



Episode #69 Rebellion Dogs Radio transcript

WHAT AAs BELIEVE: A look at the ebb and flow of 12-Step modernity vs. fundamentalism with a look inside the 2020 Great Britain AA membership survey

With or Without God: the latest Alcoholics Anonymous Membership Survey from Great Britain identifies how many members are religious vs. secular.

Today on **Episode 69 of Rebellion Dogs Radio** we are looking at our more enlightened understanding of AA members, at least a significant sample size: the findings from the **Great Britain 2020 AA Membership Survey** + English Speaking Central Europe meetings. We look, not only at this modernism movement that includes measurable assessment of AA members and AA life today, but we look at how progress is happening in AA, within the context of fundamentalism in AA. It is worth viewing both sides, what are the payoffs for those who embrace a strict orthodoxy and why is AA's progress, too slow for some.

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MUSIC: My podcasting and broadcasting history pre-dates my shows about addiction/ recovery & mental health. I was an indie music broadcaster first, so I always end with something new from IndieCan Radio. For Episode 69, a treatment counsellor I work with in a Zoom aftercare group, is also a singing bass playing rock-n-roller by night. Lucy DiSanto – who has been on this show before to talk about addiction/recovery and mental

health has a couple of music projects: Acid Test, formerly signed to former label Sire Records (who remembers records?) and ON (Episode 41 with Lucyⁱ). So Dan and Steve and Lucy (ON) have been recording during the pandemic and they were performing live in August. I will feature something from their second record. In the 1990s and early this century I loved female fronted acts, Garbage, Hole, Portus Head, Tricky, The Cranberries, Alanis Morissette, Sinéad and Shania Twain were/are huge, too. I am sure Lucy grew up with a diet of Nirvana, Smashing Pumpkins, Nine Inch Nails and Marilyn Manson, because I think ON sounds like a female fronted Smashing Pumpkins. Maybe that's just me... you be the judge. Anyway, that's how we'll say farewell today.

So we will talk about some of the Great Britain 2020 membership survey findings. There is so much good stuff here, we may devote two shows to this data, including demographic shifts through the five-year intervals since they started fifty years ago that we just can't get to today. Today's focus, an all-new reveal about AA from the 2020 survey. It is about what members believe. This will be great.

Let me ask you, "Do you believe in a higher power?"

Okay, now for those who do, "Is your higher power religious or secular?"

This is exactly what the 2020 AA membership survey asked Britons and English-speaking Europeans; the results have been reported. Results reveal a diversity in AA that will surprise some. It's the first time this question has been added to the quinquennial survey — other questions are the same as they've been for 50 years: age, length of sobriety, etc. We have a snapshot of a sizable segment of members that reflects AA this decade. This question about worldview, I think it is an important question that would be helpful to also ask in the demographics questions we already ask members about in the USA/Canada triennial membership survey.

What do we believe on this side of the Atlantic where well over ½ of AA members are? I think we should ask; do you agree? We didn't know about Britons and now we do; better to anticipate member wants/needs when we know our demographics.

Since 1980, *A Newcomer Asks* explains that members stay sober with or without a power greater than ourselves. And how people define this agent of change varies from an anthropomorphic supernatural force to a more down to earth power of example:

"The majority of A.A. members believe that we have found the solution to our drinking problem not through individual willpower, but through a power greater than ourselves. However, everyone defines this power as [they] wish. Many people call it God, others think it is the A.A. group, still others don't believe in it at all."ⁱⁱ

A Newcomer Asks (also of Great Britain origin), for decades now, rightly explains AAs as having diverse worldviews with no suggestion of advantage or disadvantage of one worldview vs. another. Where the 1980 leaflet/pamphlet qualified the inclusivity of AA membership, now the 2020 survey in Great Britain quantifies who believes this, who believes that; is the *Big Book*, “No human power could have relieved our alcoholism,” widely believed or merely Bill W’s worldview.

As the report to the Great Britain General Service Conference states: the aim(s) of the membership survey are to:

- carry the message to professionals, and
- help inform the General Service Conference for future decision making.ⁱⁱⁱ

This survey came from members of an estimated 4,661 Great Britain weekly AA meetings and 723 English-speaking Central European Region meetings.^{iv}

What do AA members believe keeps them sober?

Survey says:

The 2020 membership survey reports that 2/3 of AAs manage fine with an irreligious/secular AA sobriety.

Still, 1/3 hold a religious/supernatural notion of what’s going on for them in AA: Allah, Yahweh, Shiva, The Creator etc., or a nameless vague God of *one’s understanding*. Or even a higher power beyond our understanding.

Survey highlights reported to the Great Britain General Service Conference of AA:



The highlights of the Great Britain AA Membership Survey of 2020,^v were reported by non-alcoholic trustee Dr. Mani Mehdikhani to the Great Britain General Service Conference. Dr. Mehdikhani is a clinical psychologist at Greater Manchester West NHS Mental Health Foundation Trust.

AA [in the UK] has conducted surveys every five years since 1972. Questions have changed over time, but a number have remained consistent in all ten waves of the survey. However, several new questions of interest were identified for exploration, including:

1. What role does the concept of ‘Higher Power’ play in members’ recovery?
2. How do members qualify “power greater than yourself” and define “spirituality”?

Regarding worldview, here's what was asked and the results:

- Are you spiritual: 91% say "yes," 9% say "no."
- Do you have a higher power: 95% say "yes," 5% say "no."
- **Is your higher power religious:** 35% answered "religious."
- **Is your higher power secular:** 65% answered "secular."

Mind the gap: how newcomers and long timers differ in their answers

There is a difference between how newcomers to AA express themselves and/or what they believe vs. members with double-digit years of AA experience. The General Service board calls this difference, "significant."

Of members sober for no more than 12 months, 78% identify themselves as being "spiritual." For members with more than ten years in AA, 94% use the word "spiritual" to describe themselves. The overall average is 91%.

Newcomers who say they believe in a higher power is 81%. Double-digit AAs weigh in at 94% for "have a higher power;" the overall average is 95%.

Along with a third of members (35%) describing their higher power in "religious" terms and two thirds (65%) of Britons that described their HP as "secular," there were 6% who stated that their higher power was "both religious and secular."

For rank and file 12-Step members like us, some will be unsatisfied with the GSO survey findings; we feel teased and want to wade deeper into the minutia: "What do you mean by "religious?" How do you define, "secular?"

I admit, I am one who wants more detail, more specific questions. These are natural questions for regular AA members that will get us talking in coffee shops, meetings, podcasts and other social media. Yeah, about that: meeting my needs is a secondary purpose of this AA membership survey; Public Information is the primary purpose of collecting data, creating a snapshot of AA membership for outreach to professionals, agencies and the general public. The focus is what professionals need to know: healthcare or justice system workers, therapists, employee-assistance workers, researchers, reporters, and the general public. Survey results are posted in the "for professionals" page of the General Service Office website^{vi}. The public are not as captivated by the nuances of AA's individual or collective beliefs in the way rank-and-file members might be. Our survey shows the target audience some basics: how important are meetings, steps, service, meeting attendance to members and now: what we believe?

What explains this gap that GSO characterizes as “significant” when it comes to belief/language such as higher power or spirituality? I have some idea; I bet you do too. Add to my list of possible explanations:

1. On average, newcomers are younger, compared to members of ten years and more; this gap could be a generation-gap, demonstrative of modest supernatural beliefs among youth compared to their 60-year-old+ counterparts.
2. Skeptical newcomers reporting here are yet to have an AA conversion experience; by their tenth anniversary, they too will be of the camp, “Yes, I was lost but now I am found!”
3. Only the newcomers who either already talk in higher power/spiritual experience language, or assimilate this *AA-speak* into their vernacular, stick it out in AA for ten years or more. Those who find higher-power talk alienating or superstitious, may just leave AA.

You surely can add to these explanations; what’s your theory about why newcomers and long-timers respond differently to the same questions?

I would like to hear about it. The Brits have not asked about higher power in previous surveys, so we can’t compare this year’s answers to member worldviews over the decades.

How does AA worldview compare to Britons beliefs as a whole?

For context, from the YouGov 2020 survey of the British population:

“Overall, four in ten (41%) Britons believe there is neither ‘a god’ nor ‘a higher power’. Younger generations are less theistic, 50% of 25–39-year-olds and 45% of 16–24-year-olds are non-believers, compared to 32% of those 60 and over. ... A quarter of religious people (23%) said their religion is ‘very important’ ... four in ten (42%) of those who belong to a particular religion say religion does not play an important role in their lives.”^{vii}

What people believe isn’t obvious, based on how we each self-identify: While 55% of Britons are not religious, we can’t assume that the religious members all believe in higher powers; from the survey, 34% identify as Christian and 7% are of another religion. Of Christians, 10% do not believe in God or a higher power. For some, it seems, “Christianity” is a cultural touchstone to which one identifies – not a worldview. Not all Christian agrees that conforming to a supernatural belief or taking biblical stories literally is an absolute rule for being Christian. We have secular Jews, Buddhists and Hindus who all connect with a community of the religious without feeling tied to rituals and/or beliefs.

An atheist might scratch their head over someone who calls themselves a godless or agnostic Christian. So what; why would a Christian care what atheists' definition of "being a Christian" is? AA did not invent the idea of, "Take what you like and leave the rest."

I'm looking at this not strictly for the eye-opening demographic facts, but for how new data will inform AA members. Does this comfort the inflicted; do these facts inflict the comfortable? Will people react or mobilize and in what way?

This survey is interesting enough to me on its own but what about context? A valuable mentor to me and many, Ernie Kurtz would say, "Tell the story in context (let your reader know what else is going on around the event you are profiling)."viii

CONTEXT: Survey Findings in the Bigger Picture

What other data is informing AA stewards in Europe? Are records of declining AA membership over the decades a cause for concern, for instance? Is there a connection between these two data points?

I don't know Great Britain or English-speaking Central Europe membership numbers specifically – if anyone listening (or reading) can help out here, let me know. But I do know about (i) America, (ii) Canada and (iii) International (other than USA/Canada). So let's look at International membership trends so far this century, compared to Canada and the USA; this is what's reported to us each year in *Box 459: News and Notes from GSO*:ix

Region	2000 members	2021 members	Difference	Gain/Loss
International	666,413	573,789	- 92,624	-14%
USA	1,161,436	1,438,253	+ 276,817	+24%
Canada	97,504	86,790	- 10,714	-11%

So, AA is growing nicely in the USA, adding over a quarter of a million members since the turn of the century – a 24% increase since Y2K (higher than the 18% population growth in the USA over the first two decades this century). AND outside AA – Canada and Internationals – AA is bleeding members. International AA members – to which Great Britain and English-speaking European groups are included – are 14% less than in the year 2000.

While the World Health Organization raises the alarm on rising alcohol use disorder as one of the leading preventable deaths and root cause of 200 types of disability or health risk, worldwide^x, attendance in the best known, free, no waiting list or referral needed intervention for alcohol problems is on the decline, everywhere but the USA. AA in

Canada is down 11% so far this century and we see a 14% decline of members in the rest of the world.

If indeed, UK membership – like anywhere that isn't USA – is in membership decline, could GSO be concerned about how and why our AA message isn't resonating with newcomers, today?

What makes America more fertile for AA to grow? In the USA people find hope in the AA promise, "God is doing for us what we could not do for ourselves." As we have seen in our euro-data, "most of our experiences are ... of the 'educational variety.'" While we had tried to get ourselves sober, quit forever, etc., AA's common denominator is that abstinence could not have happened by ourselves alone. Secular members point to the AA process, the AA people, something more humanist as the AA active ingredient; help was needed but it was not an anthropomorphic higher power.

While American believers are on the decline, religiously inclined members still make up the majority. Even many American atheists recognize religiosity in US culture. Are Americans more predisposed to "touched by the hand of God" talk? Ranking 148 countries in terms of what percentage of citizens hold supernatural (religious) worldviews, here's how the jurisdictions we are talking about rank against each other from a 2020 report^{xi}

- The United Kingdom is 140th in the most religious countries – eighth from the bottom, with 27% theists.
- Canada is 121st with 42% believers.
- The USA (where over half of AA lives) is 104th with 69% of America who believes in gods.

Does AA popularity require a religious culture? At different rates in different places, shifts away from belief in Gods are the trend. Should the USA AA community wake up and smell the irreligiosity? Maybe the decline in Canada and Internationally is a foreshadowing of things to come in USA's AA membership, too. At the time of writing *Alcoholics Anonymous* over 95% of Americans believed in God.^{xii} As American "nones" continue to grow as the fastest religious option in USA demographic surveys, American society sees AA in context to the growing secularity.

AA is regarded, in several 9th Circuit Court rulings to be religious. In the face of the wording of our Twelve Steps, courts are not buying "We're spiritual – not religious" as a rebuttal. Currently, in New York State, a bill is on the Governor's desk for signing into law. Senate bill S7313A ensures defendant's a right to complete court ordered alcohol or substance use treatment in a nonreligious treatment program.^{xiii} What is meant by 'religious treatment program' if not Twelve Step facilitation? How much of AA growth in the USA is referred to us through the healthcare and criminal justice system? By our

(USA/Canada member survey 2014^{xiv}) numbers, 33% of us came from courts, healthcare, jail, etc. What if that tap ran dry or is severely restricted?

In 2009, I wrote an article to *AA Grapevine* asking if our early 20th century Alcoholics Anonymous was as impactful on the 21st century newcomers as it once was. I shared how I have been examining how literature and rituals in AA may not be staying current and relevant. Hey... they printed it. They titled it "Overhaul?"^{xv} While they published this member's taking inventory of our current literary offerings, for whatever cautionary editor motivation they were feeling, they added this factoid at the end:

"EDITORS NOTE: Over the years AAs have hotly debated whether to update the books written by Bill W. The General Service Conference discussed changing the *Big Book* in 1995 and the *Twelve and Twelve* in 2002, both times voting to keep the basic text as is."

[Listen to "Overhaul? @ www.aagrapevine.org"](http://www.aagrapevine.org)

In the USA, we have comforted the change-adverse traditionalists in the language we use and the actions we take. USA/Canada General Service conference went along with reifying the words of Bill W, as Grapevine reminded us in the 2009 article above.

But sometimes, it goes the other way. In previous blogs, we have discussed if – while AA as a whole is growing – secular AA is the fastest growing subculture within our ranks. So member groups, not needing vetting or approval, are offering meetings with readings and rituals suited to a more secular crowd.

AA as a whole is bending towards change, also. As reviewed and agreed upon by our General Service Conference, the next printing (and the PDF now online at aa.org) of *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* will see some member-led changes to the language of Bill W. The 1950s notion of rape being an act of lust is now widely understood to be a criminal act of violence. Heteronormative bias doesn't suit our next generation of AA stewards, either. So we are changing it:

The text on page 66 which previously read: "No one wants to be angry enough to murder, lustful enough to rape, gluttonous enough to ruin his health," has been revised to read: "No one wants to commit the deadly sins of anger, lust or gluttony."

The text on page 117 which read: "Nearly every sound human being, experiences at some time in life, a compelling desire to find a mate of the opposite sex with whom the fullest possible union can be made ..." has now been revised to read: "Nearly every sound human being, experiences at some time in life, a compelling desire to find a partner ..."

So, the effort to work towards a more contemporary AA language, as we have seen with the 12&12 changes, is in motion. Would you have re-written the 12&12 differently? I would have, too. But the point is, between the 2009 Grapevine comment that we will never change and now, progress is being made. I think the new copy is better than it was: progress, rather than perfection.

In Great Britain, one stated purpose of membership surveys is, “to help inform future decision making.”

Would Britons be alone, if they looked to modernization, in this discussion about a secular or more inclusive AA narrative? Within the United States, our growing irreligious population would say American members and groups should be at the table to discuss if a *Big Book* approach to AA in its current form is optimal, passible, or hindering our efforts to effectively respond when anyone, anywhere reaches out for help. Parody for a secular AA message does not mean replacement of what is still loved and cherished. An additive approach may be wiser than this slower practice of re-writing a few sentences per year.

If the drain on membership, known to Britons and other jurisdictions, is a concern and efforts to change our narrative towards a more contemporary language are put into motion, physics and sociology both would anticipate equal and opposite force or reaction, resistance to modernization in AA.

Resistance? AA fundamentalism hides out in plain view. Not everyone who disagrees with change is a fundamentalist. Not everyone who believes in God is, either. So can we talk about fundamentalism in 12-step fellowship terms? First, how is fundamentalism characterized more broadly?

FUNDAMENTALISM in AA

Orthodoxy in AA is natural. A concern for preserving AA is functional; it works along with modernity; fundamentalism is dysfunctional, treating agents of change as evil doers. Preserving the integrity of the message is the orthodox “Yang” sharing a symbiotic relationship to the gateway-widening “Yin” – in a healthy and functional AA.

Orthodoxy and progressiveness co-existing is pluralism. Fundamentalism in AA, by definition, is threatened by pluralism. Giving equal time and legitimacy to a modern AA narrative is viewed as an existential threat. Fight mode is one predictable reaction to fear of having one’s sacred text challenged. When it comes to groups working together to conduct the business of AA as a whole, functionally, you have to get deep into the weeds of AA stewardship, into Concept V^{xvi} to understand both tyranny of the majority and tyranny of the minority.

“the greatest danger to democracy would be the ‘tyranny’ of apathetic, self-seeking, uninformed, or angry majorities. Only a truly dedicated citizenry, quite willing to protect and conserve minority rights and opinions, could ... guarantee the existence of a free and democratic society. All around us in the world today, we are witnessing the tyranny of majorities and the even worse tyranny of very small minorities invested with absolute power (Twelve Concepts of World Service, p 24, by Bill Wilson).”

While fundamentalist AA is a minority it is organized, motivated and vocal. Fundamentalism is already a tyranny of the minority that has frustrated progress in AA; others will argue we are still in balance, despite frustration expressed both in our more liberal and conservative corners.

Twelve Step fellowships are not a zero-sum game with just one side left standing. Our first tradition is unity. If our founders meant “uniformity” they would have cautioned that individual welfare depended on uniformity. Bill Wilson thought better of it; he could see we (with all of our contrary views, beliefs and experiences) had to look out for, and honor, each other. Burning everything to the ground and starting over is not the only road to change/growth. Also, railing against change is not a path to an AA that maintains, or grows, in our relevance to the recovery community as a whole.

The stereotyped divide in AA might be:

- ✓ Progressives that want to end the primacy of faith-healing AA. “Who said we are not coming for your *Big Books*? We are, it is out of date, sexist, passive-aggressive religious non-sense. Let us put that relic away and start with what we know, today!”
- ✓ Rigid traditionalists are longing for a return to the good ol’ days and suspicious of change as being a toxic threat to their hold on “If it ain’t broke don’t fix it!” stewardship of AA.

Is it not about adding voices (experiences) , as needed, to the AA conversation? I recommend, if you have not already indulged, to listen to Jackie B talking about [Generous Orthodoxy](#)^{xvii} and AA. It is a captivating and thoughtful talk about blending *yes to “A” and yes to “B”*, instead of fighting it out for *either “A” or “B.”*

Fundamentalism would not exist if it did not have a payoff. Anyone who wants to exemplify, “love and tolerance of others is our code,” might want to walk a mile in the *Big Book* thumper’s shoes. Fundamentalism offers freedom from uncertainty and connection with kindred spirits as expressed below from *Frontiers in Psychology* (2018).

1. Fundamentalism offers infallible beliefs or principles that provide guidance regarding how to obtain salvation.

2. Fundamentalists believe in the superiority of their teachings, and in a strict division between righteous people and evildoers.
3. This belief system regulates thoughts, but also all conceptions regarding the self, others, and the world. It is a 'meta-belief' – a worldview that directs what to do in various particular situations and how to live in general, providing a sense of coherence and control, reducing ambiguity about the world.
4. An increased subjective feeling of control, but that it also fosters self-regulation and, more specifically, self-control.
5. In order to behave virtuously, such as avoiding vice or sin, self-control is necessary. Fundamentalism is positively related to temptation resistance, the endurance of discomfort, the ability to delay gratification, and response accuracy.
6. Fundamentalism provides individuals with a sense of meaning in life and that it offers relief from distress and uncertainty."^{xviii}

All 12-Step fellowship members crave certainty, embracing wellness ahead of overindulgence. A literal approach to AA does achieve this. AND, so does a take-what-you-like-and-leave-the-rest approach.

We need to understand the upside to fundamentalism and why this manic certainty feels so good and would be worth fighting for. In *Psychology Today*, Dr. Jeremy E. Sherman, in "Fanaticism is a Disease Like Alcoholism," says:

"Fanatics are people who indulge in a heady, intoxicating, and toxic concoction of self-affirming, know-it-all confidence that they have unique access to absolute truths, truths so perfect that they have to impose them on everyone. ... fanaticism is a drug. ... Where fanatics say, 'I reasoned once, came to the absolute truth and don't have to reason again,' science, a practical practice we can learn to apply well beyond the lab, admits that there is no last word, just today's best guesses, to be improved upon through ongoing inquiry.

Sustained reason is just the hard work that addiction to fanaticism frees us from. No wonder fanaticism is so intoxicating. Being a know-it-all provides such powerful pain relief. ..."^{xix}

What is the fear or threat that 12-Step fundamentalists want to inoculate themselves from? How about the terror of an always lurking existential threat – an ever-present progressive, incurable, and fatal ailment whereby good people can still relapse? Putting one's faith in 164 pages of closure and certainty could be a "powerful pain relief."

Like a family with an addict, in a fellowship with fundamentalism, the whole of the family cannot function with ease. The addict does not think they have a problem; we're the problem – not them. Extremism is like addiction; extremists are compelled to

interfere with progress by demanding compliance with a certain view and practice of AA and frustrate efforts to widen our gateway with contemporary approaches.

Fundamentalism is more prevalent but not relegated to our faith-healing members. Irreligious 12-Step fundamentalism is as equally dysfunctional as religious 12-Step fundamentalism. Both extreme is contemptuous, lacking in our AA code, “love and tolerance of others.” The opposite of fundamentalism is not secularism, nor is it modernism. The opposite of fundamentalism in AA is pluralism in AA.

In a pluralist society coexisting with fundamentalism is, well, that is what pluralism means: everyone is equal and free to express themselves with candor. While fundies may hold a rigid view of AA, that is fine at their meetings or other gatherings. It does not invite their closely held views to veto our collective agenda. 12-Step culture is an imperfect, but tolerant and inclusive tapestry. “Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help others achieve sobriety.” In a functional AA with sobriety as the focus, there is plenty of room for both supernatural and/or secular expression all along both spectrums.

But while being all kumbaya about liberal democracy, being naïve does not help, either. Looking at fundamentalism in 12-Step recovery; does fundamentalism render AA or the larger 12-Step community powerless to evolve and thrive?

There exists a religious fundamentalism scale. Read [Britannica online](#).^{xx} On this (religious) fundamentalism scale, there are four precepts or dimensions^{xxi}: I have played with the wording only slightly, maintaining the core meaning, while speaking in more of an AA-ese vs. Christian language.

- (1) the belief that there is a single set of teachings containing the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, inerrant truth about God, mankind and addiction.
- (2) this essential truth stands in opposition to evil, which must be actively fought.
- (3) the truth is to be followed in our current day according to the fundamental practices of the past; and
- (4) people who succeed in following these Steps, exactly as described in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* have a special relationship with God.

Let us borrow these four precepts associated with fundamentalism and see how it plays out in our fellowship.

Precept #1:

“the belief that there is a single set of teachings containing the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, inerrant truth about God, people and addiction.”

The primacy of the *Big Book* (book-centric AA has not always been the norm) and fundamentalism in AA are correlated. AA Fundamentalism 101: we have a text that is a “collection of infallible beliefs or principles that provide guidance regarding how to obtain salvation,” and “it provides individuals with a sense of meaning in life and that it offers relief from distress and uncertainty.” Look at “How It Works:”

“Remember that we deal with alcohol – cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power – that One is God. May you find Him now! Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon ... no human power could have relieved our alcoholism ... God could and would if He were sought.”

Big Book “inerrant truths” is not how a cornerstone of 1940s AA. Book-based AA is a, post-founder, modern history, AA reality. It seems to have taken root in the mid to late 1980s, and found a veto-like power over modernization until around 2015, or so. Several gentle forces sparked a return to the middle, more secular AA groups, millennials moved from newcomers to service positions, taking 12-step recovery to the internet. *Big Book* sales dropped out of the one million copies per year status.

AA is more regional than homogenous. While fundamentalism has a grip on local AA culture, in some communities, in other places it never did. In my own place and time of early sobriety, I don’t remember anyone telling their own story with injections of “As the *Big Book* tells us on page ...”. If this surprises anyone, check older AA recordings. Clancy I, and other popular speakers, did not borrow from the book to legitimize their stories, in the cassette tape era of AA storytelling.

I didn’t take it too seriously. However, just outside AA’s doors in the USA, Gerry Falwell’s myth of the moral majority spawned a fear-based Christian revival. Conservatism, punctuated by Ronald Reagan in the USA, Margaret Thatcher in UK and Brian Mulroney in Canada, dominated the 1980s. Did conservatism in society inform a nostalgia for AA of old, in the rooms. As ubiquitous as the *Big Book* has been in the first two decades of the 21st century, the book that bears our fellowship’s name was not a million-seller until the author had been dead buried, and immortalized. Bill’s book was in print 34 years (1973), before selling the 1,000,000th *Big Book*. From 1973’s milestone it was 14 more years before we started selling one million books each and every year, popularizing *Big Book* reading meetings and weekend retreats.

Early signs of *Big Book* primacy came with more and more members describing addiction and recovery by directly quoting the first 164 pages (that which was written by Bill Wilson). To quote page and verse was to borrow *authority*—this idea of authority in AA was not previously appreciated by AA culture. Individual expression would

come to be rebutted with, “Well, on page X of the *Big Book*, we are told that Y”. In this regard, the *Big Book* way was intended as a conversation ender – the one and true view of addiction, the alcoholic and God, trumping freethought. More and more meetings were *Big Book* meetings, which encouraged people to talk in *Big Book* language and members to draw the conclusion that AA is the book; the book is AA.

Did I mention assimilation? Meanwhile in Hollywood, *Star Trek: The Next Generation* was offering a GenX view of our world, growing in viewership in lockstep with *Big Book* thumping’s early timeline. *Next Gen* introduced us to a new threatening antagonist in the universe: The Borg -- cybernetic organisms linked to a hive mind called “the Collective.” The Borg’s purpose is to forcibly assimilate others into their one homogenized purpose, a quest for perfection. Individual Borg are referred to as drones and move in a robotic, purposeful style ignoring most of their environment, giving them a zombie-like appearance.

Borg says: “Prepare to be assimilated; resistance is futile.”

Loving me some *Big Book* and the prayer answering, sobriety granting Czar of the universe offered to us by Bill W is not, of itself, fundamentalism. “My way of getting sober is better than your way of getting sober” is just tribalism. That is why, for fundamentalism, precept 2 has too also be present.

Precept #2

“this essential truth stands in opposition to evil, which must be actively fought.”

The “evil” in precept 2 is threats to the fundamentalist desire for closure, for certainty. To suggest in any way that our sacred writings are not literally “inerrant truth,” that somehow, we can improve, this is like declaring a war on God; how dare you?!? On a mission from God, the one true god – this mission comes with boundless confidence and energy for rallying to prevent change in AA.

Orthodox members will have concerns about maintaining the integrity of the AA message. There is an argument for preserving the integrity of a historical document. But can a “preserve the history” argument find compromise? Could a *yes/and* solution work? Could we keep the original text as is and create a new text with equivalency to help and explain the AA way to today’s newcomer? That is a bad joke to fundamentalists, see precept #1.

Fundamentalism needs a foil; they need evil to fight. Meanwhile back in Great Britain, membership findings that legitimize secular recovery (human power) may be labeled by some as the silver-tongued temptations of evildoers. The truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth is already in the *Big Book*, everything else that does not fit the narrative, well that is the constant evil that fundamentalists fight or shield themselves

and vulnerable newcomers against. I can picture that somewhere, the revelation of a majority of AA's being secular – unabashedly – could be evil enough to raise a fuss.

With empathy we can see how our *Big Book* fundie fellows are not weaving the same tale I am. They have their own story where they are the hero/protagonist; and science and skepticism is the antagonist. "Sustained reason," as described above from *Psychology Today* or the 2020 GSO survey talk could be just the Precept #2 evil that spurs reaction, all part of a constant threat to their "unique access to absolute truth." Fight mode is understandable if someone/something threatens to take our fix away.

Study of fundamentalism exposes common tenets or problems that they in turn, promises to overcome, "sensitive to distress and uncertainty ... a sense of coherence and control. ... a need for closure ... a desire for clear and certain explanations." Craving order and clarity is as human as seeking comfort. As alcoholic, we can all appreciate wanting more and more of it. Crossing an invisible line, extremists go from "this works for me," to "this is the absolute truth." Getting high on absolute truth, who among us could not imagine our own neurotransmitters firing when the one perfect truth we rely on is under threat. And if you or I or anyone else were in Bill W's shoes, compelled to write a book codifying this amazing three or four years of AA experience, who wouldn't be touched with a little of the old righteousness of the recently converted?

The common threats (evils) *Big Book* fundamentalism opposes:

1. Treatment-talk: a progressive language from the more-will-be-revealed camp.
2. Secularism: a growing movement inside and outside AA that legitimizes godless recovery and a non-theistic or non-*Big Book* narrative of the AA program.
3. AA pamphlets, *Living Sober*, The General Service Conference, any "watering down" of the first 164 pages (the "fundamental, basic, intrinsic, inerrant truth").
4. Therapeutic assisted recovery including medical and clinical interventions that aid and accelerate sobriety, trauma-informed or other contemporary approaches to addiction recovery.
5. Academic/scientific study of peer-to-peer recovery outcome rates (AA and all others), randomized, controlled longitudinal studies and other contemporary findings.

I call these five categories (I don't know, maybe there are more) adversaries, or "evil" as described in precept #2, because these are what are constantly berated by fundamentalist. Claims are made as to why these not-in-the-first 164-pages inferior attempts to help are out of touch or in denial of their one great truth. Again, when pluralism is the adversary, any alternate narrative is the enemy.

How will fundamentalists look at the Great Britain AA findings, revealing who is religious and who is secular? While it's easy enough to dismiss a single or a few cases of

atheists staying sober in AA as heavy drinkers who *only think* they are real alcoholics, saying the same about 2/3 of European English-speaking AA, that would present a new challenge.

The promise of AA fundamentalism is this: all has been revealed, there is a master plan, recovered means no risk of relapse, so long as one adheres to the fundamentalist one-truth idea – an all-knowing, all-powerful God, not a doorknob God. The price of the liberty fundamentalism offers from doubt and relapse is a willingness to actively fight evil. In AA terms that's plurality that has crept in or threatens to creep into our otherwise peaceful one-truth recovery oasis.

Precept #3

"The truth is to be followed in our current day according to the fundamental practices of the past."

What is known about these so called "fundamental practices of the past?" Did Bill W take sponsees through the book? Did Dr. Bob? Not seen in any historic records, it stands to reason that the premise of the *Big Book* being the "single set of teachings containing the fundamental, basic, intrinsic, inerrant truth" was not exactly how AA was going in New York and Akron in the early years. This primacy of one message and one messenger all came – as with all fundamentalisms – from the man with a message, touched by the hand of God to do one last important thing: die. None of this zealotry can happen until the "messiah" is a memory.

Big Book mania reached a new "high" in the 1980s and 1990s with the mania that came with Cocaine Anonymous gatherings. Joe and Charlie weekends accelerated a folklore of book sponsors, book learning and one book primacy. Of course recovery from following the directions as laid out in the book, *Alcoholics Anonymous* has proven to be effective. But to create a buzz, we needed a story about this one fundamental road map offering a 75% success rate and also important was a comparative myth about modern medical and therapeutic approaches floundering in single digit recovery rates.

In the Second Edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* a claim is made without footnotes:

"Of those who came to A.A. and really tried, 50% got sober at once and remained that way; 25% sobered up after some relapses, and among the remainder, those who stayed on showed improvement."^{xxii}

Some early AA groups kept tallies on success and failure, but where these members recording AA history in the making statisticians? That does not mean it's true or false. Did AA get them sober, or did they get sober first and then join AA? In some accounts, alcoholics had to already be sober, praise be to Jesus, before they were counted as an AA member – this was pre-Tradition Three. The story today is that the *Big Book* and *Big*

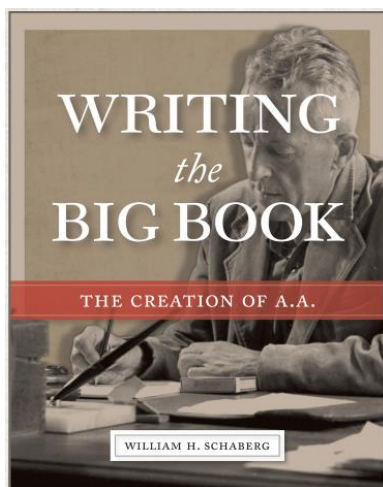
Book sponsors of early AA that had a track record that beats what treatment centers can do, today. Book-based learning works. While it is easy to critically deconstruct the perception fundamentalists that theirs is a superior recovery process, this skepticism is not proof that *Big Book* study is inferior, it is not even proof that fundamentalism does not produce the best outcome rates. The *Big Book* promises are coming true in their lives—just ask them. The point here is we do not know, scientifically what best practices are, within 12-step fellowships or the broader recovery community. I see many great examples of happy, helpful *Big Book* thumpers. But this efficacy is not proof that multiple pathways do not work^{xxiii}.

From academic studies of studies SAMHSA (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) in 2009 “concluded that of all those who experience a lifetime substance dependency, 58% will achieve stable recovery.” Another more conservative account (White 2012) was just over 50%. Those who reach five years of abstinence decrease their risk of relapse from 50-70% in the first year to under 15%.^{xxiv}

We know that trying AA works for many. We do not have absolute evidence that it’s the steps, the meetings or God that sobers us up. If there be gods, I don’t have to believe in them for them to intervene in my life. And we do see that other non-12-Step peer to peer groups work, also.

Here is an AA statistic that has borne out as true from biographical research on the early members of AA. The first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* had twenty-eight alcoholic stories—one was an Al-Anon story, totaling 29—and we now know how each of these 28 early AAs fared. Sure enough, 14 (50%) never drank after writing their story, 7 (25%) relapsed but eventually stayed sober until death and the other 7 (25%) when back to drinking and never found lasting sobriety.

So, there is your 50 + 25 = 75% success rate.



But for fundamentalists that claim reading and following the *Big Book* is the “fundamental practices of the past” these stories were written before the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was written. None of these 21 of 28 alcoholics who got sober in early AA had seen the Twelve Steps until after they shared their experience, strength and hope. We learned this from primary documentary research offered to us by William Schaberg in his 2019 [Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA](#). There is no reference to Twelve or even the mythical Six-Steps anywhere in these first stories, with the possible exception, using your imagination, in the final draft of Bill W’s own story. Here, we can identify ten of

these twelve “fundamental practices” that are more true to present-day AA, thanks to the by-the-book phenomena of our most recent 40 years, than facts reveal about how AA worked in the first ten years.

Like a placebo, truth or myth, present day members who give themselves completely to this fundamentalist pedagogy find more hope and confidence, the more they buy in. What is the harm if it is a myth that “provides individuals with a sense of meaning in life and that it offers relief from distress and uncertainty?” Nothing ... for those who are helped, anyway.

Except, what does hurt from fundamentalism, is weaponizing this story as a way to disparage other approaches, frustrate attempts to offer more secular or contemporary approaches and “blame the victim” when an earnest attempt at finding a spiritual connection with He who has all power, fails a particular alcoholic. That is where precept #4 becomes an issue.

Precept # 4

“people who follow these Steps, exactly as described in the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* have a special relationship with God.”

Again, orthodoxy good – fundamentalism bad. Describing oneself as saved, recovered, at one with God, a walking, talking *Big Book*, that’s all good. Not good, is when zealotry presents as (i) anti-intellectualism, (ii) anti-secular AA, (iii) efforts to block new literature and (iv) accusing any modernization as watered-down AA. Instead of a *yes-and* approach, change is eyed as evildoers doing evil things.

Big Book quoting and adoration will comfort some and disturb others. Some passages in the *Big Book* are more hyperbolic than humble, more exclusive than inclusive and more manic than emotionally sober: From “Into Action”:

“Every day is a day when we must carry the vision of Gods’ will into all of our activities... Much has already been said about receiving strength, inspiration, and direction from Him who has all knowledge and power. If we have carefully followed directions, we have begun to sense the flow of His Spirit into us. To some extent we have become God-conscious. We have begun to develop this vital sixth sense.^{xxv}

A sixth sense; sense the flow of His Spirit? Any sentence here is claiming a special relationship with God; being elevated in a chosen one, in good with the all-mighty status, as exemplified in precept #4.

To seek God’s will, sure if that’s how your worldview goes. But “must carry the vision of God’s will?” Our folklore is that Bill W had a special relationship with “the” all-powerful God, and in his enthusiasm as a new author he promises we will too. That’s

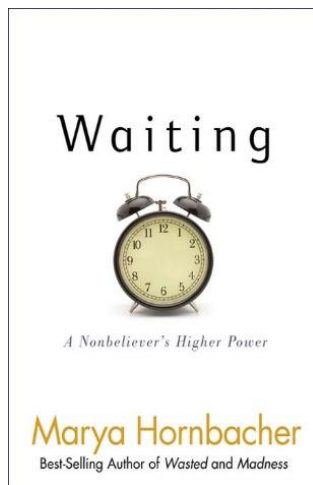
why many parrot the words of the big book, like a secret incantation to God-consciousness.

We are escape artists (as addicts); wanting to escape uncertainty is understandable. Here's one way to look at the fundamentalist's antidote to uncertainty; this relates to 12-step culture:

"Another way to look at this is to see fundamentalism as a version of faith rooted in fear — of error, of choice, of doubt, of mystery."^{xxvi}

Should we fear making mistakes, having to choose without a written guarantee, being ambivalent or living in a story of our life to which the last chapters have not been written? I think it's healthier to recognize our incompleteness. We can make peace with our individual humanity or try to transcend it... which is emotional sobriety?

"We learn to accept that we may never know. When we question, we learn to accept that there may be no answer. When we shout our doubt out into the universe, we learn to accept that we may be met with a silence that we do not know how to read." Marya Hornbacher, (2011) [*Waiting: A Nonbeliever's Higher Power*](#)



Is Hornbacher wiser than Bill (Wilson)? How could she not be? Born a few years after founder Bill W died, Hornbacher was sober more years than any 1939 AA member had known; at her disposal, the collective wealth of recovery wisdom of the ages (including the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*). How could any modern 21st century voices of recovery not have something additive to the addiction/recovery discussion?

Fundamentalism in AA holds the same four precepts of any manic state: feeling closer to God, a change-resistant glorification of the past, identifying evil and potential threats, and a primacy of one way of talking, seeing, believing, and behaving. Is this how recovery the right way looks: afraid, hostile, dogmatic? Or are feelings and impulses, a manifestation of our maladaptive addictive tendencies reemerging? In *Waiting's* new millennial sobriety Gods are not needed to dispel doubt and uncertainty, because doubt and uncertainty are not barriers to recovery or self-esteem.

Great Britain's report that 2/3 of their members credit a secular esprit de corps — while only 1/3 literally agree with the intervening notion of a supernatural "flow of His Spirit." A special relationship with God works. A special relationship with reality works, too. Why fear doubt and uncertainty if the only thing to fear is fear itself?

Recovery, Discovery, and Rediscovery

Our new 2020 membership survey addresses an elephant in the room: like most of society in the developed world, most AAs do not believe in an anthropomorphic higher power. A third do (35% religious) and two thirds do not (65% secular). It turns out that AA is a microcosm of the pluralist society just outside our rooms that supports secularism and also, a variety of theologies.

Today, a “many paths” to relief from alcoholism – or alcohol use disorder if you prefer – is identified in our survey of fellow members of AA. AA works if you believe in a God; AA works with a practical, humanist approach, too.

I talked about Episode 69 as being like a three-act story: Act three has a climax and a resolution. This part of the story hasn’t been written yet. How can we resolve the challenges we face? Is it asking too much that fifty years from now, AA will be a place that anyone seeking help with a problem with alcohol (assuming that’s still a thing in 2072) will find what they need without having to accept anyone else’s worldview, nor having to deny their own.’

November 28th, 1963, President Lindon B Johnston gave a Thanksgiving address to a nation who had lost their leader, Johnston’s former boss. LBJ said to a nation of believer that the Devine “why” of what happened was not in America’s grasp. But that the “human duty of determining what is to be. ... A great leader is dead. A great nation must move on. Yesterday is not ours to recover; but tomorrow is ours to win or to lose.”

Let’s keep talking. Anything that shines a light on what AA is, such as this 2020 membership survey – even if it rubs up against our ingrained belief of what AA is (and/or will always be) – is sobering. It tells us who we are. This will surprise some, including some of us who will be challenged to take inventory of our view of what and who AA is. We may be tied to a view of what AA is for some reason that is incorrect.

If a lot a lot of what informs us of what AA should be is based on incorrect ideas of what AA was like in the past or even who we are as a fellowship now, we ought to keep digging. Let’s ask more of AA what they believe. Who has worked the Steps? Who started but never completed them? Who never paid any attention to them? Would it not be better to know than assume? Maybe it is service or fellowship that helps keep some of us sober. Maybe it is our own empowerment? Truth will not break any magic spell that is keeping AA going. They say the truth will set us free; maybe it will help make us more effective, too.

There is so much more in this 2020 survey – I hope I will get to the rest sometime soon... like before the 2025 survey comes out.

We're done ... almost. Last time my home group met face-to-face in our U of T classroom, before the whole building, the whole school, the whole city was COVID-19 shut down, I went from the meeting to Lee's Palace march 14th on Bloor Steet, APE was playing – an IndieCan.com (from my SiriusXM and college radio days) favorite plus ON, plus a headliner from the UK, Sulphur, and Phantom High from Toronto. LUCY STEVE and DAN are on the road, playing live soon so let's play them. I haven't seen live music since that fateful day, March 14, 2020.

So, . A power trio exploring its roots in post punk, art rock Fronted by Lucy Di Santo on bass/ vocals and Steve Fall (Toronto) with Dan Cornelius on Drums (NYC) from their sophomore indie release, which at which a tour is planned starting summer 2022, we're going to play the ideal Rebellion Dogs Radio choice of songs offered: "UNDER DOG." Look them up on Soundcloud or visit : www.onmusic.ca

ⁱ <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio/blog/mere-addiction-and-the-acid-test-story-rebellion-dogs-radio-41>

ⁱⁱ https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-24_a newcomeras.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/Members/2020-Survey>

^{iv} <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/Professionals/Interesting-Statistics>

^v <https://docplayer.net/218663622-Aa-membership-survey-2020-mani-mehdikhani-non-alcoholic-trustee.html>

^{vi} <https://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/Professionals/Interesting-Statistics>

^{vii} <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/lifestyle/articles-reports/2020/12/29/how-religious-are-british-people>

^{viii} <https://www.chestnut.org/william-white-papers/100/ernie-kurtz/items/>

^{ix} Search back issues for group and member estimates (generally in Summer Issue each year of Box 459

<https://www.aa.org/box-459>

^x <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/alcohol>

^{xix} <https://ceoworld.biz/2020/05/16/revealed-the-worlds-most-and-least-religious-countries-based-on-religious-beliefs-2020/>

^{xixii} <https://time.com/4283975/god-belief-religion-americans/>

^{xiii} <https://www.nysenate.gov/legislation/bills/2021/s7313/amendment/a>

^{xiv} https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/assets/p-48_membershipsurvey.pdf

^{xv} <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/track/882797/aa-grapevine-overhaul-by-joe-c-dec-2009>

^{xvi} C16 CONCEPT V Throughout our world service structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, thus assuring us that minority opinion will be heard and that petitions for the redress of personal grievances will be carefully considered. https://www.aa.org/sites/default/files/literature/en_bm-31_3.pdf p. 207

^{xvii} <https://youtu.be/jC-xUZ6P-WA>

^{xviii} <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00285/full>

^{xix} <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/ambigamy/201411/fanaticism-is-disease-alcoholism>

^{xx} <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fundamentalism>

^{xxi} <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.00285/full>

^{xxii} Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, Fourth Edition, p. XX

^{xxiii} A longitudinal study of the comparative efficacy of Women for Sobriety LifeRing, SMART, 12-step groups for those with AUD <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/29606223/> Sara E Zemore et al

^{xxiv} David Best, (2019) *Pathways to Recovery and Desistance: the role of the social contagion of hope*, Bristol, Policy Press

^{xxv} Bill Wilson, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, p. 85

^{xxvi} <https://www.theatlantic.com/daily-dish/archive/2008/04/unpacking-fundamentalism/217702/>