Now I Understand AA (Thoughts of an Agnostic at Year 35)

By Bruce Q.

I have been active in Alcoholics Anonymous – and sober – for thirty-five years. I have also been a card-carrying agnostic the entire time. These two facts have never been in conflict for me, though AA culture sometimes assumes they could be.

I didn't come to AA confused about whether I had a problem, or asking if should wait til I'm "much worse," like liver failure. **Step One**, as I practiced it, was simply accurate diagnosis: ***I have alcoholism, and I want recovery.*** That was ***why*** I walked through ***"that door."*** I never dwelled on whether to keep drinking until I qualified for recovery by being gravely ill (rather than just a complete mess.)

I was unaware at the time, but **Step Two** worked just as cleanly. I didn't come to believe that God would restore me to sanity; *I came to believe* – after a handful of meetings attended seriously – that ***this program*** could help me. Empirically. Socially. Psychologically. Over the years, I've gotten what people could call "miraculous" results from AA in terms of mental health and stability. I use the word *miraculous* with a smile, but the outcomes are real.

Step Three is where language usually breaks down for people like me. I ***can't*** "turn my will and my life over to God." But I ***did*** turn a great deal of my time, energy, and attention over to AA. I showed up – alot. I never missed my home group. I followed the structure. I accepted correction. I got a sponsor; I read the book. That was my version of letting new paradigms into my life – and it worked.

This raises an obvious question: **if AA works so well without theology**, why is God-language so central and so persistent? I think there are several simple, non-mystical answers.

First, most people believe in God. Framing AA in those terms is natural and cognitively easy for them, even if it isn't for me.

Second, believing that a benevolent intelligence is paying close attention to your life likely reduces free-floating anxiety. If someone else is watching the dashboard, you don't have to grip the wheel quite so hard.

Third, if you believe God's help is available, you are open to being reoriented. If you ritualize asking Him for His guidance, you also pause before acting. Whether one calls this placebo, or externalization, doesn't really matter – the effect is real.

But the **fourth point** is the most important: sobriety is often about **avoiding** moments of very bad judgment.

People in recovery don't usually relapse because of deep philosophical error. They relapse because ***they walk into a liquor store with a twenty-dollar bill already in their hand.***

If, at that moment, they stop to ask, *"What is God's will for me?"* the answer is suddenly obvious. No one hears a Divine Voice saying "Buy the vodka." They hear their own better judgment – just framed in stronger language (it's the judgment of God.)

To me, they are not hearing God. They are hearing themselves. But crucially, they are *not* hearing the impulsive self.

I do something similar in a completely secular way. Let's say I struggle with procrastination. A 3×5 card that says *"Don't procrastinate"* is useless. But if I ask, *"What would a normal person do?"* the answer arrives instantly: that normal person would make a list, do the next three things in order, one per hour, and only then take a break. Asking "What would a normal person do?" or "What would a successful AA member do?" taps into that external judgment just enough to interrupt the loop. It's Step Three without metaphysics.

For me, I've come to think that AA is often misdescribed. A friend was told,, decades ago, *"AA is a **spiritual program** for a **physical disease**."* That phrase sounds tidy and profound, but it explains almost nothing. What it does – very effectively – is reorganize behavior through **social immersion.**

And for me, a more accurate description would be: **AA is a *social program* for a *physical disease*.**

How could anyone deny it? You **sit** in meetings and hear great speakers that you can model yourself on. You sit with someone on your **left** and someone on your **right** trying to do the same thing you are doing. You sit in a room with a **hundred people** aligned in the same direction. You read a book **knowing a million other people** have read it. You say, ***"I am an alcoholic,"*** and a hundred people nod, smile, and assent. You give a talk and thirty people **stand in line** afterward

to say they're glad you came. You get coffee. You go to the beach with AA friends. You spend Saturdays with AA people.

That isn't spirituality. That's belonging.

AA works not because belief intervenes, but because people stop treating their first thought as authoritative – and because they do so in public, with witnesses, repetition, and reinforcement. **You bet:** God-language is one way to accomplish that pause. Mine is another. Both approaches work when they **interrupt** impulsive decision-making and replace it with structure.

Which brings me to my favorite AA joke:

AA requires tremendous coordination. *I call it mind–foot–butt coordination. Your feet have to take you to the meeting. Your butt has to sit there. Your ears have to listen. Your mind has to pay attention. With all that complexity,* ***no wonder*** *many people don't make it.*

It's an everyday version of Bill Wilson's line, *"Rarely have we seen anyone fail who has closely followed our path."* Strip away the reverence, and what's left is not mysticism but compliance – showing up, staying put, listening, and letting something in.

That low bar is not a flaw. It's the secret of the program.

These wonderful thirty-five years sober aren't a philosophical argument. They are data. And what they suggest is this: AA doesn't save people by belief. It saves people by giving them a durable relationship to a group, a program, a path, when their relationship with themselves is broken.

Everything else orbits that center.

Bruce bottomed out in 1990, while working in a technical job in a Boston college. Shaky and demoralized, with a lonely walk-up apartment and a kitchen full of empty bottles, he walked through "that door" and into the college's Tuesday and Thursday noon AA meetings. Those meetings had a faithful attendance of about a dozen people. His sobriety date is that date, February 7, 1990, when he was 32 years old. Later that year, he relocated to Los Angeles, and he has had a secular home group over the years in L.A., New York, Chicago, and back in L.A. again since 2003. He has many fond memories of 1990s meetings with Charlie P., a founder of agnostic AA in Southern California.

Bruce and his wife have two daughters in their 20s. He enjoys hiking in the hills, long walks at the beach, and exploring the city with their dog Ruckus, who keeps a list of several dog-friendly AA meetings. Recently, age 67, Bruce started taking advantage of another kind of support group, this one for Parkinson's Disease. For this, he applies a cliche' he heard somewhere (along the lines of, "Accept the things you cannot change, change the things you can"). And he carries over from AA the learning that he'll get benefits from that PD group and fellowship in proportion to the time and effort and caring he puts into it.
