

AA, Still Relevant After All These Years

Like any good idea, its origins were ordinary. Alcoholics Anonymous effectively began in mid 1930's America, when two struggling drunks - a medic ('Dr. Bob') and stock broker ('Bill W') - turned to each other, sharing account of their dire struggles with alcohol. Something transformational happened insofar as from these efforts at self-honesty and testimony, they were enabled, and soon others, to re-build shattered lives and develop a new concept of themselves as 'recovering alcoholics'. The embryo was there in these acts of meeting, sharing, acceptance and hope. The rest is history. And as alcoholism affects many others, the wives of those early pioneers (who were mostly men, in that era) began to wonder, 'what is in this for us?' It was another inspired idea when 'Lois W.' (wife of Bill W.) thought that the spouses might equally benefit from meeting to share their experiences in living with and supporting their men folk, and so Al-Anon was born in 1951. Each organisation grew and depended upon those astonishing powers of group affiliation, that sense of 'we are in this together'. AA & Al-Anon are now worldwide Fellowships, open to anyone, who has a 'desire to stop drinking' (AA) or who is 'affected' by drink problems in another(s) (Al-Anon).

I am not an alcoholic and nor have I lived with anyone with alcoholism, so why my interest? As a clinical psychologist working with the field, whilst I provide professional therapies for substance misuse (motivational enhancement, relapse prevention, psychodynamic approaches, family interventions), somewhere along the line I felt that I lacked a deeper understanding of how AA worked, with all its containing and transformative potential. So, rather nervously I attended my first 'open meetings' (i.e. are open to anyone, including non-alcoholics) of AA around 2002 and was impressed by the solidarity of their meetings and the ways in which people disempowered by addictions could begin to listen, learn and find voice. Yes, I found some of the passed-down language old-fashioned, but the spirit is more important than the word; more importantly, I witnessed the sustained recovery that I had heard of but seldom encountered back in the clinic. Change happens. Not only did I learn professionally, but over time found myself strangely helped by their traditions and accumulated cultural capital, so that I too could 'keep it simple' and 'in the day', that I too could value my strengths and be aware of my limitations; I could address my 'spiritual' needs (I am a humanist, so prefer words like 'values' and 'meanings' to spirituality). Change happens. I was confirmed in believing what I had always thought, that there need be no

competition between AA and professional therapy and indeed that there is much common ground, albeit expressed in very different language (much professional language is technical and alienating by comparison with the more direct, 'lay' language of AA).

How do I think it works? I would not be presumptuous to answer this question but venture some reflections based on extensive psychotherapy experience with clients who use AA and through acquired familiarity with fellowship traditions. AA invites a way of living one's life rather than being a 'treatment' and far exceeds 'relapse prevention'. It is intimately concerned with care of self, through connection with others in similar situations and the Steps are useful metaphors of becoming, an identity shift from being the 'user' of the past. Alcoholics can come in from the cold and learn from sober others, moving beyond, in the words of one AA saying, 'the committee of one'. By the way, I love their gritty, down-to-earth humour; irony always helps in desperate or difficult situations. In different words, AA fosters new knowledge of 'oneself as another' (to use a felicitous phrase from philosopher Paul Ricoeur) and underscores the importance of attending to mutual vulnerabilities and strengths (so-called character defects and assets). It is hard to describe, but from what I can see AA is a mixture of reassuring, impersonal fellowship (structures, traditions, practices that transcend the individual, as in the Greek *koinonia*, communion, to 'have a share in something') and invitation to fashion a deeply personal programme of recovery. Another saying:- "I can't, we can", which the psychologist in me translates as we are forever reliant upon cultural resources and symbols which exist beyond our creation. Recovery, however, does not fall into the laps of anyone who comes to AA meetings and is a process that each person has to own, struggle and work hard for.

I am fascinated by how individuals and communities make sense of their events and history by the telling and transmission of stories. Stories allow sense and coherence to grow, so meaning can be made of past troubles. When AA meetings encourage sharing on the basis of 'experience, strength and hope', I see this as the forming of new, forward-looking narratives. Narrative change is part of changing one's life, so that what was once broken can be repaired (in principle), provided it is seen as having been broken in the first place- stories in the service of truth as distinct from covering up.

I make a point of talking about AA with all clients presenting with alcohol problems, often more than once. The professional is well-placed to encourage involvement and counter

myths about AA. We invite members of AA to give introductory talks to clients and staff. And a few principles that I observe in my practice include:- 1. Never assume that a client knows about AA in any detail; information is care. 2. Help clients weigh up their fears and interest in AA; mirror open-mindedness. 3. Encourage a client to attend a few meetings and to allow personal research on alternatives to drinking; what have they got to lose (except drinking!)? 4. Share some of AA wisdom and Traditions as required; be a good knowledge and resource broker. Of course, I do many other things as well, but these are starters.

Bill W. acknowledged that AA would not be for everyone and in 1944 said, “the roads to recovery are many”. This remains true; recovery by any path is recovery. On the other hand, with decades of collective experience and a world- wide reach, AA is a remarkable survivor and remains (highly) relevant after all these years.....

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