



Servitude & Stewardship: Emotional Sobriety and the Twelve Traditions

Rebellion Dogs Blog March 2023

Inspired am I, by the March 2023 *AA Grapevine*: “Special Section: GET INTO SERVICE! Chairing sponsoring, being a GSR, joining committees, making coffee and more.”ⁱ The joy of giving; service of others, without compensation, is not a dull chore – it is the source of quality when it comes to recovery. In the 2020 Great Britain (and Central Europe Region) AA membership survey, people were invited to share about “What aspects of attending AA do you feel have significantly helped your recovery?” Going to meetings, working the 12 Steps, some idea of a higher power, all of these are reported as “significantly helping.” Let’s not overlook that three out of four members who have found recovery also include:

- (i) helping other people
- (ii) sponsoring others
- (iii) having a home groupⁱⁱ

We talk a lot about recovery and working “a program” comes up a lot. Within the Twelve Step and Twelve Tradition communities we hear about three legacies. Recovery is one of three vital supports in the same interdependent way a three-legged stool is: recovery, unity, service are the three legacies. So, inspired by March’s *AA Grapevine* article and the emphasis Great Britain members place on service – as well as Twelve Steps and meeting attendance – let’s look at the role that helping others has on healing ourselves.

I speak of CHIME, In my recovery and others I see:

- (i) **Connection**
- (ii) **Hope**
- (iii) **Identity**
- (iv) **Meaning**
- (v) **Empowerment.**

These five elements are a theme with those who enjoy positive long-term recovery outcome rates. While much of my service work has been in a Twelve Step/Twelve Tradition function, CHIME is a winning formula with everyone I know in recovery, She Recovers, Dharma/Refuge Recovery, LifeRing, SMART Recovery, Women for Sobriety, Celebrate Recovery, and others.

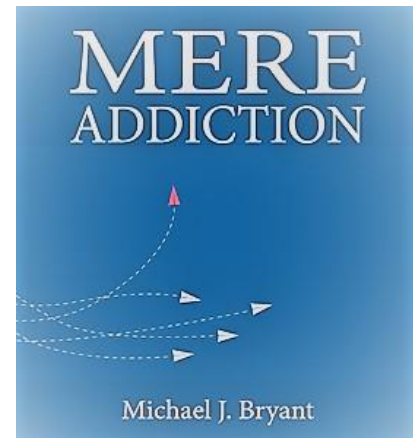
Not everyone who gets sober works Twelve Steps (outside of anonymous fellowships or within them). Within what has been widely coined "12-Step Fellowships," some dismiss Step-work and/or do not credit that part of AA, NA, FA, SLAA, Al-Anon etc experience for being the active ingredient for getting sober or adding meaning and joy in their life, today. This isn't to say that Twelve Step recovery is a hoax or a distraction; Step-work has brought stability and character in my own sobriety. The important thing for me to remember is my experience is not "the" experience. There is no *the* there and I need to respect the tapestry of others' experiences, some of which I expect would never work for me, just as my path would not be a winning formula for all, either. But outside of the 12&12 (Steps/Traditions) model or within it, I am convinced – based on my personal experience and others who thrive – that emotional sobriety does not come from self-reflection, alone. Many of us must step beyond focus about unmet needs and uncomfortable feelings. Listening to (or helping) others can achieve this. Even the 12-Step model was born of two steps, worked simultaneously: as the creation story goes, Bill W admitted that alcohol posed a clear and present threat to him (honesty); he talked to and listened to Bob S, a fellow sufferer of the same malady (service).

Look no further than my own case: service more than self-reflection paved the way to a content life. To whatever extent my life today has value, I didn't get to the second half of life by any holy rote. I did not finish college. My formal education was piecemeal, courses on economics, finance, risk and underwriting, music conferences, songwriting workshops, creative writing and non-fiction courses, there were plenty of industry, management and leadership training, and community college, courses that offered me formal learning, yes. But I was active in Twelve Step/Twelve Tradition service before I left high school.

Some say that everything they needed to learn in life was taught in kindergarten. A lot of what I've learned about navigating the game of life has been in AA business meetings, answering AA help-phones, and committee work from conferences to professional outreach. I am not an Addiction Medicine doctor, a treatment program director, or a rockstar, but I do sponsor some of them. We are all equals in AA. No one is an expert, and no one is subordinate. I have also helped people in these widely varied professions help their fellows find recovery from addiction. This non-degreed writer you're reading has dined with royalty, shared a stage, been backstage and had private conversations in green rooms about music, finance and sports *royalty* as well as dinner and conversation with Prince Philip. I don't feel like a fraud in the company of the famous. I also don't feel superior or afraid serving the homeless in a soup kitchen, or talking to the fallen in jails and detoxes.

This egalitarian attitude is not remarkable in recovery; it's cliché. The unforgettable story of Episode 41 Rebellion Dogs Radio guest Michael Bryant describes aptitude and

ambition leading to law school, Harvard Law School, clerking at the Supreme Court of Canada, getting elected and being appointed the top dog in Ontario's criminal justice system. His rocky addiction and setback in recovery found him jailed, turning to Sanctuary, a community of social justice and homeless people well known to those of us on the AA hospitals and institutions meetings circuit. Michael was reluctantly accepted into the company of the woebegone whose code is "love thy enemy." Michael became a public defender, at the bottom rung of the criminal justice system of laws he created. He's back in British Columbia now, heading Legal Aid for the Province. Michael's opposite track comes to the same obvious truth – everyone has the same rights and value. If you haven't heard the story of Michael Bryant's journey and book, [Mere Addiction](#) listen to Episode 41ⁱⁱⁱ from 2018, aged, but still sporting that new-car smell.



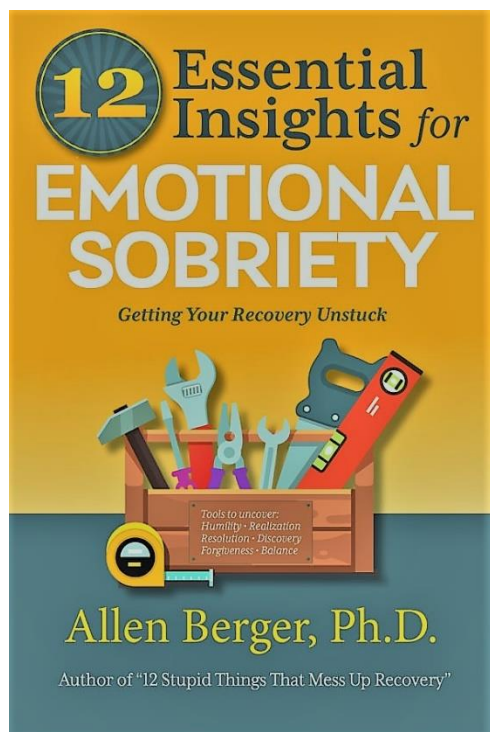
Emotional sobriety, facing stress or defeat or doubt, these are skills learned in recovery. And again, there is a time always for more self-reflection, but moving beyond basic self-care and into servitude and stewardship, this is what taught and preserves emotional sobriety.

Some of the chapters of Allen Berger's [12 Essential Insights for Emotional Sobriety: Getting Your Recovery Unstuck](#)^{iv} include:

- Discovering Novel Solutions
- Living Life on Life's Terms
- Holding On to Ourselves in Relationships
- Knowing It's Not Personal
- Realizing that No One Is Coming
- Breaking the Bonds of Perfection

Do I recognize these traits in my life and the lives of others? Yes.

How and why? In my case these life-skills were a byproduct of being in the service of others, professionally also, but I learned in AA; I learned it through the Twelve Traditions. Just as the steps of AA traditions are principles that neither Bill Wilson, nor AA as a whole, invented. Personally, I think the Twelve Traditions are far more clever and unique to AA than the common Twelve Steps. But like the steps, principles of the traditions were borrowed – not invented. Necessity was the mother of invention, and the profound vision of Bill W and early AA saw a need to create a chaordic organization; the antithesis of a top-down, command-and-control structure, chaordic is a word suggesting the harmony of both chaos and order.



Characteristics of a chaordic organization: Exist primarily to enable their constituent parts. Powered from the periphery, unified from the core. Durable in purpose and principle, malleable in form and function. Equitably distribute power, rights, responsibility, and rewards.^v

Twelve Traditions reconcile chaos and order in balance, enabling all constituent parts, empowering autonomous members and groups that also unify around purpose and principles. Dee Hock, retired CEO of VISA created a buzz around chaordic organizations this century. I walked into the legacy of a 12&12 community in the mid-1970s. The argument that peer-to-peer was born more accurately from Twelve Tradition culture vs. Twelve Step culture is a musing I will gladly make in another blog. But this blog will exemplify that XA

(all the anonymous 12&12 fellowships) offer:

- Power at the periphery; each member, each group can outreach to the community, offering an “invite a professional open meeting night” as a onetime or periodic way to engage your community, attend or put on a booth at a local health and wellness fair or start your group’s own podcast or blog featuring stories by members.
- Unified from the core: I don’t know about where you live, but if you want to get active in your local intergroup, in a district service committee, a recovery clubhouse or Zoom based meeting, there is no waiting list; there are more jobs than volunteers, so if you want to join an existing committee instead of creating something new, what your looking for to give your life and recovery a more solid foothold, already exists steps away or a few clicks away.
- Malleable in form or function: We will hear from members hiding behind the safety of the coffee bar at their home group, helping out within an AA subculture and carrying their message inside institutions. Some of the ways to do service haven’t been invented yet. *Living Sober* says, “There is no prescribed A.A. ‘right’ way or ‘wrong’ way. Each of us uses what is best for [themselves] – without closing the door on other kinds of help we may find valuable at another time. And each of us tries to respect others’ rights to do things differently. (p. 2).” The same is true with service, no matter how introverted or extroverted you are, if you want to find what feels/fits the best or if you want to stretch beyond your comfort zone, you can be doing it later today or tomorrow. Because you can’t get

it wrong. The fear that causes procrastination is mostly an illusion. The rest is just the learning curve of life.

Inspired by the *AA Grapevine* March issue on service, I want to remind people that in both my own process, and what I see in these other stories (and many more), I find AA is not *self-help* so much as *mutual aid*, whereby we are independent AND we are not alone, and those in need AND those aiding are equals and interchangeable. I who freely help you today, will need your assistance tomorrow, just as I needed help from another before.

Recovery can represent more than abstinence from using mind-altering processes or substances to cope. Recovery is thriving, and peacefulness and usefulness. It is connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment. Looking back now I owe my sobriety to being encouraged to get engaged, help others, pitch in, and I have been clean and sober ever since. No one said I had to complete the Twelve Steps to help a newcomer or go with the Public Information committee to a high school to share my story of addiction and early recovery as a student from a school at the other end of town. Getting involved in the Ste. Jerome Quebec Young People's Conference came from a nudge, "We can use some help Joe, can you come to our planning meeting?" There was no vetting of homegroup or sponsor or sobriety date.

I was already sober when I worked the Twelve Steps, and a big factor to being sober was the distinction that I was engaged with – not merely attending – AA and NA meetings. Opening up the meeting room, setting up the chairs, making coffee, serving people coffee and saying, "Hi, how are you?", going with other members to pick up newcomers and taking them to their first meeting, these were foundational in my sobriety. Being engaged in a recovery community, day to day, assuaged the doubt about my own ability to stick it out and slowly, it built character, gave me purpose and meaning.

People can and do help other people in their first peer-to-peer meeting. That's kind of what peer-to-peer means, right? If not enough people are active in your group or mine, are we modeling prosocial behavior and talking about the role of serving others in our meeting as delivering connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment (CHIME)? Are we talking about service and how it gets/keeps us sober. If newcomers are like me, they have to get sober before they work the steps and I had to get active before I could stay sober. Are we putting a cart before a confused and unresponsive horse by talking about the Steps, over and over again?

Well in *AA Grapevine* they are not, this month. They are talking about engaging peer-to-peer in the service of others and how it kept them sober and offers a rewarding and

meaningful life. Those brought together in a bond of common suffering do it for free and are richer for it.

In “Confession of a spreadsheet-Loving Nerd: She found the service she loves, and it keeps on giving back,” (*AA Grapevine* March 2023):

“I had no idea what to say to people I soon discovered that if I made the coffee, people would come up to me and start talking. This caused me, if only for an hour a week, to think of other people and not me.”

Christine S of Texas recalls,

“At six months sober, I was made the literature chair ... What this service position did for this self-centered, grandiose, fearful alcoholic was to help me gain some perspective,”

As recalled in *Grapevine*, Christine got active outside of her group, became a group rep and found greater meaning, purpose, and identity the further down our inverted triangle of AA service they explored.

“When I walked in to my first district meeting and area assembly I felt like maybe, for the first time, I belonged. My whole life I had been trying to hide a secret, a secret I was sure would cause everyone to run away if they knew the truth about me. That secret was that I’m a nerd, a spreadsheet-loving, policies and procedures following nerd. Here was a group of people who were using those kinds of strengths to give back to the Fellowship they loved just as much as I did.”

In “Building Bridges: How getting involved with area committees strengthened her awareness of AA unity and inclusiveness,” Diana M from Nevada shares about being a member of an underrepresented population in AA and how moving a muscle can alter our mood:

“Becoming involved in this committee has helped me form closer ties and achieve broader awareness of our customs on both sides. ... Working together with my Hispanic colleagues opened us up to different perspectives and ideas. I’m certain that we all benefit as we learned more ways of thinking and problem-solving.”

From “Here’s What We Do: He was once a drunk and living in his car. Now he’s sober and helps show future health-care professionals what AA is and isn’t:”

“Maybe someday one of these future doctors will remember what they have heard and seen at an AA meeting to help one other patient find their way to us. That impression that stands out most to these [medical] students, according to

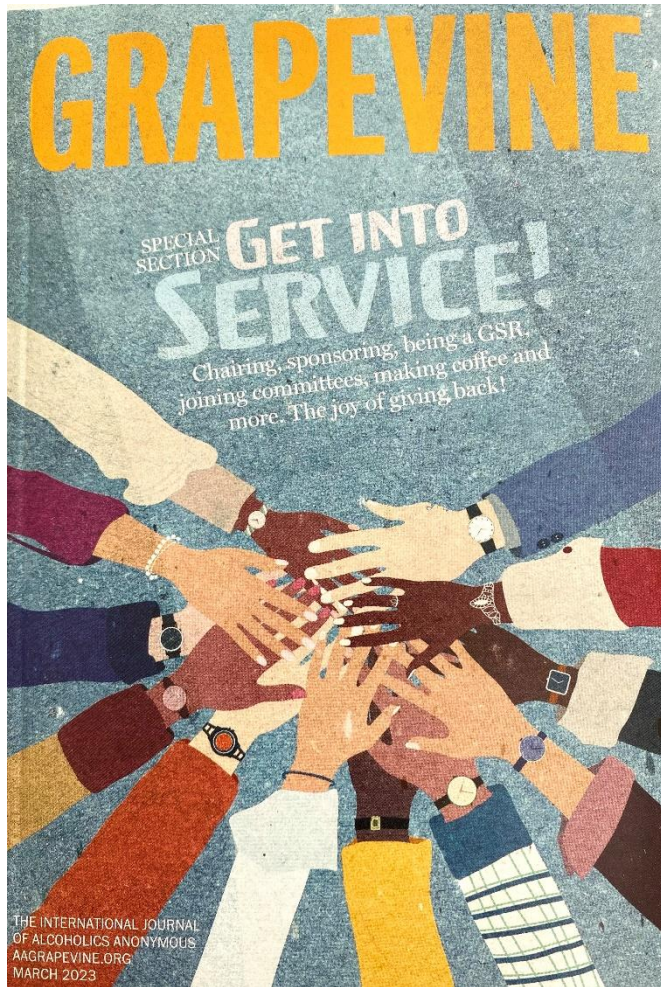
our conversations with them, is the honesty they hear in our sharing. They are awed by AA members sharing their fears and their joys.” Tony S, Pennsylvania

And for me over the years, service work, and to the extent that this is done in a 12&12 informed environment, living and learning the Twelve Traditions, has enriched and informed the biopsychosocial holism of my recovery. The principles of the Traditions help make sense of the principles followed in the Steps. But beyond how service seems to improve recovery outcome rates in my own case and many I have travelled with through the decades, my service journey had made me better at the whole of life. Who I am as a financial advisor, a songwriter, broadcaster, parent, elder caregiver, citizen, athlete, has all been improved by applying the age-old principles learned in Traditions and service. Learning to set my own boundaries, set reasonable expectations, cooperate with the whole of life, is there any one thing that has aided me more in my place in the world than lessons learned from peer-to-peer service? Perspective and wisdom of avoiding being better than, or lesser than, restraint when the urge to express myself impulsively, humility, being curious, these are the result of a process, not something I brought to the game.

In, “I Just said Yes,” I am reminded that I am less likely to worry about either myself or my circumstances when I am in the service of others. And service today can reconcile regrets from our past. Cynthia S from Washington’s exposure to grateful women in Seattle prison, inspired better ways of looking at things and assuaged misgivings from her past.

“I hit bottom during my kids’ teenage years. Going into juvenile detention centers has been a way of giving back and showing up for teenagers. ... I really look forward to returning to in-person meetings when this COVID-19 finally ends!”

I have brought the temperature down in the boardroom by reminding management that we ought to place principles before personalities. You know where I learned that. Over ten years I produced and hosted an indie music radio show that went from college radio to the internet, to SiriusXM. Never once did I mention my own name. “This is IndieCan radio,” was an anonymous intro to over 600 episodes because of what I learned in the rooms. I was in the service of emerging musical artists, I wasn’t their leader or teacher. The band name was important, the album name, the venue or music conference or festival name was important. My name was inconsequential. Being a parent, I am not the star of every drama I am involved with. I may only have a supporting role, I may not even be in the credits. But I am there and what I say and do matters so I try to get it right most often.



I have read a lot of books, taken a lot of courses and been inspired by so many. But I grew up in a recovery community and my learning is not over. My greatest challenges may not have yet been faced. I do not know what lies ahead. I can hold in my mind “I matter in this world,” and “I will one day be forgotten; my legacy is inconsequential.” Both are true. I talked about the Twelve Traditions, framing 12&12 organizations as chaordic.

When invited to think of this idea – harmonizing and utilizing conflict and paradox or holding durable principles and purpose while being flexible in method, self-regulating vs. punitive leadership – does this all sound like a liberal intellectual fantasy? Let’s look at some examples of chaordic systems. Is this not how the universe runs? Chaos and order is the yin/yang of how all of life runs, outside of human made

constructs, of course. So thinking about ourselves or our fellowship or community at large as a chaordic structure, that’s nothing new, that’s reverting back to the norm. The alternative, one element and not the other tends towards either nihilism or fascism. I don’t have to tell you, that’s not good.

And when I read about chaordic organizations and their possible answer to some of the economic disparity and eco-failures of our 20th century top-down, command and control dynamic, I already know what Dee Hock is talking about and how it works. I learned it from people just like me, suffering from addiction and thriving in recovery.

Someone in a meeting confronted me, “Joe are you a human being or a human doing?” I went to Adult Children of Alcoholics Anonymous, I went to therapy, all very rewarding but at the end of the day, can’t I be both? I am both. My life, which includes and is informed by my recovery is crafted from service in AA. Some of it is boring – blame life, not AA. Some of it brings a tear to my eye or raps me in awe. I cannot make my AA a repetitive strain disorder, doing the same thing every week, reading the same book over and over at the cost of anything new. If I do not stay curious, I am inclined to default to

furious (I can't be both at the same time)^{vi}. If things are repetitious or predictable, I start fault finding. But in AA service, every new project feels new and not-yet-defined. A lot of my values have been forged or better defined by getting active. My equanimity (emotional sobriety) comes from servitude and stewardship, more so than the (also necessary) inward gazing recovery work. I think we ask newer people to get engaged in service because it's time to give back; it's a duty. Maybe. But maybe getting engaged, becoming accountable, feeling useful, for some of us, this has to happen before the lasting recovery comes.

If I see people struggling with the Twelve Steps for the first time, maybe a balanced meal of AA would help. Get some nourishment from AA service, too, while we are doing the inward navel gazing and reconciling how to heal our lives.

And I find it better to bring others, not push others, into service. Why go to a district meeting without bringing someone new I'm working with. I don't know what they need? I only know what I have done, so should I not show them all of what I did, including getting engaged, front of stage or in the background.

If someone has been through the Step-work and they are suffering now, maybe more of the same would be good; but maybe getting outside of themselves and into the freely given service of others might be the next right thing. Why do we help someone through the Steps and send them to figure out AA service on their own? I don't know – I'm just asking.

There are enough walking *Big Books* to keep that story going. I'm going to try to be more of a walking *Service Manual* as a path towards connection, hope, identity, meaning and empowerment, and away from the sickness of addiction. Servitude in many cases is the expression of gratitude for the helping hand that gave us a second chance at life; but for many others, helping another may be the spark that inspires hope of our own sustainable recovery.

[AA Grapevine Sample Audio](#)

[AA Grapevine the Podcast](#) (new ½ hour show every Monday)

ⁱ <https://www.aagrapevine.org/>

ⁱⁱ [2020 Great Britain AA Membership Survey Report](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://rebelliondogspublishing.com/rebellious-radio/blog/5522310/mere-addiction-and-the-acid-test-story-rebellion-dogs-radio-41>

^{iv} *Emotional Sobriety* (2021), Dr. Allen Berger <https://amzn.to/3ZpwICU>

^v <https://chaordic.io/blog/what-is-in-a-name/>

^{vi} <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/jerkology/202108/maddiction-addiction-self-righteous-outrage>