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Publication Date

2024

Peer reviewed|Thesis/dissertation

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Santa Barbara

Something More and Other: Spirituality as a Means of Transforming the Self

From Independent to Interdependent in Alcoholics Anonymous

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy
in Religious Studies

by

Jennifer Lois Hahn

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June 2024

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June 2024

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From Independent to Interdependent in Alcoholics Anonymous

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Jennifer Lois Hahn

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents and family for going to great lengths all my life to provide me with exceptional schools and teachers, including themselves. To my husband and son for their unwavering love and support on this long journey. To my advisor for her endless patience in guiding me towards my growing edge.

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ABSTRACT

Something More and Other: Spirituality as a Means of Transforming the Self From Independent to Interdependent in Alcoholics Anonymous

by

Jennifer Lois Hahn

This dissertation seeks to understand how, from a naturalistic, interdisciplinary perspective, the spiritual aspect of Alcoholics Anonymous helps some people get and remain sober. First I sought to understand the historical origins of spirituality in AA as a necessary component of the program, investigating the ways in which the founding generation of AA members wrestled with their religious antecedents and American pluralism to arrive at a “spiritual, rather than religious” understanding of their program’s core mechanism of change. Then, through ethnographic participant observation and extended interviews with 34 current and former members of AA, I sought to understand how contemporary members of the program come to cultivate beliefs, practices, and experiences relative to God or a higher power “as we understood Him” and how they explain from an emic perspective why these help them stay sober and lead happier and more fulfilling lives. My research reveals that spirituality in AA, while expressed through many different concepts of God and higher power(s) and through practices aimed toward “conscious contact” with them, generally takes two forms: a sacralized relationship with human others, and a relationship with an extraordinary Other. While most AAs take part in both types of spirituality, atheistic and agnostic members often don’t participate in the second type, but they are still able to remain sober. I argue that both types of spirituality help the alcoholic to change their *self-construal* from more independent to more interdependent with their AA fellows, humanity as a whole, and—for some—an

extraordinary God or higher power of their own understanding. This shift in self-construal, which AAs call a “collapse of ego at depth,” helps alcoholics to overcome the isolation and intense negative thinking that many describe as contributing significantly to their alcoholism.

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Introduction

An estimated 1.35 million people in the United States and 2 million people worldwide are members of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), a mutual self-help organization that emphasizes the necessity of developing a relationship with God or another higher power through a “spiritual program of action” in order to achieve and maintain sobriety (AA General Service Office 2022; Alcoholics Anonymous 1939/2001: 85). Visit any AA meeting and you will quickly hear members testifying that without the intervention of a higher power and the cultivation of spiritual practices and attitudes, they could not remain sober. While empirical research clearly supports working the AA program as one of a number of effective treatments for alcoholism (Project MATCH 1998), there is little consensus in the literature regarding what role, if any, spirituality plays in mediating this effect.

Previous research on the role of spirituality in Alcoholics Anonymous has suffered from a lack of consistency and specificity in how investigators define the term. Some fail to define spirituality at all, assuming that its meaning is stable and self-evident. Others define it in terms so vague that it is essentially meaningless. Some focus on one aspect of spirituality, such as belief in a supernatural agent, and ignore other aspects that are equally important to the AA program. Differences in how researchers define the term make it difficult, if not impossible, to build knowledge across studies.

At the same time, investigators have shown little interest in how AA members (AAs) themselves use the term spirituality, the variety of experiences, beliefs, and practices they deem spiritual, and how they see these contributing to their recovery. By failing to understand emic ideas about spirituality, researchers run the risk of gravely misunderstanding

the actual beliefs and practices that contribute to sobriety. This lack of knowledge about the phenomenology of AA spirituality tends to support AA's tacit claim that all types of higher powers, spiritual experiences, and practices work equally well to promote sobriety when this may not actually be the case. Alcoholism is a destructive and often deadly disease. If in fact evidence indicates that certain spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices work better than others to help alcoholics, such knowledge could eliminate years of suffering for some of those who struggle with alcohol addiction.

This lack of specificity in defining spirituality is compounded by an equally limited conception of alcoholism. For decades, alcoholism research in the United States relied upon the biomedical or "brain disease" model, advocated by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA). This model views alcoholism as a universal, largely biological disorder and tends to underemphasize historical or cultural contributors to the malady. This has been replaced with an improved biopsychosocial model, but when researchers investigate environmental contributors to alcoholism, they tend to focus heavily on family dynamics, rather than larger sociohistorical factors (Skewes et al. 2013). Cross-cultural variation in alcohol-induced behavior and an apparent absence of alcoholism in small, pre-industrial societies challenges the presumed universality of alcoholism and suggests that some aspects of life in modernized countries may influence whether or not individuals develop problematic relationships with alcohol (Heath 1958, 1984; Douglas 1987; The Social Issues Research Centre 1998; Sudhinaraset et al 2016). By ignoring the cultural and historical circumstances that contribute to individuals developing a pathological relationship with alcohol, scientists and the clinicians that implement their findings leave these circumstances untreated and ever ready to push recovering alcoholics into relapse. Furthermore, by assuming alcoholism is a disease of

individual or familial origin, we render potentially destructive aspects of our modern, American way of life unintelligible and therefore immune to improvement.

This dissertation will contribute to research on spirituality's role in helping members of Alcoholics Anonymous achieve and maintain sobriety by offering a novel approach to understanding and defining alcoholism and spirituality. It will go beyond the usual boundaries of the biopsychosocial model and try to understand the role of culture in the development of alcoholism. Additionally, instead of stipulating a definition of spirituality that makes sense to me the researcher, I have instead decided to interview my participants, often at great length, about what spirituality means to them. Conclusions about spirituality will be grounded in how AA members themselves define the concept; a better understanding of what spirituality *is* will help us to more accurately reflect upon how spirituality *works*.

This interdisciplinary method of putting history and ethnography into conversation with social psychology has demonstrated significant evidence that the spiritual program of AA works for some people by producing a change in self-construal from a more dependent to independent schema, contrary to the more individualist tendencies in American culture, where alcoholism and addiction now rage at epidemic levels (cite). Spirituality takes two main forms in AA— a social form in which fellowship with others is seen as a sacred saving force, and a relationship with an extraordinary Other—both of which play a role in enacting this change in sense of self. All members participate in the sacred fellowship, but not all members believe in or claim contact with an extraordinary other, and yet a significant number of atheist and agnostic members are able to remain sober in the program. This seems to indicate that for some alcoholics, the sacrality of the fellowship alone is transformational. In the conclusion, I will present ideas for how these claims about AA spirituality causing a

change in self-construal could be tested empirically through collaboration between myself and an expert in social psychology or cognitive science.

Literature Review

Researchers in a number of disciplines have attempted to understand whether and/or how spirituality as practiced in AA plays a role in helping alcoholics to achieve and maintain sobriety. While the majority of research on this specific problem has been done by clinical psychologists, historians and social scientists have also addressed the spirituality of the program, although usually as part of a broader agenda. This review will provide a summary of work on this issue in each discipline in turn and then a synthesis of these approaches as they pertain to my goals in this project. Due to the approach I am taking, at times it will be necessary for me to look at research on alcoholism separately from research on spirituality, instead of research addressing only the nexus of the two.

Spirituality

Previous psychological work on spirituality as a mediating factor in AA's effect on sobriety has produced conflicting, sometimes even contradictory, results. A number of studies have demonstrated that spirituality plays an important role in helping alcoholics to achieve and maintain sobriety (Nowinski 2015). Their findings include the following: about 25% of the direct effect of AA on the intensity of alcohol consumption can be explained by spirituality/religiousness (Kelly et al. 2011); those reporting a spiritual awakening after treatment were more likely to remain sober (Katsukas, Bond, and Weisner 2008); the practice of 11th step prayer and meditation is positively correlated with length of sobriety (Carroll 1993); and those who "accept the spiritual paradigm" attend AA more frequently and have lower relapse rates (Gilbert 1991). Other research has indicated that spirituality does not in

fact mediate AA's effect and may even interfere with other effective aspects of the program. For example, Tonigan, who in other studies has found a positive relationship between spirituality and sobriety, in a 2002 study reported that both atheist and spiritual alcoholics derive equal benefit from AA (Tonigan 2002). Likewise, a recent study on the role of locus of control in alcoholism found that alcoholics who think of themselves as in control of their sobriety do better than those who think God is in control (Murray et al. 2008).

In opposition to those who claim that spirituality has a positive effect on the achievement and maintenance of sobriety, others have argued that spiritual practices encourage heightened group affiliation, which is the confounding variable, or a real cause, behind this effect. A number of studies counter this claim, however, by showing that while all AAs seem to benefit from group affiliation, those who work the more explicitly spiritual aspects of the program (the 12 steps) seem to be able to remain sober longer than others. According to Tonigan: "With a few exceptions, AA-focused studies show that commitment to, and practice of, prescribed AA behaviors is a stronger predictor of later abstinence than sheer frequency of AA meeting attendance" (Tonigan 2008, 370). This is also confirmed by emic data; a common AA slogan states "We go to meetings to *feel* better; we work the steps to *get* better." In a recent National Institutes of Health meta-analysis of AA research on spirituality, the authors conclude "no support was found for the hypothesis that increased spiritual practices improved drinking outcomes because such changes enhanced 12-step meeting attendance... Although the possibility remains that spiritual practices mobilize other prescribed 12-step activities that actually explain drinking reduction, we consider this possibility to be remote" (Tonigan, Rynes, and McCrady 2013, 1170). As I will argue, understanding AA spirituality from an emic perspective will reveal that the group

itself in AA is sacralized, making distinctions between group effects and spirituality problematic.

Often the conflicting results of studies on AA spirituality are due to researchers' tendency to stipulate definitions of spirituality and religion for the purposes of research that often have little to do with how members of AA themselves conceive of these terms. Decades of research and theorizing in multiple fields has demonstrated that religion and spirituality are not stable, *sui generis* categories, but concepts highly contested within and across cultures (Zinnbauer et al 1997; Taves 2009; Altmeyer et al 2015). Often researchers in psychology use definitions of religion or spirituality anchored to whatever instrument they are using to measure it, and since they often use different measures, or measures that don't describe religion and spirituality in terms that make sense in the context of AA, they are perhaps not measuring what they think they are, but instead some component(s) related to spirituality, but not exhaustive of what their subjects mean by the term. Furthermore, these widely divergent scholarly definitions of spirituality make comparison and knowledge-building across studies extremely difficult (Johnson and Robinson 2008; Johnson 2013). While some researchers do not even bother to explicitly define spirituality when investigating its effects (see Kelly et al. 2011), others employ working definitions characterized by "a certain vague all-inclusiveness" which is "so broad as to be almost meaningless" (Zemore 2008, 115). Some approach spirituality as a global, trait-like concept, while others attempt to break it down into component parts. Depending on how it is defined and measured, spirituality is reported to have differing, and sometimes contradictory, effects on mental health and addiction (Johnson and Robinson 2008). Such conflicting results are in part due to researchers' lack of attention to how AAs themselves understand spirituality and the

imprecision of their own definitions of spirituality, both of which stem from this ill-considered approach to the category. In a comprehensive review of the problem of defining and measuring spirituality in alcoholism research, Johnson and Robinson conclude: “Researchers should articulate their definitions carefully as they develop hypotheses, select measures, and report findings, making their implicit assumptions about SR [spiritual/religious] constructs explicit. Only then will we understand if one researcher’s work on the role of spirituality in alcoholism contradicts or confirms another’s” (173). The authors go on to recommend that researchers break spirituality down into component dimensions and make more specific claims, for instance, that increased meaning in life promotes sobriety, rather than more general claims about spirituality as a whole. Nonetheless, those that follow this advice sometimes become confused when they disaggregate spirituality into component parts, since many of those parts, particularly those that are most effective in promoting sobriety, appear to be traditionally secular. In one study, for instance, the subdimensions of spirituality associated with better substance use outcome included forgiveness of others, purpose in life, serenity, and existential well-being, all of which could be considered secular rather than spiritual (Connors et al. 2008). Again, this problem emerges from researchers’ tendency to favor the definitions of spiritual and religion stipulated by psychological scales, rather than how AA members themselves understand and enact these concepts in their recovery. While some are willing to disaggregate spirituality into possible component parts, they remain attached to the idea that spirituality is an ontological category that exists outside of human judgments and therefore find themselves confused by what remains after their dismantling. More recently, in a study showing that individuals who reported having a spiritual awakening in a recovery home, had “increased

coping self-efficacy, increased hope, and decreased chance of negative exit” (Bell et al. 2023, 344), the authors noted that due to AA’s “peculiar approach to spirituality,” “standard scales of religiosity, spirituality, or awakening meant for the general population may not adequately capture the experiences of those in 12-step groups” (346).

As Ann Taves has argued (2009), once researchers adopt a particular definition of spirituality they lose access to the way that subjects define and use the term, which is particularly problematic for research on how AA spirituality works to arrest alcoholism. *In order to understand how AA spirituality works, we have to understand what AA spirituality is.* While Johnson and Robinson’s recommendation that researchers disaggregate spirituality seems prudent in a general sense, it presupposes that researchers know what AA members mean by spirituality, and, thus, what it is that needs to be broken down. “Relatively little attention has been given to the definitions of SR [spirituality/religiousness] held by alcoholics in or out of treatment,” (181) they write. Until we know more about how AA members understand spirituality in practice, we will not be in a position to test its effectiveness either holistically or in terms of components.

For instance, two of the most recent studies on spirituality’s role in mediating the effectiveness of AA do not adequately address the distinction between religion and spirituality that is foundational in AA (Tonigan et al. 2013; Kelly et al. 2011). They rely on an instrument known as the Religious Background and Behavior (RBB) self-report questionnaire, which asks respondents to identify as atheist, agnostic, unsure, spiritual, or religious and provides definitions of these terms. “Spiritual” is defined as “I believe in God, but I am not religious.” Such a definition is potentially problematic for members of AA who consider themselves spiritual but do not call their higher power “God” or do not believe in a

higher power at all. As Johnson and Robinson have argued, ignoring the emic distinction in AA between religion and spirituality “will bias results towards and underestimate of involvement in spirituality in non-religious respondents” (Johnson and Robinson 2008, 170).

Some psychologists are working to address difficulties in measuring spirituality in a consistent manner across cultures, but problems remain. Douglas MacDonald and colleagues conducted an impressive study in eight countries aimed at evaluating what they felt was the best scale available at the time, The Expressions of Spirituality Inventory (ESI-R) (MacDonald et al 2015). They determined that while this five-factor measure of spirituality “demonstrates superior goodness-of-fit” across samples from a number of cultures, overall their results indicated “quite clearly that spirituality is not a concept that ‘transcends’ culture and holds a firm universality of meaning. Rather it seems the opposite holds true; the specific meaning ascribed to spirituality appears to be intrinsically bound by culture and cannot be fully understood without giving consideration to cultural factors (32).

Moreover, defining spirituality based on the researchers’ understanding of the term and not the understanding of the members of the culture or subculture being studied, obscures both the generic forms of AA spirituality, those beliefs and practices that AAs tend to share in common, and the specific variations of such spirituality. Very little research has focused on the differences in how AAs conceive of their higher powers, the types of experiences they report, the practices they cultivate and how such differences might have an impact on whether or not spirituality promotes sobriety.

Alcoholism

Current scientific research on AA’s efficacy tends to downplay the cultural and historical circumstances that contribute to alcoholism, instead conceiving of the malady as a

universal “brain disease” of genetic or familial environmental origins. Scholarship in anthropology has determined that alcoholism is virtually nonexistent in small, preindustrial societies and that “drunken comportment” varies widely across cultures depending on the context in which drinking occurs (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 2003 [1969]; Glasser, 2012). Everywhere alcohol impairs sensorimotor function, but other alcohol-induced behavior varies in different societies. For instance, research on the Camba, a traditional society in Bolivia, demonstrated that they consumed more alcohol than most other societies. However, this consumption was limited to 2-3 times a month in social gatherings and there was no evidence of solitary or out-of-control drinking characteristic of alcoholism (Heath 1958). Other studies have shown societies in which intoxicated people get quiet and still rather than loud and disinhibited (MacAndrews and Edgerton, 2003 [1969]). More recently, Stanley Brandes’ ethnographic work with an AA group in Mexico City revealed that excessive drinking is seen as a sign of masculinity in that culture and that therefore “a large portion of their meetings is devoted to redefining masculinity, in such a way that drinking becomes antithetical to rather than an intrinsic component of true manhood” (Brandes 2001, xvi). All of these studies would seem to indicate that cultural and historical circumstances play at least some role in whether or not individuals are likely to develop a problematic relationship with alcohol and therefore may likewise play a role in any successful treatment.

Scholarship on AA

In 1979, Ernest Kurtz produced the first comprehensive scholarly history of Alcoholics Anonymous. Kurtz argued that while AA has roots in multiple types of Protestant Christianity, it is the evangelical-pietist variety, rather than the humanistic-liberal that came to dominate AA spirituality. The most important religious insight of AA, Kurtz claimed, is

the realization that the alcoholic is “not God” (the title of his book). Over 40 years ago, Kurtz argued that like evangelical Christians, AAs hold on to a transcendent idea of God, who, through his grace, bestows sobriety on alcoholics in steps 1-3. Kurtz also claimed that AA spirituality, like its evangelical predecessors, emphasizes sin and salvation.

Kurtz essentially argued that despite AA’s claimed openness to all spiritual orientations (or none at all), certain types of spirituality are favored and encouraged by the program more than others. While I agree with Kurtz on this general point, I am inclined to think that AAs, both in the past and today, are more inclined toward an immanent notion of God and that their notions of sin and salvation are very different from those promulgated by evangelicals. The salvation offered through AA is decidedly this-worldly, and thus not of the traditional evangelical variety. While individual AA members may believe in a heavenly afterlife, the focus in AA meetings is on escaping the hell of alcoholism and building a new, meaningful, serene life in this world.

In her work *Revelatory Events*, Ann Taves argues that the founders of AA, particularly Bill Wilson, made a concerted effort to present the program in “spiritual, but not religious” terms that would not alienate religious groups such as the Catholic Church and would allow individuals’ religious beliefs and practices to override AA’s core spirituality as needed (Taves, 2016). Taves makes the case that while in his personal life Wilson was an “explicit perennialist”, when it came to how he presented the program in the steps, traditions, and his public talks, this perennialism remained only tacit, always able to take a back seat to more established religious traditions. While I agree with Taves that tamping down this perennialism was Wilson’s goal, I think some of it has inevitably shaped the kinds of spiritual experiences, beliefs, and practices that are encouraged in AA. For instance, as I

argued in my master's thesis, the Big Book is significantly indebted to the ideas of depression-era New Thought leader Emmet Fox, who promoted a number of typical perennialist notions at odds with traditional Christianity. I think that AA's tacit perennialism is sometimes sensed by both those with more traditional orientations and those of a more agnostic/atheist bent and makes affiliation with the program more difficult for them. For instance, Celebrate Recovery, an evangelical Christian group founded by Rick Warren and based on the 12-steps, is quickly growing around the country, in part because it allows traditional Christians to praise Jesus Christ and quote from the bible in meetings, something that most AA meetings would not allow (Kelly and White 2012). There are also a number of secular sobriety groups that have arisen in the last 30 years or so, including Rational Recovery, Secular Organizations for Sobriety, and SMART Recovery, that likewise have found AA's spirituality unpalatable, but for different reasons.

Recent historical scholarship on AA has provided evidence that the program attempts to address a number of issues attendant to modernity in the United States, such as consumerism, social fragmentation, and meaninglessness. While not addressing AA specifically, there is a robust body of historical literature on types of suffering that have accompanied economic and cultural modernization. For example, T.J. Jackson Lears has argued that at the end of the 19th century Americans began to feel a sense of unreality due to, among other things: an unprecedented level of physical comfort; the increasing interdependence of the American economy which made workers just a cog in the wheel of a giant, remotely operated machine; urbanization, which left city dwellers feeling as if they had no true self, just masks they donned for different social situations; and a liberalization of Christianity in which the hard edges of hell were smoothed away into a focus on present

comfort (Lears 1981). Lears argues that some people felt so unnerved by these changes that they developed a disease called neurasthenia, where they would lay in bed with “nervous prostration”, sought out intoxication through drugs, and experienced what today we would call anxiety and depression. One symptom of neurasthenia was the use of drugs such as opium to calm the nerves and provide an intense experience. Lears argues that these conditions led to the rise of a therapeutic culture that tried to soothe this fragmented sense of self, meaninglessness, and, as Nietzsche termed it, “weightlessness.” In response, advertisers began marketing a panoply of products to restore life’s vitality and meaning, harkening a shift in religious orientation from the goal of “salvation to self-realization.” Alcoholics are arguably prime victims of this consumer-oriented culture, in which the solution to all one’s problems is the consumption of some product (sometimes alcohol itself) to soothe oneself.

My work also builds upon more recent scholarship such as Kathryn Lofton’s work on the Oprah Winfrey phenomenon, in which she argues that the millions of women who consume Oprah’s spiritually oriented products and advice do so in response to an “unnamed restlessness” (Lofton 2011). Oprah encourages them to ease this feeling through the consumption of consumer goods. As Lofton points out, this is a “trap” since what they long for is a connection that the products cannot provide. Lears argues that the only thing that can actually fill this hole is a commitment to something beyond the self. As this dissertation will demonstrate, Alcoholics Anonymous encourages alcoholics to connect to a power (God) and a community (the AA group) beyond themselves in order to achieve the “ego collapse at depth” its founders considered critical to lasting recovery (Wilson 1961).

Historians who work specifically on AA have recognized these historical and cultural contributors to modern suffering and have argued that AA works in part by providing a

remedy for them. Trysh Travis has made the bold claim that AA's founders designed the program to counter the destructive tendencies of modern consumer capitalism. "A significant portion of early AA literature devotes itself to denigrating the beliefs and practices dedicated to mass-producing the productive capitalist citizen known as the 'self-made man,'" Travis writes (Travis 2009, 65). "Wilson came to believe that it was precisely the culturally mandated and uncritical belief in the market values of individual competence, efficacy, and power that underpinned the disease of alcoholism.... Because the spiritual dimensions of that illness were rooted in key elements of modern, middle-class, white male identity, alcoholism could only be remedied by rejecting that identity" (67). Historian Eoin Cannon likewise believes that AA's spiritual solution might go beyond addressing problems of individual or familial origin, arguing that the alcoholic's ability to achieve sobriety through AA is based on adopting a "new conception of self as socially embedded" and a new social vision, similar to the New Deal liberalism of AA's early years, in which people are responsible for taking care of one another (Cannon 2013, 147). Like myself, Travis and Cannon are interested in how processes outside of the biological or familial, which are the focus of most contemporary scientific research on alcoholism, might contribute to alcoholism and AA's spiritual solution to it.

Research in these three fields – clinical psychology, anthropology, and history – strongly suggest that both spirituality and alcoholism cannot be understood outside of the historical and cultural contexts in which they exist. In order to accurately understand how spirituality might contribute to AA's positive effect on sobriety, we need to talk to members of AA themselves. Identifying spirituality and alcoholism as inherently unstable and contested complex cultural concepts will naturally compel inquiry into how AA literature

represents spirituality and how AAs themselves define and deploy their spirituality in relation to it on the ground.

Research Methods

Since nearly 65,000 AA groups currently meet in the United States, it would be difficult and expensive for one researcher to attend a representative sample of AA meetings. But, as the second most populous city in the country, Los Angeles is home to thousands of AA meetings per week, located in all types of communities throughout the city. While anchoring my research in Los Angeles necessarily limits it in certain ways (for example, I was not able to attend to the experiences of rural AA groups), there was sufficient diversity here to allow me to witness how AA operates in different socioeconomic and cultural contexts. Out of respect for AA's traditions I only attended open meetings - closed meetings are reserved for those who identify as alcoholic. Between 2015 and 2020 (prior to the Covid-19 pandemic), I attended approximately 50 AA meetings in the greater Los Angeles area, and a few in other parts of the country when the opportunity arose. To protect anonymity, I took no notes during meetings, and minimal notes in my car afterward, careful not to mention any personal specifics or identifying details about what I had heard. These field notes were general notes to myself about themes to consider and I also recorded the approximate size and types of most meetings, so I could be sure to attend a variety. I did my best to visit meetings in a multitude of neighborhoods in an attempt to reflect the diversity of the region as a whole.

Over this time period, I also conducted semi-structured interviews lasting from an hour to two hours with 31 current members of AA and 3 former members of AA.¹ I recruited members through the snowball method, asking people to refer me to others they knew in the program. I also struck up conversations with some of those I met after meetings and asked if they would be open to being interviewed or knew of anyone else who would. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. I then used Dedoose software to code interviews for information related to my overarching research question, which asked: How does spirituality in AA help some members to achieve and maintain sobriety? All of my interviews occurred in person in a public setting (a certain popular coffee chain deserves a shout out) and began by asking interviewees for their AA “pitch,” the story members are prompted to tell in meetings about “what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now.” Nearly all of my participants were able to speak for at least 20 minutes on this topic with little prompting. I then asked follow up questions about how they understood spirituality, who their higher power is, what kinds of practices they engaged in to contact their higher power, how they prayed and meditated, and then asked them to describe any spiritual experiences they had had as a result of the program in detail, probing for phenomenological information about the details of what happened to them bodily and mentally during these experiences. I also asked them about their childhood religious or spiritual affiliation, present religious or spiritual affiliation, and how that had changed over the years and as a result of their experience in AA. I left each interviewee with an embarrassingly long survey indicative of my neophyte status as a researcher, and to their

¹ To protect the anonymity of AA members past and present all, with the exception of the widely known founders of AA and Al-Anon, will be referred to using first names and last initials only or a pseudonym, depending on their preference. While I am sympathetic to using “person-centered” language to refer to those struggling with addiction, I have chosen to use the term “alcoholic” at times in keeping with how my interviewees identify themselves.

great credit, 14 of them sent it back to me. I also provided them with a list of local resources for those suffering from alcoholism and addiction (See Appendix 1 for survey instrument).

In 2015, I attended the AA's International Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, taking notes on my general impressions of the event - again I did not record any individual stories or identifying details. In 2016, I attended a retreat in Sedona, AZ for those interested in AA history, where I met a number of exceptionally kind individuals who helped initiate me into AA historical research. In 2016, I also had the opportunity to spend two weeks doing research in the AA Archives in New York City and the Stepping Stones Foundation archives at the historic home of Bill and Lois Wilson in Katonah, New York.² All of these methods were approved by the Office of Human Subjects at University of California, Santa Barbara.

My ethnographic work is informed by Clifford Geertz's concept of "thick description" (Geertz 1973): deciphering the meaning of a wink sometimes requires an attention to subtle details, informed by immersion in a culture and community. I continue to believe that research in religion (and other aspects of culture) needs to be grounded in meticulous attention to detail in long-term observation, conversation, and collaboration with participants, so that any psychological experiments, which play a critical role in knowledge building in religion, especially across cultures, are richly informed by on-the-ground realities. While I concede that no scholar goes into a research project without a preconceived agenda, however preliminary, I see great value in grounded theory's encouragement to set aside as much as we can our assumptions and allow our observations to guide us toward emergent

² I visited AAs GSO Archives and The Stepping Stones Foundations archives in the Fall of 2016. A special thanks to archivist Michelle Mirza at GSO and Sally Corbett-Turco, executive director of Stepping Stones, for their generous help.

categories and areas for exploration (Corbin and Strauss 1990; Emerson et al 2011; Russell 2006). Finally, my scholarship is heavily influenced by the concept of “lived religion,” the idea that religious and spiritual people do all kinds of creative and disruptive interpretative work on their own that often is at odds with or emphasizes different things than their leaders would prefer or their theology would instruct (Bender 2010; Orsi 1985). My training and disposition leads me then to a preference for definitions of spirituality and religion that emerge from AA members themselves, and so one of the first things I asked them was to explain the relation between the two, and how they live out their spirituality (often preferred over religion) in their daily lives, and how they feel this helps them to get sober. The dissertation thus begins with my participants’ own understandings of how AA spirituality works, based on historical sources and their responses to this very question, before I shift into a scholarly analysis of what their answers mean from a naturalistic perspective.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 – “An Entire Psychic Change” –clarifies the problem that AA is trying to solve, namely alcoholism, arguing that AAs’ framed alcoholism as, fundamentally, a problem with the self. AA’s founding generation thus called for a spiritual awakening that would lead to an “entire psychic change” (Anonymous 1939, xxix) or radical transformation in the self. Contemporary AAs and their predecessors speak of their pre-AA experience as being overly focused on the self in a negative way, and AA spirituality and group protocols (the 12 traditions) as a means to achieve “ego collapse at depth” so that recovering alcoholics become a part of a greater whole (Wilson 1961).

In Chapter 2—“A Power Greater Than Ourselves”: A Common Core of AA Spirituality—I argue that, while AA allows members to engage with God or a higher power “as we understood him” (Steps 3 and 11), there is nonetheless a common core of AA spirituality that most of the fellowship agrees upon, that some new or renewed relationship with others or an Other must emerge that changes the self profoundly. I examine historical evidence that AA’s “spiritual, rather than religious” orientation emerged in the first few years of the fellowship in order to allow alcoholics of all backgrounds to join AA, and also so that the fellowship would not fall into conflict with existing religious groups, who might not send their members to a program with a theology too explicitly different than their own. My research demonstrates two modes of spirituality operative in AA: a relational spirituality based on the self connecting to *others* in the fellowship of alcoholics or the Group of Drunks (G.O.D., as some members say), and a more vertical spirituality in which the self engages a (usually) supernatural Other (God, higher power, or whatever term works for the individual). Most members engage both types of spirituality, but some members, such as atheists and agnostics, find the first, relational spirituality, more than adequate to change their sense of self to one compatible with sobriety. A close reading of the 12 steps and 12 traditions reveals an underlying common theology of AA, shared by most members in my sample: AA spirituality, no matter what God or higher power is engaged, or none, enables a transformation in self from self-focused to other-focused.

In Chapter 3—Varieties of Higher Powers— I examine the variety of higher powers engaged by AA members, demonstrating that while the majority of my sample identifies as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), a still significant minority remains committed to more traditional religious traditions such as Catholicism and Evangelical Christianity. Both SBNR

and traditionally religious AA members expressed sometimes immanent and sometimes transcendent views of God, suggesting that immanence has grown in influence in AA since Ernest Kurtz wrote his foundational history of the organization more than 40 years ago. I also explore how AAs with more traditional religious beliefs navigate membership in AA and their churches (all my religious participants were Christians of some kind), sometimes with ease, and sometimes with some difficulty. I also look at those who needed to leave their childhood faith behind in order to get sober, finding a new, more loving and accepting God through their work in AA. I then explore the atheist and agnostic experience in AA, which reveals just how important relational spirituality, or the close connections between peers in the fellowship, is to ongoing sobriety not just for non-theistic members, but for everyone.

Finally in Chapter 4—Cultivating and Experiencing “Conscious Contact”—I report my ethnographic findings on how AA members cultivate and experience “conscious contact” with God or their higher powers through spiritual practices, such as prayer and meditation, and spiritual experiences, which are often transformative and profound. I compare these practices to those of the evangelical samples studied by T.M. Luhrmann, using her concept of “kindling” to help explain how AA efforts work to change the self.

In the last chapter, “Conclusions and Future Inquiry: Toward Explanation,” I summarize my findings, arguing that it is through the development of a more interdependent other-oriented self-construal (Markus and Kitayama 1991) that psychological suffering of the alcoholic variety is vanquished, and suggest how future researchers might test whether this is indeed the mechanism through which AA works.

William James argued in 1901 that some human beings require “something more” than ordinary reality in order to live happy lives. This dissertation will argue that for some in Alcoholics Anonymous, that something more, rather than what once in their alcoholism was the false promise of another drink, becomes something other or Other, and that it is through the development of a more interdependent other-oriented self-construal that psychological suffering of the alcoholic variety is vanquished.

Chapter 1: “An Entire Psychic Change”

“One year later he called to see me, and I experienced a very strange sensation. I knew the man by name, and partly recognized his features, but there all resemblance ended. From a trembling, despairing, nervous wreck, had emerged a man brimming over with self-reliance and contentment. I talked with him for some time, but was not able to bring myself to feel that I had known him before. To me he was a stranger, and so he left me. More than three years have now passed with no return to alcohol.”

- Dr. William Silkworth, “The Doctor’s Opinion,”
Alcoholics Anonymous (“The Big Book”), 1939

“But Thou, O Lord my God, hearken; behold, and see, and have mercy and heal me, Thou, in whose presence I have become a problem to myself; and that is my infirmity.”

- Augustine, *Confessions*, c. 400

The idea that alcoholism is a problem which requires a radical transformation of the self – “an entire psychic change” (Anonymous 1939, xxix) – cultivated through spiritual practices and experiences has been present since the founding days of AA. Despite their differences, nearly all the AAs in my contemporary sample – whether members of faith traditions, agnostics, or atheists – experienced their spiritual growth in AA, at least in part, as a transformation of the self. If we are to explore how this transformation of self occurs through the program’s Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, first we must understand the nature of the problem the AA program is trying to solve. This problem goes far beyond excess drinking and is instead defined as a “spiritual malady” that often precedes the ingestion of alcohol. “I was born an alcoholic,” many of my interviewees and other AA members say. This chapter will explore what AAs mean by “alcoholic” as an identity, the program’s claim that “an entire psychic change” is necessary for ongoing sobriety, and how a

“deflation of ego at depth” became one widely shared emic way of understanding of what must happen to make way for the spiritual awakening that is AA’s solution to alcoholism. A full understanding of this process requires us to look at both the common core of the AA program, as embodied in its literature, *and* at how this particular sample of current AA members talks about their understanding of alcoholism and its relationship to the self. This dual approach will bring the realities of “lived” religion—the various ways adherents of all traditions interpret, reimagine, and even resist the “official” tenets of their traditions (Bender 2010)—to the forefront, revealing how the common core of ideas in AA is lived out and implemented on the ground, in the individual alcoholic’s life. While AA makes it very clear in Tradition 3 that the “only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking” (Anonymous 1952, 139), and that there are no official beliefs about God or alcoholism or anything else one must assent to, there still remains a common core of ideas, present in the program’s literature and oral tradition, that the majority of those working the program agree upon. One of these widely, but sometimes tacitly shared ideas is that alcoholism is a symptom of a *diseased self*, and that “an entire psychic change,” brought about by a relationship with a Higher Power, is required to treat it.

It is important to acknowledge that the concept of self is no less complex and freighted than the concepts of spirituality and alcoholism, as discussed in the introduction. The study of the self—what it is, where it resides, if it even exists—has a long history in the crosshairs of many academic disciplines, religious worldviews, and vernacular understandings that vary across cultures. In the first part of this dissertation, I will rely upon vernacular conceptions of the self as employed by current and former AA members. In part II, where I propose scientific mechanisms to explain the transformation of my participants,

the latest literature on the self from the cognitive sciences will come into play. For now, I will be considering how early AA members and the psychologists they read and consulted, as well as contemporary members, conceive of the self and its relationship to alcoholism and recovery. In later chapters, I will explore in more depth the spiritual beliefs (Chapters 2 and 3), practices (Chapter 4), and experiences (Chapter 5) that these AA members have relied upon in order to effect this profound transformation of self. For now, a brief overview of the steps should suffice for us to begin to understand the problem they are trying to solve. The Twelve-Step path includes admitting powerlessness over alcohol (Step 1), trusting in a Higher Power (Steps 2 and 3), confessing and working through one's resentments (Step 4 and 5), acknowledging and working on one's "character defects" (Steps 6 and 7), acknowledging and making amends for harm done to others (Step 8 and 9), ongoing awareness of resentments and harms done to others (Step 10), prayer and meditation (Step 11), and working with other alcoholics (Step 12).

Part I: The Problems of the Alcoholic Self

Most often my interviewees spoke of "the self" as a collection of attributes housed in their minds and bodies that differentiated them from others: their personality traits, emotional and behavioral tendencies, physiological predispositions, and the patterns in their ways of interacting with themselves, others, the world, and even God. Most saw these as amenable to change, and indeed felt they needed to change in order for them to become sober. Most agreed that the Twelve Steps, with their stated goal of "having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps," allowed them to accomplish this desired change in self by creating a new relationship with a "power greater than ourselves" that helped them to believe and do things they couldn't on their own.

“I think I was born an alcoholic,” Joseph Y., 31, told me. Four years sober in AA from an addiction to alcohol and crack cocaine, he said, “I think there’s a real physical aspect to it. I really think it’s a disease.” Jack A., 65, and sober for more than half his life, recalled first coming into contact with AA: “They gave me the good information that every newcomer should have. Not to say that I’m not responsible for my actions—I am. But it is a disease. It is not my fault. It gets worse, never better.” Despite 35 years of continuous sobriety, Jack, like all AA members, still says when introducing himself at meetings: “Hi, I’m Jack and I am an alcoholic.” His sober status does not change what he fundamentally is – an alcoholic, a type of self that is prone to alcoholism. This way of introducing oneself is known in AA as “identification.” “How do you identify?” people often ask. “As an alcoholic,” is the standard answer in AA meetings, or sometimes “as an alcoholic and drug addict.” In other Twelve-Step fellowships, one might identify as a compulsive overeater, a sex and love addict, or a gambling addict. The purpose of identification is to remind the person that they have a permanent condition that does not ever go away. The thinking is that no matter how stable and happy an alcoholic might feel, no matter how many years of sobriety she has under her belt, taking a drink will always, eventually, lead to disaster. “We are like men who have lost their legs,” says the Big Book. “They never grow new ones. Neither does there appear to be any kind of treatment which will make alcoholics of our kind like other men... Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn’t done so yet” (Anonymous 1939, 30). In some meetings, this portion of the Big Book is read, and in unison, for emphasis, everyone says “but it hasn’t done so yet.” This condition, this disease, is about much more than drinking too much. It is at the core of the self. And, as in 1939 so it remains today – medicine and

psychotherapy can certainly help those struggling with alcoholism, but most in the field would agree a permanent cure that would allow the alcoholic to drink like a “normie” is rare to nonexistent.

The notion of alcoholism as arising from a diseased self and not amenable to medical or psychological treatment alone was first codified in the program’s foundational and most widely read text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*, known among members as “The Big Book,” first published in 1939. Members are not required to read AA’s literature. However, the vast majority of active members hear the literature read at meetings, and most also read it on their own, in groups, and with sponsors. Many members also participate in Big Book studies, reading groups modeled after bible studies, where the book’s meaning is scrutinized line-by-line, sometimes with a dictionary that allows for deeper understanding of both common and unusual words, and sometimes with an index of frequent topics, such as humility or surrender, that can be cross-referenced for further illumination on a topic. We’ll explore the role of the Big Book in more depth later when I discuss members’ intense interest in their organizational history, but for now suffice it to say that the Big Book is treated by most members with veneration and as a source of authority on what alcoholism is and how to recover through the Twelve Steps of the program.

AA’s literature and the testimonies of contemporary members make it clear that most AAs view alcoholism as a disease affecting their body, mind, and spirit. The claim that is made tacitly in the literature and among members, I would argue, is that *alcoholic is a type of self*, a self that experiences and interacts with the world in a particular way, which often leads a person to drink in excess or engage in other self-soothing or compulsive behaviors. Furthermore, alcoholism is “but a symptom” of this type of self – and so in essence, for AA,

the “diseased self” is a deeper problem than alcoholism. Spirituality is the solution offered to repair this self, so that alcohol is no longer needed to make life tolerable. In a discussion of working to release resentment toward others, a key part of the Twelve-Step path, the Big Book says: “From [resentments] stem all forms of spiritual disease, for we have been not only mentally and physically ill, we have been spiritually sick. When the spiritual malady is overcome, we straighten out mentally and physically” (Anonymous 1939, 64). This “spiritual disease” is logically more fundamental than the mental or physical illness. The Twelve Steps are designed to treat this spiritual disease, which in turn is thought to treat the alcoholic’s mental and physical problems. But one problem even a spiritual experience cannot change is the ways in which AA claims an alcoholic is “bodily different from his fellows.” Prior to his involvement with Wilson and AA, Wilson’s doctor, William Silkworth, had promoted his theory of alcoholism as, in part, an “allergy of the body,” or an “abnormal reaction” to the ingestion of alcohol that causes “the phenomenon of craving,” or the immediate desire for more, despite the consequences. It is important to note that Silkworth recommended “entire abstinence” (Anonymous 1939, xxx) for all who had experienced a serious drinking problem, even those who had had transformative spiritual experiences. The necessity of avoiding alcohol completely remains a bedrock of the AA program to this day.

The Actor

Though the bodily part of the alcoholic self cannot be changed, the Big Book argues that the spiritual and mental part certainly can, which can then arrest the physical component so long as “abstinence” is maintained. In the Big Book, the spiritual and mental components of the disease stem largely from self-centeredness. Not just self-centeredness in the

colloquial sense of arrogance or putting one's own interests above others, but also something deeper and potentially more troublesome. In AA literature, self-centeredness is repeatedly defined as a negative focus or overreliance on the self. In telling his story in the Big Book, Wilson articulated what was required for him to have his own spiritual experience: "Simple, but not easy; a price had to be paid. It meant destruction of self-centeredness. I must turn in all things to the Father of Light who presides over us all" (Anonymous 1939, 14). Wilson's spiritual experience meant the destruction of self-centeredness and self-reliance and a reorientation of self toward his Higher Power (see Chapter 2 for more on the role of Higher Powers in AA spirituality). The idea that the diseased self of the alcoholic is overly self-focused, self-serving, and self-reliant, is further elaborated in the chapter "How it Works," which lays out the Twelve Steps for the first time, particularly in the explanation of how Step 3 works ("Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*"). To illustrate why this step is necessary, the Big Book uses the allegory of "the actor:"

The first requirement is that we be convinced that any life run on self-will can hardly be a success. On that basis we are almost always in collision with something or somebody, even though our motives are good. Most people try to live by self-propulsion. Each person is like an actor who wants to run the whole show: is forever trying to arrange the lights, the ballet, the scenery and the rest of the players in his own way. (Anonymous 1939, 60)

One problem with the actor trying to run the whole show is that he is only a part of it – he cannot see the big picture. And so his efforts result in more chaos and anger his fellow actors. He tries even harder to get everything just right and then starts blaming other people when his plans fail. "What is his basic trouble? Is he not really a self-seeker even when trying to be kind? Is he not a victim of the delusion that he can wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world if he only manages well?.. Our actor is self-centered—ego-centric, as people like

to call it nowadays” (Anonymous 1939, 61).” In meetings and interviews, AA members refer casually to “the actor” to explain the nature of their “ism”, or the disease in thinking and behavior that underlies their drinking. The actor is a symbol of themselves before undergoing the Twelve-Step process, when they tried to “wrest satisfaction and happiness out of this world” through sheer force of will, and then when that failed, through inebriation. Part of what the Twelve Steps offer is a way to accept “life on life’s terms” (Anonymous 1939, 417) without the need for alcohol. The Big Book’s multifaceted understanding of the problem of self can be seen in the following much-quoted passage of the Big Book:

Selfishness—self-centeredness! That, we think, is the root of our troubles. Driven by a hundred forms of fear, self-delusion, self-seeking, and self-pity, we step on the toes of our fellows and they retaliate. Sometimes they hurt us, seemingly without provocation, but we invariably find that at some time in the past we have made decisions based on self which later placed us in a position to be hurt. So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. *They arise out of ourselves*, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn’t think so. Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid. Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We had to have God’s help. (Anonymous 1939, 62) (emphasis mine)

This passage mentions the self 11 times, citing a number of different problems that ail the alcoholic self, including: delusion (not being able to trust oneself), seeking (focusing too much on the needs of the self), pity (negative feelings toward the self), hurt (problems with other selves), will (forcing one’s self or ideas on the world, oneself, and others—“self-will run riot” is an oft-used phrase in AA), and centeredness (too much focus on the self). Not only do alcoholics’ problems ‘arise out of ourselves,’ but this kind of self is deadly (“it kills us”) and must be gotten “rid” of. This can only be done with “God’s help.” Again, in the Big Book, alcoholism is not simply a matter of drinking too much. It is a condition of a diseased

self, one that is too inwardly and negatively focused. As Dr. Mike, an AA member and frequent speaker who runs a Big Book study podcast puts it on his web site:

The spiritual malady is the result of my being out of order with my higher power who I choose to call God. I was the manager or director of my life. I was playing God. I was the director in the drama of life and managing the world so I could get what I thought I needed to feel ok. The problem was playing God. It didn't work. I was in conflict with everyone and everything. Fear and resentment dominated my thoughts and I made decisions based on self which caused me harm and harmed others. My playing God was insane because I am not God. Therefore my illness is a result of relying on self. Selfishness and self-centeredness is the root of my trouble. My troubles are of my own making and arise out my living a life run on self-will. I must be God-centered instead of self-centered and God-directed rather than self-directed. How do I accomplish this? The program of recovery. The Twelve Steps. The specific directions in the first 102 pages of the book Alcoholics Anonymous."

The extent to which Dr. Mike's language matches that of the Big Book is perhaps striking to the uninitiated. As an AA member who produces a podcast study of the Big Book, some in the program might call Dr. Mike a "Big-Book-thumper," which is not necessarily a negative thing. A "Big-Book-thumper" is someone – much like a "Bible-thumper" – who likes to remind himself and others of the very specific and critical messages in the Big Book that have helped them and others to get sober. Like people of many faiths, paths, and practices before them, these "thumpers" fear the saving message of their founders getting diluted and distorted (see Taves 2016) and they seek to return people to these revelations by encouraging them to pay close attention to what the Big Book does and doesn't say. Though occasionally subjects of mild derision, my interviewees more often than not seem to venerate "Big-Book-thumpers," just as they venerate the book itself. Many say that the Big Book and AA as a whole "saved their lives," that they'd be "dead without it," because the nature of their diseased self was so miserable, demoralizing, and impossible to tolerate without alcohol, and then eventually, even with it.

Another way to talk about the various understandings of self in AA is through the second-order concept of agency (Taves 2009). My interviewees rarely use these terms

themselves (hence, second order), but it is a perhaps useful tool to draw out some of the complexities and productive tensions in this understanding of alcoholism. The actor of the Big Book story has an inflated sense of agency; he mistakenly believes that he has the power to control those around him and the whole of the play itself. It is only by realizing his limited agency, and then giving his agency over to a Higher Power outside of himself, that he is able to regain agency in his life. The acceptance of his limited self is paradoxically what makes him able to transform into a more expanded and effective self. The issue of agency will be explored in more depth in Chapter 6, when I explore some psychological and cognitive processes that may underlie these transformations.

Part II: What It Was Like—Contemporary Voices of Dis-ease

As I wrote earlier, in order to understand the Twelve Steps and how they work, we have to understand the problem they are trying to solve. What is this intolerable condition of the self faced by most who have developed a problematic relationship with alcoholism? Why do they believe they need to undergo “an entire psychic change?” Wouldn’t abstinence from drinking alcohol be enough? When I interview current members of AA, I usually begin by asking them to give me a mini version of what AAs call a “pitch,” which is a story that follows the template of “what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now” with a focus on their alcoholism and recovery. This is the format that members at speaker meetings follow when they tell their stories to the others in the meeting. Usually, “what it was like” covers the period of their childhood and their development of alcoholism; “what happened” hinges around how they came to find the AA program and become sober; and “what it is like now” describes how much better their lives are now that they are sober and how the program helps them stay so. “What it was like” often takes up much of their storytelling. Alcoholism,

for many, became a life full of misery and dramatic losses. Stories of incarceration, divorce, painful family separations, physical and emotional abuse, mental illness, hospitalizations, DUIs, accidents, suicidality and other brushes with death are common. Not everyone's alcoholism leads to such extreme "bottoms" – some of my interviewees refer to themselves as "high functioning," meaning their drinking didn't get them into as much trouble as some of their peers. But almost everyone I interviewed experienced an immense amount of personal suffering early in life that their alcohol use dulled for a time, until eventually it stopped working, or more often, made their problems even worse.

A Fish Out of Water

Many AA members talk of a feeling which began very early in life that they were somehow different than those around them, that unlike others, they "didn't get the manual" on how to live a happy life. They report having felt "less than" or "separate from" those around them and struggling with low self-esteem. Often their first experience of inebriation provided release from these negative feelings. After divorcing in her late 20s, Teri M., started seeing a man who was a heavy drinker. It began innocently enough—they enjoyed bar hopping on 1970s Sunset Blvd. But for Teri, this led to a gradual descent into alcoholism, which in its full-blown form lasted over a decade. Even though her alcoholism did not start until later in life, as a young person, Teri recalls, "I was just like a fish out of water." Now 74 and sober for almost three decades, she explains this feeling further:

I was alone in this universe and I didn't understand why. Why I couldn't connect, why I couldn't feel the way other people felt. And it was all very secret with me. I always thought that it might be something mental, growing up that there was some something that God left out. But I put on a very good performance and seemingly did very well. You know I had lots of friends but deep inside there was just nothing but a big deep hole, and I remember that, and I think most of us can, if we go back... [It] had nothing to do with my mother and father, had nothing to do with the way people treated me, it was just something wrong with me.

Many members report similar feelings of incompleteness or discomfort with themselves that preceded their alcoholism; a term often applied to this phenomenon by AAs is “dis-ease,” by which they mean the disease of their alcoholism is related to a larger lack of ease (“dis-ease” in AA terms) in their lives that drives them to drink. When Teri began drinking regularly in her late 20s, she initially believed she had found a remedy for what made her feel different and inadequate. “I thought oh my God! Thank you, God! This was the panacea to all of my problems, because this made the world perfect to me. I didn't wake up with a hangover, but bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and happy with the world, and ‘Oh, isn't this wonderful?’ And I thought why didn't I know about this before?” For about two years, alcohol seemed to enhance Teri's life, and then the drinking took a more serious turn. No longer was it about being out and socializing, but instead she and her boyfriend fought constantly, fueled by a steady supply of wine cartons dropped off by the local deli. “I always say, yes I think there is a gene that contributes to this, but there's also a personality,” Teri tells me. “Very definitely a personality.”

Though more than thirty years Teri's junior, Natasha A. likewise reported feeling inadequate to the task of living and fundamentally different from her peers. Natasha began drinking at the age of 11, after her family moved to a foreign country. But her sense of otherness came from somewhere deeper than geographical dislocation or ethnic difference:

I didn't know how to fit in, and the thing that I could do really well is drink, and I picked that up really easily and that's just what I did. And I was a black out drinker from the get-go. And very quickly my life just became a shambles... I always felt very alone. It was me against the world and I had nobody else and I had to figure it out and I had no one to turn to and I just felt like everyone else knew what to do and I didn't. And I didn't want anyone to know that I didn't know. And that's just how I always felt. But when I drank I felt OK, and that I could hide behind that somehow and it just gave me strength to just get through. But eventually it wasn't living. Like I was very high functioning for some reason. I kept being able to do... It's like I had education, I had a job, I had a relationship, but I had nothing on the inside. None of it fit me in any way shape or form.

As it did for Teri, alcohol also initially helped Natasha to cope with her feelings of loneliness, inadequacy, and emptiness. But the life she created for herself through her “high functioning” didn’t fit her “in any way shape or form,” leaving her with “nothing on the inside.” Both Teri and Natasha felt different than those around them from a very young age, even before they ever took a sip of alcohol. Like many in AA they believe they were born with an “alcoholic personality,” a self that from the get-go was perhaps organized and oriented differently than the standard model.

A Delete Button on the Wall

Cathy H. experienced her *second* “nervous breakdown” at the age of 26. She too had once been “high functioning.” A “straight-laced” child of immigrants, she attended Sunday school, studied hard to get into a good college, and played violin and piano. But eventually the feelings of extreme anxiety that had always existed in her just below the surface started to overcome her, and she entered a “terrible depression.” She described telling her new therapist what she was feeling at the time:

I remember I was super skinny and I was crying. I was bereft. I told her I had malaise. It was like grief. I said, I’m a wash-up. I had this notion that I was 26 and a wash-up, that my life was over. I didn’t know what I wanted to do. I couldn’t find a boyfriend and I drink a lot, and blah, blah, blah. I had this whole sort of litany of, myriad of all these things. And in the middle of all that she heard me say, “And I drink a lot.” She’s like “Why don’t you check out Alcoholics Anonymous? You’ll get a lot of support there.” And I was like, “Are you insane?” I was so shocked that that’s what she pulled out of there. Like, “Aren’t you listening? I have panic attacks, I’m depressed... My big plan was if there was a delete button on the wall, I would push it. Like that was my plan.... like I’d be gone. So if I press delete, then I would not be there anymore. And she just heard it, that I needed... I guess she could hear the alcoholism, you know.”

Cathy doesn’t just mean that her therapist simply heard her say she drank a lot; rather her therapist heard the “alcoholism” or the “ism,” as other members might call it, the negative preoccupation with self that made her think she was a “wash-up” at 26. Now 44, and 17 years sober in AA, Cathy recalls her bouts of suicidal ideation with compassion. Thinking about

suicide and/or trying to commit it, is sadly common among my interviewees prior to finding lasting sobriety. Some still felt these feelings even in sobriety, but usually to a lesser degree.

KFUK

These negative feelings toward oneself, this desire to not even be here anymore, was often precipitated and accompanied by a vicious internal monologue that some of my interviewees and other AA members refer to, half-jokingly, as KFUK. This internal radio station tells them things such as: “you are worthless,” “you’ll never amount to anything,” “everyone hates you,” “they’d be better off without you,” “you’re a bad artist/writer/musician,” “you’re a shitty mother/father/sister/brother/girlfriend/boyfriend,” “you say the stupidest things,” “something is very wrong with you,” and so on. When Angie P.’s sister told her to join her church or she’d go to hell, Angie, 51, and with 18 years of sobriety, said: “Really? That’s why I don’t go to church. Your God has too many rules.” Pointing to her head she says, “I’m already dealing with this right here.’ Cause this motherfucker – shut up!” Angie says her own internal dialogue is mean enough to her – she doesn’t need additional judgment from the church. Another term for this negative internal monologue used in AA is “stinkin’ thinkin’,” and members watch for it as a sign of relapse, that their psychic change has started to unravel into the diseased self. Lily G., 44, with 14 years of sobriety, told me that for her the program is really about changing one’s thinking, rather than stopping one’s drinking. “You look at the word drinking in our literature and I would replace it with thinking, just all through it. ‘And it is our thinking’ - just being really willing to be different. Because I was so addicted to the anger and sadness and the pain...as much as you want it, it doesn't work. And then asking for it to be removed. And the humility in step 7 of not knowing what that looks like, when it's going to happen,

just knowing that it will. And like that just creates a shift in you. And so, I don't know if it's a big mind fuck, but it really really works... just willingness to behave differently, counter-intuitive stuff.” We’ll explore in more detail how AA members like Lily go about changing their thinking when I explore Steps 6 and 7 in Chapter 3.

The Least of God’s Creatures Builds a Boomerang

AA founder Bill Wilson shared contemporary members’ sense of inadequacy and the belief that it played a role in his development of alcoholism. Many AA members report “identifying with” or relating deeply to Wilson’s life story. Growing up in rural Vermont at the turn of the 20th century, his sense of well-being was disrupted by his parents’ divorce and being left to his grandparents’ care. “Tall and gawky,” and pushed around by smaller kids, Wilson became very depressed, but then “develop[ed] a fierce resolve to win,” to become “the Number One man” in everything in order to prove his worth to himself and others. “In that early period I had to be an athlete because I was not an athlete,” he recalled in 1955. “I had to be a musician because I could not carry a tune. I had to be the president of my class in boarding school. I had to be first in everything because in my perverse heart I felt myself the least of God’s creatures. I could not accept this deep sense of inferiority, and so I did become captain of the baseball team, and I did learn to play the fiddle well enough to lead the high-school orchestra, even though it was a terribly bad band. I was the leader and lead I must—or else. So it went. All or nothing. I must be Number One.” (Anonymous 1952, 53). Wilson uses the story of his childhood quest to make a homemade boomerang as an example of his low self-worth and desire to prove his value to himself and others through his accomplishments. His grandfather had told him that only indigenous Australians were able to make a boomerang. Wilson took this on as a challenge, hoping to become the first person in

America to make one. For six months, he whittled away at a piece of wood cut from his headboard, “and finally, sure enough, I made a boomerang that swung around the churchyard in front of the house and almost hit my grandfather in the head when it came back. Emotionally I had begun the fashioning of another sort of boomerang, one that almost killed me later on.”

For a while his drive to be “Number One” provided an antidote to his “deep sense of inferiority.” He found himself a popular high schooler, with a girlfriend he adored, but none of his achievements could prevent the tragedy of losing his girlfriend suddenly to a surgery gone wrong. His ambition was no match for “life-on-life’s terms,’ as AAs call it, the circumstances of life and death that we are all powerless to prevent. He sunk into a deep depression for three years, unable to finish school. “The healthy kid would have felt badly,” he later recalled, “but he would have never sunk so deep and stayed submerged for so long.” Before Wilson had even taken his first sip of alcohol, he saw himself as “unhealthy”, somehow at odds with the realities of life in a way that incapacitated him more than others. His obsessive drive to create a literal boomerang illustrated for Wilson - and for AA members who retell this story today- the psychological boomerang of self-will and an inflated sense of agency that would later turn on him when he was met with the realities of life, leading to depression and eventually alcoholism. The false notion that he could control his feelings about himself, as well as what happened to others and the world, like “the actor,” led eventually to profound disappointment and only a deepening of the depression he was trying to solve through achievement.

The Dry Drunk

The fact that the Twelve Steps are meant to solve a problem of self that is deeper than mere excess drinking is evidenced by the widely used AA concept of the “dry drunk.” Most of my interviewees report having been able to stay sober for limited periods of time before joining AA, and again for limited times in AA while “not working a program,” by which they mean they might attend meetings, but they are not actively and continuously working the steps with a sponsor. Nearly all of my sample thought it was impossible to stay sober long-term by just attending meetings. Ralph K., 66, a self-described “spiritual atheist” with 16 years of sobriety illustrated the concept of the dry drunk by telling me something his first sponsor had relayed to him:

She said that alcoholics who don’t drink and don’t have a program – they’re dry but still alcoholic. She said eventually, if they insist on staying that way, they’ll do one of two things. This is based on her own experience of 25 years. She said they will either commit suicide, a quick one, not the death by the thousand cuts, but a more sudden one. Or, more likely, they will pick up a drink, to cope with the vicissitudes of life. So she said, you know, one of those two things will happen to you. Most people relapse and go back to drinking. And start all over again.

The vicissitudes of life affect everyone, alcoholic or not. In the AA way of thinking, life with all its attendant tragedies, difficulties, and even elations, does not cause the “normal” drinker to drink to excess. But as Ralph’s sponsor warned him, the untreated alcoholic self, the self without a program, is doomed, just by the conditions of ordinary existence. The argument that permeates the Big Book and the stories of my interviewees is that life was extremely difficult for them from very early on, due to their nature, and to the type of selves they were, even before they picked up that first drink.

Part III: What Happened – Transforming the Diseased Self Through a Spiritual Experience

If a diseased self is the problem that underlies alcoholism, how is one to go about treating this spiritual malady? The answer for most in AA is that alcoholics must undergo an

“entire psychic change,” usually by way of a “vital spiritual experience.” In this section we will look at how this idea of a spiritual solution made its way into AA – mainly through three psychiatrists, one who treated Bill Wilson directly for his alcoholism, and two who are founding figures in the field – through their direct and indirect influence, respectively, on the program: William Silkworth, Carl Jung, and William James.

“To Me He Was a Stranger”

When newcomers start attending AA meetings, they are encouraged to find a sponsor, a member with more sobriety (defined as continuous days without drinking or using drugs) and usually more experience working the Twelve Steps. Very often, one of a sponsor’s first assignments to their new sponsee is to get a copy of the Big Book and read “The Doctor’s Opinion,” a preface to the book written by Bill Wilson’s physician, Dr. William Silkworth, who attended to Wilson when he got sober for the last time at Town’s Hospital in New York City in December 1934. Study of “The Doctor’s Opinion” is meant to familiarize the new AA with the group’s understanding of alcoholism. The chapter consists almost entirely of two letters written by Silkworth, “chief physician at a nationally prominent hospital specializing in alcoholic and drug addicts” (Anonymous, 1939 XXV), explaining his understanding of alcoholism and what is required for its permanent resolution, and his endorsement of the then-fledgling fellowship. In his letters, he explains how difficult he and other physicians have found it to treat alcoholism and how the general opinion among them “seems to be that most chronic alcoholics are doomed” (xxx). He then relates the story of a patient of his who he had treated a year before for chronic alcoholism. A serious case, the man had “but partially recovered from a gastric hemorrhage and seemed to be a case of pathological mental deterioration,” even believing “there was no hope” for himself (xxxi).

According to Silkworth, the man “accepted the plan outlined in this book” and the results were astonishing:

One year later he called to see me, and I experienced a very strange sensation. I knew the man by name, and partly recognized his features, but there all resemblance ended. From a trembling, despairing, nervous wreck, had emerged a man brimming over with self-reliance and contentment. I talked with him for some time, but was not able to bring myself to feel that I had known him before. To me he was a stranger, and so he left me. A long time has passed with no return to alcohol. (xxxi)

Silkworth claims that his patient, a chronic alcoholic who had been “only living, one might say, to drink,” had undergone such a radical physical and emotional transformation by following the AA program that he was literally unrecognizable. He was “a stranger”; the doctor “was not able to bring myself to feel that I had known him before.”

This sense of strangeness and unrecognizability in a recovered alcoholic is echoed in, Chapter 1 of the Big Book, “Bill’s Story,” which sponsors also often assign to their new sponsees. Here Bill relates the story of his 17 years of alcoholism and the events that led him to have a spiritual experience that left him “a free man”, at least for a time. At this point in the story, Wilson had tried for years to get and stay sober with no lasting success. He had been in and out of Town’s Hospital under the treatment of Dr. Silkworth, only to repeatedly return to drinking not long after his release. In the fall of 1934, his old drinking buddy Ebby T. came to the Wilson home in Brooklyn to visit and share his good fortune. Wilson relates the story as follows in the Big Book:

The door opened and he stood there, fresh-skinned and glowing. There was something about his eyes. He was inexplicably different. What had happened?

I pushed a drink across the table. He refused it. Disappointed but curious, I wondered what had got into the fellow. *He wasn't himself.*

"Come, what's all this about?" I queried.

He looked straight at me. Simply, but smilingly, he said, "I've got religion."

I was aghast. So that was it—last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion. He had that starry-eyed look. Yes, the old boy was on fire all right. But bless his heart, let him rant! Besides, my gin would last longer than his preaching. (Anonymous 1939, 9) (emphasis mine)

Ebby would eventually explain that he had gotten sober while a member of the then-popular Evangelical movement, The Oxford Group. Just as Silkworth had found his patient markedly changed in mind and body, so too did Wilson find his friend “inexplicably different.” “He wasn’t himself,” he writes, “There was something about his eyes.” (A change in someone’s eyes when they get sober is often commented on by contemporary AA members). Later in the story, Wilson remarked: “I saw that my friend was much more than inwardly reorganized. He was on a different footing. His roots grasped a new soil” (12).

According to Wilson, it was Ebby who first imparted to him the idea that he needed to have a spiritual experience in order to get sober, and that he could do so through a “God of his own understanding.” As I have written elsewhere, Ebby’s membership in the Oxford Group at that time makes it unlikely he was suggesting an experience of a non-Christian God; more likely he was the Christian God as best as the initiate understood him at the time of conversion (Dick B. 1998 and 2010). In recalling the months leading up to his sobriety later in his life, Wilson remembered attending a meeting of the Oxford Group at Calvary Mission, where after eating a plate of beans to sober up, he had “given my life to God” (Anonymous 1957, 60). But this proclamation didn’t solve his drinking problem and he continued drinking for three more days, until he finally checked himself into Town’s hospital for the fourth time, under the care of Dr. Silkworth. Ebby came to visit him there and relayed “the simple formula” of the Oxford Group and the necessity of believing in a God of “his own understanding.” Not long after, Wilson, until then mostly agnostic, had a white-light conversion experience from his hospital bed. I will explore this experience more in Chapter

5, as the experience, and Wilson's subsequent interpretation of it, serves as an inspiration and sometimes template for contemporary AA members' spiritual experiences. For now, I need only say that Wilson was convinced that his experience of God made it possible for him to get sober and stay sober long enough to meet another struggling alcoholic and create AA. In interpreting his experience, Wilson became convinced that he had undergone a profound transformation. He was assisted in this interpretation, as Ann Taves has shown (2016), by those around him who witnessed the change, such as his wife, Lois Wilson, Dr. Silkworth, and his reading of William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* while still in the hospital. As Wilson told it:

For a moment I was alarmed, and called my friend, the doctor, to ask if I were still sane. He listened in wonder as I talked.

Finally he shook his head saying, "Something has happened to you I don't understand. But you had better hang on to it. Anything is better than the way you were." The good doctor now sees many men who have such experiences. He knows that they are real. (Anonymous 1939, 14)

Wilson, who was a life-long science enthusiast and up to that time an agnostic, was relieved to hear his medical friend, Dr. Silkworth, a man of science, confirm that his experience was in some sense "real." Likewise, the writing of William James also provided a scientific endorsement of his transformative experience as legitimate and real (more on James' contribution below).

"An Entire Psychic Change"

According to Dr. Silkworth, the dramatic psychic change evident in Ebby, Bill, and Silkworth's later unrecognizable patient is required for a true alcoholic to get sober. This change in motivations, emotions, demeanor—in essence, of self—is not just the result of getting sober; it is absolutely essential to becoming so. The overall argument of Silkworth's

endorsement at the beginning of the Big Book is that such a drastic transformation is necessary for most chronic alcoholics to achieve any lasting sobriety. In a paragraph often quoted by contemporary AAs in meetings and in casual conversation, Silkworth writes:

Men and women drink essentially because they like the effect produced by alcohol. The sensation is so elusive that, while they admit it is injurious, they cannot after a time differentiate the true from the false. To them, their alcoholic life seems the only normal one. *They are restless, irritable and discontented, unless they can again experience the sense of ease and comfort which comes at once by taking a few drinks—drinks which they see others taking with impunity.* After they have succumbed to the desire again, as so many do, and the *phenomenon of craving* develops, they pass through the well-known stages of a spree, emerging remorseful, with a firm resolution not to drink again. This is repeated over and over, and unless this person can experience *an entire psychic change* there is very little hope of his recovery (emphasis mine). (Anonymous 1939, xxix)

An entire psychic change – not just a treatment narrowly tailored at one or two likely contributors to alcoholism– is what Dr. Silkworth recommended as necessary for recovery. This psychic change is necessary because in his normal state, the alcoholic is “restless, irritable, and discontented,” and it is only through “taking a few drinks” that he can “experience a sense of ease and comfort.” In this way, the alcoholic problem doesn’t begin with drinking, but instead with this “restless, irritable, and discontented” condition. It takes an “entire psychic change” for the alcoholic to recover. The reason this portion of Dr. Silkworth’s letter is widely quoted by contemporary AAs, in pitches, at meetings, and when they speak to me in interviews, is likely because it captures something about their experience of addiction that is not obvious to outsiders. For many, they are not drinking to feel good, so much as they are drinking to avoid feeling bad. Feeling bad, feeling “restless, irritable, and discontented,” is the default state of the alcoholic self.

In the first chapter of the Big Book, Wilson details his own hopeless battle with alcoholism, his fateful visit from Ebby, and briefly references his spiritual experience at Town’s hospital, which he would expand on in more detail in later writings and talks. While

no doubt the chapter has multiple purposes, the main one, I think, is to create identification in the reader, a potential alcoholic who needs to know that the author actually understands his predicament from the most wretched personal experience, and is indeed an alcoholic self, just like him. In Chapter 2, Wilson expands beyond his singular experience, referencing the “thousands of men and women who were once just as hopeless” as he was and have now “solved the drink problem,” meaning the nascent AA fellowship. He goes on to identify and describe “the real alcoholic,” someone who has “lost the power of choice in drink,” unable to remember the harm it causes him before taking that first sip. “When this thinking is fully established in an individual with alcoholic tendencies, he has probably placed himself beyond human aid, and unless locked up, may die or go permanently insane” (Anonymous 1939, 25). This dire pronouncement is followed by a succinct and powerful statement of AA’s solution for the real alcoholic:

The great fact is just this, and nothing less: That we have had deep and effective spiritual experiences* which have revolutionized our whole attitude toward life, toward our fellows and toward God’s universe. The central fact for our lives today is the absolute certainty that our Creator has entered our hearts and lives in a way which is indeed miraculous. He has commenced to accomplish those things for us which we could never do by ourselves.

If you are as seriously alcoholic as we were, we believe there is no middle-of-the-road solution. We were in a position where life was becoming impossible, and if we had passed into the region from which there is no return through human aid, we had but two alternatives: One was to go on to the bitter end, blotting out the consciousness of our intolerable situation as best we could; and the other, to accept spiritual help. This we did because we honestly wanted to, and we were willing to make the effort. (Anonymous 1939, 26)

Wilson here argues that for the real alcoholic there is no solution but the spiritual. He will go on throughout the book to explain and qualify the spiritual in an effort make it open to as many potentially suffering alcoholics as possible, regardless of “race, creed, or color” (28), but he is adamant that the solution AA offers is a spiritual one, not the medical or psychological one offered by “human aid,” of which, “real alcoholics” were beyond.

Carl Jung and Vital Spiritual Experiences

The idea that there is a certain type of drinker beyond the reach of medicine and psychology, who could only be saved by a complete psychic change and connection with a Power greater than himself, became AA orthodoxy through a number of channels. One channel, and perhaps the most powerful endorsement of this idea, came from Swiss psychologist Carl Jung. In the early 1930s, Jung treated a wealthy American businessman named Rowland H. for alcoholism, convincing him that only a spiritual experience was likely to cure him (Kurtz 8). Rowland joined the Oxford Group back in the U.S. to help encourage such an experience and eventually evangelized Ebby T., whom Wilson credits with first opening his mind to the idea that a spiritual experience might help him stop drinking when nothing else had (see above). As a result, many AAs, including Wilson himself, like to draw a line directly from Jung to the founding of AA (AA Grapevine 1963). Jung was a founding figure in the field of analytic psychology, as well as a contemporary, collaborator, and critic of Sigmund Freud. He loomed large in the public imagination of psychology in the 1930s, as he still does today, commanding tremendous authority over how Americans viewed the self and its relationship to the unconscious mind (Shamdasani 2009). Wilson conveyed the story of Rowland and Jung in published form for the first time in 1939 in the second chapter of the Big Book, “There Is a Solution,” but it was subsequently confirmed via correspondence between Wilson and Jung in the early 1960s.

In his Big Book account, Wilson describes Rowland H. as a man of “ability, good sense, and high character,” whose drinking had nonetheless left him sanitarium-hopping in a doomed attempt to get sober. Rowland eventually went to Europe and put himself “in the care of a celebrated physician (the psychiatrist Dr. Jung).” Having completed treatment with

Jung, and having come to understand his mind, he felt invincible to relapse. “Nevertheless,” Wilson writes, “he was drunk in a short time.” Rowland returned to Jung and “asked him point-blank why he could not recover.” Wilson paraphrased Jung’s response as follows: “You have the mind of a chronic alcoholic. I have never seen one single case recover, where that state of mind existed to the extent that it does in you.” Rowland asks, “Is there no exception?” Jung, as paraphrased by Wilson in the Big Book, replies:

Yes, there is. Exceptions to cases such as yours have been occurring since early times. Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called *vital spiritual experiences*. To me these occurrences are a phenomenon. They appear to be in the nature of *huge emotional displacements and rearrangements*. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. In fact, I have been trying to produce some such emotional rearrangement within you. With many individuals the methods which I employed are successful, but I have never been successful with an alcoholic of your description.” (Anonymous 1939, 27; emphasis mine)

Here Wilson uses Jung to endorse the idea that there is a type of alcoholic, the “alcoholic of your description,” for whom nothing but “vital spiritual experiences” can provide lasting recovery. Wilson’s paraphrase of Jung gives further official credence to the idea the reader first encounters in the “The Doctor’s Opinion,” elaborated later in the book, that the alcoholic is “bodily and mentally different from his fellows” (Anonymous 1939, 30). It also confirms Wilson’s contention that a spirituality that utterly transforms the self, exacting “huge emotional displacements and rearrangements” leading to “a completely new set of conceptions and motives,” is required for sobriety. As Wilson tells it, Rowland told Jung he felt hopeful hearing this, because he was “a good church member,” to which Jung replied that “while his religious convictions were very good, in his case they did not spell the necessary vital spiritual experience” (27). Here we have the Big Book’s first use of the terms spiritual and religious in the same sentence. What is very clearly being articulated by Wilson, and supposedly Jung, is that “spiritual experience” is something more profound and

transformative than “religious convictions.” Eventually, Wilson tells the Big Book reader, Rowland “had the extraordinary experience, which... made him a free man” (Anonymous 1939, 28).

Wilson, Jung, and James and “Ego Collapse at Depth”

In 1961, long after AA had become a massive organization with an international membership, Wilson wrote Jung to thank him for the role his treatment of Rowland had played in the founding of AA, saying that the two men’s conversation was “the first link in the chain of events that led to the founding of Alcoholics Anonymous” (Wilson 1961). Jung wrote Wilson back, confirming the broad strokes of the story as Wilson had told it in the Big Book. A few years later, AA’s magazine, *The Grapevine*, published this correspondence with the headline “The Bill W. – Carl Jung Letters: How AA History was Made: A Grapevine ‘Exclusive’” (Grapevine January 1963), further cementing the importance of Jung to the fellowship for 1960s and later audiences searching for non-traditional spiritual sources of authority.

In his letter, Wilson explains what Jung had conveyed in his conversation with Rowland that had been so revelatory to the man and instrumental to the founding of AA. “First of all, you frankly told him of his hopelessness, so far as any further medical or psychiatric treatment might be concerned,” Wilson wrote to Jung. “This candid and humble statement of yours was beyond doubt the first foundation stone upon which our Society has since been built” (AA Grapevine 1963). The hopelessness of medical or psychiatric intervention for an alcoholic of Rowland’s type was the first message of great import for AA (which, Wilson says later in the letter, was confirmed as well for him by Dr. Silkworth—see above).

Jung's second contribution, after hopelessness, was to offer a "*spiritual or religious* experience—in short, a genuine conversion" as the solution to this type of intractable alcoholism (emphasis mine). Rowland listened to Jung's recommendation to "place himself in a religious atmosphere and hope for the best," Wilson explains, and subsequently joined the Oxford Group. Encouraged to pray and meditate, Rowland eventually did have the necessary conversion experience "that released him for the time being from his compulsion to drink," which he then passed on to Ebby. But in explaining Ebby's subsequent experience, Wilson is careful to state that Ebby, "was in a very evident state of 'release,' which could by no means be accounted for by his mere association for a short time with the Oxford Group.". In Wilson's eyes, Ebby's critical spiritual experience did not occur simply because he followed the Oxford Group's religious tenets. While acknowledging that his own spiritual experience was preceded by a visit from Ebby, who "related the simple Oxford Group formulas," Wilson is clear that his own experience, while perhaps encouraged and influenced by such formulas, was something more, "an illumination of enormous impact and dimension" (AA Grapevine 1963).

As he does in the Big Book, in his letter Wilson also tells Jung of reading William James' *Varieties of Religious Experience* in the hospital after his spiritual experience. In the Big Book story, Wilson says James' book helped him realize the "multitude of ways in which men have discovered God" (Anonymous 1939/2001, 26). But in the Jung letter, Wilson further explains his understanding of James:

This book gave me the realization that most conversion experiences, whatever their variety, do have a common denominator of *ego collapse at depth*. The individual faces an impossible dilemma. In my case, the dilemma had been created by my compulsive drinking, and the deep feeling of hopelessness had been vastly deepened still more by my alcoholic friend when he acquainted me with your verdict of hopelessness respecting Rowland H. (sic)

In the wake of my spiritual experience, there came a vision of a society of alcoholics, each identifying with and transmitting his experience to the next – chain style. If each sufferer were to *carry the news of the scientific hopelessness of alcoholics to each new prospect, he might be able to lay every newcomer wide open to a transforming spiritual experience*—nearly every variety reported by James—available on almost a wholesale basis” (AA Grapevine 1963) [emphasis mine])

Here Wilson seems to imply that Jung’s proclamation of hopelessness for a certain type of alcoholic contributed to “ego collapse at depth” (his summary of James’s understanding of conversion), which then leaves a new prospect “open to a transforming spiritual experience.” Interestingly, neither the phrase “ego collapse at depth,” nor a similar variant, is present in James’ *Varieties*, but Wilson’s phrase summarizes a sentiment that can be found in James’ work on conversion (see more below). Wilson also credits Silkworth with encouraging him to approach new prospects by first explaining their medical hopelessness, and then introducing his spiritual solution.

Jung was quick to respond to Wilson’s letter, saying he had often wondered what had happened to Rowland. While Rowland had reported their conversation “adequately,” Jung told Wilson he hadn’t been able to fully express his opinion of Rowland’s situation for fear of being misunderstood during that time period. What Jung “really thought,” having treated many “men of his kind,” was that: “His craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God” (AA Grapevine 1963). Jung put an asterisk next to God, which he explained at the end of the letter by quoting Psalm 42, 1: “As man panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after God.” For Jung, it would seem, this quest for wholeness or union with God, was as fundamental a human need as our need for water. The thirst for alcoholism was a misdirected primal drive, he argued. In essence the alcoholic somehow mistakenly believed he could soothe this yearning for wholeness/God with alcohol. “You see, ‘alcohol’ in Latin is

spiritus, and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as for the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*.” In Jung’s terms this formula then means “the highest religious experience” against “the most depraving poison [alcohol]” or, in other words, *religious experience was the antidote to alcoholism*.

Jung viewed this religious experience widely, perhaps more widely even than Wilson.

As Jung told Wilson:

The only right and legitimate way to such an experience is that it happens to you in reality, and it can only happen to you when you walk on a path which leads you to higher understanding. You might be led to that goal by an act of grace or through a personal and honest contact with friends, or through a higher education of the mind beyond the confines of mere rationalism. I see from your letter that Roland H. (sic) has chosen the second way, which was, under the circumstances, obviously the best one.

I am strongly convinced that the evil principle prevailing in this world leads the *unrecognized spiritual need* into perdition if it is not counteracted either by *real religious insight* or by *the protective wall of human community*.” (AA Grapevine 1963) [emphasis mine]

Jung seems to agree with Wilson that such an experience need not be religious in the traditional sense, that there are many paths to this experience of “wholeness” or “union with God.” Where he goes further than Wilson – at least in Wilson’s published writings on AA – is in his explicit contention that this necessary experience can also be found solely through “human community,” as Wendy Dossett has astutely pointed out (2018, 230), in Jung’s words “a personal and honest contact with friends.” As I will argue in later chapters, the program of AA contains an implicit acknowledgment of the transformative potential of human connection, which AA members, particularly atheist and agnostic ones, have further developed over the years. But for Wilson personally, despite his spiritual explorations throughout his AA life, this experience remained connected to a personal notion of God. Jung’s emphasis on the power of human community to effect the psychic change necessary for recovery sheds light on two modes of spiritual experience in AA: an individual

connection to God and a profound connection to other alcoholics. For some, such as atheist and agnostic members, the two modes are identical, for others distinct, but complementary. There's a saying in AA that "God exists in between me and you. The closer I get to you, the closer I get to God." The contention that others are important to sobriety is also present in The Dr.'s Opinion, as William H. Schaberg astutely points out: "In Silkworth's opinion, this shift of perspective away from self and toward others was of paramount importance in keeping alcoholics from taking their next drink" (Schaberg 2019, 139).

William James, "Sick Souls," and "Something More"

As noted above, Wilson read James' *Varieties* not long after his own sudden spiritual experience recovering in the hospital for the last time. As he tells it, he took from James both the notion that there are many valid paths to God and the idea that "ego collapse at depth" was a key aspect of the conversion experience. In his widely known discussion of once-born and twice-born men, James argued that some individuals, the "healthy-minded," came into life with a relatively happy temperament, well-adjusted to life's circumstances and able to lead peaceful productive lives without needing to change – thus, they were once-born. Others were dissatisfied and maladjusted from the beginning, needing to undergo rebirth (twice-born) in order to have real satisfaction or peace in this life. Such a "sick-soul" possessed "a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy" (James 1902, 125). James endeavored to understand "the secrets of their [sick souls'] prison-house, their own peculiar form of consciousness" (James 126). James' idea that certain individuals possessed a negative form of consciousness distinct from the healthy-minded seems to have also had an influence on Wilson's conception of alcoholism as a

disease of the self. The AA notion of a sick self that required a conversion experience (or in Dr. Silkworth's words, an "entire psychic change") via a profound spiritual experience, certainly has strong antecedents in the thinking of James.

Wilson also probably saw in James a kindred spirit who likewise grappled with equally strong scientific and spiritual tendencies in himself. Just as AA attempted to provide a spiritual answer to alcoholism that did not contradict any of the world's major religions, so too did it strive to avoid conflict with science and medicine (Taves 2016, 116). That such a highly regarded scientist as James was insisting in *Varieties* that there was "something more" to human consciousness than could be understood solely through scientific observation and thought no doubt appealed to Wilson. "The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely 'understandable' world," James wrote in his conclusion to *Varieties*. "Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for *we are turned into new men*, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change" (James 442) (emphasis mine). It's easy to see here why Wilson, having just experienced a profound alteration of self through his white light experience, would find this pronouncement by a man of science comforting and perhaps inspirational. I will explore James' influence on AA in more detail in the chapters to come, particularly as it relates to Wilson and the fellowship's understanding of higher powers and spiritual experience.

Part IV: What It Is Like Now – "The Maintenance of Our Spiritual Condition"

While at times Bill Wilson, the Big Book, and contemporary members, talk about this “entire psychic change” as if it is a permanent, one-time deal, more often it is seen as something that must be constantly maintained by working the AA program and “practicing these principles in all our affairs.” In Bill’s own story, he says “I knew I was a free man,” but then just six months later he was very tempted to drink again while on business in Akron, which caused him to reach out to another alcoholic, Dr. Bob. AA views that moment—when Wilson realized he needed connection to another person in addition to connection to God—as the official founding moment of the fellowship. So, while a spiritual experience or psychic change is necessary to sobriety for AA members, it is not sufficient to maintain sobriety. Indeed, the transformation of self so critical to sobriety is “contingent upon the maintenance of our spiritual condition,” which is done by communing with other alcoholics inside and outside of meetings, but also through working the Steps, which most members do over and over again, even while remaining continuously sober. Indeed, the Steps themselves include a nightly inventory in the 10th step, where the alcoholic looks back on the day to determine if they have harmed anyone, if they owe amends, at what things they could have done better, what character defects might have been at play, if they had a connection to their higher power or not. Thus, while an “entire psychic change” can sound like a one-time event, it is actually something that is actively maintained on a daily basis by those in the fellowship.

Further supporting the idea that the necessary psychic change for alcoholics is not binary or permanent, many of my interviewees reported having at least two eras to their sobriety in AA – an earlier period where meeting attendance sustained their sobriety, and a later, more profound period, in which they worked the steps either for the first time, or more intensely than before, and experienced a “spiritual awakening” and a radical transformation

of the self. Sonya M. got sober in New York City when she was in her early 30s. Now 62, and 31 years sober, she attends meetings in Los Angeles once or twice a week. Eighteen years into her sobriety, Sonya was feeling isolated and depressed. “There is a saying, ‘Do you want the leaf, or do you want fruit?’ ... I was always in the program, both feet. But what I didn’t have was *the real spiritual awakening opening that place that changes you inside*,” (emphasis mine) she reports. “I think it happens to a lot of people. There was an emptiness that—things would happen in my life and I would immediately go to the dark. I was becoming more and more hopeless on the inside. Not on the outside. The outsides were fine. But then the outside started to crumble.” Her father died, she lost a job, her fiancé was leaving – all of this created a “perfect storm.” She had “smart feet” which knew to take her to a meeting. A woman sat down next to her and Sonya started unloading about all that was troubling her. “Perhaps there’s a better way,” the woman said. After some persistence on Sonya’s part, the woman agreed to act as her sponsor and take her through the Twelve Steps. She would go to her house 2-3 times a week and work the steps “in a thorough and absolute way,” working from the Big Book, while her sponsor sat with her and sewed. When they got to Step 3 – “Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood him*” (emphasis original) – her sponsor sent her home.

She said, “I want you to just contemplate what this higher power is because we can’t go any further without it.” And that meant that there just had to be a void because I was finally honest enough to admit that that hadn’t entered me. I could talk about it. I could take your God. For a while, I could, and I had tried so many things. You know, I had been to every possible spiritual community on the map. I was everywhere, reading everything, and just trying to find this thing that everyone seemed to talk about and have. And I was emptied out, because she was so clear that it was essential to have that, to really sustain sobriety. The freedom... she used words in a way – and they’re all in the book – in a way, she wove it together so that I knew that this was something personal. And she said, “It’s not information. It’s experiential.” I hadn’t had an experience. I had lots of information and that was not going to sustain me.

So I went home. I’ll never forget it. I went home. I was all alone. The sun was coming in through the window. And I just sat there. I was humbled... And I’ll never forget it to this day. Something intervened for me. And I was given this *little piece of my puzzle that fit me exactly*.

And I knew something that I hadn't known before. Makes me want to cry... I took other people through to try and get them to that point of experience. Because the steps are, there's something in those, the way they're designed, that *does something, that re-arranges something*. But it takes such desperation to finally step out of our ego and be willing. So that was my spiritual experience. And it has fed me through all these years. There's been death, lots of them. Divorce, just a whole bunch of life. And I've never gone to that dark place again, ever....

We will hear more about Sonya's spiritual experience in Chapter 5, but for now her story illustrates how even long-term AA members sometimes can stay sober, for a period, without experiencing "the entire psychic change" brought on by working the steps and having a spiritual experience, or as Sonya puts it, "the real spiritual awakening opening that place that changes you inside." Once Sonya was able to fully devote herself to the Steps, and to have the experience that "does something, that rearranges something," her despair lifted, and she was able to not just stay sober, but to experience a new ease and happiness in life, much like William James' twice-born men.

Part V: The Personal Is Political and Cultural - The Twelve Traditions and the Self

As fellowship emerged, it became clear that too much focus on the individual self was not just a problem for the lone alcoholic, but a problem for fellowship as a whole, because if one member bragged publicly about their sobriety and then relapsed, it would make the whole program look ineffective. Over the years, anonymity came to be seen as a spiritual principle, not just a practical matter. In response to the growing pains of AA's early years, Wilson wrote the Twelve Traditions to help prevent common group crises and ensure the ongoing survival of the fellowship (more on this to come in the next chapter). Some AAs are fond of saying that the steps help them avoid killing themselves, and the traditions help them avoid killing each other. The 12th Tradition is: "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities" (Anonymous

1981, 184). The ability to keep the group together, despite individual differences, became of central spiritual concern. In order to ensure the stability and longevity of the program as a whole, individual egos needed to be kept in check. “Deflation of ego at depth” wasn’t just the key to sobriety, it was what kept the fellowship in existence. To be a good AA member, one must place “principles before personalities,” checking one’s self-righteousness and desire for power over others. After all, you can’t have the actor running the show. In a Durkheimian way, the survival of the individual in AA depends on the survival of the group – and in this sense group dynamics become incredibly important, even sacralized, as we will see in the next chapter. Anonymity is also meant to help the alcoholic deal with feelings of low self-esteem, and the drive to be the best, to build the first boomerang in America, for instance, by creating an equality of members. Members talk about the steps allowing them to become “right sized” and “a part of” the group, rather than the self-loathing or grandiose thinking, and often isolation, they experienced before AA. In this way the transformation of the alcoholic self occurs both through the Twelve Steps and also the Twelve Traditions (more on this to come in later chapters) and allows the fellowship to persist to this day.

Many of my interviewees expressed difficulties remaining in an “ego deflated” state in our increasingly atomized, impersonal, and self-obsessed culture. In this way, AA acts for many as an alternative culture or community, where certain values can be protected and held despite the pressures of the culture at large. Michael D. started smoking pot when he was 12 years old. At 14, he found his father’s stash of cocaine, a drug he describes as his “first real love.” By 16 he was in rehab for the first time. He got sober, attended AA meetings for a few years, but eventually stopped calling his sponsor and decided to try experimenting with social-using, first pot and alcohol, then cocaine and ecstasy, and then one night, in what he

thought would be his final act before getting sober, he tried heroin. Five years and 14 rehabs, detoxes, hospitals, and psych wards later, he was able to stop drinking and using when he became willing to do “all the stuff” that AA recommends. Now a successful film editor in his mid-30s, he has been sober from drugs and alcohol for 12 years.

Asked about what makes it difficult for him to stay sober today, Michael said the following:

I grew up thinking that happiness is getting all the bells and whistles and the prizes and everything. Even though I've been doing well in the job and stuff, that doesn't equal happiness, you know? I've had some very good points in my career and I've never been so miserable, so I think it's an illusion that's slowly fading away that having the right car, having the right girlfriend, having the right job, having the right house—all that stuff is what society tells me. Being better looking, being quicker, being faster, making more money. I think a lot of advertising and a lot of social media and everything is geared towards that and it plays on insecurities and inadequacies and all of that stuff. I'm slowly learning that it's an inside job. It's not an external thing and the more I practice gratitude for everything that's going on in my life right now, and the more I practice being of service and the more I build a relationship with a higher power, really the happier I am and the further I get away from that, the less happier I am.

As I discussed in the introduction, most clinical models of alcoholism and recovery underemphasize the role culture may play in contributing to alcoholism. Many of my interviewees mentioned cultural pressures that made maintaining their sobriety difficult. Often at meetings people talk about how externalities, whether they be substances, or the supposed treasures of American success (cars, houses, clothes, etc.), cannot fix the deep “god-shaped blank” they feel inside of them. I will return to the interplay between self and culture in Part 2, Explanation, where I will argue that AA fills a gap in treatment by addressing the cultural contributors to alcoholism that even the biopsychosocial model of addiction tends to leave out.

In the chapters to come, I will explore in more detail how contemporary AA members, such as Sonya and Michael, effect and maintain an “entire psychic change” in themselves, despite the pressures of modern American life. Through cultivating a

relationship with God or higher power “of our own understanding” by practicing the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, and through fellowship with others. As we will see, the AA program requires the cultivation of beliefs, some commonly shared (Chapter 2) and some varying (Chapter 3), the diligent performance of practices and the willingness to undergo transformative experiences (Chapter 4) in order to achieve the successful rearrangement of self that allows not just for sobriety, but for some measure of peace and joy in life. In the Conclusion, I will build on research in the cognitive sciences on the self and religion to offer a naturalistic mechanism by which such a change can be better understood by researchers, clinicians, and those who struggle with alcoholism, in the hopes of easing the process of recovery for those who struggle.

Chapter 2: “A Power Greater Than Ourselves”: A Common Core of AA Spirituality

“Above everything, we alcoholics must be rid of this selfishness. We must, or it kills us! God makes that possible. And there often seems no way of entirely getting rid of self without His aid. Many of us had moral and philosophical convictions galore, but we could not live up to them even though we would have liked to. Neither could we reduce our self-centeredness much by wishing or trying on our own power. We had to have God’s help.”

- The Big Book, Fourth Edition, Page 62

In Chapter 1, I explored the “entire psychic change” that the AA Big Book heralds as the means through which someone formerly addicted to alcohol might become sober. One common element of this understanding, echoed often by my participants, is that the alcoholic self is a particular kind of self, perhaps even from conception, long before the afflicted person takes their first drink. Prone to negative thinking, self-obsession, self-loathing, and self-destruction, the alcoholic self, most AAs believe, is “beyond human aid” (Anonymous 1939, 24). Seeking the aid of a higher power allows the alcoholic self to transform into a sober self, one which is not only free from the need to compulsively drink, but able to become “happy, joyous, and free” (Anonymous 1939, 133). At the same time that AAs pursue this relationship with a higher power, they also pursue a relationship with fellow recovering alcoholics; both avenues serve as a means to transform their solitary, addicted selves into connected, sober selves. Most of the contemporary AA members in my sample defined spirituality as a relationship between the self and something other in the form of 1) a higher power (Other) and 2) a group of other recovering alcoholics (others). For some, with a more atheist or agnostic bent, these two were the same, in that they defined their higher power as the power of the group, or the Group of Drunks (G.O.D.), created by the fellowship.

For most, however, the two modes represented different, but overlapping and interrelated ways of engaging with the spiritual. An “entire psychic change” or “spiritual awakening” is the goal of the Twelve-Step process, centered around “ego deflation at depth” which manifests as *a reorientation from self to other*, sometimes divine, sometimes human, sometimes both, and sometimes neither, but nonetheless always understood *as a spiritual way of life*. I will trace the emergence of this common core of AA spirituality to the founding days of the fellowship, as well as through its adolescent years of massive growth that led to the creation of the Twelve Traditions, which have come to constitute the backbone of the spiritual program of AA for many recovering alcoholics. In Chapter 3, I will look beyond this common core, to the varied ways in which individual AA members express their spiritual and religious beliefs in answer to the Steps’ invitation for them to develop a relationship with God of their own understanding.

While Chapters 2 and 3 will focus primarily on the spiritual beliefs of AA members, chapter 4 will address spiritual practices and experiences in more detail. Though artificially separating spirituality into these three categories—beliefs, practices, and experiences—risks overlooking their continuity and interdependence, I have made an effort to describe how these elements work together, while focusing my lens on one aspect at a time. The order in which I have addressed these elements makes no argument about the ontological primacy of one over the others. I am aware that sometimes spiritual practices precede or determine spiritual beliefs; see for instance research on religion and embodied cognition (Soliman 2015). Many also argue that spiritual experiences can induce spiritual beliefs; see the debate over pure experience in mystical studies (McCutcheon and Martin 2012).

However, in the case of AA, it makes sense to talk first about what members believe about a higher power, since I will argue that “God as we understood him” is the central meaning of “spirituality” invoked by AA founder Bill Wilson, many of his contemporaries, and most of my sample of current AA members. In my discussion with AA members, their beliefs about a higher power were critical early on in their AA journey (see Steps 2 and 3), and many were directed by their sponsors to start thinking explicitly about what this entity or concept might be from their first days in the program. By attending meetings, talking to other members and their sponsors, and reading the AA literature, newcomers quickly learn that the key to success in AA is turning their lives over to the care of “God as we understood him.” Spiritual practices and experiences tend to follow this cognitive exploration and understanding of what a higher power means to them, although there are, of course, exceptions, including Wilson’s own white light spiritual experience at Town’s Hospital (though it is also true that his thinking about the need for God in his life preceded this experience). Wilson presents this experience as fundamental to his recovery, as a grace given from God (Bill W. 1954/2000, 144-155) and we can see in this example the difficulty in disentangling belief, experience, and practice, as well as the amount of weight an individual gives to each in their recovery.

The mainstream understanding of how AA works shared by most members – through a spirituality centered around a transformation of the self, effected through a relationship with a higher power and a group of fellow alcoholics— can be seen through a study of the program’s history, literature, and in ethnographic research conducted with AA members, mostly in the greater Los Angeles area, between 2015 and 2020. In this chapter, I will explore the common core of AA spirituality, those spiritual ideas codified in the literature

and shared by most AA members, regardless of their more specific religious or spiritual beliefs. Almost all of my sample of AA members, even self-described atheist members, talked about spirituality as a way to transform the self from alcoholic to sober. Throughout I will pay attention to how contemporary AAs understand and interpret these texts, making sure that my scholarly understanding of them matches how they are perceived on the ground. First I will explore historical documents, both the program's public literature as well as documents from the AA archives, to understand how AA came to embrace spirituality and not religion. I will then look more closely at the common core of spirituality as embedded in the program's Twelve Steps and my participant's widely shared understanding of them as designed to create a relationship with a higher power of one's own understanding. Next, I will turn to the later-developed Twelve Traditions and the spiritual principles they convey with respect to group interaction and how these are also utilized in my participants' personal lives alongside the Steps. Finally, I will look at some widely-shared similarities in the spiritual journeys of my participants, which may be related to the program's history and literature, but also may be due to AA oral tradition and contemporary trends in American religion and spirituality.

Chapter 3 will unveil the variety of spiritual and religious traditions AA members overlay upon this common core, what William James once called "over-beliefs" (James 518). Here I also ask: How do AA members talk about spirituality today, and separate it from their understanding of religion? What patterns emerge in how they conceive of their higher powers?

My conclusion is that though the diversity of higher powers invoked in AA is wide, the great majority of my sample share a common core understanding of spirituality as a basic

reorientation from a diseased focus on self to a healing focus on Other and others, from a deadly solitary existence to a life-giving relational one. In the Conclusion, I will begin to explore naturalistic explanations for why such an orientation might be healing, beginning with Gregory Bateson's (1972) concept of AA as creating a networked self and Markus and Kitayama's (1991) notion of independent and interdependent self-construals.

Part I: Spirituality as “God As We Understood Him”

Key to the emergence of spirituality rather than religion, as central to the AA program, was the adoption of the term “God as we understood him” in the Twelve Steps, also expressed as a “higher power,” which gave AA members broad, but not totally unconstrained (see below), choices in how they defined and interacted with their higher powers. As I will later argue, the Steps make certain theological claims about the nature, power, and desires of a suitable higher power for helping with alcoholism. As I discussed in Chapter 1, the idea that alcoholics required a “complete psychic change” brought about through “ego deflation at depth” and a spiritual experience came to AA from multiple channels, including Wilson's physician, Dr. William Silkworth, Carl Jung by way of Rowland H. who helped Ebby to get sober, and Wilson's reading of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* in the hospital. The evangelical Oxford Group and Bill Wilson's personal perennialism (Taves 2016) were also important in AA's adoption of spirituality rather than religion as the primary means of transformation in the program (Anonymous 1985, 17).

Why Spirituality and Not Religion?:

According to Wilson's official explanation of how AA became a “spiritual rather than religious” program (Anonymous 1985, 17), spirituality and the phrase “God as we

understood him” (Anonymous 1939/2001, 59) were compromises that evolved out of debates over the writing of AA’s foundational text, the Big Book, as it was being circulated to members in manuscript form for feedback. According to Wilson, early members were split into three camps: conservatives, who were traditionally religious; radicals, who were atheists or agnostics; and liberals, with a broader notion of what spirituality might entail. Writing two decades later in 1957, Wilson recalled: “Out of this debate came the spiritual form and substance of the document, notably the expression, ‘God as we understood Him,’ which proved to be a ten-strike,” he recalled. “As umpire of these disputes, I was obliged to go pretty much down the middle, writing in spiritual rather than religious or entirely psychological terms” (Anonymous 1985, 17). In this story, Wilson frames AA’s emphasis on spirituality over religion as the result of a compromise among early factions of the group. But just as spirituality was chosen to ease internal conflicts in AA, it also seems to have solved potential problems between AA and outside groups (Taves 2016, 116). Wilson often reported that the program’s emphasis on broad spiritual concepts, rather than specific religious dogma, was due to a sincere desire that the fellowship be open to all who suffered from alcoholism, not just those with a Protestant Christian orientation. Early members worried that if the program were too narrowly religious, it might be condemned by established religious organizations, particularly the Catholic Church (Taves 2016, 116; Kurtz 1991, 47). Schaberg summarizes the contribution of Wilson’s open-mindedness to the fellowship well when he writes: “This dedication to an ever-expanding tolerance was one of the most influential and important ideas he took away from his negative experiences with the Oxford Group and his ongoing efforts to make the Fellowship more and more inclusive

became one of the outstanding hallmarks of Bill Wilson's long leadership of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Schaberg 140).

Some of the behind-the-scenes discussions preceding the publication of the Big Book can be seen through the original working manuscript that was released to the public in 2010 with the publication of *The Book That Started It All*. This is a printing of a complete draft of the Big Book that was circulated to over 400 people for comments, including "the preacher, the doctor, the Catholic Committee on Publications, psychiatrists, policemen, fishwives, housewives, drunks, everybody. Just to see if we've got anything that goes against the grain anyplace and also to find out if we can't get some better ideas" (as quoted in Hazelden 2010, 11.) Returned comments were hand-written into this published manuscript as additions, cross outs, and marginalia. Some of the suggestions were accepted, others ignored. One of the most obvious and widespread changes was to make the book more suggestive and less directive ("You must find him now!" becomes "May you find Him now!"), as noted in essays written by AA historians introducing the text (4).

A few edits stand out for our purposes of better understanding how "spirituality rather than religion" won the day. In the manuscript, Step 11 is edited to add "conscious" before what was at first just "contact with God". Then 'God' is circled and above it "a power above us" has been written, and then crossed out. After the same circled "God", someone has written "as we understand," which did make it into the published version in the past tense with a "him" added ("God as we understood him"). A line drawn from the number in step 11 says "See inside back cover," (Hazelden 59) which reveals the following message: "We have said constantly the trouble with org [sic] religion is that they try to dogmatically pour people into moulds [sic]. So why should we give specific instructions in the book such as saying do

this and do that” (Hazelden 190). A 1954 interview of Dorothy S. (wife of Clarence S., early Akron member and founder of Cleveland AA) by Bill Wilson, who was with Wilson when he and a small group made final “proof sheet” changes just prior to publication, corroborates Wilsons official telling of this period of struggle over whether or not to tone down the religiousness of the book:

Dorothy [S]: ... I can still see you, we were reading parts, different phrases to you and you would weigh those phrases, did this really say what you meant, would it really help somebody, would it offend this group, that group, or the other groups. And after one of those discussions, Hank was sort of pounding at you that a certain phrase was perhaps too strongly put, I can still hear you say, well, I don’t want the thing to be so insipid that they don’t want to get the idea that what they have to do to get sober.

Bill: Hank was going to water it down. On the other hand, it was that friction between [Jim] B. [redaction of full name mine], Hank, and myself on the one side or Fitz M. [redaction of full name mine] on the other who wanted to draw in all the old-fashioned expressions out of which grew this concept of a book big enough to go through with. We had a hell of a rumpus about that. My position was that if you went overboard with the old expressions you could tell people and if you labeled it as a strictly Christian book you’d have to take in God knows what, and if on the other hand, we just make a psychological job of it nobody would get well from it anyway, so that was the problem. (as quoted in Hazelden 7).

This interview with Dorothy S. confirms what Wilson later writes in his published 1957 account that early AAs held conflicting perspectives on whether or not the book should contain Christian language (“old expressions”), and at the same time expressed concern that a purely psychological book wouldn’t work. A “concept of a book big enough” was a compromise in Wilson’s mind between these two extremes, what he later identified with phrases such as “God as we understood him” the “spiritual rather than religious” (Anonymous 1957, 17) nature of the program.

This desire for compromise among internal factions and harmony with external groups no doubt shaped the outcome of the final Big Book, with its repeated focus on spirituality rather than religion, but further evidence indicates that “spirituality” and “God as I understood him” preceded these discussions, and may have originated in large part from

Wilson's own background as well as from an Oxford Group phrase "God as you understand him," with an originally Christian connotation. As Taves has documented, Wilson tended to downplay his role as founder of AA, in a purposeful effort not to paint himself as a prophet and create a new religious denomination (2016, 126). In the earliest known manuscript of Bill's Story, likely written in May 1938 (Schaberg 122), Wilson tells of his grandfather's influence on him as a child, "his convictions that spheres really had their music - but his denial of the right of preachers to tell him how he should listen.". Wilson is clear in many of his writings that he himself was skeptical of organized religion long before founding AA, but that he still felt a connection to something more than the visible, natural world. Wilson further explains his own resistance to religion in more detail in the 1938 manuscript, objecting to the exclusivism of the world's traditions, the violence stemming from such exclusivism, and the inconsistencies of various doctrines. Still, he revealed, he had always felt that "that there was a mighty rhythm, intelligence and purpose behind it all despite inconsistencies," though he struggled to find a lasting personal connection to it until his spiritual experience in the hospital (Wilson 1938a, 28).

While in this earlier manuscript of his Big Book story, Wilson credits Ebby for teaching him that "spiritual principles and rules of practice...common to all the worthwhile religions and philosophies of mankind" might help him stop drinking, the Oxford Group which had evangelized Ebby, had a decidedly Christian orientation, and mention of these "religions and philosophies of mankind" is cut in the published version. AA members today also sometimes claim that "God as we understood him" came from the Oxford Group, which the AA website says "emphasized universal spiritual values in daily living." However, a

deeper understanding of the Oxford Group reveals that either Ebby or more likely Wilson, had transmuted the Oxford Group's openness to all forms of Protestant Christianity into an openness to all faiths or no faith at all. In the writings of Sam Shoemaker, the leader of the Oxford Group in the U.S. at that time, we find many instances that refer to 'God as you understand him' *at the particular moment of conversion* – the point being that one could receive help from God while not understanding God very well (Dick B. 2010). For instance, in *Extraordinary Living for Ordinary Men*, Shoemaker writes, "Any honest person can begin the spiritual experiment by surrendering 'as much of himself as he can, to as much of Christ as he understands'" (Shoemaker 1965, 76). The Oxford Group message was *not* that any God from any religion would do. This contention is supported by Wilson's memory of his trip to Calvary mission just prior to his last drink and spiritual experience in late 1934. There, at a mission run by a church closely tied to the Oxford Group, he was told that 'only Jesus could save' (Anonymous 1957, 60). In short, while the Oxford Group spoke of 'God as you understand him', it was clearly encouraging further understanding of a specifically evangelical Protestant Christian God.

Big Tent Spirituality

Thus, it seems that the wording of the grand compromise at the heart of spirituality in AA, the phrase 'God as we understood Him,' likely originated in the evangelical Oxford Group, though its meaning evolved significantly once adopted by AA. For Groupers it signaled an embrace of one's nascent understanding of the Christian God. But as Wilson was drafting the Big Book in collaboration with others, 'God as we understood Him' came to express the AA's openness to those of any religious faith or none at all and the program's "spiritual rather than religious" orientation. A further meaning evolved out of the Oxford

Group's suggestion of forming a relationship with God (albeit a Christian one) as you understand God at the moment, however incomplete or tenuous that might be. It can be seen today in AA members encouraging one another to "act as if" they believe in God as a starting point, and the hesitancy many have to define God or to make theological claims about God. I will return to this topic later in the section on "Applied Agnosticism." Eventually, AA as a whole would split from the Oxford Group for many reasons, first in New York and then finally in Akron. Wilson and other early members began to feel that the aggressive evangelism encouraged by the Oxford Group tended to backfire with alcoholics, who as a whole didn't like to be told what to do. The Oxford Group was also losing patience with the alcoholic contingent's rowdiness – a shoe was thrown at one point through the church's stained-glass window (Anonymous 1957, 65). Finally, the Oxford Group's practice of publicizing prominent member's conversions was at odds with the alcoholic group's growing sense of the practical and spiritual importance of anonymity. Interestingly, while Wilson often said the AA program was greatly indebted to the Oxford Group, he credits them not with revealing the nature of God or how to interact with God, but with certain specific practices advocated by the group. "The early AA got its ideas of self-examination, acknowledgement of character defects, restitution for harm done, and working with others straight from the Oxford Groups and directly from Sam Shoemaker, their former leader in America, and from nowhere else," Wilson said at AA's 1955 coming-of-age convention in St. Louis (Anonymous 1957, 39).

That Wilson was serious about a big-tent religious/spiritual pluralism from the early days of AA can also be seen in a 1938 letter he wrote to a supporter, in which he says "As it now stands, our religious presentation is so broad, that a Catholic, a Jew and an Agnostic, or

even a Hottentot [sic] can go for it” (Wilson 1938b). Then as now, certain factions within AA preferred a more Christian approach to the steps, but mainstream AA remains to this day indebted to an understanding of spirituality as rooted in “God as We Understood him,” meaning individual AA members have great freedom in how they come to define their higher powers, both then and now. Nonetheless, an evangelical strain remains influential in AA spirituality as I’ll explore later, alongside a more metaphysical strain that comes out of Wilson’s life experiences as well as the American spiritual and religious landscape of the last century. We will see this productive tension of evangelical and metaphysical ways of engaging with God play out later in contemporary members’ varied concepts of higher powers and their attributes. For now, we can see that the historical record demonstrates that once it broke with the Oxford Group, Alcoholics Anonymous had firmly planted itself in the non-exclusivist realm of “God as we understood him.”

Part II: Spirituality in the Twelve Steps

“The Steps prevent us from killing ourselves; the Traditions prevent us from killing each other,” says a well-known, partly tongue-in-cheek axiom often heard in the rooms of AA. Despite its macabre overtones, this statement actually conveys hope to many members of the fellowship. While the Twelve Steps, in some form, were a part of AA from its inception in the mid-1930s, the Twelve Traditions were not first published until 1946, after AA groups and the General Service Office in New York had over a decade of experience dealing with the various troubles that arise when human beings congregate for any purpose, let alone for the purpose of arresting their alcoholism. First, I will explore the spirituality offered by the Twelve Steps as a remedy to the alcoholic self and then I will turn to the Twelve Traditions as both a remedy for problems with group dynamics and ailments of the

self. AA quips aside, it is an oversimplification to say the Steps are about the individual and the Traditions are about the group. For instance, part of Step 12 suggests that alcoholics “practice these principles in all our affairs” (Anonymous 1939/2001, 60), which many AAs have extended to include the Twelve Traditions as a blueprint for personal fulfillment and serenity in life. For example, some AAs have applied Tradition 7—“every AA group should be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions”—to their individual lives, trying to make sure they are able to support themselves financially without relying upon others (see more examples of personal application of the Traditions in Part 3 of this chapter).

According to AA’s official history and Wilson’s account of the fellowship’s early days, Wilson composed the Twelve Steps based largely on the six steps of the Oxford Group, which AA had been using in a modified version in its “word-of-mouth program” prior to the Big Book’s publication (Anonymous 1957, 160). In the course of 30 minutes of effortless writing—or what many members call divinely inspired, — he broke them down into smaller pieces to make them more “definite” and “explicit” in order that far-flung members reached at first only by the literature could work the program, but also so those close at hand would stay on track. “There must not be a single loophole through which the rationalizing alcoholic could wiggle out,” Wilson later recalled of writing the steps. “I relaxed and asked for guidance. With a speed that was astonishing, considering my jangling emotions, I completed the first draft” (Anonymous 1957, 161). Wilson’s use of the word “guidance” relates to an Oxford Group practice of asking God to guide one’s thoughts and actions, and in this sense, at the very least, Wilson himself felt the steps were divinely guided. With minor changes made by early AA members and consultants who read the Big Book prior to publication, the

Twelve Steps remain today largely as they were when Wilson wrote them that night in 1938 (see Box 1).

Twice in the Steps, God is modified by the phrase “as we understood him” in italics, the second addition insisted upon by readers of the Big Book manuscript, doubly emphasizing that the individual AA member is free to choose a higher power that makes sense to her (Hazelden 58). This attitude of openness toward spirituality and one’s higher power or God has allowed some members to appeal to the deities of traditional religions, such as God, Jesus, Allah, or Krishna, while at the same time making space for nontraditional concepts such as nature, “Reality with a capital R,” the “Spirit of the Universe,” or the AA group itself (G.O.D. – Group of Drunks to some). Ernest Kurtz has deftly argued that one important commonality in most AAs’ understanding of their higher power is the conviction that they themselves are “Not-God,” as Kurtz titled his book on AA history (1979). But even as the program insists that it is open to anyone of any religious or spiritual persuasion or none at all, within the Steps themselves there are some implicit assumptions about the kind of higher power that would actually be capable of helping someone with their alcoholism, and that would allow an AA member to coexist peacefully and even pray alongside members with different higher powers (See Part 5). The major caveat here is that no one in AA is required to believe anything about any higher power or even work the steps, for that matter. According to Tradition 3: “The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking” (Anonymous 1952, 139). Still, the Steps loom large in how most AAs conceive of spirituality and their higher power. Some alcoholics have chosen other secular or more explicitly religious recovery programs because the implicit theology of the Twelve Steps conflicted with their own views (Zemore et al 2018; Brown et

al 2013). In their efforts to reject some Oxford Group propositions that “could involve us in theological controversy” (Anonymous 1957, 160), AA’s founders pitched a tent that was open to all, but perhaps too open for those with atheist or otherwise exclusivist religious backgrounds. Those who find the spiritual element of the program unpalatable can seek help from secular programs such as SMART Recovery, Moderation Management, Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS), and Women for Sobriety. On the other side of the spectrum, some evangelical Christians who find the spiritual openness of AA incompatible with their faith find help in Celebrate Recovery, which was founded by Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church in the 1990s and proudly proclaims that “Jesus Christ is the one and only Higher Power.”

The overall implicit theology of the Steps, I would argue, based on both my own interpretation of the text, and how I have heard my participants and those in AA meetings and events talk about its meaning, is that there is some kind of higher power that cares about people, desires that people to do certain things (“its will for us”), and is able to help them get and stay sober (See Box 2). In the American Judeo-Christian context, this might sound very non-specific, but if you think about traditions that employ a notion of a God very removed from human affairs – for instance, a deistic or otiose God – we can see that these are indeed specific theological claims. A God who can’t be bothered with human affairs, for instance, might not be the best one to petition in the ravages of alcoholism. Furthermore, given the dismal track record of religious cures to alcoholism, or just the general despair of life itself, it would be entirely logical to assume there is no such thing as a higher power or God, and that humanity is on its own, exposed at random and due to natural forces to chaos, illness, and death. By definition, the AA higher power *has power*. It can change things in the world, even

if that change is simply calming someone's anxiety. Some AAs' higher powers are all powerful, others are not. But all have power in the sense of the ability to take action in the world, whether through an individual's thoughts or feelings or through outside events. Regardless of whether belief in a higher power is intuitive or not, nearly all of the AA members I interviewed expressed belief in a loving and benevolent higher power that was forgiving, wanted what was best for them, and had the means to help them in some way. Though I will discuss the Traditions in more detail later, it is worth noting that by 1946, AA had semi-officially adopted a belief in a "loving God" as part of Tradition 2.

Box 2: The Implicit Theology of the 12 Steps

Steps as written in black. The theology I see implicit in the Steps appears in brackets in red. This is entirely my interpretation and in no way represents an official AA reading or statement. Though I believe my historical and ethnographic research supports this reading, others may interpret this differently.

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
[There is a power that can restore alcoholics to sanity/sobriety.]
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
[This Power will take care of us if we ask it to.]
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
[This power listens to us].
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
[This power can remove our shortcomings.]
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
[This power doesn't want us to harm people and if we do harm them, it wants us to apologize.]
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
[This power has a will for us. We can communicate directly with this power through prayer and meditation to find out its will for us and receive help in carrying it out].
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.
[If we follow these steps (which allow us to develop a relationship with this power), we will have a spiritual awakening that will allow us to stay sober].

For many years, Jamie F. labored as a sex worker in order to support her addiction to alcohol and drugs. At the time of our interview, Jamie, then 55, had been sober for 17 years, and worked at a rehabilitation facility helping others through their early days of sobriety. A trans woman, Jamie grew up as a Southern Baptist. She left home at just 15 years old, in part because she felt there was little acceptance in that culture for a person like her. “AA teaches us that we get to find a higher power of our understanding. When I heard that, it was a relief for me because I always had grown up believing that no matter what I do, no matter how I act, no matter who I am, I’m doomed because I’m not like those people who taught me about God and spirituality.” They judged her for being different, she says, while at the same time failing to live up to their own strict standards of behavior. When she started working the AA program, her sponsor told her to write down what she would like God to be. “I want him to be forgiving. Loving. Understanding. Merciful. Funny, a sense of humor.” The God she ended up believing in was “basically the same God I was raised with, without the punishing part... I chose a merciful God, not a punishing God.” Jamie says as a result of believing in this gentler God, she was able to stay sober and her life improved. While Jamie still believes in Jesus, she does not attend church. “I don’t need to go to church for God to love me,” she told me. “I had to accept that God loves me no matter who or what I look like, how I act or what I’ve done.”

Ann Taves has argued while this kind of “spiritual rather than religious” stance allowed AA to embody a “tacit perennialism in its structure and organization that could be overridden by various theological perspectives, Bill Wilson was an explicit perennialist with Catholic proclivities who viewed his own unusual experiences – spiritualist, mystical, and

drug-induced – as different ways of entering into the unseen Reality” (2016, 88). AA’s tacit perennialism, or the belief that all the traditions of the world are expressions of a singular divine truth that reveals itself in different ways over time and in different cultures (Taves 2016; Cutsinger 2007), is not stated as such in the Big Book or in the steps, but it is perhaps a common logical conclusion taken up by some AA members, particularly those contemporary members, such as those in my sample, who identify as “spiritual but not religious.” Simply by stating that members may turn their lives over to “God as we understood Him” the Steps are claiming that no one religion or God has a monopoly on truth. While an individual member may be free to invoke an exclusivist higher power, I would argue that at least in the greater Los Angeles area, this rarely happens. I will closely examine how my AA participants conceive of their varied higher powers in the next chapter. First, it is critical to understand the later-composed companion to the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and the role they came to play in the AA program.

Part III: Spirituality in the Twelve Traditions

While the Twelve Steps were written prior to the massive growth of AA into a worldwide movement, the Twelve Traditions, first published 11 years after AA’s founding, were “beaten out on the anvils of group experience,” including that of the very first groups that formed in New York, Akron, and Cleveland, according to Wilson (Anonymous 1957, 2). Groups from around the country wrote to Wilson and the AA offices requesting advice for how to handle various problems, some of which turned up with predictable regularity. The Traditions were Wilson’s attempt to assist the fellowship in matters of intra- and intergroup relationships and to ensure that the needs of the individual alcoholic were taken care of

regardless of possible group strife. The Big Book also addresses some such concerns from a much earlier date, but the traditions made the program's devotion to the health of the group as a whole more explicit. No mere operating manual, the Twelve Traditions, uses religious/spiritual language to state that: "God willing [the Traditions] shall sustain us in unity for so long as He may need us." (Anonymous 1952, 131). The Traditions position group unity in AA as the foundation of individual recovery, as a "sacrifice" the individual makes for the sake of the group (130). As my ethnographic evidence will further demonstrate, according to AA literature and the beliefs of many individual members, the group or collective in AA is sacred, set apart as something life-giving and of the utmost importance. According to Tradition One, "Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. unity." The first paragraph of the *Twelve and Twelve* explanation of Step One is worth reproducing here in full:

The unity of Alcoholics Anonymous is the most cherished quality our Society has. Our lives, the lives of all to come, depend squarely upon it. We stay whole, or A.A. dies. Without unity, the heart of A.A. would cease to beat; our world arteries would no longer carry the life-giving grace of God; His gift to us would be spent aimlessly. Back again in their caves, alcoholics would reproach us and say, "What a great thing A.A. might have been!" (Anonymous 1952, 129).

Put simply, without group unity, AA ceases to work. What began in the early days of Alcoholics Anonymous as a *pragmatic* concern over anonymity-breaking and the possible negative attention that could bring to the fellowship should a seemingly recovered alcoholic lapse publicly, evolved over time into a *spiritual* orientation that places collective welfare at the "heart" of A.A., the foundation upon which individual recovery is built, not the other way around. Taves also explores the evolution of anonymity into a spiritual principle of the program in chronicling Wilson's conflict over naming the movement. In deciding to listen to others and not name the program after himself, "he highlighted the spiritual meaning of

anonymity as a counterweight to the alcoholics' self-destructive desire for power, fame, and wealth. Anonymity was the spiritual foundation of the Twelve Traditions because it exemplified the spirit of humility and sacrifice that led AAs to sacrifice not only alcohol but also the relentless quest for power, fame, and wealth in order to survive as individuals and to make sacrifices for the common welfare of the group to preserve AA" (Taves 2016, 123).

This lesson about the meaning of anonymity as a counterweight to alcoholics' self-destructive impulses is clearly laid out in the *Twelve and Twelve's* further discussion of Tradition One.

The A.A. member has to conform to the principles of recovery. His life actually depends upon obedience to spiritual principles. If he deviates too far, the penalty is sure and swift; he sickens and dies. At first he goes along because he must, but later he discovers a way of life he really wants to live. Moreover, he finds he cannot keep this priceless gift unless he gives it away. Neither he nor anybody else can survive unless he carries the A.A. message. The moment this Twelfth Step work forms a group, another discovery is made—that most individuals cannot recover unless there *is* a group. Realization dawns that he is but a small part of a great whole, that no personal sacrifice is too great for preservation of the Fellowship. He learns that the clamor of desires and ambitions within him must be silenced whenever these could damage the group. It becomes plain that the group must survive or the individual will not. (130)

Tradition One here makes it clear that conforming to some kind of higher law above one's own interests, and passing one's recovery on to others and thereby growing the group (Step Twelve), is critical to producing the attitude of humility necessary for individual recovery as well.

Though the majority of my participants were much more likely to talk voluntarily and explicitly about the Steps than the Traditions, the concept of sacrificing personal desires and opinions for the good of the group as a whole is commonly discussed, even if some of them may not know exactly where in the literature to pinpoint this wisdom. While many dedicated members of AA attend Step and Tradition meetings, and study the Traditions in great detail with their sponsors, some members find the Traditions tedious and have difficulty seeing

them as directly connected to their personal recovery. Nonetheless, the Traditions codify the tremendous importance of preserving the relational aspect of the AA program, making it very clear that ideally, the group aspect of AA is just as important, if not arguably more so, than the God/higher power part.

It is thus no accident that AA finds its founding date in the transition from Wilson's solitary attempts to stay sober to his shared attempts with Dr. Bob. The power of individuals coming together face-to-face and collectively making decisions according to "group conscience" has always been essential to the AA program. Many of AA's first generation of alcoholics, Wilson and co-founder Dr. Bob included, as well as those in my contemporary sample, had tried to get sober by following one religious path or another, and ultimately failed. If getting sober for most people just required church attendance or even individual religious experience, AA would not exist. Alcoholics Anonymous seems to provide something more to many recovering alcoholics that is not readily available in traditional religious systems or even modern spiritual ones. It is customary in most AA meetings for someone to read the Twelve Traditions at some point in the meeting, whether at the beginning or more commonly when a small voluntary donation is being collected. When the 12th tradition is read – "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles above personalities" – many groups say the phrase "principles above personalities" in unison.

The Traditions in All Our Affairs

As noted above, many contemporary AAs have come to apply part of the 12th step – "to practice these principles in all our affairs" – to the Traditions themselves, giving the

Traditions both a more straightforward existence as group guidelines, but also simultaneously as “spiritual principles” to be practiced in individual lives. Many AA members describe the program as a “blueprint for life,” and most find that blueprint expressed not just in the Big Book and the Twelve Steps, but also in the Twelve Traditions, some more explicitly than others. Recalling in 1955 the creation of the Twelve Traditions, Wilson clarified the connection between the traditions and personal behavior: “The Twelve Traditions are to group survival and harmony what A.A.’s Twelve Steps are to each member’s sobriety and peace of mind,” Wilson stated. “But the Twelve Traditions also point straight at many of our individual defects... For the sake of the welfare of our entire society, the Traditions ask that every individual and every group and every area in A.A. shall lay aside all desires, ambitions, and untoward actions that could bring serious division among us or lose for us the confidence of the world at large. The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous symbolize the sacrificial character of our life together and they are the greatest force for unity that we know.” (Anonymous 1957, 97)

This “sacrificial character” of AA life, in which the individual ego is both subsumed and thus saved for the greater good, is a common theme echoing through my interviews, contemporary meetings, and Twelve Step culture even outside the AA rooms. But it is perhaps less well known to those outside of the program or the wider recovery movement than AA’s emphasis on a higher power (though even this is less widely known than one would expect in a program that clearly states this in its ubiquitous Twelve Steps). In a recent online article explaining the Twelve Traditions on the website Verywell Mind, author Buddy T. demonstrates “How to Apply It [Tradition 1] To Your Life”. “Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity...can be applied to your family as

much as to your group,” Buddy T. writes. “By placing your family's common interests first, you can accomplish more and benefit from the unified support. This requires that each member of the family is heard, that their opinions be respected, and that consensus is reached whether you or anyone else in the family doesn’t fully concur.” Buddy T. demonstrates how the “sacrificial character” of Tradition One can apply to the individual alcoholic’s family 1

Perhaps the most commonly seen example of AAs practicing traditions designed for the group in their individual lives is the importance many place on being financially “self-supporting” in their personal lives. In the AA context, this desire is expressed for the group in the 7th Tradition, which is read at most meetings in Los Angeles when the basket is passed for small donations to help pay the rent and brew the coffee: “Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions” (160). One woman told me that it was important for her to have her own career, alongside her husband's large salary, because due to the Seventh Tradition she wanted to be “self-supporting,” meaning able to take care of herself without her husband’s support. An article on the web site of a recovery center that uses the 12-steps in treatment (but like all treatment centers is officially unaffiliated with AA), explains to its clients how the 7th Tradition applies to their personal lives, as well as the group’s finances, noting:

The fact that the Twelve Traditions were meant for AA groups does not mean addicts and alcoholics cannot learn from them... We should do our best to earn what we have, asking only for emotional and spiritual support along the way. Perhaps, at times, we will truly need financial assistance from friends and family. But we must assess whether or not this is a true need. And if it is, we should move forward with a solid plan to pay it back. The Seventh Tradition allows us to develop the responsibility needed to stay sober. If we truly care about our spiritual growth, we must never take this responsibility for granted.

Here, the author appeals to AA’s Seventh Tradition to link individual financial independence to spiritual growth and sobriety. This sentiment is commonly spoken among AA members and at meetings.

At times AAs are so careful to practice the Traditions in “all our affairs” that sometimes they may apply them to individual behavior when it is perhaps not strictly necessary. According to Tradition 10: “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.” This Tradition was conceived as a way to avoid division and controversy, keeping the fellowship focused on their common problem of alcoholism, rather than other issues. As Wilson wrote in the *Twelve and Twelve*: “As by some deep instinct, we AAs have known from the very beginning that we must never, no matter what the provocation, publicly take sides in any fight, even a worthy one. All history affords us the spectacle of striving nations and groups finally torn asunder because they were designed for, or tempted into, controversy” (Anonymous 1952, 176). To make his point, Wilson recalls the story of the Washingtonian movement of the mid-1800s, which like AA had attempted to arrest alcoholism through mutual self-help, but had stopped succeeding when they took up the outside issue of temperance for society as a whole, among other issues such as abolition. At one point, Wilson clarifies that what must be avoided is “AA as a whole” taking a public stance on outside issues, not members engaging in their “individual responsibilities to act as they see the right upon issues of our time” (177). Still, in his opening paragraph explaining Tradition Ten, Wilson implicitly connects personal opinion to group opinion by quoting an old-timer as follows: “Practically never have I heard a heated religious, political, or reform argument among A.A. members. So long as we don’t argue these matters privately, it’s a cinch we never shall publicly” (176).

This hesitancy to take a stand on issues outside of AA in meetings, even as an individual member, rather than as the group as a whole, remains to this day. As long-time AA member Teri M. told me:

As you've probably read, we take no stands on politics or anything. I remember 9/11, one of the toughest days of my life, and I went to the church for a women's meeting, a Tuesday night, and I was just shattered. I walked in, and the place was packed and yet nobody ever referred to the happening. There was devastation—almost every other person had lost somebody. And there may have been [things said such as], 'My cousin was there, my cousin is gone,' but that was it. Nobody proselytized, [as in] 'We'll go get em,' you know? Nothing, nothing. It was just like this was a place to come when you were grief-stricken, and the power was there to get you through it. And it really was.

Would it technically have been permissible for an individual in that meeting to say something like “I want to join the military and fight against terrorism”? Perhaps. But in the meetings I have attended, I have rarely heard individual members express opinions on controversial issues outside of the fellowship, even though Step 10 appears to have been conceived of as applying to the fellowship as a whole. This is noteworthy, in that AA members in meetings value group unity so much that they are able to overcome the old axiom “opinions are like assholes - everyone has them,” at least temporarily, when it comes to outside issues.

Arguments about meeting procedures and decisions occur frequently, and opinions are often shared about AA tradition and how the Steps ought to be best worked, but these tend to also be somewhat subdued compared to other groups in which the individual lives of members are perhaps not so dependent on the survival of the group as a whole. Keeping one's opinion to oneself takes humility. Critics have sometimes accused AA of personalizing what some argue is largely a collective issue, just as the psychological and psychiatric professions have been accused of pathologizing and individualizing suffering caused by structural inequality and other collective problems (Hari 2016; Mate 2008; Alexander et al 1981; Kramer 1997).

Even some of the more seemingly mundane AA Traditions have a connection to spiritual aspects of the program. Just as AA as a whole is not supposed to take a stance on outside issues, so too, according to Tradition 4, “Each group should be autonomous except in

matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole” (146). At the same time, AA “ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose” (Tradition 6). Tami keeps both traditions in mind in her individual life, expressing their importance to her through the bumper stickers she displays in her car. “So my car has the AA circle with the triangle, and on the gas tank it says, ‘Higher Powered.’ ’Cause I like it right there. And it says, ‘Friend of Bill W.,’ Bill W. being one of the founders. [Another] says, ‘I love Rule 62.’ Rule 62 is part of the Fourth Tradition, meaning ‘Don’t take yourself too damn seriously.’” Wilson spends much of his explanation of Tradition 4 telling the origin story of Rule 62 as a lesson on how humility protects both the individual alcoholic and the group as a whole. In short, an early AA group used its autonomy (Tradition 4) to build a three-story rehabilitation and education center, what Tradition 6 would later call an “outside enterprise,” for alcoholics in their town, and things grew so complicated that they created 61 rules and regulations to keep things operating. The project ultimately was a bust, demonstrating that AA groups had the right to be autonomously wrong, but also showing the importance of not pursuing outside enterprises. As Wilson reported it, the head promoter of the failed project, in his newfound humility, had a card printed that said “Middleton Group #1. Rule #62.” “Once the card was unfolded, a single pungent sentence leaped to the eye: ‘Don’t take yourself too damn seriously,’” Wilson explained. “Even the chief architect, standing in the ruins of his dream, could laugh at himself—and that is the very acme of humility” (Anonymous 1952, 149).

This lesson on humility is so important to Tami’s sobriety that she drives around Los Angeles with it posted on her car. In AA, personal anonymity is expected “at the level of press, radio, and films” (Tradition Eleven), so Tami isn’t concerned about sharing her

recovery in this limited way, and hopes that she might reach a struggling alcoholic with her bumper sticker messages. Still, anonymity at the larger level is important to her, as it is to Teri M. Tradition Twelve reads: “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.” After showing me her *Big Book* encased in a handmade cover from one of her sponsees, Teri explains something she feels gets overlooked when it comes to anonymity in AA. “So you know about anonymity? See, most of our people don't understand anonymity, and how it's really supposed to be applied. They think it's to protect us. And really it's to protect the program on-the-one-hand, and on-the-other-hand, it's the foundation for our humility, which is the foundation for our disease.” Teri’s statement about anonymity points to two ideas about the Traditions I have been trying to get across here. The first is that while the Traditions are less well-known, cited, and studied by some AAs than the Steps, they are still foundational to how most understand the spirituality of the program, though perhaps impressing their influence less directly than the Steps. While Teri’s statement that many members see anonymity in narrow terms of individual or group protection holds true in many of my interviews, most AAs recognize the importance of humility to their ability to stay sober, and tie that humility to a spiritual sense of self many call becoming right-sized or a-part-of.

Right-Sized and A-Part-Of

Many AAs claim that the most powerful way out of an alcoholism-fueling negative obsession with self and to a life-saving humility is through service to others, which is the prescription of the 12th step. Tommie D. had 55 years of sobriety when I spoke with her shortly before her death, and she was an acquaintance of Bill and Lois Wilson and a friend of

Ebby T. She recalls Bill often visiting Ebby, who relapsed not long after carrying the message to Bill and struggled to get sober for the remainder of his life. Bill would try to help Ebby, Tommie said, not just for Ebby's sake, but because he was practicing the 12th step. The idea here is that by helping other alcoholics, the sober alcoholic also helps himself, by reminding himself of what he needs to remember in order to stay sober. "Because it's by my talking to somebody else that I hear what's going on inside of me," Tommie said. "So Bill always used to say, 'Pay attention to what you think somebody else needs to hear. Because it's really your own head [that] needs to hear it.'" The power of the relationship between alcoholics is clear in this act of "twelve-stepping" – one helps others in order to help oneself and oneself in order to help others, knowing, as the Big Book says, that "you cannot transmit something you haven't got" (Anonymous 1939/2001, 164).

The phrase "a part of" came up again and again in my interviews and at meetings. My interviewees don't just mean that they are "a part of" the AA group. More profoundly, they tie being "a part of" to anonymity, which is, according to Tradition 12, is "the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions." In this context, being "a part of", means being no better and no worse than the others around you, but rather being just one of many. By working the steps, AAs report becoming "right-sized." According to Ralph K., 66, a self-proclaimed "spiritual atheist" sober for 16 years, being right-sized means: "As a human being, nothing exceptional. Nothing better than, nothing worse than, no more, no less. Just a part of the human experience." Ralph's AA spirituality is centered around an "inner power," but not of the solipsistic variety so commonly critiqued by some scholars of religion (Bellah et al 1995 and 2006; Mercadante 2014). Ralph's inner power is "the realization that I am a part of everybody, that everybody is a part of me and that we're all in this together." His inner

power, rather than a grandiose elevation of the self to the divine, is instead relational, an expression of his embeddedness in humanity, and he is adamant that it helps him stay sober. A recent phenomenologically oriented study of five AA members in long-term recovery found similar results: “Spirituality is viewed by the participants as a means of re-establishing and fostering a relationship with self and others. In short, spirituality is about establishing and developing relational connections” (McInerney et al 2021, 287).

Joseph Y., 31, sober for four years, echoes this sentiment when he describes the sense of connectedness to others he felt in his early sobriety as a spiritual experience. “I really felt a deep love for everybody around me, whether they be in their cars or on the street or whatever,” he said one night in a home where he was housesitting in Los Angeles. “It’s just such a deep sense of love that there’s nothing worth worrying about because these loving feelings are so strong that even given the worst external circumstances, those feelings can’t be taken away.” He, like many AA members, talks about his sponsor and his sponsor’s sponsor and so on in familial terms. He speaks frequently of his grand sponsor and even great grand sponsor. It is a common practice to refer to lineages within AA sponsorship characterized in a particular way, such as “I come from a particularly loving lineage of sponsorship.” It is worth noting that in many traditions, an essential part of the mystical experience is this feeling of oneness with others. In a sense, AA trains its members through service to come to this mystical understanding. AAs get sober together, Tommie explained, when they can leave behind the ‘I way’ of the lonely and doomed alcoholic. Even in her mid 90s, Tommie was sponsoring 9 or 10 ‘pigeons’ as she called them. She estimated she had sponsored about 100 people over the years. On her wrist Tommie wore a bracelet, given to her by a friend, that simply says ‘The We Way.’ Many members talk about the importance of

staying “in the middle of the herd” when it comes to success in A.A., meaning that the group acts as a protection for the individual. In this Durkheimian way, the group does more for individuals than they could ever do for themselves.

Part 5: Common Spiritual Journeys

If we base our understanding of AA spirituality on the Steps and Traditions alone, we would miss a lot about how contemporary AAs actually live out their spirituality. One might think that AA spirituality is all about a straightforward, uncomplicated relationship with a higher power. My ethnographic work has uncovered a number of common and widespread ways through which contemporary AAs engage the spiritual in their everyday lives, three of which I will focus on now: 1) **Healing religious trauma** in moving from a judgmental God to a loving God; 2) **Applied Agnosticism**, the tendency to avoid defining or holding too tightly to theological viewpoints, while still engaging heavily in prayer and meditation to contact a God or higher power that remains somewhat of a mystery; and 3) **Hyper Pluralism**, in which the Gods and higher powers of others are not just tolerated, but celebrated and often thought to simultaneously exist alongside one’s own God/higher power.

Healing Religious Trauma

Earlier we heard from Jamie F., a trans woman who found a new understanding of her childhood God as a loving rather than judgmental force, key to her recovery in AA. In Chapter 1 we also heard the story of Angie P. who felt that her sister’s traditional, judgmental God only compounded the harsh internal dialogue that contributed to her excessive drinking. Many of my participants report feeling they were harmed by traditional religion as children or as adults and have found a way to heal this trauma through their selection of a higher

power in AA. As I will explore in further detail in Chapter 3, many participants who grew up in traditionally religious families now identify as “spiritual but not religious” in AA.

Interestingly, in what is probably the most detailed ethnographic study of SBNRs to date, Linda Mercadante reports that in her sample of 105, very few identified difficulties with religion in childhood as a source of their adult SBNR orientation (Mercadante 2014, 18).

This may indicate that childhood religious difficulties are more of a problem for people with addictions than the general population, but this deserves more investigation.

If they didn’t volunteer the information on their own - which many did - I asked my participants what it was like to come into AA and find a Higher Power that worked for them. Natasha A., who started drinking regularly when she was 11, had a hard time with this process.

When I came in that was difficult for me. I was really resistant. I had grown up with preconceived notions and ideas of religion. I had come from a religious family - my parents, my first father was actually going to be a minister and then he realized that the church was corrupt and became a cop - a very angry man. And then my parents divorced and my mom remarried. She remarried a man that she met in church and they constantly went to church and they're very good people, they're good people. They're a Methodist family. We've grown up mostly Methodist. When I went to [to live abroad] I went to a Lutheran Church, but when I came back here I went to a Methodist church. Um [long pause] so there's been like a strong - so we're from Texas originally, so there's strong Christian roots there, but I could never understand like what was going on. I don't know, it never sat well with me... At school [I felt] like forgotten about, that's how I felt like God was to me, you know, just like the abandoned kid. He loves everyone else but just not me and like I just couldn't connect. All the fables and stories - they were fables and stories to me and I didn't understand them. It wasn't until coming into Alcoholics Anonymous that I had a real experience and that's what I needed. I didn't need somebody else's ideas and concepts and teachings. I needed my own personal experience and for somebody to say, “That’s OK, that's OK” that “you don't believe those particular words. It's OK that you don't believe that feeling.” Because it's that feeling that I trust. It's that feeling that I know it's true. And it's here that I went from you know the agnostic to being gnostic. Now I know [emphasized], I know for myself. And no one can ever take that away from me.

Natasha now believes there is something greater than herself at work in the universe (I will explore her striking spiritual experience that led to that feeling in Chapter 4). She and her AA friends meet outside of the program to explore the possibilities through spiritual books and

videos, and discussion with each other. The difficulties with the church she likely inherited through her father and her alienation from the Methodist church of her later childhood, no longer got in the way of her connecting to her higher power on her own terms, which is one major goal of the 12 Step process.

Applied Agnosticism

Another common finding from my ethnographic work that illuminates an aspect of the common core of AA spirituality is a tendency among my participants towards something I'm calling Applied Agnosticism – or a resistance to defining their spirituality or higher power in detailed terms. As I indicated earlier, some of this is likely derived from the Oxford Group idea that it's best to surrender yourself to whatever you understand of God – or Christ in their case – rather than worrying too much about theological complexities. Wilson and early AAs took this Oxford Group idea and made it even more open, so that those suffering from alcoholism only need to act “as if” they believe in something, however undefined. At the same time, though, both the Oxford Group and AA recommended that those seeking God's help do so through prayer, and in AAs case, meditation too. The idea is to keep an open mind about God or higher power, and at the same time to actively interact with this amorphous he/she/it as much as possible. I've chosen the term “applied agnosticism” to refer to this interesting combination of theological indeterminacy and intense spiritual practice. Joseph, who uses frequent prayer and meditation to manage his anxiety and receive direction from his higher power, expressed the reasons for his agnosticism:

I don't know really where the direction comes from and I get kind of a little bit – like a lot of these things, I don't want to define [it]. Because I don't want to say, ‘Oh is the direction coming from inside of me, from a shared place inside of me, that God is part of me and I share with everything else? Or God is created by man, so does that mean, does that mean this or that? Getting into all the theological questions and existential questions is great, and I love reading about that stuff and thinking about it and talking about it. But deep down I know that

there's something that happens when I open myself up and I ask for direction instead of trying to think my way out of a situation. Because I feel like anytime I define something, then it's just something that can be disproven later on.

Though Joseph reports praying and meditating frequently, he prefers to keep an open mind when it comes to defining his higher power, aware of his tendency to think himself into doubt. Jack A., though still identifying as a Catholic, said he had initially felt uncomfortable approaching the God of his childhood Catholicism in part due to his shame about what he had done in his alcoholism. "I felt so ashamed at the beginning, I was like afraid to approach God in any way, like a frightened little boy afraid of his father," he told me. While Jack's higher power in AA started out as the group, he said "my concept has grown into that my God has no edges, which means I can go down to the ocean and I can look at the ocean and as vast as it is, I can't find an edge on it. You can't get to the edge of God." Jack calls his concept of God "incomplete," but it is vital to his spiritual practices and sobriety. He does not mention the more traditional Catholic conception of God as trinitarian: Father, Son (Jesus), and Holy Spirit. This more indeterminate and literally amorphous concept of God seems to work better for him, and he's quick to describe himself as "the fringe element" in his Catholic Church. Herb K., who also has an unconventional relationship with Catholicism, but a relationship, nonetheless, similarly prefers an open and evolving concept of his Higher Power, that is more akin to an agnostic understanding, but one which he applies vigorously to his daily life:

So if there is this Reality with a capital R, I don't want to use the word God because that's got some baggage, but if there is this Unconditional Energy with a capital U and a capital E, then it's infinite. It had no beginning and it has no end, because if it had a beginning then where did it come from, and so where did *it* come from, and so where did *it* come from, [that would be] the answer as to what is God. So whatever we use as a symbol of G-O-D is not the reality of G-O-D. The reality is something that we can't put into a symbol because we're finite and can't even imagine because we're finite, what infinite would be. Having said that, here we are. And so therefore whatever it is, it's creative because here we are. We've been created, I have to assume that materiality came into existence because of its very nature otherwise it itself

would be God. And it's not, because it's corruptible and it changes. And whatever It is, capital I, it doesn't change. It can't change.

For Joseph, Jack, and Herb, God, “conscious contact” (Step 11) with God remains a critical part of their sobriety, but their concepts of God remain somewhat “[un]defined,” “incomplete,” and “infinite,” respectively, as one might expect from an Agnostic. But all three men pray to and interact with this God regularly, showing an active relationship with God in ways most agnostics usually do not: applied agnosticism, as I’m calling it. As Teri M. put it, her higher power in AA is “not describable.” Sonya M. echoes this sentiment when she writes: “If I [underlined twice] could describe my Higher Power it wouldn't be big enough!”

Hyper Pluralism

Also implicit in the Steps, Traditions, and AA spirituality as focused on “a God of our own understanding” is an almost universal tolerance for other people’s beliefs. AA members understand this to mean that just as they can choose their own higher power concept, so too can their fellow members, and they might choose something or someone very different from their own. Going to AA meetings and working with others in the fellowship encourages members to take a “live and let live” attitude towards other members’ spirituality. Members are less interested in what kind of God or higher power their fellows are praying to, and more in whether or not it's working to help them stay sober.

For many AAs, this goes beyond mere tolerance. When AA members pray together in a meeting, holding hands, it is accepted that each individual is praying to whatever concept of a higher power works for them. Nonetheless, they often pray in unison, holding hands, to these many different gods or concepts at the same time. At times, they even say the Lord’s Prayer in unison, with most members either accepting, ignoring, or translating internally the

traditional Judeo-Christian concept of God into something that makes sense to them. While some atheist and agnostic members prefer not to say the prayer and have expressed their feeling that it is out of place in a program that encourages a higher power of one's own understanding, many nonetheless attend meetings where it is recited, though they may not participate. A growing movement of AA Agnostics and Atheists may eventually influence a change in this regard (see Chapter 3), but use of the Lord's Prayer is alive and well in AA meetings, even in the less traditionally religious rooms of Los Angeles.

What can we make of a room full of alcoholics saying the traditionally Christian Lord's Prayer in unison with many different concepts of Gods and higher powers actually in mind? "Pluralism is not the sheer fact of diversity alone, but is active engagement with that diversity," states Harvard's influential Pluralism Project. "Pluralism is the process of creating a society through critical and self-critical encounter with one another, acknowledging, rather than hiding, our deepest differences" (2020). I would argue that AA takes pluralism a step further, whereby individuals very rarely hold exclusivist ideas that only their concept of God or a higher power can work for others, and in fact root for their fellows' religious and spiritual beliefs to work, for the greater purpose of arresting the devastation and destruction of alcoholism. Sometimes they even borrow each other's higher powers when they're struggling to believe.

Some of my interviewees reported working with sponsors with very different beliefs about a higher power than themselves. Tammy E., 42, grew up in a Jewish Atheist family, but was "reborn" as a Baptist evangelical prior to joining AA. Born in Israel to a family who had lost three quarters of its members in the Holocaust, God was rarely spoken of. "I always felt inside there was more, but I didn't know how to put my finger on it," she tells me. At 18

she met her now ex-husband, a “Bible-preaching Bible-thumping kind of guy.” She got pregnant and was “saved” when her daughter was two years old. Now five years sober and divorced, she still describes herself as a Baptist: “So technically, I guess, I’m a born-again Christian, but my viewpoint has changed a lot.” She no longer attends church, saying her needs are met in AA. Her sixth and current sponsor is Jewish, she tells me over coffee after a long day at work.

Tami: This one is Jewish. Bernadette was Jewish. Amy is Catholic. Sarah was Jewish. Rachel was Jewish. Aurora was my sponsor for a minute. She’s a lesbian and planning her own wedding and way too busy for me. Probably not religious. But has a higher power of some type. And now, Jane is Jewish. It just so happens... And I know what Jane thinks and we’re not the same. And, at the same time, we have talked a little bit about religion and she knows that, yes, my family was Jewish, but...I converted and I’m a Baptist. And she says that her uncle is, like, a preacher in the Midwest somewhere. So she’s got a very strong working knowledge of the Old Testament and New Testament. And so we were able to share a little bit, but her belief is...brought up being Jewish. She thinks of Christ as a wonderful man. And that’s as far as she goes with it.

JLH: Right. And for you, he’s the Savior, he’s the son of God?

Tami: Oh of course he is. Absolutely.

Tami’s Israeli family disowned her when she converted to Christianity. In AA, her Jewish sponsor talks to her about the New Testament, something she describes as healing.

Something unusual seems to be happening here. Individuals with different theological commitments are able to set aside what they think they know to embody the spiritual or religious mindset of another and to even advise them in their faith. It is also worth noting that though AAs no doubt pray to very different Gods and higher powers, according to Tradition 2, “For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience” (Anonymous 1952, 132). Even though individual AAs have different Gods and Higher Powers, the group as a whole seems to be guided by the same “Loving God.”

Conclusion

In this chapter I have endeavored to show a common core of spirituality that can be found in the AA program, the history of the development of this core, its expression in the AA literature, most prominently in the Twelve Steps and the Twelve Traditions, how it is utilized and expressed by my contemporary sample of AA members, and some of the common patterns I see across AA members' spirituality. I have argued that this common core of spirituality originated in the phrase "God as we understood Him," which gave members great latitude in selecting a God or higher power that works for them, while tending to disfavor proselytizing, exclusivist understandings of God. While members choose their own higher powers, certain aspects of God/higher power are shared by the group, such as a "loving group Conscience," which helps to shape collective decision making. As the Twelve Traditions evolved they came to carry a widely shared collectivist spirituality, in which individual needs are subordinated to the ongoing survival of the group as a whole, which is seen, alongside God or a higher power, as that which sustains the individual alcoholic in sobriety, though for some alcoholics these are one and the same (e.g. Group of Drunks or G.O.D. - see more on this in Chapter 3). As Trysh Travis and Eoin Cannon have insightfully pointed out, elements of the AA program challenge American capitalist individualism, which other commentators, along with a number of my participants, have identified as a contributor to alcoholism in the first place. It is perhaps no coincidence that a collectivist voluntary organization has thrived as a safety net of sorts in a country known for its bootstrap individualism. As noted in Chapter 1, the AA literature and contemporary members cite an overemphasis on the solitary self – "self-will run riot" (Anonymous 1939/2001, 62) – as one of the most pernicious contributors to their alcoholism.

In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which AA spirituality, though often sharing the core elements discussed in this chapter, also varies among members through their more elaborated ideas about a higher power, prayer, meditation, and other aspects of working the program.

Chapter 3: Varieties of Higher Powers

“When we became alcoholics, crushed by a self-imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or else He is nothing. God either is, or He isn’t. What was our choice to be?”

-Alcoholics Anonymous, p. 53

“Dr. Bob held certain religious convictions, and so do I. This is, of course, the personal privilege of every A.A. member. Nothing, however, could be so unfortunate for A.A.’s future as an attempt to incorporate any of our personal theological views into A.A. teaching, practice, or tradition.”

-Bill Wilson, Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age, p. 232n

“The only thing [religious experience] unequivocally testifies to is that we can experience union with something larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace... All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary, it might conceivably be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves...”

- William James, The Varieties of Religious Experience, p. 448

* * *

Having explored the “diseased” sense of self plaguing many AA members prior to recovery, and the origins of spirituality, rather than religion, as the means of psychic transformation in AA (Chapter 1), and having unearthed some of the *common* spiritual claims made by the steps and traditions, despite their overall openness to most points of view (Chapter 2), we will now turn our attention to what current AA members mean when they said they are spiritual, and how they vary in their understanding of this spirituality, and their understanding of their higher powers (which some call God). Though I would argue that most AAs share the common core understanding of spirituality explored in Chapter 2, they layer upon it more elaborate and specific beliefs, which I will explore in more detail in this chapter. In Chapter 4, I will turn to the practices that AA members employ in order to make “conscious contact” with these higher powers, as well as the spiritual experiences AA

members have described to me and the critical role they say they have played in their ability to stay sober.

As I discussed in the introduction, most AA researchers, while usually paying at least some attention to the centrality of spirituality to the program, do not agree on a definition of spirituality, or of religion for that matter. This is of course not surprising from a religious studies standpoint. Scholars in our field (and others) have convincingly demonstrated that the terms “religion” and “spirituality” seem to defy universal definition (McCutcheon and Hughes, 2021). Furthermore, Ann Taves has shown that very often different people will deem the same thing religious or spiritual or natural or any combination of these (Taves 2009). For instance, many AA members view being in nature as a spiritual experience, some even using the phrase Get Out Doors – or G-O-D to refer to their higher power. In contrast, a former AA member told me: “I don't think I've ever had a spiritual experience although I feel a deep and profound sense of peace when I am in nature, particularly near the ocean” - indicating that, unlike her fellows, she does *not* consider this experience spiritual—or religious. When asked which parts of the AA program are most spiritual, another member said, “the entire thing is spiritual.” If we, as scholars, decide what counts as religious or spiritual, this often obscures our understanding of how those we study use these terms.

Because the focus of my research is on how AA members understand spirituality, I refrain from imposing a scholarly definition of spirituality of dubious utility onto my participants. Instead, I have asked contemporary AA members *how they themselves use the term spirituality, the variety of experiences, beliefs, and practices they deem spiritual, and how they see these contributing to their recovery.*

My approach also takes inspiration from anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann’s notion of “comparative phenomenology,” which she describes as:

an approach to interviewing that homes in on felt experience with the aim of understanding that experience more deeply by exploring the event through comparison to other experiences in order to elicit more phenomenological detail. The method takes a phenomenon-focused, experience-near approach. That is, the goal is to understand the specific details of the events individuals felt in the moment - from their perspective, as the event unfolded... When people say that they have sensed the presence of a divine spirit, the comparative phenomenologist wants to know where, precisely, the spirit was located and what, precisely, they felt that caused them to think that the spirit was there. (= 2020, 122)

My approach is also informed by Clifford Geertz’ notion of “thick description,” and the methods of grounded theory and open coding of interview transcripts and other materials (See introduction; Geertz 1972, Corbin and Strauss 1990; Emerson et al 2011; Russell 2006), which encourage us to immerse ourselves as much as possible in cultures so we can pay close attention to the details and idiosyncrasies that might otherwise go undetected. This “lived out” and “phenomenological approach” reveals that spirituality, *as it was conceived of by AA’s founders and most of my contemporary AA sample*, is fluid enough to allow some members to simultaneously pursue traditional religious paths outside of the program, while the majority identify themselves as “spiritual but not religious” and draw their notion of spirituality from a wide array of sources. In the next chapter, I will further explore how AA members cultivate experiences of their higher powers.

Part I: Aggregate Findings Among Sample Related to Demographics, Spirituality, and Religion

Out of the 31 current AA members I interviewed, 65% explicitly identified themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” (SBNR) and reported that they were unaffiliated with any religious traditions (see Table 1a). I did not seek out members to interview who identified in this way – in fact, I went out of my way to find people to interview who were

affiliated with religious institutions. This compares with recent 2021 Pew Research Center estimates of the number of unaffiliated Americans in the nation as a whole standing at about 29% of the population. Approximately 25% of those in the Los Angeles Metro Area identified as unaffiliated (which included atheist, agnostic, and nothing in particular) in Pew’s 2014 Religious Landscape Survey (147). So it would seem the spiritual but not religious are highly overrepresented in my Los Angeles-based AA sample. A significant number of AAs, however, *are* comfortable pursuing their spirituality through traditional religious routes. Thirteen percent of my interviewees identified as “spiritual and religious.” Three of these were Evangelicals and three were Catholics, but, interestingly, one out of the three in each category reported never attending church. Only one of my participants reported being “neither spiritual nor religious,” while none reported being ‘religious but not spiritual’; thirteen percent did not answer the question directly, some because they resisted being categorized at all. Of these, most could probably be fairly categorized as “spiritual but not religious” based on their descriptions of their beliefs, practices, and experiences in interviews. Regardless of their current stance on religion, all but two of my interviewees reported growing up in traditionally religious homes, so we see a significant shift from childhood affiliation to adult disaffiliation for most of my AA sample.

Table 1a: Participant Demographics and Current Religious/Spiritual Identification

Gender	Age	Sobriety	Race/Ethnicity (self-identified)	Childhood Affiliation	Current Religious/Spiritual Identification
15 men 16 women	27-94 yrs (52 yrs avg)	16 days-55 yrs (17 yrs avg)	17 Caucasian (55%)	7 Mainline Protestant (23%)	20 “spiritual <i>but not</i> religious” (65%)
			5 Multiethnic/racial (16%)	3 Secular Jewish (10%)	6 “spiritual <i>and</i> religious” (19%)
			3 Caucasian/Jewish (10%)	7 Catholic (23%)	1 “neither spiritual nor religious” (3%)

			2 Mexican American (6%)	4 Evangelical (19%)	0 "religious but not spiritual" (0%)
			2 African American (6%)	1 LDS (3%)	4 did not answer question (13%)*
			1 Asian American (3%)	1 Church of England (3%)	
			1 Arab American (3%)*	1 Muslim (3%)	
				5 Multifaith (16%)	
				2 Nonreligious (6%)*	

*Percentages may not add up to 100 due to rounding.

Table 1b: AA Membership Survey Data 2014 and 2022

Sample of AA Members in U.S. and Canada	Sex/Gender	Average Age	Length of Sobriety (years)	Race/Ethnicity
2014	62% male 38% female (other identities not reported)	50 yrs	10 years avg 27% less than a year 24% between 1 and 5 13% between 5 and 10 14% between 10-20 22% more than 20	89% white 3% Hispanic 4% Black 1% Native American 1% Asian 2% Other
2022	63.94% male 35.45% female .46% "non-binary, neither, both, gender fluid, non-conforming" .15% Other	52 yrs	Average not reported for 2022 23% less than a year 20% between 1 and 5 13% between 5 and 10 16% between 10-20 28% more than 20	87.7% White, Caucasian, or European American 7.3% Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin 3.6% Black, African American, or African Canadian 2.8% Native American, Alaska Native, Indigenous, First Nations, Metis or Inuk (Inuit) 1.2% Asian .5% Other .3% Pacific Islander or Hawaiian Native .3% Multiracial†

†"These numbers do not add up to 100% because respondents were allowed to select more than one." It is also worth noting that the 2022 survey collected data on types of meetings attended, reporting that 75% of members had attended a virtual meeting; 79% "preferred in-person meetings"; 2% "preferred online (virtual meetings)," and 19% "like in-person & online (virtual) meetings equally." AA does not report data on members' religious affiliations.

My exchange with Cathy H. about how her notion of God has changed from the childhood God of her Korean American Methodist church into the higher power of her AA adulthood is illustrative of this common trajectory from childhood affiliation to adult disaffiliation and later reengagement with spirituality.

Cathy H.: -but it's the same God that I was introduced [to] when I was younger.

JH: Do they wish that you went to church?

Cathy H.: Yes.

JH: But do they know that you have a spiritual life? Do they get that? Or is it not...

Cathy H.: They don't really buy my AA.

JH: Oh they don't get that—

Cathy H.: But they do...like, when I go home to New York and if there's a meeting, I can walk to it or borrow their car.

JH: Oh nice.

Cathy H.: But they'll give me, my dad will give me, like a dollar. Because he knows it's a dollar for the raffle.

JH: That's so sweet.

Cathy H.: It's very sweet. And they'll say, like, "She behaves better when she comes back."

JH: Oh.

Cathy H.: So they're able to see some kind of, like—

JH: Interesting.

Cathy H.: —psychic change.

JH: Wow.

Cathy H.: They don't really understand it. We don't really talk about it

Though Cathy grew up in a religious community, and she still believes in the God she was introduced to as a child - though she's careful to state that it may not be the way her parents understand God - she is not affiliated with the church as an adult and does not call herself religious. She associates religion with going to church or reading the Bible, noting that, in contrast, in AA, "you treat [your higher power] like your own conception of God."

As part of the survey portion of my project, I asked AAs to define both spirituality and religion in a few sentences (see Table 2). Perhaps unsurprisingly they tend to define religion as organized by others, rule-based and legalistic, and something that is to be followed passively. Spirituality in contrast, is experienced or generated by the self, open and forgiving, and is actively sought and adhered to, rather than passively followed. Even some of the spiritual and religious participants, such as Andy, an active evangelical Christian, make a similar distinction. Andy, who attends a conservative evangelical church regularly and tries to avoid watching mainstream movies because they create temptation for him to sin, writes that religion is "man-made, legalistic" and spirituality is a "walking relationship with God." This notion of a personally accessible God, who cares about the problems of individuals, has become more and more prevalent among evangelical Christians in the 19th and 20th centuries in America (Luhrmann 2015), and it is shared by those identifying as spiritual, but not religious in both my sample and in other studies (Streib and Hood 2016). We'll discuss more examples of AA members with more traditional religious affiliation later in the chapter.

Although, as noted, the majority of my participants identified as "spiritual but not religious" and the AA program itself has positioned itself as a program of "spirituality rather than religion" (Anonymous 1957; 17), it is worth noting that many of my interviewees

reported feeling harmed by institutional religion as young people. Some were told that their sexuality or gender was “wrong” according to scripture; others felt that the church failed to address the real issues harming them such as poverty and racism (see Adrienne’s story). It was unusual to encounter someone who had had a positive experience with a religious institution in their childhood. There are thus two parts to the phrase “I’m spiritual but not religious.” The “not religious” part seems to coalesce around widespread agreement among my participants that churches (and other religious organizations as well) have failed in their missions. The “I’m spiritual” part is more variable in meaning, but there are commonalities. Among my participants, it indicated a desire to hold on to something more than everyday reality. As Don R. writes in his survey response (see Table 2), spirituality means: “Belief in practices, rituals, beliefs— based on one’s own personal identification of Spirituality. Belief of God—for me it’s the belief in the Power of the Universe without observing ceremonial traditions of a group, denomination, sect, organization.” Ralph K. puts similar sentiments into what he considers atheist terms, defining spirituality as: “A state of being in awe to the mysteries of the natural world including humanity; acceptance of the present limitation of scientific knowledge, and continued practice of empathy and compassion and love.” For both men, spirituality allows for some mystery, not needing a predetermined answer from any organization. The answers, if they’re sought, come from the individual, or individuals in a pluralistic community like AA that doesn’t require theological assent in the same way as the institutions of my participants’ childhoods. It is worth noting that for many of my participants, the term spirituality is defined in AA language as “a power greater than myself” (Bill B.) or having “conscious contact with God” (Eva T. referencing Step 11).

Table 2: Survey Results – “How do you define religion/spirituality?”

(Answers are direct quotes of participants’ complete survey answers)

	Religion	Spirituality
Teri M. (SBNR)	A structured process whereby people adhere to specific practices, beliefs, and traditions that will enable them to live a spiritual life	A person who values the inner, simple values of life, rather than the material – a sense of deep inner peace that a power greater than ourselves will lead us to our destiny
Eva T. (SBNR)	organized structural	Personal, having a conscious contact with God
Christopher F. (SBNR)	organization of worship/faith	connection to power greater than myself
Sonya M. (SBNR)	Tradition - Varied Paths - Ritual	Personal - Beyond Words - Experience
Kristina H. (SBNR)	dogma	belief in a Higher Power - God
Blair C #2. (SBNR)	Community of people gathering to celebrate common belief as told to them	Religion one seeks out and creates for him or herself
Ralph K. (SBNR)	A system of beliefs in supernatural and metaphysical tenets to support a code of conduct and rituals for organizing society	A state of being in awe to the mysteries of the natural world including humanity; acceptance of the present limitation of scientific knowledge, and continued practice of empathy and compassion and love
Don R. (SBNR)	Group of people who get together and practice rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, laws, under a certain type of God	Belief in practices, rituals, beliefs – based on one’s own personal Identification of Spirituality. Belief of God—for me it’s the belief in the Power of the Universe without observing ceremonial traditions of a group, denomination, sect, organization
Sallie G. (SBNR)	A belief in a power greater than myself	A belief in a power greater than myself [same definition as religion for her]
James K. (SBNR)	Groups of people who feel their beliefs are “correct” or “right” and will fight to prove it	Non-posturing, humble service
Jack A. (S&R: Catholic)	organized worship of specific deities	individual striving for doing God's (or Higher Power's) will
Bill B. (S&R: Catholic)	Following the teaching of a God of your understanding	A belief that there is a power greater than myself and living the way you believe that power wants you to live
Andy A. (S&R: evangelical)	Man-made, legalistic	walking relationship with God
Adrienne H. (neither spiritual nor religious;	The poor, disenfranchised being led to remain so by the moneyed class, to believe fulfillment isn’t to be found on this plane. This is in service to maintain the power imbalance.	It’s the thing Agnostics use to stay tethered to their religion because they are hedging their bets.

former AA member)		
Margaret H. (neither spiritual nor religious: former AA member)	A belief system held by a group of people (i.e. not just a personal belief). Beyond that, it's so diverse and I know people disagree on the definition. I suppose what most "religions" have in common is the belief in a supernatural being or beings but I'm not sure if that applies to religions like Buddhism or animism. So maybe a religion could be classified as a belief system held by a group of people that concerns the meaning of life?? No idea.	I don't know if there is a correct definition—people seem to use the word to describe a huge range of concepts/beliefs. My own definition is probably something like 'the belief in powerful unseen forces or beings outside the physical world... (ellipses hers)

Part 2: Higher Powers At Work

It is common to hear AAs talk in meetings about how the word “God” gave them pause, or sometimes elicited outright disgust, when they first started the program. In this they echo (sometimes consciously) Wilson’s reaction when his friend Ebby first brought up the idea of God as a solution to alcoholism during his visit in 1934. Some atheist and agnostic members refuse to use the term for carefully considered reasons. The Big Book uses both “God” (sometimes modified by “as we understood Him”) (136 times, modified 7 times) and “Power” or “Higher Power” (24 times) frequently in its first 164 pages (which have remained mostly unchanged since the first edition), along with many different synonyms, including: Power greater than myself (13 times); Creator (12 times); Spirit (six times); Spirit of the Universe (four times); Creative Intelligence (three times); Great Reality (twice); Maker (twice); and the following one time each: God-consciousness within; Universal Mind; Father of Light; Father; Presence of Infinite Power and Love; Principal; and Him who has all knowledge and power; among others. Many of my interviewees had thought a lot about how they wanted to identify their higher power and had sometimes complex and deeply held beliefs undergirding these choices. What all seemed to hold in common, whether explicitly

Christian or entirely nontheistic, was a pragmatic commitment to a higher power that somehow *intervenes* to arrest or ameliorate alcoholism.

As Blair C #1, 27 and nine months sober, told me over a meal at a diner after one of her daily AA meetings: “A lot of people have a problem or a hard time understanding God or getting that spirituality because it’s something they can’t grasp, like literally hold onto, touch. That’s why they say you can make your higher power anything. Just don’t make it a doorknob because it will turn on you,” she says with a grin. Sonya M., sober for over 30 years, issues a similar warning: “I’ve heard people describe their higher power in all sorts of ways. But something has to change. There has to be a big transformation in order to have what this program promises. And I think a lot of people miss that.”

Not all religious traditions describe a God that is interested in individuals’ problems or human affairs in general. So the fact that AA calls for a higher power that can help alleviate alcoholism means, despite the diversity of conceptions of God and higher powers found among AA members, almost all share the ability to intervene in someone’s life. Sometimes this intervention may seem small such as helping to alleviate anxiety or change one’s thinking, but that is no small feat and in fact often the type of intervention AA members pray for (see Chapter 4). A few of my participants identified with the idea of their higher power as nature, but still felt that this higher power would sometimes intervene in ways that break natural laws to help them, such as through a “God shot.” A “God shot” happens when God intervenes for you and makes something happen that might appear to some as a coincidence, but is meaningful (e.g. seating you next to the person who becomes your sponsor, making the bar be closed when you go there to break your sobriety, etc. For more on “God Shots” see Chapter 4). Often God acts through other people, as Blair C #2

described in a written survey when asked to define God: “Energetic force that shows itself through people, places, things. It is light within.” Eva T. described her higher power in similar terms: “It is really without form, sex, it is elusive. It gives me strength. It sends me messages through people. It is my conscience. It loves me. It wants me to find my higher self. It wants me to love and serve others. It is kindness and goodness. It is found in me and others and in beauty.” This immanent idea that one’s higher power can act through other people is echoed by many of my participants and speaks to another means of AA higher powers’ interventional natures, which will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter on experience.

Most of my participants currently attending AA meetings used both the words God and higher power to refer to their own conception of a power greater than themselves (21 out of 31). In my interviews with them, I was careful to ask questions using the term higher power so as not to bias them toward any particular interpretation, though it’s possible my use of the term may have actually led them to use it more than they usually would. Twenty-five of my interviewees were comfortable using the term God to refer to their higher power, whether consistently or in rotation with other words including higher power and others. Those participants who did not use both terms, or either, had very strong reasons for their choice in language, which we’ll explore shortly.

Table 3: Survey Results – “In a few sentences, describe what your Higher Power was/is like?”

	Higher Power as Child	Higher Power as adult
Teri M. (SNBR)	It was a God I prayed to for things i.e. “Don’t let mom or dad find out.”	Embodies a human image but is faceless. A being but not describable.

Eva T. (SBNR)	N/A	It's really without form, sex, it is elusive. It is all powerful and loving. It gives me strength. It sends me messages through people. It is my conscience. It loves me. It wants me to find my higher self. It wants me to love and serve others. It is kindness and goodness. It is found in me and others and in beauty.
Christopher F. (SBNR)	Boss, Genie	Like me. But love only in all things.
Sonya M. (SBNR)	All knowing - Stern. Judgmental.	If I (underlined twice) could describe my Higher Power it wouldn't be big enough!
Kristina H. (SBNR)	religious = my family's religion (Jesus)	God rules my day = 1 day at a time
Blair C #2 (SBNR)	I didn't have one	Energetic force that shows itself through people, places, things. It is light within.
Don R. (SBNR)	My belief in God was not strong as it is today. I had no understanding to sustain me. An Old White Guy with a beard	There is no particular image for me. I see trees and I think of God. I see birds and I think of God. My Higher Power is like a force that lets good and bad happen for many reasons, finds favor on me and provides, protects me, can lead and instruct me. May let me fall at a given moment or lift me up at any given moment. Sometimes I believe God has cursed me to sometimes have a rough time in life.
Sallie G. (SBNR)	A man in white robes, with brown hair and a beard. Judgmental person	A calm and serene energy. It doesn't have a specific human form but it talks to me sometimes - when I'm quiet enough to receive the message.
Ralph K. (SBNR)	omnipotent, omnipresent, forgiving, punishing, tolerant, fair, all powerful, unforgetting	As a mineral-organic being, the laws of nature are in every science book and they contain full descriptions of higher power from quantum physics to astro physics.
James K. (SBNR)	A guy who wore robes and lived in the sky and sometimes kept score	I don't know how to put it into words
Jack A. (S & R: Catholic)	Benign, loving, forgiving, understanding	Infinite, no edges. Simple "is."
Andy A. (S&R: Evangelical)	I thought of God as someone to be scared of.	Omnipotent, omnipresent
Bill B. (S&R: Catholic)	Distant and a bit fearful	A loving and caring friend
Adrienne H. (neither spiritual nor religious: former AA member)	It was white Jesus... not to be crass, but God/Jesus as I was led to believe was angered by our sin and redemption could only be found by constantly begging for forgiveness and proselytizing	[left blank]
Margaret H. (neither spiritual nor religious: former AA member)	N/A	N/A [her response]

God Translated

Of my participants who self-identified as spiritual but not religious (SBNR), 17 out of 19 freely used the word “God” to refer at times to their higher powers in our interviews or in their surveys (See Tables 3 and 4). A handful of those who identified as SBNR actually only used the word “God,” not “higher power” or any other synonym, in conversation about these topics. This seems to support what long-time AA members often tell newcomers - that just because most people use the word “God” while sharing in meetings, does not mean they believe in a traditional Judeo-Christian God. For most of my sample that easily spoke of God, that God was not the traditional deity of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, or any other world religion, or of their childhood for that matter. Most of my AA sample that called their Higher Power “God” were using that term as a shorthand for a higher power of their own understanding, often more metaphysical and nonpersonal, and as noted above, more immanent, than more traditional concepts. Asked in the survey to describe in a few sentences “what their higher power” was like when they were children compared to now, some patterns emerge (See Table 3). Many described a childhood God that was fairly stereotypical visually of the Judeo-Christian deity: for example “an old white guy with a beard,” a “man in robes with brown hair and a beard,” “a guy who wore robes and lived in the sky and sometimes kept score,” and “white Jesus.”

This man in robes also seems to have been somewhat scary to my participants when they were kids, as they used words like “stern,” “judgmental,” “someone to be scared of,” and “a bit distant and fearful.” Two of my participants, one a lifelong Catholic and one a former Muslim turned atheist, had more positive views of God as children. The first described him (likely the pronoun used in those traditions at that time) very positively as

“benign, loving, forgiving, understanding.” The second used other more mixed terms: “omnipotent, omnipresent, forgiving, punishing, tolerant, fair, all powerful, unforgetting.” Most who answered the survey described their higher power today in positive and more benign terms: “loving,” “kindness and goodness,” “love only in all things,” “a loving and caring friend.” Interestingly, the present-day higher powers have for the most part lost their anthropomorphism; the “caring friend” probably is the most person-based description. Otherwise, these post-AA higher powers are undefined (“I don’t know how to put it into words”) or more amorphous (“infinite, no edges,” “energy,” “the laws of nature,” “a force”). In essence, even though many SBNR AA members freely used the term God, they performed a translation of the word into their own terms, taking seriously the Steps’ suggestion that they find a God “of our own understanding.” Some, however, found such a translation unpalatable. Unsurprisingly, none of the three atheists in my sample used the word God, and 2 out of 3 of them objected to the term “higher power.” Ralph K. said he doesn’t use “higher power” because “higher is hierarchical”; while Bill S. preferred “Reality with a capital R” when explaining how he makes the concept work for him. It is worth noting that for a significant number of my participants, spirituality is defined in AA terms as a belief in “a power greater than myself” or a “higher power

Transcendent or Immanent or Both?

Dorothy H., who described herself as “not spiritual and not religious,” felt comfortable using “higher power” at times, but was “uncomfortable” with “the universe,” a term used often by other atheists and agnostic members. Dorothy defines her higher power as follows:

On a daily function, it's my connection to AA, it's my connection to my community, and it's service work for me. There are things that do bring me comfort and relief that are outside of

me, like dogs, the ocean, things that are outside of me, things that are more tangible. It's also, I know I can shift my brain. I think that's a lot of what the whole concept of higher power is, that you're not trapped in your own head, but you're exteriorly looking on. And, you know, you hear that in Buddhism, Hinduism, whatever - you hear that everywhere. So the point is not to be so self-obsessed, not so mentally involved in yourself and the negativity. I mean it's basic psychological tools to deal with depression.

Dorothy articulated one of two common ways of viewing the higher power in AA, despite differences in religious or spiritual traditions: the idea that it is somehow “outside of me,” different from one’s own negative self-obsessed self. Ernest Kurtz picked up on this idea when he titled his foundational academic history of AA as “Not-God” (1979). Many of my participants described their higher power as a force or concept that allowed them to accept their human limitations and the futility of controlling outside circumstances, which brought them immense peace. They described feeling overly responsible for others’ actions and feelings and events inside and outside themselves in their pre-AA lives, a condition the Big Book describes in the story of the actor who wants to run the show (Anonymous, 1939, 60–see chapter 2 for a longer discussion of the importance of the actor story). As Sallie G., who grew up Catholic and Christian Scientist, but now identifies as spiritual but not religious, described it:

When I first got sober and I had my first sponsor, I had a really hard time with the God thing. I'm sure you probably heard this before in terms of the interviews that you've done. My sponsor said come up with whatever you want. Come up with “Group of Drunks.” [G.O.D.] Come up with “Good Orderly Direction.” [G.O.D.] Creative Intelligence. Whatever you want to think about it. Just know that you're not [it]. I describe my spirituality as I’m in a bus. I don't know where the bus is going. Different people drive the bus, different people get on and off the bus, and I'm okay with all of it. That is the way that I’d describe my spirituality.

Like Dorothy, and the tradition in AA that Kurtz was describing, Sallie felt it was important that AAs know that they are not God, that something or someone else is ultimately driving the bus, whether that be the collective “Group of Drunks” or a more abstract concept like “Good Orderly Direction” or Creative Intelligence (a term which also appears in the Big Book).

As with many such things when it comes to lived spirituality and religion, the immanent or transcendent nature of one's higher power in AA usually lies on a spectrum or is situationally dependent. The contemporary AA members I interviewed were most apt to describe God in transcendent terms when making a point about how important it is for the alcoholic to remember their powerlessness over alcohol and certain other realities, in which case transcendence of the "not me" variety becomes paramount. However, my sample, if representative to at least some extent of AA nationwide, seems to indicate that a more immanent understanding of God has come to pervade AA's notion of a Higher Power since Kurtz wrote his history of AA 30 years ago.

Natasha described herself as "spiritual but not religious", but had no problem calling her higher power God, and she agreed with Sonya that whatever kind of higher power an alcoholic connects with in AA, it had to be transformative, capable of "shift[ing] your brain," as Dorothy put it. After a long pause followed by a sigh, perhaps due to the difficulty of articulating such a complex and vulnerable idea, she explained her concept to me:

I guess the best way, if I had to put God into words, it's just this, all encompassing—the best thing for me is just this blanket of energy and love that's just everywhere, it's in everything, it's in all of us. The statement in the Big Book, "God is everything or God is nothing," that's a real, real big kicker for me. I was on that fence for a long time when I was new because that's a big thing, everything or nothing. And today it really, really takes my breath away because I look into and I listen to a lot of religions, though because there's so many, the thread among all of them is so right, I believe, and so right on, that God really is in every single one of us. It talks about God, that all of us are part of it, it is us, and we are it. This whole thing, this whole energy and heartbeat and so much of that is like the acceptance and how to live in that. Does that make any sense?

Natasha was describing an immanent notion of God as existing in the world and in human beings." But for an increasing number of Westerners and many of my AA sample, this kind of immanent higher power makes more intuitive sense than one wholly separate and

ungraspable. In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that in the modern West, “We have moved from a world in which the place of fullness as understood as unproblematically outside of or ‘beyond’ human life, to a conflicted age in which this construal is challenged by others which, place it (in a wide range of different ways) ‘within’ human life” (2007, 15). In this way, Taylor argues that transcendent understandings of God, while still alive and well in the West, are no longer part of the taken-for-granted reality most people share, and that even transcendent believers operate under an “immanent frame,” in which what is within the human world is the default shared reality. A creeping immanence among AA higher powers, therefore, may not be a surprising finding in a modern Western context.

If we look at the most common words used for Higher Power by those in my sample (see Table 4), we find, unsurprisingly, that God and higher power occur most frequently, but many of the other terms used clearly express an immanent understanding of deity: Energy, Universe, AA itself, Reality, Inner Power, and Mother Nature. These terms for God or Higher Power locate it in the physical realm, the non-supernatural, and even the self. At the same time, terms such as Source and Creative Intelligence could perhaps be used to describe a God or Higher power of a more transcendent nature. Joseph Y. very explicitly identified his Higher Power as “the antithesis of self,” which on the surface shows that Kurtz’s emphasis on transcendence persists; however, Joseph also described his Higher Power later in immanent terms. A number of my participants described their higher power as part of themselves or as their “higher self.”

Table 4: Childhood and Current Religion/Spirituality and Current Names for Higher Power

Name/Pseudonym	Childhood Religion/Spirituality	Current Religion/Spirituality	Current Names for Higher Power
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Jeffrey L.	Atheist, Jewish	spiritual, did not state stance toward religion	energy field, higher power, God
Catherine B.	Catholic	Catholic (does not go to church); spiritual AND religious	God, Higher power
Lily G.	Jewish, AA, American Buddhist	SBNR	N/A - did not use any names, talked about "spirituality" in general
Eva T.	Episcopalian (mainline)	SBNR	Higher power, God, Goddess, the Universe, the forces of the universe
Herb K.	Catholic	SBNR	Higher power, Energy, Mystery, Love, Reality
David B.	LDS	SBNR	God, Higher power
Eva A.	Methodist and Lutheran (mainline)	SBNR	God, energy, love
Christopher F.	Evangelical - denomination unknown	SBNR	Higher power, God
Joseph Y.	Atheist, Presbyterian (mainline)	SBNR	Higher power, God, a power, "antithesis of self and what we call ego", "Self" with capital S
Michael D.	Church of England	SBNR	God, Higher power
Jack A.	Catholic	Catholic, spiritual AND religious	God, Jesus, higher power
Rock C.	Catholic, Lutheran (mainline), Edgar Caycee	SBNR	Creator, God, Higher power
Dorothy H.	Atheist, Presbyterian (mainline)	Atheist, not spiritual not religious	"my connection to AA", Higher power
Wendell B.	Baptist (Evangelical)	Evangelical; spiritual AND religious	God, Jesus, higher power
Andy A.	Catholic	Evangelical; spiritual AND religious	God, Jesus

Sonya M.	Catholic	SBNR	God
Teri M.	Agnostic - belief in God, no organized religion, Catholic	SBNR	God
Jamie F.	Baptist (Evangelical)	Evangelical; spiritual AND religious	God, Higher power
Bill S.	Catholic	Atheist; not spiritual not religious	Reality with a capital R
Blair C. #1	Pentecostal /Four Square (Evangelical)	Christian	God, Higher power
Sallie G.	Catholic, Christian Scientist	SBNR	Higher power, God, The Universe, Creative Intelligence
Ralph K.	Islam	Atheist, SBNR	Inner Power, Mother Nature
Tami E.	Jewish, Atheist	Baptist (does not attend church); spiritual AND religious	God, Jesus, Higher power
Blair C. #2	Presbyterian (mainline)	SBNR	Higher power, God, Energy
Cathy H.	Methodist (mainline)	SBNR	God, Higher power
Tommie D.	Episcopalian (mainline)	SBNR	God
Bill B.	Catholic	Catholic; spiritual AND religious	Higher power, God, Jesus
Angie P.	none	SBNR, "AA is my church"	God, Higher power
Kristina H.	Catholic and Christian (no denomination specified)	SBNR, nondenominational Christian (Catholic church rarely)	God, Higher power, Jesus
Don R.	Baptist (Evangelical), Islam, Jehovah's witness	SBNR, Agnostic, "12 steps of AA"	Higher power, God, The Universe, The Source
Marcos R.	None, baptized but non- practicing Catholic	SBNR	God, Jesus, Higher power

Adrienne H. (former AA member)	Baptist	Agnostic, “neither spiritual nor religious”	N/A
Margaret H. (former AA member)	Jewish Atheist	Agnostic “neither spiritual nor religious”	N/A
Angela P. (former AA member)	Baptist, New Age	SBNR	Universe

Michael, who describes himself as spiritual but not religious, recounted coming to know his higher power as a part of himself through an intensive retreat on codependency and the emotional dynamics underlying his alcoholism. He recalled the flood of feelings and thoughts that came up as a result of the retreat:

It was very sad. Because I just felt the God bit when I saw the wounded child, you know, that was lonely and scared and needed to act out as a survival mechanism, you know? And the God for me was really, it was like a part of me. It wasn't something outside of me. It became an internal thing there. It was like, I can be a responsible loving parent to this wounded inner child. And there was a lot of God right there, you know. It wasn't a burning bush; it wasn't anything like that. But it was more of a real feeling of um, safety and protection and guidance and love and parenting, you know, which I sort of missed out on when I was growing up. And, and a sense of being OK, as well, just the way I am, you know, being OK, being imperfect, being OK, having gone through all the stuff I've gone through and done all the stuff I've done and the ways I've acted out. Loving myself even though that's, you know, part of the shit that I've gone through and I've done in my addiction, you know?

Through this experience at the retreat, Michael began to see a part of himself as a “loving parent to this wounded inner child” and to identify that part as God. Similarly, Ralph K, who we met in Chapter 2, identified his “inner power” as “the realization that I am a part of everybody, that everybody is a part of me, and that we’re all in this together.” Both men experienced their higher power as immanent and existing, at least in part, within themselves.

In chapter 1, I explored the “deflation of ego at depth” that Jung, Wilson, and many AAs since have adopted as a semi-folk explanation of how the Twelve-Step process works. Does having a higher power that is part of the self interfere with such deflation? Or is it

possible to cultivate one part of the self to make the rest of the self more functional, as William James suggests in one of the quotes introducing this chapter? Modern neuroscience increasingly demonstrates that the longstanding “ego theory” of the self as singular and permanent is a fallacy and instead the self is multiple, networked, extended, ever changing, and in many important ways, an illusion (Hood 2013). I will explore how more modern scientific understandings of the self might help us to better understand the transformation of self seen in AA members more in the Conclusion.

Herb K. eloquently explained how the “God of our own understanding” in AA is expressed as both immanent and transcendent in the Big Book, which he quoted from memory, easily citing page numbers.

So the Big Book suggests both, alright. “God is or God isn't.” Page 53. “God is everything or God is nothing.” And on page 14 in his own story [Bill] said “simple but not easy, a price has to be paid. It means the destruction of self-centeredness. We must turn in all things to the father life presides over us all” and in the traditions, tradition 12 has the same wording– “in thankful contemplation of him who presides over us all”–and yet throughout the book he talks about the immanence, not using those words, they're too fancy for 1939, but he says “the spirit of the universe underlying the totality of things.” Page 55, God is “deep [down] within us” and that's only where God resides. So both [ways of viewing God] are attempting to get at what I think Thomas Merton was quoting St. Bonaventure when he said, “God is that reality that has no circumference and whose center is everywhere.” Transcendence. Immanence.

So it would seem that sometimes a higher power beyond the self is most helpful in certain situations faced by those suffering from alcoholism, while for others, as well as the same people in different circumstances, an immanent notion of God as the higher-self or the “spirit of the universe” is more healing.

Revising and Revitalizing Traditional Understandings of God in AA

If we look further at how my sample responded to a prompt to describe their higher powers, which as I have shown has been central to the AA understanding of spirituality since

the beginning, more becomes apparent about those who hold more traditional concepts of God. I have chosen to go into detail in this section about the stories of two traditional religious AA members, Andy A. and Tami E., as their stories are different than most of those I interviewed, and revealed some of the tensions and possibilities of participating in AA and a more evangelical style of religion at the same time. Some find such tensions difficult enough that they leave the program for groups such as Celebrate Recovery, whose aim is “bringing the healing power of Jesus Christ” specifically—not an unspecified “higher power”—to those who are suffering.” I found the ways that Andy and Tami navigate their faith in AA instructive for understanding how the program handles religious pluralism.

As noted in Chapter 2, many of my SBNR interviewees reported needing to let go of the God of their childhood, usually described as judgmental and punishing, in order to find a new concept and relationship that would support their recovery. Even lifelong Catholic Bill B. reported moving from a childhood understanding of God as “distant and a bit fearful” to an adult understanding of God as “a loving and caring friend,” which emerged through working the 12 steps alongside his Catholicism. This echoes what we learned from members such as Jamie F. and Angie P. about a common trajectory in AA spirituality in which healing from childhood religious trauma takes place in relationship with a new understanding of God as loving and forgiving. Some of my interviewees, however, did express a more traditional, Christian understanding of God, noting that they meant Jesus specifically, or at least Jesus and God the Father simultaneously (none mentioned the holy spirit spontaneously), and that AA in fact strengthened this relationship for them.

Andy’s higher power is Jesus. When I met him for our interview on a Starbucks patio on an unusually cold December day, he told me he had just come from church. Andy and I

met at a local open AA meeting at a busy clubhouse just up the road when he was almost six years sober. As pop Christmas carols were piped steadily out of the outdoor speakers, Andy, 26, told me he started smoking and dealing weed around 13-years-old, followed by drinking every day, then trying meth for the first time at 14. The child of two then-active alcoholics, he spent a few years “really strung out” on meth and stopped going to school, but was somehow able to quit cold-turkey at 17. He enrolled in a local community college and began practicing Christian Science, which at first he found helpful in keeping his cravings and “lusting” in check. “I don’t think I sinned for a whole year,” he says. Eventually he started smoking weed and drinking again, and very quickly wound up with a DUI, followed by a string of other drinking-related arrests. Though Andy has lived in the United States since he was a baby, he did not have a green card. “I had that in the back of my mind, like every time I was in a cop car, I was thinking this is surely - I’m going to get deported this time.” He eventually wound up in a Christian “men’s home” (rehabilitation center) due to the efforts of his mom and ex-girlfriend. “I [had] never been religious,” Andy recalled. “I grew up Catholic like most Mexicans do.” During his time in Christian Science, he had met twin classmates who tried to convince him that an Evangelical approach to God was the right one, gifting him a study Bible. This experience seems to have prepared him for what he encountered at the Christian rehab center. “So I go into the program and you know I’m up at 5:30 in the morning reading our bible.” He started attending AA meetings daily, as well as NA once a week. A few months in, he relapsed, and feared he would get kicked out of the program. When the director instead showed him mercy and gave him another chance, he “stopped fighting” and “became sincere” in his efforts to get and stay sober. In his nine months in the program, “God was just doing amazing things in my life,” and he started to think he might like to be a

pastor. “God started speaking to me, you know? It became really personal and I started praying and getting into his word and it just transformed me,” Andy recalled. Looking back on his experience with Christian Science, Andy says he “feared” God and now feels that “God doesn’t want me to feel that way.” Today, like most evangelicals, Andy prizes his personal relationship with Jesus.

According to the Big Book, alcoholism is “cunning, baffling, powerful!” (59). Members often quote this line to explain the devastating hairpin turns that often afflict those living with alcoholism. “In my heart I didn’t think I was ever going to relapse again,” Andy said. Upon graduation from the men’s house, Andy became romantically involved with a newly sober woman, and they ended up drinking together. This led to him to a three-day blackout. He regained consciousness to discover himself covered in hot sauce and egg rolls. He’d had enough exposure to AA in the men’s house, even working with a sponsor during that time, to know that he needed to get to a meeting. He got sober again right away: “It’s by the grace of God, you know? Because the alcoholic that I am, I should have been off and running.” For his first few years in AA, he didn’t attend church, but working the program was enough to keep him sober. He got married, hired a lawyer, and tried to finally get a green card, but he was rejected due to his previous drinking-related run-ins with the law. “I’ve never felt so empty,” he said. “Something was missing and I knew God lets things happen so he can get your attention.” He saw this as a sign to start attending church regularly, finding a spiritual home in a small evangelical church run by those in his trade. “Right away I felt the Lord’s hand,” he said of walking one day into the church on a whim. “I love how the lord just - those kind of things you want to pray about, like what church should I go to... God knows how I work and how I do things. It’s just like last minute. I try it out. And I started

going to church and I got plugged in.” At the time of our interview, Andy was attending an evangelical church twice a week. He also attended three AA meetings regularly, as well as a private weekly step-study meeting with another of my participants, based on Herb K.’s way of working the steps out of the Big Book, which is popular in Southern California, but not affiliated with AA in an official capacity. He just started participating in a Spanish-speaking meeting, bringing coffee and doing his best to keep up with the language that he speaks and understands some, but not fluently.

Andy has come to the conclusion that his life goes best when he attends both AA and church regularly. “Honestly, there’s times where I’m like, I’m just going to go to church, I don’t need AA. And I always backslide, you know? They call it backsliding, like backsliding Christians.” I asked him if he feels like he backslides as a Christian or as an AA member. “Both,” he says, but he feels like it’s easier to go back to AA after time away, than it is to return to church. “If I go to AA [after] I miss a couple meetings, I could go back in there and feel like, you know, comfortable,” he told me. “All they really care about is just you help other people. You take other people through the steps.” He said it’s harder to go back to church after a lapse because of his own shame. “The church where I go to everyone is cool,” he said. His AA “stepbrothers” told him not to be so hard on himself as well. But Andy felt that his relationship with Jesus requires more of him and says he felt “condemnation” for himself when he was not living up to that. “It pretty much comes down to this,” he said. “There’s Christians in the world that you meet someone and you’re like, ‘Wow. I want to be like that person.’ And then there’s Christians like me that I am at times where if that’s what a Christian is, I don’t want to be a Christian. Hypocrite.” I suggested that maybe Andy is being too hard on himself, and while he can see that perspective, he also said, “I know what I’m

capable of doing.” Sometimes he would get so frustrated with his own shortcomings that he stopped going to both church and AA. “I’ll be so good for so long and then something happens, either a situation in life or something I did, because I always have a part in whatever it is I do.” As we talked, Andy recognized a pattern that often led to his disengagement - he found it very difficult to say no to people, to honor his own boundaries. Trouble with enforcing boundaries with oneself and others is commonly recognized in the program and by professionals providing treatment as a trait associated with addiction. “I just can’t say no to people,” he said. “And that literally and it spiritually kills me.” His friends invited him to Las Vegas a lot - he’d gone a few times as a groomsman- and he had trouble saying no when the others wanted to go to strip clubs. He had been able to stay sober there so far, but on a trip the previous year, “I was so ready to just drink.” Andy said he and other Christians call temptations like this “the flesh.” “Like if you’re angry, if you’re envious, if you’re lusting, if you’re being drunk, you’re not under the spirit. You’re being under the flesh and the law of the flesh and the enemy. For me, the flesh is so strong.”

Sometimes Andy felt like the advice he got in church clashed with the advice in AA. For instance, he recently recalled discussing infidelity with a pastor at his church, who said that if that were to ever happen, he would need to tell his wife. In AA, when one makes amends in Step 9, every effort is made not to cause more harm to the person or others when apologizing. Andy was not alone in interpreting that to mean that amends in the case of infidelity means stopping the behavior, but might not always mean telling anyone (besides your sponsor or other personally uninvolved trusted person) about it. The Big Book and the Steps, like any text, religious or otherwise, is open to interpretation, of course. Andy struggled with whether “to really follow Jesus” meant doing as the pastor said, or whether

moral advice is more of a “suggestion,” as AA claims in its introduction to the steps. “It bothered me for a whole week. Like, God I want to know you more. I want to know you more, Jesus, but then I’m hit with this - like, is this man’s opinion or is this what you want me to do? ‘Cause the Big Book’s telling me I don’t have to.”

A few days after this, Andy was reading the Bible and came upon the story of the Pharisees bringing the woman adulterer to Jesus, who told them “Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 7:53–8:11, NRSV). Andy told me Jesus also wrote things in the dirt, unspecified in the Bible, which he said were the sins of the Pharisees. “Jesus goes ‘And where are they? Are they no longer here to condemn you?’ And then he goes, ‘So neither do I. Go and sin no more.’ So it’s like forgiveness, but don’t do more of it... God’s just so good, you know what I mean?” I asked Andy what he felt rereading that story and he said “comfort.” He took that story to mean that his interpretation of the AA idea of causing no further harm was correct, and that the youth pastor perhaps held himself to higher standards than are necessary for regular people. At the same time, though, he also found the pastor’s words helpful, because he would never want to have to tell his wife such a thing. In this way, he blended his reading of the Bible and the Big Book, the advice of his pastor and his fellow AA members, in order to figure out his feelings on an issue of great moral importance to him.

I asked Andy what he envisioned when he imagined God, for instance when he was praying every morning on his knees for an hour or so (more about Andy’s prayer practices in Chapter 4). He told me about a dream he had in rehab one particularly bad week when his girlfriend had broken up with him and his mother was moving to Mexico. He was worried about where he would live after rehab. One night the following happened:

I go to sleep that night, and I was listening to a Christian tape, and there was a song that I liked on there, you know, and they are like old school songs, but they are made into like Jesus ones, right? They're like oldies. And I woke up that night, 'cause I envisioned God was humming that song that I like and he had the world in his hand, right? Like it looked like a marble in his hand. And he was just going like that, humming the song that I like. But this part [gestures to neck and up] was cut off, 'cause no one has ever seen god's face. So you couldn't see his face but he was whistling the song that I like, and he was going like this with the world [cups hand]. But you could see his long robe, like a white robe and he was in the universe, you know. I woke up and I had butterflies in my stomach and I just started crying. I just started crying. I mean, like who am I to see like even his robe. So, that's one reason why I am so hard on myself, because there's pastors that don't envision or dream like that. there's pastors that go their whole life, and they don't experience anything like that. And for me, I must have been in tune with God at the time. I really was. So anytime I'm praying I'm just thinking of that image.

My other evangelical participants likewise blended teachings from church and the bible with the guidance of other AA members and the Big Book in navigating their sober lives.

Tammy, who we met in Chapter 2, like Andy, worked with an AA sponsor who held different religious beliefs than she does. While Tammy and Andy were both evangelical Protestants, Tammy's sponsor was Jewish and Andy's was Catholic. Tammy, like Andy, clearly stated that her higher power was Jesus/God. Unlike some of the atheist and agnostic members I interviewed, Tammy felt immediately safe in AA because of the frequent references to God:

I see God in all the steps. And I see God in, like, some of the sayings. And for me, with having a Christian foundation, that made me feel safe because I had no idea what AA was, other than, like, from the movies. Everybody's huddled in a circle and they're like, "I don't want to drink today," you know. My life is nothing like that. I didn't know what to expect... I went in there and they're like, "Oh, you're new!" And I'm like, "Listen, I'm not like you people. Let me tell you all the things I haven't done yet" –the key word, obviously, being "yet." But I felt safe with knowing there was a presence of God.

In this way, the Judeo-Christian language of the program, which can be alienating to some members, can also be reassuring to others. While Andy's image of God had not changed much during his time in AA, and at times he felt his sponsor and fellows' theological interpretations were out of line with his evangelical church, Tammy followed the pattern of the remainder of the religiously affiliated AA members I interviewed: their understanding of

God changed dramatically through working the AA program (see Angie P. from Chapter 2). Tammy had recently gotten out of an abusive marriage when she came to AA. She had survived breast cancer. She had been through a lot. “I remember feeling like God was angry with me,” she told me. “I do remember that, for a long time, I had felt it. I mean, ‘Oh my God, I’m married to that man and then I left and all this financial wreckage and all this other...look at all these things I’ve done.’ And there’s a lot of things I did other than just sleep with one married man, you know,” she says in reference to her actions before sobriety.

And [I thought], ‘Oh my God, he must be, he must hate me. No wonder he doesn’t want anything to do with me. And in working the steps we come to a lot of our own understanding. So my foundation has not changed. But I don’t see God as being so “You’re going to hell for that. You’re so bad. You’re evil.” I don’t see that. I see him as being very loving and very caring and “You’re a child of mine. I want you to have the world.” And my life is—oh my God. From where I was to where I am now, there’s been so much growth. So for me to have had that connection already, it just got so much stronger. I know people who...some people never get it. And some people, they change it completely and they have completely different versions of a higher power. And that’s ok. I don’t understand it. Like this one lady I know, her higher power is a woman on a horse with long hair. I don’t...works for her. She’s a lesbian. It works for her. It does not work for me. I’m a Baptist and I believe in Jesus Christ and that’s it. You’re not going to tell me any different. But at the same time, I don’t think that he’s judging me with a little short ruler I’ll never live up to. I don’t feel it. I don’t feel that everybody’s going to hell just because they don’t say the same things that my ex-husband said [about God].

While AA helped Tammy develop a less condemning concept of God, she also became more open to other religious perspectives (her sponsor is Jewish, after all), and the possibility that non-evangelicals will go to heaven. The evolution of her concept of God was very similar to that of Jamie F., whom we encountered in Chapter 2, who said in AA she came into a new relationship with “basically the same God I was raised with, without the punishing part... I chose a merciful God, not a punishing God.” While still strong in their Christian faith, neither Tammy nor Jamie have returned to church.

Hearing some of the stories of spiritual transformation presented here, one might conclude that AA is somehow a pathway away from traditional religion. I don't think that is the case. For one, some of my subjects maintained or even strengthened their relationship with a traditional religious body as part of their recovery in AA. Secondly, as discussed previously, AA members in Los Angeles are likely not representative in certain ways of AA in the country (or world) as a whole. Studies looking at AA in other parts of the country are needed to determine whether AA membership leads to religious disaffiliation. It may even be possible that in certain areas, AA is a pathway towards re-affiliation with traditional religious bodies, as the Big Book actually suggests this may help with recovery (131). Of course, one might even argue that membership in AA is itself a religious affiliation, though from the point of view of AA members this idea is resisted, if not outright denounced, due to widely shared belief that the program is "spiritual rather than religious" (Anonymous 1985, 17).

Atheist Higher Powers: Group of Drunks

If we turn to the other end of the spectrum to examine AA members unaffiliated with traditional religious bodies, the emphasis on the AA fellowship (others) and higher power (Other) is often blurred or even combined. A common non-religious higher power symbol often invoked by atheist or agnostic members is the notion of the AA group as a whole, or the Group of Drunks (G. O. D.), as a higher power, as mentioned above by Sallie G. AA became a possible means to recovery for Dorothy H. when she came across this non-supernatural collectivist concept of a higher power. "Something that's quoted in the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* of Alcoholics Anonymous, that if you have problems with a higher power, you can use the group as a higher power. I was like, Ok, I can work with that," she laughs. "That was material, that was scientific. In that meeting was literally a guy with 47

years of sobriety. I was like OK, the room knows how to keep him sober. I can learn from these people this way.” She remembers that when she started going to meetings, most ended with the Lord’s Prayer, a tradition that continues in many meetings to this day, though in meetings I have attended I have never heard it recited with Jesus’ name mentioned at the end. Still, it’s a strongly theistic prayer and nontheist members often endure it, or translate it into terms that make sense to them. “I would do the prayers because I wanted to be respectful, then I would do the prayers in the living room with my sponsor and was like, OK, this was not feeling comfortable, but you know, let me try it,” Dorothy recalls. “I’m going to practice my social tolerance and maybe there’s something to this. But as time just kept going, it just became unbearable... I’m in a program that really spoke to me when it asked for rigorous honesty, but then told me to fake it ’til you make it, until I found God,” she says. Dorothy, like other atheist members I interviewed, expresses some frustration with the core AA literature, written in the 1930s and 1940s, for the frequent slippage they perceive happening, wherein nontheism is at first presented as a valid alternative, but then characterized as a step on the path to theism. For example, the passage of the *Twelve and Twelve* that Dorothy cites, reads as follows:

You can, if you wish, make A.A. itself your “higher power.” Here’s a very large group of people who have solved their alcohol problem. In this respect they are certainly a power greater than you, who have not even come close to a solution. Surely you can have faith in them. Even this minimum of faith will be enough. You will find many members who have crossed the threshold just this way. All of them will tell you that, once across, their faith broadened and deepened. Relieved of the alcohol obsession, their lives unaccountably transformed, they came to believe in a Higher Power, and most of them began to talk of God. (12 and 12 step 2)

Note how this passage opens the door to a nontheistic concept of a higher power (“A.A. itself”) only to suggest that it is a gateway to a “broadened and deepened” faith resulting, ultimately, for some, in “talk of God.” Chapter Four of the Big Book, “We Agnostics,” suggests a similar trajectory. Dorothy tells me that among Agnostic and Atheist AA

members, “that chapter is not very well-liked.” She and others find the chapter at times patronizing and somewhat manipulative in suggesting that one may start with a nontheistic concept of a higher power, but that this will ultimately lead most to believing in God. “It’s ok to start that way. Oh, that’s cute, oh the little baby, oh that’s cute, but you grow up,” she says in summary of the chapter. Other interviewees and those I’ve listened to in meetings have found that chapter helpful, however, in allowing them to begin to conceive of a higher power differently than they had as children.

Although Wilson makes a variety of compelling arguments to the logically minded about the role of faith broadly conceived in secular modern life (faith in electricity for instance, despite most of us not really understanding how it works), I agree with Dorothy that there is a bit of a sleight of hand at play in the end. Wilson was a committed theist after his spiritual experience in the hospital and his belief in some kind of deity remained strong throughout his life. So he’s perhaps just showing his personal biases (despite his stated desire not to incorporate “any of our [the co-founders] personal theological views into A.A. teaching, practice, or tradition” (AA World Services Inc. 1957, 232n). The chapter opens itself at first to a wide variety of ideas about higher powers and God, but ultimately settles back into more traditional territory. For some people that seems to be useful, but for others like Dorothy, it is frustrating to see the banner of agnosticism, even atheism at points, ostensibly waived only to be eventually replaced by a traditional understanding of God. Dorothy was about to leave AA due to her frustrations with God-talk and some evangelical-style pitches in the rooms, when she found a “We Agnostics” meeting (where I met her) in Los Angeles that was more radical than its namesake chapter in the Big Book.

If this meeting didn't work, I was drunk. And I didn't care because, you know, it was either going to be church or alcoholism, and I was like, “Alcoholism, I know what that's about.”

[We laugh]. Never liked church, right? And so I walked in. One of the long-term serving old timers there spoke that night and the first thing he said was I'm an atheist. I was floored. I looked around the room –I never heard anybody in AA say that before. The next thought was, is that allowed? Are you allowed to say that? And then the rest of them when they went to discussion [there] was everything from Buddhism to Christianity, Judaism, philosophy, Agnosticism, and I finally felt safe and I finally felt comfortable. And I think I shared that night and I just started crying because it was just this relief. And attending the meetings made me stronger to be able to attend other meetings where I'm more patient and more tolerant of more religious meetings. I kind of call it the God shield. And then I can get some dents in my shield, I can go back to the meeting and heal that and go back out.

Dorothy is part of a growing movement of atheist and agnostic AA members who are claiming their place in the program on their own terms, sometimes different from those suggested for them in the Big Book. In 2014, We Agnostics, Atheists, and Freethinkers (WAAFT) held the first international convention of those rejecting or questioning theism, while remaining solidly committed to AA. Their website reads: “We hope to eliminate the cultural bias against nonbelievers that sometimes exists in AA, and we feel that through sharing our experience, strength, and hope as nonbelievers, we will help widen the gateway to recovery for all, making AA even more accessible and welcoming to a greater number of people.”

One of these people is Bill S., a former Catholic seminarian and now committed atheist and AA member. Sober for 34 years, Bill S. describes himself as “not a theist for the past 50 years.” He hesitates to call himself “spiritual but not religious” because it has become “such a cliché” and he’s not sure what it means to people who hear it. But he does have an understanding of what spirituality means to him. The closest he gets to defining a higher power is to call it “other people” and says he relates to the “Group of Drunks” concept mentioned above.

“Spirituality is on a spectrum,” he tells me. “On the left hand side it's all about me. It's just all about me. And on the right hand, as I get more and more spiritual, on the extreme

right-hand side, I'm just so much *a part of* that I'm barely in me at all” (emphasis mine).

William prays every morning by reading aloud from a document he writes and rewrites. “It's a story I tell myself every morning about the kind of man that I want to be that day.” One part of his current version reads:

- The autonomous Self is a modern ILLUSION There is NO separate “self,”
- Instead, I am “a part of” – “a result of” – completely interdependent –operating with a VERY conditioned will (emphasis his)

As discussed in Chapter 2, the phrase “a part of” came up again and again in my interviews and at meetings. My interviewees don’t just mean that they are “a part of” the AA group. More profoundly, they tie being “a part of” to anonymity, which is, according to Tradition 12, is ‘the spiritual foundation of all our Traditions. In this context, being ‘a part of,’ means being no better and no worse than the others around you, but rather just one of many. By working the steps, AAs report becoming “right-sized.”

Higher Powers After Leaving AA

As part of my ethnographic work, I interviewed three former members of AA: Margaret H. and Adrienne H. both identified as agnostic and at the same time “not spiritual and not religious.” Angela P. identified as “spiritual but not religious,” praying to the universe regularly. All three held very negative views of organized religion, but also had important critiques of spirituality as expressed in AA, and the pressure they felt to understand their relationship with alcohol in terms of AA’s “disease” model.

“I feel like nobody ever wants to hear the ‘AA didn’t really work for me’ side,” Margaret, 36, who was no longer sober or sure she qualified as an alcoholic, told me. “And anything you say to an AA stalwart is filtered through ‘this person is an alcoholic and in

denial,” she said. “It makes me think of McCarthyism, where it’s like ‘Are you a communist?’ ‘No.’ ‘Well, that’s what a communist would say.’ But that’s also what someone who’s not a communist would say... I absolutely think it’s wonderful for many, many people. It just wasn’t for me. And I think the one thing that I really resent is that I’m not allowed to say that.” Margaret identifies as an agnostic, but not as spiritual. She says we just can’t ultimately know. While she was in AA, she was told that her higher power could be anything, but she found this confusing and, at times, nonsensical. “Your higher power can be anything. But it’s still got power, right? So my therapist kept saying my higher power could be my cat. But, like, I’m giving over everything to my cat? Like turn myself over to her will? I think that would mean I sit there and feed her all day or something, but I need help with the drinking...So I felt very manipulated by the people that were saying your higher power can be anything, because either they just thought that if I went along I would eventually believe or they thought that I was an idiot. Or maybe none of those things.”

Margaret no longer identifies as an alcoholic and has come to see one’s relationship with alcohol existing on a spectrum from less problematic to more problematic, believing she falls somewhere in the middle, but toward the problematic side. “I need to be careful basically. Like, I need to watch. If I find myself drinking every day, I have to be like, ‘Hey self, maybe let’s take a break for a little while. I can fall into a pattern where I use it to, it’s not self-medication anymore but, it’s like not the way that one should drink. But I’m never going to be a one-glass-of-wine person. Like, I still like to get drunk at times, but I do not see alcohol as standing between me and what I want in life.” Margaret is likely correct that most practicing AA members might interpret her as being in denial, but she is also right that at times the way people practice the AA program can leave little room for nuance in

understanding the diversity of problems with alcohol. Some AA “stalwarts,” as Margaret calls them, would likely say that “nuance” can kill, by allowing people the wiggle room to think their way out of the rooms. But others would also contend that a “one-size-fits-all” answer to problematic drinking and spirituality can also kill, as for some people, like Margaret, a spiritual solution is never going to fit. “I really think that I have genuinely tried in my life to be open to spiritual things. I’ve done everything that I know how to do to be open. And it’s kind of kind that part of me just doesn’t... I mean, I imagine it as, I don’t think it’s a genetic thing, but imagine it as a genetic thing. Like that gene just didn’t turn on or there are, you know, epigenetics or something. Whatever environmental thing that needed to happen for that to turn on, it just didn’t.”

When we spoke Adrienne, 46, had been sober for a couple months after months of relapse. Prior to that she had about 9 years of sobriety, which began when she was in a 12-step based rehabilitation facility, and continued when she left in outside AA meetings. She eventually stopped going to meetings regularly, but was still able to stay sober for years. But recently a mental health crisis related to a very stressful work situation had led her to start drinking again. She was “drinking myself into a wicked bad depression” and began having suicidal thoughts. When we met, she had been staying sober again on her own outside of AA, and was able to do so because of realizations she said she had about her parents’ issues not being her own that were greatly psychologically relieving. “Here’s the kicker,” she told me. “I have no desire to drink...First of all, that voice that says I’m a failure is my father’s. And the turmoil is being caused by my mother. Once I learned those things, I was like, ‘You know what? I’m easy like Sunday morning now.’ It’s not me. I’ve been self-medicating shit that had nothing to do with me. I’ve been self-medicating for diseases that were not even my

own. It's like Munchausen by proxy, by proxy." She said she still went to meetings once in a while to support her friends if asked, but, at the time of our interview, she was not seeking meetings out or formally working the program.

Adrienne said she grew up Baptist "in the best way possible," though as a queer woman she struggled with the denomination's anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and actions. When interviewed, she described herself as "agnostic" and defined religion in her survey as "The poor, disenfranchised being led to remain so by the moneyed class, to believe fulfillment isn't to be found on this plane. This is in service to maintain the power imbalance." Asked how she defines spirituality, she responded: "It's the thing Agnostics use to stay tethered to their religion because they are hedging their bets." Still, about spirituality in AA, she said, "I have nothing negative to say because I think that, quite honestly, first of all, it helps. When I accepted and got it, it totally helped. So there's nothing negative I can say about it. It has negative aspects, but I think everything does... I'm an African-American, born and raised in this country, and who identifies as queer. So there's a whole lot of things you can throw at me. Nothing in AA, nothing in AA is coming at me thus far." As we talked, however, it became clear that Adrienne did not want to go back to AA, at least at that time, for a number of carefully considered reasons, but it wasn't the spiritual part of the program that was keeping her away:

So I didn't have a conflict that I think others have – others who identify as agnostic or atheist. At the end of the day, I was so desperate. I would, I was willing to walk over broken glass. And if you said that that broken glass was littered with prayers from Jesus, so be it. You know what I mean? It legitimately is...take what you can, take what you need and leave the rest. So what I found was I would say, and very awkwardly, not very succinctly, or couldn't articulate very well, but my higher power was watching others around me embrace each other. That's what, that's what I...and every time I saw that, I was like, Yeah, that's, that, that matters. That, that's tangible. So I didn't have conflicts about the higher power because I had already worked that conflict with religion. And I knew it was bullshit. Rephrase. I believe it is bullshit. I believe this is it and so my goal is to be the best me here. If something else happens, if, if, if there's something beyond here, if the book that we, I was raised with is

accurate and John 3:16 is legitimate, I'm still going to heaven. So now I could just do it free of, um, these really strange strictures that were going to wind up having me want to kill myself. So I didn't have that kind of conflict."

The strictures that threatened Adrienne's life were her Baptist denomination's negative view of queerness, which is a key element of Adrienne's identity. Just like fellow Southern Baptist and queer woman, Jamie F., it was through working the steps of AA with her sponsor that Adrienne was able to heal some of that religious trauma and deal with aspects of her sexuality, like how to have healthy relationships, that she hadn't been able to address before.

For the first time in my entire life, I owned up to everything that had come together to make me who I am and I owned up to all the stuff that I had done to put me in the position that I was in. And that was the first time I had been a big girl my entire life. For the first time, I felt light. I was like, "Whoa." And so you kind of start chasing that feeling... Light. Like it all was gone. And here's the thing -- religion hadn't done that. Quite frankly, the best-intentioned therapists hadn't done that. Nothing had done it other than a good just writing it all down. Because there was stuff I hadn't even owned before. Some of it had just, quite frankly, been repressed. That whole experience gave me the freedom to be less repressed, which was the kicker because however -- and I don't say this with arrogance -- but however bright I seem... You know, there was stuff I just hadn't dealt with. And all of a sudden, I was dealing with it. And then it was almost, it was like the shell came off. 'Cause if you if you think I'm ebullient... then I was like a bright, shining star, you know what I mean?

Like Margaret, Adrienne sees value in her experience in AA, but she no longer wishes to participate. Part of her reasoning has to do with her concerns for the Black community both in AA and in society at large. She believes that religion and spirituality get in the way of structural changes that might actually benefit her community long term. "I think the further we can get away from people depending on the man in the sky...I think that's a real problem in the African-American community. I think we have wholly adopted the slaveholder's religion to the further detriment of our community...But there are things that we can do and I think one of the first things we're going to have to figure out how to do is excise that religion from therapy and from 12-step programs. Because I think that has done a tremendous amount of damage to our community."

Unlike Margaret and Adrienne, Angela P. identifies as a spiritual but not religious person and still connects frequently with her higher power, “the universe,” even though she is no longer a member of AA, and no longer sober. She got sober in a rehabilitation center and went on to work as a sober companion and addictions counselor for years. She had eight years of sobriety in the program when she decided she was never really an alcoholic, but that her true problems were with overusing food and relationships for emotional comfort. When we met, she described herself as “spiritually sober,” which included daily marijuana use she felt helped her to be more creative in her craft and profession. “Everything's better with a little weed buzz,” she said. “Life is better through fuckin' green glasses, you know?” When she decided to start drinking again she ran it by everyone she knew: her therapist, mother, sponsor, her best friend who was the director of a treatment center and made a conscious choice. Reflecting on her time in the program, she said:

AA taught me a lot of stuff, surrender mostly, you know what I mean? Like let shit go. Just be Zen and peaceful. Pray, be humble, be grateful. Don't take anything for granted. Give. Be giving. Help the next person. Ask for help when you need it. You know, like basic shit. I didn't ever really take much from the literature. I took most from like actual tangible experiences, you know like um [pauses], I bullshitted my way through AA, you know what I mean? But I didn't though. It's like weird.”

Angela compares what she learned in AA to the “gestational” knowledge she picked up automatically in school as a child; these things have stuck with her and inform her life to this day. She says she still considers herself spiritual, engaging in “meditation, yoga, being still, silent, positive affirmations, keeping people around me that are in that same PMA, you know, Positive Mental Attitude all the time.” But she “hates religion.” “Religion is stupid,” she said. “It's the root of everything wrong with the world. It's why wars are fought. I'm sorry that you have to write a paper about it.”

An Evolving Relationship

Just as members who have left the fellowship report changes over time in their spirituality and, at times, in their relationship or lack thereof with a higher power, so too do current AA members' concepts of high power evolve over time. Herb K., another former Catholic seminarian, though decidedly not an atheist, has used many names to refer to his higher power since joining AA, and his concept has evolved over time as well. Like Bill S., his relationship to otherness, both Other and others, changes constantly, and he helps many other alcoholics throughout the country with their own concept of a higher power in his popular workshops.

So my higher power was God, the Trinity, up until I had my new experience with AA and then I really was using Father as a relationship for different reasons and then later on I used Creator and then later on I used Spirit. The Big Book talks about "the Spirit of the Universe underlying the totality of things" and that really appealed to me in its universality and all-inclusiveness without any images, so I really liked that. But it continues to change. I've come out of a period when I've been using Mystery as the relationship. And I currently am really embracing the term Energy. A universal energy that really is an action, that really is dynamic, that really is creative, that really is unconditional. And a hackneyed word, love, I use, but I have a very substantial definition of what that means: unconditional, unilateral, creative, generative, personal. So that's the concept that I am currently engaged in. So I see that my concept of and my relationship with this power other than myself changes as I do.

While Herb no longer adheres to the trinitarian Catholic God, whose attributes and character have been worked out by theologians, clergy, and laity alike over millennia, he engages in a complex theological process of discernment as he continues to deepen his own understanding of God and as he helps those who come to for guidance in navigating their way through the Twelve Steps. In the next chapter, we'll examine the spiritual practices Herb uses to engage this Higher Power and the resulting spiritual awakenings and experiences he has had as a result.

Conclusion

Whether understood as God, Jesus, the Universe, or the Group of Drunks, and whether conceived as more immanent or transcendent, deemed spiritual, religious, agnostic or atheist in nature, most AA members view their higher powers as actively intervening in their lives. After all, if something is going to help you stop a long-time self-destructive behavior that has been impervious to all other interventions, it has to *do* something, whether through lightning bolts, God Shots, or via a small quiet inner voice giving guidance or direction. This “conscious contact” (cite) must be cultivated through practices suggested by the 12 steps, such as meeting attendance, working with a sponsor, writing and giving away an inventory, making amends, prayer, and meditation, and working with newcomers and others. Having explored what AA members *think* about their higher powers in this chapter, I will turn in the next chapter to what members *do* to engage with them, the *practices* they employ in order to form the relationship with both Other and others that most consider fundamental to their recovery, and the *experiences* they have as a result.

Chapter 4: Cultivating and Experiencing “Conscious Contact”

“I start filling the bathtub, I get up every morning that I can, I mean most days, and I meditate in the bathtub for probably nearly an hour, whether that's meditate or whether that's daydream or whatever you want to call it. And I pray a little bit and I say the Serenity Prayer and ‘God guide me, God heal me.’ I don't know, it doesn't come out exactly the same way. ‘God help me.’”

- Jeffrey L.

“I just absolutely was completely aware that I had been transported, all right? Held by loving hands and brought from the bridge of reason to the shore of faith. And I was—probably 30 seconds or three minutes, I have no idea how long it lasted—but I was completely aware of being held and being transported, that it wasn't me at all... Oh my god, I'm getting choked up even thinking about it right now.” - Herb K.

“The kinds of events people deem spiritual are kindled: the body learns to experience these events, and the experience changes the events so that they become more fluent and habituated over time. These events are important because they provide firsthand evidence that the claims of the faith frame are valid. The events offer what seems like bodily evidence—the most basic evidence we have of the world—that talk about the invisible other is more than mere talk. In the process, the events change the experience of the body... The person of faith not only works to make a god real but comes to be a body in which that evidence is felt in a certain way, and likely more easily.” -T.M. Luhrmann, *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* (Luhrmann 2020: 135).

The Twelve Steps as a whole make reference to spiritual beliefs, practices, and experiences as part of the pathway toward recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous. In the last chapter, we explored the variety of higher powers that AA members believe in to help them remain sober. We found that regardless of the concepts, attributes, or names used, AA higher powers are thought to share the ability to somehow intervene in the alcoholic's life to help them, whether they envision a traditional deity like Jesus Christ or a higher power typically considered non-supernatural such as the group as a whole. Regardless of what kind of higher power helps an AA member to recover, many shared practices, and some more idiosyncratic ones, are used in order to cultivate relationships with and experiences of “conscious contact” (Step 11) with these higher powers. Ongoing “conscious contact” is described by the Big

Book and many of my interviewees as critical to maintaining sobriety long-term. As Chapter Six, “Into Action,” states, “Much has already been said about receiving strength, inspiration, and direction from Him who has all knowledge and power... If we have carefully followed directions, we have begun to sense the flow of His Spirit into us. To some extent we have become God-conscious. We have begun to develop this vital sixth sense. But we must go further and that means more action” (85). The spiritual practices and experiences AA members engage in to establish “conscious contact” with their higher powers will be the focus of this chapter, in dialogue with T.M. Luhrmann’s work on how individuals “make God real” for themselves across cultures through a process she calls “spiritual kindling” (2023, 135). As she writes: “the invisible other—must be made real for people, and the real-making changes those who do it” (77). Luhrmann’s research demonstrates that through both innate abilities (such as the psychological trait of absorption) and training (through “inner sense cultivation” (63)), some human beings are able to cultivate culturally specific experiences of the supernatural, some individuals more frequently and powerfully than others. Luhrmann’s work is illuminating for understanding the process by which many members of AA have struggled to “come to believe” in their higher powers, by coming to identify aspects of their experience as other-generated rather than self-generated, whether that is a supernatural Other or a natural other, such as nature, the group as a whole, or their “higher self.”

The spiritual healing offered by the Twelve Steps relies on members developing a relationship with a “power greater than ourselves,” most formally through Step 11, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out”

(Anonymous 1939/2001, 59). The *Twelve and Twelve* further clarifies that: “Prayer and meditation are our principal means of conscious contact with God” (96). Given this, we can ask (1) what AAs mean by conscious contact, (2) to what extent they are able to achieve it through practices, and (3) what experiences of “conscious contact” they have had and how they have affected them. Based on interviews, it appears that what AAs mean by conscious contact is that their higher power becomes real for them, becomes an "other" who "wills" something for them and "gives" them the power to carry it out.

In *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others*, Luhrmann argues that human beings experience God as real through a mental and social process of “spiritual kindling.” She writes: “The kinds of events people deem spiritual are kindled: the body learns to experience these events, and the experience changes the events so that they become more fluent and habituated over time... The events offer what seems like bodily evidence – the most basic evidence we have of the world – that talk about the invisible other is more than mere talk. In the process, the events change the experience of the body” (Luhrmann 2020: 135). As individuals learn to experience the events of their body differently, as resulting from this invisible other, the experiences become more frequent, eventually making God feel real, the way a fire is kindled from many sparks. Kindling involves both practices and experiences, with practices often employed to bring forth experiences. Thus, as Luhrmann characterizes it, based on her study of evangelicals in the US and elsewhere, learning to hear God is a process; it involves engaging in practices that tend to make God seem real. These practices alter people’s sense of self and the way they understand what they experience. This, I will argue, is also the case with AAs. In what

follows, we will first explore the practices that AAs use to make God real and then examine the experiences of a higher power that AA's report and the role they have played in helping them to attain and maintain long-term sobriety. The change that Luhrmann describes from a more bounded sense of self to a more permeable, perhaps extended notion of self, overlaps in interesting ways with scientific advances in understanding cognition as 4E—embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended—will be explored further in the conclusion (Carney 2020).

Appraising Experiences as Other-Generated and Thus Anomalous

In her ethnographic and experimental research on American evangelicals culminating in her monograph *When God Talks Back*, Luhrmann saw a common pattern in meta-cognition, or the thoughts people had about their own thoughts, among her evangelical sample. She writes:

Prayer experts spoke as if what they were learning to do was to take their inner sensory world more seriously; to treat their thoughts, images and sensations as more meaningful; and deliberately blur the line between what they might once have attributed to an internal cause and what they might now wish to attribute to an external one. That, after all, is the point of experiential evangelical spirituality: to experience God—an external invisible presence—interacting with one through phenomena one would ordinarily interpret as internal and self-generated. It seemed that as these congregants lovingly attended to their internal sensations, those sensations took on a life of their own and become more and more vivid until the congregants occasionally experienced some of them as if they were located in the external material world, so that they saw and heard and smelled and felt sensations in ways not caused by material things (Luhrmann 2020, 69).

In essence, these “prayer experts” reported a change in how they thought about and experienced their thoughts, a change in metacognition and a resulting experiential shift whereby sensations once experienced as internally generated came to be experienced as externally generated, in this case generated by God. As we will explore in more detail later in the chapter, this change in one's appraisal of the origin of a sensation relates to Emile Durkheim's notion of collective effervescence (1912/1995, 424).

Both Luhmann and Ann Taves highlight the importance of appraisal in understanding how certain experiences are deemed supernatural or generated by God by some people, while others might consider them simply natural or generated by self or some other natural agent. They share a commitment to “comparative phenomenology” (Luhmann 2020, 121) as the philosophical basis of their work, taking what people experience seriously, and trying to tease apart, as much as is possible, the felt, phenomenological experience of an event from the appraisal of the experience as potentially nonreligious, religious, spiritual, psychiatric, or of no real consequence, while acknowledging that experience and appraisal inevitably influence one another (see Appendix 2 for an example of phenomenological interviewing in this dissertation project). Taves has shown in her work, *Revelatory Events: Three Case Studies of the Emergence of New Spiritual Paths* (2016), that the way in which individuals perceive the anomalous events they experience, and how those around them also appraise those experiences, plays a large role in whether an experience is interpreted as a founding moment in a new religious movement (as in the case of Mormonism) or a private revelation, relevant perhaps, but not prescriptive, for a “spiritual rather than religious” program such as Alcoholics Anonymous (Anonymous 1985, 17). In her “building-blocks” approach to the study of religion, Taves and her collaborators have argued that unusual sensory and mental events and their appraisal are potential naturalistic building blocks of spiritual and religious experiences (Taves and Asprem 2016). To disentangle event from appraisal, consider that while most human beings experience goosebumps at some point in their lives, depending on context, one’s cultural heritage, the presence or absence of others, one’s personal history, or the triggering event, those goosebumps might be interpreted as a sign from God or just an ordinary biological response to strong emotion or the cold.

Both Luhrmann and Taves contend that the way in which we attend to both our inner and outer experiences, both individually and with others, shapes whether and how we interpret them religiously or spiritually, and that we can learn to experience some events as evidence of a higher power or the supernatural. This naturalistic phenomenological approach can help shed light on the specific practices AA members use in order to “come to believe” in and experience their higher powers as real forces in their lives that help them to stay sober. Both theorists argue that the fact that one can learn to experience God as real does not necessarily mean God isn’t real. In fact, there are very real effects on the lives of those who experience the “real-making” process. Luhrmann writes:

Finally, I point out that there are two consequences of these real-making practices which affect people. The first is that many religious practices (we can call them prayer) affect the way people attend to their thoughts, and that changes their experience, likely in the same manner that cognitive-behavioral therapists teach their clients to alter the attention they pay to theirs. The second is that people come to experience the invisible other in relationship, and in many ways this is experienced like a relationship with a responsive human. That is a remarkable human capacity. (Luhrmann 2023, 77)

Luhrmann astutely points out the similarities between real-making practices and cognitive behavioral practices, both of which teach us to pay attention to our minds in new ways, thereby allowing us to have a new experience. She also insightfully links the real-making process of religious kindling practices to developing a relationship with an “invisible other” that “is experienced like a relationship with a responsive human” (77). As we will see in the detailed ethnographic descriptions of AA kindling practices to come, it is this new relationship with an “invisible other”—whether it is an Other, such as God, or the invisible other of the AA group as a whole—that AA members say helps them to stay sober.

Finally, Taves and Luhrmann converge in their approach by highlighting a common feature of many experiences that “stand out” (Taves’ term) for people: the feeling that some

aspect of their experience that could seem self-generated actually comes from something or someone else. This aspect of experience as other-generated is particularly relevant to many of those experiences identified as spiritual by my AA sample – ethnographic examples will be explored in more detail below.

Cross Cultural Variation in Understandings of One's Own Mind

Luhrmann argues that variations in cultural understandings, particularly in the concept of the mind, can create differences in how readily individuals experience certain phenomena as opposed to others. Referencing the work of Hazel Markus and Shinobu Kitayama on the presence of a more interdependent concept of self in some Eastern cultures (1991), Luhrmann argues that the “Western citadel” concept of the mind constrains how one experiences and interprets one’s own thinking. Luhrmann writes:

European Americans are invited by their cultural heritage to imagine the mind as a private place, walled off from the world, a citadel in which thoughts are one’s own and no one else has access to them. The mind is the source of what makes people who they are. Our identity comes from what we think and feel, rather than (for example) our family origin (e.g. C. Taylor 2007; Makari 2015). Just think of the enormous amount we spend on psychotherapy and our intense concerns with self-esteem. Middle-class Americans tend to assume that what they feel and think really matters. They also assume that thoughts and feelings are not materially real. The citadel dominates the town, but it is not part of the town. Educated Americans often assume that the brain, that pulpy, wrinkled, three-pound weight, is real. But the mind, they will say, is an epiphenomenon, a byproduct: immaterial, nonsubstantial, and invisible. Nor does the mind act directly on the world. If thought were material, we could call the thought imagined in this model “inert.” That is, those who adopt this model imagine that thought affects the world only because it affects the thinker, the one who really acts. Thought does not leak from the mind to affect another human’s body and make that person ill. (Luhrmann 2020, 85).

Luhrmann here argues that European Americans tend to see the mind as private and contained, a “citadel”, and identity as coming from their thoughts and feelings, rather than from their social relationships, even though, somewhat paradoxically, thoughts and feelings are seen as somehow “less real” than other phenomena. Her cross-cultural comparison of neo-Pentecostal evangelicals in the U.S., India, and Ghana suggests that in India and Ghana,

where the mind is thought of differently than in the U.S., God is likewise experienced differently. In the U.S., 35% of respondents reported hearing God “quasi-audibly,” compared with 45% in Chennai, and 55% in Accra. Though all three groups were united in their perception of God as a loving friend with which one might learn to converse, they differed in emphasis. Luhrmann writes: “All of them were praying and going to church and worshiping, and all of them agreed that if you stopped doing that, God would feel less real to you. In all these churches, God spoke through the Bible and through people and in the mind... Yet because of the way that congregants thought about their minds, God feels real for them in different ways” (108).

The Western citadel concept of the mind as walled off from the world seems to have left the American evangelicals more hesitant about the idea of God speaking audibly to them. They told Luhrmann such events were odd and commented, jokingly, that they did not require psychiatric intervention. Nonetheless, they described God speaking to them in their thoughts, as a kind friend. In India, people’s experiences of God seemed to be influenced by social relationships; they often perceived God as fatherly and as acting through those around them. While in Ghana, where emotions are more readily linked to the body and many fear witches attacking through bad thoughts, the mind is experienced as “less private, less bounded, and more supernaturally potent” (87), and God was more likely to speak audibly and to push them to take action. In contrast to Americans, Ghanaians tended to see the inner and outer world on a spectrum, rather than in terms of duality. “That is what I mean by kindling: that people feel God differently, in specific ways, because of the specific ways that they attend to their own experience,” Luhrmann writes (100).

People learned to hear God speak in all three of Luhrmann's study sites in three major ways: a) through placing images or thoughts in the mind, b) through people and coincidence, and c) through scripture (Luhrmann 2020, 101). These three ways of experiencing God or a higher power have parallels among my AA sample as well. In what follows, we will first explore the practices that AAs use to make God real and then examine the experiences of a higher power that AAs report, including experiences that are common among AA members, as well as those that AA members share with Luhrmann's participants. For both AA members and Luhrmann's evangelical samples, the change she describes from a more bounded sense of self to a more permeable, perhaps extended notion of self, overlaps in interesting ways with scientific advances in understanding cognition as 4E (embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended), which will be explored further in the conclusion (Carney 2020).

Part I: Cultivation

Many people come to AA less than enthusiastic about the "God Part." How then do they come to experience a relationship with some kind of higher power that they say then helps them to stop drinking? Reluctant newcomers are often reassured that they can choose a Higher Power that works for them and are sometimes encouraged to "act as if" they believe, until they actually do. An entire book of stories on how AA members "Came to Believe" was published in the 1980s (Anonymous 1987), and this is a common, perhaps even expected, narrative shared in AA pitches in meetings. There are also a number of specific practices that newcomers and those struggling with the higher power concept are encouraged to engage in to help find and relate to a higher power. These practices of "real-making" are quite similar to many described in Luhrmann's ethnographic work with evangelicals.

“Act as if”: Practices for “Coming to Believe”

Over a decade ago, I sat in a large auditorium in Santa Monica, California with members of many different 12-Step programs and listened to Herb K. say something I found both profound and irritating. I have been thinking about it ever since. I was doing research for my master’s thesis in journalism and struggling in many ways in my own life, particularly with anxiety and depression. Herb told our motley crew of fellow sufferers to consider what we would need to be true about our Higher Power or the universe for our suffering to be alleviated. Then he told us that we needed to do everything we could to believe in that, to “act as if” that were true. It seemed to me, then in my late 20s and even more skeptically inclined than I am today, like putting the cart before the horse. “It makes no sense!” I told my soon-to-be husband. “You can’t just wish your God into reality.” Or can you? In Luhrmann’s terms, perhaps God *can* “become real” to some people through certain practices and experiences.

One of the reasons Herb K. ended up moving beyond the Catholic church is that he didn’t feel it was doing a very good job of making God real for him - or others:

AA is a community that has a methodology - that's all it is - to create spirituality. That would describe church. Church is a community that has a methodology that is supposed to get you to a relationship with Power, with God. But the problem with church is—and seven years a monk, all right?—that they don't have a clear methodology. And you also don't have the threat of dying. So we [alcoholics] have a guillotine hanging over our head. I don't like the negative aspect of that, but let's face the truth. Underneath the underneath the underneath of everything in Alcoholics Anonymous is alcohol. And drinking and dying after a long term of suffering.

By working the steps in a new way with his sponsor, Herb says his life was transformed and he came to believe in God in a new way. “It took a year and I didn't know anything was happening during that year, but after the conclusion of finishing the steps, I got very clear that I had been changed, radically changed,” he recalled. “A change in the way I think and

feel and behave. And I was very clear that although I had done a lot of work, the results were disproportionate to my contribution.” We will explore the spiritual experience at the core of Herb’s transformation in part two of this chapter.

Meeting Rituals - Making Both the Group of Drunks [G.O.D.] (others) and God (Other) Real

Most AA members will tell you that going to meetings is only part of the program, and maybe not even the most important part. “Working the steps” is seen, by most, as the most critical thing one can do to stay sober. But going to meetings is almost always the first step someone takes - step zero, if you will - in their AA journey. It is at meetings that they learn what the 12 steps are and find a community of people to support them in their “new way of life.” It is usually by going to meetings that a newcomer meets their sponsor, who is most often the person who shepherds them through the Steps. Still, most AAs warn newcomers that meetings alone are not enough to stay sober. A common AA slogan is: “Meetings help us *feel* better; the Steps help us *get* better.” While the relative importance of each is a topic of discussion among many members, almost all would agree that both meeting attendance and step work are critical to ongoing sobriety, and that certain spiritual practices are inherent to both. In Luhrmann’s terms, we can think of AA meetings as establishing and reinforcing the “faith frame” through which the real-making process becomes possible. Luhrmann writes: “To operate in the real, everyday world while maintaining the idea that there is an invisible other who takes an active, loving interest in your life, people of faith adopt of mode of thinking and interpreting, a set of expectations and memories, in which gods and spirits matter...The challenge, then, for those who want to be faithful is to think with the faith frame as much as they can, despite how easy it can be to get distracted or discouraged, despite the competition from and contradictions of the everyday” (22). In AA

meetings, just as in the church services Luhrmann describes, this faith frame is introduced to newcomers and reinforced through ritual.

Sometimes newcomers to AA complain that the various excerpts from AA literature read week after week at most meetings are repetitive and boring, but old-timers will tell you there is a good reason for such repetition - alcoholics can be hard-headed, they say, and need to hear things over and over again for them to sink in. The readings are usually handouts that are given to various people before the meeting to read on cue, including an excerpt from “Chapter 5: How it Works” in the Big Book, which contains a lead-in to the 12 steps, the 12 steps themselves, and then the paragraph that follows the steps. The 12 Traditions are also commonly read at every meeting, usually while the basket is being passed around the room to collect donations for the 7th tradition. Another selection I have heard read at meetings is from Chapter 3, “More About Alcoholism.” For each of these readings, it is common for some phrases to be read out in unison, while the rest of the piece is read by one speaker. For the 12 traditions, the person tasked with reading the traditions as a whole reads the first part of tradition 12 alone - “Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all these principles, ever reminding us to place...” and the whole room in unison says “...principles before personalities.” The phrase spoken in unison from “How it Works,” comes at the end of the paragraph right after the introduction of the 12 steps, which reads:

Many of us exclaimed, “What an order! I can’t go through with it.” Do not be discouraged. No one among us has been able to maintain anything like perfect adherence to these principles. We are not saints. The point is, that we are willing to grow along spiritual lines. The principles we have set down are guides to progress. We claim spiritual progress rather than spiritual perfection. Our description of the alcoholic, the chapter to the agnostic, and our personal adventures before and after make clear three pertinent ideas: (a) That we were alcoholic and could not manage our own lives. (b) That probably no human power could have relieved our alcoholism. (c) That God could and would if He were sought. (Alcoholics Anonymous 1939/2001, 60).

Part C is said in unison: “God could and would if He were sought.”

Another commonly read excerpt from the Big Book comes from the chapter “More About Alcoholism.” A paragraph in the middle of the excerpt reads:

We are like men who have lost their legs; they never grow new ones. Neither does there appear to be any kind of treatment which will make alcoholics of our kind like other men. We have tried every imaginable remedy. In some instances there has been brief recovery, followed always by a still worse relapse. Physicians who are familiar with alcoholism agree there is no such thing as making a normal drinker out of an alcoholic. Science may one day accomplish this, but it hasn't done so yet.” (31)

While the room has remained quiet throughout the reading, together everyone says “it hasn’t done so yet” in unison. Then the original reader reads more of the excerpt.

Why are these particular phrases being highlighted by all voices in unison during meetings? “Principles before personalities,” “God could and would if he were sought,” and “it [science] hasn’t done so yet;” each emphasizes an important element of the AA program. Speaking in unison is a ritual action that brings to mind the importance of the collective working together to perpetuate the ideas and insights upon which the program is founded. “Principles before personalities” is a succinct way of describing how to achieve a successful group dynamic. Saying it in unison is a reminder to everyone present that the overall principles of the program are more important than whatever conflicts individual personalities might manufacture in the group, bringing to the forefront the more spiritual aspects of anonymity discussed in Chapter 2. That the phrase “God could and would if he were sought” is emphasized in unison should come as no surprise, given that a “God of our own understanding” is the spiritual core of the program, upon which its transformative power rests. Finally, the idea that science “hasn’t done so yet,” is also critical to understanding how AA positions itself as having no conflict with religion or science, highlighting its connections to and approval by medicine (see Chapter 1 of this dissertation and “The Doctor’s Opinion”

in the Big Book). The repetition of certain parts of the AA literature, with certain lines emphasized, can also help alcoholics even when they are not in a meeting. Memorized lines of the Big Book often come to mind for AA members when they need them most - some describe lines of the Big Book coming to them automatically, and some interpret this as a spiritual experience courtesy of their higher power (see “Scripture-Like Experiences” section below for more).

The “divergent modes of religiosity” (DMR) theory of ritual, a program of research first developed by Harvey Whitehouse, claims that rituals worldwide fall into two main categories: high frequency/low arousal (doctrinal) collective rituals and low frequency/high arousal (imagistic) rituals performed alone or in small groups (Whitehouse 2004). This distinction is useful for understanding AA meeting rituals and the role they play in creating social cohesion. “For example, one common feature of collective rituals is social synchrony achieved by moving (dancing, marching, swaying, etc.) or vocalizing (singing, chanting, intoning, etc.) rhythmically in time....Numerous studies have shown that moving in synchrony increases social cohesion and cooperation...One possible explanation is that social synchrony blurs the boundary between self and other, creating a temporary illusion of expanded agency” (Whitehouse and Cavanaugh 2022, 279). Whitehouse and Cavanaugh also note that psychological research on group bonding has found that “group identification is depersonalizing. That is, when a person highly identifies with a given group identity and when that identity is made salient, their personal identity becomes less salient (and vice versa), implying a hydraulic relationship between personal identities and group identities” (282). Their findings map well onto Luhrmann’s description of a more “porous” self, although Luhrmann would not characterize the differences in self concepts as illusory.

This work on the relationship between individual and group identity relates to Émile Durkheim's foundational work on the sociology of religion in which he argues that religion originates in human groups realizing the benefits of living collectively, projecting their gratitude for such benefits onto a totem or symbol representing them, and then worshipping this symbol, but in essence, worshipping society, or the benefits of group life, itself. Durkheim called the experience and feelings of being in a large group of likeminded people "collective effervescence." Summarizing his theory, he wrote:

We have seen, in fact, that if collective life awakens religious thought when it rises to a certain intensity, that is so because it brings about a state of effervescence that alters the conditions of psychic activity. The vital energies become hyper-excited, the passions are more intense, the sensations more powerful; there are indeed some that are produced only at this moment. Man does not recognize himself; he feels somehow transformed and in consequence transforms his surroundings. To account for the very particular impressions he receives, he imputes to the things with which he is most directly in contact properties that they do not have, exceptional powers and virtues that the objects of ordinary experience do not possess. In short, upon the real world where profane life is lived, he superimposes another that, in a sense, exists only in his thought, but one to which he ascribes a higher kind of dignity than he ascribes to the real world of profane life. In two respects, then, this other world is an ideal one. (Durkheim 1912/1995, 424).

Though Durkheim here makes a distinction between the real and ideal, he is by no means discounting the very real effects this ideal religious dimension has on human individuals and societies. While sometimes AA members can downplay the importance of meetings relative to working the steps, most would acknowledge the critical importance and interconnectedness of both aspects of the program. Something seems to happen when human beings engage in ritual action, particularly synchronized ritual action as Whitehouse and others highlight. "Man does not recognize himself; he feels somehow transformed and in consequence transforms his surroundings," Durkheim wrote over a century ago. While atheist AA member Ralph K., whom we've met in previous chapters, told me how he learned from his sponsor that going to meetings was not enough for the transformation required for sobriety—"you're not a chevy just because you sit in a garage"—he also describes a spiritual

awakening that occurred for him in the collective experience of the AA meeting, and how it spurred him to dive deeper into the steps. He recalled:

And I believe what really happened to me, what I call my “spiritual awakening,” was I was sitting in a room around 9 o’clock. Actually, the same one that I went to the first time because I kept going there. Those folks that I thought were weird became my best friends. And some of them were convicted murderers. Some were bank robbers. I mean with guns and stuff. They did their time at San Quentin and Folsom... or back east and have been rehabilitated, and are back working on cars as mechanics—some of them, they got their own construction licenses and people hire them to do all kinds of [things]. [They have an] incredible, useful life.

You know, those are all the things that I discovered, once I got past the shell, the outside. Just incredibly wonderful people. Really what happened was sitting down in the meeting and then beginning to listen to people. Really pay attention to what they’re saying. I heard some girls, younger ladies, in their 20s, talking about their life and how they grew up. And how they got into alcoholism and heroin and all sorts. And I began to not only feel it. I began to choke up. I began to hear women talk about their children and their husbands. Men talk about their wives and their parents. And I began to listen to them and my eyes would well up. And I told this guy, Bob, who used to sign my court card, “I’m turning into a sissy. I’m crying. Is this part of being sober or getting sober?” He says, “No, it’s part of being human.” He says what is happening is that you are regaining your humanity that you have lost over years. And he says, “Thinking about being human and being a human being are different things...” I began talking to people, to hear people talk and share something. And I think to me, the sense of being human and of being a part of and of caring for a stranger that I had never met before or may never meet again, you know, that’s really what awakened, re-awakened within me my desire to go back and revisit my decisions that I have made in the past. And in the process of doing an inventory with friends, sitting down, writing it down and so on, and then sharing it with [a friend], basically. I have lots of other guys and ladies that we talk to each other daily and stuff. We didn’t call each other “sponsee,” “sponsor.” But that’s really what it’s all about. It’s about not being alone anymore.

This experience of deep empathy for others in the AA meeting and fellowship, a sense of being “a part of” and “not being alone anymore” demonstrates the real power the AA group can have in an individual alcoholic’s life. For Ralph, who grew up Muslim, but is now a self-described “spiritual atheist,” the sacrality of the group, in the Durkheimian sense of the group providing benefits that solitary existence cannot, is what allows him to stay sober, he says. Though he no longer identifies as Muslim, Ralph’s experiences in AA led him to revisit the writings of 12th century Sufi mystic Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī, whose path to freedom from ego and submission to God’s will his grandfather followed (Held 2018).

There are many more ritualistic elements of AA meetings that deserve attention in understanding how AA works. For example, in Step 4, AA's create an inventory of "resentments" and then attempt to understand their own part in the conflict. In Step 5, they "give it away" or "turn it over" to their sponsor or sometimes another trusted individual, as well as to their higher power. Some individuals burn the paper they have written on in the company of their sponsors to vividly mark the process of letting go of past resentments. Interaction with sponsors in general is also in some ways ritualized - many AA members speak to their sponsors at the same time of day or according to a specific structure. Some prayers, such as the 3rd and 7th Step prayers, are often said in the company of sponsors, on one's knees.

The role of patterned storytelling or "pitches," as AA shares are called, perhaps provide the central collective ritual in AA. The guidelines for telling one's story in AA, whether in longer pitches from the podium or in shorter "shares" afterwards, help to keep the focus on transformation. Members are encouraged to share "what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now," with a focus on sharing their "experience, strength, and hope." It is quite common for members to share their spiritual experiences in AA, how they "came to believe" in a higher power, and what that higher power has done for them in their sobriety. Though I attended only open AA meetings that welcome non-alcoholics, I will not relate any specific stories I have heard in meetings since that would be a violation of anonymity. The stories related here all come from individual interviews between myself and members who gave their informed consent and spoke only on behalf of themselves.

Prayer in Meetings (and Beyond)

One way which I can share about meetings in a general way, without getting into the specifics of any one alcoholic's story, is to describe the use of collective prayer in meetings. At least one prayer, but more often multiple prayers, were said at each of the roughly 50 meetings I attended, with the exception only of the Atheist and Agnostics meeting. Usually prayers were said in unison, although sometimes one person would read the prayer, while others listened. Each of these prayers are also often said by some AA members in private or with their sponsors outside of meetings. The prayer I heard most frequently at meetings, and spontaneously from some members in their interviews, was the Serenity Prayer, thought by most to have been originally authored by early 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, though some AA members believe it is of an older provenance.

God, grant me the serenity,
To accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

This prayer is often said at the beginning or end of a meeting. It is a prayer about transformation, acceptance, and the nuanced relationship between human agency and reality. It acknowledges the limits of human agency and the bounded nature of the will, something alcoholics know all too well, but it also gives hope to the possibility for some change for the better. This prayer is beloved in AA for saying so much of relevance to recovery in so few words. Sometimes it is said at the end of the meeting while everyone in the room holds hands, speaking in unison. Afterwards they say "It works if you work it" and move their clasped hands up and down in rhythm.

Another prayer frequently said at the end of meetings (though some atheists, agnostic, and non-Christian members find it inappropriate) is the Lord's Prayer. One of the most common prayers in the Western world, I need not reproduce it here, but it is worth noting

that it is a distinctly Christian prayer, coming out of the New Testament gospels. AA traditionalists note that this prayer was important to the early fellowship; they wish to maintain that tradition and note that anyone can insert a “God of their own understanding” for what was originally intended for a Christian understanding. Others find the prayer alienating—one of the former AA members I interviewed cited it as an example of what she sees as the inherently narrow religious nature of the program. Others told me they had no trouble translating the prayer’s words in their minds to make it work for them. “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” resonates well with AA practices of making amends and restitution for harms done as well as its emphasis on forgiveness for the alcoholic but also for those whom the alcoholic resents. There is another Christian prayer that is said at AA meetings, though much less frequently: the St. Francis Prayer, or what some now call the Peace Prayer, referred to by AAs as the Eleventh Step Prayer. I will discuss it, along with a few AA specific prayers, in the next section on prayer and meditation.

Step 11: Prayer, Meditation, and Conscious Contact

Most members of AA interpret Step 11 – “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out” – as something that is ideally practiced every day. “You can’t stay clean on yesterday’s shower,” warns a slogan aimed at those who get too relaxed about working their program. Though most AA members work the steps in sequence with their sponsors, they often begin some routine of prayer and meditation before formally getting to Step 11. Prayer of some kind almost always occurs in meetings, and meditation often does as well, in various forms, even if that is in the form of “a moment of silence for those who still suffer,” or in a more formal guided meditation in some less

traditional meetings. The difference between prayer and meditation is discussed among AA members, as it is among many spiritual and religious people worldwide. I've heard a few 12-step members say that prayer is talking to God and meditation is listening to God, but understandings of this distinction differ among my participants. Many AAs in my Southern California sample reported meditating using techniques they learned outside of AA, often through Eastern traditions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, or through New Age elaborations of these. Some practiced contemplative practices from other religious traditions.

In his explanation of Step 11 in the *Twelve and Twelve*, Wilson linked meditation, which he described as a way to open a channel to a higher power, and prayer, which he viewed as the petitioning of that higher power (Anonymous 1981, 101-102). "Aided by such instruction and example as we can find, it [meditation] is essentially an individual adventure, something which each one of us works out in his own way. But its object is always the same: to improve our conscious contact with God, with His grace, wisdom, and love. And let's always remember that meditation is in reality intensely practical." For those who are not familiar with meditation from their own traditions, Wilson offered a meditation on the 11th Step Prayer, more widely known as the St. Francis Prayer, again demonstrating the interconnectedness of these actions in his mind. He told readers to think carefully about the meaning of each phrase, and then to think of oneself "as though lying upon a sunlit beach," while relaxing and breathing deeply. Wilson encouraged the neophyte to use their imagination to meditate on the prayer. In words that resonate with Luhrmann's descriptions of inner-sense cultivation and kindling, Wilson wrote:

"Shucks!" says somebody. "This is nonsense. It isn't practical." When such thoughts break in, we might recall, a little ruefully, how much store we used to set by imagination as it tried to create reality out of bottles. Yes, we reveled in that sort of thinking, didn't we? And though sober nowadays, don't we often try to do much the same thing? Perhaps our trouble was not that we used our imagination. Perhaps the real trouble was our almost total inability to point

imagination toward the right objectives. There's nothing the matter with constructive imagination; all sound achievement rests upon it. After all, no man can build a house until he first envisions a plan for it. Well, meditation is like that, too; it helps to envision our spiritual objective before we try to move toward it. So let's get back to that sunlit beach—or to the plains or to the mountains, if you prefer. (Anonymous 1981, 100).

Here Wilson seemed to grasp the importance of the mind and imagination in both driving alcoholism - creating “reality out of bottles,” or the erroneous idea that happiness and good fortune will come as the result of a drink - and in recovery through “constructive imagination.” He instructed those new to prayer and meditation to “point imagination toward the right objectives,” essentially to kindle conscious contact with God.

Why, one might ask, does Step 11 instruct one to pray “only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out”? Wilson explained that God's will can be hard to discern and that a person “tends to force his own will into all sorts of situations and problems with the comfortable assurance that he is acting under God's specific direction,” thereby causing “great havoc” (103). Great discernment is needed in order to tell God's will from one's own, and asking God for help in this seems to be what Wilson was encouraging. Specific requests of God were okay, as long as they were followed by “...if it be Thy will.” In moments of “emotional disturbance” he encouraged people to say “Thy will, not mine, be done,” a phrase often repeated in meetings and in interviews, sometimes after the Serenity Prayer.

A Want Ad for Higher Power

One way in which AA members work to make God real for themselves is by drafting, usually at the direction of their sponsors, a “want ad” for their higher power, just like an employer might put in a newspaper or online these days. Sponsors tell their sponsees to list all the traits they would like to see in their potential higher power and then to start thinking

about this version of God/HP when they pray and ask for help. It is an imaginative exercise, much like Luhrmann's evangelical sample practices when they set out a cup of coffee for God to enhance the plausibility of conversing with an invisible other. It is also very similar to Herb's "act as if" exercise, deciding what you need to be true of your higher power, and then making an acting as if that were true, until you eventually come to effort to believe that.

Jamie F., whom we first encountered in Chapter 2, reported growing up in a conservative Baptist community that condemned her for being trans, and having to reimagine her higher power when she got sober in AA. Part of how she did this was through a "want ad" for a higher power. As Jamie told me, "So when I got here [to AA] I was told that I get to find a higher power of my understanding. That was such a relief for me, because I was like, 'Wow okay, how do I do that?' So my sponsor sits down with me and he says write down what you would like God to be. And I did. I want him to be forgiving, loving, understanding, merciful. Um, funny. Sense of humor. And all of those things I have," she said, of her current God, whom she still calls Jesus, but who is very different from the Jesus presented to her in her childhood. Jamie's "want ad" for her higher power demonstrates a "real-making" practice of kindling that has changed both how she relates to God and to herself.

Learning to Pray: The "God Can"

Wilson was well aware that prayer does not come easily to some people. As Luhrmann has shown, it doesn't even always come easily for the most devout (Luhrmann 2015, xvii). Sometimes it has to be learned. Prayer, Luhrmann contends, "changes the way people attend to their thoughts" (Luhrmann 2020, xiv). AAs have developed a number of techniques over the years to help newcomers (and not-so-new comers) learn how to pray and some of these techniques help people learn to change the way they "attend to their thoughts."

“I had a tough time with prayer,” Sallie G. told me. “And so, again, this is sort of an old school thing, but people used to get coffee in cans, and so, when I couldn't pray, [someone told me] ‘I want you to get a coffee can, I want you to cut a little hole in the plastic top, and that's your God can. And whenever you can't, God can. And whenever you run into something that you can't do, I want you to write it down. I want you to put it in the God can, and I want you to not worry about it.’ If I can't, God can. And so I still do that actually. I still do. I do more traditional prayer now but if I'm really stuck, I have a little jar and I'll write something down and stick it in there.” Some of my other participants reported using a “God box,” rather than a can, to likewise “turn over” their worries and fears to God, finding this enormously relieving as a direct way to engage with the relentlessly anxious mind many of them describe.

One of the sponsors I spoke with advised me that she tells her sponsees that anytime they look at the sky and say “what the fuck?” they are engaging in prayer. Because, after all, who do we all think we're talking to when we complain about the state of things to the sky?

“When We Retire” and “On Awakening”: p. 86-88 of the Big Book

It is common practice among long-term AA members to quote passages from the Big Book by page number, as some religious people might quote chapter and verse from the bible. One of the most frequently cited passages is known as “Page 86-88”, which lays out a blueprint for how to go about daily prayer and meditation. Many of those I interviewed said it formed the basis of their daily spiritual practice, including some atheist members. It begins by providing instructions for how one might conduct the 10th step: “Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it,” which is often seen as an ongoing, daily practice of steps 4 through 9, the inventory and amends steps. Chapter 6 of

The Big Book is called “Into Action,” and describes in some detail how to work steps 5-11, which follow the making of the inventory of resentments in Step 4. Part of this chapter is devoted to an explanation of how to practice Step 11 on a daily basis. “Step Eleven suggests prayer and meditation. We shouldn’t be shy on this matter of prayer. Better men than we are using it constantly. It works, if we have the proper attitude and work at it. It would be easy to be vague about this matter. Yet, we believe we can make some definite and valuable suggestions” (86). The chapter goes on to instruct AA members to review their day and ask themselves about their feelings and behavior, if they owe an apology. It concludes with “we ask God’s forgiveness and inquire what corrective measures should be taken” (86). As in other places in the Big Book, God is used here as a shorthand for a “God of our own understanding.” Reviewing one’s day mentally, some might call a form of meditation. Asking God for forgiveness, a prayer.

The chapter then shifts to what members might do “On Awakening,” a passage which is sometimes read on its own at meetings.

On awakening let us think about the twenty-four hours ahead. We consider our plans for the day. Before we begin, we ask God to direct our thinking, especially asking that it be divorced from self-pity, dishonest or self-seeking motives. Under these conditions we can employ our mental faculties with assurance, for after all God gave us brains to use. Our thought-life will be placed on a much higher plane when our thinking is cleared of wrong motives.

In thinking about our day we may face indecision. We may not be able to determine which course to take. Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We don’t struggle. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while. What used to be the hunch or the occasional inspiration gradually becomes a working part of the mind. Being still inexperienced and having just made conscious contact with God, it is not probable that we are going to be inspired at all times. We might pay for this presumption in all sorts of absurd actions and ideas. Nevertheless, we find that our thinking will, as time passes, be more and more on the plane of inspiration. We come to rely upon it.

We usually conclude the period of meditation with a prayer that we be shown all through the day what our next step is to be, that we be given whatever we need to take care of such problems. We ask especially for freedom from self-will, and are careful to make no request for ourselves only. We may ask for ourselves, however, if others will be helped. We are

careful never to pray for our own selfish ends. Many of us have wasted a lot of time doing that and it doesn't work. You can easily see why.

If circumstances warrant, we ask our wives or friends to join us in morning meditation. If we belong to a religious denomination which requires a definite morning devotion, we attend to that also. If not members of religious bodies, we sometimes select and memorize a few set prayers which emphasize the principles we have been discussing. There are many helpful books also. Suggestions about these may be obtained from one's priest, minister, or rabbi. Be quick to see where religious people are right. Make use of what they offer.

As we go through the day we pause, when agitated or doubtful, and ask for the right thought or action. We constantly remind ourselves we are no longer running the show, humbly saying to ourselves many times each day "Thy will be done." We are then in much less danger of excitement, fear, anger, worry, self-pity, or foolish decisions. We become much more efficient. We do not tire so easily, for we are not burning up energy foolishly as we did when we were trying to arrange life to suit ourselves. (Anonymous 1939/2001, 86-88)

This passage, which is used by many in the program as a blueprint for their morning routine, mentions both prayer and meditation. As in Wilson's elaboration of the 11th step in the *Twelve and Twelve* (see above), the distinction between the two seems somewhat less important than the prescription to do both, with meditation seeming to serve in some ways as a preparation for prayer.

In this passage, "meditation" seems to mean thinking about the day ahead and asking God to "direct our thinking." This refers to a practice known as "guidance," that was passed down to AA from the Oxford Group. It is unclear at what point this process qualifies as prayer according to the Big Book's point of view, but in the *Twelve and Twelve* Wilson at least seems to favor a petitionary definition of prayer, so it would seem the following might qualify: "Here we ask God for inspiration, an intuitive thought or a decision. We relax and take it easy. We are often surprised how the right answers come after we have tried this for a while." Those right answers are God "talking back," as Luhrmann might put it, by putting thoughts into the mind (see more on such experiences later in this chapter). The book then goes on to describe this entire process as a "period of meditation," so again the distinction between the two seems somewhat unimportant to the writers of the Big Book in 1939. As I

will describe later, meditation among AA members today is often inspired and guided by Eastern religious practices, and thus modern AAs tend to think of meditation as more distinct from prayer than their predecessors. The passage then suggests that AAs pray to be shown all throughout the day what the next right step is, that they be freed from “self-will,” and that they not ask for anything for themselves. Wilson elaborates on this part of Step 11 more in the *Twelve and Twelve* (see above), explaining that AA members need help distinguishing their will from God’s will. Finally, the Big Book suggests combining these prayer and meditation practices with ones from established religions.

One of the key takeaways of this On Awakening passage is the idea that the alcoholic is “no longer running the show,” which harkens back to our discussion in Chapter 1 of the character of the actor in the Big Book, who represents the alcoholic prior to recovery. The sentiment of this passage is one of letting go of control, of allowing something outside of oneself to take over the pain and responsibility of trying to manage things beyond our control.

Herb K., who uses pages 86-88 every morning, describes how he interprets this passage:

The key is to listen to your thinking as a response to your prayer. It's not a distraction from your meditation. It's the purpose of your meditation. Listen to your thinking, like a tuned in radio frequency. You've asked to be directed, now the channel for giving you the message, the guidance, which is the Oxford Group word, is your thinking. So listen to and watch and pay attention to your thoughts. All right? And then, and I can, I do, my practice is, my interpretation of his direction is think about the 24 hours ahead, is what am I going to do today, my activity and consider your plans for the day is who am I going to be today. It's just my interpretation, all right? It's not in the Big Book, it's no place else - It's just the way I approach it. 'Cause I have that sort of way of looking at reality that I have what makes me human is that I can know, guidance, and that I can do, all right, action, so who am I going to be today and what am I going to do today?

Kristina H., who has been sober for 15 years, begins her day, like many in the program, with practices designed to cultivate “conscious contact.”

In the morning, when I put my feet on the floor, I always say, “Thank you, God.” Whether my day is just gonna be topsy-turvy...that’s the first thing that I do in the morning to connect and I just say, “Thank you, God.” And then some time during the day, I say the Saint Francis prayer, the 7th Step prayer, you know that one? And the 3rd Step prayer. Always. Daily. And I call those into my sponsor. I’m responsible to him.

Kristina and her sponsor say the prayers in unison together over the phone. Kristina’s morning routine is in some ways less elaborate than what is suggested by pages 86-88, but it begins immediately with gratitude to God, and follows the suggestion in those pages to pray throughout the day for guidance.

Ralph K. goes to an AA meeting that centers around practices associated with the 11th step. “On Sunday, tomorrow,” he told me, “I go to a 11th Step meditation meeting. Wonderful meeting. And that’s where, in meditation, every once in a while, when the doors are opened and the wind blows, and I can feel the wind hitting the back of my earlobes, I get...a feeling of real freedom. Freedom and, and the joy of, the bliss, of being free. Mostly free *from*. Free from fears. Free from worries. Free from, uh, the deliberate manufacture of misery.” Here Ralph is referring to the negative thinking some AAs call “KFUK” discussed in Chapter 1 as a contributor to alcoholism.

“An Attitude of Gratitude”

Another way AAs combat negative thinking is by writing gratitude lists as part of their 10th step review of the day (as suggested on p. 86 of the Big Book, see above), and sending them to their sponsors or other fellows via text or email. Gratitude lists can include expressions of gratitude for things both great and small: a clean bill of health, a sunny day, a safe home, a kind word from a friend, flipping one’s mindset from a focus on negative experiences and suffering to positive experiences. Michael D., who spoke in Chapter 1 about how American culture and media increases his anxiety and leads him to think that if he fixes

the externals or accumulates more stuff he will feel better, shared with me the importance of gratitude to his spiritual practice. “I write gratitude lists as well and all these little tools I learn in the program are great because I’m slowly learning that it’s an inside job. It’s not an external thing and the more I practice gratitude for everything that’s going on in my life right now, and the more I practice being of service and the more I build a relationship with a higher power, really the happier I am and the further I get away from that, the less happier I am.” A recent Hazelden Betty Ford article describes “Five Easy Ways to Cultivate Gratitude and Appreciation,” noting this is particularly important for those in early recovery, because “gratitude will help you keep perspective and offer yourself levity and grace while undergoing personal transformation.” The article tells those in early sobriety to write down what they are grateful for each day, in order to “flip the script on painful narratives, and look for nice lights in which to paint yourself and others.” It suggests asking oneself questions such as “What makes me feel lucky or important?” and “How have my struggles made me stronger?”

“Show Me How to Be Right Now”: Individual Prayers of AA Members

Joseph Y., who describes his higher power as “the antithesis of self,” has struggled with anxiety since he was in middle school and began using alcohol and drugs in an attempt to self-medicate. Now sober for almost five years, he uses prayer instead to calm the anxious thoughts that still plague him. In some ways his prayer follows some of the suggestions of On Awakening, but he has adapted it to speak directly to his anxiety:

A big prayer for me would be like, if I’m at work and I’m getting into an anxious place I’d say something like, “God, look I’m being anxious right now. Help me see this anxiety for what it is. Or just help me be -- just be with me, help me be anxious. Or just, look I’m anxious.” That’s a big prayer for me, even though it’s not, I’m not really asking for much, I’m just, you

know, it just shows me that there's something outside of myself. Or just or like "Free me from the bondage of self so I may better do thy will." Or "Show me how to be right now." Like "What should I do next?" There's a lot of that like "what's the next indicated action?" Like just "Help me be here right now. Help me, like show me what's next." Just that sort of thing and they're very, I don't know, I guess I'd describe them as very open prayers and for me the prayer really helps me sort of get quiet and listen to something other than self. Listen for direction.

It's important to Joseph that his spiritual practice helps free him from self, from that negative self-obsession that he sees as giving voice and impetus to his alcoholism. When he prays, he asks his higher power to intervene in his thinking, to transmit to him "the next indicated action," as the Big Book suggests. As Joseph told us in Chapter 2, he tries to stop himself from speculating too much on where that direction comes from, preferring to leave those "theological questions and existential questions" somewhat unanswered so he doesn't end up arguing about their form as a distraction from the substantive change he feels when he "asks for direction." Some of his language comes from the Third Step Prayer, which along with the 7th step prayer, was written for the Big Book and to be said when those steps are taken. Both prayers ask God to relieve the alcoholic of their burdens in order that they might help others, further reinforcing the pathway away from self-focus and toward focus on others and Other.

Praying On Your Knees and Sitting in Meditation

Despite calling himself an atheist who is "not spiritual," Bill S. told me he prays daily on his knees. This practice is common among some AA members and has its origins early in the program, where it was present in stories from Akron, Ohio in 1935, when AA was still a project of the evangelical Oxford group, from which it later emerged. According to Bill S.:

My sponsor was very clear that getting on your knees was very important because it was the appropriate position for a man who was begging for sobriety. And he would say that with some regularity...So I said, okay, I'm going to get on my knees every day. And when I was six years sober I started getting on my knees in the morning and I started with an affirmation. My affirmation was, 'I'm an alcoholic and I don't want to drink today. And I'm glad I didn't drink yesterday. With the help of our fellowship and the Twelve Steps, our spiritual program

of action. That's what I said. It's got no providential thing. I'm not asking for Jesus to come down and lay hands. I'm not asking for anybody to help me... That was what I said in the morning.

Bill S.'s morning practice has evolved over the years. When I interviewed him in his home perched on an estuary where he and his wife had created an exquisitely cultivated garden, he showed me where he kneels each morning to read two pages he was constantly rewriting as new insights developed.

Bill, who was 72 at the time of our interview, began practicing sitting meditation after 26 years of sobriety, when a friend invited him to a meeting he touted as “the epicenter of recovery in Southern California.” It was an 11th Step meeting, which opened from a reading out of the Big Book about meditation, followed by five minutes of meditation, the suggestion of a topic relevant to meditation, and then individual sharing on the topic, and five more minutes of meditation. It was Bill's friend's wife who really got on his case about needing to add a formal meditation routine to his sober practices. “Anna got in my face one time - they were big meditators - in a corridor in their condo. And she's pointing her finger at me and she said, ‘I'm telling you, you can't get sane, healthy and sober on 11 and a half steps.’ I mean they were militant about this necessity for a formal meditation practice.” Bill had been attending meetings near his home on the East Coast, where he said he didn't know anyone with a formal meditation practice. So he relied on his California AA friends to guide him. His friend had him start with Eckhart Tolle's *The Power of Now*, which he initially thought was “just stupid.” But then he started “paying attention to my mind during the day. I never caught it in the moment. It was always doing past or future. So I said, ‘Holy smokes, this guy may be right about that.’” He realized that he had been arguing with books his entire life and that maybe, when it came to this new area of learning, he should stop it.

Shunryu Suzuki's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* helped Bill open himself to new ideas. "I needed *not* to say that's really stupid and it's wrong. I needed to say, 'Where would a man, or a woman, have to be standing... to say that, and to see things that way? And, it opened up spiritual avenues for me that I had never had available to me before because I put up argumentative stop signs. I just wouldn't consider it, because it was clearly stupid.'" (Interestingly, Herb K. also reports having a spiritual experience after learning the Set Aside Prayer, which is inspired by a section of the Big Book and asks God to "Please help me set aside everything I *think* I know about myself, my disease, the 12 steps, and especially You..." After reading Tolle and Suzuki, Bill started trying to meditate for 3 minutes in the morning and 3 minutes in the evening, but was struggling and so he began a new AA meditation meeting in his home city in the East, because he had gotten used to doing things with a group in AA. He and his wife meditated with the AA group for 6 years, but then wanted something "a little bit more focused" with people who had a more regular daily practice like they did. They joined a nearby Zen Buddhist sangha and have been meditating with that group ever since. Bill says today when he meditates he "just sits." He is very influenced by the Zen school and pays attention to his posture, but doesn't do much beyond that. "I don't do guided meditations, they don't work for me. I don't play waterfall music in the background, I just sit, I just sit. The Zen guys are just like I just sit, you just sit. What are you doing? We're just sitting. That's what you're doing. We're sitting. We just sit... I try to pay attention to my breath and my body, but that's changed over time. I counted, and I still count when I can't shut my mind down. My mind goes all the time, I mean people say to me all the time, 'I can't meditate, I can't shut my mind down.' And I say 'I've been doing this for 8 years and I haven't had one session where my mind shuts down. So, take that excuse and

throw that in the garbage cause that's not what we're talking about.” At the time of our interview, he’s meditating 25 minutes in the morning in addition to reading his current version of the non-theistic two-page affirmation he writes himself and recites on his knees.

Like Bill, Michael D. incorporates a formal meditation practice into his daily AA routine, though his version comes from a widely used app on his phone:

I'd heard about it before and I'd read different things about mindfulness, but I've got this thing called Head Space now which actually walks you through it, sort of a guided meditation...It's an iPhone app, yeah. It's really cool. I'll show it to you... I'm doing one for anxiety right now, so you have a foundation course which is 30 days and then once you complete the 30 days you get to choose different packs and I'm doing one for anxiety because three years ago I struggled with panic attacks.

Michael pulled up the app on his phone and showed me how it worked. Like Joseph, with whom he shares a grandsponsor, anxiety continues to plague him in sobriety, and the 11th step helps him live with these negative thoughts and feelings as best he can.

Like Bill S., Christopher F., sober 3 years, prays each morning on his knees: “I always thank God for keeping me sober. Everyday...I always ask God to show me what he wants me to do. Because I know God’s plan for me every day is way better than anything I’m going to come up with on my own. Because everything I come up with on my own just causes me heartache, struggle –causes other people problems. My day is always way better [when I pray].”

Jeffrey, whose description of his morning meditation opens this chapter, survived a battle with cancer while in recovery. He died prior to the completion of this dissertation—but of cancer, not of alcoholism, which can be just as fatal in certain circumstances. Each morning of his sober life, he would get in the bathtub and let his consciousness drift as the warm water lapped over him. Like many AAs, he combined prayer and meditation, with these simple, but powerful, words of prayer: *God guide me. God heal me. God help me.*

Part II: Experiences - Higher Powers Kindled

In this section, we will explore the variety of experiences AA members have come to view as spiritual as a result of the “kindling” prayers, rituals, and other practices explored in the last section. As both the early AA literature makes clear and my interviewees make clear, such experiences may be gradual or sudden, every day or out of the ordinary. All types of experiences seem to work to minimize the alcoholic’s feelings of separateness and isolation, as long as they make them feel that they are “a part of” something beyond themselves, whether natural or supernatural.

Gradual vs. Sudden Spiritual Experiences in AA

Although Bill Wilson had a sudden, dramatic, and life-changing experience at Towns Hospital that he said helped him to stay sober for the rest of his life, the second printing of the Big Book in 1941 changed Step 12 to read “having had a spiritual awakening,” rather than “a spiritual experience,” and added an asterisk at the end of the Step to an appendix to make it clear that a sudden, dramatic experience was not required in order to get sober (Hazelden 9).

The terms “spiritual experience” and “spiritual awakening” are used many times in this book which, upon careful reading, shows that the personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism has manifested itself among us in different forms.

Yet it is true that our first printing gave many readers the impression that these personality changes, or religious experiences, must be in the nature of sudden and spectacular upheavals. Happily for everyone, this conclusion is erroneous.

In the first few chapters a number of sudden and revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming “God-consciousness” followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the “educational variety” because they develop slowly over a period of time. Quite often friends of the newcomer are aware of the difference long before he is himself. He finally realizes that he has undergone a profound alteration in his reaction to life; that such a change could hardly have been brought about by himself alone. What often takes place in a few months could seldom have been accomplished by years of self-discipline. With few exceptions our members find that they have tapped an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves. Most of us think this awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience. Our more religious members call it “God-consciousness.” (568)

This appendix was added to the second printing because Wilson and other early members worried that the Big Book’s description of Bill’s sudden spiritual experience, as well as reference to other such experiences in the original stories, might make it seem like only those who had such sudden and profound experiences could recover in AA. Even AA’s co-founder, Dr. Bob, never had a “flash of light” spiritual experience, though he certainly tried to by reading daily about “every religion,” including participating in spiritualist practices with Wilson (Taves 2016, 132). As we have seen, Wilson was concerned during this time and throughout his life with keeping the doors of AA open to people of diverse backgrounds. As Schaberg writes, the change from “spiritual experience” to “spiritual awakening” between the first and second printings, “would have the profound effect of making the Twelve Step program of recovery even more accessible to a vast number of future members—most especially those who were ‘agnostically inclined’ (as Wilson first wrote in the earliest version of the appendix).” As Schaberg’s research uncovers, “agnostically inclined” was struck out in the earliest draft of the appendix and replaced with “everyone” (601). While some of my AA sample reported having experiences similar to Wilson’s, the majority had more gradual and subtle spiritual experiences that some outside of the program might not see as spiritual. But what matters is that these AA members appraised these experiences as spiritual and, in doing so, framed them in relation to something larger than themselves.

Gradual Spiritual Experiences - “A Deep Connection with Everybody”

Joseph described for me how his gradual spiritual experiences, though lacking some of the spectacular elements some might associate with a spiritual experience, have still had a profound impact on him and his relationship to others. He said he had not had a sudden spiritual experience in which he “saw the face of God or anything like that.” But in his early sobriety he routinely encountered “gradual spiritual experiences” in his everyday life. He said:

I would describe it just an overwhelming sense of wellbeing and that I was just part of an interconnectedness and I really felt it and I really felt like a deep love for everybody around me and just a real connection, just like a real deep connection with everybody, whether they be like in their cars or on the street or whatever and that for me is the real spiritual experience. It's just such a deep sense of love that there's nothing worth worrying about because these loving feelings are so strong that even given the worst external circumstances, those feelings can't be taken away.

The experience of radical oneness with others that Joseph described helped him to feel a part of something greater than himself, liberating him from what he called “a selfish self-centered” place. Joseph, who described the profound discomfort he felt around others growing up and in his addiction, here offers a modern example of what the second printing of the Big Book clarified with Appendix II: an experience of the “educational variety” leading to “a profound alteration in his reaction to life” (568).

Sudden Spiritual Experiences - The Weedy Seadragon

Natasha A., 12 years sober, had what she describes as her “second collapse” after 9 years of sobriety when she realized that her problem with life went much deeper than alcoholism. She got a new sponsor and began working the steps “out of the Big Book,” using the methods described in Chapter 5 and 6, which resulted in a profound spiritual experience. I asked her when she first felt like maybe there was “something there” beyond ordinary,

everyday reality. She told me a story about taking someone even newer than herself to the aquarium when she was three months sober in an attempt to do service work. She told me:

She was all angry about God and I really was really pouty about the whole thing and we were just constantly fighting about God because we were new in the program and we were fighting, we were resisting everything at that moment. On the way to the aquarium we were having this whole argument all the way there and then all through the aquarium and then at the pinnacle of this argument that we were having I get to this tank and I don't see anything in it but all this seaweed, just...seaweed and I'm really angry now because I wanted to see fish and I don't see any fish. All I see is seaweed. And I just keep looking and hearing her anger and I get on my knees to like look into this tank. When I do that I finally see it up in this tank and to me, it's really magnificent and it was really probably not so amazing, but it was the weedy seadragon and it was right in front of me, right in the center of this tank, right at my eye level, and it had its tail wrapped around a piece of seaweed and it was floating perfectly right there. And it turned and it looked at me and right then it was like, my ears just started ringing, like I could hear the spheres, right, and head to toe, just riveting and things went from black to kind of white around this whole scene and just, it was like this perfection, ultimate perfection. And then I heard this voice, and it was like the voice beyond my voice and it said, "Something had a plan in mind when all this was created." And it's the first time I ever had that kind of awareness, that there was something else. It really did plan all of this and put it into place like perfectly, like everything had a purpose. It was made that way for a reason. Everything. And it was just perfect as is. Undoubtedly. That to me, yeah, it was just like a glimpse into heaven right there, was what that was. And so that to me was how I knew that there really was something else.

I ask her if she would describe this as a sudden spiritual experience, like the one Bill Wilson had. She replies that she felt "much moved," just as Bill did, when he had the first spiritual experience as a young soldier, which he very briefly describes in the Big Book. She says the experience has remained with her since, though in times of difficulty she has had more trouble accessing it. Her current thinking is that she needed to move beyond her childhood idea that heaven was something in the future, and realize that what she saw and felt at the aquarium that day "really is the great reality and that's here and now and it's nothing to achieve later."

Service as a Spiritual Experience

Another common sub-species of spiritual experience among my AA sample relates to experiences brought about by service to others, which is the 12th step of the program. Cathy

H. said that hearing a sponsee's 5th step (when a fourth step inventory is read or “turned over” to another person, usually a sponsor and God), or participating in a good session with a client, allows her to be "of ultimate, maximum service. You just feel full and like you don't need anything. Alcoholism is the disease of more. Like nothing's good enough ever. And you want the next thing. For me, a spiritual experience is [that] your heart is content and you can, like, die. I remember I had this client... and [another therapeutic worker asked], 'What do you like about Cathy?'... And he said something like, “She makes me feel safe” or “She makes me feel ok.” And I was like, I could die tomorrow, do you know what I mean?" That nagging desire for something more to ease feelings of discomfort was completely alleviated for Cathy when she felt she had truly helped another person.

Rock C., 26 years sober, who practices Druidic and Native American spirituality, shares with Cathy, and many others in my sample, the feeling that service to others is profoundly important not just to sobriety, but to our purpose as human beings on this planet. Rock, like many spiritual people and their metaphysical forebearers, believes that life is like a schoolhouse where we learn to progress spiritually, and ultimately to give back to God, the world, and humanity (Albanese 2008).

Before we're each born, into this lifetime, into this body, into the family we're born into, into the circumstances that we're born into, that we sit at a council with whatever your concept of a higher power is, and a bunch of other spiritual beings and we examine exactly where we're at in our spiritual development and what is needed next, and where evolution on planet earth is at and what is needed next, and how can I participate in life on planet earth and facilitate both of those at the same time, and when the lifetime occurs that can facilitate both in a way that is most equitable for both evolutions, that is when it's time for me to be born again into whatever form, into whatever family, into whatever circumstances is appropriate. And once that's all examined, I choose it, and I choose to agree to it, and I choose to commit to do that work. Now I've given my word. I've agreed to it and I've given my word that I will follow through and there's a thing that I like to say, who I am and what I have is Creator's gift to me, what I've done with it come the end of the day, that's my gift back to the Creator.

In Rock's cosmology, human beings decide before we are born with spiritual beings what we will do in this life based on what both we and the planet need. As Rock sees it, our existence is conceived in service, and our acts of service are a gift to the Creator. For Rock all service is inherently spiritual.

Catherine B., a life-long progressive Catholic, doesn't share Rock's metaphysics, but she agrees on the centrality of service to sobriety.

What I've found is that when I meditate it makes me feel calmer and more connected to God and I feel more connected to my purpose, which, in the program, our purpose is to just be of service to other people. And so I was really able to see the path more clearly when I meditate. And so the meditation I've found is this Metta meditation, where I offer sort of the goodness of the world to my mentor, which is my sponsor, and then my loved ones and my, someone I feel very positive about, someone I feel neutral about which is a stranger, so I think of a stranger that I've seen that day, and then someone I really dislike. And then to all beings everywhere. Oh, and you do yourself, and then all beings everywhere. And it's just, it's fantastic... I got sick this year, and I had to have a lot of MRIs of my brain where they put your head in a box and then they push you in the tube and it's very painful and frightening for me and I was able to do the meditation and get through it, just like really easily."

Metta meditation, or loving-kindness meditation, which has its origins in Buddhism, helped Catherine to focus on something other than her own discomfort and fear. She was able to direct her thoughts toward helping others from inside the MRI machine, and in doing so, she was able to also help herself.

Out-of-the-Ordinary Experiences

The experiences that my AA sample tended to view as out-of-the-ordinary were those in which thoughts or events seemed to come from beyond themselves. These were the experiences that they were most likely to attribute to the intervention of their higher power. In her cross cultural comparison of how God speaks to evangelicals in the U.S., Chennai, India and Accra, Ghana, Luhrmann reported three types of thoughts or events that evangelicals often attributed to God: a) images and thoughts in the mind that did not seem to be their own, b) events or interactions with others that seemed unexpectedly well timed, and

c) scriptural passages that appear in the mind at apt moments (Luhrmann 2020, 101). The experiences my interviewees tended to appraise as spiritual fall into these categories as well, although the “scriptural” phrases typically came from the Big Book, rather than the Bible.

a. *Images and Thoughts in the Mind that Did Not Seem to be Their Own*

A few of my interviewees heard a distinct voice speak. Cathy, for example, got sober while working at a boarding school for adolescents struggling with addiction. One night, while drinking in a bar, she heard a voice say, “Maybe you shouldn’t drink for a while.” “I think that was a spiritual experience,” she told me. Most, however, had less dramatic experiences of thoughts or images that did not seem to be their own.

Sonya M., discussed in Chapter 1, had just finished Step 3 with her sponsor, when, sitting by the window after returning home, “something intervened for me. And I was given this little piece of my puzzle that fit me exactly. And I knew something that I hadn’t known before.” This “spiritual experience” has fed her ever since and she has never gone back to the darkness of depression she experienced before, even in recovery. Sonya “knew something that she hadn’t before,” a noetic experience as William James would have classified it. This new knowledge she identified as non-ordinary, as a cognition that did not come from her.

David B. grew up a devout member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and didn’t have a sip of alcohol until he was 27 years old. When he and his wife decided to leave the church, he started drinking socially, but it very quickly spiraled out of control. Eventually he was addicted to and dealing crystal meth, facing the removal of his children, homelessness, and possible prison time. David articulates well the situation described in the first chapter of the alcoholic feeling like their thinking is attacking them:

Within drug use, you're in a maze, but you don't realize that you're the one on the outskirts of the maze drawing all the new pathways. So as you're trying to find your way out, you never will, you know? It doesn't matter how smart [you are] or if you've gone through lots of higher education or never finished high school. It doesn't matter where you're at because you're playing a game against yourself and you'll always be able to explain something away one more leg further out in this harsh reality that you're creating. You'll always be able to one up, you'll come to a conclusion that you'll think you have outsmarted the game and figured it out and then your own brain is playing against yourself and so you'll figure out a way to explain what just happened in a malicious way that puts the blame on somebody else or some group that's controlling you.

In David's analogy, the alcoholic or addict is stuck in a destructive maze of their own creation, and without some kind of outside intervention is doomed (see discussion of Gregory Bateson's cybernetic theory in the Conclusion). He eventually found his way to rehab, but after just a few days, he and some others stole all the hand sanitizer in the place, made some "really terrible cocktails," and got drunk in their rooms.

A couple days later, it was like, I can't stop these cravings. Like I want this, I want sobriety so bad, but I can't do it. I [was] raised as I said in a Mormon home, so really conservative Christian home. And I fell to my knees, as a last-ditch effort, I fell to my knees before I went to bed that night feeling like I was just going to take off and leave rehab and go back out. I prayed for the craving to be taken from me, that I wouldn't feel it, just at least for that one night. That I could get through that night without using, that I wouldn't feel that craving. And I laid down and I went to bed and I fell asleep. And I woke up the next morning and I went to group and I shared it and I said, I'm not saying I believe in God, I'm not saying I have any idea what the fuck happened, but I prayed and I didn't feel the craving anymore and I went to sleep. So I don't know why it worked, I don't care why it worked. [Laughs]. It worked. Like, I have no interest in launching a lifelong investigation as to why the hell that worked but it did, and so now I do that. [Laughs].

The God David prayed to that night was the god of his childhood: Heavenly Father. He's describing an experience of having his cravings "lifted," as Bill Wilson, Catherine, and Ralph did. But he's also noted a sudden moment in which his thinking changed and attributed that to the actions of a higher power. He admitted to not knowing for sure what happened, to struggling with whether to attribute his experience to God or something else, but he decided it was best to leave that mystery alone and go with an interpretation that fit with his childhood faith, which has given a good life to his parents and siblings. He has returned to

church, but also attends AA and NA. At the time of our interview, he had been sober for four months. Something had penetrated his self-constructed maze, something other, something that was not him and needed to be “not him” to change the game.

b. *Well-timed Interventions and Events*

As Luhrmann observed, evangelicals often attributed unexpectedly well-timed actions or events to God’s interventions. “God was also understood to speak through people and circumstances. Congregants would describe events that might seem to be coincidences, but they would say that God was speaking to them through these circumstances in order to communicate something to them: that He loved them, or He wanted them to make this decision or that one” (101). Members of AA have their own term for such coincidences: “God Shots.” A “God Shot” happens when something occurs - someone says something profound, events unfold in a particularly serendipitous or beneficial way - and AAs believe it is their higher power helping them.

Eva T., who is 13 years sober and describes herself as “spiritual, but not religious”, told me:

I don't have any religious beliefs, but I do believe that there's some force, some power out there that if I seek advice, if I seek to do God's will—sometimes I call it God, the Goddesses, sometimes I just say the forces of the universe because I really don't know. I mean, I think if there is something, like that it's so beyond gender or a name even for it. But sometimes there's this... what people would call coincidences, things that happen that I can't describe where it seems like there's something [pauses] working and I cannot explain to you what it is, but I just know that if I seek it, it's there. I think it's when people say that there's God within you, I think like the goodness in me [pauses, starts crying a little] when I've been able to have compassion for people or like when my character defects—like I grew up really being taught to hate people and to pretend like they're dead if they ever harm you and like rejecting them and casting them off. I mean that was how I was raised. And for me to have been able to overcome that and have compassion for people and being able to see the errors of my ways, that has to be some kind of divine intervention because that did not come from me, like that did not come from what I was taught. That did not come from what like naturally just comes out of me as a reaction to who I was brought up to be and so I think that's God. The goodness in me when I want to reach out or I care for a person and my desire to be of service in AA -

all those things I think are God, you know? I think that that is like higher power stuff, working in me. Or like when people tell me things and I believe it. It's like this wisdom that exists. It's so nebulous. It's so hard for me to really try to understand it.

Eva is careful to emphasize that these thoughts and feelings are not self-generated, they “did not come from me,” and partly because of their foreignness, she believes they come from God. Luhrmann also describes a similar sense among her evangelical samples that these experiences come from beyond the self. When people tell Eva important things she needs to hear for her recovery and she believes it, she feels it is God sending the message.

Eva went on to tell me about an experience in which she had lost her anger management bracelet, which had become very important to helping her to regulate her emotions - she would stroke it when she got angry. She couldn't find it anywhere. “I just stopped and was like please God, help me, help me find that bracelet, help me... So I was in my car, I'm like just let me go look underneath the seat and it was there. Like, I don't know, like those kind of little coincidences I think— I mean, maybe they are coincidences. I like to think that it's some kind of higher force helping me not be crazy and helping give me peace in my life.”

I asked Natasha, whose weedy seadragon experience we read about earlier, if she had had any other spiritual experiences.

None that particularly strong. And today they look different. Today they're more like the synchronicities that I recognize, that I'm aware of. They're definitely more like I can see the synchronicities or I'll ask God to kind of show up for me today in little things, maybe I can see signs, and I do. It's really stupid, but I have this affinity thing for like lizards, like I love them to death. I think they're amazing. And on days that may be a little difficult, I'll ask God, kind of show me, and all of a sudden lizards will just be everywhere. Like they just appear in like the most random locations and I know he's there. So things like that. Um, but, mostly today, it's just the synchronicities and I know when I'm definitely taken care of.

Natasha's higher power intervenes in the world through what she calls “synchronicities” or what others might call “meaningful coincidences,” populating the world with lizards to

remind her of his presence. Like Luhrmann's evangelical participants, Natasha believes God speaks to her through what others might call coincidences.

Many AAs reported to me that they often felt God speaking most clearly to them through the mouths of other people, particularly people in AA. As Catherine B. said, "Mostly I find God in other people. So I find relief in talking to God and trying to connect to what his will is, but it's much easier to find God in other people and say, 'This is what's going on. This [is] what I'm thinking. What do you see?' And then I can usually, if someone has no ulterior motive, that's when I get the answers." Catherine believes that God speaks to her through the words of ordinary others, just as Natasha and Eva believe God speaks to them through seemingly ordinary experiences, but which they see as special or unusual communication from beyond the ordinary realm.

c. Scripture-Like Experiences

In all three of Luhrmann's evangelical samples, God was often deemed present when a line of scripture came suddenly to mind. One of Luhrmann's participants, for example, reported praying to God and then "it was in my mind very clear to read 2 Thessalonians 3:10. I had no idea what that meant. It just popped into my mind," bringing him "peace and relief" (92). A number of AA members have described a similar phenomenon to me, but with the hallowed words coming not from the Bible, but from AA's Big Book. Don R. describes a recent relapse he went through, just a few weeks before we spoke. He had been sober for 4 years, when he saw a syringe of heroin on a public bus and in a split second injected himself.

DR: And after the drinking and drugging was over, for some strange reason or another, phrases and clichés out of the Big Book started to weigh heavy on my mind. And I was able to re-think the situation all the way through. And I ultimately decided to be honest with

myself, taking suggestions that I've heard in the program about calling somebody. And maybe that will help me. And it did.

JH: Do you remember any of the phrases that came to mind that helped you?

DR: Yeah, the one major phrase that stuck with my mind is a phrase that's written in the Big Book in Chapter 3. It's the very last phrase of that chapter, and it says, "In certain times..." Hold on, let me think for one second. "At certain times, an alcoholic has no mental defense against the first drink. His defense must come from a higher power." And, like I said, I had used for two days. On the last day of using, I drank two beers and I passed out in my apartment. When I woke up the next morning, the first thought on my mind was, "Wow, you relapsed." And then the following thought after that was that phrase out of the Big Book...It's the very last phrase of that chapter. And that phrase rang in my mind long enough and hard enough for me to ultimately make the decision to not give up and give this program another try.

Don's experience highlights the fragility of recovery, but also that his years in AA had taught him what to do should he suddenly have "no mental defense" against drinking and using. The lines from the Big Book that came into his mind helped him confine his relapse to two days, when it could have been years or the rest of his life. Like the evangelicals in Luhrmann's sample, Don describes words, in this case from the Big Book rather than the bible, entering his mind suddenly. A skeptic might say the words entered his mind because his experience triggered him to think about a relevant part of the Big Book. But the way Don describes it, something non-ordinary happened when those words "rang" in his mind. God was speaking to him through his mind using the words of the Big Book. As we have seen repeatedly, AA members regularly report having thoughts that do not seem to be their own or experiencing interventions and events that seem like more than coincidences, which they tend to attribute to their higher power and appraise as spiritual.

A Special AA-Case of the Other Intervening: The "It Being Lifted" Experience

The Big Book and those I interviewed describe an additional experience, an experience of the obsession with alcohol "being lifted," which many attribute to God. These experiences of "the obsession being lifted" are abundant in AA and are what William James

described as “noetic” or providing a new knowledge of profound reassurance to members.

The Big Book describes it as follows:

We will seldom be interested in liquor. If tempted, we recoil from it as from a hot flame. We react sanely and normally, and we will find that this has happened automatically. We will see that our new attitude toward liquor has been given us without any thought or effort on our part. It just comes! That is the miracle of it. We are not fighting it, neither are we avoiding temptation. We feel as though we had been placed in a position of neutrality—safe and protected. We haven’t even sworn off. Instead, the problem has been removed. It does not exist for us. We are neither cocky nor are we afraid. That is our experience. That is how we react so long as we keep in fit spiritual condition. (85)

Wilson himself described a similar experience in Towns hospital of knowing he would never drink again after his spiritual experience. But then five months later he found himself deeply tempted in the lobby of a hotel in Akron, and his reaching out to a fellow alcoholic for help led to the founding of AA. The Big Book notes that this “position of neutrality” can only be maintained by keeping oneself in “fit spiritual condition.” Ralph described his own experience of feeling that his alcohol problem had been lifted as follows:

My surrender and my really emotional experience which made me give up drinking happened in the back seat of the car on August 3rd... In that accident, when, uh, when I was sitting in the back seat of the car, I was overcome with a feeling. I was overcome with emotion of peace. Complete. Complete peace. Yeah. I didn’t stop to think. And I think it probably was of the level of the amygdala. I think it was more at the reptilian level of the brain, you know. The one that deals with flight or fighting. I think it just, I was just overcome with the sensation that I’m no longer going to be drinking, that alcohol, this chapter of my life is finished. And I’m at peace, you know. It was really amazing, the sense of euphoria. The feeling. I still remember it. It still gets me, that scintillated feeling of really lightness and of freedom. I know that was really survival instinct kicking in. I think it was probably at the cellular level. Very visceral. That I’m done killing myself.

I asked Ralph if he would call that a spiritual experience and he says “yeah,” but then I asked if he would attribute it to something metaphysical and he says “no.” His friends would tell him it was “the grace of God,” but he prefers to call it “survival instinct.”

Catherine B. 22 years sober at the time of our interview, also described having the feeling of wanting to drink “lifted”:

I wanted to drink every day for a year-a-half and every day at the end of the day I called my sponsor and cried that I wanted to drink. Every single day. And I really, I thought about drinking all the time. And, one day, I was going to bed, I was getting ready to call my sponsor. I don't know why, I called her at the end of the day every day and I realized I hadn't thought about drinking that day. I'd forgot. And it was so profound to me, that this had happened, because I lived in this horrible single apartment... and I was, you know, alone in this one little room and I would just, it was hard. I had no car and it was such a miracle to me that it had happened. It was a miracle to all of us.

Eventually the feelings of self-hatred that had plagued her for most of her life began to also be lifted, 21 years into sobriety, which she describes as a gradual spiritual experience:

I had this old message of self-hate that I just, I hate me, and over time, I really saw how that doesn't serve me at all, and really I'm so lovely and so that, I started practicing that idea, that I'm just lovely and I could still have all the same faults and troubles but I'm going to be lovely now. And that, to not have that self-hating tape going all the time and instead to have this idea of I'm just lovely, which I keep, I actually had it constantly for a few months and then sometimes I let it go and I take some of the old tapes back, but then I, but I go back to that. And that was an evolution for me and it only happened last last year is when, but I would call that a spiritual experience. That is a psychic change in who I am.

Plagued, like many of her fellows, by near constant negative self-talk – what some members playfully call KFUK (see Chapter 1) – Catherine, finally after two decades in the program, has begun to feel that she is “lovely.” For her, both the desire to drink, and the underlying feelings of self-hatred, have been lifted by spiritual experiences through her AA work, the first sudden, and the second gradual.

Conclusion

As Luhrmann says in her preface to *How God Becomes Real*, “When I ponder why faith endures, I am struck by how little our theories consider two straightforward features of religion. First, religion is a practice in which people go to effort to make contact with an invisible other. Second, people who are religious want change. They want to feel differently than they do” (Luhrmann 2020, ix). Unknowingly (maybe) Luhrmann is offering perhaps the most simple and profound description of addiction I have heard yet: “They want to feel

differently than they do.” Perhaps it is a description of the human condition in general, felt more intensely by those of us who suffer with mental health, no matter what the cause. In a footnote to a letter to AA founder Bill Wilson, Carl Jung remarked “spiritus contra spiritum,” meaning, by his own formula, that religious experience worked against alcoholism: “In essence the alcoholic somehow mistakenly believes he can soothe this yearning for wholeness/God with alcohol” (see Chapter 1). What Luhrmann’s theory of kindling suggests, when applied to a sample of alcoholics recovering in AA, is that one need not wait around for this yearning for wholeness to be satisfied by some external force. Rather, human beings might co-create or “kindle” such experiences of an external Other or others in agentic ways that can bring about real effects, namely as escape from what one AA member calls the “guillotine” of alcoholism, to a life, which the Big Book describes, as “beyond our wildest dreams.”

Future experimental investigation of both proclivity in the form of absorption and cognitive training through AA practices is warranted not only to advance our understanding of spiritual experience, but also to understand why AA may work better for some alcoholics than others, and to assess whether specific ways of interpreting the steps (as advanced already by atheist members) or alternative treatment modalities are particularly warranted for alcoholics lacking in certain proclivities or amenability to training. The AA slogan “it works if you work it,” while motivating to some, may not hold true for everyone, and “fake it ’til you make it” might actually never work for someone who is just not able to “make God real” in Luhrmann’s terms. In the conclusion, I will make the argument that the ways in which Americans are taught to think about our minds, as well as our wills (or will power), may make us more susceptible to developing alcoholism and other forms of addiction, and may

act as a hurdle to recovery that is overcome, in part, by adopting a new culture with a more interconnected sense of self in the AA program. We will also explore some of the recent advances in the cognitive sciences and 4E understandings of cognition that might help to explain how such processes of imaginatively ameliorating suffering might work in naturalistic terms.

Conclusions and Future Inquiry: Toward Explanation

In this dissertation, I set out to answer what, on its surface, might appear to be a simple question: How does the spiritual component of AA work to help some alcoholics get and stay sober? I chose to investigate the spiritual component because those I knew in the 12-step programs told me quite clearly and emphatically that the spiritual aspect of AA was the critical part, upon which all the other parts depended. When I formally began my dissertation research, interviewing mostly current members of AA primarily located in the great Los Angeles area, attending open-AA meetings, reading AA literature, and eventually conducting historical research in archives associated with AA, this contention - that spirituality was the critical component for most alcoholics in recovery AA - became overwhelmingly clear. What I learned, though, was that by design AA allowed members to develop a relationship with a “God of our own understanding,” and that this God or Higher Power varied widely among members. I also learned that by making a conscious split with evangelical Christianity, and becoming a “spiritual rather than religious” program, AA allowed individuals struggling with alcoholism in the United States and eventually all over the world, to practice whatever religion, spirituality, or non-religious worldview they felt would help them. This radical pluralism of AA - the effect of many people of different faiths or no faith at all helping one another interpret God and the world around them - and its impact on the current religious landscape deserves further study. But what struck me, was that, despite this religious and spiritual diversity, the way that both my AA sample and the AA literature described how spirituality *worked* was remarkably similar, and might be best captured in the concept of “ego collapse at depth,” as Bill Wilson summarized William James in a letter to Carl Jung (Wilson 1961; see Chapter 1). Somehow, the AA program allowed successful members to

have what they resoundingly described as a “spiritual experience” in which their sense of self, a self which had been “a problem” to them, as fellow-sufferer St. Augustine once lamented, was radically altered through an “entire psychic change.”

My historical and ethnography study of Alcoholics Anonymous has led me to conclude that the spiritual component of Alcoholics Anonymous likely changes the self-construal of alcoholics from independent to interdependent allowing them to feel a part of a group of others and in relationship to Other, and that this reorientation of self is healing and is protective against alcoholism. There is considerable support from psychology to suggest that socio-cultural processes can affect people’s sense of self. In this conclusion, I want to highlight some of this work to suggest a direction for future research that might allow us to better understand how this transformation can be understood from a naturalistic perspective, and then perhaps replicated to help others who suffer with similar problems related to their sense of self.

In 1972, Gregory Bateson offered a cybernetic theory of how the AA program works that, perhaps not surprisingly given his widely felt influence in many fields, presaged the current 4E model of cognition: embodied, enacted, embedded and extended (Carney 2020; Soliman et al 2015). The 4E model of cognition aims to correct the dualistic nature of previous scientific inquiry into cognition as seeming to occur in brains separate from the body and the world. Research in many fields increasingly indicates that human cognition is *embedded* in the intersection of brain, body, and world and *enacted* as these continuously act upon one another, meaning human thinking is *extended* beyond the confines of the brain or sometimes even the individual. Bateson argued that the elements of recovery suggested by AA created an extended and connected self that was capable of more than it was in its

original solitary state. Bateson was one of many early proponents of understanding the mind as embedded in the body and the environment/world, rather than somehow separate from either as had been the longstanding claim of Cartesian dualism, an extreme form of which he argued afflicts the alcoholic:

In sum, I shall argue that the 'sobriety' of the alcoholic is characterized by an unusually disastrous variant of the Cartesian dualism, the division between Mind and Matter, or, in this case, between conscious will, or 'self,' and the remainder of the personality. Bill W.'s stroke of genius was to break up with the first 'step' the structuring of this dualism. Philosophically viewed, this first step is not a surrender; it is simply a change in epistemology, a change in how to know about the personality-in-the-world. And, notably, the change is from an incorrect to a more correct epistemology. (442)

Bateson contends that this dualistic view of the self as separate from the body and the world, condemns the alcoholic to a competitive, symmetrical stance with other, in which their alcoholism can only escalate. It is only by giving up this battle with other, whether that be the bottle, other people, or even God, that the alcoholic has hope of getting sober and living a harmonious life in a complementary relationship with others. Admitting "powerlessness" in step one, Bateson claimed, shifted the alcoholic from a symmetrical to complementary relationship with other. The out-of-control use of alcohol, rather than existing outside of the self, where it is resisted in a futile symmetrical battle, is subsumed inside the self by the admission that one is "an alcoholic" in AA. This saves the alcoholic from "an obsessive acceptance of a challenge, a repudiation of the proposition 'I cannot.'" (447) In the symmetrical relationship with alcohol, the alcoholic can achieve sobriety for short periods of time, but as soon as this happens, they let their guard down, forgetting their vigilance against a deadly opponent. "Gradually the focus of the battle changes, and the alcoholic finds himself committed to a new and more deadly type of symmetrical conflict," Bateson wrote. "He must now prove that the bottle cannot kill him. His 'head is bloody but unbowed.' He is still the 'captain of his soul'— for what it's worth" (449).

Bateson ultimately argues that “the religious conversion of the alcoholic when saved by AA can be described as a dramatic shift from this symmetrical habit, or epistemology, to an almost purely complementary view of his relationship to others and to the universe or God” (449). My ethnographic findings in this dissertation would seem to confirm Bateson’s theoretical contention that “In the very literal sense, alcohol supposedly makes the individual see himself as and act as *a part of* the group. That is, it enables complementarity in the relationships which surround him.’ (451) This “collapse of ego at depth,” as Wilson and many contemporary AAs call it, allows the recovering alcoholic to experience being ‘a part of’ something greater than oneself, the Group of Drunks or God as others, and for some, in relationship to God as Other. In paraphrasing and explaining Step One of AA, Bateson wrote:

There is a Power greater than the self. Cybernetics would go somewhat further and recognize that the ‘self’ as ordinarily understood is only a small part of a much larger trial-and-error system which does the thinking, acting, and deciding. This system includes all the informational pathways which are relevant at any given moment to any given decision. The ‘self’ is a false reification of an improperly delimited part of this much larger field of interlocking processes. Cybernetics also recognizes that two or more persons-any group of persons-may together form such a thinking-and-acting system. (452)

Bateson extends his argument beyond individual alcoholic pride “to show that this principle of their behavior is derived from the strange dualistic epistemology characteristic of Occidental civilization” (446). Writing in 1972, he implies here that entire cultures can be in “error” when it comes to their concept of self. A more nuanced, modern view would suggest that all cultures and individuals are multivalent and contain a range of epistemological positions. In 1991, social psychologists Hazel Rose Markus and Shinobu Kitayama, argued that self-construal varies across cultures, with most cultures in the West conceiving of the self as independent, while most Eastern (and some other) cultures express an interdependent concept of the self. Though they introduce what at times seems like overly dichotomous and

simplistic thinking with respect to East and West, they also note that interdependent subcultures exist within the West, citing Quakers and rural communities as examples (228), though one might add there is a long tradition in Christianity of a more interdependent model of the self. According to Markus and Kitayama, the interdependent self extends beyond the boundaries of the typical independent self, encompassing important others. “We suggest that for many cultures of the world, the Western notion of the self as an entity containing significant dispositional attributes, and as detached from context, is simply not an adequate description of selfhood. Rather, in many construals, the self is viewed as *interdependent* with the surrounding context, and it is the ‘other’ or the ‘self-in-relation-to-other’ that is focal in individual experience” (225). Though this independent vs. interdependent typology differs somewhat from Bateson’s description of the embattled vs. recovering alcoholic self as symmetrical or complementary, Markus and Kitayama likewise argue that the interdependent self-construal “is in opposition to the Cartesian, dualistic tradition that characterizes Western thinking and which the self is separated from the object and the natural world” (227). Both Bateson and Markus & Kitayama, explore some of the more negative results of the mind vs. matter dualism, though Bateson is a more outspoken critic, warning of apocalypse if humankind continues trafficking in dichotomous paradigms (Bateson 1972, 455), while Markus & Kitayama, at least in their foundational paper on “Culture and Self,” are more descriptive and less proscriptive. They are, nonetheless, very attuned to the positive aspects of interdependent societies, though perhaps less attuned to the negative side of interdependence (codependency, for example). Citing the work of feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan, they conclude:

Being dependent does not invariably mean being helpless, powerless, or without control. It often means being interdependent. It thus signifies a conviction that one is able to have an effect on others and is willing to be responsive to others and to become engaged with them. In other words, there is an alternative to selfishness (which implies the exclusion of others) besides selflessness (which is to imply the exclusion of the self or self-sacrifice): There is a self defined in relationship to others (247).

“A self defined in relationship to others” is, I argue, the goal of the AA spiritual process.

Going to meetings and working the Steps *both* play a critical role in helping the alcoholic to change their self-construal from independent to interdependent, whether sitting in a room full of others who understand, or praying and meditating to bring forth the assistance of a higher power in the ongoing, lifelong work of staying sober.

Participation in AA changes one’s theory of self, or one’s “self-construal” as Markus and Kitayama would put it. A theory of one’s own self, how it works, what it is capable of, how it is to be kept healthy - these are questions at the heart of recovery from alcoholism in AA, but also in learning to live with any mental illness. For some, such as those on the autism spectrum, the difficulty theorizing what is happening in others’ minds may be more at issue in causing disability or difficulty. But for some people, metacognition, or one’s own thoughts about or experiences of our self in relation to others and the world, can be central to our problems. As Tanya Luhrmann has pointed out in conversation with Marcus and Kitayama’s work, the Western idea of mind as an impenetrable citadel can make some experiences of God more difficult and less likely (Luhrmann 85). I would take this one step further to argue that the ways in which Americans are taught to think about *ourselves*, our minds, our wills (and will power), may make us more susceptible to developing alcoholism and other forms of addiction, and may act as a hurdle to recovery that is overcome, in part, by adopting a new culture with a more interdependent sense of self in the AA program.

As one of a number of future projects in further exploration of the relationship between self-construal and addiction, I would like to collaborate with a cognitive scientist, to conduct a longitudinal experiment to test construals of self in AA, ideally prior to treatment in AA, and then at various milestones of sobriety. Alternatively, we could investigate how construals of self differ between those actively experiencing alcoholism and those who have been sober for particular amounts of time in AA. We could add a control group of those who have remained sober through other means, which might shed light on how programs other than AA, such as non-religious programs and explicitly evangelical Christian programs, also may have an effect, though perhaps different in some ways, on one's understanding of self. Through semi-structured interviewing, I plan to ask subjects at T1 and T2 (and beyond) about their concept of self to elicit detailed responses, that can then be supplemented by psychological scales selected and administered by my colleague. This work would no doubt benefit from further insights from recent developments in the cognitive science of religion on the relationship between concepts of self and religious transformation, as well as from more recent work on cross-cultural understandings of self in many disciplines and their implications for individual health and well-being. If it is indeed true that one's self-construal can make a difference in whether or not one develops alcoholism or is able to recover from it, and that these construals differ across cultures and can be changed through certain practices, self-construal should be studied as part of any biopsychosocial model of addiction (Skewes et al. 2013). I also wish to explore in further work the links between alcoholism and addiction rates in the United States, construals of self, and cultural pressures on the self that may contribute to psychological suffering and the use of substances, rather than collective political action, in an attempt to relieve it.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Survey Instrument

Participant #: _____

AA Research Survey

Please write in, circle, or check your responses to the following questions. While the researcher will know your identity and link your answers here to data collected in the one-on-one interview, she will never disclose your identity (or any identifying information about you) when reporting the results of this research. Your answers to this survey will be stored securely and no one but the researcher will have access to them.

1. In approximately what year (and month, if you remember) did you attend your first AA meeting?

2. In approximately what year (and month, if you remember) did you attend your first AA meeting *with the intent to recover* (meaning you were not required to be there or going for someone else, but because you yourself wanted to get sober)?

3. Do you currently attend AA meetings regularly (approximately once a week at minimum)?
Yes ☐ No ☐

If you answered no to question #3, skip to question #7.

4. If yes, for about how long have you attended AA meetings regularly (in your most recent period of commitment to the program)?

5. In the last 30 days, how many meetings have you attended per week on average?

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14 or more	

6. Do you currently have a home meeting (one particular meeting you attend almost every week)?

Yes ☐ No ☐

7. Are you currently working with a sponsor?

Yes ☐ No ☐

8. If yes, for approximately how long have you been working with your current sponsor?

9. Approximately how often do you speak to your sponsor?

Multiple times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week

Every two weeks

Once a month

Less than once a month

10. Are you currently serving as a sponsor?

Yes

No

11. How many people do you sponsor?

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8 or more

12. Do you consider yourself an alcoholic?

Yes

No

Undecided

13. Are you currently sober – that is abstaining from both alcohol and drug use?

Yes

No

14. If so, approximately how many days/months/years have you been sober?

Please answer the following questions about your drinking habits *during the period in your life in which you were drinking alcohol most frequently*.

15. How often did you have a drink containing alcohol?

Never

Monthly or less

2-4 times a month

2-3 times a week

4 or more times a week

16. How many standard drinks containing alcohol did you have on a typical day?

1 or 2

3 or 4

5 or 6

7 to 9

10 or more

17. How often did you have six or more drinks on one occasion?

Never

Less than monthly

Monthly

Weekly

Daily or almost daily

18. If you are currently sober, how many other periods of 30 days or more of sobriety have you experienced in your life?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

19. If you are currently sober, how many relapses have you experienced since you started attending AA meetings *with the intent to recover*?

20. Approximately when did you last experience a craving for alcohol?

21. What is your race and/or ethnicity?

22. What is your gender?

Female

Male

Other: _____

23. Do you identify as LBGT?

Yes

No

Unsure

24. In what year were you born? _____

25. What religious or spiritual tradition(s), if any, were you affiliated with as a child? (Please be as specific as possible. For example, if Christian, please specify whether you were Catholic or Protestant. If Protestant, please identify which denomination(s) you belonged to.)

26. Are you currently affiliated with any religious or spiritual traditions?

Yes

No

27. If yes, which one(s)?

28. Besides your childhood and current affiliations, please list any other religious or spiritual traditions you have been affiliated with in your life:

29. In a few sentences, how would you define religion?

30. In a few sentences, how would you define spirituality?

31. Which of the following statements best describes you right now (Check one):

- ☐ I'm spiritual but not religious
- ☐ I'm spiritual and religious
- ☐ I'm religious but not spiritual
- ☐ I'm neither religious nor spiritual
- ☐ None of these statements apply to me

32. How old were you the first time you tried to stop or cut down on your drinking but found that you couldn't?

33. Have you ever been addicted to any drugs?

Yes No Maybe/Unsure

34. Do you currently have an AA service commitment?

Yes No

35. Have you ever had an AA service commitment?

Yes No

Please read the following excerpt from AA's "Big Book" (Appendix II: Spiritual Experience, p. 567)

In the first few chapters a number of sudden revolutionary changes are described. Though it was not our intention to create such an impression, many alcoholics have nevertheless concluded that in order to recover they must acquire an immediate and overwhelming "God-consciousness" followed at once by a vast change in feeling and outlook.

Among our rapidly growing membership of thousands of alcoholics such transformations, though frequent, are by no means the rule. Most of our experiences are what the psychologist William James calls the "educational variety" because they develop slowly over a period of time.

36. How many *sudden* spiritual experiences had you had *before* you started attending AA meetings *with the intent to recover*?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

37. How many *sudden* spiritual experiences have you had *since* you began attending AA meetings *with the intent to recover*?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

38. How many *educational* (gradual) spiritual experiences had you had *before* you started attending AA meetings *with the intent to recover*?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

39. How many *educational* (gradual) spiritual experiences have you had *since* you began attending AA meetings *with the intent to recover*?

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 or more

40. Please briefly describe any spiritual experiences (whether sudden or educational) that have played a role in your recovery.

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

41. Are you currently working the steps?

Yes No

42. If yes, what step are you currently on?

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12

43. How many times have you worked the steps all the way through (completed steps 1 through 12)?

0 1 2 3 4 5 or more times

44. Do you currently have a relationship with a higher power?

Yes No

45. If yes, what term(s) do you use most often to refer to this higher power? (Circle all that apply)

Higher Power
God
Goddess
Allah
Creator
Buddha
The Universe
Jesus
Energy
Yahweh

Vishnu
Karma
The Source

Other(s): _____

46. In a few sentences, describe what your higher power is like:

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

47. If you had a higher power or powers as a child, what term(s) did you use most often to refer to this higher power? (Circle all that apply)

Higher Power
God
Goddess
Allah
Creator
Buddha
The Universe
Jesus
Energy
Yahweh
Vishnu
Karma
The Source

Other(s): _____

48. In a few sentences, describe what your higher power or powers *as a child* were like:

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

For questions 49-55, please distinguish as much as you can between prayer and meditation.

49. If you currently have a higher power, approximately how often do you pray to your higher power?

Multiple times a day
Once a day
A few times a week
Once a week

A few times a month
Once a month
A few times a year
Once a year or less
Never

50. When you pray, do you get a response from your higher power?

Always Sometimes Rarely Never Unsure

51. What is this response like? (Check all that apply)

☐ I hear my higher power saying words or sentences in my mind
☐ I experience an unusual feeling of peace
☐ My higher power directs my thinking to certain ideas or actions
☐ I hear my higher power speak to me through other people

Other (please describe):

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

52. Please briefly describe how you pray to your higher power. What prompts you to do it? What are some of the things you tend to say? Do you say them aloud or in your mind? How do you position your body? Where do you do it?

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

53. How often do you meditate?

Multiple times a day
Once a day
A few times a week
Once a week
A few times a month
Once a month
A few times a year
Once a year or less
Never

54. If you meditate, which of the following terms would you use to describe your meditation practice? (Check all that apply)

☐ Buddhist
☐ Secular Mindfulness (has roots in Buddhism, but not religious)
☐ Christian Centering Prayer

☐ Transcendental Meditation
☐ Mantra-focused
☐ Breath-focused
☐ Guided
 Other terms you would use:

55. Please briefly describe how you meditate. What prompts you to do it? How do you position your body? Where do you do it? How do you direct your attention? What is the experience like?

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

56. How important are the following activities in helping you maintain or work toward your sobriety?
1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important

Working with my sponsor

1 2 3 4 5

Working with my sponsee(s)

1 2 3 4 5

1 = Not Important, 5 = Very Important

Prayer

1 2 3 4 5

Meditation

1 2 3 4 5

Attending Meetings

1 2 3 4 5

Friendship outside of meetings with other AA members

1 2 3 4 5

Working the steps

1 2 3 4 5

Reading AA literature

1 2 3 4 5

Working with newcomers

1 2 3 4 5

Service

1 2 3 4 5

57. In the last 30 days, have you engaged in any morning and/or evening routine(s) related to your recovery?

Yes

No

58. If yes, please describe the routine(s) and how often you engage in it/them:

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

59. Please describe any other spiritual practices you engage in that are important to your recovery:

(use blank page at end if you need more space)

60. How often do you read official AA literature?

Multiple times a day

Once a day

A few times a week

Once a week

A few times a month

Once a month

A few times a year

Once a year or less

Never

Thank you very much for your participation! Please mail your completed survey back ASAP in the envelope provided.

Please use the following space for any answers that did not fit above. Please write the number of the question you are continuing to answer:

Appendix 2: Example of Phenomenological Interviewing

Herb K. (HK): At ten years of sobriety when I had this epiphany concerning the set aside experience and that my tradition had prevented me from having a relationship with the God of my understanding, when I took the third step, I was meditating on it and I was *very* aware of standing on the edge of a cliff, the bridge of reason, all right, thinking the existential leap of faith that I was going to now, 3rd Step, make a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God. I'm on the edge of the cliff. My reason has brought me this far and I can see the shore over there, a relationship with the mystery. I can see it. And I'm now going to sprint over there and I just absolutely was completely aware that I had been transported, all right? Held by loving hands and brought from the bridge of reason to the shore of faith. And I was, probably 30 seconds or three minutes, I have no idea how long it lasted, but I was completely aware of being held and being transported, that it wasn't me at all.

Jennifer Hahn (JH): Can you talk about how that felt?

HK: Oh my god, I'm getting choked up even thinking about it right now. Well I was experiencing it until I started thinking about it.

JH: Sure.

HK: And as soon as I became aware of it and began thinking about it, I came out of it. Actually thinking God maybe I've had too much coffee this morning. [Laughs]

JH: [Laughs] I love it.

HK: [Laughs] And yet looking back I know exactly that that was a moment of grace that had accumulated over time and just was one of those gifts that you have.

JH: Um, but going back to those few moments, like—

HK: Yeah.

JH: - were you, where were you, to start?

HK: Uh, in my bedroom.

JH: Okay.

HK: Yeah.

JH: And you were, you were doing the third step, were you saying the third step prayer, or—

HK: I was in a meditation preparing to say the third step prayer, my version of it, I'd written out my own third step prayer.

JH: Oh cool. Cool. And do you, um, your awareness, were you aware of the room around you or were you more—

HK: No I completely was taken to a different place.

JH: Okay.

HK: Yeah.

JH: Yeah. So you, you had a sudden spiritual—

HK: Oh, there's no question.

JH: Yeah.

HK: No, no. There's no question. It was one of the mountaintop experiences.

JH: Yeah.

HK: It wasn't 20 minutes -

JH: Yeah.

HK: But it was, I know it wasn't 30 seconds.

JH: Yeah.

HK: It felt so fast that it could have been, but I'm sure it was 3, 4 minutes, something like that.

JH: Yeah. And did you, were there images associated with it or—

HK: Just those hands.

JH: Okay, so you saw—

HK: No no no, the hands were part of the image. It was not seeing an image, but the feeling and awareness of being carried over.

JH: Okay.

HK: Yeah. It wasn't -

JH: So not visual, more like a -

HK: I don't know what it was.

JH: [Laughs] Yeah, it's hard to describe -

HK: It certainly wasn't a visual as I'm visualizing it right now. It was an awareness and experience of being transported and I had the intuition that Ohhhh, I'm as powerless over making this decision as I am over alcohol and unmanageability. That I'm as powerless over my spiritual life as I am over alcohol, right? Now, humility about powerlessness, but gratitude concerning the gift, they were all there at that time.

JH: Hmm. Cool. And was this your first time working the steps or that second time.

HK: No, this was the third time.

JH: Third time, okay. And this was the most transformative time that you talked about or?

HK: Well, it was transformative—

JH: Yeah.

HK: I wouldn't measure it against the other two because 1988 was the first time I was really changed to being aware of my narcissism and wanting to do something about it and the second time I became aware of the delusion of my old thinking and I'd never seen that before—

JH: Yeah.

HK: - and this third time I saw the uh, the impediment and obstacles of the information and the experiences that I had, that I held, coming into this process and that's when I had that set aside prayer—

JH: Oh cool.

HK: —and the experience of at least asking of it to be set aside, yeah.

JH: Yeah, cool.