold suspect. According to critics, AA is not a democratic community that contributes to a more just world, but an oppressive community that robs its members of their individuality and perpetuates an unjust status quo. And AA's spirituality is depicted as a ruse that aims to pass off the most oppressive aspects of religion under the guise of spirituality.

While AA's critics are more wrong than right, they do express truths that we ignore at our peril. The attributes they mistakenly project onto AA constitute legitimate dangers. The critics are right to maintain that not all communities are democratic in practice or liberatory in effect. Many communities are hierarchical; rather than promoting a more egalitarian and just world, they maintain and justify unequal and oppressive social systems. The critics are also right to be cautious of anything that smacks of religion. Actually it is in the very volatile combination of religion and community than many of us have had our worst experiences with what Lerner refers to as "repressive communities." Repulsed by the hypocrisy and abuse of power that prevails in numerous religious organizations, many of

us left these communities when we came of age and never looked back.

Perhaps it is no wonder then, given our collective lack of experience with progressive communities, and our all-too-familiar experience with repressive religious communities, that we fear both community and anything akin to religion. AA's critics see aspects of AA that remind them of repressive religious communities and conclude that AA must be of like kind. This fear, which often borders on paranoia, is one source of the huge disparity in assessments of AA. Thus, on the one hand, James Christopher, in *How to Stay Sober: Recovery without Religion*, insists that AA "echoes the damage religious superstition has caused since the dawn of humankind."²⁶ But contrast that statement with Robert Wuthnow's allegation that AA is part of a movement in which "the sacred is being redefined, turned on its authoritarian head, made more populist, practical, and experiential."²⁷

What are we to make of the striking differences in opinion regarding AA? How can AA be both "America's most nurturing contribution to the culture of this planet"²⁸ and a "retreat from a free society"?²⁹ Is AA the spearhead of a revolutionary, democratic spirituality or damaging religious superstition? Clearly someone is wrong about AA. But more important, diverse assessments of AA highlight our collective inability to distinguish between nurturing progressive communities and repressive communities, between a democratic spirituality that fosters progressive change and oppressive religion that perpetuates an unequal status quo. This inability constitutes an unmitigated disaster, if indeed, progressive

spiritual communities hold the key to human survival. To purposefully create such communities requires that we recognize the characteristics that distinguish them from repressive communities. Hence any inquiry that helps us to make these distinctions is worthy of our efforts and AA, as it happens, provides an excellent vehicle for this inquiry. Why? Because AA is a progressive spiritual community that is falsely accused of being a repressive religious community. By exposing the errors and confusion that underlie damning assessments of AA, we discover the characteristics that make AA such an exemplary model of both community and spirituality. This effort thus enables us to mine AA for the invaluable lessons it offers.

The Critics and Beyond

AA's critics exhibit much of the ignorance and confusion that stem from a casual familiarity with AA. However the critics also resort to several tricks, which, whether intentional or not, confuse the issues and misrepresent AA. One common ploy is to pick and choose among the pieces of evidence, ignoring any aspects of AA that would undermine one's critique. Critics also neglect the diversity that exists within the recovery movement, which enables them to disparage AA by citing the behavior of groups or individuals who are neither aware of, nor guided by, AA's program of recovery.

But trickery aside, the key to understanding the controversies surrounding AA is to recognize that the collision between AA and its critics is a clash between two disparate worldviews with conflicting notions of what it means to be human and what constitutes healthy human interaction. On the one hand are the assumptions of modernity, a secular worldview that grew out of the European Enlightenment and blossomed into the Ideology of Individualism with its promise of unlimited individual autonomy. AA philosophy, by contrast, is grounded in a spiritual belief that humans are interdependent and hence that there are limits to human autonomy. The two opposing philosophies are characterized by diverse approaches. The secular view taken by AA's critics employs a dualistic, "either/or" perspective that is devoid of paradox, whereas AA philosophy is dialectical, utilizing a "both/and" interpretation that is replete with paradox. Critics who approach AA with modernist assumptions and dualistic thinking continually misinterpret AA. They condemn what they fail to understand. But for every negative

assessment made, there is another explanation, a positive appraisal of AA based on altogether different values and beliefs. The following six sections summarize some of the more popular critiques of AA, each critique juxtaposed with a brief rebuttal that not only exposes the fallacies contained therein but also offers alternative, positive interpretations of AA. The themes touched upon in these summaries will be returned to again and again throughout this treatise. As we explore the history, philosophy and workings of AA, it will become increasingly evident that AA's critics are wrong and that it is the positive interpretations of AA that are valid.

I. Unhealthy Dependence or Healthy Interdependence?

Critics claim that AA fosters passivity and unhealthy dependence by encouraging alcoholics to rely on each other as well as on a Higher Power. AA's Twelve Step program, according to Lê, Ingvarson and Page, in *Alcoholics Anonymous and the Counseling Profession: Philosophies in Conflict*, "promotes the idea of individual helplessness and encourages dependency, which is directly contrary to the usual therapeutic goals of self-direction and independence."³⁰ Wendy Kaminer, in *I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional*, contends that the recovery movement disempowers people by encouraging a belief "in the impossibility of individual autonomy,"³¹ while Lê, Ingvarson and Page, maintain that "AA members are encouraged to relinquish self-direction and self-responsibility."³² Christopher goes even further, claiming that AA members have been "coerced into giving up their individual identities and free-thought processes" and are "wrapped in the swaddling clothes of cult care."³³

In this fine example of dualistic thinking, the critics pit self-responsibility against reliance on others as oppositional and mutually exclusive behaviors; one is *either* independent (and responsible) *or* dependent (and irresponsible). According to this popular Enlightenment assumption, *any* dependence is a weakness to be avoided at all costs. By contrast, AA philosophy maintains that one can be *both* independent *and* dependent (i.e. *interdependent*), able to rely on others as well as to take responsibility for self and for others. Not surprisingly, the possibility of interdependence, or even the word itself, is never mentioned by AA's critics.

To advance their claims, critics focus on the surrender required by the first three steps of AA's Twelve Step program and ignore the responsibility and action required by the remaining steps. The first three steps call for an acknowledgment of powerlessness over alcohol and a turning of one's will over to a self-defined Higher Power, whereas steps four through twelve require alcoholics to make a critical self-examination, to admit their wrongs, to make amends to those one has harmed and to commit oneself to continuous self-critique and improvement as well as service to others. Clearly, even a cursory exam of the entire Twelve Steps exposes the absurdity of the allegation that AA fosters an abdication of responsibility.

But critics don't just fail to grasp that surrender and responsibility can be practiced simultaneously. They also miss the rather obvious fact that, for alcoholics, the act of surrender is itself a responsible act. In the First Step—"We admitted we are powerless over alcohol, that our lives have become unmanageable"³⁴—alcoholics accept the truth concerning their addiction. In admitting

their powerlessness, they surrender the belief that they can control their drinking. This in turn gives them the permission or rational to give up alcohol altogether, and thus to end the futile attempt to drink without creating negative consequences. This act of surrender is thus the initial and necessary act of responsibility that sets life on a new footing and makes possible subsequent responsible behavior. By not drinking, alcoholics not only eliminate the many problems and crises caused by their drinking, they also gain the opportunity to repair damaged relationships with spouse, children, family, employer, etc. Alcoholics are therefore greatly empowered by sobriety, which means that they are empowered by surrender and hence experience the spiritual paradox of "surrendering to win."

Critics also err in representing AA's surrender as all-encompassing. Kaminer paints a portrait of total, abject submission when she writes "Imagine the slogan of recovery—admit that you're powerless and submit—as a political slogan and what is wrong with this movement becomes clear."³⁵ But the surrender required by AA is not absolute, but limited and specific. In addition to admitting their powerlessness *over alcohol*, AA members admit their lack of control over "people, places and things" outside of themselves. They practice the directives of the Serenity Prayer—to accept the things they cannot change and to focus instead on changing the things that they can.³⁶ Adherence to these guidelines is empowering, as one's energy, time and resources are used more productively. Nor is AA's practice of surrendering to a Higher Power the broad abdication of responsibility implied by Kaminer. Because AA members define that power for themselves and direct their own spiritual life, this

surrender often boils down to nothing more than following one's deeper sense of what is right, rather than giving in to shallow and selfish desires.

II. Cult of Victimization or an Effective Antidote to Self-Pity?

Critics not only accuse AA of robbing members of their individuality, but they also insist, in a rather inexplicable act of self-contradiction, that AA, and the recovery movement that it spawned, encourages excess individualism. AA is said to foster a narcissistic self-absorption that results in an exaggerated sense of self-pity and victimhood. Kaminer offers as evidence the maudlin treatment of recovery served up by talk-television—a cheap shot to say the least, given that no group or issue is likely to be accurately portrayed when packaged as entertainment. Kaminer's broad treatment is particularly ludicrous when used to judge AA because the majority of AA meetings are private affairs. The more typical "closed meeting" is not open to non-alcoholics and rules of confidentiality are observed. Thus, AA is a far cry from the exhibitionism of talk-television.

But while Kaminer errs in treating a diverse movement as monolithic, her caricatures are all-too-familiar. Many of us know recovering individuals so fixated on their victimization that they lose perspective and come to view everything through the lens of their suffering. Furthermore, Kaminer accurately describes the allure of victimhood in writing that "Not only may victimization make you famous and the center of some small circle of attention, it offers absolution and no accountability and creates entitlements to

sympathy, support, and reparations."³⁷ However, we will discover not only that the critics are dead-wrong in accusing AA of contributing to the cult of victimhood but that AA's philosophy and Twelve Step program are, in fact, the best counter-force to the dangers of narcissism and victimhood that exist within the recovery movement. In adopting a spiritual way of life, AA inherited effective antidotes to self-pity. Through the practice of personal inventory, AA members assume responsibility for their share of blame and relinquish excessive blame of others and exaggerated notions of one's victimization. In AA, self-pity is perceived to pose a danger to sobriety, as evidenced in the AA expression "poor me, poor me, pour me another drink." AA members maintain vigilance against this danger by urging those who lapse into self-pity to "get off the pity-pot." In AA, the community guides its members away from self-pity to self-responsibility, away from the easy criticism and blame of others to the difficult critique of self.

The critics, who are obviously well aware of the common ground shared by the struggles for personal and social justice, broaden the sweep of their target with this criticism. Thus, while Kaminer assails the recovery movement for encouraging people "to see themselves as victims of family life,"³⁸ she also laments the "pervasive sense of victimization among blacks,"³⁹ and Rieff groups recovering individuals with academic multiculturalists (academics who include the perspectives and experiences of marginalized groups as valid subjects of inquiry) claiming that "the politics of victimhood [is] a centerpiece of both movements."⁴⁰

Again the critics paint with a broad stroke, in this instance ignoring the enormous diversity of the Left. However, victim politics is sufficiently widespread to be worthy of our concern. Victim politics is apparent in versions of identity politics that define people as "oppressed" and "oppressor" on the basis of one's innate human attributes. In these political versions of original sin, men are born sexist pigs, whites are born racist and heterosexuals are born homophobic.

Ken Wilber, in *A Brief History of Everything*, offers the classic feminist depiction of patriarchy as one example of the problems inherent to victim politics. Many feminists portray patriarchy, Wilber observes, as a system "imposed on women by a bunch of sadistic and power-hungry men."⁴¹ This theory locks us, Wilber maintains, "into two inescapable definitions of men and women. Namely, men are pigs and women are sheep."⁴² Wilber points out that this depiction is not only overly flattering to men, because it proposes that they succeeded, in every culture and across eons, to come together and oppress the other half of humanity, but it is also decidedly unflattering to women, who are portrayed as not only weaker, but stupider, than men. Far better, Wilber insists, to realize that "men and women *co-created* the social forms of their interaction" and to "trace out the hidden power that women have had [in] various cultural structures throughout our history."⁴³ Patriarchy is, Wilber posits, "an unavoidable arrangement for an important part of human development" that is just now becoming unnecessary.⁴⁴

Lerner also laments the fallout of victim politics, claiming that victim politics fails to "capture the complexity of social reality" and

contributes to a dualistic, us/them mentality which makes the Left self-defeating.⁴⁵ Victim politics has created, according to Lerner, "hierarchies of suffering" which have led, on the one hand, to a battle among the "oppressed" over who is suffering the most and therefore worthy of the largest entitlement. On the other hand, those defined as the enemy—in particular, the white men who bear the brunt of this bad analysis—respond, Lerner alleges, to the "assumption that their very being is oppressive [by] closing their ears to the liberal or progressive agenda and turning to the Right."⁴⁶

Unfortunately many of AA's critics exploit the weaknesses of victim politics to undermine struggles for justice by suggesting that the best way to evade the self-defeating trap of victimhood and self-pity is to abandon the interrogation of abuse and oppression altogether. But to do so is tantamount to giving up the struggle for justice, the effective pursuit of which requires the knowledge and empowerment gained from the examination of oppression. Lorde explains the necessity of this inspection in writing that, as black, female and lesbian;

America's measurement of me has lain like a barrier across the realization of my own powers. It was a barrier which I had to examine and dismantle, piece by painful piece, in order to use my energies fully and creatively.⁴⁷

Rather than forsaking the interrogation of injustice we must discover and employ methods of investigating and dismantling modes of oppression, both individual and social, that enable us to transcend the us/them dichotomies that encourage us to define ourselves as victims and subsequently trap us in pathological self-absorption. I propose that AA illustrates the most effective method

to accomplish this goal, that is through the application of the spiritual principles of self-responsibility, forgiveness and compassion. AA, of course, did not invent this spiritual approach, but merely adapted it to the problem of alcoholism. That a spiritual approach is also effective in the political arena has been adequately demonstrated by both Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King.

III: Evasion or Assumption of Social Responsibility?

Just as critics claim that independence and dependence are incompatible, they create another false dichotomy by posing responsibility to self and social responsibility as oppositional and mutually exclusive. The struggles for personal and social justice are depicted as being invariable at odds with each other; one can focus *either* on self *or* on other, we are told, but never on both. For AA's critics, this means that the personal struggle can only occur at the expense of the social struggle. Anyone engaged in personal recovery is therefore presumed to be socially negligent. Rieff describes AA as "a turning inward...[an] abdication of social responsibility...The message, whether psychological or political, is that there are no civic, no social obligations, only private ones."⁴⁸ To make his argument convincing, Rieff omits any mention of the service work required by AA's Twelfth Step, which stipulates that "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs."⁴⁹

Stanton Peele, author of *Diseasing of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control*, argues that AA's "disease theory" of alcoholism is proof that AA promotes an abdication of social

responsibility. Peele claims, on the one hand, that AA defines alcoholism as a disease in the most literal (i.e. biological/physical) sense of the term. On the other hand, Peele maintains that AA employs this literal definition to excuse alcoholics of responsibility for their behavior. According to Peele, AA's so-called disease theory presupposes that alcoholics are passive victims of their addictions and therefore "ought not be held to ordinary moral standards and codes of community conduct."⁵⁰ But Peele is wrong on both counts. For starters, as we have seen, AA's Twelve Step program actually requires (over and over again) the assumption of responsibility. And while AA does employ a quasi-disease concept of alcoholism, we will find when we consult AA literature that AA's interpretation is more metaphorical than literal. AA offers a holistic view that stresses the threefold nature of alcoholism as a physical, mental and spiritual illness or malady, with the emphasis on the spiritual. Hence, AA members are well aware that, while they might suffer from a "disease," they remain responsible for their behavior. This paradoxical juxtaposition of blamelessness and culpability is satirized by one AA member known to this author who jokes that "I'm allergic to alcohol...whenever I drink, I break out in hand-cuffs."

From AA's dialectical, both/and perspective, the struggles for personal and social justice are not only compatible, but mutually dependent. The "self-absorption" of recovery, at least as practiced in AA with its strong emphasis on responsibility, is not an abdication of social obligation but the necessary first step out of the selfishness for which substance abusers are notorious. In the case of alcoholics (or drug addicts in general), it is fairly evident that personal work

necessarily precedes social/political work. The assumption of responsibility begins with abstinence. After taking this first step, AA members work through the rest of the requirements of the Twelve Step program, each step requiring ever-more involved acts of responsibility, until arriving at the Twelfth Step, with its emphasis on obligation and service to others. Far from promoting an abdication of responsibility, AA encourages and guides alcoholics to become both personally and socially responsible.

IV. Anti-Intellectual or Restoration of Balance of Head and Heart?

Critics point to AA's focus on emotions as evidence that AA is anti-intellectual. With their "widespread preference for feelings over ideas,"⁵¹ Twelve Step groups, Kaminer argues, substitute sentimentality for objective analysis. But AA is not so much anti-intellectual, as it is wary of an over reliance on the intellect. Consistent with its holistic perspective, AA values emotions alongside thoughts, thus challenging the fragmentation of modern life caused by modernity's worship of the human intellect and neglect of the emotional and intuitive side of human nature. In seeking to restore a holistic balance between head and heart, AA subverts an oppressive order, in which, according to Lorde, "feelings were expected to kneel to thought as women were expected to kneel to men."⁵² To restore this balance is empowering because, Lorde explains, "We are easier to control when one part of our selves is split from another, fragmented, off balance."⁵³

Kaminer bolsters her charge that AA is anti-intellectual by ridiculing the simple slogans of AA. But in dismissing these mottoes

as "nonsensical jargon,"⁵⁴ Kaminer mistakes simplicity for nonsense. Obviously many AA sayings merely express common sense—"don't pick up the first drink," "first things first," "keep it simple," "Think, Think, Think," "you're worth more than a drink," "progress, not perfection," "keep the plug in the jug." However, these aphorisms are effective tools precisely because of their simple and easily remembered format; many a panicky alcoholic has surmounted the urge to drink through recollection of one or more of these expressions. And some of AA's mottoes embody great wisdom rather than common sense. AA's principle of living one-day-at-a-time, for example, expresses an ancient, and widely esteemed, spiritual guide to life.

Kaminer also finds fault with the repetition of AA precepts. "Imagine listening to the same Serenity Prayer, the same steps and traditions," she laments, "at every meeting you attend."⁵⁵ But AA is not a classroom of dullards struggling to grasp the simplest of concepts, as Kaminer implies. On the contrary, AA is a community, which by Fox's definition, is a group of individuals putting "shared values into practice."⁵⁶ Hence the necessity of repetition, as AA members practice applying shared values to the endless variety of circumstances that constitute life.

V. Religious or Spiritual?

Critics allege that AA is religious, refuting AA's claim to be spiritual, as opposed to religious. The truth is actually more complex. AA began in the Oxford Group, an evangelical Christian organization. Critics cite AA's origins as proof of its religious nature, disregarding

the fact that AA left the Oxford Group because it was *too* religious. AA's founders sought to create what Wilson dubbed "the Broad Highway"⁵⁷ by transforming the Oxford Group's religious program into a spiritual program devoid of both the dogma and coercion that so many contemporary individuals find objectionable. The important question then is not whether AA is religious or spiritual—it is both, because while its destination was spirituality, it still carries the markers of its origins. Rather, we should determine how successful AA was in creating a program that appeals to a wide array of individuals, regardless of their religious persuasion or lack thereof. The phenomenal growth of AA, the proliferation of Twelve Step programs and the widespread dissemination and practice of AA philosophy in the broader culture are all indications that AA achieved its goal by creating a spiritual path that is broad enough to be both acceptable and useful to 20th-century individuals.

AA members are very protective of AA's concept of spirituality and the distinction between religion and spirituality is continually emphasized. While free to express their particular religious beliefs, AA members observe the limits of acceptable discourse and avoid venturing into territory that others will find invasive or inappropriate. In fact, the surest way to get censured in AA is to proselytize in meetings or suggest that the spiritual views of others are misguided. Religious/spiritual issues do however constitute a significant portion of AA discourse. In critical comparisons, members often contrast their largely negative childhood experiences of religion with their positive experiences in AA. And given the freedom to develop their own concept of a Higher Power, AA members do

indeed change their image of God. Many members trade the judgmental, vengeful God of their childhood for a loving, tolerant, forgiving God. Others abandon monotheistic images altogether and embrace pantheistic concepts of God. Both of these concepts—a loving God and a pantheistic God that exists *within* the group—are referenced in AA's Second Tradition, which states that "For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience."⁵⁸

Some members refer to AA as their "church," seemingly giving credence to the claim that AA is more akin to religion than spirituality. But members understand that this statement implies both comparison, and contrast, to organized religion; it is to say that AA takes the place of a church by meeting some of the same needs that a church meets but without the associated drawbacks. If AA is a church, it is uniquely egalitarian and democratic. In contrast to hierarchically structured churches in which ministers preach to silent congregations, AA has as many ministers as congregationalists. In AA everyone speaks as well as listens, everyone is "ministered to" and in turn "ministers to" others, everyone is both philosopher and theologian.

Fox contends that there are two models of spirituality and social organization—one democratic and the other authoritarian. Base communities are democratic; they operate, Fox explains, according to the Dancing Sara's Circle model, whereas the authoritarian approach employs a Climbing Jacob's Ladder model which is "intrinsically elitist, hierarchical, and competitive, since only a few can make it to the top of the ladder."⁵⁹ Fox argues that AA is a base community.

"The term *base* means," Fox alleges, "that 'the church is not being thought of from the top down, but from the bottom up, from the grassroots.'"⁶⁰ Base communities, Fox posits, awaken "those at the bottom...to their own leadership potential; worship and teaching do not come 'from above' but arise from the experience of people."⁶¹ Fox insists that:

AA groups and the groups they have spawned...perform a healing service using a Sara's Circle model. Their common ground is the storytelling that ensues. They bring about group and individual empowerment based on the common grief and suffering that addictions inflict on the addicted, their families, and friends.... Empowerment arises from the wounds that exist within the group.⁶²

If the distinction between the spirituality that AA advocates and the religion that it disavows remains ambiguous, it is perhaps because the concept and practice of spirituality, at least in the West, is relatively new. AA, possibly more than any other modern Western entity, has contributed to this important emergent phenomenon.

VI. Sexist or Feminist?

AA's gender exclusive language and its references to a male God make AA vulnerable to the charge of being sexist. AA's texts, which have not been amended since Wilson penned them, refer to alcoholics as male despite women's presence in AA from its earliest days. The chapter in the Big Book, "To Wives," refers to women as the wives of alcoholics and relegates female alcoholics to a mere footnote.⁶³ The footnote, rather unsatisfactorily, instructs readers to adapt the information in the case of female alcoholics. Old-fashioned and condescending references to women that appear in AA literature—phrases such as "our women folk"⁶⁴—are particularly

jarring to the modern ear. But, while AA's language is undeniably sexist, some feminists extend their critique of AA beyond the realm of language and allege that AA, which was founded by a group that was overwhelmingly male, is designed to meet the needs of male alcoholics and is therefore unsuited for female alcoholics. This charge fails to acknowledge AA's underlying feminist essence. If AA is *superficially* sexist on the level of language, we will discover that it is also, when it comes to values and practices, *profoundly* feminist.

Envisioning Political Change

I have claimed that AA, as a model of community and spirituality, has much to offer the Left. I would like to speculate at this point on how the Left would be affected by the application of this model, calling on the ideas of Fox, Lerner, Lorde, Anzaldúa and others to create a vision of the integration of spirituality and social activism.

Political Struggles Guided by Spiritual Principles would be Self-critical

AA members learn to be self-critical through the practice of taking a "personal inventory." Faced with a conflict or dilemma, they focus on their own culpability rather than on the faults or limitations of others. A self-critical stance repudiates dualistic, us/them models that divide the world into good and evil, with evil securely located outside oneself. It acknowledges instead a dialectical perspective in which all of us are understood to be both good and evil, both oppressed and oppressor, both victim and victimizer.

The psychologist Carl Jung maintained that each one of us contains both shadow and light. To be self-critical then is to accept the existence of, and assume responsibility for, one's shadow. The shadow, according to Jungian psychologist Jacqueline Small, contains "our disowned, despised, and repressed traits."⁶⁵ Jung believed that those who repress their shadow end up projecting it onto others. "They cast their shadow out onto the world," Small insists, "expunging these 'evils' from themselves and seeing them only in others."⁶⁶ Thus we denounce from a distance, Small notes, that which we despise in ourselves.

Shadow projection is both an individual and group behavior. When practiced collectively it contributes to all manner of bigotry and social injustice. Anzaldúa identifies racism as a case of collective shadow projection. She contends that white society has split itself off from minority groups and subsequently projected its negative parts onto minorities. "Where there is persecution of minorities," Anzaldúa alleges, "there is shadow projection."⁶⁷ The scapegoating of marginalized groups is, according to Fox, another manifestation of collective projection. To put an end to this multitude of social evils requires therefore that we reassimilate our shadows and stop projecting them onto others. We do this through critical self-examination, which enables us, according to Fox, to embrace our shadows and hence alleviates the need to project them outward.

Social activists have several reasons then to engage in self-scrutiny. As previously mentioned, it is the means of dismantling negative self-images projected upon us by others. However self-critique is also necessary if we, as members of oppressed groups, are

to transcend us/them dichotomies and honestly assess our participation in the oppression of others. Lorde calls for vigilance against the tendency to duck this work when she warns of the woman that "is so enamored of her own oppression that she cannot see her heelprint upon another woman's face."⁶⁸ And Anzaldúa insists that "*We have a responsibility to each other, certain commitments. The leap into self-affirmation goes hand in hand with being critical of self.*"⁶⁹

The practice of self-criticism, if engaged by social activists, would put an end to victim politics by debunking simplistic us/them, social models. Identity-based hierarchies of oppression, which Lorde warns are often used "as a ticket into the fold of the righteous, away from the cold winds of self-scrutiny,"⁷⁰ would topple under the weight of honest self-assessment.

***Political Struggles Guided by Spiritual Principles
would engage in both the Personal & Social Arenas***

Personal struggle lays the foundation for social struggle, both by providing an essential source of power and by transforming the character of social struggle. Unexamined personal pain is, according to Lorde, untapped power. "When I live through pain without recognizing it, self-consciously," Lorde contends, "I rob myself of the power that can come from *using* that pain, the power to fuel some movement beyond it."⁷¹ Lorde also notes that in acknowledging her vulnerability she diminishes the arsenal of her enemies; "My history cannot be used to feather my enemies' arrows....Nothing I accept about myself can be used against me."⁷²

Fox points out that the personal struggle also transforms the social struggle from one driven by anger and hatred to one guided by compassion, forgiveness and understanding. Fox emphasizes the necessity to engage on the psychic battleground—to enter what psychologists call "the dark night of the soul" and what AA members know as "hitting bottom"—in order to experience the emptiness, pain, doubt and vulnerability that give birth to wisdom and compassion. "Compassion is often born of a broken heart," Fox argues, "[and] the struggle for justice is born of the experience of injustice."⁷³

Lorde and Anzaldúa also insist that we act out of compassion and forgiveness rather than anger and hatred. "Hatred is a deathwish for the hated, not a lifewish for anything else," Lorde declares, while anger is "an incomplete form of human knowledge...a blind force which cannot create the future [but] can only demolish the past."⁷⁴ And Anzaldúa calls for forgiveness because carrying the ghosts of the past only prevents us from forming new relationships and finding new ways of coping.

Lerner argues that the Left, which he criticizes for its habit of writing people off as the enemy, would be radically transformed by compassion. He insists that the most effective way to counter oppression "is to begin to recognize the pain and fundamental humanity of those who have in various ways been complicit with systems of oppression."⁷⁵ Compassion does not require, Lerner notes, tolerating oppressive behavior. Rather, it is an extension of trust towards imperfect human beings who sometimes engage in evil acts—a trust, Lerner explains, that each of us is capable of transcending who we have become and returning to our "deepest inner truth."⁷⁶

We must learn, according to Lerner, how to convey "to others a deep and profound respect for their beings, even as we struggle against their oppressive actions."⁷⁷ Williamson argues similarly, insisting that "There is a difference between holding people accountable and personally demonizing them."⁷⁸ The former guarantees democracy, Williamson notes, while the latter undermines it. AA offers the Left a dramatic demonstration of the profound transformations that people are capable of when they are shown compassion and respect in spite of their significant failings.

Some of AA's critics deny the link between personal and social struggle by characterizing engagement in the personal arena as an indulgence of the privileged, insisting that the "real oppressed" are too busy struggling for survival to entertain such trivial pursuits. Lorde soundly refutes this nonsense. While she acknowledges that Black people have had to focus on material survival, she cautions against moving:

from this fact to the belief that Black people do not need to examine our feelings; or that they are unimportant...or that these feelings are not vital to our survival; or, worse, that there is some acquired virtue in not feeling them deeply.⁷⁹

Williamson urges us to consider our "personal development as part and parcel of our social and political training...a means to a political end,"⁸⁰ while Lerner contends that we must guard against both the danger of withdrawing into "head work," as well as the "tendency to become conventional political beings....abandoning our ethical, spiritual, and ecological sensitivities."⁸¹ Anzaldúa insists that:

The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes,

which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the 'real' world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.⁸²

Political Struggles Guided by Spiritual Principles would be Characterized by Inclusive Communities

AA's third tradition stipulates that "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking." By placing the decision regarding membership squarely with the individual, AA relinquished all means of exclusion. As a result, AA is all-inclusive. By contrast, the Left is largely organized along lines of identity, with separate gay groups, African-American groups, Asian-American groups, women's groups, African-American gay groups, Asian women's groups, etc., etc. While identity-based organizations provide an effective venue for marginalized groups to collectively interrogate their oppression, overcome negative self-images and gather their strengths, they are ineffective over the long run, because, as Anzaldúa declares, "separatism by race, nation, or gender will not do the trick of revolution...ultimately, we must struggle together."⁸³

Lorde believes that we have been taught to respond to difference with fear and hatred, and that our survival depends on our capacity to develop "new patterns of relating across difference"⁸⁴ as equals. In Lorde's vision of community, difference is "not merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic."⁸⁵ It is only when we recognize the "creative function of difference in our lives," Lorde insists, that "the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening."⁸⁶

AA provides one successful pattern for relating across difference as equals. By encouraging its members to focus on their common pain and vulnerability, AA enables alcoholics to see past their differences and discover their common humanity. AA's approach has resulted in what Kurtz refers to as the "practice of joyous pluralism."⁸⁷ Kurtz describes AA in language strikingly akin to Lorde's, maintaining that AA treats difference as "richly fruitful rather than harmfully destructive."⁸⁸ He explains that AA:

solved the paradoxical challenge of the alcoholic's sense of being 'different' in a way that allowed, opened to, and indeed even enforced a joyous pluralism. A unity of identity founded in shared weakness could not be threatened—on the contrary, could only be enriched—by 'difference'; for 'difference' became by definition 'good' when its basis was identical identifying weakness.⁸⁹

Nor is AA's quest for common ground a superficial search for fragile armistice. Rather, AA fits Pecks' description of community as:

a group of individuals who have learned how to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure, and who have developed some significant commitment to 'rejoice together, mourn together.'⁹⁰

By creating inclusive communities in which members engage, as equals, in deep and honest communication, AA discovered the means to effect reconciliation across differences. AA breaks through the silence that engulfs us and thus strikes at the heart of human conflict, because, as Lorde explains, "It is not difference which immobilizes us but silence. And there are so many silences to be broken."⁹¹ The Left must also create inclusive communities that engage in deep communication if it hopes to achieve reconciliation. Anzaldúa endorses AA's approach, claiming that "By highlighting

similarities, downplaying divergence, that is, by *rapprochement* between self and *Other* it is possible to build a syncretic relationship."⁹² She insists that "It is time we began to get out of the state of opposition and into *rapprochement*."⁹³

Lerner worries that the Left no longer even entertains a vision of inclusive community. Some academic radicals, Lerner observes, have replaced the notion of a common interest or common good "with a multiculturalist focus that insists that there can be no unifying shared ethical vision."⁹⁴ They argue, according to Lerner, that we lack a "language of common values" on which to build an inclusive community. Lerner insists that "When multiculturalism is allowed to extend to the denial of the common good or the possibility of objective ethics, it undermines the basis for building a more caring community."⁹⁵ Lorde and Anzaldúa also speak to the failure of the Left regarding community. Lorde warns against hiding "behind the mockeries of separations that have been imposed upon us and which so often we accept as our own,"⁹⁶ while Anzaldúa laments that "For the politically correct stance we let color, class, and gender separate us from those who would be kindred spirits. So the walls grow higher, the gulfs between us wider, the silences more profound."⁹⁷

A Typical AA Meeting

This chapter attempts to provide the reader who has never attended AA with an accurate conception of what takes place in AA meetings. No doubt meetings vary across both time and geography. AA gatherings today surely differ from those held in the 1930s and contemporary meetings (or groups) vary amongst themselves in character, demographic composition and ritual practice. For example, many groups but certainly not all, recite the Lord's Prayer. But there are enough common threads uniting AA meetings today that a knowledge of one meeting provides a general sense of AA. The following description is of the meeting attended by this author.

This particular group is unique in one significant way. Unlike most AA groups that meet weekly in a borrowed space such as a church, hospital or community center, the group described here rents a building which enables it to hold about seventy meetings a month, usually two daily, with one around mid-day and one in the evening. Two meetings a week are designated for women. The Friday night meeting is the only "open" meeting; open meetings are for alcoholic and non-alcoholic alike and consist of just one speaker, an AA member who has agreed to give an "open talk." Closed meetings are for AA members only. Usually groups that meet weekly designate one meeting a month as their open meeting with the remainder being closed meetings. The following description pertains to the more common, closed meeting.

Closed meetings are facilitated by a chairperson who has volunteered to run a particular meeting, say the Tuesday evening

meeting, until he/she recruits another volunteer to take over. If the chair fails to show up, another member will take charge, utilizing a list of instructions which enables anyone to step in at a moment's notice and successfully run a meeting. The chair opens the meeting with a welcome and then precedes to read the AA preamble which is as follows:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any cause. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

The chair then leads the group in the Serenity Prayer, often introducing it with the comment that "AA is not a religious program but it does have a spiritual side. If you like, join me in the Serenity Prayer." The chair inquires if anyone is attending their first AA meeting because this information is vital to the direction the meeting takes. When new members are present, meetings are oriented for their benefit. If there are no new members, the chair asks for suggestions of a topic. Typical subjects include any of the Twelve Steps and Traditions or principles common to AA such as gratitude, honesty and responsibility.

The instructions suggest several methods to determine the order of speakers. The chair might randomly call on people, go by seating order or ask the person speaking to select the next speaker. Often the chair simply permits a period of silence after each speaker, allowing the next speaker to voluntarily take the floor. Meetings

normally range from eight or ten people to about fifty, which is all the room will hold. Those who do not want to talk will usually introduce themselves when called on and then "pass" on the opportunity to speak, saying something to the effect of "I just want to listen today." Towards the end of the meeting, if everyone has not had an opportunity to talk, the chair will ask if anyone has "a burning desire" to speak; this allows anyone who wants to talk to do so. While meetings are scheduled for an hour, the chair might decide to run over if there are only a few members who have not yet had the opportunity to speak. In a large meeting, it is understood that there isn't enough time for everyone to speak and the meeting ends when the last speaker to take the floor before the end of the hour finishes speaking. Individuals have the floor until they relinquish it. Some speak briefly, while the more loquacious will generally limit themselves to eight or ten minutes.

About forty minutes into the meeting baskets are circulated. AA is "self-supporting" which means that AA does not accept money from outside sources and that each group supports itself through the donations collected at meetings. Unlike some churches which request members to tithe, the customary donation at AA is one dollar. No one donates more than a dollar per meeting and many throw change in the basket or donate nothing. A small percentage of the money is sent to AA headquarters, while the rest pays for coffee and supplies and in the case of this group, for rent and utilities.

Announcements are made before the meeting ends. The custom of this group is to close the meeting with the Lord's Prayer. Members

stand in a circle holding hands and the chair initiates the group recitation of the prayer.

Meetings are informal, with men and women alike getting up periodically to make or serve coffee. People come and go as needed, arriving late and leaving early. There is a saying in AA that "you are never late as long as one person remains with whom to talk." Many members arrive early and stay after meetings to socialize. If someone is new or having a difficult time, they are likely to be approached after the meeting by members offering support and opportunities for further discussion.

Although not universal to all AA meetings, this group employs the rule of "no cross-talk" which means that the speaker who has the floor is not interrupted. No cross-talk also entails restrictions on how members respond to each other. The problems of another are not addressed directly and members avoid telling each other what to do. Instead advice is couched in a description of similar experiences and lessons learned that might prove beneficial. The absence of cross-talk is a great equalizer because it allows all members, regardless of their timidity or sense of powerlessness, to speak without fear of interruption; it thus eliminates the opportunity for anyone to dominate the discussion or intimidate others into silence.

When a newcomer is present the meeting topic automatically becomes AA's first three steps. Members design their comments to be of benefit to the newcomer, addressing any difficulties they encountered with the first three steps, such as discomfort with AA's spirituality or the process of overcoming the shame of identifying as alcoholic. Newcomers are advised in regard to AA's spirituality to

"use the group as your Higher Power" or to "think of God as Good Orderly Direction" or to "take what you like and leave the rest." Members welcome newcomers and offer specific advice such as "don't drink and come to meetings," "if you don't like this meeting, shop around until you find one you like" and "attend ninety meetings in ninety days, if you're not satisfied we'll refund you back your misery." The chair gives the newcomer a membership book which contains a schedule of local meetings and a list of phone numbers, explaining that members who volunteer their phone numbers are willing to be called at any time, day or night, to offer assistance. The norms of meetings are learned by observation rather than instruction and infractions of the rules are ignored. Thus, for example, a newcomer that interrupts someone who is speaking is allowed to finish with the interjection and the faux pax is not pointed out.

Newcomers are generally easy to spot. Not because they are strangers; new faces cannot be taken as new to AA. But, as AA members note, "no one comes to AA on a winning streak." Consequently, many newcomers display fear, depression, anxiety or the physical symptoms of withdrawal from drugs and alcohol. The body language of shame is often palpable, as witnessed by this author in the woman who killed a motorcyclist while driving drunk or the man who came straight from jail after being arrested for battering his wife.

Some newcomers are hostile, seething at the courts or other institutions that have mandated AA attendance. But these individuals soon learn that, while their relationship with these

institutions might be coercive, their relationship with AA is not. Because AA does not believe in forcing sobriety on anyone, it provides no mechanisms to verify anyone's participation to outsiders. Members who receive the "nudge from the judge" to attend AA carry a multi-lined sheet of paper with one line designated for each meeting attended. The chair signs his/her first name and last initial alongside the date, time and location of the meeting. But AA provides no addresses, phone numbers or other means to check the validity of the chairs' signatures. Newcomers quickly realize that they can just as easily go to the bar and sign their own paper. In fact, AA members often point out this fact to newcomers while stressing that successful sobriety is self-motivated.

The tell-tale signs of a newcomer often disappear within a meeting or two as people learn what to expect in AA and subsequently become more comfortable. One common fear is that of having to talk, but newcomers quickly pick up on the technique of "passing" and realize that no one is ever forced to talk. They also discover by listening to others that they can keep their comments general and superficial as opposed to personal and expository, thus controlling themselves the extent of their vulnerability.

The process of recovery in AA, like that of spiritual development, is self-directed. New members are advised to read AA literature, attend a lot of meetings and find a "sponsor"—an "elder" AA member who offers individual advice and support. However, the decision to follow this advice is a matter of personal choice and the response of newcomers varies widely. Some are avid readers while others never crack a book. While many attend meetings infrequently,

it is not uncommon for those struggling with abstinence to attend one or more meetings daily. Likewise, the decision to label oneself alcoholic and adopt the standard AA introduction—"I'm so-and-so and I'm an alcoholic"—is entirely up to each individual.

The new person is, of course, neither necessarily aware nor supportive of AA values and principles. But newcomers are often envious of the contentment they see in sober AA members and this envy hooks many a newcomer. Baffled by alcoholics who clearly enjoy life and can laugh about the trials and tribulations of alcoholism, newcomers want what they see in others. They become self-motivated, not just for sobriety, but for all that AA offers.

If the desire to drink or the discomfort experienced in AA outweighs the desire to not drink, the newcomer probably won't attend many meetings, thus diminishing the chance at sobriety. It's true that some alcoholics achieve sobriety without AA, but many of those who attend AA after going-it-alone testify that what they experienced was a white-knuckle, miserable sobriety that bears little resemblance to the comfort and serenity found in AA.

Critics portray AA meetings as invariably gloomy. Kaminer insists that "the mood of the group—somber—is fairly constant."⁹⁸ AA members, according to Kaminer, avoid eye contact and speak in barely audible tones with heads hung low. Actually, the attitudes expressed in AA run the gamut of human emotions, with hope, joy, gratitude, lightheartedness, laughter and contentment being every bit as prevalent as despair, depression and self-pity. These emotions, as well as one's body language, are a fairly accurate gauge of the length and quality of one's sobriety. Depression and low self-esteem

are chiefly exhibited by those new to sobriety, while confidence and gratitude are expressed by those reaping the benefits of long-term sobriety and AA's way of life. The down cast eyes and mumbled monologues that critics cite as characteristic of AA as a whole are in fact the attributes of AA members who have yet to overcome their shame and depression. In denying the wide range of emotions and body language displayed in AA, critics deprive themselves of the valuable insight this rich source of data offers into AA's process of recovery. Changes in attitudes and demeanor provide a dramatic demonstration of the deep healing and profound transformation that individuals experience in AA. Vivid representations of the stages of this transformation are evident in the diverse behavior exhibited in meetings. The collective, in effect, displays the individual's journey by reflecting the individual's past, present and future in the demeanor and attitudes of others, enabling AA members to look to each other for reminders of the past and glimpses of the future.

A Brief History of Alcoholics Anonymous

On a cold afternoon in November 1934, Ebby T. paid a visit to Bill Wilson, his long time drinking companion and soon to be co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous. The two men talked across the kitchen table. Bill drank while Ebby, who declined the offer of a drink, proceeded to describe to his friend his recent release from alcohol. Ebby told Bill of how he had joined the Oxford Group, a nondenominational, evangelical Christian movement, and how through the practice of the group's precepts, he had achieved sobriety. He described the steps he had taken to Wilson. They entailed an admission of powerlessness over alcohol, an honest self-examination, a confession, restitution for wrongs committed and reliance on God. Ebby told Wilson how his drinking had unaccountably stopped as a result of these practices and how his fears had been replaced by peace of mind. Without evangelizing or argument, Ebby told Bill his simple tale and then took his leave.

Wilson was alternately drawn and revolted by Ebby's story. In the days that followed, he continued his solitary drinking but Ebby's visit had made an impression that he could not shake. Both Ebby and Wilson were, by Wilson's own account, chronic alcoholics with the threat of commitment hanging over them. They were what Jack Alexander—*The Saturday Evening Post* journalist who would make AA famous—referred to as "sanitarium commuters."⁹⁹ In the 1930s, professionals in the field of alcoholism treatment were baffled by chronic alcoholics, with whom they were only able to achieve a sobriety rate of two to three percent. Alcoholism remained, Alexander observed, "one of the great unsolved public-health

enigmas."¹⁰⁰ Wilson, who was desperate for sobriety, had dined out on four separate occasions under a doctor's care—all to no avail. For Wilson, Ebby's success offered hope. Wilson later described the impact of Ebby's visit:

Several themes coursed in my mind: First, that [Ebby's] evident state of release was strangely and immensely convincing. Second, that he had been pronounced hopeless by competent medicos. Third, that those age-old precepts, *when transmitted by him*, had struck me with great power. Fourth, that I could not, and would not, go along with any God concept. No conversion nonsense for me.¹⁰¹

But try as he might, Wilson could not stop thinking about Ebby's sobriety. The visit had, Wilson later maintained, struck the spark that was to become Alcoholics Anonymous.

Wilson had a dilemma. Drawn by the prospect of sobriety and yet deeply revolted by religion, his moods alternated, he explained, "from rebellion against God to hope and then back again."¹⁰² Wilson, who had been trained as an engineer, was every bit the modern, secular-minded man. He worked as a sort of industrial spy, scouting out the technological prowess of various companies and then making recommendations to brokerage firms as to their investment potential. He made a fortune on the stock market only to lose it in the crash of 1929. Afterwards Wilson went into a down-hill spiral of drinking and depression. For the Wilsons, the early 1930s were years of profound misery. By 1934, the thirty-nine year old Wilson was living off his wife's meager salary and pan-handling to get money for alcohol. His wife, Lois, had three ectopic pregnancies against the backdrop of his repeated sorry promises to stop drinking. Broke and often homeless, the couple, according to one archivist, had 54 different addresses in the early 1930s.¹⁰³

Wilson needed a rationale that would allow him to try Ebby's remedy. He decided that alcoholism was akin to a fatal disease and asked himself who was he to reject a possible cure. So Wilson joined Ebby in the Oxford Group, attending meetings at Calvary Church in New York City and within a matter of weeks he had taken his last drink. Andrew Delbanco and Thomas Delbanco, in "AA At the Crossroads," note how out-of-character a spiritual approach to sobriety must have been for Wilson. They contend that:

the value of giving oneself up rather than 'pulling oneself together' [was] an ineffably strange reversal for a man like Bill, whose life had once been all about seizing opportunities, looking for the main chance, training, disciplining, driving himself.¹⁰⁴

Kurtz observes that the "self-conscious wariness of 'religion' that was so deeply to infuse the program and fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous"¹⁰⁵ was already evident in that November exchange between Wilson and Ebby. Indeed, Wilson's personal struggle to embrace a spiritual solution without compromising his modern disposition became AA's struggle. The attempt to resolve this tension is central to AA's early development and its subsequent character. If Wilson could forge a path for himself—a highway broad enough to encompass both religion and science—then perhaps this Broad Highway would provide a path for others to follow.

Thrilled with his new sobriety, Wilson described how his "thoughts began to race as [he] envisioned a chain reaction among alcoholics, one carrying this message and these principles to the next."¹⁰⁶ He realized that more than anything else, he wanted to help other alcoholics get sober. Drawing upon numerous sources, Wilson began to put together the ideas that would become the core of AA

philosophy and practice. From the Oxford Group, he took the necessity of spiritual conversion. From the medical field, he took the verdict that alcoholism was a hopeless and fatal affliction. To these ideas, Wilson added the lessons drawn from his own experience. He recognized the power of "the kinship of common suffering"¹⁰⁷ that he shared with Ebby, another alcoholic who understood his misery. After all it was Ebby, not his wife or his doctor, who finally made Wilson acknowledge the utter hopelessness of his condition. On a doctor's "say-so alone," Wilson claimed, "maybe I would never have completely accepted the verdict, but when Ebby came along and one alcoholic began to talk to another, that had clinched it."¹⁰⁸

Wilson also realized that his ego had been deflated by his acknowledgment of hopelessness and that it was this humility that opened him up to a spiritual alternative. "The dying," Wilson suggested, "can become remarkably open minded."¹⁰⁹ Thus Wilson concluded that alcoholics had to be humbled if they were to accept a spiritual remedy. He reasoned that if alcoholism were addressed as a sickness rather than a sin, perhaps alcoholics would listen. "To modern man, science is omnipotent; it is a god,"¹¹⁰ Wilson explained. "Hence if science would pass a death sentence on the drunk...Perhaps he would then turn to the God of the theologian, there being no place else to go."¹¹¹

In May 1935 Wilson got the opportunity to try out his ideas on another alcoholic. Dr. Robert Smith, another sanitarium commuter, became AA's second co-founder. In the now famous story, Wilson found himself in a hotel lobby in Akron, Ohio. Drawn to the friendly sounds coming from the hotel bar, Wilson was panicked by the urge

to drink. He reached out to another alcoholic to save his own skin, and in the process, saved the other man also. Wilson wrote of his initial encounter with Bob Smith, that "Needing him as much as he did me, there was genuine mutuality for the first time."¹¹² This mutual need became another of AA's core ideas—alcoholics needed each other to get, and remain, sober.

During the summer, the two men formulated what they were learning into several simple, operative principles which they practiced on some unsuspecting alcoholics laid up in the local Akron hospitals. By September Wilson and Smith had three sober alcoholics to their credit, an amazing success rate that surpassed that of the medical establishment and indicated that they had indeed discovered something new and exciting.

The efforts of the two men over the summer of 1935 marked the birth of the AA fellowship although the actual organization of the group and its independence from the Oxford Group would be several years in the making. In the fall of 1935, Wilson returned to New York City where he rejoined his group of struggling alcoholics in the Oxford Group. In Akron, Smith continued to administer to alcoholics in hospitals but he, like Wilson, also worked under the auspices of the Oxford Group. Wilson and Smith recruited alcoholics into the Oxford Group, where they pursued sobriety through the practice of the group's spiritual principles. But tensions soon surfaced between the alcoholic and the non-alcoholic members of the Oxford Group. In 1937 the alcoholics in New York left the Oxford Group to pursue sobriety on their own and two years later the Ohio alcoholics followed suit.

The Birth of AA's Twelve Step Program

In November 1937 the sober alcoholics awoke to the amazing fact that between New York and Ohio they now numbered over forty. Startled by their own success, they realized the potential demand that existed for their approach to sobriety. The alcoholics decided that Wilson would author a book, putting in writing what they had learned so that they could pass it on to others in need.

Wilson began writing in May of 1938, starting with the chapter "How It Works," which included the initial version of the Twelve Steps. Wilson described the steps as "the heart of our therapy, and a practical way of life."¹¹³ They were, he maintained, "an amplified and streamlined version of the principles enumerated by my friend of the kitchen table."¹¹⁴ As Wilson completed sections of the book, drafts were circulated among the New York and Ohio alcoholics and intense debate ensued over the book's content, and in particular, over the wording of the Twelve Steps. The conflict revealed profound differences over the religious content of the program. Wilson reported how the struggle ensued between several of its chief protagonists:

Fitz wanted a powerfully religious document; Henry and Jimmy would have none of it. They wanted a psychological book which would lure the reader in...As we worked feverishly on this project Fitz made trip after trip to New York from his Maryland home to insist on raising the spiritual pitch of the AA book...As umpire of these disputes, I was obliged to go pretty much down the middle, writing in spiritual rather than religious or entirely psychological terms.¹¹⁵

Wilson became, Kurtz alleges, the "man in the middle,"¹¹⁶ stepping into a lifelong role of mediating between various factions within AA. But umpire or not, Wilson had strong opinions of his own.

If alcoholics were cantankerous when it came to religion, Tim Stafford, in "The Hidden Gospel of the 12 Steps,"¹¹⁷ suggests that Wilson was the most cantankerous of them all. Wilson never was able, according to Stafford, to "reconcile himself to any orthodox expression of faith."¹¹⁸ But Wilson was also anxious to tone down the religiosity of their approach because he wanted a program that would appeal to *all* alcoholics, regardless of their religious persuasion or lack thereof. Under the auspices of the Oxford Group, Wilson had difficulty recruiting Catholics because the Catholic church had declared the Oxford Group off limits. This lack of inclusion deeply disturbed Wilson and made him dead set against making any particular religious demands that would create barriers for alcoholics. Wilson wanted a program that would appeal to Jews, Catholics, agnostics and atheists, as well as Christians.

But neither was Wilson inclined towards a purely psychological approach because experience had taught him that spiritual conversion was the key to sobriety. Where medical science had failed, a spiritual approach worked. In a passage from the Second Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Wilson explained his position, referring to himself in the third person:

Though he could not accept all the tenets of the Oxford Groups, he was convinced of the need for moral inventory, confession of personality defects, restitution to those harmed, helpfulness to others, and the necessity of belief in and dependence upon God.¹¹⁹

The problem was thus two-sided, according to Kurtz, who explained that AA "had to remain attractive to the temperamentally non-religious while it avoided giving offense to the personally religious."¹²⁰ AA's solution was to project itself as spiritual rather

than religious. In her memoir, *Lois Remembers*, Lois Wilson explains that the alcoholics decided to "present a universal spiritual program, not a specific religious one."¹²¹ The phrases "God as we understood Him" and "a Power greater than ourselves" were incorporated into the wording of the Twelve Steps as part of the compromise between what Delbanco and Delbanco refer to as AA's pietist and rationalist wings. Thus, traces of the division between these two wings are still discernible, Delbanco and Delbanco note, in the wording of the steps.

Controversy also raged over the book's title. Lois reveals that Bill initially considered naming the book *The Wilson Movement*, but "This natural but egotistical impulse was soon overcome by more mature reasoning."¹²² Other suggestions included *Dry Frontiers*, *The Empty Glass* and *One Hundred Men*—a name that reflected that by 1939 the group had grown to one hundred. This last name was given serious consideration, according to Lois, until one of AA's female pioneers, Florence R., objected to the insinuation that AA was all male. (Florence's story was included in the first edition of the book. Tragically, she did not remain sober and died of alcoholism.) Eventually members agreed to the title, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, using a term that grew out of the habit of New York members to refer to themselves as "a nameless bunch of drunks." Shortly thereafter the book, which was hefty due to the thick stock on which it was printed, became known simply as the Big Book and the group took the name Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Big Book, which focused on experience rather than theory, included the stories of thirty AA members because it was the stories themselves that provided the best evidence of the efficacy of their

approach. The book urged recovering alcoholics to form their own AA groups, explaining that "Any two or three alcoholics gathered together for sobriety may call themselves an AA group, provided that, as a group, they have no other affiliation."¹²³ Wilson devoted one chapter of the book, "We Agnostics," to what he described as "softening up the agnostic."¹²⁴ The Big Book was published without listing Wilson as the author.

The Big Book was, according to Wilson, "the backbone"¹²⁵ of the society and the culmination of a three year period of trial and error in which AA put together insights and ideas from diverse sources. However AA's "own continuing experience," Kurtz observes, "also significantly shaped the development of A.A.'s thought."¹²⁶ AA filtered what it learned from others through the lessons of its own experience and, in the process, created a new entity altogether. AA was, Wilson declared, "a middle ground between medicine and religion, the missing catalyst of a new synthesis."¹²⁷

The Oxford Group Legacy

The Big Book revealed just how far AA had departed from the Oxford Group. However, the Oxford Group remains, according to Kurtz, AA's "conceptual home"¹²⁸ because it is the source for much of AA's philosophy and methods. The Oxford Group was founded by the American Lutheran clergyman, Frank Buchman, in 1908. Buchman developed a method of personal evangelism in which the missionary first confessed to the prospective convert, thereby soliciting the convert's confession and subsequent conversion. Buchman's converts were then urged to convert others as a means to strengthen and

reinforce their own conversion. Buchman broke his conversion process into a series of steps—the practices of surrender, self-exam, confession and restitution that Ebby had explained to Wilson over the kitchen table.

The Oxford Group aggressively recruited members and in particular went after the rich and famous, who were then used as frontmen in publicity campaigns. Group members met in small, informal gatherings where they exchanged personal stories and engaged in the practice of "team guidance." Akin to a Quaker meeting, the group sat quietly, each individual listening for God's guidance. Any guidance received was then discussed collectively by the group as a means of checking its validity. Members strove to obtain the "Four Absolutes" of absolute honesty, absolute purity, absolute unselfishness, and absolute love.

AA clearly took from the Oxford Group both the core of its conversion program as well as the practice of breaking conversion down into a series of steps. Conversion, Wilson conceded, "does seem to be our basic process; all other devices are but the foundation."¹²⁹ AA also borrowed from Buchman's method of personal conversion. The self-confession that Buchman advocated is evidenced in AA's practice of encouraging alcoholics to focus on their own "personal inventory," while refraining from taking the inventory of others. And Buchman's belief that the convert's faith is strengthened by working to convert others became incorporated in AA's Twelfth Step work. AA members view this work as a form of insurance against drinking but Twelfth Step work also embodies, Kurtz posits, the fundamental religious insight "that human life has meaning, ultimate meaning,

only as lived for others."¹³⁰ Wilson acknowledged AA's debt to the Oxford Group, explaining that "the important thing is this: the early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgment of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups."¹³¹ Kurtz maintains that AA also inherited from the Oxford Group an antipathy toward formal organization, the practice of story-telling, an emphasis on individual responsibility, a hands-off policy regarding social issues and a wariness of rational thought.

However, Kurtz argues that AA is actually more defined by its departures, than its similarities, to the Oxford Group. As Wilson noted, the alcoholics learned from the Oxford Group, "what, and what not, to do."¹³² For unlike the Oxford Group, AA, Kurtz explains, "steadfastly and consistently rejected absolutes, avoided aggressive evangelism, embraced anonymity, and strove to avoid offending anyone who might need its program."¹³³ Wilson insisted that many of the ideas and attitudes of the Oxford Group "simply could not be sold to alcoholics."¹³⁴ Alcoholics disliked pressure, Wilson claimed. They had to be led rather than pushed. They rejected, Wilson observed, the practice of team guidance as too authoritarian. And the Oxford Group goals of absolute honesty, purity, unselfishness and love were, Wilson alleged, "frequently too much for the drunks," who preferred to hold on to their defects, "letting go little by little."¹³⁵ Wilson declared that "We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. [Our principles] are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection."¹³⁶ Alcoholics, Wilson retorted, were not interested in

"trying to get too good by Thursday."¹³⁷ For the alcoholics, the goal was sobriety not salvation.

The alcoholics also rejected the aggressive evangelism and the public campaigns of the Oxford Group. Preferring to remain anonymous, they pursued a policy of attraction rather than one of promotion and embraced the principle of anonymity in stark contrast to the public exhibitionism of the Oxford Group. And, of course, AA toned down the theistic content of the Oxford Group program out of its wariness of religion and its desire to avoid offending anyone.

Kurtz explains that:

'Salvation' as the message remained. Yet A.A.'s total omission of 'Jesus,' its toning down of even 'God' to 'a Higher Power' which could be the group itself...these ideas and practices, adopted to avoid any 'religious' association, were profound changes.¹³⁸

Wilson and his cohorts learned from experience that they could not impose any particular form of salvation on alcoholics. "Nevertheless," Wilson declared, "we can bring people within the reach of salvation—that is, of the salvation *they* choose."¹³⁹

Kurtz suggests that what AA rejected from the Oxford Group was not so much religion, but absolutes. "A large part of Wilson's wariness of religion," Kurtz alleges, "lay in his horror of absolutes."¹⁴⁰ The only absolute that AA embraced, Kurtz maintains, was "don't drink" and even that proscription was modified because it was deemed to be too absolute. Smith and Wilson began, according to Kurtz, to present AA as the "Twenty-Four Hour Program" or the one day-at-a-time program; so that alcoholics could focus on not drinking *today*—a far more manageable goal.

AA would instead embrace the idea of limitation, beginning with the admission of limited power over alcohol, but also evidenced Kurtz observes, in AA's disclaimers of having a monopoly either on God or on solutions to alcoholism and in AA's mottoes of "First Things First" and its commitment to progress rather than perfection.¹⁴¹ AA's sense of limitation is well summarized in the Serenity Prayer which came to Wilson's attention in June 1941. On reading the prayer—"God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference"—Wilson exclaimed that "never had we seen so much A.A. in so few words."¹⁴² The prayer became a mainstay of AA philosophy.

Adolescence and Early Growth

In the spring of 1939, all 5,000 copies of the first edition of the Big Book sat in the warehouse while the alcoholics scrambled to find money to pay the printer. The alcoholics publicized the book through a mailing and a radio show, fully expecting a flood of orders to pour in. Suitcases in hand, they arrived at the post office and found all of two orders for the book. Wilson later described "the AA book fiasco in 1939"¹⁴³ as AA's darkest days. Indeed, times were also difficult for groups members, many of whom had gone into hock to get the book published. AA's early years were particularly hard on the Wilsons, as Bill remained unemployed and devoted all his time and energy to AA without any monetary compensation. Evicted from their home, the Wilsons spent the summer of 1939 in a summer

camp of a friend without knowing where they could go in the winter. For the next several years, they lived off the charity of friends.

In September 1939, an article on AA in *Liberty* magazine resulted in the sale of several hundred books. Then an Ohio paper, the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, ran a series on AA that, according to Wilson, "ushered in a new period for AA, the era of mass production of sobriety."¹⁴⁴ Cleveland's twenty AA members were deluged with calls. Big Book in hand, they responded to all inquiries and soon devised the system of sponsorship in which all new members were visited by an AA sponsor and conducted to their first meeting. Within a year, Cleveland had thirty AA groups and several hundred members.

But it was Jack Alexander's series in *The Saturday Evening Post* March 1941 that unleashed the pent-up mass demand for sobriety. Alexander spent a month investigating AA and then wrote a glowing report of this "band of ex-problem drinkers who make an avocation of helping other alcoholics to beat the liquor habit."¹⁴⁵ He described how AA had, in the previous six years, helped over 2,000 people achieve sobriety—"a large percentage of whom had been considered medically hopeless."¹⁴⁶ He noted the profound personality changes of AA members, whose "transformation from cop fighters, canned-heat drinkers and, in some instances, wife beaters, was startling."¹⁴⁷

As a result of Alexander's report 6,000 inquires swamped AA's tiny New York office and new AA groups began to sprout up all across the country. Many of them were strictly mail order groups formed without any personal contact with established AA members and armed only with the Big Book and literature sent from AA

headquarters. Others were established as those AA members who worked as traveling salesmen went from town to town, equipped with lists of inquiring individuals. By the end of 1941, AA had 200 groups and 8,000 members. In 1942, the first prison group formed in San Quentin, with a resulting drop in recidivism rates from 80% to 20%.¹⁴⁸ AA was getting approval from all sides, including from clergy and medical men. "The pioneering had ended," Wilson announced, "We were on the U.S. map."¹⁴⁹ By 1949, AA had 80,000 members in 3,000 groups in 30 countries and was growing at a rate of 30% a year.¹⁵⁰

The Evolution of the Twelve Traditions

New groups relied heavily on an active correspondence with the New York office. From 1941 through 1956, Wilson personally answered all inquiries, offering AA's accumulated experience in the form of advice to groups facing various challenges. AA was, Wilson claimed, in a period of frightening and exciting adolescence.

"Everywhere there arose," Wilson observed, "threatening questions of membership, money, personal relations, management of groups, clubs, and scores of other perplexities."¹⁵¹ It was, Wilson contended, "out of this frightening and at first disrupting experience" that AA members realized that they "had to hang together or die separately. We had to unify our Fellowship or pass off the scene."¹⁵² Just as AA had discovered and fine-tuned a way of life that enabled alcoholics to prosper, it now needed guidelines for group prosperity.

In 1945, Wilson began to formulate the Twelve Traditions, a set of guiding principles that offered tested solutions to the problems

AA faced both internally and externally. The traditions were, Wilson alleged, "the best answers that our experience has yet given to those ever urgent questions, 'How can A.A. best function?' and 'How can A.A. best stay whole and so survive?'"¹⁵³ The traditions provided the means for AA to maintain its unity, relate to the world and continue to prosper and grow. The Twelve Traditions were adopted at AA's First International Convention in 1950. In 1953, the 12 & 12—Wilson's explanation of both the steps and the traditions—was published.

Wilson summarized the ideas that became incorporated into the traditions:

It was thought that no alcoholic man or woman could be excluded from our Society; that our leaders might serve but never govern; that each group was to be autonomous and there was to be no professional class of therapy. There were to be no fees or dues; our expenses were to be met by our own voluntary contributions. There was to be the least possible organization, even in our service centers. Our public relations were to be based upon attraction rather than promotion. It was decided that all members ought to be anonymous at the level of press, radio, TV and films. And in no circumstances should we give endorsements, make alliances, or enter public controversies.¹⁵⁴

Wilson declared that the forces of anarchy, democracy, and dictatorship all played roles in AA. Anarchistic alcoholics were brought to their knees by the Tyrant Barleycorn. This allowed AA, Wilson reflected, to settle "for the purest kind of democracy."¹⁵⁵ Indeed, Wilson maintained that "there isn't a fellowship on earth...which more jealously guards the individual's right to think, talk, and act as he wishes. No [AA member] can compel another to do anything; nobody can be punished or expelled."¹⁵⁶ Group autonomy, majority rule and the principle that leaders serve rather than govern were safeguards against the emergence of a ruling elite. The idea of

least possible organization ensured that AA would remain flexible enough to incorporate new experience. And the fact that any two or three alcoholics could always start their own group worked, Kurtz suggests, against "any absolute rigidities."¹⁵⁷ The pattern for AA's democracy had been established in the communal, if tedious, process of revising the Big Book and hashing out the nature of the program.

The traditions apply the same sense of limitation and humility to AA as an organization that the Twelve Steps apply to individual alcoholics. "We of AA try to be aware," Wilson confessed, "that we may never touch but a segment of the total alcohol problem. We try to remember that our growing success may prove a heady wine; that our own resources will always be limited"¹⁵⁸ This awareness of limitation is reflected in AA's singular focus on sobriety. To maintain this focus, AA deemed it necessary to avoid anger and controversy amongst its members and to refrain from taking positions on outside issues. Wilson determined that AA would work closely with doctors and religious personal, but would not engage in debate over medical or religious controversies related to alcoholism or take positions on any social or political issues outside of its main focus. The goal was to maintain AA unity, which Wilson described as "one of the greatest assets that our Society has."¹⁵⁹

Wilson insisted that "On anvils of experience, the structure of our Society was hammered out."¹⁶⁰ Indeed, several of the traditions can be traced to particular events in AA's history. AA's commitment to remain non-professional stemmed from an offer Wilson received from a New York hospital to operate as a lay therapist complete with salary, office and expense account. Wilson's enthusiasm for the idea

was quickly dampened by his fellow AA members, who, in the face of Wilson's opportunity, realized they wanted AA to remain nonprofessional and nonprofit.

The decision to keep AA self-supporting originated ironically in a fund raising effort. In February 1940, John D. Rockefeller, an avid supporter of AA, organized a benefit for AA. The gathering was, Wilson proclaimed, "a veritable constellation of New York's prominent and wealthy."¹⁶¹ AA members anticipated that their financial worries were about to end, but to their surprise, Nelson Rockefeller, representing his ill father, closed the evening by suggesting that AA's strength lay in its unselfish motives and that all AA required from its friends was good will. "Whereupon the guests clapped lustily," Wilson lamented, "and after cordial handshakes and good-bys all around, the whole billion dollars' worth of them walked out the door."¹⁶² Within several days, the flabbergasted alcoholics began to see the wisdom of Rockefeller's view.

In 1948 AA's commitment to remain self-supporting was tested by the news that the group had inherited \$10,000. Still broke, the group was sorely tempted to accept the donation. But upon reflection, AA members realized that AA stood to become rich from future donations. Not only were they reluctant to become beholden to benefactors, but they worried that the task of dispensing excess funds might divert them from their focus on sobriety. They decided, Wilson reported, that AA "must always stay poor. Bare running expenses plus a prudent reserve"¹⁶³ became the group's policy. The \$10,000, and all subsequent donations, were declined.

AA's membership requirement resulted, according to Wilson, from "years of harrowing experience."¹⁶⁴ In the early days, each group created rules for who they would exclude. This intolerance stemmed, Wilson insisted, from the fear that "something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink."¹⁶⁵ As one member quoted by Wilson exclaimed, "'beggars, tramps, asylum inmates, prisoners, queers, plain crackpots, and fallen women were definitely out. Yes sir, we'd cater *only* to pure and respectable alcoholics!"¹⁶⁶ But the fears soon proved groundless, Wilson claimed, as many of these "troublesome people" not only made astounding recoveries but became intimate friends as well as "our principle teachers of patience and tolerance."¹⁶⁷ As Wilson explained it, "Our membership ought to include all who suffer from alcoholism. Hence we may refuse none who wish to recover."¹⁶⁸ In the 12 & 12, Wilson clarified that "You are an AA member if *you* say so. No matter who you are, no matter how low you've gone, no matter how grave...your crimes—we still can't deny you AA."¹⁶⁹ Thus AA became a society, which, Wilson alleged, "would include every conceivable kind of character, and cut across every barrier of race, creed, politics, and language with ease."¹⁷⁰

Likewise the principle of anonymity, which began as a means to protect alcoholics from public exposure, evolved into the concept of "principles before personalities," which meant, Wilson reflected, "personal and group sacrifice for the benefit of all AA."¹⁷¹ AA would not allow its members to pursue fame and fortune at AA's expense and therefore the names and pictures of AA members would not be made public. AA's principle of anonymity is reflected in the use of

first name and last initial only, the publishing of Wilson's books without credited him as author, AA's refusal to create shrines to its founders who are referred to simply as Bill W. and Dr. Bob, and its ruling that no AA group could be named after an AA member, living or deceased. Anonymity was, according to Wilson, "real humility at work...an all-pervading spiritual quality which today keynotes AA life everywhere....the greatest safeguard that AA can ever have."¹⁷²

Wilson's Continued Activities

Dr. Bob died in November of 1950, after having personally administered to 5,000 alcoholics. Wilson withdrew from formal leadership in 1955, but the focus of his activities continued to be AA. He authored *Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age*, a history of AA that was published in 1957.

Throughout his life, Wilson pursued an interest in spirituality, even experimenting with ouija boards in an attempt to contact the dead. Drawn to Catholic mysticism, he took instructions in Catholicism in the late 1940s, but he quit out of frustration over the claim of the infallibility of the Pope. In a letter to a friend, Wilson explained that "These excursions into the absolute are rather beyond me. The thing that still irks me about all organized religion is their claim how confoundedly right all of them are."¹⁷³

For the remainder of his life Wilson continued to be motivated by a desire to help alcoholics. He experimented with both LSD and niacin (vitamin B-3) as possible cures for alcoholism, hoping to find an alternative to AA for those alcoholics who could not accept AA's spiritual approach. And Wilson persisted, Kurtz contends, in his

"attempts to remove the mental or psychological and physical obstacles that impeded some persons from openness to the spiritual."¹⁷⁴ In an effort to reinforce AA's sense of responsibility to those alcoholics who approached AA and left unassisted, Wilson successfully lobbied AA's Thirtieth Anniversary Convention(1965) for the adoption of *The Declaration*, in which members pledge, "I Am Responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of A.A. always to be there. And for that: I am responsible."

In 1961 Wilson wrote the psychiatrist Carl Jung to let Jung know that he had initiated the chain of events that led to AA. For it was Jung's patient, Rowland H., who had recruited Ebby T. into the Oxford Group and gotten him sober. And it was Jung who had suggested to Rowland that his only hope for sobriety was a spiritual conversion, this advice leading to Rowland's subsequent sobriety in the Oxford Group. Jung had told Rowland, according to Wilson, "that science had no answer"¹⁷⁵ to his alcoholism. Wilson identified in Jung a kindred soul in the struggle to embrace both science and spirituality. For Jung, Wilson explained, "saw value, meaning, and reality in religious faith," unlike the majority of psychiatrists who agreed with "Sigmund Freud's view that religion was a comforting fantasy of man's immaturity."¹⁷⁶ According to Kurtz, both Wilson and Jung "intuited a religious component in alcoholism itself: this was why the spiritual approach of Alcoholics Anonymous 'worked.'"¹⁷⁷ And both AA and Jung contributed to the merger of psychology and spirituality that led to the development of transpersonal psychology—the school of psychology that comes closest, Jacquelyn Small argues, "to the basic tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous."¹⁷⁸ If

Jung made a major intellectual contribution to transpersonal psychology, then AA is perhaps among its first practitioners.

Wilson, a heavy smoker, died of emphysema in January 1971. His contributions to AA, embodied in both the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions, have enabled AA to survive and prosper through decades of tremendous change. By 1995—the year that AA turned sixty—the Big Book had sold over 13 million copies and AA had more than a million members between the United States and Canada with another 800,000 scattered across 140 other countries.¹⁷⁹

From the Horse's Mouth

This chapter summarizes AA philosophy as presented in AA's two main texts—the Big Book and the 12 & 12—both of which were written by Wilson. Going directly to these texts affords us the opportunity to clear up some of the controversies regarding AA. The books clearly reveal AA's "disease theory" to be metaphorical rather than literal and they provide ample evidence of AA's focus on responsibility. They also demonstrate that Wilson's portrait of the alcoholic, when compared to the views of contemporary experts on alcoholism, is remarkably accurate. But unlike contemporary experts, Wilson had little insight into the origins and causes of alcoholism. But neither was Wilson much concerned with causes. Instead, he wrote at length of the alcoholic's shortcomings and explained how AA's spiritual way of life offered an effective antidote to these shortcomings. Wilson also mounted an ambitious defense of AA's spiritual approach, seeking to dismantle the obstacles that prevented alcoholics from embracing AA. It is in this defense of spirituality that Wilson challenged many of the values and assumptions of modernity.

The importance of the Big Book and the 12 & 12 can hardly be overestimated because without them there would have been nothing to prevent AA from changing with the times and evolving into something entirely different. The fact that AA's program has worked for so many for so long explains why the books have never been rewritten. While Wilson's folksy language and seemingly unsophisticated analysis might appear odd to outsiders, AA members are understandably protective of it. Their attitude can be described as something along the lines of "if it works, don't fix it."

Plight of the Alcoholic

Alcoholics, according to Wilson, are mentally, physically and spiritually sick. They suffer, Wilson held, from a "peculiar mental twist"¹⁸⁰ and have lost "the common sense and will power"¹⁸¹ to control their drinking. The alcoholic has "strange mental blank spots [where] will power and self-knowledge"¹⁸² are of no use whatsoever. Alcoholics are "smitten by an insane urge that condemned us to go on drinking, and then by an allergy of the body that insured we would ultimately destroy ourselves in the process."¹⁸³ In this respect, alcoholics differ from non-alcoholics, Wilson reasoned, whose "brains and bodies have not been damaged as ours were."¹⁸⁴

The alcoholic's mental sickness stems from "misdirected instincts,"¹⁸⁵ which Wilson defined as our innate human desires for security, sex, and society. When misdirected, these instincts result, Wilson alleged, in "character defects"¹⁸⁶ that in turn "ambushed us into alcoholism and misery."¹⁸⁷ It was these character defects, or "instincts gone astray,"¹⁸⁸ that Wilson felt were "the primary cause of [the alcoholic's] drinking and his failure at life."¹⁸⁹

Wilson listed the character defects of alcoholics as nervousness, worry, depression, resentment, jealousy, envy, fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, self-centeredness and frustration. Alcoholics are, Wilson insisted, quick to blame others and easy to anger. Focused on their resentments, they "wallow in depression, self-pity oozing from every pore."¹⁹⁰ Lonely and isolated, alcoholics drink, according to Wilson, to remove the barriers they believe to exist between themselves and others. Alcoholics also drink, Wilson argued, "to drown feelings of fear, frustration, and depression."¹⁹¹ Wilson described compulsive

drinking as a vicious cycle in which the alcoholic's character defects and emotional insecurity generate fear and the fear in turn generates more character defects.

While mentally and physically ill, Wilson declared that the alcoholic's most basic trouble was spiritual sickness. Alcoholics, Wilson observed, are unaware of their dependence on other humans and their ultimate dependence on God. Deluded by illusions of self-sufficiency, they indulge "foolish dreams of pomp and power,"¹⁹² a state of mind that Wilson described as a "perverse soul-sickness."¹⁹³ Wilson insisted that alcoholics rely too heavily on human intellect and play God:

We are certain that our intelligence, backed by willpower, can rightly control our inner lives and guarantee us success in the world we live in. This brave philosophy, wherein each man plays God, sounds good in the speaking...but how well does it actually work? One good look in the mirror ought to be answer enough for any alcoholic.¹⁹⁴

Alcoholic are destined to fail, Wilson concluded, because they rely entirely on self-sufficiency. "Our human resources, as marshaled by the will, were not sufficient," Wilson proclaimed, "they failed utterly. Lack of power, that was our dilemma. We had to find a power by which we could live, and it had to be a *Power greater than ourselves.*"¹⁹⁵

Contrary to allegations that AA considers alcoholism a genetic disease that alcoholics are born with, Wilson suggested that alcoholics cross an invisible line that separates social drinking from alcoholism.¹⁹⁶ He maintained that most alcoholics could quit drinking on their own if they made the attempt early in their drinking careers. The charge that AA regards alcoholics as blameless because they suffer from a disease is also not substantiated by Wilson's

writings.¹⁹⁷ When Wilson did assign blame for alcoholism, he placed it squarely on the shoulders of the alcoholics, who he insisted, had been "crushed by a self-imposed crisis."¹⁹⁸ He described the alcoholic as "an extreme example of self-will run riot."¹⁹⁹ Our troubles, Wilson concluded, "are basically of our own making."²⁰⁰

Wilson's emphasis on the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of alcoholism demonstrates that AA's "disease theory" is metaphorical. In fact, Wilson, according to Kurtz, never considered alcoholism a disease. Kurtz cites as evidence a speech to a group of clergy in which Wilson asserted that:

We have never called alcoholism a disease because, technically speaking, it is not a disease entity....Therefore we did not wish to get in wrong with the medical profession by pronouncing alcoholism a disease entity. Therefore we always called it an illness, or a malady—a far safer term for us to use.²⁰¹

AA's Spiritual Solution

While AA considers alcoholism a multi-dimensional illness, the spiritual aspect is viewed as key to the alcoholic's recovery. "When the spiritual malady is overcome," Wilson reasoned, "we straighten out mentally and physically."²⁰² The spiritual way of living that AA offers as a solution to alcoholism is guided by the Twelve Steps, which are explained in detail in the Big Book and the 12 & 12. The steps are not a theory, Wilson explained, but a set of principles "which if practiced as a way of life, can expel the obsession to drink and enable the sufferer to become happily and usefully whole."²⁰³

AA's program of recovery begins with the act of surrender. Wilson insisted that alcoholics had to quit playing God and to admit to their human limitations, beginning with the particular limitation

regarding alcohol. It is essential, Wilson alleged, for alcoholics "to fully concede to our innermost selves that we were alcoholics"²⁰⁴ and to smash any delusions that we could become normal drinkers. "The result was nil," Wilson warned, "until we let go absolutely."²⁰⁵ Wilson addressed the alcoholic's reluctance to make this admission, acknowledging that none of us like to admit complete defeat and that our "natural instinct cries out against the idea of personal powerlessness."²⁰⁶ But Wilson assured alcoholics that they would:

soon take quite another view of this absolute humiliation. We perceive that only through utter defeat are we able to take our first steps toward liberation and strength. Our admissions of personal powerlessness finally turn out to be firm bedrock upon which happy and purposeful lives may be built.²⁰⁷

Having surrendered, alcoholics are guided to rely on forces outside themselves. "Perhaps there is a better way,"²⁰⁸ Wilson suggested. We have to trust an "infinite God rather than our finite selves,"²⁰⁹ Wilson claimed, because our human power is insufficient to destroy our self-centeredness and remove the compulsion to drink. "Without help it is too much for us,"²¹⁰ Wilson concluded.

The steps direct alcoholics to make "a searching and fearless moral inventory."²¹¹ This thorough house cleaning is necessary, Wilson maintained, in order to "repair the damage done in the past...[to] sweep away the debris"²¹² from our life of self-will. Wilson described that alcoholic as "a tornado roaring his way through the lives of others,"²¹³ leaving behind a path of broken hearts and havoc. Wilson reproached alcoholics for habitually blaming others for their problems. Alcoholics also blamed situations, claiming that conditions drove them to drink. "It never occurred to us," Wilson admonished, "that we needed to change ourselves to meet conditions, whatever

they were."²¹⁴ Wilson insisted that alcoholics assume responsibility for their behavior and remedy their defects while avoiding judgment of others. Self-searching, according to Wilson, was "the means by which we bring new vision, action, and grace to bear upon the dark and negative side of our natures."²¹⁵

Upon completion of this inventory, the steps require alcoholics to admit "to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs."²¹⁶ This admission of our most shameful secrets quieted, Wilson reflected, the "tormenting ghosts of yesterday."²¹⁷ He observed of this confession:

Provided you hold back nothing, your sense of relief will mount from minute to minute. The dammed-up emotions of years break out of their confinement, and miraculously vanish as soon as they are exposed. As the pain subsides, a healing tranquillity takes its place.²¹⁸

Wilson believed that AA's practice of inventory and confession enabled alcoholics "to settle with the past [and] leave it behind us."²¹⁹ Moreover, he insisted that "tomorrow's challenges can be met as they come."²²⁰ Thus, alcoholics are prepared by AA practice and philosophy to be fully present in the moment and live one-day-at-a-time.

Alcoholics are also required by AA's Twelve Step program to ask God for assistance in removing their character defects and to make personal inventory a daily habit. "Something had to be done," Wilson argued, "about our vengeful resentments, self-pity, and unwarranted pride."²²¹ Alcoholics had to be free of anger, criticism, scorn, vengefulness, all of which Wilson regarded as "emotional booby traps"²²² that led to relapse. Wilson insisted that we had to be hard on ourselves but considerate of others:

Where had we been selfish, dishonest, self-seeking and frightened? Though a situation had not been entirely our fault, we tried to disregard the other person involved entirely. Where were we to blame?²²³

Wilson urged alcoholics to avoid "quick-tempered criticism...sulking or silent scorn"²²⁴ and to admit to our faults but forgive those of others. He went so far as to insist that "Where other people were concerned, we had to drop the word 'blame' from our speech and thought."²²⁵ Wilson advised alcoholics to "avoid retaliation or argument"²²⁶ and to cease "fighting anything or anyone."²²⁷ He encouraged alcoholics to make honesty, courtesy and a love of justice the basis of our relationships with other people. We rely on our Higher Power, Wilson maintained, to "show us the way of patience, tolerance, kindness and love."²²⁸

Wilson believed that successful, long-term sobriety was dependent on helping others. He insisted that if:

an alcoholic failed to perfect and enlarge his spiritual life through work and self-sacrifice for others, he would not survive the certain trials and low spots ahead. If he did not work, he would surely drink again.²²⁹

Wilson promised "undreamed rewards"²³⁰ to the alcoholic who reached out to other alcoholics. Life would become fuller and more meaningful as concern for the welfare of others replaced selfish concerns. Service to others, Wilson alleged, becomes the foundation for "right living for which no amount of pomp and circumstance, no heap of material possessions, could possibly be substitutes."²³¹

Wilson argued that spiritual values and growth should come before the satisfaction of instincts and material desires.

Wilson offered advice on the best way to approach other alcoholics. He warned against talking down to others from a moral highground and urged the use of "everyday language to describe spiritual principles," so as not to arouse prejudice against any "theological terms and conceptions."²³² He stressed the importance of making it clear to the new prospect that *"he does not have to agree with your conception of God."*²³³ Wilson also urged AA members to seek only to be helpful and avoid criticizing a new prospect. Nor were members to force themselves upon anyone or waste their time on anyone who wasn't interested in sobriety.

Wilson insisted that alcoholics were fortunate to find AA. He suggested that:

Here was haven at last. The very practical approach to...problems, the absence of intolerance of any kind, the informality, the genuine democracy, the uncanny understanding which these people had were irresistible.²³⁴

Wilson praised AA's inclusive fellowship, in which "no one is too discredited or has sunk too low to be welcomed cordially [where] social distinctions, petty rivalries and jealousies...are laughed out of countenance."²³⁵ AA fellowship was, according to Wilson, "that gay crowd inside, who laughed at their own misfortunes and understood his."²³⁶ Wilson promised that:

There you will find release from care, boredom and worry...Life will mean something at last.... Among [AA members] you will make lifelong friends. You will be bound to them with new and wonderful ties, for you will escape disaster together and you will commence shoulder to shoulder your common journey.²³⁷

Alcoholics are never cured, Wilson explained, but only granted "a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual

condition."²³⁸ AA members had discovered that there were two types of sobriety—the "dry drunk" was sober, but miserable, holding on to the character defects that caused the drinking in the first place. AA sobriety, on the other hand, was marked by the serenity achieved when alcoholics let go of their character defects and came into balanced, healthy relationships with self, others and God. Hence for AA, abstinence is a mere beginning, the prerequisite for a spiritual way of life. Only one of AA's Twelve Steps—the First Step—even mentions alcohol, whereas the Twelfth Step calls for the demonstration of AA's spiritual principles "in all our affairs."²³⁹

In a passage of the Big Book that AA members refer to as "the promises," Wilson noted the changes we could expect from living the AA way of life:

We are going to know a new freedom and a new happiness. We will not regret the past nor wish to shut the door on it. We will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace. No matter how far down the scale we have gone, we will see how our experience can benefit others. That feeling of uselessness and self-pity will disappear. We will lose interest in selfish things and gain interest in our fellows. Self-seeking will slip away. Our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change. Fear of people and of economic insecurity will leave us. We will intuitively know how to handle situations which used to baffle us. We will suddenly realize that God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves.²⁴⁰

Addressing the Resistance to all Things Spiritual

Throughout both texts Wilson confronted "the roadblocks of indifference, fancied self-sufficiency, prejudice, and defiance"²⁴¹ that prevented people from acceptance of the spiritual. We can assume these arguments mirror Wilson's own struggle to come to terms with a spiritual solution to alcoholism. At times the reader senses that

Wilson described himself in his depiction of the stubborn and close-minded agnostic. In taking on the resistance to spirituality, Wilson, whether unwittingly or not, challenged modernity's most basic assumptions. When he ridiculed the "fancied self-sufficiency" of alcoholics, he targeted the Ideology of Individualism with its exaggerated notions of the possibility of individual autonomy. In belittling the alcoholic's infatuation and over-reliance on science, technology and the human intellect, Wilson derided modernity's most cherished treasures.

For starters, Wilson disputed the alcoholic's pretense of independence, asserting that alcoholics were not even capable of forming "a true partnership with another human being."²⁴²

Alcoholics, according to Wilson, either played God and dominated those about them or they leaned too heavily on others. And while not admitting to such, alcoholics were surely dependent on alcohol. They were, Wilson observed, "subjects of King Alcohol, shivering denizens of his mad realm."²⁴³ Wilson reproached the "rebellious alcoholic [who concluded] that dependence of any sort must be intolerably damaging"²⁴⁴ for failing to distinguish between right and wrong forms of dependence. Where self-sufficiency failed, Wilson declared, dependence upon a Higher Power worked and that "far from being a weakness, this dependence was [a] chief source of strength."²⁴⁵

Wilson railed against the conceit that placed the human intellect and human endeavors at the center of the universe. He berated "the belligerent one [who] cherish[ed] the thought that man...is the spearhead of evolution and therefore the only god that his universe knows!"²⁴⁶ He criticized the notion that "human

intelligence was the last work, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and end of all."²⁴⁷ Wilson described the social forces that led to illusions of human self-sufficiency:

Scientific progress told us there was nothing man couldn't do. Knowledge was all-powerful. Intellect could conquer nature. Since we were brighter than most folks (so we thought), the spoils of victory would be ours for the thinking. The god of intellect displaced the God of our fathers.²⁴⁸

Wilson concluded that the "intellectually self-sufficient"²⁴⁹ were far too smart for their own good.

Wilson also challenged those alcoholics who, while rejecting a Higher Power, claimed to live without faith.

Had we not been brought to where we stood by a certain kind of faith? For did we not believe in our own reasoning?...What was that but a sort of faith? Yes, we had been faithful, abjectly faithful to the God of Reason....We found, too, that we had been worshippers....Had we not variously worshipped people, sentiment, things, money and ourselves?... In one form or another we had been living by faith and little else.²⁵⁰

Wilson suggested that "Perhaps we had been leaning too heavily on Reason."²⁵¹ He insisted that alcoholics used reason to justify all manner of bad conduct and that logic and reason were not entirely dependable.

Not willing to disavow science altogether, Wilson argued that AA was scientific. Scientific method, Wilson explained, consisted of "search and research, again and again, always with the open mind."²⁵² True scientists, Wilson alleged, would give AA a fair hearing and discover that AA "showed results, prodigious results."²⁵³ Wilson claimed that ultimately we had been intolerant, "recoil[ing] from meditation and prayer as obstinately as the scientist who refused to perform a certain experiment lest it prove his pet theory

wrong."²⁵⁴ We were "handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice,"²⁵⁵ according to Wilson. Some of us were so touchy, Wilson claimed, "that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism."²⁵⁶

After criticizing agnostics and atheists for their unreasonable prejudice against the spiritual, Wilson sought to reassure them. Speaking directly to their fears, Wilson encouraged agnostics to "Take it easy. The hoop you have to jump through is a lot wider than you think."²⁵⁷ AA only made suggestions, Wilson argued, and did not demand that anyone believe anything. AA members, Wilson contended, "tread innumerable paths in their quest for faith,"²⁵⁸ with many alcoholics using the AA group as their higher power. "Here's a very large group of people," Wilson reasoned, "who have solved their alcohol problem. In this respect they are certainly a power greater than you, who have not even come close to a solution."²⁵⁹

Wilson insisted that the convictions of agnostics were not an obstacle to success in AA, nor did they preclude a spiritual experience. He maintained that:

any alcoholic...can recover, provided he does not close his mind to all spiritual concepts. He can only be defeated by an attitude of intolerance or belligerent denial. We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program. *Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery. But these are indispensable.*²⁶⁰

Throughout the two books Wilson refers to God in a variety of ways. When referred to by a pronoun, God is always male and thus it appears that the *God of Wilson's understanding* is a personal God—a monotheistic father-figure: "He is the principle; we are His agents. He is the Father, and we are His children";²⁶¹ "Him who has all knowledge and power";²⁶² "His Spirit";²⁶³ "Him who presides over us

all."²⁶⁴ "the Father of Light."²⁶⁵ But Wilson also flirted with a pantheistic view of God in his frequent references to "the Spirit of the Universe,"²⁶⁶ "the new God-consciousness within,"²⁶⁷ "the Great Reality,"²⁶⁸ and "the Presence of Infinite Power and Love."²⁶⁹ And Wilson believed that ultimately God is within us. "We found the Great Reality deep down within us," Wilson proclaimed, "In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found."²⁷⁰

Wilson assured his readers that there are many ways to acquire faith and that AA did not represent any particular faith but only dealt in general spiritual principles. He insisted that AA had no monopoly on God and that when "we speak to you of God, we mean your own conception of God."²⁷¹ The main object of the Big Book, Wilson asserted, was "to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself."²⁷² Wilson declared that "the Realm of Spirit is broad, roomy, all inclusive; never exclusive or forbidding to those who earnestly seek. It is open, we believe, to all men."²⁷³ He invited alcoholics to "join us on the Broad Highway."²⁷⁴

* * *

While Wilson ostensibly aimed his critique at the alcoholic, in actuality he addressed the general human condition. When Wilson described the alcoholic as "an extreme example of self-will run riot,"²⁷⁵ he implies, according to Kurtz, that the alcoholic is "simply a human being 'writ large.'"²⁷⁶ Wilson made the broader application of his critique explicit when he maintained that "Finally, we begin to see that all people, including ourselves, are to some extent emotionally ill...[and] are suffering from the pains of growing up."²⁷⁷

While Wilson suggested that self-sufficiency destroyed alcoholics, he proposed:

a look at the results normal people are getting from self-sufficiency. Everywhere he sees people filled with anger and fear....And everywhere the same thing is being done on an individual basis. The sum of all this mighty effort is less peace and less brotherhood than before. 278

Wilson concluded that "The philosophy of self-sufficiency is not passing off. Plainly enough, it is a bone-crushing juggernaut whose final achievement is ruin."²⁷⁹ And Wilson also insisted that AA's spiritual way of life had a wide applicability. Indeed the Twelve Steps offered, according to Wilson, "a way to happy and effective living for many, alcoholic or not."²⁸⁰

AA's Christian Ethics

Before leaving our study of AA's texts, it is appropriate to acknowledge the extent to which AA's way of life is based on the principles and values found in the Sermon on the Mount, which many theologians regard as the best summary of the teachings of Jesus. The parallels are so strong that the sermon could well have served as the blueprint for AA.

AA's practice of focusing on one's own faults rather than those of others reflects Jesus's query, "And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother's eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?"²⁸¹ AA's insistence that making amends and setting right our relationships with others is a first order of business echoes Jesus's advice to "First be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift."²⁸² Jesus's warning "That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment"²⁸³ is

repeated in AA's belief that anger and resentment have the power to destroy us.

AA urges compassion, understanding and forgiveness to those who have wronged us, while Jesus advised us to "Love your enemies"²⁸⁴ and ask God to "forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors."²⁸⁵ AA suggests that we put aside old desires for revenge and avoid conflict altogether, while Jesus admonished us to disregard the old adage, "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," and instead "resist not evil."²⁸⁶

Even AA's principle of living one-day-at-a-time is found in the sermon, when Jesus advised "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day *is* the evil thereof."²⁸⁷ And the truth expressed in the Second Beatitude, "Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted,"²⁸⁸ is embedded in AA's understanding that the alcoholic's experience of "hitting bottom" is a mystical event that often opens the door to salvation.

AA as Group Therapy

As the proverbial elephant, AA is open to various interpretations, several of which are presented in the following three chapters. This chapter explores AA from a psychological perspective, explaining how AA works as a form of group therapy. The next chapter analyzes AA as a social phenomenon that provides a powerful antidote to the downsides of modernity. The last of the three chapters describes AA's efficacy as a spiritual community. Each of these three interpretations is equally valid. In fact, they verify each other through significant overlap, albeit each with its own emphasis. Taken together, they provide a better understanding of AA than any one of them can provide alone.

* * *

Professionals in the field of substance abuse treatment generally regard AA as not only effective, but as necessary, for long-term sobriety. Roughly 70% of alcoholics who undergo professional treatment for alcoholism do not remain sober and numerous studies indicate that for many the difference appears to be AA. One study conducted in the 1980s, which followed nine hundred alcoholics after they left treatment, found an abstinence rate of 73% for those who attended AA versus 33% for those who did not attend AA.²⁸⁹ Aware of AA's efficacy, most treatment centers introduce clients to AA during treatment with the hope that clients will continue to participate in AA after leaving treatment.

Sociologist Norman Denzin, in *The Recovering Alcoholic*, suggests that "the socialization experiences that occur in treatment lack the power to keep the alcoholic sober for any length of time

[whereas] the interactions that occur within AA appear to hold the key to sustained sobriety."²⁹⁰ But AA interactions achieve more than just sobriety, and it is AA's wider impact that is of interest here. Recall that Peck maintains that AA is "without doubt the single most effective agency of human transformation in our society."²⁹¹ E. J. Khantzian and John E. Mack, in "How AA Works and Why It's Important for Clinicians to Understand,"²⁹² attest to AA's broad influence in writing that:

there is increasing evidence that AA helps patients to succeed not only in arresting their uncontrolled drinking and drugging but also in transforming their lives physically, emotionally, and spiritually. For many, the transformation is dramatic. Individuals who at one time appeared totally unraveled and self-absorbed....suddenly appear more whole, and they begin to show concern for the care of others as much as for themselves.²⁹³

Experts have come to understand, from a psychological perspective, how AA effects this radical transformation by addressing the psychological needs of alcoholics.

A Psychological Profile of the Alcoholic

Khantzian and Mack maintain that "Alcoholism and drug dependence are the result of complex interactions of biological, psychological, and cultural factors."²⁹⁴ However, Khantzian and Mack contend that it is psychological suffering that lies at the heart of substance abuse. Denzin concurs, describing drinking as "a symptom of an underlying emotional disorder."²⁹⁵ The alcoholic's suffering is manifest in a variety of emotions and behaviors. Alcoholics, according to these experts, lack healthy self-esteem, regard themselves as unworthy or not "good enough," are uncomfortable with themselves and uneasy in their relationships with others,

perceive themselves as abnormal, unattractive, inept and as loners and misfits.

Alcoholics suffer, Khantzian and Mack observe, from "special intensities of troubling feelings, such as fear and emptiness... and relative oversensitivity or vulnerability to emotional pain."²⁹⁶ They tend, Khantzian and Mack report, to either feel numb or to experience their emotions so strongly as to be unbearable. Alcoholics have trouble identifying their feelings and distinguishing one emotion from another. Subsequently, they also have difficulty expressing their emotions, such that they often feel, Khantzian and Mack explain, "emotionally stunted [and] distant from others."²⁹⁷ For alcoholics, life is perceived, Khantzian and Mack allege, "through some kind of filter" that prevents the emotional impact of one's experiences from registering.²⁹⁸ Many alcoholics complain of feeling as if they are forever trying unsuccessfully to fill up an inner emptiness.²⁹⁹ Denzin describes alcoholics as living solitary lives, "cut off from others, unable to project themselves into the position of others."³⁰⁰

According to Khantzian and Mack, alcoholics drink to mute or avoid their emotions, "to control or alter feeling states that are inaccessible or cannot be put into words,"³⁰¹ and to feel normal, which includes "anything from feeling calm, soothed, or subdued to suddenly feeling more integrated, socially engaging, powerful, effective, or attractive."³⁰² They drink, Denzin contends, "to escape an inner emptiness and fear of self," using alcohol "as a crutch; as a means of finding a valued self-feeling that would transcend the inner lack that was felt on a regular basis."³⁰³ Denzin notes that for those

unable to meet their needs sober, alcohol reduces loneliness, fear and anxiety and releases the inhibitions that prevent sociability with others.

Khantzian and Mack argue that alcohol serves an important function of "affect management" for those who lack healthy means of regulating their emotions. Alcoholics come to rely on alcohol, Khantzian and Mack reason, "to artificially alter or manipulate their feelings."³⁰⁴ Khantzian and Mack explain that "If the pain is too great and our psychological and material resources disproportionately meager, we will turn to maladaptive or pathological forms of affect management or regulation."³⁰⁵ Khantzian and Mack suggest that we might:

think of the substance-addicted population as being composed of individuals who cannot, or could not, achieve a style of affect regulation or self-governance that relies enough on internal resources or strength, or upon human relationships that are sufficiently mutually enhancing or integrating, to avoid excessive substance dependence.³⁰⁶

Substance abusers mask their underlying low self-esteem, emotional impairment and chronic suffering, according to Khantzian and Mack, by acting tough and uncaring, self-centered and invincible, aloof and disdainful or through the use of cynical humor. They display "attitudes of entitlement, complacency, or pseudo-self-sufficiency," Khantzian and Mack insist, "as a means of coping with the helplessness, loss, and despair often underlying their disorder."³⁰⁷

If we were to compare this profile of the alcoholic with Wilson's depiction in the 12 & 12 and the Big Book, the similarities would demonstrate that Wilson's understanding agrees with that of

contemporary social scientists. While Wilson's description is not as sophisticated as modern psychological explanations, Kurtz posits that AA, through the use of simple concepts and understandable language, made modern psychology accessible:

Over the years some have felt it psychologically unfashionable to speak in terms of 'instincts' and 'moods' rather than of 'drives' and 'complexes'; yet by this freeing of vocabulary—no matter how time-bound or imprecise later critics may find it—all members of A.A. were enabled to communicate with each other across lines of time, social class, and educational background.³⁰⁸

Origins of Alcoholism

In looking to family environment for the origins of substance abuse, modern psychology discovered valuable knowledge unknown in Wilson's day. Khantzian and Mack report that childhood neglect and abuse contribute to the developmental deficits that in turn produce the emotional vulnerabilities that lead to substance abuse. And Denzin argues that alcoholics were wounded in childhood by dysfunctional interactional and interpersonal experiences. "The inner instability of the pre-alcoholic self" has its origins, Denzin insists, in "a preponderance of negative emotional experiences that detach the individual from close relations with others."³⁰⁹

One result of dysfunctional parent-child relationships is that substance abusers find it difficult to depend on others and to trust others enough to ask for what they need. Denzin maintains that this distrust makes healthy intimacy improbable, if not impossible. As a consequence, substance abusers often experience a self-perpetuating cycle of negative emotions. Craving an elusive intimacy, they become

increasingly isolated. This isolation is often hid, Denzin alleges, behind ever grander illusions of self sufficiency.

Substance abuse creates conditions conducive to its own continuance. Isolation, fear and low self-esteem are further exacerbated in addiction. John R. Peteet, in "A Closer Look at the Role of a Spiritual Approach in Addictions Treatment," asserts that shame, guilt, self-loathing and the sense of failure and hopelessness deepen as addicts behave it ways that harm themselves and those they care about. Denzin concurs with Peteet, explaining that "the drinking act produces a second layer of emotions and negative experiences that are woven into the underlying negative emotions the person already holds about himself."³¹⁰ The alcoholic, Denzin claims, "literally produces an 'alcoholic personality' for himself."³¹¹ According to Denzin, drinking becomes "inscribed in the basic and primary self-images" of the alcoholic; it becomes a "functionally autonomous" act as new reasons to drink supplant the original motivations.³¹²

AA as Group Therapy

Khantzian and Mack theorize that AA works because it is a sophisticated and powerful group psychology that effectively accesses and repairs the psychological vulnerabilities of alcoholics. Khantzian and Mack explain how AA members learn from each other how to confront problems without the immediate emotional relief offered by alcohol and drugs. In AA alcoholics begin to identify, experience, sort out and express their emotions. They discover new ways to comfort themselves and subsequently are able to take charge of their emotions, rather than being ruled by them. AA

members test new means of affect management in practical day-to-day situations. Successes and failures are brought back to AA where the emotions they evoke can be talked out rather than acted upon. The comfort and support offered in meetings enables alcoholics, Khantzian and Mack posit, to tolerate their emotions and modify their behavior. Thus, AA assists alcoholics, Khantzian and Mack conclude, in the acquisition of effective, mature and flexible means of affect management.

Moreover, AA provides the human connections, according to Khantzian and Mack, that enable alcoholics to break through their isolation. Denzin contends that the solitary existence of the alcoholic is reversed by the interactional group context of AA. The acceptance that alcoholics experience in AA is key to this transformation. Because no one is ever turned away from AA or told not to return, AA members receive an unconditional support that is offered regardless of the offensiveness of one's behavior or personality.

Connected by common experience, AA members engage, Denzin claims, in a "deep, authentic, shared emotional understanding;"³¹³ they draw upon similar biographies to create "a common field of shared experience" from which a sense of emotional identification emerges. "Each individual identifies," according to Denzin, "with and through the emotional feelings of the other."³¹⁴ The atmosphere produced is, Denzin alleges, one of "warmth, fellowship, relief, togetherness, oneness, solidarity, perhaps even love and caring."³¹⁵ Thus, alcoholics are able, Denzin asserts, "to form social groups among strangers, yet to do so within a historical structure of understanding that makes no alcoholic a stranger to a recovering alcoholic."³¹⁶

The acceptance offered by AA assists the alcoholic, Khantzian and Mack explain, to develop the positive self-esteem without which recovery is impossible. Self-esteem is also enhanced as a result of the small successes achieved by newly sober alcoholics, of which sobriety is the most fundamental. Denzin reasons that "by making sobriety the primary goal of the alcoholic, AA produces a situation in which daily success can be accomplished and hence experienced."³¹⁷ Progress in turn generates hope and inspiration for the tackling of larger achievements.

Thomas Gregoire, in "Alcoholism: The Quest for Transcendence and Meaning," insists that AA avoids "the downfall of insight oriented psycho-dynamic therapies"³¹⁸ by requiring alcoholics to change their behavior, as well as their thoughts and attitudes. AA emphasizes new behavior as an essential prerequisite of a sober life, often advising new members to "bring the body and the mind will follow." For AA, Gregoire alleges, behavior change must either accompany or precede cognitive change in order to accomplish successful recovery. Within AA there is an implicit understanding that alcoholics who fail to transform themselves and their behavior will eventually return to drinking.

Story Telling as the Means of Recovery

Khantzian and Mack refer to AA's "use of the shared narrative [as] one of [its] most brilliant devices,"³¹⁹ while Denzin describes talk as AA's "means of recovery."³²⁰ Gregoire points out that even AA's written literature is largely based on the stories of its members, which are constituted as "tales of quest," of journeys "in search of

oneself."³²¹ Khantzian and Mack believe that AA "succeeds because it creates a human context of listening and attending to others' stories and also provides a place to help people to understand and feelingfully express their own history."³²²

Khantzian and Mack observe that many AA members who initially speak with shaky voices eventually conquer their timidity and become both eloquent and inspirational. In speaking openly of painful personal experiences of humiliation, loss, near-death experiences, as well as the deaths of friends and loved ones, AA members learn to face and endure pain. It is in the process of sharing, Khantzian and Mack believe, that addicts repair their affect deficits.

Denzin asserts that "the self is recovered in and through the stories the member learns to tell."³²³ Recovery is a story-telling process in which the alcoholic learns to interpret his/her personal history within the framework of meanings that AA's theory of alcoholism provides. Each AA member becomes a talking subject, Denzin explains, through a process of "socialization into the language and lore of A.A."³²⁴ Following AA's format, members offer their own personal account of what life was like while drinking, what happened as a result and what life is like sober. In their stories, alcoholics present their alcoholic self to the group. It is, Denzin describes, a degraded, embarrassed and lost self that comes to AA "in shattered pieces ... [having] been humbled by alcohol."³²⁵

It is through the repeated telling of one's story that the alcoholic recreates his/herself. Denzin theorizes that "A new self rises out of the languages, rituals, and interactions that A.A. groups and

meetings offer...the old self of the past slips away, to be replaced by a radically transformed sense of selfhood."³²⁶ This process requires the destruction of the old drinking self and the construction of a new, nondrinking self. According to Denzin, AA facilitates a radical restructuring of identity in which the old self of the suffering alcoholic is replaced by a new identity as a recovering alcoholic; the drinking self of the past "is absorbed into the archetypal past A.A. offers"³²⁷ and subsequently replaced by a new, sober self.

Denzin posits that the self-referential nature of AA discourse enables this transition in selfhood. In the telling of one's story, the alcoholic, Denzin suggests, objectifies the past self; "the individual is able to turn back on himself, see himself as subject and object, and distance himself from who he previously was."³²⁸ Thus a doubling of self occurs, in which the alcoholic, Denzin contends, "becomes a second self within the texts of the stories she tells."³²⁹ The past is entered into, relived, reinterpreted and ultimately exorcised. The alcoholic is able to step outside of that past, objectified self and create a new self. This process requires community, Denzin insists, because it is in the communal discourse that the alcoholic:

can accomplish what he cannot do by himself. He can, that is, double back on himself, reflect on himself, hear himself talk, and locate himself within a structure of experience in which he is both object and subject to himself. In so doing he provides the context for others who seek the same ends for themselves.³³⁰

In this process of storytelling alcoholics are able, Denzin asserts, to distance themselves from the past and the old alcoholic self in small, incremental steps. Recovering alcoholics come to define themselves in contrast to their old selves. They create themselves anew in contradistinction to who they no longer want to be. This

transformation requires, Denzin argues, the continuous juxtaposition of the old self of the suffering alcoholic and the new self of the recovering alcoholic; "Sobriety is maintained precisely because these two selves are continually kept alive in the dialogues that occur"³³¹ within meetings.

Denzin believes that AA's unique form of humor, which is based in self-parody, helps to effect this distancing from the past. By transforming serious situations into humorous antidotes through the use of paradox and contradiction, AA members overcome, Denzin explains, the shame associated with their alcoholism, which in turn enables them to distance themselves both from the past and the moral denunciation they experience at the hands of others. According to Denzin, fully integrated AA members inject humor into their stories; "Indeed a member's standing in AA is associated in part by the degree of humorous distance he can effect between his past and his present humorous understanding of that past."³³²

AA discourse is, Denzin reflects, "a prose that is at once personal and collective."³³³ In sharing their individual stories, AA members contribute to a communal discourse that Denzin proclaims "is greater than the sum of its spoken parts."³³⁴ Individual personal histories become part of the collective history. "In this way," Denzin observes, "the member's personal life becomes a part of the shared, group consciousness. The AA group becomes a public structure of private lives."³³⁵

Stages and Obstacles in the Acquisition of a Sober Identity

Denzin delineates three stages that AA members must pass through in order to become recovering, rather than suffering, alcoholics. In the "preparatory stage" new members identify themselves as "situational alcoholics" and believe that they have a temporary problem with alcohol. They imitate the language and behavior of other AA members without understanding underlying meanings. As members become socialized into AA and begin to comprehend AA's theory of alcoholism, they enter the "interactional stage" in which they still speak "from a self-centered point of view"³³⁶ and frequently misunderstand AA. During this stage the alcoholic confronts the stigma of alcoholism and releases the situational identity. By the participatory stage, the member is an integral part of AA and has entered into friendships with other members and learned to produce the socialized speech of AA. In this final stage the member surmounts the stigma of alcoholism and accepts the identity of a recovering alcoholic.

Denzin identifies several obstacles that alcoholics face in moving through these stages. For starters there is the dilemma of identifying as an alcoholic which Denzin compares with that of the homosexual who must come "out of the closet" in order to gain a self-affirming identity. AA enables alcoholics to overcome this dilemma, Denzin explains, by neutralizing the stigma of alcoholism through the ritual of having alcoholics repeatedly declare to each other "Hi, my name is ... and I'm an alcoholic."

AA discourse also poses a challenge to alcoholics, according to Denzin, because it requires them to "move from the masculine, repressive view of emotion to the feminine mode of mood and emotionality"³³⁷ and hence to violate cultural gender norms against the open disclosure of emotions. Denzin argues that AA inverts the cultural dictate that defines any display of emotion as weak and feminine. Members are sanctioned to cry in AA; they are encouraged to reveal their fears, depression and deviance and to talk about their personal failures. The display of "loss of face" that would normally be avoided in ordinary conversation is not only valued in AA, Denzin observes, but treated with compassion. Denzin maintains that AA creates an emotional zone in which either sex can "discuss self-degrading or emotionally disruptive experiences and not be evaluated negatively by members of the opposite sex."³³⁸ However, because AA discourse is characterized by female emotionality, female alcoholics are generally more adept than their male cohorts at entering "the emotional space that exists within any A.A. meeting,"³³⁹ according to Denzin, and hence find it easier to move into the participatory stage.

Denzin notes that alcoholics who either fail to surmount these obstacles or complete the transformations of self required by the three stages are not successful in AA. Faced with difficult situations, members who still identify as situational alcoholics are likely to drink. Those who are unable to relinquish masculine modes of expression are also, Denzin asserts, more prone to relapse. On the other hand, members who move into the participatory stage of

involvement in AA are apt to remain sober and experience the full transition to a new, nondrinking self.

AA as Antidote to Modernity

In the previous chapter alcoholism was presented as a psychological dilemma faced by individual alcoholics. However alcoholism can also be viewed as a social affliction. Ernest Kurtz takes this broader perspective in interpreting alcoholism as a symptom of the malaise and alienation of modern life. Kurtz describes alcoholism as the modern age's "metaphor for the problematic reality of being human"³⁴⁰ and suggests that AA is effective because it offers solutions to modern predicaments. To understand Kurtz's interpretation of AA requires a consideration of the legacy of the European Enlightenment and how this legacy contributed to modern alienation.

Modern Alienation

The European Enlightenment brought about the demise of feudalism and the ascent of the modern liberal state and thus ushered in the age of modernity. This far-reaching revolution transformed the political, ideological and economic foundations of Western societies. On the ideological front, the rational scientific thinking promoted by the Enlightenment undermined the religious dogma that supported feudal authority. Meanwhile technological and scientific progress gave birth to capitalism which soon overwhelmed and destroyed antiquated feudal economic arrangements. For the modern liberal state, the dominant worldview became capitalistic, secular and rational rather than feudalistic, religious and superstitious.

With the age of modernity and the modern liberal state came a multitude of benefits or what Ken Wilber refers to as the dignities of modernity. Wilber counts among these dignities, science and medicine, the practice of representational democracy and the values of freedom, equality and justice. Science and technology raised the standard of living while modern medicine improved health and increased life span. In addition, the liberal state delivered previously undreamed of freedoms. Whereas feudal systems subordinated the rights of individuals to the "greater common good," the liberal state promoted individual freedom and autonomy and advanced the notion that the state has no right to interfere in the individual pursuit of happiness. Hypothetically at least, modern individuals gained the freedom to pursue happiness unimpeded by others and without regard for the greater good. In fact, modernity promised happiness as the reward for the individual's release from the burdens of religious superstition and feudal forms of authority. Prophets of modernity declared that science, technology and the human intellect would create a bright future for humanity—a modern utopia.

While liberal freedoms and scientific advances clearly constitute great benefits to humanity, modernity is, according to Wilber, both dignity and disaster, "an intense combination of good news, bad news."³⁴¹ Modern dignities, for starters, were not equally available to all. But even for those who enjoyed the benefits of modernity there was a price to be paid. The freedom to pursue individual happiness led to a rampant individualism that fragmented society and left individuals stranded in isolation. Worship of the

rational and scientific and a concomitant devaluation of the emotional and intuitive sides of human nature created an identity crisis in which individuals experienced themselves as fragmented and unreal. And a secular, rational world could not provide the meaning and value traditionally offered by religion. Wilber lists among modernity's disasters:

the death of God, the death of the Goddess, the commodification of life...the brutalities of capitalism...the loss of value and meaning, the fragmentation of the lifeworld, existential dread, a rampant and vulgar materialism—all of which have often been summarized in the phrase made famous by Max Weber: 'the disenchantment of the world.'³⁴²

Wilber credits modern science with creating much of this disenchantment. Not content with the limits of its own domain of inquiry, modern science became, according to Wilber, scientific imperialism. A powerful and aggressive science sought to include all of life within its grasp. To accomplish this, modern science perpetuated, Wilber maintains, a "reductionist nightmare,"³⁴³ denying the very existence of mind, soul and spirit, and reducing everything to matter, which "could best be studied by science, and science alone."³⁴⁴ The world according to this modern nightmare, is, Wilber describes, a mechanism governed solely by chance and devoid of meaning and value, a "flatland"³⁴⁵ of all surface and no depth, or as Whitehead would have it—"a dull affair, soundless, scentless, colorless; merely the hurrying of material, endlessly, meaninglessly."³⁴⁶

Rather than happiness and utopia, modernity spawned disenchantment and alienation. Kurtz argues that modernity is, by its very nature, incapable of delivering on its promise of happiness.

Individual autonomy could not translate into happiness, Kurtz explains, because "human freedom meant insatiable craving" which did not result in happiness but "boomeranged to generate almost infinite unhappiness."³⁴⁷ Thus, Kurtz notes, "the very *identity* of modernity...revealed itself as inherently addictive."³⁴⁸

The epidemic levels of addiction in the United States bolster Kurtz's claim that America is "*the* Enlightenment nation."³⁴⁹ As "the one political entity founded as *new* in the age of Enlightenment out of commitment to the living out of Enlightenment insights,"³⁵⁰ America exemplifies, Kurtz proposes, the modern era's dedication to secularization, technological progress and the pursuit of individualism. No wonder then that the United States has over twenty million alcoholics, ten million drug addicts and millions of others addicted to various compulsive behaviors.³⁵¹ With two percent of the world's population consuming sixty percent of the world's illicit drugs,³⁵² the United States offers ample evidence that substance abuse is, at least in part, a response to modern predicaments.

As far back as the 1830s, the Frenchman, Alexis De Tocqueville, testified to the strength of America's commitment to Enlightenment goals. In his insightful classic, *Democracy in America*, Tocqueville warned of the dire threat that America's intense pursuit of individualism posed to social cohesion and well-being. He suggested that individualism that is unchecked by responsibility or obligation to community leads to a fragmented society of isolated individuals. Individualism encourages people, Tocqueville alleged, to "form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their

whole destiny is in their hands."³⁵³ In America, Tocqueville insisted, "Each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart."³⁵⁴

Nor has America's commitment to rugged individualism waned since Tocqueville's day. In *Habits of the Heart*, Robert Bellah suggests that contemporary American culture defines "personality, achievement, and the purpose of human life in ways that leave the individual suspended in glorious, but terrifying, isolation."³⁵⁵ Hence Americans, as citizens of *the* Enlightenment nation, suffer perhaps more than others from modern alienation and existential dread. The paradoxes of modernity, Kurtz reasons, "pinched most painfully in the United States of America, the first modern society."³⁵⁶

AA's Answer to Modernity

Kurtz declares that AA "with very little notice, has uniquely confronted the problem of the modern even as it has shown the way to sobriety to a million men and women."³⁵⁷ AA is, according to Kurtz, "a counter-Enlightenment phenomenon antithetical to the central assumptions of self-styled 'modernity.'"³⁵⁸ In its challenge to modernity, AA incorporates, Kurtz alleges, the insights of existentialist philosophy. In "Why A.A. Works; The Intellectual Significance of Alcoholics Anonymous,"³⁵⁹ Kurtz explores the affinity between AA and existentialist philosophy, claiming that AA became an "unconscious bearer of the existentialist insight"³⁶⁰ that to be human *is* to be limited and dependent, and yet to yearn for transcendence. This insight is, Kurtz explains, both antithesis to, and

debunking of, modernity's assumptions about the unlimited nature of human autonomy and independence. Modernity sought absolute autonomy and absolute control and the existential philosophers in turn exposed the illusory nature of these goals.

According to Kurtz, AA recognized along with the existential philosophers that the source of modern alienation is not human limitation per se, but the *denial* of that limitation. AA understood the "sin"³⁶¹ of modernity, Kurtz explains, to be the insistence on absolute human independence and the refusal to admit to human dependence. Alcoholics sin in refusing to admit their limitations regarding alcohol. The claim to be unlimited is a claim to be God and AA finds the claim, Kurtz alleges, to be inherently self-centered. Self-centeredness, AA proposes, is the root of the troubles and vulnerability of both alcoholics and non-alcoholics alike. The alcoholic demonstrates this vulnerability, Kurtz contends, by living out the denial of limitation that ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Kurtz describes how AA guides alcoholics to embrace the idea of essential human limitation. The idea of "fundamental finitude"³⁶² is implicit, Kurtz explains, in AA's very definition of the alcoholic as "one who cannot drink any alcohol safely."³⁶³ Thus, Kurtz maintains, "there is an essential 'not'—an inherent limitation—in the very concept of 'alcoholic.'"³⁶⁴ When the alcoholic declares under AA's guidance that "my name is so-and-so and I am an alcoholic," he/she expresses the honest acceptance of limitation and thus throws off the self-deception that is the root of the alcoholic's problems. The realization that marks the beginning of sanity for the existentialist

philosophers, signals, Kurtz proposes, the beginning of sobriety for alcoholics.

In "hitting bottom" alcoholics come face-to-face with their essential human limitation. They grasp the existentialist insight, Kurtz notes, "by standing on the brink of 'the sickness unto death' that is despair."³⁶⁵ Kurtz contends that AA members, as a result of their suffering, "intimately knew the nature and ramifications of the illness, the dis-ease, that was their age's metaphor for the problematic reality of being human."³⁶⁶ AA understood, Kurtz posits, that the essence of the human condition was the "conjunction of infinite thirst with essentially limited capacity"³⁶⁷ and that this dilemma is personified in the alcoholic. If the modern citizen suffers from illusions of self-sufficiency, the alcoholic, according to AA's perspective, is but an exaggerated version of this self-delusion, or as Wilson put it, "an extreme example of self-will run riot."³⁶⁸ Alcoholics, whom Wilson believed to be "all or nothing people," deny even more vehemently than the average individual their need for others.

According to Kurtz, AA also grasped the second part of the existentialist insight that humans, while limited, yearn to transcend their limitation. AA understood the alcoholic, Kurtz suggests, as one for whom "the thirst for transcendence had been perverted into a thirst for alcohol."³⁶⁹ AA is not unique in viewing the compulsion to drink as a misdirected spiritual quest. Kurtz argues that the common use of the word "spirits" to refer to alcohol conveys this implicit understanding.³⁷⁰ Unfortunately, in substituting "spirits" for the "spiritual," the alcoholic makes a poor substitution, because, Kurtz

asserts, the pursuit of the infinite by means of the finite is inherently addictive and ultimately self-defeating. It is the ludicrous nature of this quest that provides the source of much of AA's humor. AA members laugh, Kurtz observes, at the ridiculous search for transcendence through alcohol, juxtaposed against the reality of human limitation. Hence AA's self-parodying humor is based, Kurtz declares, on the "essential incongruity at the core of the human condition."³⁷¹

In defining alcoholism as a threefold disease which encompasses the spiritual, mental and physical, AA expresses its understanding, Kurtz maintains, that modern citizens suffer from a "false separation within the self."³⁷² Healing therefore requires a holistic approach that reinstates the underlying unity of human life. AA pursues this holistic integrity, Kurtz claims, by moving the emotional side of human life to center stage and relegating the rational to back stage; in AA, sobriety is understood to come "through witness, not by reasoning."³⁷³

Kurtz proposes that AA also contradicts the modern assumption that any dependence is humiliating and dehumanizing. Modernity, Kurtz alleges, defines "full humanity as the overcoming of all dependencies."³⁷⁴ Therapies based on modernist assumptions aim, Kurtz reasons, to cure the alcoholic's dependence on alcohol by guiding clients "to responsible personal *autonomy*."³⁷⁵ AA incorporates what Kurtz describes as a "longer-wisdomed insight"³⁷⁶ by suggesting that the alcoholic's problem is not dependence per se, but dependence *on alcohol*. For AA, to be human *is* to be dependent. AA's remedy to the alcoholic's dilemma, Kurtz asserts, is "not the

elimination of dependence but its shift to its proper object."³⁷⁷ AA requires alcoholics to surrender the idea that salvation can be found in the self and to place their dependence upon God and other humans. According to Kurtz, alcoholics need each other precisely because of their weakness and limitation; they transcend their individual limitations by "embracing a new relationship with others who are also essentially limited."³⁷⁸ This self-transcendence is enabled, Kurtz maintains, by AA's understanding "that to be fully human is to need human others."³⁷⁹

Kurtz explicates how AA "as *fellowship* lives out and enables...the need for connectedness."³⁸⁰ This need is written into the steps which present the subject as "we" rather than "I," making it clear, Kurtz insists, that alcoholics need "other alcoholics with whom to utter that first 'We.'"³⁸¹ This mutual dependence is consistently reinforced in AA meetings, with members sharing stories that, according to Kurtz, "*both* offer hope *and* ask for help."³⁸² Kurtz suggests that the essence of AA therapy is the constant reminders in every AA meeting that each alcoholic "has *both* something to give *and* something to receive from his fellow alcoholic."³⁸³ In stark contrast to the assumptions of modernity, AA proclaims, Kurtz alleges, "the *integrity* of dependence;"³⁸⁴ in insisting that the alcoholic is not omnipotent, not-God, AA discovers the essence of the alcoholic as "revealed to be needing others, and needing them in a mutuality that accepts that *every* human being needs others both to give to and to receive from."³⁸⁵

The unique society that AA creates is, according to Kurtz, based on the mutual need that stems from shared weakness; in AA, each

alcoholic "enables and fulfills the other...each becomes fully human and thus humanizing only by connection with the other."³⁸⁶ Thus alcoholics find a strength born of shared weakness and discover that wholeness arises from the acknowledgment of limitation. The honest acknowledgment of need becomes in turn the ability to give. In AA, members transcend their self-centeredness and expand, Kurtz explains, beyond their original "limitations in depth of feeling, understanding and insight."³⁸⁷ Paradoxically the individual's identity is strengthened rather than weakened as a consequence of mutual dependence because relationships of reciprocity and mutuality ultimately empower the individual.

In sharing their weakness AA members experience, Kurtz reports, a feeling of fundamental human equality. AA's joyous pluralism stems from its premise, Kurtz observes, that humans are more alike than different. In AA members are encouraged to identify rather than compare themselves to each other, to search for similarities rather than focus on differences. When weakness and the sense of incompleteness are shared, they lead, Kurtz reasons, to "ready acceptance that the partial completenesses of others complement rather than destroy, enrich rather than diminish, one's own partiality."³⁸⁸

While AA embraced limitation, it also recognized the need to limit or control that very limitation. AA understood, Kurtz posits, that "either claiming absolute control or denying any ability to control seemed equally dehumanizing."³⁸⁹ Dependence on others is limited because others are also recognized as "not-God." Kurtz claims that this recognition of universal human fallibility is consistent with the

anti-perfectionism, rejection of absolutes and sense of limited control that pervades AA, from the Serenity Prayer to the focus on not drinking today to the goal of progress rather than perfection.

* * *

AA achieved its critical perspective of modernity, Kurtz asserts, through the rescue and practice of ancient concepts, including those of sin, surrender, conversion and salvation. Kurtz believes that these concepts afforded AA insight into the underlying problems of modernity precisely because of their age. Kurtz argues that AA has made significant contributions to modernity in both the rescue of ancient wisdom and in the pragmatic use and effective communication of that wisdom. He proposes that, on the landscape of twentieth century America, "Alcoholics Anonymous best if not alone witnesses with a clarity and simplicity that render its wisdom readily, easily, and vividly understandable by all and accessible to all."³⁹⁰ Because of AA's affinity with existential philosophy, Kurtz recommends that AA be accorded the respect it deserves as "a phenomenon of unique *intellectual* significance."³⁹¹

Kurtz notes that AA's insistence on the need for others is its most famous as well as its most criticized facet. This mutual need is written off, Kurtz observes, as the mere "substituting of a social dependence for a drug dependence."³⁹² But Kurtz points out that is "all too human to attack most sharply that which threatens most acutely, and the instinct of the modern mind here is accurate."³⁹³ The mutual healing through shared vulnerability that occurs in AA is no small accomplishment, Kurtz alleges, "in an age when the expansion of 'me' and 'more' as the watch-words of modernity seem to

jeopardize all human community."³⁹⁴ Perhaps AA has a major contribution to make to modernity, Kurtz suggests, in its insistence on the fundamental and inescapable human need for human others.

Because AA's ethical and religious framework mitigates against narcissistic and individualist tendencies, AA should not be confused, Kurtz contends, "with the intellectually fuzzy, pop-therapeutic fads that perennially sprout on the American landscape."³⁹⁵ Kurtz notes that the recent proliferation of self-help therapies coincides with the explosion of drug use that began in the late 1960s, but he observes that:

Astute commentators readily recognized the 'narcissism' that underlay both the drugs and the therapies, but only the most acutely psychoanalytic realized that Alcoholics Anonymous, far from being a manifestation or cure of the craze, afforded perhaps the only cure for both the fads and the malaise underlying them.³⁹⁶

* * *

When we recognize how effectively AA addresses modern predicaments, the veracity of Wilson's claim that AA's spiritual way of life offers "a way to happy and effective living for many, alcoholic or not"³⁹⁷ becomes evident. In both philosophy and practice, AA provides relief to the suffering of modern citizens. By balancing head with heart, AA reinstates holistic integrity to fragmented individuals. By checking individual rights with a strong sense of social responsibility, AA counters modernity's ruinous emphasis on individualism. And AA restores value and meaning to life by providing a format for living out the need for connection to others. In returning to a sacred worldview and opposing what Wilson referred

to as the "bone-crushing juggernaut"³⁹⁸ of self-sufficiency, AA discovered a way to transcend the disasters of modernity.

AA as Democratic Spiritual Community

For Mel Ash, author of *The Zen of Recovery*,³⁹⁹ AA is a community of spiritual practitioners akin to Buddhist communities. Given the many parallels between existentialist philosophy and Zen Buddhism, Ash's comparison of Zen and AA lends credence to Kurtz's comparison of existentialism and AA. Ash's analysis also supports the psychological interpretations of AA summarized in chapter seven, although Ash emphasizes AA as therapeutic community rather than as group therapy.

* * *

While Wilson could simply invite alcoholics to join him on the Broad Highway, it remained for AA to make that highway a reality. Just how successful was AA in forging a spiritual program devoid of dogma and acceptable to modern secularists? Mel Ash finds evidence for AA's success in the many parallels between Zen Buddhism and AA. Buddhism not only is defined by its lack of dogma, but for generations it has proved attractive to Westerners. From the American Transcendentalists—Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman—to Alan Watts and Jack Kerouac of the Beat Generation, to the Beatles, to Deepak Chopra's current audience, Westerners in full flight from monotheistic religious traditions have been drawn to the less doctrinal spiritual traditions of the East. Ash, who is both an AA member and Buddhist instructor, was struck by the resemblance between the two traditions. Their common ground includes, Ash alleges, the practice of spiritual democracy, the absence of dogma, insights about suffering, the centrality and inclusivity of community, wariness of the human intellect and the practice of mindful living.

Both Zen and AA practice spiritual democracy, Ash explains, by granting individuals the freedom *and* the responsibility to find their own way. Buddha instructed his followers to "Be lamps unto yourselves,"⁴⁰⁰ whereas AA, Ash observes, encourages the same sentiment with its motto "To thine own self, be true." Both practices avoid devotion to leaders or prophets. In fact, Zen practitioners say that if you meet Buddha on the road you should kill him. This practice of "Killing the Buddha" instructs us, Ash notes, not to rely too heavily on any particular teacher. AA members also kill the Buddha, Ash maintains, by not hinging their sobriety on another human being. Ash reasons that when AA members remind each other that "the member with the most sobriety is the one who got up earliest this morning," they highlight the fallibility of all AA members, including those with the most years of sobriety.

Both AA and Zen, Ash explains, shun dogma and are concerned with "the all-encompassing spiritual rather than the narrow and exclusive systems of the religious."⁴⁰¹ Neither Buddha nor AA addressed theological issues such as life after death, and AA, while clearly grounded in the ethical teachings of Jesus, avoided doctrinal debate by refraining from any mention of Jesus. Ash explains that, while Zen views attachments to beliefs and opinions as roadblocks to enlightenment, AA's founders perceived rigid ideas and absolutes as obstacles to sobriety.

Both traditions refrain from defining God. Ash asserts that AA, in advocating the "God of your understanding," encourages its members to define God for themselves. Buddha, on the other hand, claimed that God is an ultimate mystery that eludes capture in words

or thoughts. For Buddhists, God is pantheistic; God is the universal mind which exists inside all things, including humans. AA offers a diversity of references to God, evoking both monotheistic and pantheistic images. Interestingly, Ash discovered that many fellow AA members, given the freedom to define their own Higher Power, select concepts of God that they feel a part of and that are "essentially an extension of our deepest yearnings and noblest hopes."⁴⁰² Wilson himself observed this intuitive process in which AA members first experience God within themselves and then apprehend God based on that inner experience. "With few exceptions," Wilson reported, "our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves."⁴⁰³ This is of course consistent with Wilson's claim, referenced earlier, that "We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found."⁴⁰⁴

Both AA and Buddhism perceive suffering as the entrance to enlightenment, driven, Ash notes, by the paradox that "The more desperate and bottomed-out we became...the more we became, in fact, people on a spiritual odyssey."⁴⁰⁵ Buddha devised the Eightfold Path to an enlightened life after "having seen into the nature of his own suffering," Ash alleges, whereas Wilson created AA's Twelve Step program after surviving the misery of alcoholism. For both traditions, suffering constitutes, Ash contends, the "season in which we usually hear the call."⁴⁰⁶ Ash claims that "We had to pass through our own dark night of the soul in order to gain the light. We had to become completely empty and wrung out."⁴⁰⁷

Ash insists that alcoholism educates alcoholics in Buddha's First Noble Truth—that life is suffering, but it is AA that teaches alcoholics Buddha's Second Noble Truth, which is that we cause our own suffering through the denial of the fundamental unity and interdependence of life. According to Zen philosophy, all human discontent, dysfunction and compulsion is caused by our illusions of separation. And our suffering is such, Ash maintains, that "the harder we try to attain happiness in our limited sense of selfhood, the further we get from any real and lasting fulfillment."⁴⁰⁸

The solution offered by both Zen and AA, Ash declares, is to become mindful of our basic unity and to let go of our feelings of uniqueness and separation. The path back to our authentic nature is through community. We recover in AA, Ash reasons, to the extent that we regain a consciousness of unity with others. According to Ash, both AA and Zen open "our hearts...[to the] sense that we all need each other...[that] each of us completes the other."⁴⁰⁹ As a consequence, Ash explains, "the big loneliness recedes just a bit."⁴¹⁰ Healing in community offers the advantage of "together action," which Ash points out is the Zen belief that it's more efficient to clean dirty potatoes by rubbing them against each other than by washing them individually. In AA we heal together, Ash suggests, because "we need each other to get better...[that] alone, it might take forever."⁴¹¹ The Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh, in *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, emphasizes the efficacy of community. "Communities of practice," Hanh writes, "with all their shortcomings, are the best way to make the teaching available to people."⁴¹²

Both traditions, Ash asserts, value the welfare of the collective over that of the individual. This priority is evident in AA's first tradition, which states that "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity."⁴¹³ Among Zen practitioners, all effort, Ash observes, is exerted for the *Sangha* or community. Hanh defines a Sangha as a group of people "who practice together to encourage the best qualities in each other."⁴¹⁴ He concludes that "If it moves in the direction of transformation it is a real Sangha."⁴¹⁵ Given AA's efficacy in transforming its members for the better, AA clearly qualifies as a Sangha.

Ash also insists that AA practices the Buddhist "bodhisattva ethic" in which enlightened bodhisattvas delay their individual liberation from suffering until all humans are liberated. Both Buddha and Wilson modeled this ethic, Ash explains, by dedicating their lives to relieving the sufferings of others. Ash regards Wilson as "an American Buddha...[who] attained enlightenment as a result of his tremendous suffering and then passed on his profoundly simple teaching...never...ask[ing] for anything in return."⁴¹⁶ Wilson's contribution, Ash reasons, "lay in his implicit renunciation of a personal salvation or selfish redemption. Instead of Me, he addressed Us and identified what it was that made us alike rather than different."⁴¹⁷ Ash believes that Wilson's personal example of self-sacrifice evolved into AA's ethic of paying for our recovery by sharing it with others. This ethic implies, Ash posits, that there is no such thing as personal salvation; "There is no personal self to save. There is nothing to save unless we also save the world."⁴¹⁸ It is this

ethic, Ash asserts, that protects AA members from "the diminishing spiral of self-absorbed recovery."⁴¹⁹

Both traditions hold an inclusive concept of community that embraces the diversity of humanity. Buddha's message, Ash declares, "was completely egalitarian and offered without distinction to caste, education or sex,"⁴²⁰ just as AA's message reaches across lines of religion, class, race, gender, and sexual orientation. Wilson's Broad Highway parallels, Ash observes, the Buddhist desire to make "the rescue vehicle...large enough for everybody."⁴²¹ Both traditions emphasize human commonality and deemphasize difference in their pursuit of egalitarian community. In Zen, Ash explicates, "differences in appearance and belief are only different faces of the same, unchanging truth."⁴²²

Another common trait of both traditions, Ash alleges, is a wariness of the human intellect. Zen fears the rational because of its propensity to rob us of life. Our thoughts are, Ash warns, "the spectral hands that push the fullness of life away and keep it at a mental arm's length."⁴²³ Buddhists counter the mental habit of focusing on the past or the future through the practice of mindful living. Similarly AA members live mindfully, Ash suggests, when they live one-day-at-a-time, reminding each other that "if you've got one foot in yesterday and the other in tomorrow, you're pissing all over today."⁴²⁴ Mindful living also requires, Ash insists, that we remain aware of our thoughts and actions and attend to our responsibility. For AA members, these practices are guided by AA's Tenth Step, which requires that we continue "to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it." Ash

notes that both AA and Zen regard serenity as the reward for mindful living.

Ash identifies numerous other parallels between AA and Buddhism. He believes that AA members conform with the Tao when they admit their powerlessness and turn their will over to a Higher Power. AA's process of making amends is, according to Ash, a way to "balance and neutralize the effects of our karma."⁴²⁵ And both traditions advocate a life of balance; with its slogan "Easy Does It," AA encourages alcoholics, Ash proposes, to avoid the emotional highs and lows that endanger sobriety. In Zen, this balance is known as "the Middle Path of mindfulness, acceptance and tolerance."⁴²⁶

Ash alleges that AA succeeds in encouraging people to explore their own spiritual path. In recent decades, Ash has witnessed an increasing number of members of Twelve Step groups taking instruction in Zen meditation as the means with which to pursue AA's Eleventh Step which directs members to seek "through prayer and meditation to improve [their] conscious contact with God." Ash concludes that members of Twelve Step groups are drawn to Buddhism because of the common ground it shares with Twelve Step philosophy.

Kurtz also comments on the profound resemblance between AA and Zen Buddhism, noting that AA incorporates Zen's "calm acceptance of human limitation."⁴²⁷ Kurtz posits that AA, precisely because of its profound Americanness, is well suited to promulgate Buddhist ideas. He insists that:

If a philosophy accepting not only limitation but the wholeness of the limitation is ever to be made effectively available to the vast majority of ordinary Americans, this will likely have to be achieved by a source as

pragmatically American yet deeply Christian as Alcoholics Anonymous.⁴²⁸

Ash contends that Zen and AA are not religions, at least not in the traditional sense of the term. He cites the growing popularity of both practices as evidence that:

Something new is emerging, something that doesn't hand our spiritual guidance over to others, something that insists on the dignity of each person's unique search. Something is emerging that doesn't merely give lip service to the spiritual, but actually and fundamentally saves lives and changes awareness for the better.⁴²⁹

* * *

That AA can have Christian origins and yet resonate so strongly with Buddhism is not as surprising as it might initially appear. Hanh contends that while Christianity and Buddhism "have different roots, traditions, and ways of seeing [they] share the common qualities of love, understanding, and acceptance."⁴³⁰ The obstacle that prevents many people from investigating the teachings of Jesus, Hanh explains, is Christian dogma—in particular, the insistence that Jesus is the only Son of God. "From a Buddhist perspective," Hanh queries, "who is not the son or daughter of God?"⁴³¹ The value of the life of Jesus, Hanh believes, is found in his teachings. Hanh insists that "When we look into and touch deeply the life and teaching of Jesus, we can penetrate the reality of God,"⁴³² which he describes as the qualities of love, understanding, courage, and acceptance. Thus AA, by avoiding Christian dogma and embracing Christian ethics, finds common ground with Buddhism.

Fox argues for a pantheistic interpretation of Christianity, claiming that the Christian dogma that Hanh finds objectionable is in

fact a distortion of the teachings of Jesus. Fox looks to the Christian mystics of the middle ages for evidence of this interpretation.⁴³³ Fox maintains that when Mechtild of Magdeburg wrote of "a spirituality in which we see 'all things in God and God in all things,'"⁴³⁴ he was advancing the pantheistic relationship to divinity that Jesus advocated in preaching "that the reign of God was *among* us."⁴³⁵ Furthermore, Fox contends that the Sara's Circle model employed by AA operates according to the pantheistic understanding "that God is in all things....[that] God works *from the base*, from the bottom up, from the inside out."⁴³⁶ By creating "group experiences in which persons treat one another as equals in a circle, sharing a common story of pain and grace," AA acts on the belief, Fox suggests, that "wisdom, and thereby divinity," are found in the group itself, among and within its members.⁴³⁷ Thus, while AA encourages its members to create their own images of God, it offers an *experience* of God as pantheistic. And, as both Ash and Wilson observed, many AA members define God based on that experience.

Numerous Christians also attest to AA's success in creating the Broad Highway. Writing in *Christianity Today*, Tim Stafford asserts that AA is not Christian but that Wilson "made a group that has a wider appeal, for it takes on the pluralistic religious coloration of our culture."⁴³⁸ Stafford insists that AA recognizes "as many gods as there may be religions, any of which can 'work.'"⁴³⁹ As for fears that AA members might express intolerance of Christians, Stafford concludes that "this seems rarely to be the case."⁴⁴⁰ He explains that "Christians can express their convictions [in AA] without any sense of

intimidation, unless they undermine the pluralistic assumptions of the group by suggesting that others' view of God is misguided."⁴⁴¹

Christians note as well the disparities between AA and organized Christian institutions. Dale Ryan, a Baptist pastor and author of "Addicts in the Pew,"⁴⁴² discovered that recovering alcoholics find in AA "a level of honesty and integrity about life that is in contrast to what they experience in church."⁴⁴³ And Philip Yancey, in "The Midnight Church," relates how "AA has meant salvation in the most literal sense"⁴⁴⁴ for an alcoholic friend. Yancey alleges that AA, which keeps his friend alive, "has none of Christianity's underlying doctrine and centrality of Christ."⁴⁴⁵ He reports that his friend perceives the Christian church as "irrelevant, vapid, and gutless"⁴⁴⁶ compared to the vitality of AA. Ryan proposes that the "Christian wisdom that's embodied in the Twelve Steps got separated off institutionally from the mainstream of the church."⁴⁴⁷ In this sense, one might argue that AA is *more* Christian than Christian institutions, practicing a distilled Christianity based on Christian values while avoiding the theological issues that distract so many "Christians" from living according to the teachings of Jesus.

Klaus Makela, in "International Comparisons of Alcoholics Anonymous," also confirms the existence of AA's Broad Highway. He maintains that:

Spirituality is an extremely complex field of meaning...For some [AA] members, spirituality has a definite theological content, whereas for others, spirituality is simply a humble and respectful attitude toward life. AA is not characterized by a set belief about spirituality but rather by an emphasis on the individuality of spiritual beliefs. Thus, the same meeting may be attended by supporters of different religions and denominations as well as by atheists and persons uncommitted to any particular religion.⁴⁴⁸

* * *

Perhaps AA's critics are right to label AA as both church and religion. If the mark of a true church be, as Fox insists, where compassion is found, or if Hanh is correct in maintaining that one of the main tasks of a church is "*looking deeply together*,"⁴⁴⁹ then AA is indeed a church. And if, as Kurtz alleges, "it be a function of authentic religion both to make comprehensible the human experience of suffering and to open human sufferers to each other in a healing way, Alcoholics Anonymous qualifies well."⁴⁵⁰ However, by rejecting dogma, AA transcended the specifics of any particular religious practice and arrived instead at a spirituality that encompasses principles common to diverse religions, such as the practice of living one-day-at-a-time. Ironically, many AA members are more familiar with the Sanskrit version of this concept than with Jesus's advice to "Take no thought for the morrow," because it is the Sanskrit poem, which begins with the line "Look to this day, For it is life," that appears in AA's daily prayer book, *Twenty-Four Hours a Day*.⁴⁵¹

Kurtz declares that AA achieved a "contemporary coup"⁴⁵² by opposing spirituality to religion, and then positing religion as derogatory and spirituality as acceptable. "To render the spiritual acceptable in modern times is," Kurtz alleges, "no small achievement."⁴⁵³ Ash also acknowledges AA's historical significance, insisting that "Bill's introduction of the Twelve Steps will be viewed as one of the greatest spiritual, if not religious, movements of the time. Only half a century later, virtually no one is untouched by the message."⁴⁵⁴

AA's Feminist Essence

To establish AA's credentials as an agent of progressive social change requires that we lay-to-rest the various feminist critiques of AA. Undeniably AA's use of gender exclusive language is sexist. However fair play dictates that we consider the historical context of AA's origins and thus not judge AA too harshly merely on the basis of its literature. As well, we need to understand that AA members have good reason to be protective of, and hence reluctant to amend, their literature. Having granted the sexism inherent to AA's gender exclusive language, we can turn to the more important critique regarding AA's suitability, or lack thereof, for female alcoholics. I believe that AA is well-suited for women because AA's underlying essence is actually remarkably feminist. I offer as evidence AA's female emotionality, its democracy, its commitment to a holistic balance between head and heart, its focus on relationships and emphasis on human interdependence, its democratic spirituality and inclusive community and its efforts to equalize power. Despite this preponderant evidence, numerous feminists argue that AA is ill-suited to meet the needs of female alcoholics.

In 1975, Jean Kirkpatrick founded Women for Sobriety (WFS) as an alternative to AA for female alcoholics. Kirkpatrick maintains that female alcoholics suffer more than male alcoholics from guilt, depression and feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness and inadequacy and that therefore AA's "unified," one-size-fits-all, program is unsuited to women.⁴⁵⁵ Kirkpatrick, an alcoholic who failed to get sober in AA, alleges that AA's practices of personal inventory and amends exacerbates women's sense of shame and low

self-esteem. Kirkpatrick replaced AA's Twelve Steps, with their focus on resolving past issues, with thirteen positive affirmations, among them are "Happiness is a habit I will develop" and "I am what I think." Positive thinking and a focus on the future are, Kirkpatrick believes, the best means for women to raise their self-esteem.

Contrary to AA's multi-dimensional view of alcoholism as having mental, physical and spiritual components, Kirkpatrick advocates a behavior modification model that views alcoholism as solely a mental affliction that requires the mental treatment of positive thinking.

Fifteen years after Kirkpatrick established WFS, numerous feminists continue to find fault with AA's Twelve Step program. Gail Unterberger, in "Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics,"⁴⁵⁶ claims that AA's approach is too masculine for women. In "The Twelve-Step Controversy,"⁴⁵⁷ Charlotte Davis Kasl argues, in much the same vein as Kirkpatrick, that AA is designed to break down the over inflated egos of the white, middle-class men who founded AA and is therefore unsuited to women who instead suffer from the lack of healthy egos.

In revising AA's Twelve Step program, both Kasl and Unterberger made significant departures from AA. They changed AA's inner-directed, personal inventory into an outer-directed, social critique. Instead of a "searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves,"⁴⁵⁸ Unterberger recommends "a hard look at our patriarchal society and [acknowledgment of] those ways in which we have participated in our own oppression,"⁴⁵⁹ while Kasl urges an examination of "our behavior and beliefs in the context of living in a hierarchical, male-dominated culture."⁴⁶⁰ AA's practice of daily

personal inventory and prompt admission of wrong doing became for Kasl "Continued to trust my reality, and when I was right promptly admitted it and refused to back down."⁴⁶¹

Kasl and Unterberger also altered AA's practice of making amends. While Kasl's program includes "making amends when appropriate,"⁴⁶² Unterberger only recommends that we become "aware of those who depend on us and of our influence on them" and that "We will discuss our illness with out children, family, friends and colleagues [and] make it clear to them (particularly our children) that what our alcoholism caused in the past was not their fault."⁴⁶³ Unterberger alleges that women, unlike men, have nothing to apologize for, a notion that she defends with the rather dubious assertion that "Women's feelings of guilt are often pervasive and diffuse, whereas men's remorse tends to be tied to specific acts."⁴⁶⁴

Unterberger and Kasl also depart from AA in their views on community and social obligation. Unterberger's community is a "community of sisters,"⁴⁶⁵ a separatist vision far removed from AA's joyous pluralism. The sense of obligation to others in Unterberger's Twelfth Step is decidedly lukewarm—she suggests that, "having had a spiritual awakening," all we owe others is to know that "we are competent women who have much to offer others."⁴⁶⁶ Remarkably, Kasl declined altogether to write an alternative to AA's Twelfth Step. Instead she advised women "to remember to first care for and love themselves." As for community, Kasl urges us to move on. Clearly she does not share AA's bodhisattva ethic whereby sober members stick around to help others get sober or the sense of AA as a Sangha committed to the life-long practice of shared values.

When Kasl and Unterberger complete their feminist "improvements," little of AA remains. Gone is the insistence on personal responsibility and obligation to others. Gone are the mechanisms for resolving shame that enable alcoholics to put the past behind them and live in the present. Forgiveness of others, inclusive community, adherence to spiritual principles—all are scrapped. And Kasl and Unterberger replace AA's deemphasis of difference and focus on common ground with exaggerated notions of male-female difference. In fact, AA's feminist critics promote a very idealized, romantic portrait of female alcoholics as blameless. AA's dialectical juxtaposition of innocence and culpability is replaced by an us/them model in which women are cast as passive victims lacking the ability to harm others. Kasl's and Unterberger's laudable attention to the social causes of alcoholism comes unfortunately at the expense of any acknowledgment of personal responsibility. Unterberger's alcoholic mother only needs to let her children know that her alcoholism is not their fault; any admission of her mistakes or apologies are deemed unnecessary. Perhaps Unterberger would have the mother explain to her children when they are old enough to understand such things how patriarchy bears sole responsibility for any suffering they endured as a result of her drinking.

Stephanie Covington, a recovering alcoholic, mother and author of *A Woman's Way Through the Twelve Steps*, refutes the myth that female alcoholics do not harm others. She insists that "When an addiction is at the center of our lives, other people suffer."⁴⁶⁷ Covington argues that even the best behaved of female alcoholics abuse others through neglect, indifference and emotional absence. As

for alcoholic mothers, Covington claims that "When we can't even take care of ourselves it's impossible for us to be aware of what's really happening in our children's lives."⁴⁶⁸ Alcoholic mothers, according to Covington, are irresponsible and unreliable, they thrust too much responsibility on their children and they are "critical, demanding, immature, self-involved, and emotionally unavailable."⁴⁶⁹

Covington notes that many substance abusing mothers suffer shame for their failure as parents and believe that they are beyond forgiveness. John Peteet warns of the dangers of this shame, maintaining that "Addiction-related deception, failed promises, and harm done to others often creates a sense of moral failure and hopelessness, which in turn contributes to further substance abuse."⁴⁷⁰ To be effective, recovery programs must provide mechanisms to resolve shame and self-pity. Peteet contends that the active responsibility that AA members take for their alcoholism "contributes to a transformation of identity from victim to survivor to helper."⁴⁷¹ AA's feminist critics need to ask themselves if, in discarding AA's process of personal inventory, amends and restitution, they serve female alcoholics well. What do they offer, for example, to the drug-addicted, alcoholic mother whose children burned to death in a house fire while she was at the drug house? Are we really to believe that this woman's shame and guilt can be resolved through an interrogation of the patriarchy?

Interestingly Wilson anticipated the arguments of feminists. In the 12 & 12 he wrote that:

Some of us...clung to the claim that when drinking we never hurt anybody but ourselves. Our families didn't suffer...What real harm had we done?... This attitude, of course, is the end result of purposeful forgetting.⁴⁷²

AA's Feminist Essence

By 1995 more than one-third of AA members were female,⁴⁷³ a figure that indicates that for many women, gender differences are not hindering their participation in AA. In "What Do Women Get Out of Self-Help? Their Reasons for Attending Women for Sobriety and Alcoholics Anonymous," Lee Ann Kaskutas presents the findings of research in which she sought to determine the validity of feminist claims that the experience of female alcoholics differs enough from that of their male counterparts to warrant distinct treatment approaches. To her surprise, Kaskutas found greater sobriety among female AA members than among women who pursued alternatives to AA. She also discovered that women in AA achieve higher abstinence rates than their male cohorts. Interestingly Kaskutas credits women's lower self-esteem as a contributing factor to their success in AA, explaining that:

characteristic psychological traits of women alcoholics (such as low self esteem, drinking because of feeling inadequate, and external locus of control) may in fact make it easier for women to follow the AA steps and admit powerlessness over alcohol, to admit past wrongs, to accept surrendering to a higher power, and to ask for help than for men—who are supposed to be independent and self-reliant (Beckman, 1993).⁴⁷⁴

Covington also concludes that AA works for women, observing that "Having spoken of the limitations of Twelve Step programs, it is equally important to acknowledge the many ways in which the spirit

of these programs meets the needs and concerns of women."⁴⁷⁵ Covington alleges that AA empowers *all* of its members, including women who have traditionally lacked power. And AA's practice of empowering oneself, as we empower others, is consistent, Covington maintains, with female ways of being; "It is in this mutuality—the open sharing of feelings, struggles, hopes, and triumphs without blame or judgment—that women can find the most powerful resources for healing."⁴⁷⁶ Covington describes AA's model of mutual support and cooperative power as "the feminine form of power at its best."⁴⁷⁷ For Covington, AA is reminiscent of traditional women's circles. She reflects that:

For centuries, [women] have supported each other by meeting in groups, sharing information and resources. We have gathered together to wash clothes, sew quilts, share stories over coffee, raise children, play cards, raise consciousness, exchange business contacts. Because of this tradition, we often feel very much at home in a recovery meeting. In Twelve Step programs, we move out of isolation and gather for mutual support.⁴⁷⁸

Covington also argues, as did Kurtz and Denzin, that AA undermines masculine cultural norms. She cites as evidence AA's valuing of relationships of mutual support over self-reliance and competition. As well, AA's rule of no cross-talk mitigates against the culturally ingrained habit of men to dominate women in discussions.

AA's suitability for women is also evidenced in AA's propensity to address several problems that are more common to women than to men. The Serenity Prayer provides an effective antidote to the social pressure exerted on women to be responsible for everyone and everything. In practicing the guidelines of the prayer, women limit their arenas of responsibility and subsequently put less time and

energy into others and take better care of themselves. AA also helps women by emphasizing a goal of progress rather than perfection.

But perhaps the best evidence that AA works for women is the extent to which women have embraced Twelve Step philosophy and practice. Not only have women joined Twelve Step groups in large numbers, but they have adapted the Twelve Steps to meet a variety of women's needs, addressing issues such as codependency, incest, sexual abuse and eating disorders.

Lesbian Alcoholics

Research on lesbian AA members sheds light on the feminist controversy over AA. In "Lesbians' Participation in Alcoholics Anonymous: Experiences of Social, Personal, and Political Tension,"⁴⁷⁹ Joanne M. Hall presents the results of what she describes as a "feminist ethnographic study of lesbians' experiences in recovery."⁴⁸⁰ Hall studied thirty-five lesbians who were, or had been, members of AA—of Hall's sample, one-third were women of color. While some of the women attended separate lesbian AA meetings, few did so exclusively; most of the women also participated in what Hall refers to as "mainstream AA," which she defines as those meetings that "are open to all, but...are generally controlled by Euro-American male members."⁴⁸¹

In the San Francisco Bay area where Hall conducted her research, lesbian participation in AA was so high that one informant explained that 'Everyone who is anybody in the lesbian community is in recovery in AA.'⁴⁸² Whether this participation rate is due to a higher incidence of alcoholism among lesbians, or to a greater

propensity on the part of lesbians to pursue sobriety, remains unclear.⁴⁸³ Regardless, Hall reports that "lesbians as a group have been moving away from alcohol use"⁴⁸⁴ and that AA and other Twelve Step groups now meet many of the same social needs of lesbians that used to be met in the bars.

In choosing lesbians, Hall picked a population that is very politicized and therefore inclined to be critical of AA. Not surprisingly, Hall found that the experience of lesbians in AA was fraught with tension due to the political controversy surrounding AA. The lesbians' perceptions of AA often differed on the basis of whether or not the women accepted, or rejected, the various critiques of AA. These differences were evident in opinions of separate lesbian AA meetings versus mainstream meetings. Women who preferred lesbian meetings, said that they experienced homophobia, racism and sexism in mainstream AA meetings. However, many lesbians reported positive experiences in mainstream AA. They valued AA *precisely* because they found an easier interaction with heterosexuals in AA than in other environments. "They experienced a level of kindness, safety, and inclusion," Hall explains, "that was not always available to them as lesbians in other social institutions."⁴⁸⁵ One lesbian spoke of her amazement that people she assumed to be very cold and unfeeling turned out to be accepting of her sexuality. Another commented on how beautiful it was to have "all these people who are not like you...interested in keeping you sober,"⁴⁸⁶ and demonstrating their concern with phone calls and visits. One woman attested to finding her greatest support among heterosexuals and how that acceptance

not only increased her tolerance, but provided her the opportunity to teach others tolerance. She explained her AA experience as one of breaking down barriers between people:

There's a lot of real important allies I have made through AA. These are straight people in AA who have befriended me because of this common bond we have. I may not have met them otherwise. It is an enormous amount of human compassion I get to have. I remember sitting next to a Hell's Angels type guy in an AA meeting. He was probably a rapist, but we were sitting there talking and I thought, 'I love you, you creepy Hell's Angel.' He was changing his entire life and I was changing mine.⁴⁸⁷

These accounts demonstrate how AA's inclusive community fosters reconciliation across differences. By focusing on their common vulnerability and pain, the lesbian and the biker experience AA's joyous pluralism; they discover what Kurtz describes as "a unity of identity founded in shared weakness."⁴⁸⁸ In breaching the silence that separates them, the lesbian and the biker see past their differences and discover their common humanity. The barrier between them comes down and in its place is reconciliation and a heightened sense of mutual understanding, acceptance and compassion.

Another reason cited by those lesbians who preferred separate lesbian AA meetings was the freedom to address issues such as sexual abuse or concerns particular to the lives of lesbians. But some lesbian alcoholics objected to this change in focus, alleging that lesbian only meetings strayed too far from AA values and practices. One woman commented that "I think this still needs to remain a 12-step program. So if someone walks in, they can tell that they are at AA and not a lesbian rap group."⁴⁸⁹ The lack of spirituality in the lesbian meetings also concerned many of the women, one of whom

insisted that she understood that women rejected AA's spirituality because they associated it with patriarchal religion but she felt that the spiritual essence of the program was lost when religion was rejected altogether. She explained that:

If you say religion is bad, there is no spirituality at all, and you can't even say the word God, then you can't even get your hands around the first three steps. If you can't get to the idea of a God, or a higher power, then you can't get the whole program—the spiritual awakening.⁴⁹⁰

Many of the women felt, Hall relates, "that those who attended lesbian AA seemed less 'healthy' or less 'spiritual' than other AA members."⁴⁹¹

AA's failure to examine the role of patriarchy in alcoholism was also a source of controversy. While some of the lesbians believed that AA contributed to false consciousness, others claimed that AA enhanced their political awareness. "Once you get clean and sober," one woman explained, "you have so much more ability to see the world clearly."⁴⁹² And sobriety was viewed by many of the women as a political act, in-and-of-itself, that empowered the alcoholic by freeing up one's time and energy for social activism. These women noted the opportunity for activism *inside* of AA, with one woman alleging that for a lesbian to chair an AA meeting constituted "a little political triumph right there."⁴⁹³

Hall concluded that "many lesbians find ways to incorporate what AA has to offer and want to use this resource; the automatic conclusion that AA will 'not work' for marginalized women does not match their experience."⁴⁹⁴ Hall advised social workers to prepare their lesbian alcoholic clients for some of the obstacles they will encounter in AA by providing "anticipatory guidance, the

opportunity for ventilation of concerns, and support in exploring how these obstacles might be overcome."⁴⁹⁵

Apples and Oranges

Clearly AA does not work for those whose objections or discomfort prevent them from participation in AA. Nor can AA address every issue or concern. Sexual abuse, for example, is not an appropriate subject matter in AA; this is true, of course, regardless of whether the victim of such abuse be male or female. This means that recovery venues other than AA are necessary. As well, separate AA meetings for women, lesbians, gay men and other marginalized groups are, for many, a necessity. But diverse recovery venues often compliment, rather than compete, with each other. In her comparative study of AA and WFS, Kaskutas found that many women attend both groups, using each group to meet different needs. The women appreciated WFS for the freedom to engage in cross-talk and as a safe place to discuss intimate women's issues, whereas they valued AA as more salient to their sobriety. But the women also liked AA's spiritual focus and valued the acceptance, fellowship and supportive environment found in mixed gender meetings.

While alternatives to AA are warranted, critics are mistaken to declare AA unsuitable for women or to assume that their "feminist" revisions constitute improvements to AA. In fact, Covington concluded just the opposite, arguing that many of the "efforts to rewrite the Steps from a woman's point of view...[move] too far away from the original spirit of the program."⁴⁹⁶ As a consequence of these departures, many revised programs exist in relation to AA as apples

to oranges. WFS, for example, takes an antithetical approach to sobriety than AA—as a behavior modification program, WFS aims to enhance individual control whereas AA encourages the surrender of control.

While the merits of alternatives to AA are debatable, AA's uniqueness is beyond dispute. Because of its spiritual focus and inclusive community, AA offers unparalleled opportunities. As was evident from Hall's study, even separate lesbian AA meetings differ drastically from mainstream AA. In sacrificing AA's spiritual way of life, the lesbians lost the focus on responsibility, forgiveness and disavowal of self-pity that enables AA members to move beyond a victim identity. In disavowing AA's Twelfth Step work, the lesbians relinquished the protection that service to others offers against narcissistic self-absorption. And separate women's meetings deprive women of the rare opportunity to increase their tolerance and achieve reconciliation, perhaps even with those once deemed as enemies. Where else but mainstream AA can the lesbian feminist and the "creepy Hell's Angel" come to know, understand and love each other?

To judge AA as sexist on the basis of its gender exclusive language is unfair. To dismiss AA as unsuitable for women is a serious mistake that stems from the failure to acknowledge AA's underlying feminist essence. Far from being sexist, AA is one of the most ambitious and effective practitioners of feminist vision in our time. How else can we explain an organization that is committed to holistic health, democracy and equality—a bold experiment that empowers women even as it guides legions of men to explore their

emotions, admit their fears, assume their responsibilities and become more just in their personal relationships? In fact, one might reasonably argue that AA's practice of inclusivity makes it *more feminist* than separatist alternatives to AA. It is AA after all that undertakes what Audre Lorde describes as "the work of feminism to make connections, to heal unnecessary divisions."⁴⁹⁷

A Quiet Revolution

Robert Wuthnow's 1994 book, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, corroborates many of the claims made heretofore about AA. Wuthnow presents the results of an extensive three year research project undertaken by fifteen scholars on "the small-group movement." The study sheds light on AA indirectly by looking at a larger movement to which AA belongs. Wuthnow's findings on the small-group movement verify the populist and democratic nature of AA and confirm AA's efficacy as an antidote to the fragmentation, isolation and alienation of modern life. His conclusions buttress arguments that AA corrects modernity's unbalanced focus on individualism by restoring a healthy balance between individual rights and social commitments. And Wuthnow substantiates assertions that AA fosters a spiritual pursuit that is intuitive, democratic and self-directed, rather than dogmatic and authoritarian. Wuthnow also bolsters the contention that small groups such as AA foster reconciliation across differences and thereby contribute to the common good.

Wuthnow identifies the small-group movement as consisting of the following four categories: (1) adult Sunday school classes, (2) Bible study groups and prayer fellowships, (3) self-help groups—the category that includes AA and (4) special interest groups—a loosely defined category that includes political issue focus groups as well as book discussion, sports and hobby groups. While the groups included in Wuthnow's research have diverse goals and purposes they all function as support groups—that is to say, that all of the groups could be described as employing what Fox refers to as the Sara's Circle

model of peer support through the sharing of personal stories. Wuthnow's team of researchers interviewed over a thousand members of small groups, amassing a considerable amount of data that enabled Wuthnow to gauge the nature and impact of this burgeoning movement. His book offers, Wuthnow alleges, "a dispassionate summary"⁴⁹⁸ of the study's findings.

Wuthnow was struck by the tremendous extent and impact of the movement, which he described as a "vital feature of American society"⁴⁹⁹ and "a significant force in American religion."⁵⁰⁰ The movement is easy to dismiss, Wuthnow concedes, because it does not make headlines and avoids public policy debates. Most groups are initiated, Wuthnow observes, in response to a particular need and group members generally focus on their own group, unaware or unconcerned with the larger social phenomenon in which they partake. The effects of these support groups, Wuthnow contends, are barely perceptible—a suicide prevented here, an addiction surmounted there. Wuthnow notes of the movement's repercussions that:

What happened took place so incrementally that it could seldom be seen at all. It was, like most profound reorientations in life, so gradual that those involved saw it less as a revolution than as a journey. The change was concerned with daily life, emotions, and understandings of one's identity. It was personal rather than public, moral rather than political.⁵⁰¹

However, Wuthnow insists that it is a mistake to overlook the small-group movement or to dismiss it as artificial or ineffective. To ascertain its impact requires, according to Wuthnow, that the individual stories "be magnified a hundred thousand times to see how pervasive they have become in our society."⁵⁰² Wuthnow not

only asserts that the movement's growth—forty percent of Americans now participate in small support groups—is unprecedented, but he also claims that the movement's influence is unique in the history of our society. The movement is, Wuthnow maintains, "beginning to alter American society, both by changing our understandings of community and by redefining spirituality."⁵⁰³ Wuthnow declares that "The small-group movement has been effecting a quiet revolution in American society."⁵⁰⁴

Wuthnow believes that small groups are filling some of the gaps left by the break down of traditional forms of community and family. They provide, Wuthnow posits, the intimacy that historically was found in families, friendships and neighborhoods and as such have "emerged as a serious effort to combat the forces of fragmentation and anonymity in our society."⁵⁰⁵ But small groups are also, Wuthnow alleges, changing the ways we relate to each other by "reunit[ing] spirituality with its roots in human community."⁵⁰⁶ With its emphasis on support, the movement suggests, according to Wuthnow, "that the sacred is pursued best...by being part of a close-knit group that can put faith into practice."⁵⁰⁷ Wuthnow insists, much as Ash did, that something new and radically different is afoot. Present-day seekers, Wuthnow explains, are not following a fixed path, but are taking responsibility to map their own spiritual journey. Small groups "may be fostering an intuitive spirituality," Wuthnow proposes, "rather than one grounded in biblical traditions."⁵⁰⁸ Wuthnow discovered that people, when confronted with personal crises, "found they could no longer believe in a child-like image of God that had no relevance to the bad times of life."⁵⁰⁹

He suggests that "The god people worship in their groups may not be the same gods that smile on established religious organizations."⁵¹⁰ The groups "are dramatically changing the way God is understood," Wuthnow asserts, with the result that "God is now less of an external authority and more of an internal presence."⁵¹¹ The movement is "revitalizing the sacred,"⁵¹² according to Wuthnow, by making it more personal and serviceable to the needs of individuals. "Groups generate a do-it-yourself religion," Wuthnow declares, "a God who makes life easier."⁵¹³

Wuthnow theorizes that confronting personal crises in the context of a support group "may be a significant way in which spiritual development takes place."⁵¹⁴ He notes the effects of the groups on the spirituality of group members:

This heightened awareness of God was very decisively influenced by the group process. As people shared their problems or just their thoughts, and as they empathized with others, they ceased feeling so alone. Rather than feeling they were distinct individuals, they momentarily dropped the boundaries separating themselves from others and felt more a part of something larger than themselves. There seemed to be a kind of spirit in the group that they were participating in, but one that was more powerful than they.⁵¹⁵

Wuthnow's reference to the "spirit in the group" verifies Fox's suggestion that base communities provide an pantheistic experience of the Divine.

Wuthnow sought to determine how much attention members of small groups paid to private versus public commitments. He had expected to find group members "to be turned inward, devoted to their own emotional needs to the point that they would have no time or interest in politics or civic affairs."⁵¹⁶ To his surprise, Wuthnow discovered that groups encouraged, rather than deterred, social

involvement. Small groups have a positive impact on the wider community, Wuthnow reports, "by freeing individuals from their own insecurities so that they can reach out more charitably toward other people."⁵¹⁷ The groups "draw people out of themselves" Wuthnow contends, and connect them "to the wider society."⁵¹⁸ Wuthnow argues that the groups are "not an insular phenomenon,"⁵¹⁹ but are instead constantly extending themselves outward to new people through family settings and friendship networks. The groups are conducive to volunteer service, Wuthnow explains, because they generate interest and caring that extends outside the boundaries of the group and subsequently prompt their members "to become more active in their communities, to help others who may be in need, and to think more deeply about pressing social and political issues."⁵²⁰ He thus suggests that "the critics who charge that small groups are engaged only in a narcissistic obsession with their members' own feelings appear to be wrong."⁵²¹

Wuthnow also interrogated the effects of group participation on the individuality of group members. He found that the groups, because of their strong norms of tolerance and respect for individual autonomy, do not compromise the individuality of group members. Wuthnow maintains that the groups are "thoroughly American... because they fit well with the emphasis on individualism that has been so prominent in American culture."⁵²² But Wuthnow also claims that the groups "provide an occasion for rounding off the rough edges of our individuality, transforming us into communal beings."⁵²³ The give and take that individuals experience in the groups helps to temper, Wuthnow alleges, "the rugged individualism that has

decayed the fabric of communal life in our society."⁵²⁴ Wuthnow also discovered evidence for the Americanness of the movement in the populist and democratic nature of the groups; the movement exists, according to Wuthnow, "not because of strong leaders and agendas, but despite them."⁵²⁵

Wuthnow's research substantiates Alexis De Tocqueville's assertion that small organizations are the key to American democracy. Tocqueville reasoned, Wuthnow explains, "that such groups empower people to be concerned about larger social issues,"⁵²⁶ a view Wuthnow endorses in arguing that the small group movement is strengthening community attachments and producing "an overall positive effect on involvement in wider community activities."⁵²⁷ The movement has, Wuthnow postulates, "significant potential for maintaining, or even enhancing, the role of community in contemporary society."⁵²⁸ Small support groups, Wuthnow insists, "enrich the wider society...by linking the individual to larger social entities."⁵²⁹ And by reconnecting community to spirituality, the groups have created the potential, Wuthnow suggests, for spirituality to "become one of the primary ways in which the common good is enriched and ennobled."⁵³⁰

In maintaining that "many small groups have the potential to build bridges among people from different segments of the society rather than simply isolating them further among their own kind,"⁵³¹ Wuthnow corroborates arguments made herein that AA fosters reconciliation across differences. Wuthnow explains that "In a world torn by political, racial, ethnic, and religious conflicts, small groups perhaps can become a staging ground for seeking reconciliation."⁵³²

And Wuthnow substantiates my contention that the mechanism that effects this reconciliation is personal responsibility. Small groups promote forgiveness, Wuthnow observes, by providing the opportunity to vent anger at the same time that they require individuals to assume responsibility for their share of blame. Group participants, according to Wuthnow, "learn to recognize that part of the problem is theirs" and then subsequently "realize that it is in their interests to forgive the targets of their anger."⁵³³ This is the process of shadow assimilation described earlier, by which individuals—through the assumption of personal responsibility—transcend us/them dualities and adopt a both/and dialectal perspective that enables them to move from self-pity to compassion and forgiveness.

Interestingly Wuthnow reports that the positive attributes that he discovered to be characteristic of the small-group movement as a whole were most pronounced in the groups that make up the category of self-help groups to which AA belongs. In comparisons between the four broad categories of groups, Wuthnow found that the self-help groups generated the highest levels of trust and satisfaction among their members, were rated the best at making newcomers feel welcome and were "the most democratic, the least dependent on formal organization, and the most capable of functioning without strong leaders."⁵³⁴ Wuthnow also noted that within the category of self-help groups, the groups accorded the most favorable ratings by their members were those groups that employ versions of AA's Twelve Step program.

Unfortunately Wuthnow did not explore the particular role of AA in the development of the small-group movement, but several observations appear justified. First is the rather obvious fact that AA is the Grandfather of the plethora of groups that constitute Wuthnow's category of self-help groups. But AA has also provided both model and inspiration for the groups of Wuthnow's other three categories. Fox contends that "Support Groups borrow from the successful Sara's Circle model of peer-group healing that AA has launched."⁵³⁵ Obviously Bible study groups and adult Sunday school classes predate AA. But Wuthnow did not study historical examples of these groups, but their reincarnation *as support groups*. These church sponsored groups were remodeled as a response, at least in part, to the unflattering comparison noted by Yancey when he contrasted AA's vitality to the perception of Christian churches as "irrelevant, vapid, and gutless."⁵³⁶ Church leaders created support groups modeled after AA in order to reinvigorate churches and as a means to attract and retain members.

Clearly AA plays both a unique and pivotal role in the small-group movement as model, inspiration and original source. And given the recent, most-favorable ratings awarded the Twelve Step groups, we can surmise that AA and its off-shoots continue to be in the forefront of this movement by demonstrating a successful practice of inclusive, democratic, spiritual community. It seems safe to conclude then, that AA, perhaps more than any other entity, is responsible for this quiet revolution which is revitalizing the sacred, redefining and reinvigorating community and effecting reconciliation between groups torn apart by differences.

Conclusion

The evidence I have offered in support of my claim that AA is an agent of progressive social change ranges from the obvious to the not-at-all-obvious. Clearly AA's practice of feminist values and its success at healing the alienation and fragmentation of modern life are important contributions to a more just world and as such offer testament to AA's progressive political essence. Less readily apparent perhaps is the contribution to social justice that AA makes by way of the dramatic individual transformations of its members. Surely it is indisputable that AA members become more just in their personal relationships as they move from self-pity, resentment, anger and selfishness to self-responsibility, forgiveness, compassion and service to others. However it is necessary to repudiate the false dichotomy that poses the struggles for personal and social justice as invariably at odds with each other in order to recognize that the personal justice that AA fosters translates into social justice. The struggle for justice is, as Anzaldúa describes it, "a two-way movement—a going deep into the self and an expanding out into the world, a simultaneous recreation of the self and a reconstruction of society."⁵³⁷ This mutuality exists regardless of whether we are consciously aware of it. Thus while Gandhi insisted that "We have to be the change we wish to see,"⁵³⁸ it is also true that *as* we change ourselves we alter the world in ways that we perhaps neither intend nor recognize. This is the quiet revolution that Wuthnow discovered, and the fact that its participants are often unaware of their participation in this revolution, or that the revolution is neither

loudly proclaimed nor takes place in the public eye, does not mitigate against its significance.

AA's impact on society is just such a quiet revolution. And make no mistake about it, the movement that AA fosters is from injustice to justice, from shadow projection to shadow assimilation, from anger, resentment, self-pity, prejudice, bigotry and scapegoating to compassion, forgiveness, self-responsibility and increased tolerance, understanding and acceptance. As AA members assume personal responsibility and stop blaming the cop, the spouse, the boss, they alleviate the psychological need to engage in either individual or collective shadow projection and thus undermine psychological support for political and economic injustice. That AA promotes justice is evident in the reconciliation that so many of those quoted herein—from Kurtz to Wuthnow to the lesbians of Hall's study—have claimed is a common occurrence in AA. And because of AA's inclusivity, this reconciliation often occurs across *the very lines* of class, race, ethnic, gender, religious and sexual orientation differences that currently divide people and provide the cites of so many contemporary human conflicts. Surely reconciliation is a vehicle of justice and therefore the reconciliation across difference that AA so ably effects is a contribution to social justice.

This brings us to the most politically controversial of AA's efforts—i.e. AA's quest to restore the sacred. Given the all-too-common role of religion as a reactionary force, it is natural to assume that AA's religiosity must somehow compromise its progressive political essence. However close examination reveals an altogether different reality, which is that AA, by rejecting dogma and insisting

on the freedom of individuals to pursue their own experience and knowledge of Spirit, has transformed religion from a reactionary to a progressive force. For it is not AA's assertion that Spirit exists that is reactionary. What is reactionary about religion is that which AA rejected, namely the imposition of religious dogma. Religion, as practiced by AA, that is, devoid of dogma and infused with democratic freedoms, is in fact a profoundly progressive force. AA of course does not refer to itself as "religious," but distinguishes itself from the dogmatic and reactionary religious practice that it disavows by labeling itself "spiritual." In order to comprehend how AA brought about the political catharsis of religion and to appreciate the enormous significance of this accomplishment, we must step back for a moment and consider the historical setting in which AA pursued its momentous goals. Ken Wilber's exposition of the relationship of religion and science provides this context.

Science and Religion

In *The Marriage of Sense and Soul*, Wilber alleges that modern science and religion are engaged in an aggressive war that threatens the very survival of humanity. Wilber explains how this hostility came about and proposes the means of its resolution. According to Wilber, premodern science and religion coexisted peacefully, but with the advent of modern science and scientific imperialism in the aftermath of the European Enlightenment the relationship became antagonistic. When scientific imperialism reduced Spirit to matter, it created, Wilber declares, "a massive and violent schism and rupture in the internal organs of today's global culture."⁵³⁹ Modern science

challenged the central tenets and dogmas of religion and made it possible, Wilber reports, for intelligent people to "do something that would have utterly astonished previous epochs: deny the very existence of Spirit."⁵⁴⁰ But science could not eliminate religion because science cannot provide the meaning that humanity craves. The province of science is truth, Wilber maintains, not wisdom or value or worth. Science elucidates the basic facts of the universe. It tells us what is, Wilber contends, but remains conspicuously silent on what should be. "In the midst of this silence," Wilber observes, "religion speaks;"⁵⁴¹ it is religion that provides billions of people worldwide "the basic meaning of their lives, the glue of their existence, and offers them a set of guidelines about what is good."⁵⁴² Wilber asserts that "Science is clearly one of the most profound methods that humans have yet devised for discovering *truth*, while religion remains the single greatest force for generating *meaning*."⁵⁴³

Wilber describes these two formidable forces—truth and meaning, science and religion—as locked in a relentless struggle, each vying for world domination. The threat posed by this conflict is so enormous that Wilber reasons that there is no more pressing agenda facing humanity than to bring science and religion back into peaceful coexistence. If this is hyperbole Wilber is in good company, for Fox posits the possibility that science and spirituality might come back together as "the best and most empowering news of our time"⁵⁴⁴ and Peck depicts this unification as "the most significant and exciting happening in our intellectual life today."⁵⁴⁵

Wilber submits that the way to end this conflict is to integrate modern science and premodern religion. For this integration to take

place, both religion and science much begin, according to Wilber, "to harbor the suspicion that its truth is not the only truth in the Kosmos."⁵⁴⁶ Science, for its part, must give up its imperialistic and reductionist assault on Spirit. And religion must relinquish its mythological proclamations because, Wilber alleges, they are dogmatic and cannot stand up to the interrogation of science. In the place of prerational mythic belief, we must discover, Wilber insists, an "authentic spirituality"⁵⁴⁷ or "true religion"⁵⁴⁸ whose claims will meet the rigors of scientific authority. To accomplish this religion must rely on its unique strength, which, Wilber suggests, is not dogmatic myth, but contemplation. Wilber maintains that the great wisdom traditions of the world have, through the practice of contemplation and over the course of the last three thousand years, amassed data that shows "a surprising unanimity."⁵⁴⁹ It is *this* knowledge, Wilber proposes, "that religion, holding its head high, can bring to the integrative table."⁵⁵⁰ An authentic spirituality will, Wilber posits, "unite the best of premodern wisdom with the brightest of modern knowledge, bringing together truth and meaning in a way that has thus far eluded the modern mind."⁵⁵¹

Furthermore Wilber stipulates that the transition from premodern religion to true religion will also require that religion incorporate the liberal political freedoms of the Enlightenment. True religion will thus combine religious freedoms, which Wilber describes as the "release from the chains of space and time, self and suffering, hope and fear, death and wonder,"⁵⁵² with political freedoms. Taken together these two freedoms create, Wilber alleges, a new progressive force which points "to the liberation of all

beings...weaving together political freedom and spiritual freedom as the warp and woof of a culture that cares."⁵⁵³ True religion then is progressive, according to Wilber, because it extends political liberal freedoms into the spiritual sphere unlike premodern religion which attempts to coerce people into systems of prerational mythic beliefs. This means, to summarize Wilber, that the process of integrating religion and science transforms religion from a reactionary, to a progressive, force. Wilber asks if this transition doesn't suggest that "true religion, far from being a reactionary force yearning for a lost yesteryear, would become, for the first time in history, the vanguard of a progressive, liberal, and evolutionary force"⁵⁵⁴

* * *

When AA is examined in light of Wilber's views, it is obvious that AA accomplished the very transformation of religion that Wilber describes. The terminology varies, but in distinguishing religion from spirituality AA references the same differences that Wilber makes between premodern religion and authentic spirituality or true religion. To interpret AA in Wilber's language then is to maintain that AA created an authentic spirituality by rejecting the dogma of premodern religion and by incorporating the political liberal freedoms of the Enlightenment into its practice of spiritual democracy. Furthermore AA achieved this end by the very method prescribed by Wilber, that is through the integration of religion and science. That AA consciously pursued this integration is evident in Wilson's claim that AA sought "a middle ground between medicine and religion, the missing catalyst of a new synthesis."⁵⁵⁵ In launching the Broad Highway, AA declared the integrity of both science and

religion and created an avenue in which there was amply room for both truth and meaning. For it was not modern science that Wilson critiqued, but scientific imperialism with its hegemonic imposition of logic and reasoning and matter into arenas of meaning and value and Spirit. Wilson challenged the idea that human intelligence was "the beginning and end of all"⁵⁵⁶ and he pointed out the folly of being "abjectly faithful to the God of Reason."⁵⁵⁷ But he also argued for the compatibility of science and religion when he insisted that AA, with its underlying spiritual foundation, was itself scientific for it "showed results, prodigious results" when subjected to scientific method of "search and research, again and again, always with the open mind."⁵⁵⁸ And AA lived out the integration of science and religion by merging psychological and medical truths with spiritual wisdom. For Wilson this integration was a matter of survival because he could no more shed his modern scientific disposition than he could his skin, and yet he was acutely aware, as he noted in a letter to a friend, that "We will find some spiritual basis for living, else we die."⁵⁵⁹

Not only did AA achieve both the integration of science and religion as well as the resultant political rehabilitation of religion, but AA pursued these momentous goals a full half-century before influential thinkers like Wilber, Fox and Peck began to articulate their importance. AA also foreshadowed recent developments when Wilson argued that the existence of Spirit is compatible with modern science. Scientists are increasingly rejecting modernity's assertion that the world is a mechanism governed solely by chance and devoid of Spirit. According to Wilber, "Chance is not what explains the universe; in fact, chance is what the universe is laboring mightily to

overcome."⁵⁶⁰ Wilber declares that the twelve billion years since the Big Bang is not even enough time to produce a single enzyme by chance. The traditional interpretation of Darwin's theory of evolution is inadequate to explain evolution, which, Wilber contends, does not result from random mutation, but occurs "in quantum leaps of creative emergence."⁵⁶¹ Scientists have agreed, Wilber notes, to refer to this process as "'quantum evolution' or 'punctuated evolution' or 'emergent evolution.'"⁵⁶² Hence, Wilber announces, "self-transcendence is built into the universe."⁵⁶³ This means that the Universe is creative, and "what is creativity," Wilber queries, "but another name for Spirit?"⁵⁶⁴

If Wilber is correct, then AA's quest to restore the sacred and create an authentic spirituality governed by liberal freedoms constitutes a major contribution to the pursuit of liberation and freedom. Thus the claim that AA is progressive appears understated. Rather we should declare that AA, for the last sixty-five years, has been in the forefront of efforts in the Western world to forge a new, and powerful, progressive force.

Ye Shall Know Them by Their Fruits

A spirituality sensibility that insists upon the fundamental underlying unity of all human beings is perhaps the quintessential progressive ideology because it implies by its very definition that all humans are worthy of respect, compassion, freedom, equitable treatment and opportunity. AA offers evidence of the veracity of this claim, for if AA's fruits of healing, reconciliation and justice demonstrate AA's progressive political character, it is AA's

spirituality that brings these fruits to bear. It was AA's grounding in a keen awareness and honoring of our basic human interdependence that enabled AA to reject modernity's dualistic thinking and emphasis on individualism and embrace instead a dialectical perspective that balances individual freedom with social responsibility. This perspective, along with the spiritual practices of compassion, forgiveness and service to others, made AA a prolific producer of justice. AA's spirituality is therefore not detractor to, but actually guarantor of, AA's progressive political essence.

Conversely the Left's failure to resolve the dilemmas of modern life stems from its lack of a spiritual grounding. The Left's inability to address the crisis of meaning is attributable, as Lerner so clearly articulates in *The Politics of Meaning*, to its disavowal of the realm of Spirit and meaning and its subsequent narrow focus on economics and politics. In its dismissal of Spirit, the Left merely perpetuates modernity's flatland and all of its associated disasters. Modernity's reductionist nightmare is evident in the us/them dichotomies of victim politics; whereas modernity defines marginalized and oppressed groups as subhuman, inferior "Others," the Left simply reverses roles and defines "the oppressor" as the inherently, and irremediably, evil Other. Sabotaged by the anger, self-pity and shadow projection fostered by victim politics, the Left cannot produce the fruits of healing, reconciliation and justice. Thus while the Left loudly proclaims itself the solution to modernity, its affinity with modernity renders it incapable of mounting an effective challenge to modern disasters.⁵⁶⁵

Judged by their fruits, it is AA, and not the Left, that models an effective pursuit of justice. If we wish to achieve progressive social change, we would do well therefore to follow AA's example. To reap the bounty of compassion and forgiveness, we must engage the struggle for personal justice, even as we combat individualism and narcissism with an emphasis on individual responsibility and social obligation. To be rid of the debilitating effects of self-pity requires that we be self-critical and accept responsibility for our share of the blame. The strength of this critique is greatly enhanced if we become adept at self-parody, following the lead of AA members in unleashing the tremendous capacity of humor to heal our wounds and propel us beyond our shortcomings. We will need to forge a multitude of Broad Highways, proliferating the practice of spiritual democracy and advancing the transformation of religion from a reactionary to a progressive force. And we must create inclusive communities that replicate AA's practice of joyous pluralism by fostering reconciliation through deep, honest communication in search of our common humanity—communities that allow us our all-too-human character defects even as they enable us to grow beyond them. Like AA, we ought to adopt a holistic, eclectic, dialectical perspective that provides ample room for head and heart, truth and meaning, mystery and paradox, awe and gratitude. By following AA's example, we will infuse our personal lives, as well as our communities, with justice, thereby increasing the possibility that one day we might awaken to discover this justice reflected back upon us from the world.

* * *

Who looks out with my eyes? What is the soul?
I cannot stop asking.
If I could taste one sip of an answer,
I could break out of this prison for drunks.
I didn't come here of my own accord, and I can't leave that way.
Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.⁵⁶⁶

Rumi.

Appendix A:
The Twelve Step of
Alcoholics Anonymous

- (1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
- (2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
- (3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
- (4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
- (5) Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
- (6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
- (7) Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
- (8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
- (9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
- (10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
- (11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
- (12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

Appendix B:
The Twelve Traditions of
Alcoholics Anonymous

- (1) Our common welfare should come first: personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity.
- (2) For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
- (3) The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.
- (4) Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.
- (5) Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
- (6) An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
- (7) Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
- (8) Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
- (9) A.A., as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
- (10) Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the A.A. name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
- (11) Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
- (12) Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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Look to this day,
For it is life,
The very life of life.
In its brief course lie all
The realities and verities of existence,
The bliss of growth,
The splendor of action,
The glory of power—

For yesterday is but a dream,
And tomorrow is only a vision,
But today, well lived,
Makes very yesterday a dream of happiness
And every tomorrow a vision of hope.
Look well, therefore, to this day.

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- 485 Hall 6.
- 486 Hall 6.
- 487 Hall 6.
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- 490 Hall 7.
- 491 Hall 7.
- 492 Hall 11.
- 493 Hall 11.
- 494 Hall 12.
- 495 Hall 12. My personal experience confirms the value of this advice. By adequately addressing my concerns about AA as they arose, my therapist facilitated my participation in AA and thus prevented me from missing out on the enormous benefits of AA membership.

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502 Wuthnow 3.
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514 Wuthnow 285.
515 Wuthnow 263.
516 Wuthnow 346.
517 Wuthnow 323.
518 Wuthnow 360.
519 Wuthnow 339.
520 Wuthnow 346.
521 Wuthnow 330.

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- 522 Wuthnow 345.
- 523 Wuthnow 293.
- 524 Wuthnow 215.
- 525 Wuthnow 131.
- 526 Wuthnow 318.
- 527 Wuthnow 330.
- 528 Wuthnow 360.
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- 565 I borrow heavily here from Ken Wilber, who charges that "extreme postmodernism" perpetuates the disasters of modernity and is therefore incapable of effectively challenging

modernity. I do not cite Wilber directly here because Wilber does use the term "the Left" and I do not want to presume that Wilber would extend his critique to what I refer to as the Left. I believe that the Left shares many of the mistakes of extreme postmodernism and therefore state these conclusions as my own.

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