



Rebellion Dogs Blog, June 2017

Review of AA's Annual Membership Survey + "Love & Tolerance is our Code"

In this Blog:

- ⇒ *The latest AA membership survey*
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In the Summer Box 4-5-9: *News and Notes from the General Service Office of A.A.* our latest membership numbers will be posted. Comparing our January 1, 2017 numbers with a year prior, we can look at what the trend means for AA and how we might be responding to the trend. To let the cat out of the bag, worldwide AA membership is down 6% over last year. AA has largely had

flat membership numbers since 1991 (2.1 Million members). Membership isn't down everywhere but USA and Canadian membership is down about 10%.

The Road to Detroit 2020

Reading the Spring Box 4-5-9, we see that the theme for the next World Convention (Detroit, July 2 - 5, 2020) was chosen from suggestions sent in from the membership. And the winner is: "Love and Tolerance is Our Code". Into Action of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, says, "Love and tolerance of others is our code (p.84)."

Today, we can see evidence in AA – the oldest of 12-Step based mutual-aid groups – that there is a growing tolerance. This isn't to say there isn't fear of what might become of AA if this-or-that happens. There are bullies and bigots in AA. We are no better than any other microcosm of society. I have some ugly in me; maybe you will concede that you have your dark side, too. I can be dismissive or condescending. I can think *my* way is the *best* way.

James Truslow Adams (1878 - 1949) is credited for saying, "There is so much good in the worst of us and so much bad in the best of us that it behooves any of us to find fault with the rest of us."

Out-going General Service Board Chair (2013 - 2017) Terry Bedient talks about diversity being an imperative to unity - not a threat. In the May 2017 *A.A. Grapevine*,

Terry quotes co-founder Bob S as our co-founder reflected on what he'd learned over nine years of sobriety (1944): To be intolerant is to be smug and obnoxious, which is no help. Bob, simmered down AA's 12-Step to be two ideas – love and service. Bob was rarely verbose, so let me share his entire June 1944 *A.A. Grapevine* article:

On Cultivating Tolerance

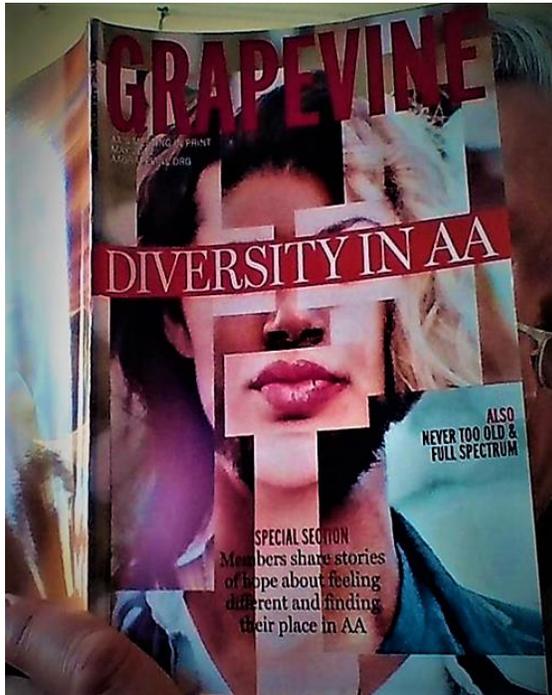
During nine years in AA, I have observed that those who follow the Alcoholics Anonymous program with the greatest earnestness and zeal not only maintain sobriety but often acquire fine characteristics and attitudes as well. One of these is tolerance. Tolerance expresses itself in a variety of ways: in kindness and consideration toward the man or woman who is just beginning the march along the spiritual path; in the understanding of those who perhaps have been less fortunate in educational advantages; and in sympathy toward those whose religious ideas may seem to be at great variance with our own.

I am reminded in this connection of the picture of a hub with its radiating spokes. We all start at the outer circumference and approach our destination by one of many routes. To say that one spoke is much better than all the other spokes is true only in the sense of its being best suited to you as an individual. Human nature is such that without some degree of tolerance, each one of us might be inclined to believe that we have found the best or perhaps the shortest spoke. **Without some tolerance, we might tend to become a bit smug or superior – which of course, is not helpful to the person we are trying to help and may be quite painful or obnoxious to others.** No one of us wishes to do anything that might act as a deterrent to the advancement of another – and a patronizing attitude can readily slow up this process.

Tolerance furnishes, as a by-product, a greater freedom from the tendency to cling to preconceived ideas and stubbornly adhered-to opinions. In other words, it often promotes an open-mindedness that is vastly important – is, in fact, a prerequisite to the successful termination of any line of search, whether it be scientific or spiritual.

These, then, are a few of the reasons why an attempt to acquire tolerance should be made by each one of us.ⁱ

Yes, this is the same Dr. Bob who, early in his sobriety, said he pitied me and other atheists (Dr. Bob's Nightmareⁱⁱ). If I feel hurt by his earlier words, I can consider his later words as amends. I could also see--empathizing instead of analyzing – that fundamental attribution error (not bigotry) explains Bob's slight on atheists. It was really close-mindedness that Bob warned about; what sober alcoholic can't identify with a time that our denial of alcoholism had us at a disadvantage? The idea that close-



mindfulness was caused by worldview was a miscalculation. Discovery is full of miscalculations. Atheists are not intellectually stubborn and those with a supernatural worldview are not inherently humble. Anyone could hold a bias; that's human nature. Have I never attributed negative character traits to "others" that I didn't identify myself as being part of? I have – I still do.

I agree with Dr. Bob's position that someone in the throes of an addiction, who can't be treated because of denial deserves my empathy and concern. So, 1939 Dr. Bob and I agree on that. I don't think atheism causes confusion of the facts. In the goodness of time, I suspect that (1944) Bob outgrew that early-sobriety

assumption.

Looking at Bob's growth curve, I can certainly see Dr. Bob's example. If he can bend to accommodate my worldview, can't I bend to embrace those who hold seemingly contradictory views about how AA works? I like the fact that Bob S called it "cultivating" tolerance. I don't participate in either the prayer or affirmation, "Grant me the serenity..." because I don't see serenity, courage or wisdom as gifts from outside agency. I like Bob's view: we cultivate and nurture these ideas and they grow within us.

In Bob's journey, evidence suggests that he owed his continued sobriety to an anthropomorphic deity until his death; "praise Allah!" So, Bob's view about how AA works didn't change. What changed with time was his appreciation that I had a different view about addiction and recovery and that my view – alternative, not competing – was fine with him.

As Bob articulated with his hub-and-spoke metaphor, we are a fellowship of common suffering (the hub) and like a bicycle wheel has many spokes, there are many paths from the hub to wheel (sobriety and service). Sure, we might each think ours is more remarkable than another; but is it... really?

Atheists think they have a firmer grasp on reality.

Big-Book thumpers claim to have the only 75% successful AA-way.



Some say AA is a fellowship not a program, some say we are a fellowship of a program.

I'm not going to persuade anyone they're right or that others aren't wrong but what can be gleaned from co-founder Bob's lessons in AA-life? If he can try a little tolerance momentum occurs and he can become more tolerant. That's been my experience, too.

So why am I bringing this up? Wasn't I talking about AA's population survey?

I'm going to be talking about AA population and, according to the way we do statistics, we will see a decline in AA membership. Every year I look at these statistics. I'm going to do a little year-over-year and compare today's members to 10 and 20 years ago, too. The number isn't important to me; it's the movement (the trend). So, the movement is down and that might be disconcerting. And I don't know about you but I'm predisposed to:

- think that a declining number is a negative and
- assume it's because of *those* members in *those* groups and I hope they'll save time now and see it my way (before it's too late).

Alas, some of the back-to-basics groups blame the atheist/agnostic groups for diluting the message. Freethinkers blame Big-Book thumpers for being too rigid. I'm going to try to see my way as one spoke, no better or worse, no less or more vital to the whole, than all the other spokes.

How real are these numbers?

They are false. The true number is either higher or lower. Numbers have been collected the same way over time so that's why looking at trends is more reliable than placing our faith in a stated number.

How are the group and member numbers calculated? If you are a member of a group, your group has a General Service Rep. That rep, gives the district registrar an updated group form. That form includes meeting times, the group contact and the number of members. These numbers are given to the Area registrar and forwarded to the General Service Office. Likely, some GSRs round up and some round down. It's not science. If I think of my own groups how many members do we have? Do I count the people at the last business meeting? Or do I count how many who showed up at Sally's medallion? How many signed up to be members? Of those, how many are regulars or active in the

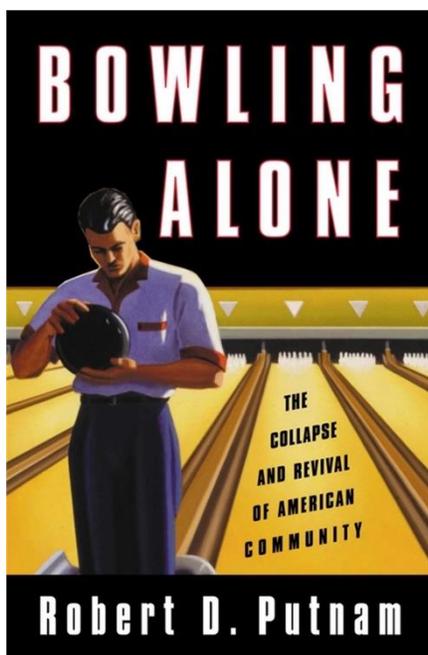
group? By design, AA is not organized. But if we're going to talk about this, it's helpful to know where an organization that collects no personal information ascertains membership.

What this tally doesn't always count is people who attend but don't join a group. It doesn't count, what I perceive to be, a growing number of mostly-online-members who might have gone to two or three face-to-face meetings every week before but now they get their "one alcoholic talking to another" fix on social media, chat-groups, YouTube, podcasts, etc. Some members, because of preferences or life-circumstances, once went to three meetings a week and now go to three face-to-face meetings a year. They still maintain contact with AA friends, they may or may not follow certain AA-like protocols like daily inventory, helping people in need, relying on others when help is called for, etc. It doesn't say anywhere that attendance at AA is how we qualify "real" AA members.

As is our seasonal ritual let's look at this year's survey numbersⁱⁱⁱ and give some context, year over year and decade over decade.

Members	Year over Year	2017	2016	2007	1997
Worldwide	-6%	1,962,499	2,089,698	1,989,260	1,9659,513
USA		1,124,125	1,262,542	1,213,269	1,158,850
Canada		77,145	85,530	95,443	98,720
Subtotal	-10.5%	1,201,270	1,348,072	1,308,712	1,257,570
Corrections		34,903	35,710	2,432	59174
Miscellaneous		125	66	292	NA
Non-US/Can	+3%	726,201	705,850	616,899	614,611

The bright light (if you think more members is correlated with AA's wellness) is beyond the USA/Canada base. GSO is aware of AA in 181 countries and New York gets these numbers from 62 autonomous General Service Offices. As a Canadian, the double-digit decline decade over decade makes me wonder. At one time, Canadian AAs were over 110,000 and now we are 25% less. Conversely, non-US/Canada members increased 20% (1997-2017).



In a previous year-in-review, for context, we looked at how AA is doing exceedingly well compared to professional associations, community groups and bowling leagues.^{iv} I looked at the finding in demographer Robert David Putnam's *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* and how AA was doing compared to other declining groups over second ½ of the 20th century. You can read that essay at [AAgnostica](#).

I have also wondered out loud if AA attrition ought to be interpreted as AA success or failure. Not everyone who leaves AA gets drunk. Not everyone who leaves AA goes away angry. I know people who have been invested in AA deeply, got what they needed and moved on. Family, career or social anxiety are just a few reasons that people who don't "need" meetings, stop going to meetings.

In response to this membership decline, freethinkers might wonder if the tough-love rigidity of fundamentalist AAs are bullying alcoholics out the door. I've heard from "our more religious members" that the book *Living Sober*, agnostic 12-Step or anything other than a strict 164-page diet is killing alcoholics. The "make AA great again" crowd and the "AA must be reformed" crowd will both affirm their suspicions about the others bad influence on AA when they view membership trending. One camp thinks GSO is too religious and the other thinks it's too liberal.

All of us have biases. Maybe that's why I started this blog with a reminder of "Doctor (Bob)'s Opinion," that "Without some tolerance, we might tend to become a bit smug or superior—which of course, is not helpful."

Both secular AA and back-to-basics AA are on the rise and if each are helping alcoholics find sobriety, that's great. Let's hope we don't crowd out the less vocal moderates in the meantime. How many freethinkers have been to a dozen back-to-basics meetings and how many back-to-basics members have been to several atheist/agnostic groups? It's hard to cultivate tolerance when confined to an echo-chamber.

I'd like to know more about the steady growth outside AA's American (and Canadian) base. If any readers have more detailed data, please let me know. I was talking this week with Carlos from Portugal (which inspired me to get this blog out today) and he shared some local *intel*. Both AA and NA attendance is down for the Portuguese. Portugal is trying Skype meetings which is new for them.

I wonder how the new leaflet "The 'God' Word: Agnostics & Atheists in AA" has impacted the UK since their GSO approved and printed it (2016). Is it well received by groups and members? Does it widen AA's gateway?



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couched how best to survey participants. Ask directly “Do you believe God is a myth” and you get the well documented outcomes: 3% of Americans identify as atheists. But if you’re less confrontational with the questions, [University of Kentucky](#) found that American atheists could be 26% of the population^v.

Another 2016 US survey asked people to describe their concept of God. Just over ½ (53%) hold an anthropomorphic (*God as we understand Him/Her*) and in this survey, 10% answered “I do not believe in God”. Another 30% said “God is an impersonal force.”^{vi}

Again, “Love and Tolerance” will be the 2020 theme in Detroit and it’s not too early to incorporate this into our AA homegroup and inter-group relations. By the way, as another measure of AA membership, after several quintennial conferences of diminishing numbers, the 2015 Atlanta AA Convention exceeded all previous attendance numbers: Over 57,000 attended the “Happy Joyous and Free” themed Atlanta Convention.^{vii}

Think globally and act locally are applicable ideas. Our home-group is the highest office in the land in AA terms, so let’s begin making AA more loving and tolerant at our front door. That isn’t to ignore our collective efforts. If one of the growing characterizations about AA is that we are religious, “The ‘God’ Word” would help everyone. But “First thing’s First” and I wonder if there’s more I can do at my own home group and in my local AA community.

Peace.

ⁱ ©A.A. Grapevine, June 1944

ⁱⁱ “If you think you are an atheist, an agnostic, a skeptic, or have any other form of intellectual pride which keeps you from accepting what is in this book, I feel sorry for you.” From *Alcoholics Anonymous*, “Dr. Bob’s Nightmare”

ⁱⁱⁱ http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/smf-53_en.pdf

^{iv} <http://aaagnostica.org/2015/09/06/aa-membership-growth-or-decline/>

^v <https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/edzda>

^{vi} <https://www.prrri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Survey-Topline.pdf> Question 8

^{vii} http://www.aa.org/newsletters/en_US/en_box459_fall15.pdf