

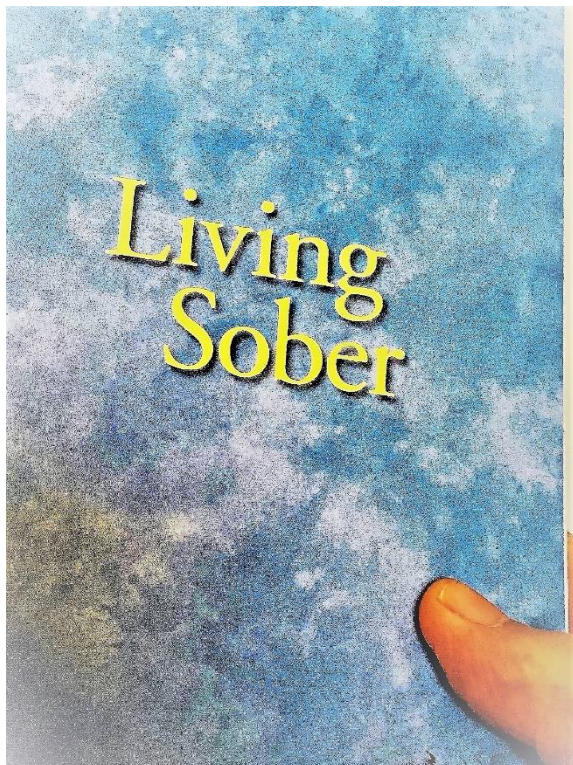


Remembering John Lauritsen the collective AA wisdom of *Living Sober*.

Professionals, and hopefully more people in recovery from substance use disorder, are discovering or re-discovering the practical lived experience offered in AA's "little book," *Living Sober*. One non-alcoholic who has systematically studied AA members and outcome rates, as much or more than anyone, would be Dr. John F. Kelly. Dr Kelly is professor of Psychiatry in Addiction, Harvard Medical School:

"The way that AA has been shown to work in scientific studies is more aligned with the experiences reported by its own larger and more diverse membership as detailed in its later social, cognitive and behaviorally oriented publications such as Living Sober (written when AA had more than a million membersⁱ, about half of whom had at least five years of continuous sobriety) than with its quasi-religious/spiritually oriented 'Big Book' based on the experience of fewer than 100, very severe, nearly all male individuals –most with very short-term sobriety."

From *Living Sober*:



On personalizing AA recovery (Chapter 1)... "The point is, there is no prescribed A.A. 'right' way or 'wrong' way. Each of us uses what is best... without closing the door to other kinds of help we may find valuable at another time. And each of us tries to respect others' rights to do things differently.

Sometimes, an A.A. member will talk about taking the various parts of the program in cafeteria style—selecting what [they like] and letting alone what [they do] not want. Maybe others will come along and pick up the unwanted parts—or maybe that member will go back later and take some of the ideas [they] previously rejected."

On changing our old drinking routine (Chapter 8)... "Certain set times, familiar places and regular activities associated with drinking have been woven closely into the fabric of our lives. Like fatigue, hunger, loneliness, anger, and overreaction, these old routines can prove to be traps dangerous to our sobriety.

When we first stopped drinking, many of us found it useful to look back at the habits surrounding our drinking and, whenever possible to change a lot of the small things connected with drinking.”

On relapse (Chapter 31)... “Try to remember that alcoholism is an extremely serious human condition, and that relapses are as possible in this ailment as in others. Recovery can still follow.

Even after setbacks, if you continue to want to get well, and remain willing to try innovative approaches, our experience convinces us that you have embarked with hundreds of thousands of companions on the path of happy, healthy destiny. We hope to see you among us.”

Anne Fletcher speaks and writes about life and lifestyle challenges. Her highly regarded body of work includes two about addiction and recovery: *Sober for Good*, interviewing people in recovery, and *Inside Rehab*, researching fifteen programs from skid row to Malibu celebrity treatment centers. In 2019 she authored an article about AA’s 1975 *Living Sober* with an effort to end this book being such a well-kept secret in recovery from addiction. She interviews John L about *Living Sober* who is almost certainly John Lauritsen, author of *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* (2014). Her 2019 commentary is worth a look (or a second look) and is called: “Living Sober—The Little Big Book That You May Not Know About.”ⁱⁱ

This blog is a tribute to John L, mentioned above, who died March 5th, 2022, unexpectedly and in good health, exactly 83 years from the day he was born. John (like his namesake John Kelly, quoted above) was a Harvard graduate market research executive and analyst. In a memorial, *The Defendant* quotes John Lauritsen:

“I have spoken out when people with common sense kept their mouth shut. I have exposed fraud, punctured group fantasies, and blasphemed against the prevailing superstitions.”ⁱⁱⁱ

John Lauritsen is among the pioneers of indie (do-it-yourself) publishing, founding Pagan Press 40-years ago, long before print-on-demand. Like life before smartphones, it’s hard to remember life before Amazon-style self-publishing. I have read some of his orthodoxy challenging counterpoints which challenged blind trust in early AIDS protocol and who is thought to be the real author of *Frankenstein*.

I agreed with much of what John would say about AA—not everything—and I feel he was a vital voice in a growing secular AA movement. He found sobriety in the 1960s when Bill Wilson was still alive and before *Living Sober* was in print. He loved the practical—not supernatural—narrative about addiction and recovery. The 24-hour-at-a-time program, take what you like—leave the rest, ideas from lived experiences of fellow sufferers. The Steps, at least as written, were a deal-breaker for John, but there was AA before there was Twelve Steps and AA people were getting sober. Today, some people work the Twelve Steps exactly as written, some start but do not finish, some adapt the ideas in terms of what is needed and workable in their own situation. Of course, some people respectfully decline the Twelve suggested Steps.

Over seven million units of *Living Sober* have been bought. This has been an influence in the success of AA members since the AA General Service Conference approved this booklet for print in 1975. Dwarfed by the 40+ million copies of AA’s first effort, the 1939 *Big Book*, *Living Sober* may seem lesser-than. I read *Living Sober* early and often in my sobriety, not cover-to-cover but as a regular go-to. Many AA meetings do exactly that, reading one of the 31 chapters outload before starting discussion.

I volunteer at a local treatment center in Toronto, Canada. They have had an in-house AA meeting for dozens of years. A secular AA meeting was added; so was SMART Recovery. Pre-pandemic when we volunteers offered lived experience as an adjunct to the clinical/professional healthcare received. Most of what we do as non-professionals in recovery was in coordination with counsellors. One of the peer-led parts of the program was a *Living Sober* meeting where we would do just that, going through the book, Chapter 1 to 31 and starting again. They are in no order; you can start anywhere. I recall that some treatment clients, who had been to AA before, did not know about *Living Sober*. “Is this new?” they would ask. “Newer,” I would say, “but it’s been around for over 40 years.”

Ann Fletcher highlights *Living Sober* features as “AA in a nutshell without any reference—aside from the appendices and descriptions of other AA publications—to a higher power, powerlessness, or spirituality, aspects of AA that put many people off.” Fletcher identifies misconceptions including AA’s own early assumptions that are challenged in *Living Sober*. Following science and/or lived experience, the narrative has to change with new evidence revealed.

Living Sober flies in the face of people with a certain pre-disposition; an idea of AA being uniformed and inflexible. Who would do that? Well, there are two camps I can think of: Fundamentalists and harsh critics. Both hold a concrete—vs. abstract—way of evaluating constructs such as Alcoholics Anonymous.

Literalists see the 1939 text as holy writ, studying it like bible-class and promulgating a revisionist history of early AA whereby the first one hundred members followed this Twelve Step process *exactly as written*, that 75% of people who follow these “instructions” thoroughly would get and stay sober, and other approaches to AA are watered down, inferior or for heavy social drinkers who only *think* that they are “real alcoholics.” These 75%-success claims are not randomized trials. These are anecdotal observations. While not false, this data and the way it was measured, does not follow currently agreed upon standards of review and measurement. For instance, someone backchecked the twenty-eight stories in the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, fourteen of them never drank after writing their story, seven returned to drinking and died without sobering up, seven more relapsed but returned to AA, dying sober. So there is your $14 + 7 = 75\%$. But these stories were written before the Twelve Steps had been written. Chapter Five, “How It Works” was created after the stories had been recorded. Could there have been biases about whose stories were included or who was asked to record a story in the first place? I do not know; but it is sufficient to say that this 75%-math is not a scientific method; it is empirical data.

Because of *Living Sober*’s try what works liberalness, more fundamental AA members disparage the booklet and have even floated failed petitions to the General Service Conference to have the book discontinued.

Critics of AA, outsiders and insiders, who rail against the orthodoxy prefer a static villain with one message and an exclusive, heteronormative, Judeo-Christian, Caucasian, male version of Americana. Arguments that AA is a religion in denial were memorialized by James Christopher who started Secular Organizations for Sobriety in 1986. The Twelve Steps and the *Alcoholics Anonymous* text they were written in, both promulgate a supernatural higher-power bias. Atheists, feminists and underrepresented racial groups have experienced microaggression within meetings and find this core literature exclusive—not inclusive.

It is difficult to include the *Living Sober* ethos of AA in either a “AA is a harmful cult that must be stopped or avoided” rant or a “Single message, written by a messiah, touched by the hand of God,” narrative of the *real* AA.

Fletcher points out that the chapters of *Living Sober* are not professional advice nor against professional advice about the harm of alcohol use disorder or a path to recovery. *Living Sober*’s claim is that is a collective of experiences that has worked for many, in whole or in part. Any AA literature can be viewed in the same light: These are suggestions, this is what some members have found helpful, going it alone did not work for many of us, “We realize we know only a little (page 164, Alcoholics Anonymous).”

John L found much that was good about AA and many of these ideas were captured in the booklet *Living Sober*. I find value in AA and in this book, also. Personally, I think it could use an update. As Fletcher points out, Chapter Four, “Remembering that alcoholism is an incurable, progressive, fatal disease” could use a re-write: alcohol use as a disorder is on a spectrum. Some, maybe 2% can return to moderate drinking. Medical treatments, such as naltrexone (Saint Clair Method) diminish or block the buzz from alcohol so people with a drinking problem do not get the effect they seek if they do drink. We would not feel pleasure from drinking. Some people take this as an aid with the goal of abstinence in mind. Others take the drug with the plan to continue drinking without drinking in excess or suffering the previous consequences.

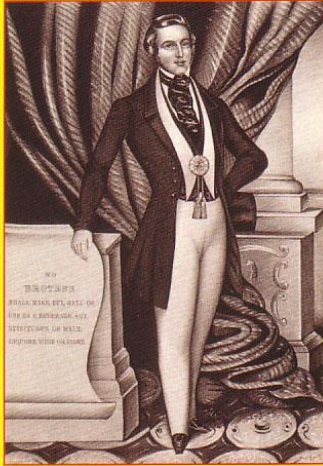
So while we now know that a small percentage of people who wish to return to drinking without harmful side effects, can this chapter be written in a way that is more informed? I think so. The whole booklet also lags behind our current approach to gender pronouns and would do well to incorporate AA’s use of podcasts, smartphones, YouTube, podcasts and other multi-media, and of course virtual gatherings is no longer a geeks way to connect; Zoom is middle of the road now.

If anyone asked, I would vote in favor of updating the info and language of *Living Sober* to reflect the science and culture of . Hell yeah! I lean toward a say “yes” to everything that works approach. If one group says the *Big Book* way is “real AA” and members see success in this esoteric messaging, go for it. Even if you are badmouthing a book like *Living Sober*—which I like—I am for you and your group authority; “vive-la-difference!” Whatever works. I don’t have to go to your meeting; you don’t have to come to mine. What am I going to do with a newcomer who thinks/talks like you if there isn’t a meeting that thinks/talks like you?

If you think the *Big Book* is a pack of superstitious nonsense and antithetical to 21st century recovery, also fine. Keep doing what you are doing be it reading *Living Sober* or seeking out a non-AA approach to sobriety. Recovery is not a zero-sum game. If you get sober your way, that does not take away from my ability to get sober my way. If your group grows in popularity, how is that an existential threat to me and my group? There is no “the” there, as far as “the’ way to find sobriety and enjoy recovery is . You do you, I’ll do me.

John L called things the way he saw them. *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* is complementary to the peer-to-peer recovery line up as any literary offerings. I think we are lucky to have it.

**A
Freethinker
in
Alcoholics Anonymous**



John Lauritsen

ⁱ Regarding how many members of AA at the time of writing *Living Sober* (1975), according to [Box 4-5-9 News and Notes from AA General Service Office](#), membership first reached 500,000+ in 1974; in 1981, the one million members mark would be eclipsed.

ⁱⁱ <https://rehab.com/pro-talk/living-sober-the-little-big-book-that-you-may-not-know-about/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://childrenshealthdefense.org/defender/john-lauritsen-poison-by-prescription-the-azt-story/>