



Rebellion Dogs Blog August 2017

How Baby Boomers are Killing AA and Four Ways You and I can Stop Them

“The boomer generation is the only one that unselfconsciously uses the pronoun ‘we’ when describing itself; X, Y and beyond [younger generations] flee the room the moment someone says, ‘we.’”

Douglas Coupland, author of Generation X in his Foreword to Rosa Harris’

BOOMERVILLE-Musings on a Generation that Refuses to Go Quietlyⁱ

“We stood at the turning point... we practice these principles in all of our affairs...” Douglas Coupland, is it something we said? This quote speaks 12-Step culture. If this speaks to needs of future generations, what does this say about AA sustainability?

Long before AA’s centennial birthday (2035), we will be a mostly-millennial fellowship. Will our literature resonate with newcomers and 2035 long-timers in the same way that we-loving Baby Boomers feel about AA verses, today? Here’s something else to think about: Is our job as stewards to preserve AA as it was, or prepare AA for those yet to come?

According to U.S. Department of Health Services National Center for Health Statistics this is how the break down goes generations-wise in and outside of 12-Step rooms:

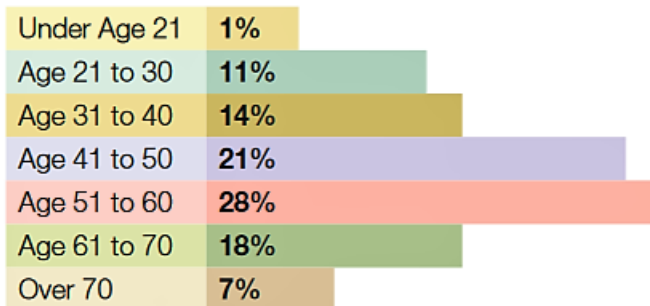
<i>Generation</i>	<i>Years “we” were born</i>	<i>Age “we” are now (2017)</i>
<i>Silent Generation</i>	1928—1945	72 years and older
<i>Baby Boomers</i>	1946—1964	53 to 71 years old
<i>Generation X</i>	1965—1980	37 to 52 years old
<i>Millennials (Gen Y)</i>	1981—1997	20 to 36 years old
<i>Post Millennials (Gen Z)</i>	1998—2014	3 to 19 years old

I’m a Boomer. According to Coupland, when I—or we of my era—say, “What AA needs to thrive in the future is to ...” what I really mean is, “What I want ...,” “What makes me most comfortable ...” Also, if Coupland has nailed it, I am under the misapprehension that I am speaking for everyone; I am unaware of projecting my own biases. Speaking in the authorial “we” might not be an empathetic, community building way to treat fellow addicts. Certainly, things are different since my foggy memories of what made me start to feel comfortable in AA

and want to get sober. Maybe this is a serious generational thing – a communication breakdown.

Unless someone (younger) points it out, how would I know that the way I express myself is repugnant to the generation of AA that matters most – generation-next.

AGE OF MEMBERS



Average Age of Members is **50** Years.

On the previous page and here, charts look at generations and AA population. According to demographers (first chart), there are five generations in AA, today. On the left is AA's age (2014 AA Membership Survey)ⁱⁱ. AA conducts a triennial survey. At the time of writing this, AA is collecting 2017 data but it won't be available to membership until mid-to-late-2018. Currently in AA, our average AA is a Gen X

(50-years-old). About 25% of us are millennials. That number can only grow, if one assumes that AA will grow or at least stay the same as our current (roughly two-million) population. Exactly 0% of our literature was written by Generation Next. *As Bill Sees It* dried up for new content upon Bill's 1971 death when the oldest Gen Xers were six-years-old.

Is it possible that the way the older ½ of our fellowship likes to be read to from the podium is turning off the younger generation? Could this be a contributory factor to AA's population stagnation or decline (depending on how you measure it) since late last century?

Today, let us take inventory of AA literature and the bulk of copy-cat 12-Step books that followed AA's lead. Let's look at the authorship of "we" and consider how big a problem it is and what *we* can do about it.

First, let's look at AA's generational trending, as studied and reported by the Pew Research Groupⁱⁱⁱ. The 2016 report starts off with this zinger:

Millennials have surpassed Baby Boomers as the nation's largest living generation, according to [population estimates](#) released this month by the U.S. Census Bureau. Millennials, whom we define as those ages 18-34 in 2015, now number 75.4 million, surpassing the 74.9 million Baby Boomers (ages 51-69). And Generation X (ages 35-50 in 2015) is projected to pass the Boomers in population by 2028.

Again, 2028 is well before AA's centennial birthday in 2035. If AA still gathers around a 100-year old – never updated – *Big Book*, how large will the 100th birthday cake have to be? Who will

be left to care about AA's legacy? If our literature inadvertently polarizes our current and future demo, AA loyalists will be sharply declined.

The Pew Report by senior researcher, Richard Fry goes on to further future-shock us:

For a few more years, Gen Xers are projected to remain the "middle child" of generations – caught between two larger generations of the Millennials and the Boomers. They are smaller than Millennials because the generational span of Gen X (16 years) is shorter than the Millennials (17 years) ... Baby Boomers have always had an outsized presence compared with other generations. They were the largest generation and peaked at 78.8 million in 1999."

"Talking 'bout my generation," as The Who sung to us, Baby Boomers have taken it back; we no longer hope we die before we get/got old. AA language started getting old in 1999. If we continue to "party like it's 1999 (OMG—even Prince is dead)" we are dreaming if we imagine AA having a relevant place in a 2035 discussion about addiction and recovery.

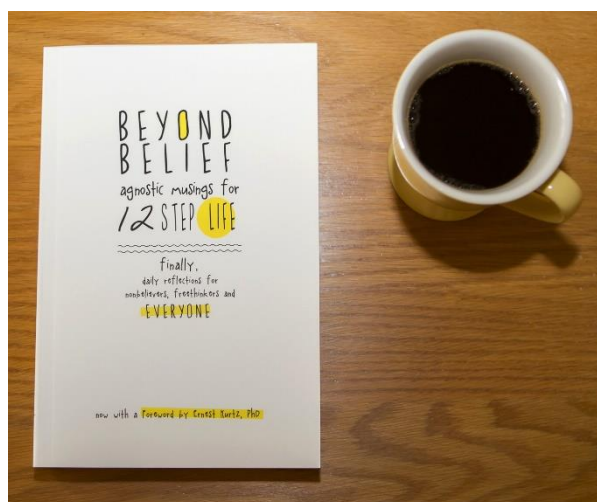
Our literature is written most often in this we-authorship. As a writer, I can tell you it is not natural and if *we* were to replace it with a better way, *we* could solve some uncomfortable and clumsy obstacles. Just writing and re-reading that last sentence, I find this we-thing to be an insidious habit. I struggled with this very dilemma when I wrote a book for people with alcohol and other substance use disorders.

I remember trying this out as an author. Was I going to write *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* in first person, I, I, I, finger pointing you, you, you second-person or with "we" authorship? To 12-Step rooms, of any generation, we-talk begets eyeball rolling.

So, from the Preface of *Beyond Belief*, here's how I recounted this editorial conundrum leading up to our January 2013 release:

The daily musings in this book are written in the customary *we* voice. I know—only obnoxious people talk this way in meetings. However, this is the style used in self-help writing. There are imperfections with the English language and they become even more pronounced using this *we* voice.

Technically, "God of our understanding" should be "Gods of our understanding." If two people believe in God, the God of one's understanding is a different one than the others—hence, *Gods*. "Clearing away our *side* of the street" would be more grammatically correct as "our *sides* of the street" but nobody talks that way. "Our drug of choice" should be "our drugs of



choice” and “our inner-child” should be “our inner children” to be consistent with the plural “our.” As an editorial turning point there was no way to be grammatically correct and not come across awkwardly. Most daily reflection books are penned in a *we* voice so *we do too*, despite the ambiguity.^{iv}

In light of Douglas Coupland’s new information, with *Beyond Belief*, would I make the same editorial decision – if I’m thinking about the average person new to recovery, today? She is a millennial. Or maybe she’s Generation X or a teenage Gen Z.

We-authorship: the good, the bad and the ugly

The GOOD: Our first literary effort wasn’t written from an exclusive we-authorship perspective, originally. It was written in second-person – “You...” The original manuscript and the edits to Chapter Five (“How It Works”) includes the statement, “If you are convinced, you are at step three, which is that you make a decision to turn your will and your life over to God as you understand Him.” The next edit was “Being convinced we were at step three, which is that we decided to turn our wills and our lives over to God as we understood Him.”

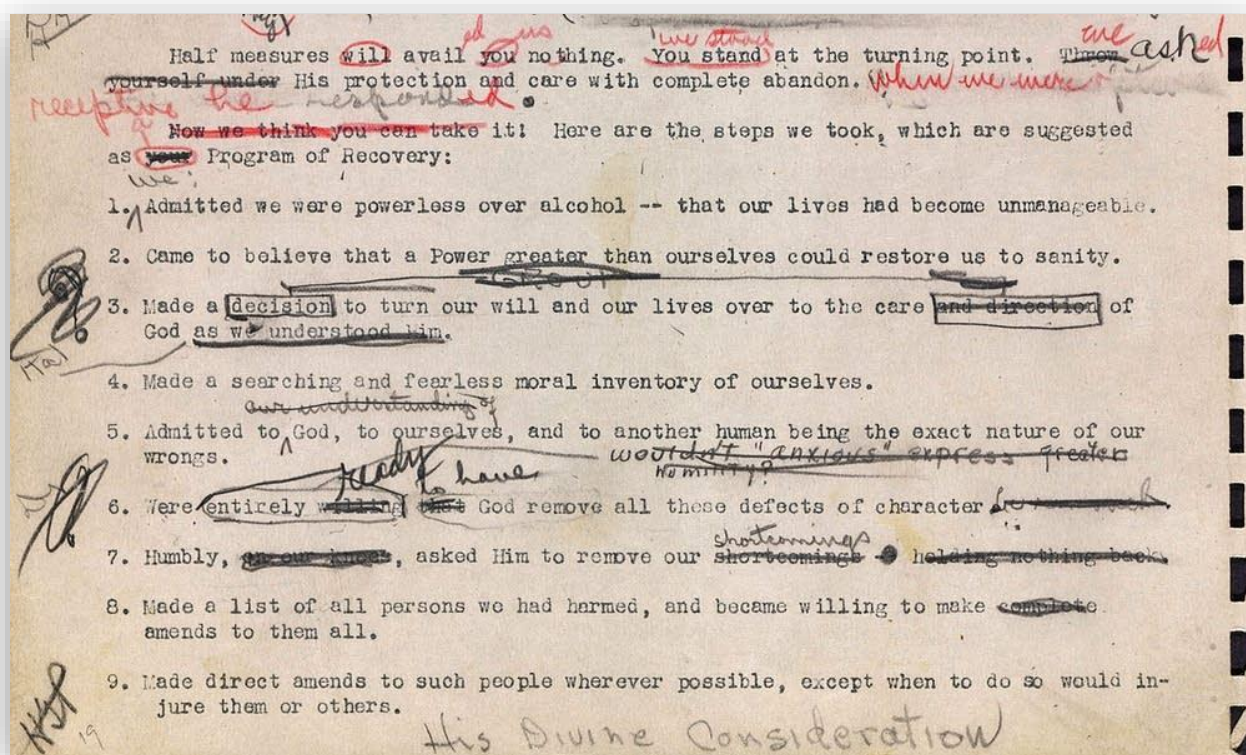
This you-to-we-authorship change was a reaction to broad criticism that our manuscript was going to confront and alienate our prospective new members. Doctors who worked with inebriates reminded us that telling a problem drinker what to do would not be well received. Better, we tell them what our experience has been; stop pointing a finger at the alcoholic. “Use suggestions; don’t make commands,” we were told by the academics, religious and medical experts of the day. It made sense that this would be more palatable to our reader.

Other examples of the original “you”/second-person language was:

“Half measures will avail you nothing. You stand at the turning point. Throw yourself under His protection and care with complete abandon. Now we think you can take it: Here are the steps...” *Alcoholics Anonymous* manuscript

So, the “we language” reflected our experience, it didn’t presume to instruct; we made a list, we stood at the turning point was a big improvement over “you must this” and “you will find that...” It was just right for a time. It took from 1939 until 1973 for AA to sell one million we, we, we *Big Books*. By 1990 we sold over ten million and then sold one million per year until 2010 where we exceeded thirty million cumulative *Big Books* sales.

From a 2009 high of 1,220,138 annual *Big Books* we sunk nearly 30% to 887,532 in 2010. We would rest below one-million annual sales for years. In 1990 when we were regularly selling a million per year, Baby Boomers were between 26 and 44 years old – prime time for coming to AA for the first time. By 2010, Boomers were 46 – 64, past the average age that sufferers of alcohol and other drug use disorders first come to AA. Since 2010, the average newcomer is either Gen X, 30 to 45-years-old or even late 20s millennials.



The unconsciously (according to Coupland) blissful Baby Boomers talked up our we, we, we, experience during our heyday. This phenomenon turned Alcoholics Anonymous into one of USA's largest publishing companies, driving Bill W books (*Alcoholics Anonymous*, 12 & 12, *AA Comes of Age* and *As Bill Sees It*) to over fifty-million copies by 2010. Along with book sales, membership growth follows the *We-Gen* Baby Boomers, too. AA broke two-million members in the early 1990s when Boomers were 30 to 45-years-old which is prime newcomer-age. The 2017 first-time-to-AA member of 30 to 45-year-olds are Gen X and millennials.

We are at the end of the "our experience has taught us" generation and we are now starting the era of the, "I mistrust you if you keep talking that way" AA members.

No problem; if the literature as written is no longer communicating effectively, we can just change a few pronouns, right?

The BAD: In 2002, The General Service Conference affirmed the following advisory action:

"The text in the book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, written by Bill Wilson, remain as is, recognizing the Fellowship's feeling that Bill's writings be retained as originally published."

It should be no surprise that the lion's share of 2002 delegates and other Conference members were we-loving Boomers.

Reflecting on the challenges of a new millennium, AA at least asked the question; “Ought our literature be updated? Is this mid-20th century language up to code for the millennial generation?” The blowback was unwavering. In 2003, as they looked at proposed *Twelve and*



Twelve fixer-upers, the General Service Conference voted unanimously to re-assert the 2002 idea of never altering Bill W’s writings... not one wee (we) word.

Hence, the General Service Conference’s *welcome the new millennium* introduction to the 12 & 12 is what the Conference calls, “a unified response to questions regarding specific language, idioms, and historical figures or events from A.A. members, newcomers and non-alcoholics.” Thus, your *Twelve and Twelve* intro now starts off as follows:

“Alcoholics Anonymous first published *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in 1953. Bill W., who

along with Dr. Bob S. founded Alcoholics Anonymous in 1935, wrote the book to share 18 years of collective experience within the Fellowship on how A.A. members recover, and how our society functions.

In recent years some members and friends of A.A. have asked if it would be wise to update the language, idioms, and historical references in the book to present a more contemporary image for the Fellowship. However, because the book has helped so many alcoholics find recovery, there exists strong sentiment within the Fellowship against any change to it. In fact, the 2002 General Service Conference discussed this issue and it was unanimously recommended that: “The text in the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, written by Bill W., remain as is, recognizing the Fellowship’s feelings that Bill’s writing be retained as originally published.

We hope that the collective spiritual experience of the A.A. pioneers captured in these pages continues to help alcoholics and friends of A.A. understand the principles of our program.”^v

So, Boomers, who prefer the we-language, pretty much reified AA best-sellers into our own likeness. It isn’t wrong to preserve a legacy. The question is about our primary purpose. As asked previously about stewardship: is our duty to preserve AA in the likeness of our founders or prepare AA in the best way we can for the AA member yet to come?

The UGLY: One point has already been made; *Generation-Next* is saying loud and clear, “We don’t feel comfortable with this “*we* tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all *our* affairs,” language, and, as Gen-X Douglas Coupland describes us,

Boomers unselfconsciously retort with glee, “If it works why fix it? *We* will be amazed before *we* are half way through.”

The other more insidious consequence of a generation of we-talk is a tendency towards believing that or representing the AA experience as being universal. The thinking goes, if we did this and we got that then we must be the same. To all but the unselfconscious, this just isn't true. If I do twelve things exact as you explained that you had done, I will get a different result than you. If you do the same as me, you will get a different outcome. Results may vary.

Take AA's love-in with the word, “spiritual.” Contrary to *Big Book* warnings, bristling over the word “spiritual” is harmless. Being united as AA members isn't to abandon authenticity and cave to group-think. It's fine to have a *practical* experience as a result of these steps... or just *an experience* as a result of these steps. It's cult-like to take our literature literally and encourage conformity. If spiritual is the word you would have used to describe your experience, run with it. “Spirituality” isn't a bad word. Just don't worry about those who take a pass on claiming to have had a spiritual experience. We will get and/or stay sober just like you - in our own individual way.

From “We Agnostics:”

“...we often found ourselves handicapped by obstinacy, sensitiveness, and unreasoning prejudice. Many of us have been so touchy that even casual reference to spiritual things made us bristle with antagonism. This sort of thinking had to be abandoned.” *Alcoholics Anonymous*, P 48

This is one *fly in the ointment* of taking our literature literally or isolating a single statement without context. This very statement from page 48 was walked-back in so many ways over the years. By the second printing of the same *Big Book* more had been revealed.

“The Spiritual Experience (Appendix II),” is our sober-second-thought about AA. We note that, while “our more religious call it God-consciousness,” many AAs identify their sobriety as being a “personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism... the ‘educational variety’ ... a profound alteration in his reaction to life...” and so on.

Recovery can be pragmatic — or material vs. spiritual — if you prefer. This problem of group-think starts or at least is compounded with we-authorship. To quote AA Chair of the Board emeritus, Rev. Ward Ewing, as I am apt to do, “Experience trumps explanation.”^{vi} We all share the transformative experience from compulsive drinking to being freed from the bondage of addiction. Calling it a *spiritual* experience is an explanation which doesn't help everyone identify. While many sincerely identify it as a *spiritual* experience, AA isn't faith healing and it's an established fact that conformity to a religious explanation of recovery isn't necessary. To encourage conformity is not helpful and this misstep is front-of-mind for millennials.

HOPE for a future that includes AA

Baby Boomers threw an anchor in the water by declaring the writings of Bill W. to be sacred. I share the opinion that it was not Bill W's wish to be reified as casting the final word, or a more precious word, than any other AA member. It's not the founders that are to blame for resistance to change; it's my nostalgia-snorting Baby Boomer generation that is the problem.

I've asked before, "If the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was a text book, wouldn't it be updated every five years or so?" Grade Five math principles are largely the same today as they were in 1939. However, we change the books that each generation of students reads for good reason.

If I sound nihilistic or defeatist, maybe I'm just trying to show that I can relate with Generation Z, the cool kids. They love that #post-apocalyptic stuff so maybe I played the prognosticator of hell-and-damnation a little heavy. The future is not predetermined. We aren't held hostage, waiting for AA *as a whole* to change its editorial policy. There are things we can do today, at our home group. You and I can save the AA day.

Four Ways to Save AA from Baby Boomers

Save the day Action #1: Stop Reading from the *Big Book* at Open Meetings. August 2017 *Grapevine* has an article "Too Much Too Soon" suggests that reading "How It Works" at meetings "might not be best way to set newcomers on the right course... most newcomers don't need to know all the Steps at their first meeting."



That's a sober idea that sounds radical, only because of what you and I are accustomed to. If I stop reading from the *Big Book* at my home-group I eliminate a lot of we-talk. You don't have to ban the book; just stop drowning our meeting in it. Dr. Bob got sober shortly after he talked to Bill W. Bill had no book, no Steps and no "How It Works" but the two men helped each other get and stay sober.

In the absence of traditional readings, newcomers hear firsthand accounts — not we-talk. I might say that I read this-or-that in AA literature and how it helped me. So it's not forbidden fruit. But leave the book on the library table for now — attraction rather than promotion. Curious minds will find it.

Save the day Action #2: Focus sharing at meetings on personal experience. There is nothing sacred and nothing forbidden in how an AA meeting is formatted. There are no must or must-not rituals. Stop praying, stop saying “I’m _____ and an alcoholic”; any of these customary rituals are just that – not all of them were done in the meetings that got our founders sober. Here is a local example. Toronto’s, We Are Not Saints Group lights up Friday night by opening with the AA Preamble, the chair identifies (an AA lead) for 2–3 minutes, then she asks for three topics from the floor, writes them down, passes around the paper with the topics, everyone can share or pass or talk about something else, the meeting closes with the Responsibility Declaration. If the Steps are talked about, it’s first person experience, not “we this,” or “we that.” If higher power is talked about, it’s a personal experience and not a “God as we understand Him.”

AA literature is found at the library table next to coffee, tea and treats. Reading literature on one’s own time is encouraged but firsthand accounts dominate the meeting time instead of what one hundred now-dead white guys did 75 years ago.

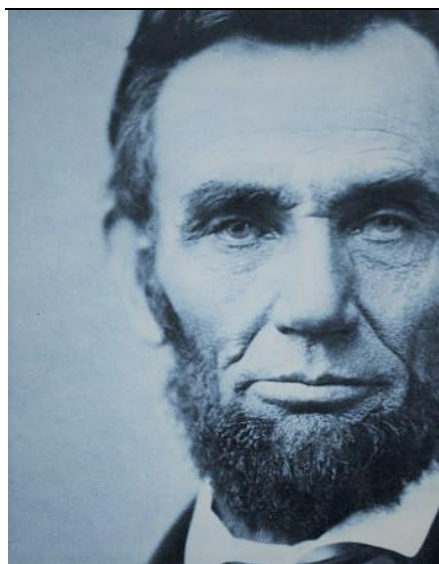
Save the Day Action Plan # 3: Stop quoting from the Big Book or 12 & 12. Why do I do that, anyway? It lends authority and I get to say “we” when I mean “I.” It’s sneaky, it’s inauthentic and it’s obvious what I’m doing and unattractive to today’s newcomer.

It’s also unnecessary. If I say what I mean, in my own words, it may not be as articulate as Uncle Bill W but it’s sincere. People don’t remember what they heard; they remember how the meeting (members) made them feel. Memorizing what Bill wrote won’t leave an impression with the people who matter most – the newcomers.

Save the Day Action Plan # 4: Don’t go away mad but start your own meeting with alternative readings and a coffee pot. There are plenty of books about alcohol use disorder written in this century; some of them are written by AA members who were just as sober and just as smart as any of our first members. The [Rebellion Dogs bookstore](http://rebelliondogspublishing.com) has plenty of my favorites. I can find one of these books and read from it at my meeting or each week’s chair can pick any book or magazine article she likes. This isn’t blasphemous, it’s just an uncommon suggestion.

From the General Service Office of AA, a clarification is made about this matter.

“The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present. The occasion is piled high with difficulty, and we must rise with the occasion. As our case is new, so we must think anew and act anew.”



Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865)

“Conference Approved,” an often-misunderstood term, “does not imply Conference disapproval of other materials about A.A. A great deal of literature helpful to alcoholics is published by others, and A.A. does not try to tell any individual member what he or she may or may not read.”^{vii}

My meeting – and yours – is the highest authority in AA. If I can’t persuade my meeting to try another way of running the meeting for a trial period and see what happens, how am I going to persuade the General Service Conference? Write to your delegate; write to *The Grapevine* or your Intergroup newsletter; share this blog on Facebook; write your own blog. These are all worthwhile ideas. While you do that, I don’t want to think globally and forget to act locally.

The AA way is that we share experience; we have no expertise to offer and we make no demands to make.

If a better way works in even one group, it will catch on. AA was created by trial and error and our history is ongoing. We can still try new things without hyperbolic fear of ruining everything. I can ask myself, “Does what I say during our meeting resonate with the next generation? Is my meeting a welcoming place to the next generation?”

That’s how I’m going to change AA. And if one change doesn’t have lasting impact, I’ll try another. It doesn’t matter to me what other groups read or say or pray. Let every member read every book that holds the key to sobriety for those members – or no book at all.

I’ll try new things and see how people respond. Maybe I will ask you what you’re doing at your meeting and maybe I’ll try that next week.

So, from a Baby Boomer, on how to save AA from Baby Boomers narcissistic nostalgia, there you have it; one meeting at a time, one member at a time. I don’t remember where this quote come from which I take artistic liberty with. I believe it has indigenous origins.

For me I will try to think of it as “*We do not inherit AA from our founders; we borrow it from the next generation.*” I hope I can leave AA better prepared than I found it.

ⁱ <https://www.amazon.com/Boomerville-Musings-Generation-Refuses-Quietly-ebook/dp/B0165SOKTM>

ⁱⁱ http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/p-48_membershipsurvey.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>

^{iv} Joe C., *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life*, Toronto: Rebellion Dogs Publishing, 2013 (Preface)

^v Wilson, Bill, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, New York: AA World Service, 2012

^{vi} AA *Grapevine*, “We Share Common Ground” October 2016

^{vii} http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-29_en.pdf