

*“You can’t be a real  
Alcoholic if you  
Don’t believe in God”*

*An AA member’s experience of fundamentalism  
in some splinter groups*

*By*

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*Dedicated to*

*Harry and Mary*

*With love and gratitude*

*To Sue Price and Neville Young*

*For their editing support*

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# Introduction

I went to my first AA meeting on May 15, 1984. One of the first things that caught my attention was the AA logo. I was immediately intrigued by the triangle within a circle. It reminded me of symbols used by secret societies. There was a sense of spiritual mysticism about it. Then, someone explained its meaning.



Unity, Service, and Recovery – That sounded pretty cool! I was happy to have found AA. Although an agnostic, I sensed that powerful spiritual principles were lovingly expressed in two of the three legacies of the triangle.

Despite being a drunk who didn't believe in God, I was always interested in New Age spirituality. I had made the rounds of various spiritual organizations before coming to AA. Unity of

thought, belief, and action was considered necessary in the spiritual organizations I attended. Service to others was also considered a powerful tool. The final principle of recovery was one that I hadn't seen before but knew it applied to my life. After twenty years of drinking, it was clear that I had problems which I would need a lot of help to overcome.

I also liked the idea of the circle surrounding the triangle. I read somewhere that Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, said in a speech that the circle symbolized "*the whole world of AA.*" "This is for me," I thought. Although an agnostic, I sensed that there was a fellowship in which I would feel accepted. I hoped that the unity, service, and recovery in AA would be an adequate substitute for the family I never had growing up.

However, in recent years, I have become aware of a movement in AA that I find disturbing. These are splinter groups that believe their brand of AA is the only valid interpretation of the program. They represent only a small minority. These groups forcefully impose their ideas on mainstream AA, especially newcomers. Often, with extreme views, these are the fundamentalist groups. Some members of these groups hold the belief that an alcoholic cannot recover without a belief in God. If they do stay sober without God, then they could not have been real alcoholics.

Since its inception, AA has always been a spiritual, not religious, program. Recently I have had a growing concern that this type of extreme religiosity can be dangerous. Newcomers may be very uncertain if they are real alcoholics who need the support of a

twelve-step program. Moreover, some newly sober members may feel lost and vulnerable. Those that don't believe in any unseen power may wonder what God has to do with not drinking.

As I will share in this book, I know of several instances in which members have fallen into the hands of hardcore fundamentalist sponsors. They have sometimes been bullied and received dangerous advice. For some members, this approach to recovery has not ended well. This type of extremism is undermining AA. The all-important legacy of unity ensures the fellowship's survival and keeps it alive and spiritually healthy.

I felt moved to write this book to remind members that there is room in our fellowship for everyone. Atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers are welcome, as well as those who do believe in God.

Tradition three of AA states:

*"The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking."*

The plain truth is that [secular AA](#) has now become an established and powerful movement within the fellowship. These days, large numbers of alcoholics who don't believe in the traditional idea of God are getting sober. They are not only able to stay sober but are reaping the rewards of the twelve steps as non-believers. They are successful because they have found alternative

and equally effective higher powers that have led them to contented sobriety.

\*

We must remember Bill's words. He wanted the fellowship to grow and flourish.

### *Responsibility Is Our Theme*

*Newcomers are approaching AA at the rate of tens of thousands yearly. They represent almost every belief and attitude imaginable. We have atheists and agnostics. We have people of nearly every race, culture and religion. In AA we are supposed to be bound together in the kinship of a common suffering. Consequently, the full individual liberty to practice any creed or principle or therapy whatever should be a first consideration for us all. Let us not, therefore, pressure anyone with our individual or even our collective views. Let us instead accord each other the respect and love that is due to every human being as he tries to make his way toward the light. Let us always try to be inclusive rather than exclusive; let us remember that each alcoholic among us is a member of AA, so long as he or she so declares.*

*Bill W.*

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If we are to survive and thrive as a spiritual community, we must never forget to “*live and let live.*” (Popular AA slogan) By trying to convince other members that a particular brand of AA is the

only genuine brand, we are fragmenting it and making it exclusive rather than inclusive.

In this short publication, I share my experience in the spirit of inclusiveness. Hardcore fundamentalists have as much right to exist in AA as atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers. I intend to increase awareness of splinter groups with their extreme dogmatic views. AA members, especially newcomers, can then make an informed choice about the direction they want their recovery to take.



# Chapter One

## An Agnostics journey through The Twelve-steps

Dear Friends

My name is Andy, and I am a recovering alcoholic. I owe my life and sobriety to [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). I went to my first meeting on May 15th, 1984, and have been attending ever since.

I would like to tell you that as a newcomer, I got a sponsor, took suggestions, and lived happily ever after. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Although I loved the fellowship from the outset, there were two words in the AA literature that I couldn't tolerate. These were "God" and a "higher power."

Having had negative experiences with religion and religious people in childhood, I rejected God before I was a teenager. I saw myself as an agnostic and could not overcome my initial prejudice toward the twelve steps. Perhaps this is not surprising as six of the twelve steps mention 'God' and a 'higher power.'

Despite my prejudice, I never labeled myself an atheist. An enquiring agnostic would be a better way of describing how I viewed the unexplained. In later recovery, I felt more comfortable with the expression, a spiritual ['truth seeker.'](#)

For most of my childhood, I attended a Roman Catholic boarding school. I had to adhere to strict religious doctrine that often seemed cruel and punitive. The idea of a monotheistic human-like Father God struck me as ridiculous and incredulous. As I grew older, I leaned more toward mysticism. I couldn't deal with the traditional Christian idea of God.

The idea of [new age](#) spirituality, which exuded love and peace, seemed more appealing than the church. I felt intuitively drawn to the concept of a higher self. From an early age, I was more comfortable with the expressions 'higher mind' and 'unifying universal consciousness.'

In my early days of sobriety, I was full of resentment and prejudice toward everything that reminded me of my childhood religion. Right from those early days, I suspected that AA was a cult or, at the very least, some quasi-religion. I used prejudice as an excuse not to get a sponsor and work the steps. I believed recovery from alcoholism was a psychological process that had nothing to do with the need for God or a higher power.

I rejected the twelve steps and decided psychotherapy was more appropriate. I passionately clung to the idea that the primary cause of my problems lay in a dysfunctional childhood. I drank to avoid feelings of rejection and abandonment. They were at the core of my psychological pain. These problems only escalated as I grew into adulthood. I never viewed alcohol as a problem. It was the solution. An intimate relationship with alcohol was my substitute for any partnership with another human being.

I was not prepared for what happened to me in recovery. My head was a complete mess without a sponsor or willingness to work the steps. I went almost insane without alcohol. The drink was the only relief I knew to subdue my negative thinking, underlying rage and fear. Unable to be honest in therapy, I used it to continue blaming my childhood. It was such an impossible way of trying to stay sober that, on several occasions, my relapses almost ended in tragedy.

It was only through unremitting suffering, both as a [dry drunk](#) in AA and frequently a wet one, that it slowly became apparent that my best ideas about staying sober failed utterly.

*“Some of us tried to hold onto our old ideas, and the result was nil till we let go absolutely.”*

Big Book *“How it works”* p, 58 4th edition.

It became increasingly clear that I could not stay sober on my own power. My very best attempts at *“running the show”* of my life (BB *“Into action”* p 88) resulted in one relapse after another. Eventually, I started to warm to the idea of working through the steps with a sponsor. Pursuing sex, power, and money had not worked to keep me sober or fix my inner emptiness and loneliness.

How could I work through the AA program if I didn't believe in God or any unseen higher power? Eventually, I got lucky and found David, an experienced sponsor willing to work with me. He suggested that I put the whole God issue on the back burner.

After so many years of relapse, I could no longer deny that I was powerless over alcohol. My sponsor made it clear, that I would need some greater power. Previously, in AA, any notion of an invisible higher power would fill me with anxiety and hopelessness. It was an idea that was impossible to grasp.

My sponsor pointed out the subtle difference between a higher power and a *"power greater"* than me.

*"Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity."*

*(Step two)*

Here was a concept that was easier to tolerate. - A *"power greater"* than me could mean anything. With my sponsor's help, I could admit that AA itself was certainly a greater power. It sounded so much more honest than some invisible higher power.

He opened ["The twelve Steps and twelve traditions."](#) This book is AA conference-approved literature that was written by [Bill Wilson](#) in collaboration with Tom Powers. There, on page 27, in black and white, are written the words:

*"You can, if you wish, make AA itself your higher power."*

Suddenly, what seemed unattainable was now within reach. I now had a more [practical conception of a higher power](#), not one based on the idea of an invisible God-like power. So now,

**Group Of Drunks** (a helpful acronym for GOD) was an acceptable substitute. It was brilliant and suited me perfectly!

The twelve steps became even more accessible when David stated that step three was just a decision to go on with the rest of the program.

*"Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood him."*

Then, he made one final comment. It dissolved any further reservations. What David said was a revelation. I was amazed that I hadn't seen it sooner. "For many AA members," he said, "the twelfth step offers a spiritual awakening, not necessarily a God awakening."

As I mentioned, I had no problem with the new age idea of a non-God-centered spirituality, so my sponsor's interpretation of step twelve was like music to my ears.

*"Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps" .....*

*(Step twelve)*

I was able to accept these new ideas wholeheartedly. David was a very strict but experienced sponsor, and I was fortunate to have found him! Despite being a practicing Catholic and having a

reputation for being a 'Big Book thumper,' he never imposed his religious beliefs on me.

David suggested that I put the whole question of God on hold until I had completed the first nine steps. Shortly afterward, he introduced me to two more acronyms for God. They were also very beneficial.

So now, after so many years of trying to get sober on my own power and failing, I received the.....

**Gift Of Desperation** – Another powerful acronym for God that made me willing to ask for help.

Then David suggested that I use.....

**Group Of Drunks**, as a power greater than me.

Once I had the gift of desperation and was willing to use AA as a power greater than me, all that remained was to become teachable. This suggestion involved taking guidance from an agnostic-friendly sponsor. I began following.....

**Good Orderly Direction**.

It worked!

I went through the first nine steps and discovered a life beyond my wildest dreams. I have found great happiness and joy in helping other alcoholics through the program.

With Bill Wilson, Dr. Bob Smith was the other founding member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Three months before he died, Dr. Bob gave a short talk at the First International AA convention in Cleveland, Ohio. It was 30th July 1950. In his speech, he shared that our twelve steps, when simmered down to the last, resolve themselves into the two core principles of AA: [love and service](#).

I discovered in my step work that as a practicing alcoholic and for a long time as a dry one, selfishness and self-centeredness were the character defects that made it impossible to care about anyone except myself.

After completing the first nine steps, I was beginning to discover true happiness and joy through service work in AA. An inner transformation, achieved by working the steps, amounted to a non-God-centered spiritual awakening.

Since my early life, then later as a drunk, I had no idea what love was. The twelve steps are teaching me the key to true and enduring happiness. They teach me how to offer love and service in and out of AA. Therefore, the two core principles of love and service to others became powers greater than me. They were both ideals to which I could aspire.

What came as a real surprise is that by working with others, I gradually began to sense some invisible power guiding my life.

Positive, sometimes coincidental events started to occur. I began to understand that *'as you give, so shall you receive.'* I am uncomfortable calling this higher power God because I still do not know what God means. I like to call it a higher consciousness. When I am aware of it, this higher intelligence does for me what I could never do for myself.

In the next chapter, I will tell you about a recent encounter with a religious fundamentalist in AA. It was shocking, even for someone with thirty-nine years in the program. This encounter is the main reason why I decided to write this short book. My intention is to increase awareness of all the different approaches to recovery that a newcomer may encounter. We are all trudging *"the Road of Happy Destiny"* (BB *"Vision for you"* p 164) toward sobriety. Once they know what is on offer in AA, they will be more likely to make an informed choice.

Every alcoholic who comes into recovery with a desire to stop drinking owes it to themselves to decide what kind of groups may be most helpful. What brand of AA will guide them toward a meaningful and contented recovery?



# Chapter Two

## An agnostic's encounter with AA fundamentalism

Since adolescence, it has been my dream to write a book. After working through the twelve steps, I finally felt well enough to sit down and set pen to paper. The book was about my successful journey through the program as an agnostic alcoholic.

Several months ago, I began to post my blogs on a website with a forum for people concerned about drinking. Members of the fellowship are active on this forum. The purpose of the blogs was to give atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers hope. I wanted them to know that it is possible to recover from alcoholism in AA without having to believe in the traditional idea of God.

What surprised me was that one person contributing to the online forum began to judge the content I was posting. The feedback I received was that my blogs had nothing to do with the Big Book of AA. His comments struck me as dishonest, as the Big Book has been central to my recovery. I merely replaced frequent references to God with alternate higher powers that worked for me. I quickly recognized that I was dealing with a member who believed in a fundamentalist interpretation of the program.

He then made a shocking statement. After 39 years in the program, I had never heard anything as divisive and contrary to the all-inclusive ethos of AA.

This is what he said:

“You can’t be a real alcoholic if you didn’t believe in God.”

In stark contrast to this declaration, here is a quote from Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA.

*“This was the great contribution of our atheists and agnostics. They had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of belief or lack of belief.”*

*Bill W.*

I wondered how newly sober members would react if told they couldn't be 'real' alcoholics if they didn't believe in God. Let's face it; some newcomers are still struggling with the implications of step one.\* How may they react when hearing a statement like this?

*\*“We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable,”*

Moreover, what kind of effect would a declaration such as this have on confused, sometimes vulnerable newcomers with little or no faith in God? What might happen to them if they fell under

the influence of extremists? I have been in the fellowship long enough to understand the power of the alcoholic illness. With over a decade as a 'dry drunk' and frequent lapses into drinking, I discovered what it means to be a 'real' alcoholic.

There was a sense of genuine concern for agnostic newcomers. One has to wonder how many walk away from AA after hearing this type of rhetoric.

*“Well, if I’m not a ‘real’ alcoholic because I don’t believe in God, I may as well go back out drinking. The fact is that I don’t believe in God, nor am I likely to believe in the foreseeable future.”*

When this fundamentalist member first made this remark to me, an AA old-timer, I immediately recognized it for its dishonesty. How a confused, agnostic newcomer might respond is another matter. Let them be reassured:

“Nowhere in *“We agnostics”* (Big Book Ch 4)  
Does it say you have to believe in  
A power greater than yourself,  
Only be open to the concept”

Take [the12.org/chalktalk](http://the12.org/chalktalk)

Irrespective of an AA member’s spiritual belief system, no one in the fellowship is qualified to comment on another member’s alcoholism. What is a ‘real’ alcoholic anyway? Every newcomer has to answer this question for themselves. Since its inception, AA has always made it clear that each member must make their own diagnosis. A belief or disbelief in God is entirely irrelevant when determining if someone is suffering from alcoholism.

The Big Book itself instructs members about the importance of self-diagnosis:

*“We do not like to brand any individual as an alcoholic, but you can quickly diagnose yourself. Step over to the nearest barroom and try some controlled drinking. Try to drink and stop abruptly. Try it more than once. It will not take you long to decide if you are honest with yourself about it. It may be worth a bad case of jitters if you get a full knowledge of your condition.”*

BB *“More about alcoholism”* p 43 First edition

What does it take to be a ‘real’ alcoholic? Are there fake alcoholics in AA as well as real ones? Is there an implication here that, at least in the fundamentalist camp, some strange hierarchy exists? Moreover, what does believing or not believing in God have to do with making a diagnosis of alcoholism? The statement made by the fundamentalist member strikes me as divisive and harmful to AA’s legacy of unity. Do declarations such as this violate the third tradition?

*“The ONLY requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.”*

The third tradition does not discriminate against any prospective member based on their belief system regarding God.

Let us consider one final point. If it is true, AA must be full of potential, but not ‘real’ alcoholics. If they are not, then what are they doing in AA? Few people end up in the fellowship by accident.

Atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers are working the steps in a way that works for them. Many are enjoying long and contented sobriety. These days, secular AA is a big part of the AA landscape. Undeniably, it is going from strength to strength and has become a formidable movement within the fellowship.

[Secular AA](#)

[AA Agnostica](#)

[AA for Agnostics](#)

[Beyond Belief Sobriety](#)

[Rebellion Dogs Publishing](#)

The good news for alcoholics who don't believe in God is that in recent years, AA has adopted a much more liberal position on the question of God. More so than ever, AA's General Service Office (GSO) welcomes alcoholics regardless of their belief system.

Please see the AA conference-approved pamphlet by clicking the link below. It states categorically that AA is not a religious organization. The fellowship no longer views believing in God as a condition to recover from alcoholism.

The pamphlet says that a power greater than the alcoholic is necessary to affect a successful recovery. It can be AA itself or any positive greater power that helps to facilitate contented sobriety.

The name of the publication is [The 'God' word](#). Please view the free PDF download.

In conclusion, irrespective of an AA member's personal belief system, here is a quote from AA conference-approved literature.

*"You're an AA member if you say so." –*

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions – *"Tradition three,"* p. 139 (First paragraph)

# Chapter Three

## What is AA fundamentalism?

I have now been with my current sponsor for twelve years. His name is [Witold](#) and he is from the fellowship in Poland. His pen name is [Meszuga](#). If you are Polish, his blogs are excellent. For many years, he identified as an agnostic. His spiritual journey has now led him toward Quakerism. I recently asked him to share with me how he sees the kind of fundamentalism present in AA. I loved his definition:

*“A FANATIC/FUNDAMENTALIST is a person who fervently and uncritically adheres to an idea or religion and is extremely dismissive of adherents of other views. Such a person is incapable of tolerating any alternative belief systems. A fundamentalist seeks to impose their beliefs on others and tries to force them to adopt their subjective worldview.”*

In the Polish language, the expression ‘*fanatic*’ is used more frequently than ‘*fundamentalist*’. Not so in English. These two words are not the same. I was curious to learn how they differ. I looked both words up in the dictionary. The results were interesting and revealed apparent differences: -

\*

## FANATIC

A person who is zealously enthusiastic for some cause, especially in religion - *Wiktionary*

## FANATICAL

Having an extreme, irrational zeal or enthusiasm for a specific cause – *Wiktionary*

## FUNDAMENTALIST

One who reduces religion to strict interpretation of core or original texts. - *Wiktionary*

## FUNDAMENTALISM

The tendency to reduce a religion to its most fundamental tenets, based on strict and subjective interpretation of core texts. – *Wiktionary*

\*

I like my sponsor's description because his interpretation seems present in both extremes found in AA. There are striking similarities but also apparent differences between the kinds of fundamentalism and fanaticism present in the fellowship. In this chapter, I will address the issue of fundamentalism and, in the following chapter, how I have come to understand fanaticism as it appears in some splinter groups.

The fellowship's fundamentalists tend to interpret the AA Big Book literally. Frequently referred to as [Big Book Thumpers](#), they



believe that the content of AA's recovery text is divinely inspired and, therefore, non-negotiable. It is true that the word God is mentioned in the Big Book 142\* times. Perhaps not surprisingly, the fundamentalists like to declare that an alcoholic cannot recover without God or a higher power.

142 times\* [Please click this link.](#)

They cling to the idea that the higher power has to be divine and unseen. This power takes care of them and keeps them sober. They defend this literal interpretation aggressively when anyone challenges their point of view.

What is truly ironic is the following quote from *The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*—written by Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA who also wrote the Big Book. Yes, the same Big Book that the AA fundamentalists take so literally. And yet, Bill states in the chapter about step two in the 12&12:

*“You can, if you wish, make AA itself your higher power.”*

12&12 *Step two* p 27

The fundamentalists reject Bill’s statement in *“Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions,”* which is AA conference-approved literature for reasons known only to themselves.

Here are some other examples of Bill’s writings. He tries to encourage and welcome atheists and agnostics. In 1961, Bill wrote

an article for the Grapevine, a popular monthly AA magazine. He was determined to make the fellowship all-inclusive. As the co-founder, Bill wanted AA to be accessible to all alcoholics, irrespective of their personal beliefs.

## The dilemma of no faith

“The phrase *“God as We Understand Him”* is perhaps the most important expression to be found in our whole AA vocabulary. Within the compass of these five significant words, there can be included every kind and degree of faith, together with the positive assurance that each of us may choose his own. Scarcely less valuable to us are those supplemental expressions — “A Higher Power” and “A Power Greater Than Ourselves.” For all who deny, or seriously doubt a deity, these frame an open door over whose threshold the unbeliever can take his first easy step into a reality hitherto unknown to him — the realm of faith.

In AA such breakthroughs are everyday events. They are all the more remarkable when we reflect that a working faith had once seemed an impossibility of the first magnitude to perhaps half of our present membership of three hundred thousand. To all these doubters has come the great discovery that as soon as they could cast their main dependence upon a “higher power” — even upon their own AA groups — they had turned that blind corner which had always kept the open highway from their view. From this time on — assuming they tried hard to practice the rest of the AA program with a relaxed and open mind — an ever deepening and broadening faith, a veritable gift, had invariably

been put into its sometimes unexpected and often mysterious appearance.”

We much regret that these facts of AA life are not understood by the legion of alcoholics in the world around us. Any number of them are bedeviled by the dire conviction that if ever they go near AA they will be pressured to conform to some particular brand of faith or theology.

They just don't realize that faith is never a necessity for AA membership; that sobriety can be achieved with an easily acceptable minimum of it; and that our concepts of a higher power and God as we understand Him afford everyone a nearly *unlimited choice of spiritual belief and action.....*”

Bill W

Copyright © AA Grapevine, Inc. (April 1961).

So here we have the fundamentalist point of view and Bill's words. They seem diametrically opposed. This discrepancy raises a question that demands a satisfactory answer. Who here is carrying a pure and undiluted AA message? Is it Bill W or the AA fundamentalists?

I have thought about the answer to this question and owe my response to the knowledge gained since coming to AA. It is contained in the principle of “live and let live.” My answer expresses the all-inclusive quality that makes AA unique and spiritually powerful.

If we remember '*the only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking*' (tradition three), then the fundamentalist interpretation is just as valid as Bill's. There is one essential proviso. In the interests of AA unity, both points of view need to be respected and accepted as equally valid. The definition offered by my sponsor contains insights into fundamentalism that I agree with completely.

There is no reason why conflicting opinions cannot coexist. Sadly, this becomes impossible when AA members become "*extremely dismissive of adherents of other views*. Such an inflexible position remains *incapable of tolerating any alternative belief systems*. Fundamentalists *try to impose their beliefs on others and force others to adopt their subjective worldview.*" (My sponsor's definition.)

When this type of thinking becomes dominant in the attitude of fundamentalists, danger arises and threatens the integrity and unity of the fellowship. An exclusive position within any spiritual community can quickly become divisive and counter-productive.

Any group becoming aggressively intolerant of any alternate belief system undermines AA's legacy of unity.

When I understood this, I realized why GSO (the General Service Office) of AA in NYC once informed me in an email.

*"The AA program is open to personal interpretation."*

I accept entirely any splinter group's freedom to interpret AA literature in a way that works for them. Provided members do not aggressively impose their views on other members, they can pursue their sobriety in whatever way works for them.

The integrity of AA's three-sided triangle, *the very lifeblood of the fellowship*, remains undisturbed. The legacy of unity\* is honored and respected as a power greater than the individual alcoholic.

## \* Unity

*“Unity establishes a tradition of mutual love and support among AA members. It’s only through group unity that every member can achieve long-term sobriety from alcohol.”*

<https://fherehab.com/>

# Chapter Four

## What is fanaticism in AA?

Once I looked up the definitions of fundamentalism and fanaticism, I understood the distinction between the two. The fundamentalists believe in a literal interpretation of the AA Big Book, provided it complies with their subjective beliefs. They focus almost entirely on the Book rather than embracing other conference-approved literature. Mainstream AA, on the other hand, considers all other AA texts as equally essential to aid recovery.

Unquestionably, the Big Book has become the fundamentalists “*core text*” because of frequent reference to God and an unseen higher power. Their core belief is that an unconditional surrender to God, or higher power, is a non-negotiable condition to recover from alcoholism.

*“The tendency to reduce a religion to its most fundamental tenets, based on strict and subjective interpretation of core texts”.* (Wiktionary)

On the other hand, the fanatic in AA is somewhat different. They may also be fundamentalists and passionate about the Big Book. However, their extreme ideas extend to other aspects of how they view recovery from alcoholism.

*“Having an extreme, irrational zeal or enthusiasm for a specific cause” – Wiktionary*

In AA worldwide, meetings with fanatical ideas and practices are now frequently called cult-like splinter groups. Although still in the minority, they represent a clear and present danger to certain fellowship members. In early recovery, some newcomers are lost, needy, and vulnerable. Many years of alcohol abuse has taken its toll.

Some have mental health issues on top of their alcoholism. They are frequently on medication prescribed by doctors and psychiatrists. They come to AA desperately searching for a solution to their drinking. A burning desire to feel more positive and hopeful sometimes compels them to make decisions about their recovery that they may come to regret.

\*

When I was new, my hopelessness often condemned me to make irresponsible decisions. I was flaky, reckless, and impulsive. If I went to a meeting and heard someone share what seemed like a powerful message, I felt magnetically drawn to them.

I was so impressionable that whenever someone seemed to have a strong message, I hung on their every word. Over the years, I have called this ‘power-sharing.’ More often than not, a confident personality usually delivers this type of testimony. It may

indicate the person who shares like this has much to offer the newcomer. However, this is not always the case.

Just because a person sounds well doesn't mean they are well. In the fellowship, I had to learn to be discerning and trust my intuition. Sometimes, a member with a strong personality wants to shine and be admired by the rest of the group. Frequently, they are sharing to inflate their egos and not to carry AA's message of [love and service](#) to the still-suffering alcoholic.

Sadly, I have witnessed influential ego-driven personalities cause harm to vulnerable newcomers. The question arises: Are these people committed to helping others get well? In some cases, their agenda seems entirely self-serving. In stark contrast to the principle of "*Love and tolerance*" (BB "*Into action*" p 84), which underpins the philosophy of AA, these sponsors often feed off the vulnerability of those they sponsor. Their motive can often be to reinforce the power trip that they are on. One can usually find these personalities in cult-like splinter groups.

These powerful and often charismatic personalities sometimes suffer from problems other than alcoholism. Some alcoholics come into recovery with coexisting personality disorders. One such disorder is known as NPD or [Narcissistic Personality Disorder](#). The causes are complex. For many, it is a compensatory behavior to protect a fragile self-esteem hiding beneath an over-inflated ego.

In some cases, these sponsors are very controlling. They abuse their sponsees with impunity. They constantly try to build



themselves up at the expense of those they see as weak. The psychiatric profession refers to this phenomenon as feeding their [narcissistic supply](#). Ultimately, guiding someone toward a meaningful spiritual awakening through domination and abuse is impossible. I write these words to increase awareness. Such people are often a feature of the AA landscape. They are known as [narcissistic predators](#).

It is essential that newcomers feel empowered to make an informed choice when asking for sponsorship. It is a decision that is best grounded in gathered information and an intuitive sense of discernment.

Groups that practice an extreme recovery style are a breeding ground for narcissists. Why? Hardcore splinter groups also attract vulnerable newcomers who are frequently lost and desperate for a solution. They hope a dynamic group will offer them hope and a strong sense of direction. Vulnerable newcomers are often nothing more than prey to sponsors that have narcissistic tendencies. These types of personalities cultivate fertile ground for the creation of a [cult](#).

A decision to ask someone for sponsorship based on reckless impatience can end in disaster. The plain truth is that all that glitters at meetings is not gold! My sponsor always reminds me that AA is nothing less than a psychiatric hospital. It is crucial to bear this in mind when asking for help.

This short [You Tube movie](#) may be useful to watch. It's the story of one particular AA group that went rogue and became a cult-

like splinter group. I say rogue because as soon as the local AA intergroup was informed about its activities, this particular meeting was promptly removed from the regional meetings directory. You may have already encountered such a group during your AA journey. If you haven't and do find yourself in this type of meeting, there's only one thing I can suggest - RUN!

The YouTube clip I have shared with you is a classic example of an AA meeting that became fanatical. It may have meant well initially, but strong personalities with big egos warp it into something harmful and ultimately dangerous. Maladapted alcoholic egos sometimes propel a group towards "*extreme and irrational zeal.*"

It is important to remember that if recovery from the alcoholic illness is to be successful, the maladapted alcoholic ego gradually needs to be replaced with humility. Ego deflation is the purpose of AA's twelve steps. Ego reduction by working on steps one to six followed by the daily practice of humility in steps seven to twelve.

*"Humility is the solid foundation of all virtues."* – Confucius

*When it comes to working your seventh step, the quality of humility really breaks down to having a reasonable perspective of yourself. It is quite simply seeing the truth of your life and your place in the world.*

[www.jasonwhaler.com](http://www.jasonwhaler.com)

An unbridled, out-of-control ego does not indicate recovery from alcoholism; humility does! I have learned to apply discernment in AA whenever asking for or being offered advice.

It's straightforward; I avoid members with big egos. Many of them like to see themselves as leaders with all the correct answers. Energetically, alcoholics with self-aggrandizing tendencies are takers and not the givers. An accurate description of people with narcissistic tendencies is energy vampires.

\*

### *A member's testimony with a tragic outcome*

*In the interests of anonymity, actual names have been changed.*

Several months ago, I met a young man at an online AA meeting. Simon struck me as a very personable young man with a sensitive disposition. We exchanged phone numbers, and it wasn't long before we started chatting. The one thing we had in common was that we were both members of 'The Vision for You' groups.

In the UK fellowship, the 'Vision' has the reputation of being a cult-like splinter group. You can read more about these kinds of AA groups [here](#). Unsurprisingly, Simon's experience in the Vision group was not positive. He had been in the fellowship for about five years when I met him. When he was a newcomer, he ended up in a 'Vision' group. A friend told him that it was the best AA you could find.

Simon had a very controlling and dictatorial sponsor who ended up firing him. His sponsor let him go for not following his suggestions to the letter. This heavy-handed approach always ended in a warning that if he didn't follow his sponsor's suggestions, he would die of alcoholism. For example, calling his sponsor at precisely the same time each day was suggested to Simon as a non-negotiable requirement.

The 'Vision for You' sponsor expected nothing less than complete compliance with the suggestions that he gave to Simon. Eventually, he felt he could no longer comply with this authoritarian approach. On that day, his sponsor let him go. Unable to trust anyone, Simon floundered for several years in AA, going from sponsor to sponsor. After his experiences in the vision group, he seemed unable to find a new sponsor he could trust.

During our phone conversations, his anger was plain to see. His self-esteem was still in tatters after walking away from the 'vision for you' groups. On the one hand, he knew that the Big Book itself invited AA members to practice the principle of "*Love and tolerance of others.*" (BB "*Into action*" p 84) On the other hand, he felt angry and betrayed by receiving the exact opposite of love and tolerance from his sponsor.

Simon had a good friend in the 'Vision' called Harry. It was Harry who encouraged Simon to get involved in this group. They both had the same sponsor, who fired them about nine months later. Thankfully, Simon is back on track and going through the steps

again with a new sponsor. Tragically, his friend was not so lucky. Harry took his own life shortly after his sponsor fired him.

This rigid and fanatical attitude doesn't take into consideration some essential facts. These days, more and more alcoholics are coming into AA with co-existing mental health issues. In some hardcore fundamentalist groups, all mental and emotional disturbances are seen as [symptoms of a dry drunk](#). An extreme belief by some AA members is that the only solutions are the twelve steps and a relationship with God. They believe that the steps are a cure-all. Any deviation from this thinking is considered dishonest and condemned as willful defiance.

Harry had bipolar disorder. More often than not, hardcore fundamentalist groups are intolerant of AA members being on prescribed medication for poor mental health. Rather than suggesting that Harry see his doctor, his sponsor told him he would die from alcoholism if he didn't fully surrender to his sponsor's suggestions.

Let's be honest. This extreme approach to sponsorship can be dangerous. No one is better qualified to comment on the circumstances that led to Harry's tragic suicide than Simon. They were good friends and shared the same sponsor. Let him tell you in his own words what he thinks happened to Harry in the 'Vision for you' group. I wrote down some questions and asked Simon to answer them honestly.

\*

*Simon's testimony of the tragedy that befell his friend Harry*

**What age was Harry?**

*Approx 35*

**What was his profession?**

*Harry was an Independent Management Consultant who helped people financially plan their businesses.*

**How long had Harry been in AA before he joined the 'Vision for you group'?**

*Two months*

**How long had Harry been attending the 'Vision' before he ended his life?**

*Six to nine months.*

**What attracted Harry to the group?**

*A friend informed Harry that it was the best available style of AA because of its hard-core approach to recovery.*

**Did he have diagnosed mental health issues?**

*Yes*

**What was the diagnosis?**

*Bi-Polar disorder*

## **Was he on medication?**

Yes

## **Was Harry bullied by his sponsor?**

*It is hard to be sure about the use of the word bully. I certainly believe Harry's sponsor was dictatorial, emotionally coercive, and absolutist. This is because we shared the same sponsor and I was treated the same way. He informed Harry that the 'vision' way was "good" AA. If you didn't rigidly do it this way, you weren't "willing," and you would die from your disease. His sponsor's treatment of his other sponsees, including myself, required a demonstration of a non-negotiable willingness. These included:*

*Completing **six daily suggestions**\* given to all newcomers to the 'Vision.' - You must call your sponsor within a 5-minute window each day. - The expectation was to turn up to meetings 15 minutes early and leave 15 minutes after the close of the meeting. - You were required to say yes to all AA engagements - Only To attend 'Vision' approved meetings that were usually 1.5 hours long. - In meetings, you were expected to only share "the message" according to Vision guidelines and share your experience with the twelve steps as instructed by your sponsor. - You had to check in with your sponsor before making decisions. He acknowledged that you were working an adequate program if you satisfied all these requirements.*

*This type of sponsorship was very different from the sponsor I have now. There was no mercy or compassion when I brought a problem to my 'vision' sponsor. There were only absolutes. In the 'vision,' the*

*suggested program was presented as a "cure-all" for all ills. If you felt unhappy or unwell, you needed to do more AA.*

*I now see a grain of truth at the heart of this. My ability to hold an even keel in any weather improves as my emotional sobriety grows. This reality about recovery has taken years of sobriety to develop. I sincerely believe that throwing newcomers into the deep end of recovery in AA is very dangerous, especially for those with complex mental health issues. Let's be honest: AA is a last resort for many. They arrive at meetings very vulnerable and broken. It is more likely to lead to drowning than recovery. I think this is what happened to Harry.*

### **\*Six daily suggestions.**

**What kind of negative comments did Harry's sponsor make to him?**

*If you don't do as suggested, you will die of alcoholism. If you don't follow my suggestions, you are not serious about your recovery, and your chances of survival are slim." The reason why I am angry at the 'vision' is because there are some people who are too lost and vulnerable for these kinds of highly structured meetings. I believe there is a place for it, but it doesn't consider that none of us are the same. We have diverse needs at different times.*

*I now work a similar program with many of the same tools. Still, my current sponsor offers them to me using the two core principles of AA: love and tolerance. The 'vision' was presented to me (and Harry) as the only way to survive in AA. We were newcomers and had no experience.*



*Newly sober members should be aware that the vision approach to recovery has nothing to do with mainstream AA.*

*We didn't know differently, so when our sponsor sacked us, it was like the end of the world. For Harry, it really was. Having read the big book, I see that a code of love and tolerance is the AA way. Harry and I, and most likely many others in the vision, once believed that these meetings were "better" than the rest of AA. Not anymore! The bubble has burst. I am now discovering a fellowship that genuinely practices "love and tolerance of others." (BB "Into action" p 84)*

**Was the Big Book the only literature that was used at the vision?**

*Yes, - but there was a specific way of doing step 4, which isn't in the Big Book. They adapted the Big Book to suit their style of recovery. Their interpretation of the literature and the general suggestions offered made them believe they were superior to mainstream AA. In addition, they talked a lot about "sticking with the winners."- The idea that only a "chosen few" were recovering in AA was because everyone else wasn't doing it the 'vision' way.*

**Was Harry's sponsor aware of his mental health issues?**

*I don't know, but Harry was very open about it. Our sponsor wanted to know all the details about my life, so I think it was the same with Harry. The Vision had an extreme position regarding taking medication in recovery. I remember once, a woman came to a meeting and shared how deadly and irresponsible it was to tell people not to take meds. She was*

*horrified at the suggestion that taking pills for fragile mental health was a sign of poor sobriety. At the time, I thought that she was nuts.*

*After several years in AA, my mental health improved after I went to a doctor. He treated me for depression. I can see that sometimes, medication makes people stable enough to start benefiting from the spiritual program of action. Without the stable base of prescribed medication, they would never have been able to benefit from what AA has to offer.*

### **Why did Harry's sponsor fire him?**

*I'm not sure. Once Harry's sponsor fired him, he was shunned by the rest of the group. I am ashamed to say that I, too, ignored Harry once his sponsor excommunicated him. I received a strong suggestion to stick with the winners. I was desperate to get well then, as my life was falling apart. It was the most horrible time of my life.*

### **How long after being fired did Harry end his life?**

*Three weeks. - Harry complained to a friend that his sponsor was very controlling.*

### **In your own opinion, what kind of person sponsored you and Harry?**

*He wasn't very well himself because he wouldn't have been so rigid and controlling. He lacked empathy for others and had no love or tolerance for the people he sponsored. His attitude was that if it's not working for you, irrespective of other problems, it's your fault because you are not doing AA properly.*

## **How would you describe Harry's personality?**

*Harry was bright and ambitious. On the surface, he had all the potential to be a very successful human being. However, deep down, I think he was in spiritual pain. He couldn't integrate the gap between the person he knew was his best self and his actual behaviors over the last years while using drugs and alcohol.*

\*

So this is Simon's testimony. He came to know Harry and his sponsor very well. It's up to the reader to decide if his account of the events that led to Harry's tragic suicide is plausible. Having been a member of the "Vision for you" group myself twenty-five years previously, I believe this is an honest account of his experiences with extremism in the fellowship.

Without a doubt, Harry's sponsor was not responsible for his tragic suicide. However, one can't help but wonder if Harry would still be alive today if he had received compassion and understanding. Indeed, that is something every alcoholic/addict deserves on their journey towards the light of recovery.

Qualities of compassion, empathy, and understanding must ultimately be the effective way. The "tough love" approach often practiced in these splinter groups is frequently not love but abuse!

Was Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, right when he declared that the only successful way to treat the alcoholic illness is through the practice of "*love and tolerance?*" (BB "*Into action*" p 84)

*“Our sorrows and wounds are healed only when we touch them with compassion.”* (Gautama Buddha)

*“Eventually, you will come to understand that love heals everything, and love is all there is.”* (Gary Zukav)

Rest in peace, Harry

# Chapter Five

## Prescribed medication and Fundamentalism

After twenty-two years in the fellowship, I continued to suffer from anxiety and depression. To manage these, my doctor prescribed medication. My track record with holding down a job was still chaotic, and my relationships with women were unhealthy and co-dependent. Using the acronym for God as **Good Orderly Direction**, I had been through the steps at least twice to the best of my ability. This work was constructive; however, I still lacked emotional sobriety.

Perhaps I hadn't gone deep enough into my history to entirely "*clear away the wreckage of the (my) past*" (BB "*A Vision for you,*" page 164). At the time, I remember finding an interesting article written by Bill Wilson in 1958. It was very comforting to read about his experiences with depression in later sobriety.

The article is called "[\*\*The next frontier; emotional sobriety.\*\*](#)" In it, Bill shares how he overcame depression through unconditional love and service to others. He describes how, with these new realizations, he ascended to a new level of spiritual growth. I found his honest testimony very encouraging. It inspired me to

go through the steps again to achieve the same peace and contentment that Bill eventually found.

With this in mind, I decided to join a Big Book study and go through the steps again. This particular group ran twice a year. Although they were all AA members, the organizers announced that the Big Book study was unaffiliated with mainstream AA. However, the facilitators of The Big Book study all belonged to the same home group.

The idea was to go through the first 164 pages of the Big Book as a group. The suggestion was to highlight all the passages that are considered relevant to recovery. Then, the participants were to complete written step assignments. Finally, the request was to share their completed work with one of the helpers.

The study took place every Tuesday evening. I knew a lot of the people on the course. Like me, they had been in AA for years. Most of them were not content with their sobriety. Like me, they continued to suffer from anxiety and depression. The group leader made a startling announcement after introducing herself and explaining the rules and regulations.

To participate in the Big Book study, you had to be free of any medication. Anyone found to be on meds for anxiety or depression had to leave the group. No one commented, least of all me. Years before, when I was in the 'Vision for you,' it was also

strongly suggested that I stop taking my meds. I was desperate for a solution at the time, so I complied.

It was a mistake that caused me to become very unwell again. My mental health was just too fragile to function without medication. I secretly started to retake it. I survived in the Vision groups for a further two years by lying about taking [medication](#). Once again, I was in the same position after joining the Big Book study. This time, I kept quiet. When we met again the following Tuesday, I watched several people leave. I knew a few of my AA buddies were also on prescribed meds.

You may be interested in the reasons the leader of the Big Book study gave for the requirement to be medication-free. It had become apparent that she had extreme views about alcoholics taking what she saw as 'mood-altering' medication in recovery.

*Firstly, if, as a recovering alcoholic, you are on meds, the twelve steps won't work for you. You can't simultaneously hand your "will and life over to the care of God" (Step three) and medication.*

*Secondly, by taking meds, you are not sober. The suggestion was that alcoholics were merely "eating their alcohol" in the medication that they were taking for poor mental health.*

Those of us keen to go through the steps just kept quiet about being on prescribed medication. Everyone wanted to give the Big Book study their best shot.

\*

An American AA member brought this Big Book study over from the States. Despite identifying as an agnostic, I found the material presented very helpful. For example, the written assignment we received on step two was a game-changer in my recovery. The suggestion was to share our personal life experiences about each of the [eight bedevilments](#). (BB "*We agnostics*" p. 52)

The idea that these bedevilments were symptoms of the "*spiritual malady*" was presented to us. (BB "*How it works*" p. 64) I could identify with them so much that I warmed to the idea that alcoholics are spiritually unwell. I still didn't believe in God, but considering we all suffered from the bedevilments, perhaps Bill was right; alcoholism, at its core, is a spiritual illness.

The truth is that the message we received in that Big Book study was excellent. Sadly, I cannot say the same for the messenger. What taking prescribed medication had to do with the facilitator of the group is beyond me. If she had stuck to the material and stopped playing doctor, it would have been an altogether different and life-giving experience. Her extreme position on the question of medication cost one of the members of the Big Book study their life!

*To preserve anonymity, the name 'Mary' is used in the following account.*



Mary was a young Irish girl keen to work through the steps. She was also on prescribed medication for depression. Mary joined the Big Book study determined to overcome the mental health problem that made staying sober so challenging. She wanted a sponsor who she thought was experienced enough to help her.

Perhaps understandably, Mary chose the facilitator of the group. The leader of the Big Book study agreed to sponsor her if she stopped taking her anti-depressants. Mary was informed, in no uncertain terms, that the steps wouldn't work for her if she continued taking medication. In the sponsor's mind, step three depended on her sponsees *turning their will and lives over to the care of God* (Step three) and not pills for poor mental health.

Mary was so keen to go through the steps that she agreed. She put down her meds and began going through the steps with the rest of the group. Two weeks later, Mary committed suicide. This tragic event once again begs an answer to the all-important question: Is any sponsor in AA qualified to interfere in the treatment that a sponsee is receiving from their doctor?

Of course, some alcoholics take mood-altering medication as a substitute for their addiction to alcohol. Taking medication to get high is very different from taking medication for mental health issues. In the minds of some fundamentalists, fragile mental health is a sign of [untreated alcoholism](#). Although that may be true for some alcoholics, it is not valid for all.

After 39 years in AA, I am baffled by this dishonest, closed-minded, and rigid point of view. Why can't the fundamentalists acknowledge the difference between untreated alcoholism and poor mental health? In early recovery, Bill Wilson, the co-founder of AA, also suffered from fragile mental health:

*"In my early years of sobriety, I was full of pride, thinking that A.A. was the only source of treatment for a good and happy life. It certainly was the basic ingredient for my sobriety and even today, with over twelve years in the program, I am very involved in meetings, sponsorship, and service. During the first four years of my recovery, I found it necessary to seek professional help, since my emotional health was extremely poor. There are those folks too, who have found sobriety and happiness in other organizations. A.A. taught me that I had a choice: to go to any lengths to enhance my sobriety. A.A. may not be a cure-all for everything, but it is the centre of my sober living."*

*"As Bill Sees It"* - p. 285.

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Regarding medication in recovery, let AA itself guide us:

**["The AA Member - Medication and Other Drugs."](#)**

Like Bill, I needed professional outside help when I first got sober. On top of my alcoholism, a psychiatrist also diagnosed me with Borderline **[Personality Disorder](#)**. Later, I was also diagnosed with Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (**[CPTSD](#)**). These mental health issues have required

professional help. Gradually, I had to accept that I had two illnesses: alcoholism and poor mental health. In recovery, I had to treat them simultaneously but in different ways.

If a newcomer ever approaches me and asks about my experience with medication, this is what I tell them:

*“Medication enabled me to get well enough to do the twelve steps, and the twelve steps eventually helped me to stop taking medication.”*

I am someone who needed to be on medication for twenty-five years. With the help of time, good sponsors, and a commitment to the spiritual program of action, I have now been medication-free for fifteen years. Thankfully, I no longer have to treat my poor mental health with meds. However, one day at a time, through [love and service](#) to others, I will need to treat the spiritual illness of alcoholism for the rest of my life.

*“It is easy to let up on the spiritual program of action and rest on our laurels. We are headed for trouble if we do. For alcohol [ism] is a subtle foe. We are not cured of alcoholism. What we really have is a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition.” (BB ‘Into action’ p. 97 - First edition)*

Rest in peace Mary

# Chapter Six

## A personal experience of Fundamentalism

I had been a serial relapser in AA for over a decade when I arrived at the doors of the [vision for you](#) groups. No amount of sex, power, money, or running away overseas kept me sober. Therapy didn't work either. I used it to continue playing the blame game. The fact that I became an alcoholic was the fault of my dysfunctional childhood. All this was about to change forever.

I have written this book to increase awareness of the dangers of participating in fundamentalist splinter groups. The risks are real. Should newcomers to AA be thinking about trying this approach to recovery, at the very least, they deserve an honest testimony from someone who, in the early 90s, spent three years in the 'Vision.'

Suppose we are recovering from an illness requiring a spiritual (not religious) solution. In that case, some of the methods used in these groups have little or no therapeutic value. As an old-timer in AA, I fail to see how ego-driven bullying from some sponsors helps newcomers. How can pushing a recovering alcoholic

towards unconditional compliance help them when unready? Genuine spiritual growth takes time, perhaps a long time.

I joined the 'Vision for You' in 1993. One of the conditions of membership was being willing to take the suggestions of a sponsor. Taking medication for depression was not tolerated in these groups. Once again, allow me to stress that taking medicines for mental health issues is no one's business in the fellowship. It is a matter between the alcoholic and their doctor. Sponsors are not qualified to interfere with a member's medical treatment. This attitude to medication and aggressive sponsorship can make this type of AA dangerous to some of the more fragile members.

So, was there a positive side to being in a fundamentalist group? Recovery from alcoholism is all about honesty. I owe it to the reader and myself to tell you about any therapeutic value received whilst attending these groups.

Yes, without doubt I can say that there were things that I learned from [David B.](#) the founder of the 'Vision,' which has and continues to be of enormous value. Undoubtedly, David was a rigid sponsor. At times, he shouted at me and then hung up the phone. Eventually, he fired me when he discovered I was on anti-depressants.

In the meantime however, I learned some valuable lessons about how to treat the illness successfully. The first thing he did proved to be a game-changer in my recovery. He gave me a sticker to put

on the mirror in my bathroom. I was to read it every day when I was shaving.

*“You are now looking at the problem.”*

Up to that moment, all my relapses were in some way, connected to blaming others for my own problems. As a supposed adult, I continued to see myself as a victim. Everything was always someone else’s fault. David was very intolerant of his sponsees whining and complaining about their lives. In that sense, his style of recovery was highly challenging. You were given daily suggestions and were expected to follow them unconditionally.

With David, recovery was all about taking the suggested actions. He just wasn’t interested in listening to your feelings. He saw an over-concentration on feelings as self-indulgent and self-pitying. His approach to recovery was all about following the direction of your sponsor. He suggested writing a gratitude list, calling a newcomer, or getting another service commitment at a meeting if you wanted to feel better.

David was a practicing Catholic, as were some of his lieutenants in the ‘vision’ pyramid. He was the charismatic leader, a familiar sign of a [cult](#). The extraordinary thing was that he never tried to push his religious beliefs onto me. His approach was unexpected and quite remarkable. As someone considered a Big Book thumper, I will always be grateful that he didn’t try to shove God down my throat.

Perhaps it was because he knew I was an agnostic and didn't want to scare me off with heavy-handed indoctrination regarding God. He told me to make AA itself my higher power. (Step Two) Step three was just a "*decision*" to proceed with the rest of the steps. In that sense, David's strict behavioral approach probably saved me from further relapse. Despite being a practicing Catholic, his humility concerning his position on my agnosticism was most impressive.

I learned a lot about the illness from David. He believed that recovery from alcoholism was about learning to *live in the solution* (through taking action) and not *continuing to live in the problem* (thinking). In his mind, dishonest, alcoholic thinking could only result in blame, resentment, arrogance, and self-pity. David believed that these character flaws always led to a miserable life.

In conclusion, after thirteen years of slipping and sliding, I was now armed with the **Gift Of Desperation**. Considering my "*old ideas*" (BB p. 58) hadn't worked to keep me sober, I was ready for David B's recovery style. It was a trial by fire. I call this period of my journey toward sobriety the "AA boot camp" years. During this time, my mental health problems vastly improved with medical treatment. I certainly wouldn't send a mentally unstable newcomer to a 'Vision' group. Still, I got what I needed to get off the merry-go-round of relapse.

If you or anyone you know is concerned about getting involved in a fundamentalist splinter group, you may find the following links helpful:

[United States](#)

[United Kingdom](#)

[Rest of the world](#)

[www.aacultwatch.blogspot.com](http://www.aacultwatch.blogspot.com)

\*

For your information, here is the official conference-approved pamphlet on sponsorship:

[Questions and Answers on Sponsorship](#)



# Chapter Seven

## Lord Donald Soper

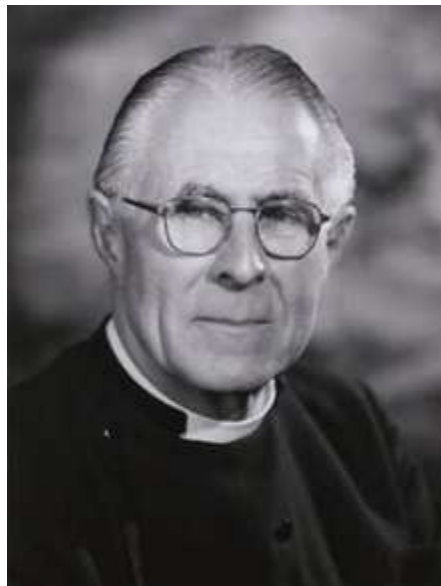
During my early days in AA, I used to attend a lunchtime meeting in central London. It was on Monday to Friday at 1pm. This AA group occurs at the Hinde Street Methodist church, just a stone's throw from Oxford Street. For a long time after getting sober, I was too flaky to go back to work. It was ideal to give my day some structure.

[Hinde Street Methodist Church](#) has a fascinating history that may interest alcoholics in AA. It also became home to the [West London Methodist Mission](#), which was involved in social work programs supporting people experiencing homelessness, alcoholism, and drug addiction.

*"For over 100 years the West London Mission of the Methodist Church has been in the forefront of care for some of the London's neediest people. The work now concentrates on the homeless, those with **drug and alcohol problems**, offenders against the law and counseling. The Mission runs Day Centers and specialist high care residential units. This work relies on voluntary contributions and more information is always available." Wikipedia*

One man became prominent within the Methodist ministry in central London. He was also involved in helping to rehabilitate alcoholics and addicts, many of whom were homeless.

**Donald Oliver Soper, Baron Soper** (31 January 1903 – 22 December 1998) was a British Methodist minister, socialist and pacifist. He served as President of the Methodist Conference from 1953 – 54. After May 1965, he became a peer in the House of Lords and became known as [Lord Donald Soper](#) (*Wikipedia*)



I mention him because I was first introduced to Lord Soper and his writings while attending meetings at Hinde Street. He was the first person who made me aware of fundamentalism as a social phenomenon.

After a meeting one day, I went into the church for some quiet time. Just before leaving, I noticed the literature rack at the back of the church. There, I found all kinds of pamphlets and books. I took one of the pamphlets by Lord Soper to read on my way home. Sitting on the tube train, I absorbed his views on religion, socialism, and its application in society.

It happened about thirty years ago, so I don't remember much of the content. However, one sentence stayed with me because it was so thought-provoking. At the time, I didn't understand what it meant. In my AA journey, I gradually began to get a sense of what Lord Soper was discussing.

***"All fundamentalism is born out of fear."***

Only years later, I acknowledged the absolute truth of this statement. In recovery, I have experienced fundamentalism both in and out of AA. In my quest to find a spiritual awakening, I did the rounds of churches and organizations devoted to spiritual development. Some of them held extreme views about spirituality. I would go so far as to say that one or two of them had all the hallmarks of [cult-consciousness](#).

If Lord Soper's statement is true, I wondered what people attracted to fundamentalism are so afraid of. If they are secure in their belief in God, why must they aggressively impose their

beliefs and values onto others? Instead of letting them find their way, they target newcomers and try to convert them to their way of thinking. As far as they are concerned, their way towards recovery, based on a dependence on God, is the only way!

Here, again, is my sponsor's definition of fundamentalism and its close relative fanaticism.

*"A FANATIC/FUNDAMENTALIST is a person who fervently and uncritically adheres to an idea or religion and is **extremely dismissive of adherents of other views**. Such a person is incapable of tolerating any alternative belief systems. A **fundamentalist seeks to impose their beliefs on others and tries to force them to adopt their subjective worldview.**"*

Concerning my quest for a genuine spiritual awakening, I have always felt discouraged by anyone, supposedly on a spiritual path, trying to *"impose their beliefs."* Trying to *"force"* me to *"adopt their subjective worldview"* was always doomed to failure.

As a relapsing alcoholic, my journey toward sobriety has, at certain times, benefitted from hardcore fundamentalism. When I lost all sense of direction and felt hopeless, it became necessary to seek the **Good Orderly Direction** of someone like David B. That is why there is a place for highly structured and disciplined groups. The proviso is that they are not cults. In such groups, the risk of psychological harm through control and manipulation is frequently too high.

Let's be clear; heavy-handed behavioral modification does not necessarily lead toward a meaningful spiritual awakening. In my case, it was merely the first stepping-stone on a path that led to the "*entire psychic change*" that Dr. Silkworth mentions in "*The doctors opinion.*" (BB p. XX1X) Bill W also makes it clear that to affect a successful recovery from alcoholism, "*love and tolerance of others*" must be "*our code.*" (BB "*Into action*" p 84)

The plain truth is that besides David's accepting attitude of my agnosticism, I have never found much love or tolerance in fundamentalist splinter groups. In fact, on a purely human level, this recovery style's general ethos pointed to precisely the opposite. It was always about fear-driven control. In my experience, there is no love in fundamentalism. Just like Lord Soper said in his pamphlet, the driving force of this type of extremism is fear. Love is the only thing that creates a foundation for healing, leading to a healthy spirituality.

\*

Recently, I reconnected with an old sponsor of mine. We were both in the 'Vision for you' groups but at different times. Reminiscing about our past experiences, I asked him what he thinks about this hardcore approach to recovery.

*My question:* - Suppose the Big Book fundamentalists are happy and secure in their relationship with God. Why do they get so defensive and hostile when confronted with atheists, agnostics, and freethinkers in AA?

*His answer: - Because they are not secure. Their happiness is skin-deep, shallow, and easily broken. It is the happiness of being surrounded by an echo chamber where everyone conforms and repeats the same mantras. It is the happiness of the consequent comfort zone and false dependency upon groups, rigid formulae and personalities. The slightest variance or removal of any of this and their whole house of cards falls down around them.*

*They live in fear and it shows in their behavior, body language and attitude towards any different approach to recovery. I know this because I have experienced it firsthand and fortunately worked through by gaining a deeper understanding of human behavior.*

*Also, all the BB fundamentalists I have ever met do not follow the BB precisely as written. They follow an adulterated version that has been "interpreted" or distorted or even contradicted in some way by a sponsor or self-appointed guru.*

*Sponsors are free agents, unsupervised, un-vetted, and unaccountable to anyone, so they do what they like. Newcomers need more experience to know any better.*

*Signed "P"*

I hope this book will increase the awareness of newcomers seeking a healthy AA group to support their recovery.

In conclusion, it is essential to remember that alcoholics who come together in the spirit of recovery may call themselves an AA group.

*"You're an AA member if you say so." –*

Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions – *"Tradition three,"* p. 139  
(First paragraph)

Hardcore splinter groups have as much right to exist as any other group. However, as someone who has witnessed the damage these groups can inflict on certain members, I owe you, the reader, the opportunity to make a more informed choice.

In fellowship

Andy F

<https://aafornagnostics.com/>