

Draft Cover 'The God Word'

The God Word

Agnostic and Atheist Members in AA

Draft

The God Word

Agnostic and Atheist Members in AA

AA is not a religious organization. Alcoholics Anonymous has only one requirement for membership and that is the desire to stop drinking. There is room in AA for people of all shades of belief and non-belief.

Many members believe in some sort of god and we have members that come from and practice all sorts of religions; but also many are atheist or agnostic. It's important to remember that AA is not a religious organization; we have a simple idea that there is a power greater than us as individuals.

What we all have in common is that the programme helps us find an inner strength that we were previously unaware of – where we *differ* is in how we identify the source. Some people have the thought of the word God as standing for “good orderly direction”, or even “group of drunks”, but many of us believe that there is *something* bigger than ourselves which is helping us today.

This power may lie within some person's religious beliefs, or it can be completely separate from any religion. For example, one member looks at the sea and accepts that it is a power greater than him. We could ask ourselves ‘Do I believe that somehow there is a *power greater than myself*’

As Bill W wrote in 1965...*“We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA 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 AA, so long as he or she declares”.*

Whatever you do, please don't let someone else's religious beliefs prevent you from finding the solution that is available to you through Alcoholics Anonymous.

AA literature and resources you may find helpful:

Tradition 3, short and long forms

AA World Services Pamphlets:

'A Newcomer Asks' (in particular, questions on AA and religion and 'God')
'Do You Think You're Different?' (in particular, Ed's story and Jan's story)
'Many Paths to Spirituality'

Books:

Alcoholics Anonymous (the 'Big Book')

In particular:

- Foreword to First Edition
- Foreword to Second Edition, p. xvi
- Chapter 2, 'There is a Solution', pp. 26-29
- Chapter 4, 'We Agnostics', pp. 44-57
- Story, 'The Vicious Cycle'
- Appendix 11, 'Spiritual Experience'

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 'Step Two'

Living Sober

Came to Believe

As Bill Sees It, selections on 'Higher Power'

Pass It On

AA Comes of Age, 'Unity: The Second Legacy', p. 81 and 'Service: The Third Legacy', pp. 166-167

***Grapevine* Articles:**

You may also find some of the *Grapevine* articles on these topics helpful. Articles in *Grapevine* are written by AA members from around the world and represent their experience, strength and hope in print. These divergent opinions of AA members are not statements of AA policy and are not those of the Fellowship as a whole or AA. The *Grapevine* is not Conference approved, as the articles cannot go through the process of Conference approval. The articles listed here are provided only as potential sources of information and experience shared by AA members.

The *Grapevine* is available in print and digital formats by subscription. Both may be ordered through its website, which also has searchable digital archives of articles from past issues.

'The Dilemma of No Faith' by Bill W (AA Co-Founder), April 1961. Published as 'God as We Understand Him: The Dilemma of No Faith' in *The Language of the Heart*

'From Atheist to Agnostic', by R C, April 1961

'An Atheist Speaks Out', by E L, May 1962

'Can an Atheist Find a Place in AA?', by Anonymous, June 1964

'Unbeliever in AA', by L W, July 1966

'Sober For Thirty Years', by Jim B (author of Big Book story, 'The Vicious Cycle') May 1968 (reprinted November 1999)

'The Power of Good', by Anonymous, April 1978

'Listening for the Reality', by June L, April 1991

'An Agnostic Alternative', by Mike F, March 2003

'The Only Faith You Need', by Michael B, February 2004

'Finding Our Way', by Jerry S, September 2013

'Danger, Construction Ahead', by Jim D, March 2015

'Out of the Closet', by Anonymous, March 2015

'Ready to Bolt', by Tom F, March 2015

An Atheists Experience in AA

My name is Paul, and I am an alcoholic. I am an atheist. I believe there probably is no God. I cannot prove there is no God, because it is impossible to prove a negative statement like that. I have been an atheist since long before I came to AA. I have a Higher Power. It is very tangible, and easy to understand, and to contact. It is the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous.

I came to AA a beaten man, in February 1995. I am a very lucky, grateful person. I have not had a drink since that first meeting, one day at a time. When I came to that first meeting, the word God in the Steps, and subsequently when I read the Big Book did trouble me, but I was desperate. I went to lots of meetings, listened and read, and did not pick up that first drink. I started on our programme of recovery. In the following years I realised that Bill W is very clear in the Big Book, he refers repeatedly to the God or Higher Power 'Of your understanding'. The God in the Big Book is the God of Bill W's understanding.

I had tried many times to stop, and to control my drinking. I could stop for a day, a few days and, 18 months before I came to AA, I stopped for 3 months. Each effort ended in failure because I was still in denial. I thought that if I really put my mind to it I was strong enough to stop. Each time I tried to stop I went back to drinking and it got worse. It was a terrible place to be. I believe that the first stage in my recovery was a deep down honesty, with myself, admitting that alcohol was controlling me, and there was nothing I could do about it on my own. I needed a power greater than alcohol, and greater than me – and I found that power in Alcoholics Anonymous.

When I honestly admitted that alcohol was controlling me, I also admitted that my life was unmanageable. Because if alcohol is controlling my life, then I am not, and my life is, by definition, unmanageable. To me that's Step 1.

I am on a journey, and my appreciation of the 12 steps is evolving as I grow in the Programme. I need that regular conscious contact with the Fellowship to keep me sober, one day at a time.

Living Sober as an Agnostic

Before I came into the Fellowship I thought AA was a Christian organization. I also thought it was very old-fashioned. I tried psychotherapy and it did nothing for me. I tried other kinds of counseling but they didn't work either. I was drinking to oblivion on a daily basis. AA for me was a last resort and proof of just how desperate I was.

The meetings seemed to be full of God – in the twelve steps, in the literature, in people's sharing, but I didn't care at the time because I felt I was in the right place. I was amongst alcoholics like myself and they seemed to be alright. It was only when I began to feel better and started to consider these mysterious steps that I wondered how on earth I was going to be able to do them without a belief in God. People in the fellowship told me my higher power could be anything – a number 19 bus if I liked – but that was clearly daft.

I settled on the idea of the fellowship itself as my higher power, while trying to stay open to the possibility of developing a religious belief, because the literature indicated that ultimately I needed to believe in God if I was going to stay sober. The literature seems to say that it's ok to be an atheist or an agnostic, but if we want proper sobriety and a happy life, eventually we are going to need God in our lives.

I know today that isn't true, but at the time I got a sponsor and went through the steps with her, shared my step four with her and prayed with her. It felt hollow and untruthful but I did it because I thought that was what I was supposed to do.

My lack of religious belief sometimes made me feel I was on the margins of AA rather than properly plugged in, but I went regularly to meetings and did service where I could. Gradually AA worked for me despite my misgivings. I developed a conscience in AA and learnt how to be honest with myself and others. I learnt the value of service and how to make friends in sobriety

I haven't had a drink for 25 years and I am no longer waiting for my religious conversion. I am still an agnostic. I don't know whether or not there is a supernatural power, but I can't believe that there is and having a few years of sobriety behind me gives me the confidence to be open about my lack of belief.

I am aware that it's not so easy for others and I am glad that there are a few atheist meetings now where newcomers can share freely. I do have a practice which some people would describe as spiritual, although I wouldn't call it that myself. I meditate every day and I think it helps keep me on an even keel, mentally and emotionally.

I was desperate to stop drinking and came to AA even though I hated the idea of it. And it got me sober. I trust that if I look into my own heart, clearly and with humility and follow my instinct and my conscience I will do the right thing and my life will be useful and meaningful. If I am not sure, other alcoholics whom I trust will be able to help me.

There is a place for atheists and agnostics in AA; a way through to a happy, sober life and we should help each other to find it.

Neil's Story

When I was a kid I was forced to go to Sunday School and church although both my parents were very infrequent church attenders. When I was a teenager, one of the local ministers ran off with a parishioner's wife. His replacement chucked my unmarried Sunday School teacher out of Sunday School because she got pregnant. I found this all very hypocritical so I rejected God, rejected religion and rejected the church. In my late teens I read something in a magazine which said "if you can believe in nothing else, believe in yourself". That article suddenly transformed me into Superman and that was the way I lived for many years.

When I finally arrived in AA, I was admitting for the first time that I wasn't fit to run my own life and that I wasn't Superman. I read the 12 Steps and I had no problem realising there was a power greater than myself – vodka and coke. I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of Alcoholics Anonymous because you bunch of complete strangers couldn't make a bigger mess of my life than I'd made myself.

After about 3 weeks in the Fellowship, I suddenly realised I hadn't had a single argument during that 3 weeks. For most of my life I'd been having at least one argument with at least one person every day. That's when I realised that I'd been living according to my own conscience even though I hadn't made a decision to do so. It felt so good that I made a decision there and then to live according to my conscience. That's the way I've lived for a number of years now and it still feels good.

Gradually, as time went on I came to believe that there is something within me that guides me through life and looks after me. I don't know who or what it is but I'm convinced there is "something". Sometimes I call it "God" simply because it's one syllable and it slips off the tongue easily. I still consider myself an agnostic, though.

The first three words of Step 2 are "Came to believe". Those three words tell me that it is a gradual process. I haven't seen a big flash of light and been instantly transformed but many little things have happened in my life to convince me that "something" exists. And that works for me.

Mikey's Story

As an atheist, I have found over fifteen years of rewarding growth in AA, but the absence of agreement on religious issues has been a challenge.

Once I started to take AA's suggestions, confusion gave way to clarity and AA's gifts of happiness, serenity, and gratitude; the big three slowly made their way into my life.

But there was a difficulty for me in those early days. At meeting after meeting, I heard that if I expected lasting sobriety that I'd have to somehow "come to believe" that a mystical force was in charge of my life, that I'd have to "turn my will" over to this supernatural force, and even seek to discover "his will for me."

I was horrified to think that such would be the price of sobriety for me I would have to renounce my rational convictions. I was in despair.

Then I found a sponsor who showed me the ropes. He guided me through my First Step inventory and taught me that sobriety was possible for an alcoholic who was unable to pretend that reality was something it wasn't. In fact, he told me, honesty required *not pretending* about anything; and honesty, he told me, was a non-negotiable requirement for sobriety.

But to be honest, I would have to examine myself carefully; I would have to embrace a power that would let me see myself for what I was. I would have to turn my life over to the power of reason if I were to be "restored to sanity." After all, the essence of my alcoholic insanity was a cognitive break with reality.

When I "turned my life over" to the higher power of reason, the insanity began to dissolve away.

I discovered that life can be driven by the principles of the Steps rather than by my impulses and urges. As I "turned my life over" to the principles of the Steps, my former alcoholic behaviours began to take a back seat.

My character defects and shortcomings were all tied up with the urges and impulses of my former alcoholic life. The more I aligned my life with the principles of the Steps, the more clearly I was able to see the world, and less frequently I found myself at the mercy of urges and impulses, anger and resentments, guilt from harm done to others, or just plain fears. I was being set free!

It could never have happened drunk; it could never have happened without discovering the principles of the Steps.

It happened when the principles of the Steps were put into practice by a mind set free by the higher power of reason. It is a blessing for which I shall be forever grateful.

Sheila's Story

I came into the fellowship seven years ago, as a self proclaimed atheist. I had had many years working in a Church of England school so had become used to just ignoring the "god" bits. I did not join in with the prayers etc. I was desperate for help and knew that I needed AA, and thought that I would just carry on ignoring the "god" bits, starting the serenity prayer with the word "Grant", for instance.

As I became more involved in my own sobriety, and the AA programme, it became obvious that I could not ignore all this stuff indefinitely. I knew that I would have to find a way that worked for me. I found the "Chapter to the Agnostic" and the relevant steps in the "Twelve and Twelve" unhelpful as it was not any specific concept of "God" that I rejected it was the whole idea that there was anything in charge or had a purpose for me or "looked after me".

Someone suggested that I use the Fellowship itself, as represented in the AA group as a "Higher Power". Steps two and three became simply, a belief that maybe this programme would work for me and then a willingness to follow suggestions and really give it a go. This worked for me.

Since then I have moved onto a deeper understanding. Most importantly, I know that I am not in control. I had no control over my drinking and now I have no control over other people, places or things, or what life will throw at me.

I did realise, however, that I had a faith all along, not in a magic man in the sky but in the power of nature. If I cut my hand the cut will heal, all by itself as long as I keep it clean. My body has been busy healing, recovering from the damage caused by alcohol. I believe that this also applies to my psychological well being. With the help of the human power of compassion and unconditional support I get from the members of this Fellowship and the tools of the Twelve Step Programme, I can give this healing process a chance. It is certainly a power greater than myself.

Dean's Story

I came into AA on 18th March 1999. I came in as a desperate confused alcoholic who was also an atheist. As soon as I saw the word God in the serenity pray card that was on the table, I thought, "well that's it, I don't belong here, it's a religious cult".

The person who chaired that first meeting said not to worry too much about it and to keep coming to meeting and things will start to make sense in time. As I was desperate to stop drinking I did just that. I learned that it was a God of my own understanding and that AA was not about religion.

For the next four years, I didn't do much but go to meetings and do a bit of service. In those four years I just got sicker, until one day I had a choice to make; kill myself or get a sponsor and work the steps.

I got a sponsor and set out to work my way through the steps, only to fall at step two. I still didn't have a clue about the God word. My sponsor who is a Christian said he could not help me find my own God, and that it had to be my journey.

As I didn't want anyone to accuse me of contempt prior to investigation, I set out looking at different religions. I soon learned enough to start on the subsequent steps, I knew there might be something, was not sure what, but there were enough sober people around me to show me something was working.

In all I spent about a year looking at religions and different spiritual beliefs. I went to church meetings, groups, meetings and get-togethers. Some looked very inviting; Buddhism and Taoism had a lot to offer and fitted in with the type of life I was trying to live. But there was always something that didn't sit well with me, and it was this that was blocking me from making any commitments to any of the religions or beliefs.

After all this I thought that I had wasted my time, My AA friends and sponsor didn't agree with me and pointed out that I had spent a year finding out what God wasn't for me. After sitting and sleeping on this for a while it dawned on me, out of everything that I had seen and learned in the past year, IT WAS OK TO BE AN ATHEIST IN AA.

My higher power is very much the love and wisdom I find in the rooms of AA, and the beautiful things I see while walking in nature. I have no problem in using the word God with or without a capital G. My role now in AA is to carry the AA message to the still suffering Alcoholic, that includes my journey in finding a god that works for me.

An Atheist in Recovery

I stumbled into the fellowship of AA because I could not stop drinking and I needed to get my life back on track.

The first thing I noticed was the God word. I knew this would be a problem for me. I thought AA was a cult and I would be brainwashed into becoming a religious fanatic BUT I was desperate and didn't know where else to go. I felt safe in meetings and people were not judgmental. They seemed to have the same issues I did when it came to drinking.

I began to listen. I began to share. The god word was and is still an issue. I am an atheist. I am also clean and sober and have been since that first day I walked into the rooms of AA over 6 years ago.

I kept coming to meetings. I made friends in AA. Life started to get better. I noticed a change in my luck and circumstances. I told my sponsor it felt like I had a guardian angel. She asked if it could be my higher power, God even. I said I preferred to think it was the power of the rooms and the support of the people in them.

All I know is that I could not have got sober on my own. I have a good life now. I work the steps, I do service, I help newcomers and I share my experience, strength and hope. In my experience I do not have to find god to stay sober.

This simple programme works for me. I love the diversity in the rooms. We are all different. We are all unique. It's an inclusive club where, as stated in Tradition 3 – *"The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking"*.

In the back of the Big Book under Appendix II – Spirituality, it states: *"...We find that no one need have difficulty with the spirituality of the program. Willingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery..."*

I owe my life to AA and the people in it. I came here to get sober, not to get religion. I no longer think the fellowship is a cult. For me it is a lifesaver.

Anon

The God Word

Whilst I respect that many AA members believe in a God of their understanding, I cannot conceive of a supernatural being that resides in the sky, has human characteristics, especially those of the male gender, and organises me and everyone else as if it were a master puppeteer. And yet I have no difficulty in accepting a power greater than myself, and that such an acceptance is vital to my continued recovery. I guess that makes me agnostic, but I don't like to be defined by labels, although I do use it when in the presence of someone who is struggling to find a power greater than themselves.

The power of the AA group is undoubtedly greater than myself, and involvement with this power is vital to my continued recovery: as Aristotle said: 'The whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. But in my daily life outside of meetings, and indeed to practice the 'God Steps', I need a different conception of a power greater than myself. On page 55 of the Big Book it says: 'We found the great reality deep down within us'. Through the practice of daily meditation I sense, beneath the mental chatter and the fleeting bodily feelings, a deep sense of calm and peace, from which I draw strength to be able to deal with all that occurs in my daily life ('the power to carry it out', as it says in Step 11). This I identify as my true nature, which is common to all of us. It is also, for me, the great reality that is referred to in the Big Book, is beyond all concepts and labels, and defies all attempts at description.

Anon

My name is Jon; I am an alcoholic. I am also an atheist.

I went into rehab many years ago and saw the Serenity Prayer written on a blackboard with the word "God" as big as the rest of the prayer. When I found the prayer was used at AA meetings I immediately closed my eyes, ears and mind to everything to do with AA. I went to dozens of meetings whilst in rehab and don't remember a thing, not even the 12 Steps.

When I came back to AA years later, I had friends who told me to use the rooms as my higher power (Group Of Drunks) and to pray, even though I don't believe in any religious deities. When it came to the Step 3 Prayer though, I rebelled, mainly because of the "thys" and "thees". How can a prayer published in 1939 use old English? It was a few years before I saw the sentence below the prayer which said I didn't have to use these words. My bigotry again.

My sponsor asked me to record all of the happy coincidences in my life, especially those after I stopped drinking. He thought that would lead me to adopt a loving god but to me they were just happy coincidences. My higher power did evolve though. It wasn't anything religious. It was an acceptance of myself as a small thing in a massive and magnificent universe. It serves me well.

I was able to work my way through the Steps with the universe as my higher power. I still 'pray' but not to any religious deity. My 'prayer' is a moment of calmness I find where I can take stock of whatever issue is on my mind and stop thinking of it as the biggest problem that exists. In light of everything and everyone around me my biggest problems aren't the most important thing in the universe and neither am I.

Other sponsors and people I meet in the rooms sometimes try to lead me towards a religious higher power but I am 100% content with what I have.

Like everyone else, I am indebted to Bill W and Dr. Bob, but I am also grateful to the part that Jimmy B played in the Big Book.

It is many years since my last drink. I am happy and contented. It's all down to the Fellowship.

Johnny's Story

I am an alcoholic, and I am also an atheist, and it is to my own kind that I am writing. The atheist, the agnostic, the people who are still searching. As an atheist (and from present indications shall probably be one until the day I die) I respect the right of others to find whatever kind of Power they need to take the load off their own self will; and I expect them to let me find my own way to do likewise.

For some of us, reaching an atheistic position is one of the few spiritually honest things we ever did. Our minds may be more open than many think. I attend numerous AA meetings and the one thought always stands out in my mind, many stories are about particular alcoholics who have found their places in life and, more important, in AA. In each case, there is a fight, a surrender and an acceptance.

If you are of an atheistic or strongly agnostic mindset like myself, chances are you'll walk into a meeting, see the steps hanging on the wall and want to scream, laugh or walk back out. People told me their stories, of God, the divine, the power of love, an intelligent creator. I told them I believed in mathematics. Some look at me in despair. And not infrequently, I've been asked, "So you think you're the most important thing in the universe?" In response I say "On the contrary. I think I am among the smallest. Cosmically speaking, I barely exist". If you broke down all matter, you'd arrive at the same thing: what scientists name a quark. And I find that not only fascinating but wondrous, awe inspiring and humbling. I believe that the most important spiritual principle of AA is humility.

I tried AA in 1999 and after one meeting I went out and got drunk, and stayed drunk for another year; a year filled with horror and degradation that in comparison made my other nine years of drinking seem like child's play. Having had my fill of people and life, and people and life having had their fill of me, I again turned to the last door that was open to me: AA.

The first night back, I don't think I would have cared if God Himself had been the chairman, I was staying, and I have stayed, and if the monkeys don't get too restless upstairs in my overactive mind, which I think of as my travelling circus, I will be staying every day, each and every twenty four hours of them one at a time. I believe that there is a place in the world and in AA for people who do not have the capacity to believe, and that we are no more or no greater oddities, than those people who do believe. After all, Faith is not something that you can buy ready for sale at a supermarket. You either believe or you don't believe, and if you don't, stop worrying about it. You can still stay sober.

Is there a God or isn't there? I say it doesn't matter. In AA we recognize we are flawed, that we can and must change and that our purpose not only in sobriety but in life is to be of service to others. I believe that I exist at random, but I do not exist alone; and that as long as my quarks cohere, my entire function on this hurtling planet is to give what I can to others.

That keeps me sober. Amen.