



June 2014

I am a sample—not an example!

A new book by John Lauritsen's called *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous celebrates diversity in recovery*

I am a *sample* of recovery; I am not an *example*. I hear ya, “Come on Joe, you’re playing the semantics game, again. You’re not going to write a whole blog on it, are you?” Hear me out. What I am saying is this: isn’t it enough to show that it can work, without laying claim to how it works? If it works for me, it can work for you; if it works for her, it can work for him.

There are many *samples* of recovery that every new member can draw upon to forge their own salvation. We need not adopt the uniformity of zombies; no one should need to shoehorn themselves into someone else’s solution.

In the rooms we find many people working individual programs of recovery—not everyone working an identical program. Some of these individual programs are in tune with the suggested Steps while others reject them completely.

By various online dictionary definitions, examples are “a person or way of being that is seen as a model that should be followed” (www.Meriam-Webster.com) or “one that is representative of a group as a whole.”

(www.TheFreeDictionary.com)”Oxford (www.OxfordDictionaries.com) includes, “A person or think regarded in terms of their fitness to be imitated.”

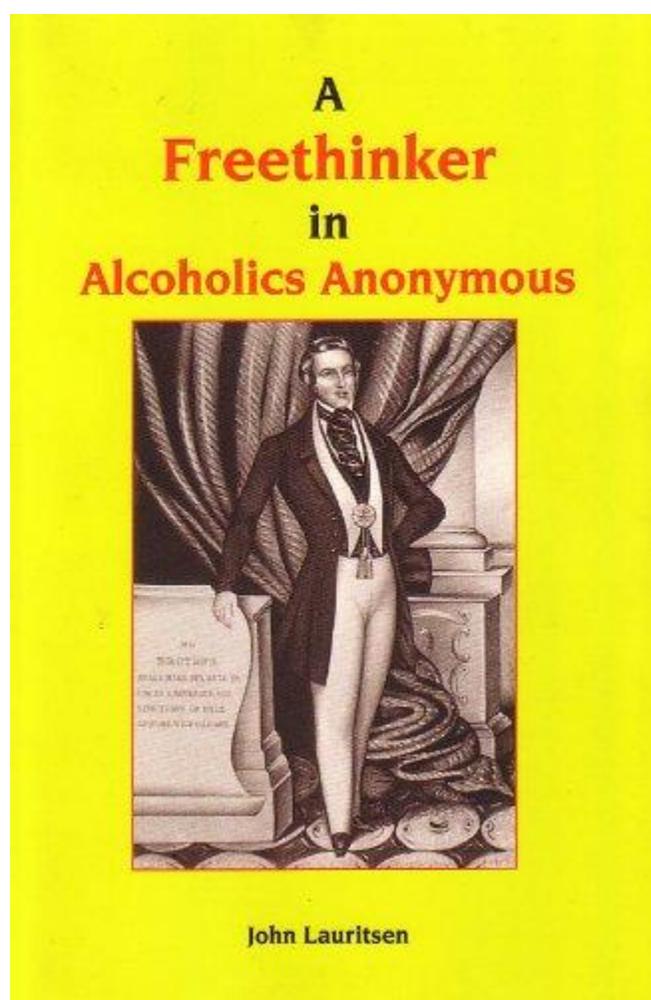
Samples of sample definitions include (www.Merriam-Webster.com) “a small amount of something that gives you information about the thing it was taken from” or better yet (www.MathIsFun.com) “A selection taken from a

Our Declaration of Unity was unveiled at the Miami Beach International Convention of AA in 1970: This we owe A.A.'s future: To place our common welfare first; to keep our Fellowship united. For on A.A. unity depends our lives, and the lives of those to come.

larger group so that you can examine it to find out something about the larger group.”

In the same way a Psychology test mines a random sample, I like to include myself as being within an extreme range of possibilities in sobriety, more than I like to be emulated as a *power of example*.

I say again that I believe that the role of a new member’s inner circle in recovery is to help her or him find *their* salvation—not indoctrinate them into *our* brand of salvation—a new person should observe many samples of recovery from an ample pool of addicts to help formulate their own plan for sobriety.



By the (big) book, “How It Works” is by implementation of the Twelve Steps of *Alcoholics Anonymous*. John Lauritsen, in his new book, *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous* says “Not so fast!”

“The Fellowship and the 24-hour Plan are the pillars of Alcoholics Anonymous. ... there is great freedom in A.A., both for the group and the individual. In my 46 years of sobriety I have always been able to find groups with a maximum of fellowship and minimum of religiosity.”

John reminds us that the **suggested Steps** is another way of saying the **optional Steps**. They violate his creed and core beliefs so he never worked the Steps. John explains why he disagrees with the

powerlessness premise. The concept of an intervening deity has never proven in life or in AA. Forget morality; while the Step Four idea of taking inventory isn’t a bad idea, as John sees it, alcoholism isn’t brought about by

moral defects. Alcoholism causes moral compromise—not the other way around.

John credits his success, which he describes as social, physical, financial and intellectual recovery to what he calls, “real A.A.” According to what John has observed in AA since 1968, what works is the 24-hour program, the Fellowship’s mutual-aid environment and a determined mantra of “If you get run over by a train, don’t blame the caboose for killing you; stay away from the first drink.”

The dogmatic preaching of the Twelve Steps is what John calls “false AA.” It’s not because he thinks the Steps don’t work; he accepts the claims of many that, for them, the Twelve Steps have been life altering. However, in *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous*, the argument is made that there are some premises about the Steps that are born of AA mythology and not our actual history. One myth is that this is exactly how the first 100 members got sober.

The early members had an oral tradition before we codified it into 164 pages. Most members who were Step oriented had a six-step process which varied from member to member and region to region. The Twelve Steps were new to these (mostly sober) members when they read Bill’s version of Chapter 5, “How it Works.” Some liked them, some objected. It was a tough sell for Bill to get the members to adopt the Steps and it was hardly unanimous. As John writes:

“Whether the Steps are helpful, harmful or both, it is intolerable that they should become sacred dogma. Everyone should be free to criticize or reject the Steps—openly, and without risk of ostracism. Every A.A. member and every A.A. group should be free to reinterpret and re-write the Steps, in line with the principles of the A.A. Preamble and the Twelve Traditions. The True A.A., the Fellowship, belongs to us freethinkers as much as it does to the god-people.”ⁱⁱⁱ

John’s books describes AA as a Fellowship of two million members all working their own unique “program” that we have quilted together in part from ideas and practices we learn from the sharing and encouragement we get in the rooms and, in part, from the values and practices we bring to or develop in recovery.

So, John L is a sample of recovery. Anyone from the rooms or the treatment industry ought to read his book to better understand AA's wide tent. He is candid about his ideas of what could make AA better. One need not adopt his views, but we would be remiss to not hear how he came to these conclusions. John exemplifies, as many in AA do, that physical, social and mental recovery are all possible without adherence to a deity, the powerlessness notion or the idea that defects of character are correlated to substance or process addiction.

***Mantras for newcomers
from early AA:***

*A pickle never becomes a
cucumber again; once an
alcoholic, always an
alcoholic.*

*If you get run over by a
train, it's not the caboose
that kills you; it's not that
last drink that's to blame –
it's the first drink that gets
us.*

I came here a drug addict who also drank compulsively. Alcohol wasn't a drug of choice over any of the others—it was good enough. I generally identify as an alcoholic. I freely talk about drugs if it fits into the story I am telling but I don't talk a lot about the past in meetings, in part because my greatest hurdles in life were to come after my last drink. In AA, sober, I had two kids from two moms and my infidelity was a contributor to both of those breakups. Herpes and HIV came after "the gift of the 12 Steps." The same is true with my financial bankruptcy; that was a gift of sobriety. I have compulsive eating working and hoarding tendencies that concern me at

times. I was in jail five years sober for non-payment of speeding tickets. Somehow, I thought powered-by-AA gave me an exception to life's rules; the Royal Canadian Mounted Police disagreed.

Mine is no conference talk about the socio-economic upward trend from day-one of sobriety through to present day. Some consider me an "example" of decades of sobriety. I call myself a sample, not an example. I don't have what everyone wants, nor do I want to have what everyone wants. I want to live my flawed, incomplete life without the pressure of other people looking up to me. Others can look and they can learn all they want. I live by my values. Sure, much of what forged these values was the lessons learned in the rooms. But I feel no obligation to be "on" or a power of example.

I champion radical inclusion and I speak out against what-you-need-to-do-ism. “My way is the best way” chatter is, what Ernie Kurtz calls spiritual arrogance—an oxymoron if I ever saw one. In his recent book, co-authored with Katherine Ketcham, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling*, a story of grandiosity or a sense of superiority is told:

“Playing God’ can happen in small ways, for example in the ever-present temptation to seek an edge, gain some privilege:

A car accident occurred in a small town. A crowd surrounded the victim so a newspaper reporter couldn’t get close enough to see him.

He hit upon an idea. ‘I’m the father of the victim!’ he cried. ‘Please let me through.’

The crowd let him pass so he was able to get right up to the scene of the accident and discover, to his embarrassment, that the victim was a donkey.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Instant-karma, where the principle character immediately sees that his arrogance made him out to look like an ass to everyone else, isn’t always the case. Years of reinforcement can encourage those in the rooms who hold themselves out as the bishops and cardinals of *The AA Way*, compounding their arrogance and belligerence. This dynamic makes for what we see in some quarters of 12 & 12 Fellowships, an air of polarizing platitudes espoused by bullies that make those with doubt, critical thinking and alternate views look for the exits or alternatively, emotionally close down—becoming closet skeptics.

No one should feel that what they have to say about addiction and recovery is unfit for an AA meeting or any Twelve Step meeting for that matter. We are all samples, from the most devote servant of Yahweh to the boldest reductionist, we all have standing and we are all united.

I will close with some reflections offered by Bernard Smith, one of our early non-alcoholic Trustees and AA’s first Chair of The General Service Board (originally known as the Alcoholic Foundation). Bern authored the Bylaws of the General Service Board, adopted by AA in 1957. Smith’s Miami talk on Unity and Continuity in July of 1970 would be the last we would hear of Bernard Smith. He died the following month of a heart attack. Bill W was dying himself and could not make Bern’s funeral. He sent a tribute that would be read by another AA member. In this tribute Bill W gives thanks.

“Bern made a remarkable and inspiring talk to some 11,000 of our members gathered in Miami Beach to celebrate our Fellowship’s 35th anniversary. The subject of his talk was ‘Unity’ – truly an apt subject, for no man did more than he to assure unity within our Fellowship.

For that matter, he did much to assure our very survival, for he was one of the principle architects of the General Service Conference.

Bern Smith would not want, nor does he need, encomiums from me. What he has done for Alcoholics Anonymous speaks far louder than any words of mine could ever do. His wisdom and vision will be sorely missed by us all.”

Here are some of the timeless words from Bern Smith’s speech. They demonstrate to me that all of us samples of recovery have standing and add value—to each other, now and for the still suffering alcoholic who has not yet reached our doors.

“Perhaps no time in history has this land of ours been so torn by dissention, by divisiveness, by mistrust. Yet we are here in convention assembled as if on an island of unity in a world sea of disunity. What we seek now and will forever seek in the future is not to find unity, for we now have it, but rather steadily and unceasingly to insure that our precious unity will remain in continuity of all time.

Now, you may have observed that the title of my talk this evening is ‘Unity and Continuity.’ The word ‘unity’ is variously defined. I have chosen as the definition applicable to our Fellowship that which reads: ‘the quality or state of being or consisting of one, a totality of related parts.’ For, indeed, we are assembled here this evening as a true totality of related parts...

Slowly and painstakingly, we have built upon the spiritual foundation of this great Society a structure that, I believe, can with continued devotion insulate this Fellowship against the ravages of time, of dissent, of materialistic decay...

Alcoholics Anonymous does not claim any monopoly on the achievement of sobriety. While sobriety is indeed the end we seek, the means by which we attain it render this Fellowship unique. We believe, as Aldous Huxley said in his *End and Means*: ‘Our personal experience and the study of history make it abundantly clear that the

means whereby we try to achieve something are at least as important as the end we wish to attain. Indeed, they are even more important. For the means employed inevitably determine the nature of the result achieved.’

Our message to society is not so much that we have succeeded in ceasing to drink, but that, by the nature of the means we employ, we have found a way to fulfill our lives. We do not acquire sobriety through the use of chemical formula or a powerful drug. We achieve it by applying to our daily lives the simple tenets of humility, honesty, devotion, love and compassion.”^{iv}

Bernard Smith’s talk suggests to me that AA’s tenets are universal principles that transcend language, creed and personal experience or taste. The means can be various and the end the same. We hear, “Go to enough meetings and you’ll hear your story.” The feeling that comes from that experience is that we are no longer alone. That feeling is very empowering—very healing. Let’s hope that we can continue to celebrate the variety of AA experiences. Every sample and every example matters for any society with the legacies of recovery, unity and service.

ⁱ Chapter 8, “The Fellowship,” Lauritsen, John, *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous*, Dorchester: Pagan Press, 2014

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ Kurtz, Ernest, Ketcham, Katherine, *Experiencing Spirituality: Finding Meaning Through Storytelling*, New York: Penguin, 2014, p. 205

^{iv} More on Bern Smith: http://www.alcoholics-anonymous.org/lang/en/en_pdfs/en_box459_oct-nov08.pdf