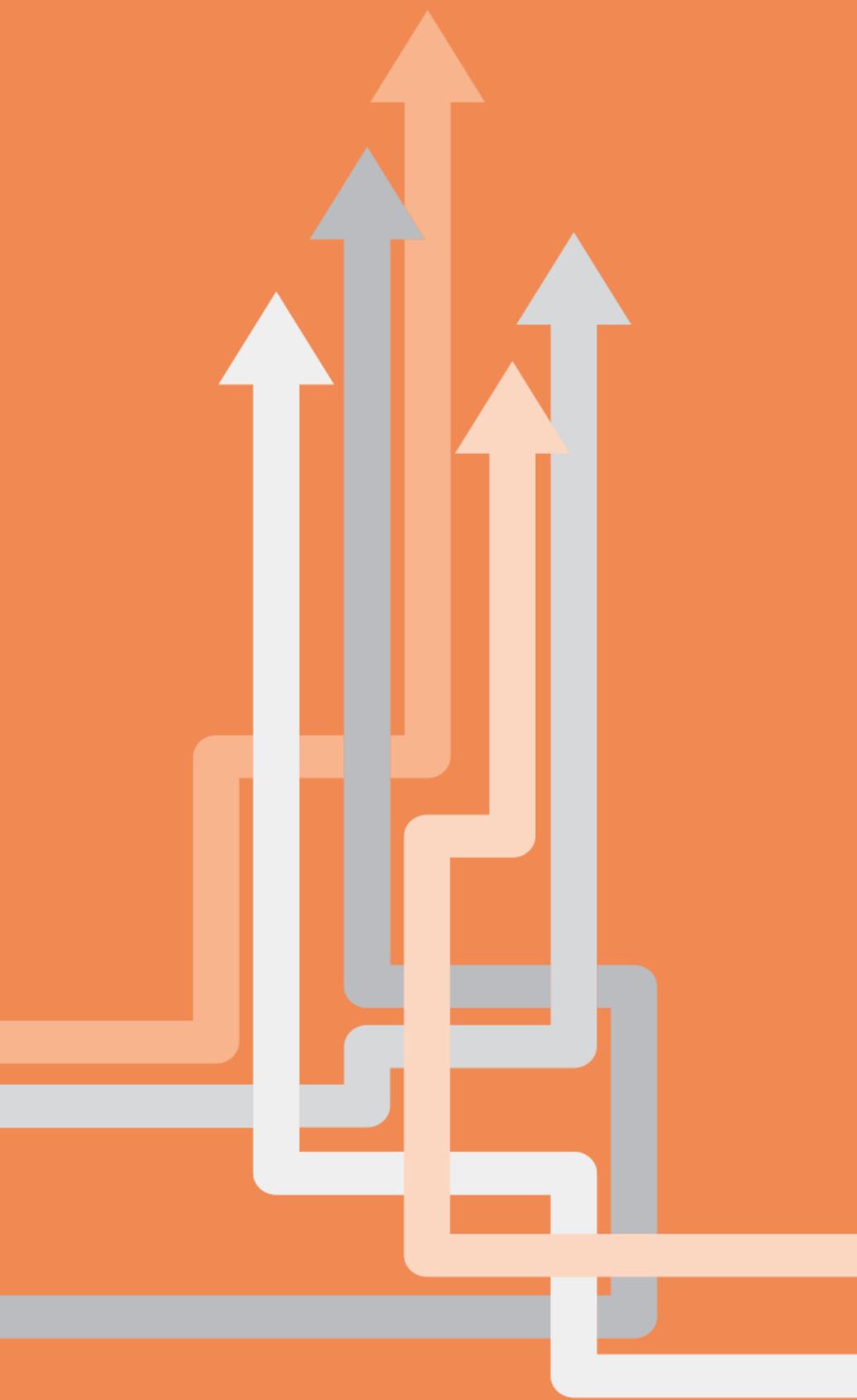


Many Paths to Spirituality



This is A.A. General Service Conference-approved literature.

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 causes.
- Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

*Copyright © by The A.A. Grapevine, Inc.;
reprinted with permissions*

Copyright © 2014
Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc.
475 Riverside Drive
New York, NY 10115

Mail address:
AA General Service Office,
P.O. Box 1,
10 Toft Green,
York YO1 7NJ

www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

Printed in UK

Many Paths to Spirituality

A.A. — a kinship of common suffering

“Newcomers are approaching A.A. at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In A.A. we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of A.A., so long as he or she so declares.”

—Bill W. (A.A. Grapevine, July 1965)

A misconception about Alcoholics Anonymous is that it is a religious organization. Since A.A. groups often rent space in churches, attending an A.A. meeting in a church basement can reinforce that impression, and the possibility of hearing a prayer at the end of a meeting can further cement the idea for some.

Yet A.A.’s pioneering members realized from the beginning that their sole purpose was to help people gain sobriety, and they went to great lengths to ensure the broadest membership among all who suffer from alcoholism. A.A. is a Fellowship, a community of like-minded sufferers who have found a way out of a hopeless condition.

We came to A.A. out of desperation to stop drink-

ing, or reeling from the consequences of our actions while drunk. A.A.'s sense of community and partnership is strong because of our shared suffering and our shared solution. In our meetings people from all walks of life come together with a common purpose. Some members return to their religious roots, others find different spiritual paths. Some may find this "God of their understanding," yet never become involved with organized religion. Still others make the A.A. group itself their higher power.

But one thing was sure — whatever our backgrounds, our beliefs or our lack of belief — our drinking had gotten out of hand.

We needed help

Alcoholism can be a lonely affair. Often, we drank to keep the pain of life at arm's length, and then, when the pain overran us, we drank to wash it away. For some of us, things didn't seem so bleak. We felt we could control our drinking — except when we couldn't. We recognized that our lives would be a lot less chaotic if we could stop drinking, but we didn't know how. We tried different strategies — drinking beer only, not drinking on an empty stomach, having just two drinks a night — but sooner or later we ended up drunk again, wondering what went wrong.

And it wasn't just ourselves we were hurting. Our families, friends, employers and even complete strangers began to pull away from us, wary of our denials and skeptical of our many lies and pledges to stay sober.

"I knew I was an alcoholic before I came to A.A. I had attended management training courses on how to identify drug and alcohol problems in my employees — and I clearly fit the description. In addition, I am trained as a scientist and an engineer. The objective evidence was all around me — empty gin bottles, webs of lies, damaged relationships and self-loathing. I had also tried unsuccessfully to quit drinking on my own for several years, so I knew that I needed help."

We reached out

A time came when we could no longer look the other way and pretend that we were in control of our drinking. Angry, defiant and suspicious as we were, something had to be done.

Asking for help didn't come easily to many of us.

We saw it as a sign of weakness or a character flaw. But when we finally did surrender and reach out for help with our drinking, we got back far more than we expected.

“I met with a doctor who specialized in addiction treatment. He encouraged me to go to A.A. meetings and listen. I did, and soon something deep inside me began shifting. The Fellowship gave me hope — hope that I didn’t have to die drunk, that there was another way.

“My world had been so dark for so long that I grabbed onto that thin strand of hope with all my might.”

We found sobriety — and some obstacles

Having finally found something that worked in our struggle against alcohol, we clung to A.A. like a drowning person clutches onto a life raft. But some of us soon encountered some questions about spirituality that seemed to present obstacles to our full acceptance of the A.A. program. Based on our prior beliefs — or the lack thereof — we felt at odds with what we perceived to be a religious approach to A.A. or pressure to adopt certain religious or spiritual concepts in order to remain in A.A.

“When I arrived in A.A. at age 50, broken in every way, I was immediately faced with a distressing and essential conflict. I knew almost immediately that A.A. was my only hope and I saw that the spiritual dimension of the program was unavoidable. And yet my rejection of any form of divinity was absolute; my agnostic/atheistic view was as essential to my being as the shape of my hands or the sound of my voice.

“Coming to believe in a higher power, however I defined it, seemed wholly impossible, and yet absolutely essential if I was to survive my disease, which had taken me to a level of demoralization and despair I could not have imagined possible.”

Working the A.A. Program

Recognizing, first of all, that we needed to stay sober, many of us began to discover that we could utilize the A.A. program without conforming to religious or spiritual concepts we either disagreed with or didn’t have. As we became more familiar with A.A., we began to realize the deep significance in the phrasing of A.A.’s Twelve Steps, which emphasize “a Power greater than ourselves,” and “God, as we understood Him.”

These words and A.A.'s traditional commitment to inclusivity provided comfort to many of us, leaving the door to spirituality open for alcoholics of all faiths, beliefs and practices, and allowing each of us to determine for himself or herself just what to believe.

“In trying to find something to believe in, I read books about philosophy, spirituality and eastern religions. I listened to people share in meetings and tried to believe in their higher power. I even tried prayer and going back to church. But, in spite of my efforts to ‘educate myself’ into a higher power, I didn’t know what I believed. But I knew that the days I prayed seemed to go better than the days I didn’t, even when I thought I was praying to my bedspread.”

Many paths to spirituality

Many of us came to rely on a “Higher Power,” whether it was the collective power of A.A., the A.A. group itself, or some other entity, concept or being that helped us to stay sober.

“My sponsor encouraged me to choose my own conception of a higher power. It didn’t need a gender, or a name, or any human attributes — it just had to be ‘a power greater than myself.’ It was then that I realized that the Fellowship, though comprised of human beings, represented a power greater than anything human. Even more surprisingly, by taking the Steps in my own clumsy way, supported by the unconditional love of my fellow alcoholics, I had discovered a quiet, inner voice — a God within.”

There were many other ideas and approaches, too, that helped us move forward in staying sober and understanding how the A.A. program could work best for us.

“By incorporating basic Buddhist practices with my A.A. practices — regular meetings, doing service, working with newcomers, living the Steps and reading A.A. literature — I have discovered an awesome way to improve my conscious contact with the God of my understanding and live life on life’s terms in relative serenity. I still have anxieties, anger and all the rest of the emotions that come with life, but, bit by bit, I am able to manage them.”

Many of us come from different belief systems and cultures, yet there has always been plenty of latitude in A.A. for members to practice whatever belief works best for them.

"I am a Sioux/Blackfoot woman. I have been sober in A.A. for many years. Many of us believe in the Great Spirit, and it was a great relief to find out I could believe in a higher power of my choice. I didn't have to give up any part of my beliefs when I joined A.A. I could live in the white man's world, but also retain all of my people's Native traditions, customs and ceremonies. In fact, A.A. made my beliefs stronger. My joining A.A. didn't restrict me, it gave me more freedom."

The spirit of tolerance is strong in A.A., and members of all faiths and traditions find common ground in our program of recovery.

"I'm a devout, lifelong Catholic. That is an integral part of my experience, strength and hope. I call my higher power God and do not feel I should have to qualify that every time I speak at a meeting. I'm perfectly okay with others referring to Buddha, Mohammed, Yahweh, or whatever name they call their higher power.

"I'm uncomfortable, though, with anyone citing the Bible, the Koran, the Talmud, or any non-A.A. literature as the truth in an A.A. meeting. But I certainly give them the right to refer to or even quote (briefly) from any of these texts if it's part of their A.A. experience.

"In my eighteen years of recovery, I have heard plenty of inappropriate talk about religion, and I probably will again.... But so far I haven't found it necessary to take a drink over any of it, and more than once, it has caused me to experience unexpected spiritual growth. And that's the point, isn't it?"

For many of us, sobriety was a gift — freely given and freely received. Yet we have to do our part in maintaining it.

"I'm still an agnostic. But I have discovered that the program will work for anyone who will let it. I didn't have to find a way to make it work. It will work perfectly well on its own, provided I'm willing to do some work myself.

"The first thing I had to do was resign from the debating society. That didn't mean I started agreeing with everything I heard. It means only that I listened without arguing, used what I could use, and filed the rest for future reference.

"The second thing I did was become an active member of my home group, which happened to be my sponsor's home group. (I'd gotten a sponsor imme-

diately. I already knew that was one thing I'd better do right away.) I saw that whatever else spirituality might consist of, it had to include being of maximum service to my fellow alcoholics, whether or not they were still suffering."

In working the program, we came to a better understanding of spirituality and the part it plays in our recovery.

"When I first came to A.A., I thought that religion and spirituality were the same thing. But I've come to realize that religion means being committed to a practice of belief, and being spiritual means actively living life through a life-giving force. I believe this is any power greater than myself, whether I choose to call it God, Allah, Higher Power, Creative Intelligence, or the Power of Good.

"I don't have a specific religious faith that I practice or church that I go to. Matter of fact, I haven't been in a sanctuary for some time. But I do try to practice the principles of the A.A. program. Through this, I believe that my higher power lives within and through me, and that is my sanctuary."

With time, we came to recognize that we could stay sober and enjoy full membership in the Fellowship, regardless of our beliefs.

"When I finally admitted I was an alcoholic and came into the program four years ago, I thought, 'Oh God, why me?' We Jews were supposed to be immune to alcoholism, we were the 'Chosen Ones' — or so my denial told me. Yet today I am doubly blessed; I am a grateful, recovering, Jewish alcoholic.

"It took me a long time to separate Judaism from alcoholism, to accept that spirituality did not affect or change my religious beliefs, but enhanced them, that my higher power was not the same as yours, that praying and the posture I use to pray does not alter my Jewishness but is necessary for my recovery. Today I can even recite the Lord's Prayer without feeling guilty since it was pointed out to me in 'How it Works' that I have to go to any length to get and stay sober.

"During my years of alcohol abuse I alienated myself from my family, my friends, the world, and even myself. I forgot the joy of my religion and the feeling of prayer. Now that I am recovering, I am able to accept people in my life, I can accept and love me and I am capable of rejoining the human race."

As A.A. has grown and taken root literally around the world, cutting across lines of gender, race, lan-

guage and religion, the Fellowship has kept its doors open to alcoholics of all beliefs, supported by two basic principles found in A.A.'s Traditions: that A.A. has but one primary purpose — that of carrying the message to the alcoholic who still suffers, and the recognition that the only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

“My sponsor was well versed in A.A.’s Twelve Steps, Traditions and Concepts. He had a substantial service history and talked to me about the 36 principles upon which A.A. was founded. It is these principles that I would ultimately turn my life and my will over to.

“This God — ‘good orderly direction’ — as represented by the two million or so alcoholics who are members of this global Fellowship, is what I have accepted.

“Living inside of the Steps, the ongoing efforts to promote the unity spoken of in the Traditions, and the discipline we find in applying the Concepts in the way we do business, both internally and with the world at large — these are the things that have provided me with a power greater than myself.

“A.A., I believe, is truly universal, and this conscience that has changed the lives of so many, and continues saving the lives of so many more is worthy of my devotion. I have never seen or felt anything more spiritual than what I witness when I see the transformation that takes place as people begin to live this way of life.”

A source of power

Spiritual experience in A.A. is broad and varied, and for those members who struggle with spiritual concepts, ongoing sobriety often brings the realization that — in some remarkable and unforeseen way — they have indeed experienced a spiritual change.

“When I was a newcomer, I could not understand the concepts of spirituality or faith. I had no God of my understanding. I battled to understand what spirituality meant.

“In reading Appendix II in the Big Book, Alcoholics Anonymous, I have come to understand the profound changes that come from spirituality. The appendix says, ‘With few exceptions 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. Most of us think this

awareness... is the essence of spiritual experience.'

"The appendix continues: '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.'"

Some refer to a "spiritual awakening," a phrase found in the Twelfth Step and throughout A.A. literature. In *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (page 106), Bill W. writes about spiritual awakenings:

"Maybe there are as many definitions of spiritual awakening as there are people who have had them. But certainly each genuine one has something in common with all the others.... When a man or a woman has a spiritual awakening, the most important meaning of it is that he has now become able to do, feel, and believe that which he could not do before on his unaided strength and resources alone. He has been granted a gift which amounts to a new state of consciousness and being. He has been set on a path which tells him he is really going somewhere, that life is not a dead end, not something to be endured or mastered. In a very real sense he has been transformed, because he has laid hold of a source of strength which, in one way or another, he had hitherto denied himself."

"Using the inner resource I have discovered in A.A. as a higher power, I have been able to do the Steps just as they are written in the Big Book. I pray to this inner resource and ask to know what it would have me do and to give me the strength to do it. I carry this message to others. It works! I am experiencing a spiritual awakening and I feel all the promises coming true. I feel better inside than I have in years.

"I am now sponsoring several men and it is a wonderful feeling to see another alcoholic get sober. I am proof that it is possible to be an atheist on matters of the supernatural but still have a spiritual awakening and reap the rewards of the A.A. program of recovery."

How do I find A.A.?

Almost anywhere in the United Kingdom, the United States and Canada, you will find a telephone number for Alcoholics Anonymous or A.A. in the local phone book, news-paper, or on the Web.

Wherever an A.A. group meets, it has one purpose: to help alcoholics stay sober. A.A. groups meet in all kinds of places. Some meetings are held in schools or churches; some A.A. groups meet in hospitals or even office buildings. But it's important to keep in mind that an A.A. group is not connected with the church, school or government office where it happens to meet.

Some of us attended our first A.A. meetings in a hospital, jail or treatment center. Before we left, we found out how to contact A.A. in the place where we would be living. Some of us found our way to A.A. through school or job counseling programs. Many hear about us through their doctors or friends.

If there is no A.A. group nearby, help is still available. G.S.O.'s A.A. website is www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk. You may also write to GSO, PO Box 1, 10 Toft Green, York YO1 7NJ. That is the mailing address of the A.A. General Service Office. The A.A. members who work there may share their experience with you, and will be glad to offer suggestions for getting an A.A. group started.

Some additional A.A. resources related to this topic:

Came to Believe

Alcoholics Anonymous

Appendix II, "Spiritual Experience"

Chapter Four, "We Agnostics"

"Do You Think You're Different?"

From the A.A. Grapevine:

Spiritual Awakenings: Journeys of the Spirit

Spiritual Awakenings II

THE TWELVE STEPS
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.

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 nonprofessional, 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.

A DECLARATION OF UNITY

This we owe to A.A.'s future: to place our common welfare first; to keep our fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depend our lives and the lives of those to come.

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.