



What Beyond Belief means to me

The life of Wayne M and the uncanny comparisons to AA co-founder Bob S. Two men, two legacies that are beyond belief

Can we walk the same walk if we don't think the same thoughts? My AA home group is called Beyond Belief Agnostics & Freethinkers (Toronto, Canada). I had a hand in the naming of the group which had its first meeting September 24, 2009. I guess the meaning of *Beyond Belief* could be different for each of us. Here's what it means to me: between the deaths of AA's first co-founder and the recent death of Wayne M from my home group, two portraits tell one story.

Our group lost one of our original members, Wayne M, to cancer March 21, 2014. In Wayne's story we see that he was trying to stay sober from 1992 to 2004. He had been in four rehabs, two were 12 Step based and two were not. In an article about his atheist 12 Step recovery, "A Higher Purpose," Wayne writes:

"After three months at Halton Recovery House (October 1997 to January 1998) I managed to stay sober for a year and a half. Then I picked up a drink and the next thing I knew five years later I was in a psych ward. It was 2004 and I was jobless, homeless and friendless. Even my brother would not take a phone call from me.

It was there I decided that I did not want to die a drunk.

I knew I needed treatment to get started—again—and I chose Renascent (House).

My sobriety date is Sept 30, 2004. In November I entered Renascent and completed treatment."

All of us at Beyond Belief would have loved to celebrate Wayne's 10th anniversary of continuous sobriety later this year, but it is not to be. I want to remember Wayne and share with you an uncanny connection that his story has to Bob S's story from "The Co-Founders of Alcoholics Anonymous" P-53 15M 8/12 (RP) © Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. Dr. Bob said that "love and service" is the core of AA. He died of cancer in City Hospital, Akron November 16, 1950. No, I am

not drawing a connection between AA service work and cancer. While these two men shared this life-ending experience, the point is how they lived sober and not how they died.

One of these men, Dr. Bob, saw himself as a servant of God and credited his sobriety to the grace of God. Wayne's faith was in the transformative experience of (what the professionals call) cognitive restructuring, a psychotherapeutic process of learning to identify and dispute irrational or maladaptive thoughts. Forget the, "Who was right and who was wrong" argument; or "Were they both guilty of *patternicity*?"—a word used by Skeptic Magazine Editor Michael Shermer to describe the believing mind's tendency to find patterns or connections in the random noise and chaos of life's experience. Let's drop the language and imagine that both of these men's stories are being told through silent film and not their own narration. Here we have to follow the alcoholic's feet and stop listening to the words they choose to describe their experience. I think the actions and result of these two men are strikingly similar.

For my money, Ernie Kurtz seems to be saying two things about AA in the book about us, *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. A believer himself, he is not myth-busting the ABC of AA lore from "How it Works:"

- (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives
- (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism.
- (c) That God could and would if He were sought.

Not God means two profound things about how AA works: We had to stop trying to control the agenda (we were each *not God*); secondly, the transformative power of the AA way was not directly from the hand of God but the transference from despair to hope that comes from one alcoholic talking to another.

Dr. Bob describes AA as an oral tradition, one drunk talking to another before there was a book, a fellowship or a program:

"You see, back in those days we were groping in the dark. We knew practically nothing of alcoholism. I, a physician, knew nothing about it to speak of. Oh, I read about it, but there wasn't anything worth reading in any of the text-books. Usually the information consisted of some queer treatment for D.T.s, if a patient had gone that far. If he hadn't, you prescribed a few bromides and gave the fellow a good lecture.

At that point, our stories didn't amount to anything to speak of. When we started in on Bill D. (AA #3), we had no Twelve Steps, either; we had no Traditions."

Before meeting Bill W, Doctor Bob was as hot and cold with God. He had prayed unanswered prayers in solitude to be freed from the merciless obsession of drinking. He had cursed God and vowed to never darken the door of a church ever again. Still, he found himself associated with the Oxford Group. Before and after his last drink Bob found merit in the Oxford's Four Absolutes—Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness and Absolute Love. Like Wayne, who languished through fits of sobriety and relapse, Bob found himself discouraged and hopeless. Here he is talking of Henrietta Seiberling, who would later be responsible for introducing Bob and Bill.



“Henry, do you think I want to stop drinking liquor?”

She, being a very charitable soul, would say, ‘Yes, Bob, I’m sure you want to stop.’

I would say, ‘Well, I can conceive of any living human who really wanted to do something as badly as I think I do, who could be such a total failure. Henry, I think I’m just one of those *want-to-want-to* guys.’

And she’d say, ‘No Bob, I think you want to. You just haven’t found a way to work it yet.’

The fact that my sobriety has been maintained continuously for 13 ½ years doesn't allow me to think that I am necessarily any further away from my next drink than any of you people. I'm still very human, and I still think a double Scotch would

taste awfully good. If it wouldn't produce disastrous results, I might try it. ... I'm not trying to be funny. Those thoughts actually do enter my mind."

Bob articulated the humility of what makes us all equal in AA. While the length between us and our last drink may be different from each other, the possibility of the next drink remains the same distance away for all of us. Bob never had that white-light experience Bill talks about. Through all of his life, Bob, a devoted believer, felt the humility of what we still call—not a cure, but—a daily reprieve. For Bob as for many of us, including Wayne, this reprieve was contingent on a day-at-a-time approach that was nurtured by a willingness to help others.

Bob continues in his Detroit talk:

"I think the kind of service that really counts is giving of yourself, and that almost invariably requires effort and time. It isn't a matter of just putting a little quiet money in the dish. That's needed, but isn't giving much for the average individual in days like these, when most people get along fairly well. I don't believe that type of giving would ever keep anyone sober. But giving of our own effort and strength and time is quite a different matter. And I think that is what Bill learned in New York and I didn't learn in Akron until we met."

Wayne came to believe the same thing. For the last years of his life, Wayne returned to the place that he last went to treatment, first as a volunteer and then to work for a fraction of what he previously earned as a sales executive. Wayne writes:



Renascent

The road to recovery starts here.

"After being sober for more than a year, I started volunteering at Renascent. As time went by and I always showed up and did well at what they gave me, they started offering me paid shifts. I was offered a full time job in 2007. It was to assess people that wanted to attend our treatment program. My job was to interview them and determine if they were a fit for us and, more importantly, if we were a fit for them.

To say I loved it would be the understatement of all time. For the first time in my life, I had a job that was not a job. It was what I did when I woke up. I could not wait to get there in the mornings.

You see, it was an ideal way for me to live my higher purpose. That way I could be a useful part of the human race.”

Next, let's look at how Bob describes, call it Twelve Step work or the transformative impact of recovery and service. We might imagine either Wayne or Bob saying the following, which comes from Bob's last major talk:

“We should attempt to acquire some faith, which isn't easily done, especially for the person who has always been very materialistic, following the standards of society today. But I think faith can be acquired; it can be acquired slowly; it has to be cultivated. That was not easy of me, and I assume that it is difficult for everyone else.

Another thing that was difficult for me (and probably don't do it too well yet) was the matter of tolerance. We are all inclined to have closed minds, pretty tightly closed. That's one reason why some people find our spiritual teaching difficult. They don't *want* to find out too much about it, for various personal reasons, like the fear of being considered effeminate. But it's quite important that we do acquire tolerance towards the other fellow's ideas. I think I have more of it than I did have, although not enough yet. If somebody crosses me, I'm apt to make a rather caustic remark. I've done that many times, much to my regret. And then, later on, I find that the man knew much more about it that I did.”

Both men's recovery was glued together by the faith in being less interested in personal stuff and more interested in their fellows. Both men would agree that Ernie Kurtz's observations were true; although one of them believes in a supernatural explanation of the process and the other sees a natural explanation for the *hows* and the *whys* in their worldview.

Both men are now dead. Both transformed his own life and left the world a better place.

Beyond the belief of each man (which we might be tricked into thinking defines them as people) is their legacy—what they did, the choices they made, the values that they lived by. To be mentally (or spiritually, if you prefer) *beyond belief* is to be beyond the narcissism of small differences. We are 99% the same which is what Wayne and Bob saw in another when communicating their experience strength and

hope. Much of mankind is transfixed in the 1% of what is different in each of us. This is the road to isolation, loneliness or what artists portray as a living death. This loneliness is well known to the alcoholic, as both Dr. Bob and Wayne have shared in their stories.

What freed them from this purgatory? Was it what they believed or what they did? The clue for me is that in one way the two men differ greatly; in one way they appeared to be identical. The result for each, and the lesson it teaches us, is 99% the same. Faith without works is dead. Deeds are surely the measure of each man's life; beyond their beliefs, we find concrete values, which both men lived and left as their legacy.

Read the story of Wayne M, "A Higher Purpose" on AAagnostica: <http://aaagnostica.org/2014/03/09/a-higher-purpose/>

Read the story of Doctor Bob S. at aa.org: http://www.aa.org/pdf/products/p-53_theCo-FoundersofAA.pdf