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Folk Talking, Folk Listening:

How Alcoholics Anonymous Works

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in Culture and Performance

by

Maggi Michel

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Folk Talking, Folk Listening:

How Alcoholics Anonymous Works

by

Maggi Michel

Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Performance

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Michael Owen Jones, Chair

This performance-centered examination of over twenty-seven years of fieldwork in the study of folk narrating practices in Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) in Los Angeles emphasizes folk listening as performative and as an important mechanism for change in recovering alcoholics. Analysis of customary performance of the A.A. folk repertoire of slogans and sayings offers a method of interpretation of these "bullet points of recovery" and employs that method to answer questions about spirituality and problematic use of the term "God." A folkloristic view of the folk listening component of narrating practice examines special narrating forms called "speaking" and "sharing" and shows listening skills as essential to empathic connections in this mutual-help group. Neural implications of repetition, imitation, high-emotion storytelling, and identity development are explored as functions of mirror cells, hippocampal

plasticity, and the role of the amygdala in memory. Recovery outcomes for individuals who assemble A.A. folklore and folk practices to build connections to others are presented in light of R. Georges and M.O. Jones' concept of folklore as a personal resource.

The dissertation of Maggi Michel is approved.

Donald J. Cosentino

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Michael Owen Jones, Committee Chair

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2012

Dedication

Kind Sophia, who listened until I got my heart right

Michael Owen Jones, whose brilliance is rivaled only by his kindness

Stephen Yenser, who sees beyond sight and knows the best words in the best order

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I know that in the next few weeks I will recall more names I should have listed here. Forgive me, please, if yours is one of them. Despite the failure of my memory at the moment of making this list, I appreciate you none the less and thank you for your generosity.

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Review of “The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture, Volume IV: Myth, Manners, and Memory” forthcoming in Western Folklore.

Review of Elaine Lawless’ “Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative” in Western Folklore 2004, Vol. 63; No. 4, pages 331-332

"Sniffing Out the Truth: A Close Textual Analysis of Faulkner's 'Barn Burning'" published in Westwind 2000. Winner of Vice-Provost Award for Best in Issue

POETRY

“Tephramantica” Goblin Fruit, Autumn 2011
“Architecture” Chaffey Review, 2011
“Where Raw Words Come From” Thunderclap, 2011
“Uncradled” Calyx, 2009
“The Green of Your Startling Eyes,” “Orthopterous,” “Nasty Little Saint,” Live Oak Review, 2009
“Between Battles” Goblin Fruit, Fall 2008
“What You Have Bricked Up In the Walls” in The Louisiana Review, Vol. 6, Spring 2008
“St. Fragile, Pray For Us" Bang! New Fiction 1998

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Chapter One: Introduction

One afternoon as I was typing this work with the radio on, the disk jockey mentioned in an off-hand tone that the singer of the song he was about to play had died at the age of forty-six of an overdose. He announced the name of the band and I stopped typing mid-word, shocked. I knew him. His wife had been the reason I became a member of Alcoholics Anonymous twenty-four years earlier. In the intervening years I had lost touch with the hard-living musicians I knew then; he had been one of the best and blazed the brightest. I said a quick prayer for her and hoped his end had been easy.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the harmful use of alcohol is responsible for four percent of deaths per year worldwide and is "the third highest risk factor for disease and disability" (WHO 2011). Many who misuse alcohol cannot stop or control their habit of drinking to excess, leading to a condition many call alcoholism and construe as a disease. Investigators in many disciplines, largely the behavioral and medical sciences, conduct research into treatment for alcoholism using quantitative methods and small numbers of subjects over short time periods. Their research questions focus tightly on atomistic elements of alcoholism, abstinence, treatment, recovery, and relapse. They examine genetics, neuroplasticity, neural networks (such as the reward system), psychology of addiction, and more. Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), a worldwide no-cost mutual-help organization with membership in the millions, has achieved some success since its founding in 1935 in Akron, Ohio. Investigators often include members of A.A. as subjects in research projects in attempts to extract working principles from A.A. practices. A coterie of researchers studies stories they hear told among recovering alcoholics in A.A. They analyze two forms of A.A. stories in terms of worldview,

identity, structure, and other rhetorical concerns, presuming that these stories are the key to A.A. recovery.

My investigation of recovery draws on my active membership and continuous sobriety in A.A. over the last twenty-four years in a western section of Los Angeles County and on my training as a folklorist at the University of California Los Angeles. I regard A.A. groups as folk groups and A.A. lore, practice, and repertoire as folklore, the most prominent feature of which is A.A. folk narrating. My investigation takes the full context of all A.A. narrating – both speaking and listening components – and the performance context of the narrating as data. I use folkloristic methods to analyze A.A. repertoire and narrating events to reveal how A.A. works to produce an observable and measurable change in human behavior in those who work the action steps of the A.A. program over time.

A.A. members participate in many narrating events, from daily phone calls to weekly meetings to large regional conferences, over the course of maintaining months and years of abstinence. They follow recommendations and suggestions for reading, writing, and meeting with others and learn to speak and listen in ways distinct to A.A. as they participate in a lively discourse about how to grow in sobriety. Sobriety, the basis of which is continuous abstinence, is prized as a more mature, stable, compassionate, fulfilled, and spiritual way of life. By far the overwhelming majority of the time spent "working the program" of A.A. is spent listening; a smaller portion, talking; a tiny portion, listening. Finally, the least amount of time spent by most alcoholics is spent reading A.A. literature.

Alcoholics enter A.A. damaged by harmful use of alcohol, the trauma of chaotic and sometimes dangerous events under the influence of alcohol, and by the social isolation and shame of actions driven by the use and desire to use alcohol. As years of participation in A.A.

accrue, these individuals heal and change into what one A.A. member calls "workable human beings." An examination of what A.A. narrators say, what A.A. listeners hear, and how the speaking and listening change them might help us understand how that change happens, and, further, the limitations of the changes A.A. participation can wreak.

My writing about the A.A. program here is, in a way, performative; that is, by drawing from what A.A. members themselves narrate, I relate the story of A.A. in Los Angeles in the way that any attendee would learn it. Many resources exist to learn about A.A. from archived material through the website maintained by the World Service Office of A.A. online at AA.org. The full text of the basic text used by members, called Alcoholics Anonymous, is online; in two separate sections, it contains a more detailed account of what is written below.

The Founding of the Alcoholics Anonymous Program

The founding of the A.A. program dates from early 1935, when a stockbroker, Bill Wilson, clinging to the hope that a solution given to him by a friend, Ebby Thatcher, would keep him sober sat down and told his story to Robert Smith, known as Dr. Bob. Bill spoke of his history of desperate drinking, the months of recovery he had achieved after Thatcher's visit in November, and of his practice of a simple program of spiritual action, guided by Thatcher. Dr. Bob stopped drinking that day and within weeks he and Bill were working together in Akron, Ohio, forming the first of what later became known as A.A. groups.

In the first five years, the A.A. program spread by word of mouth. Bill, with help from some other members, wrote a book describing the problem of alcoholism and the program of action, illustrated by a set of stories of recovery in the second half of the book. The book's title, Alcoholics Anonymous, gave the groups their name. Fashioned out of thick paper because Bill

said that these alcoholics would want to know they were getting their money's worth, early members called it "the Big Book," or "the book," as it is still called. Sales of the book carried the message of a treatment that worked and the groups grew in size and spread to more locations. An article about the organization written by Jack Alexander appeared in the Saturday Evening Post in 1941; the overwhelming response nearly snowed under the still-fledgling group with requests for help from all over the country. The A.A. members worked ceaselessly to answer every request and A.A. expanded exponentially.

One of the sites of expansion was located in Los Angeles, California, where a Big Book arrived in the hands of Kaye M. She appears in the story told by A.A. members in Los Angeles of their beginnings.

The Founding of Alcoholics Anonymous in Los Angeles County

Over the years, I have heard little narrating about early members[1] of A.A. meetings in Los Angeles. A few older members have mentioned that it different it was "back then." The most usual narrating was to make a joke about the coffee being better now. One reason for this omission is that each A.A. narrator learns to tell his or her own story, which rarely includes experiences of A.A. before the 1980s. Another reason is that A.A. members narrate that they consider themselves to be part of a world-wide fellowship, something that transcends geo-political borders. Many A.A. members who travel take special delight in visiting meetings in

[1] I met one of the first members in Los Angeles A.A. in 1995 at a San Diego convention for the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of A.A. He was an elderly man, well past his 80th birthday, and the featured speaker for a crowd whose numbers topped fifty-thousand. I met him later; pretending affection, he hugged me and then grabbed me where he shouldn't have. As A.A. narrators say, "We are not saints."

other places and, upon their return, narrating about the similarities and the sense of unity they feel with all A.A. members.

By chance, though, I happened across a pamphlet entitled "How A.A. Came to Los Angeles," written by the Southern California Archive Committee (SCAC), that enshrines the history of the founding of the A.A. program in Los Angeles (SCAC 1986) I had never seen it before, but the fellow who gave it to me told me that the L.A. Central Office keeps it in print and sells it. I later verified that Central Office does, indeed, keep it in print. This surprised me, as I had never heard the contents or any part of them narrated.

The pamphlet tells a great story, vivid, exciting, with moments of drama and joy. I researched its contents further, however, and found that archived historical documents, such as a letter from Kaye M. to Bill Wilson(Miller 1947), do not match the story. There are facts omitted and facts told slant that, if told and told correctly, would change the import of the pamphlet significantly. The story as printed is shaped to valorize a particular "lineage" of individuals associated with certain early A.A. members and Bill Wilson and to endorse a particular tradition of "rough" and dictatorial sponsorship. This is an example of folklore as a revival. The folk history is no longer being told in A.A. meetings (and perhaps never was in this way), and therefore is in danger of "dying out." Some A.A. members would like to keep certain parts of the story, told in a particular way, alive in the repertoire. They "revive" the story and reproduce it, hoping it will live again in the lively stream of A.A. narrating, because they conceive it to be meaningful, relevant, or appealing" (Georges and Jones 1995).

Alcoholics Anonymous in Los Angeles County at Present

In the greater portion of A.A. in Los Angeles, alcoholics can obtain low- to no-cost (most attendees drop a dollar in the basket to help pay rent for the room) compassionate treatment for alcoholism through widely available group meetings and one-to-one help from its members. Long-term participation is encouraged and supported with the express aim of creating serenity and sobriety, that is, working the steps to obtain a spiritual condition that can heal the negative consequences to mental and behavioral health so that the recovering abstinent alcoholic develops the ability to enjoy life and intimacy with others and achieve greater resilience to the risk of relapse.

The A.A. program is not primarily a treatment for acute alcoholism. It is a treatment for chronic alcoholism. Anyone is welcome to attend "open" meetings, even if intoxicated. However, most open meetings specify that only those with twenty-four hours of abstinence may participate in narrating. Closed meetings (those restricted to A.A. members) ask that a participant state his or her name and attest to a "desire to stop drinking," pursuant to the third of A.A.'s Twelve Traditions (suggestions for group practice shaped in A.A.'s early days by the calamities and experiments-gone-wrong of the founders) that guide the conduct of A.A. groups. The Third Tradition sets the only requirement for membership as a "desire to stop drinking." Most members say, simply, "My name is ___, and I am an alcoholic." Others use the Tradition's wording or a variant such as "…and I have a desire to stop drinking," for example.

A.A. members act according to traditions and customs, some of which are recorded in literature or ephemera. By far the greater amount of information about A.A. traditions and customs is encoded in A.A. narrating. A.A. members' anarchy, love of innovation, and tolerance of wide deviations from traditional norms is also traditional and customary, which provides

newcomers and mid-timers opportunity to forge his or her own personal practice and repertoire of material. A.A. members teach each other essential traditional knowledge and behavior. To better convey the experience of A.A. practice, my further description of the A.A. phenomenon does not quote A.A. literature; rather, it summarizes what A.A. members have said and demonstrated in narrating. Some similarity to printed A.A. literature appears because of the symbiotic relationship between oral tradition and print; utterances that work particularly well and become part of the common vernacular appear in A.A. print literature as it is constantly revised and reprinted, and quotes from A.A. literature enter the vernacular to be learned by most practitioners by imitation in practice, not by memorization in study. Many A.A. narrators are surprised when I tell them that a saying they just quoted is in the Big Book. This gives rise to one of the meanings of the saying, "You might be the only Big Book some people ever read."

Reading and writing do form a part of the A.A. program, especially in the process of "working the Steps." This is usually done by going through the explanation in the Big Book and writing as suggested there. Discussions of the writing and a process of amends for past harms follow, in the form of apologies and restitution, often guided by another member who has already completed the process himself or herself. The result of this process (which many A.A. members repeat over the years) is, ideally, a spiritual awakening.

The spiritual awakening connects the A.A. member to a kind of awareness previously unavailable t, or available but unattended to the A.A. member, to some skill of thinking and/or feeling and/or integrating thinking/feeling/experience as yet beyond his or her ability to employ: to what some would call the conscience; truth; the play of Chaos and Order; the still, small voice; the impulse to act for the good of all concerned; the considered moment; Zen Buddhism's *satori*; one's better angels; the loving spirit of the universe; nature's imperative; the voice of (fill in the

blank with the name of your preferred deity here); the imagination; the totality of experience (which some call intuition); or what A.A. members refer to generically as a Higher Power (sometimes called H.P. and pronounced "haitch-pea"). Through daily practice of review of actions, amends for harms, service to others, prayer and meditation (which A.A. members frequently explain as, respectively, "talking to and listening to" a higher source), and carrying the message by being an example of change, A.A. members make incremental progress that leads to impressive outcomes in the form of lives changed for the better. This is the spiritual experience of the "educational variety," the understanding of which early A.A. members developed from readings of William James' "Varieties of Spiritual Experience."

Long-term practice proceeds with the stated aim of maintaining and seeking to enlarge the spiritual condition which is the outcome of abstinence plus working the Twelve Steps in order to achieve sobriety by dint of daily effort. A.A. narrating describes abstinence as a by-product of sobriety.

Sobriety is the desired outcome of the practice of A.A. folklore and is described as a condition beyond abstinence, which is seen as a condition for sobriety but is barely a beginning. Long-term practice of the A.A. program and increasing sobriety are explicitly linked as cause and effect. Practitioners who attain least twenty years of practicing the A.A. program in a continuous state of abstinence from alcohol earn the right to be called an old-timer. Old-timers are regarded as having more sobriety than newcomers.

This "spiritual experience of the educational variety" recognizes that, in the absence of a singular epiphanic awakening that induces remarkable change, a series of small insights and behavioral change can accumulate to produce remarkable change. This outcome is the "spiritual awakening" which, in daily practice, produces sobriety, which is quantifiable as "a lot" and

qualifiable as “good” or “great” but rarely referred to as “a little” or “bad.” “Good meetings” have “a lot of sobriety” and a well-practiced individual A.A. member had “good” or “great” sobriety.

In A.A. parlance, sobriety defines a state of human behavioral development characterized by patience, kindness, tolerance, insight, and humility. Those with sobriety demonstrate empathy in their narrating responses to others. They are often seen being of service to others in humble ways, such as sweeping the meeting room floor, moving chairs, or listening patiently to distraught and needy A.A. members. A.A. members remind each other that “We are not saints.” Over years of immersion in A.A., I have seen practitioners who were once selfish, difficult angry people gain the unmistakable demeanor of serenity by doing what A.A. members call “working the program,” a “program of action.” I have seen others remain angry but abstinent. Still more are simply human, trying their best each day to do a little better than the day before at living a happy, fulfilled life of service and sobriety.

Whether those individuals might have had a different outcome had they not worked the A.A. program bothers A.A. members not at all. When asked, “Do you really need this program? What if you tried drinking? Maybe you could handle it now. Why do you have to keep going?” A.A. members often reply, “Maybe I could drink. Maybe I could stop going to meetings. But I have found a host of good friends and a path of personal development I’ve never found anywhere else, and, believe me, when I was drinking, I looked everywhere. Maybe I’m not still an alcoholic or maybe I never even was an alcoholic. I don’t care. I like the life I have and working this program gives me a way to maintain and improve it and myself. I think I’ll keep hanging around.” This kind of response often baffles the questioner. If questions persist, many A.A.

narrators invite the questioner to visit a meeting to see for himself or herself. That often ends the questioning.

Abstinent individuals establish A.A. membership and sobriety by taking actions recommended by the A.A. program. A.A. members advise those who want to recover to "get into action." They attend narrating events and participate in specialized A.A. narrating and listening skills. A.A. practice consists of a great portion of empathetic listening,[2] a smaller portion of narrating, and a tiny portion of interaction with text that reflexively incorporates oral tradition.

The primary narrating events are informally organized meetings, casual meetings called fellowship, and one-on-one conversations between alcoholics. These events also afford opportunities for members to practice "being of service," that is, to take action to benefit others. Apart from the narrating events, A.A. members take action when they "work the steps," that is, perform writing, reading and specialized narrating in discussion of that writing with another sober member. The objective of these actions is to assess past harms that resulted from alcoholic behavior prior to recovery, then to form and carry out a plan for making amends for those harms, including restitution where possible. Ongoing assessment and amends, prayer, meditation, and helping others – both by talking/listening to each other and by demonstrating in all one's actions the change A.A. practice has wrought– complete the list of the most significant actions recommended by the A.A. program.

[2] I am indebted to M. Monahan for this insight. In her book, "Seeds of Grace: A Nun's Reflections on the Spirituality of Alcoholics Anonymous," she calls A.A. listening "the spiritual practice of listening." I have not been able to trace the source of my exposure to her notion. I am certain of the attribution only by way of the first sentence of this footnote, made long ago without further detail.

The goal of A.A. practice by participating in narrating events, helping others, and working the steps is to understand and embrace key concepts in A.A. lore. Enacting these concepts in expressive behavior over time is held to produce what A.A. members call "a spiritual experience of the educational variety," which they consider to be the font of recovery.

All A.A. practice is aimed at producing this remarkable change. The text of the Twelfth Step attests to this. A.A. narrators call attention to the first instance of the word "the" in its wording: "Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry the message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs." Narrators annotate this step by saying, "We carry the message, not the alcoholic," and "A.A. is a program of attraction, not promotion." This establishes the low-key approach A.A. recommends (which most A.A. members with fewer than five years of sobriety are hard put to emulate, there being no zealot like a recent convert), an approach in which the member waits until asked for information about A.A. before offering simple, short answers illustrated with exceedingly brief commentary from his/her own experience. A.A. members are meant to live as examples of sobriety rather than preach or recruit.

An example of this low-key approach: As a meeting is underway, an old-timer (a member with twenty or more years of continuous sobriety) sitting next to a newcomer feels a tug on his sleeve. Turning his head slightly, he hears the newcomer whisper in his ear, "I don't think I need to be here. I don't think I need to go to meetings."

The old-timer nods. "Same thing I think every time I come to a meeting."

The newcomer asks, "Then why are you here?"

The old-timer shrugs. “I think the same thing every time I go to the gym, too. I don’t let it stop me from going. Gym, meetings, it’s all the same. They keep me alive and out of misery. I just show up.”

The old-timer turns his attention back to the main speaker at the podium. The newcomer fidgets for a while, then leaves. The old-timer does not move so much as an eyelash when the fellow exits.

Note the absence of exhortation, advice, instruction, or proselytizing. The old-timer simply states that he, too, has a similar experience and relates how he handles it. He leaves it to the newcomer to decide what will work for him. A.A. narrators say about talking to new attendees, “When they’re ready, there’s nothing wrong you can say. When they’re not, there’s nothing right you can say.”

A.A. folklore comprises a repertoire of practice and lore. Important concepts around which much of the lore clusters are identified as keywords below:

A.A. narrators introduce themselves as *alcoholics.* They call what they do a *program of action* for *recovery* (also called *sobriety* or *serenity)* from the *disease of alcoholism*, which they consider to be *relapsing, chronic, progressive* and *potentially fatal*. They consider acknowledgement of God or a *Higher Power of* [the individual’s] *own understanding* to be necessary for recovery, and that *the result* of A.A. practice is a *spiritual experience*.

As is true in much folk narrating, the terms used by A.A. members noted above have special meanings when used in A.A. narrating. In particular, A.A. folk use of the terms *disease* and *God* or a *Higher Power* employ these words to label concepts far different from everyday meanings. The meaning of many colorful, incisive A.A. slogans and other narrating forms tend to cluster around these concepts. Examining how these slogans are used in performance shows

how narrators use A.A. folklore to evoke and co-create generative meaning rather than to teach doctrine. Further, examining performance of slogans helps illuminate the underlying meanings these concepts name. I will document and examine this and other features of the rich repertoire of A.A. narrating in Chapter Three and Four, which examine sets of slogans and sayings and how they reveal underlying A.A. concepts.

As I visited A.A. groups in more than twenty cities in the United States and Europe, I found that much A.A. folk narrating remained similar or identical from place to place. My study of A.A. in Los Angeles County includes that much that is shared with the core repertoire that one finds active in most English-speaking A.A. groups; however, I gathered narrating only in practice, not from Internet sources. I include characteristics of A.A. repertoire in Los Angeles County such as features and content unique to this location or shared with only a few like groups.

A.A. Narrating as Folklore in Performance

If any one characteristic distinguishes folklore from other kinds of human activity, it might be the "face-to-face" experience of folklore in transmission. If any one characteristic distinguishes folklore investigation from other kinds of investigation, it might be the "shoulder-to-shoulder" posture of the folklorist in the field with the folk group. In many conversations with other folklorists, this phrase has arisen spontaneously in response to my request to describe what makes the study of folklore different from other scholarly and scientific inquiry. In the A.A. narrating encounter, the ground upon which the narrators stand is meant to be level and practitioners are exhorted to "look for the similarities, not the differences."[3] A.A. narrating

[3] This prominent A.A. slogan is most frequently performed to teach newcomers how to listen most effectively to another A.A. member narrate. The "similarities" are the ways in which alcoholism and

practices develop and spread along lines familiar to any scholar of folk narrating, not along lines of theory, research, and experimentation as therapeutic practices do. A.A. listeners learn that the rhetorical earmarks of dogma signify a high signal-to-noise ratio; a humble, direct, "take what you like and leave the rest" [4] tone is the outstanding characteristic of narrating most heavily endorsed by A.A. listeners in word and behavior. Although in some folklore encounters, and in some A.A. narrating encounters, an instructive mode might be employed, folklore in general and A.A. folklore in particular has what business people call a "flat" structure rather than a hierarchical one, and transmission of folklore does not depend on the power inherent in a hierarchical dominant/subordinate dyad, nor does A.A. practice.

Further, A.A. narrating is folk narrating, not expert (advisory, directive, or therapeutic) narrating, largely because of the egalitarian, bottom-up design of A.A.'s system of group cooperation, which founder Bill W. called "benign anarchy" (W., Bill, 1957) In A.A., no "priest" or expert class exists, though A.A. members respect old-timers and some lionize sponsors (A.A. members who aid other members with "less time;" that is, fewer days or years of sobriety.) A.A. is, as founder Bill W. is often quoted as saying, "one alcoholic talking to another." I would add to this: "A.A. is two alcoholics talking and listening to each other." My analysis of the fieldwork

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recovery affect both the narrator and the listener. The "differences" are the demographic and/or autobiographic details.

[4] This utterance, in practice, means "Take what you can use..." or "Take what works…" rather than "Take what you like…" The fact that the imprecision of the phrase "Take what you like…" persists is an anomaly in A.A. narrating. Usually slogans and sayings are polished in use to the shape that most elegantly and exactly fits their purpose. Once again, the marvelous resistance of folklore to compliance with academic formality perplexes and charms me.

data I present examines how A.A. members speak and listen as a two-fold folklore practice and how they learn, teach, and demonstrate folk listening.

A folkloristic approach to examining A.A. practice therefore offers a unique fit, an opportunity to study a highly developed folk practice that has spread, through face-to-face narrating, around the world. Further, this narrating practice actively teaches enhanced narrating-listening techniques that are necessary to participate in narrating and embedded in the narrating-speaking. This study offers an opportunity for folklorists to expand the performance study of folk narrating, which already includes the audience, the interaction between speaker and audience, and many other performance considerations, to include discrete examination of listening skills developed and employed as part of the folklore itself; that is, folk listening.

A.A. Folk & Folk Groups

Elliot Oring explores folklore by way of its constituent syllables, beginning with "folk" (Oring 1986). Oring quotes Alan Dundes as saying that, "'Folk' can refer to *any group of people whatsoever* who share at least one common factor." (Italics in the original) Note that Dundes is thus defining folk by pointing to people who are already in folk groups. Oring finds Dundes' definition insufficient to narrow all possible groups of human individuals into those that should/could be called folk groups.

A definition of "folk," as "folk" relates to "folk group," should include all possible humans in a set who might become part of a folk group that forms a subset. By Dundes' definition, anyone who wants to stop drinking would be a member of the folk who might become members of the folk group of A.A. Many might drink and desire to stop drinking because they are taking a medicine for which alcohol consumption is contraindicated, or because they are

restricting their caloric intake, or for any number of reasons. Most of those people would not become members of A.A.

To make Dundes' definition of "folk" more usefully related to and better at defining a folk who might form folk groups, I would say that the folk share something in common *that actively shapes experience in ways that matter to those folk.* (Emphasis mine)

People who come to their first A.A. meeting who actually want to stop drinking usually have tried everything else. A.A. membership still carries a stigma; I continue to hear narrators share that they pictured dirty basement rooms full of skulking Skid Row bums shaking and sweating and that they were loath to associate with those who attend. (This narrating is always greeted with a wave of hearty laughter, to the relief or, occasionally, bafflement of the narrator.) What newcomers and established members have in common is problem drinking they cannot control, problem drinking which shapes – more accurately, misshapes – their lives, and a willingness to try even A.A. meetings as a possible solution.

Identity

Those conducting the meeting offer the newly arrived the chance to "identify" (the A.A. term for the utterance to follow). If the individual can manage to say, "My name is ____, and I have a desire to stop drinking," a warm welcome sounds from those gathered. This is the first moment of forming an identity as a member of that folk group. Those who join the folk group, a subset of the folk who attend one or a few meetings, are those who at the least do not mind saying that they want to stop drinking. Though this is seen as a shaming ritual by some, in fact it is meant as the opposite. A.A. members see being an alcoholic as similar to being a diabetic (a comparison often made in narrating) in that they have a disease that is partly treatable by daily

changes in behavior. They see no shame in having a disease. Saying, “My name is __ and I’m an alcoholic” is seen as taking the first of the Twelve Steps, admitting that the alcoholic is powerless over the disease and cannot manage it unaided, just as a diabetic is powerless over having a chronic disease and can admit without shame to being powerless to manage it unaided.

The salient “something in common” that brings individuals together as a folk with a shared identity gives rise to much folklore production. Gang members use special gestures, members of sports teams give each other nicknames, members of the armed forces tattoo insignia on their skin, etc. Here is an emergent example:

On Larry Mantle’s Air Talk episode broadcast on KPCC Monday, August 06, 2012, at 10 am, Mr. Mantle spoke to a member of a neighborhood group that had formed because they all live in an area frequently disturbed by the noise of helicopters (commercial tours, police, and news.) Mr. Mantle asked the fellow if the noise of the helicopters had been what brought them together. The fellow replied that, yes, the noise had initially motivated them to meet to form a group. He stated that in their conversations, however, the noise was not their main concern. In discussing their common experiences, concern for privacy and concern for governmental control of access to aerial views emerged as central topics (Mantle August 6, 2012).

Having a single thing in common was not sufficient ground on which to form a folk group or folk identity. They do not consider themselves “people bothered by helicopter noise.” They consider themselves “people concerned about privacy and governmental intrusion.” The something-in-common got them together in a room. The commonality of experience kept them talking long enough to form a group and begin making folklore, such as a name (Pasadenans Against Excessive Helicopter Noise) and an identity (repeated motifs concerning quality of life and citizen-led change as key elements of their shared identity) in the form of communication

they have published on their website since forming five months ago (at this writing) on March 15, 2012 (Curt 2012).

The meaningfully-different experiences they share that arise from their "something in common" inspire expressive behavior, as well. The website's motifs show evidence of an emerging identity taking shape.

Having "identified as an alcoholic," the newcomer will discover from A.A. narrating that the attendees gather so that they "may solve their common problem," as they say, and serve what they call their "primary purpose," which is "to stay sober and help others achieve sobriety." As the meeting continues, the newcomer will hear and see expressive behavior generated by the common experiences the individuals have in staying sober and helping others.

As the newcomer attends meetings over time, he or she will slowly piece together an experience of A.A. folklore in repeated but not repetitive reproductions of the drinking-to-recovery storytelling of sober members, the immersion in the entertaining vernacular of A.A. talk, the puzzling-out of the meaning of the insight-inducing slogans, and the constant stream of answers to the thousands of thousand-fold questions newcomers ask.

A particularly adept and accomplished narrator was fielding questions after speaking at a meeting in West Hollywood frequented by musicians. His story includes gangs, crime, alcohol and heroin use, prison time, slow growth in sobriety, and ends unexpectedly in fame almost accidentally accomplished by being exactly who he is, a grizzled and tattooed veteran of the streets and decades of sobriety.

After a few exchanges between the narrator and attendees, one of the many black-clad and body-modified attendees asked about developing a spiritual practice, detailing a set of

customary A.A. actions he had tried and heard about, referring to traditional A.A. narrating about the notion of a Higher Power, and somehow ending it all with a question mark.

The narrator looked blankly at the fellow and responded, "Ask a shorter question." The room erupted into roars of laughter.

The fellow looked around earnestly, asking those nearby if they could answer his question. The response came back, "Buddy, you just got your answer." After a moment, he shrugged, grinned, and joined in the laughter.

The folklore produced by the folk of A.A. centers on the many-featured expressive behaviors A.A. members learn, generate, practice, and transmit over time that help sober alcoholics live a life they call "happy, joyous, and free." Further, A.A. members learn, generate, practice and transmit expressive behaviors that a) hold the individuals together in groups b) hold the groups together worldwide to protect the integrity of the traditional practices that comprise the A.A. program of action.

This is pragmatic folklore, folklore that entertains as it works, that works to entertain, that works because it entertains, that teaches because it both works and entertains. The play of A.A., the ludic nature of A.A. folklore, is essential to the success of the stated aim: to practice A.A. folklore so as to achieve personal change. A.A. members find themselves looking forward to engaging in A.A. narrating.

Few, if any, other audiences could respond to the questioner and the "shorter question" response as the assembled group did that day. The shared experience of the limitations created by and fatal nature of the disease – an invisible gun held to each A.A. member's head – and the acceptance of the need to take daily action that members call "simple, but not easy" created an audience of people who understood both the questioner's earnest desire to get it right and his

complicated thinking, which they rightly saw as an attempt to manage understanding through intellectual constructs, a strategy quite common in alcoholics new to the experiential learning of A.A. folklore. Indeed, such thinking continues to plague alcoholics in recovery.

The laughter was empathy enacted. The laughter and the shoulder-clapping encouragement signaled to the newcomer that he was home, and that he should return again and again, and that learning how to ask the question is part of learning the answer.

Narrating and Attending

Seen in this light, the narrator and the one who hears, the speaker and the listener, perform a kind of duetic action. Thus, folklore in transmission and folk groups defined by identity are hard to separate, existing in a tautological arrangement that takes shape, exists, and survives within opportunities for direct transmission.

My understanding of this duet of action between narrator and audience comes from a way of investigating folk narrating as performances founded by several scholars, notably Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones, and called event analysis. This analytical tool takes into account many factors of behavior and identity as they emerge in dynamic action. Therefore, a view of folklore as emergent, active, and behavioral rather than static, inert, and material underlies this kind of analysis. To understand that view, a look at how folklore is conceived and studied is in order.

Folklore Studies

In Folkloristics: An Introduction, Georges and Jones move beyond the collection and study of items of folk forms such as folk art or folktale, which has yielded, for example, much

useful classification and analysis of types of a kind familiar to those who use the Aarne Thompson Tale Type Index. They note that scholars in disciplines such as linguistics, literature, anthropology, history, and more "study folklore as one studies other things that serve as data for that discipline." Another view regards regions, age groups, ethnic or occupational groups, as examples as folk groups who produce and possess the folklore they produce, defining subsets of these categories for select study (Georges and Jones 1995).

Georges and Jones construct the study of folklore as folkloristics, a term that encompasses the principal perspectives of those who study folklore exclusively or principally. They list four perspectives from which one might view folklore; as historical artifact, describable and transmissible entity, culture, and behavior.

While aspects of research done from all four perspectives comes into play, the fourth perspective, folklore as behavior, deeply informs my work. Georges and Jones include human psychology within that perspective. In the study of recovery from alcoholism, much good research has been done investigating A.A. practice by psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists, and others in related fields, whose findings support Georges and Jones statement that "…folklore can be viewed as an expressive manifestation of physical, cognitive, and psychological states and processes."

Georges and Jones developed the idea of considering folklore as a personal resource to the individual practitioner. These authors extend the reach of folklore far enough to grasp at what has thus far eluded investigation into A.A. recovery, which is the individual outcome A.A. practice produces in each alcoholic who engages in it over time, when they explain that "every individual [has] his or her own folklore *repertoire*," (italics in the original) (p. 269) which is a personalized and selected variation of all possible repertoire items. The "way a folklore example

fits into a person's distinctive continuum of experience…makes it relevant and meaningful for the individual."

A.A. members narrate about putting together one's own program, about "using the tools of the program" dynamically to meet changing life challenges. The use of folklore as a personal resource allows many alcoholics to shape individual experience of A.A. recovery traditions into an individual practice tailored to individual potential and desire for growth. The A.A. program offers most who stay a way to remain abstinent. The program offers many a way to build a more workable life that includes laughter and community. The program offers some a way to build empathy, real intimacy, and a connection to that something that hovers above the ordinary which some call divine. Finally, for a few, the program offers a way to build a capacity for deep compassion, insight, and peaceful acceptance of the human condition.

That outcome is measurable by investigators who examine "physical, psychological, cognitive" and, recently, neurological states. That outcome is qualitatively assessable, though not yet quantitatively measurable. Long-term A.A. practitioners can tell by listening to other A.A. narrators "how much" sobriety they have, and can often specifically comment on the narrator's practice and progress. A.A. listeners assess narrating and subtly respond to the narrator, helping the narrator shape his or her performance according to those responses. Interpreting A.A. narrating through the lens of Event Analysis helps reveal this assessment practice.

Event Analysis

In a series of articles beginning in the late 1960s, Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones began a scholarly partnership and line of investigation that challenged prior notions of stories as discrete textual items with a classic Beginning-Middle-End structure and storytelling as

a singular activity by a storyteller whose agency controlled both the story and its context. Their approach examines narrating (a term larger than storytelling) as a stream of narrating in which a story might arise as a nexus within a web of connected dynamic forces at a narrating event. Event analysis considers and values the conditions, personal characteristics, and participants of the event (among a host of other factors) as being equally constitutive of the event as the central narrating component. These articles exemplify an important turn in folklore studies of recent decades called "event analysis."

Event Analysis: Narrating Behavior

Prominent among articles important to development of this event analysis approach is "Toward an Understanding of Storytelling Events," explicates a systematic approach to performing event analysis. He presents methods and terms with great clarity and coherence, establishing a set of postulates to help organize a narrating event as a communicative event and social experience within which participants operate according to status relationships. Worthy of special note is his statement that "The duties and rights that establish the statuses of the participants in every storytelling event constitute reciprocal sets" (Georges 1969:319). Further postulates introduce ideas of the uniqueness of any one event, and the social uses and similarities of all events.

"Feedback and Response in Storytelling Events" (Georges 1979) appeared in the "Topics & Comments" section of Western Folklore. In this, Georges takes on the then-recent expansion of inclusion of audience feedback and narrator response into records of narrating events. His moving record of interaction with a narrator named Mr. Kindinis represents, in my view, an important milestone in the then-newly important technique of recording a full range of

information about details about the narrating and the narrator's behavior. The central focus of Georges' writing is the emotional expressive behavior the narrator displays as he narrates a story that was not purported to be a personal narrative, but a traditional tale. Mr. Kindinis becomes alternately pleased and saddened by the tale, at one point overcome by tears at the plight of the women in the tale.

Georges' writing opens a question he does not attempt to answer. As a fieldworker and documenter of the narrating, he wonders how to interact with a narrator who is visibly moved. The way Georges describes his consternation, later contemplation of the dilemma, and later attempt to contact the narrator to resolve the dilemma (only to find Mr. Kindinis had died) make it clear that Robert Georges felt empathy for his informant.

This short commentary stands tall on the on the landscape of fieldwork methodology. In stepping away from the examination of a fixed text bereft of performance and context data, the folklorist steps away from the sleeping form of the text as corpus and enters a dance with the lively self of the narrator who embodies the story in a performance of storytelling. Without the bound black and white pages lying flat on the desk before him or her, the folklorist must employ his or her heart and ears as well as eyes in "reading" the telling. Here we begin to approach interplay between the student and the studied that might produce an understanding of the human condition rather than of a structured set of words.

Barre Toelken, in "The ʻPretty Language' Of Yellowman," (Toelken 1973)exemplifies a holistic approach to interpreting narrating data that dovetails with Georges' work. He interprets data gathered from Yellowman, a Navaho man. Included in Toelken's data is material about the life of the narrator, his way of life and that of his family, beliefs from the Navaho tradition that inform the narratives, and information about the delivery of the narrating (such as speed, tone of

voice, facial expressions, timing of audience response.) Toelken's analysis uses these various kinds of data to support his idea about a basic Navaho belief in the congruence between health and order. His conclusion rests on a consideration of the narrating in context, considering even his own experience in undergoing a ritual of healing. He finds in this analysis that narrating the Coyote tales are "ways of thinking and ordering [that] seem consciously symbolic, but not the less 'real' to the users." The sense Toelken has of how "real" the narrating is to the users was developed by examining many components of the narrating event, not just the text of the narrative. The way that Toelken participated in the lives of his narrators enriches both his data and his interpretation of it.

A third article, "Do Narrators Really Digress? A Reconsideration of 'Audience Asides' in Narrating," (Georges 1981) finds meaningful information in narrating that was once considered to be apart from the "text" of the narrative. This article works toward Georges' larger project in a way that almost exemplifies it: Georges sees narrating as a human behavior, and narrating events as opportunities for documenting and examining that behavior for what it reveals about how and why humans use folklore and practice folklore-driven behavior. This approach rejects a text-centered approach that views a story or a narrative as an artifact which, when properly interpreted, can reveal information about the humans who use this artifact.

"Communicative Role and Social Identity in Storytelling Events" (Georges 1990)examines Georges' question, "Why do participants in narrating events behave as they do?" He seeks answers in an understanding of the role each narrator and audience member must assume in a storytelling event, and in an understanding of the ways in which participants identify themselves and each other socially. He reminds the reader that unless two or more individuals are willing to interact by behaving in a certain way, storytelling does not occur. This work brings

to life a narrative folklorist's opportunity to include data about the narrators and their relationships in data for event analysis and the usefulness of that data to enrich the portrait of humanity narrating research paints.

Donald Cosentino, in Defiant Maids and Stubborn Farmers,(Cosentino 1988) uses such an approach to analyze Mende narrating events. He expands the list of factors he includes in his data to include such things as costume, lighting, documentation of social position within the community, and knowledge of rivalries that inform "insider" communications, as well as paralinguistic and kinesthetic narrating techniques. He paints a lively and vivid portrait of narrating events and roots his explication of them firmly in his knowledge of the narrators, their community and their relationships to one another as manifested in their narrating.

Event Analysis: Material Behavior

Often research articles within a line of investigation are as useful in pointing out lacunae in data as they are in interpreting existing data. Such an article exists among the foundation set of articles that established event analysis research methods.

In "How Can We Apply Event Analysis to Material Behavior and Why Should We?" (Jones 1997) Michael Jones expertly evokes the creation of cultural material (a broad category that includes, for example, folk art) as taking place at events, of which narrating is a prominent and important feature. Some of the meaning of the material created is "built in" to the object by the narrating that takes place at the event. For example, narrating about quilt pieces made from significant items of clothing worn by family members create the meaning of a "kinship quilt".

This article, important in the expansion of event analysis, points to something prominent in its absence from Alcoholics Anonymous – namely, a material culture of its own.

Ephemera related to A.A. are produced and consumed by commercial operations outside of A.A. These products often sport the symbol of a triangle within a circle, a symbol long associated with A.A. As product designs proliferated, many of those associated the symbol with sentiments at best unrelated to A.A. The World Service Office in New York conducted a bottom-up survey to gather a consensus among all A.A. groups willing to participate. What should be done about this symbol? Because a basic tenet of A.A. practice is that "we have ceased fighting anything or anyone" and "resign from the debating society," the consensus arose from the ranks that A.A. World Service Office would not instigate legal action to protect the symbol, but rather cease entirely to use that symbol. A.A. members are free to buy such items as they please; as the Tenth Tradition states, A.A. takes no position on outside issues. Commerce of any kind is always an outside issue.

Products abound designed to promote or resemble A.A. lore. My long-term observation shows that members who consume these products are alcoholics newly sober and newly immersed in the relief and companionship of being part of the A.A. fellowship tend to buy a lot of A.A.-related items. If there were a roll call, I would be raising my hand as having spent some money in my first five years on such baubles. A few stickers, a couple of pieces of jewelry, cards and trinkets…many members indulge in those during their first five years. After that, not many members continue, passing those items on to newcomers or the local charity bin. Those who, in their early enthusiasm, tattooed A.A.-related designs onto their skin might later disguise them or remove them to regain anonymity. In a sad commentary on the persistence and power of the disease of alcoholism, doctors and paramedics have told me that they see some of those tattoos on patients in the ER for substance-abuse related injuries or deaths.

The relationship of Jones' article to fieldwork considerations provides an introduction to a consideration of the work of scholars on fieldwork techniques suitable for gathering data for later event analysis.

Event Analysis Fieldwork Techniques

Toelken, in an address to the American Folklore Society called "Beauty Behind Me, Beauty Before," (Toelken, 2004) makes the valuable point that only after fifty years of studying Navajo narrating has he begun to approach the most important uses and levels of meaning that narrating holds. Indeed, he found that for all those years, the informants he had been interviewing were not the primary sources he assumed they had been. Only after building trust and understanding did he finally establish the beginnings of access to certain deep knowledge about the narrating to which he had devoted a life of research.

Reading this article encouraged me to question my own assumptions about my early conclusions, and led me directly to consider sobriety as a long-term outcome. Further, it led me to a breakthrough understanding of the experience of the notion of the Higher Power, often called "God," in the lives of A.A. members.

Bill Ellis, in "Why Are Verbatim Transcripts of Legends Necessary" (Ellis 1987), argues for transcription techniques that include as much visual and paralinguistic content as possible. This continues the rejection of a text-centered approach. An accurate and complete record of the event, which by its nature constrains and makes possible certain opportunities for use of narrating techniques (a noisy venue drowns out subtleties of whispered comments, for example), includes a full representation of linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesthetic information. Elizabeth Fine continues this line of inquiry in "An Illustration of a Performance-Centered Text" (Fine

1994), wherein she develops a paper-based method for representing as many of the components of a performance of "Stag-O-Lee" as she can. Her consideration of what factors to include, and how to solve problems of producing them, points toward the challenges of sufficient representation and documentation of data on narrating events. Events are rich with details that inform the analysis of the event. Capturing them all as accurately as possible daunts even the most eager folklore researcher. Considering which details will prove most useful and meaningful in analysis can help the folklore researcher decide how to record such data.

Fieldwork Design and Methods

Definitions of what constitutes a folk allow room for folk groups who share an identity they or others consider to be or construct as ethnic, racial, or cultural. The folk group I study herein fits none of those categories. I do not embrace the notion that all identities constitute membership in a culture named for that identity; in fact, I find the word "culture" used so loosely, so frequently, and in so many disparate applications that I would, given space, construct my best argument to convince my readers to abandon use of the word, leaving it to the popular writers who use it in a manner not unlike that of pre-teens applying glitter glue to everything they own.

Therefore, I am not writing about a people, not "doing ethnography." I do fieldwork and I record, report on, and analyze my findings. I do fieldwork because I am studying the folklore of folk groups, not a "people" or an "ethnos."

Instead, my writing aims to report, as best as I can approximate given only words, the kind of experience many/most A.A. members have, the kind of things that many/most say, and the kind of changes many/most A.A. members achieve. I record and present observable

expressive behaviors and direct commentary from members through the lens of a folklorist to bring fresh insight to the intriguing phenomenon that is A.A. expressive behavior.

With regards to data, what I state herein is not what I assert; it is what I report. What I state about the A.A. program, A.A. practice, A.A. members, etc., is what A.A. members narrate and demonstrate about the A.A. program, A.A. practice, A.A. members, etc. in open meetings. To protect anonymity, I report no direct quotes of any single utterance with a few exceptions; a handful of A.A. members who are close friends gave me permission to quote directly a particularly apt phrase or conversation. These utterances and the narrators are as unrecognizable as I could make them to those who might know my friends.

I report the most commonly and frequently used version of any particular expression, what Colin Quigley calls "the kind of thing that everybody says" (Quigley 2002), to capture a kind of narrative consensus. A.A. narrators are adept at humorous variations on standard repertoire items; I depict a few of these. Dialogue or monologue that sounds as though it might be quoted from actual speech is, in fact, my fictional representation of what I have been hearing and speaking since 1985. My studies in UCLA's Creative Writing Program under the auspices of Stephen Yenser in Poetry and Mona Simpson in Fiction equipped me with certain skills; if what I depict misleads some readers into believing that an utterance I generated was quoted rather than composed as dialog, or into believing that a narrating event I describe is an actual event they attended, then I thank these two great teachers for training me well. Further, I remind my readers that, in the Deep South of my youth where storytelling is a cherished art, a child who tells a lie is admonished by being told, "You're telling a story." Older, more accomplished narrators tell lies the listener would swear are true stories. I will tell you stories, and they will be lies; that is,

constructions meant to represent a truth so convincingly that you will believe it must have happened, or could happen.

Methods

I present the "raw" rather than the "cooked." In presenting fieldwork data organized and categorized in ways that mimic, invoke, and arise from the use and experience of the material in practice, I let the folk speak for themselves, guided by folk models intrinsic to and discoverable within their repertoire and practice. When commonly- and frequently-used utterances appear in this work in clusters organized by topic, the way in which A.A. members use the utterances to enact foundational concepts shows itself. When narrating activities at narrating events appear in a taxonomic hierarchy, the methods by which A.A. members direct and shape narrating toward preferred outcomes becomes perceptible. I hope that by making my fieldwork and qualitative methods perceptible, knowledge workers more familiar with quantitative methods might find points of intersections and even, perhaps, areas of commonality with qualitative workers. An interdisciplinary understanding of data from Alcoholics Anonymous could help contextualize quantitative data and focus qualitative study.

Modes: Fieldwork, Member, Analytic

My attention during many meetings is entirely devoted to my full engagement in the meeting as an active member. The questions I ask as a fieldworker, during data-gathering, arise from a different mode of thought. During fieldwork, I purposely curtain off analytical thinking as thoroughly as I can, attempting to be as unfiltered a recorder of linguistic, paralinguistic, and kinesthetic data as possible. Later, as I analyze my data, my investigative and critical thinking

take over, often challenging my fieldwork mode of thinking. To oversimplify, what I can describe as three distinct but interrelated modes of awareness obtain. In the first, I participate in AA narrating as a member, with no conscious thought of fieldwork. Occasionally, a narrating occurrence strikes me as noteworthy and I switch briefly into my fieldwork mode as I recognize, analyze, and make note (mental or written) of the utterance, returning at completion to Member mode.

In Fieldwork mode, I think as little as possible, focusing instead on heightening my awareness of sensory input and of perceiving patterns. In Analytic mode, I consider the implications of what I have perceived in Field mode in correlation to what I have learned in Member mode, all the while applying what I know about folklore. After years of practice, I find it easy to maintain a clear difference between the mental activity of these states and to switch from one to the other.

If I were a different sort of scholar, I would at this point digress into a long analysis about the three modes and the construction of self, a notion I would bolster with references to Theories of Mind and perhaps even Deconstruction. Happily for me (and perhaps for some of my readers) I am not that sort of scholar. With a little encouragement, however, I could easily be convinced to hypothesize that my perception of my awareness as distinct modes might relate to neurologically measurable brain states.

Calibration

Montana Miller pronounced the best brief description I have yet heard about what folklorists do: "We see something interesting and then we hang around until we notice a pattern" (Montana Miller, presentation at WSFS Conference, 2007). As the pattern emerges, we calibrate

ourselves to become ever more aware of instantiations of that pattern, variations on that pattern, and especially, to become sensitive to degrees of, not the authenticity or power but something like those qualities, of each instantiation. Having, as a discipline, rejected the notion of ur-form, we folklorists search for something more like most common form, relying on measures of frequency, effectiveness in achieving stated purpose, and group recognition/reward to assess any instantiation as it relates to most common form.

Ascertaining Accuracy

Michael Jones, in a memorable grad session in the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA, asked the assembled students how a folklorist in the field can best discern what a narrator meant by a particular utterance. We cast about for highly theorized mechanisms, flipping through notes and muttering to each other. After waiting patiently for a few moments, he gave the answer with a characteristic grin: "Ask 'em."

I learned then that my fieldwork can/could /may/might/would /will/should/shall be as transparent as I please. I have worked hard in the company of A.A. members to be transparent in my actions. When I was actively investigating a particular phenomenon and went to a meeting for that sole purpose, I went to open meetings and identified myself as a researcher. At meetings I frequented, I told as many attendees as were interested what I was doing. Many members were uninterested, listened barely if at all, and/or promptly forgot what I said. If my work comes to their attention, I predict that many with whom I spoke will say they had no idea what I was doing.

From that openness arose my practice of asking the narrators what they meant. I rarely made notes in meetings, other than occasionally scribbling a key word or two as a prompt. After

a narrating event, if I was particularly interested in an utterance, I would write it down. If I had any doubt about the wording or my interpretation, I asked the narrator. I made further notes at home, some handwritten, some typed.

I worked assiduously at validating my memory of the data and verifying my interpretations over the course of fieldwork from 1998-2001 until I was satisfied that I was able to remember and record reliable data in authentic context. I perform spot checks on the quality of my memory and interpretative skills now and then, as any instrument should be re-calibrated from time to time. This respect for the narrator's own authority over his or her narrating is, to me, a crucial enactment of folklorists' "shoulder to shoulder" stance with regard to those whose folklore we study.

Immersive Adaptive Fieldwork

The fieldwork I present herein represents what I learned from long-term immersive practice in A.A. The outcomes I present are changes I experienced as I changed due to my adoption of and growing proficiency in A.A. practices. I attended thousands of meetings in cities in the United States, Ireland, and Italy. I worked with sponsors, took positions of services, sponsored others, attended conventions, narrated, listened, read the Big Book, and celebrated anniversaries of sobriety, touching all the bases as I headed home.

Therefore, one source of my data is my immersion in A.A. activity and in A.A. narrating. Other members' actions and narrating to me and about me verify that I have attained high proficiency in both action and narrating. I do not report as a participant, who might put on and take off the costume of the folk group. I report as a member whose skin is in the game; that is,

my very body/brain constitutes my membership as it enacts both A.A. narrating and A.A. activity.

In my observations, I rely on A.A. knowledge that is validated locally and maintained locally, without requiring that it stand in relation to other lore, science, scholarship, and knowledge about harmful drinking, or even that it maintain consistency with A.A. printed matter or A.A. lore in other times and places.

Local practice

My comparative fieldwork verified for me that local differences exist and helped me identify certain items and features of A.A. repertoire in Los Angeles County as being specific to my fieldwork sites. Certain narrating items and practices act as shibboleths to identify their local origins. Researching origins to verify their authenticity as being generated in Los Angeles County (when that mattered) became an enjoyable activity, akin to my very own role on "CSI: LA—Forensic Folklore."

I did not pursue etiology of repertoire items as an exercise in Kaarle Krohn's Finnish historic-geographic method. Rather, my goal was to develop an instinct for what was native in order to assure that any attribution I made regarding repertoire development to local factors would not go wide of the mark.

A.A. practitioners are keenly aware of local lore and geographic differences. At many meetings, A.A. members who have spent time in meetings in another location will narrate about the differences, sometimes objecting to a difference or lobbying to change something. One informant summed it up beautifully when she said, "Where they do it right is where you got sober."

The Fieldworker Identifies

"Hello, my name is Maggi and I'm a folklorist…um, I mean, I'm an alcoholic." I am fortunate, for the purposes of this work, to be both.

Early training as a journalist (beginning in sixth grade at a college prep school and continuing through the first two years of my undergraduate studies) prepared me for the observation, validation, and reporting of human behavior. After completing two years majoring in Journalism at Louisiana State University, I moved to Los Angeles, founded a rock band, and studied alcoholism, as it were.

My first exposure to the concepts of the Twelve Steps came on September 25, 1985. An article on the cover of the Life section of the Los Angeles Times reported on a Twelve Step program related to Alcoholics Anonymous. As I read the article, I was amazed to find that I found much of what it held described my own life. I had a feeling of many pieces of seemingly disparate experiences and beliefs finally falling into a cohesive and comprehensible pattern. Still more, this article described whole meetings full of people whose experience matched mine. Up until that point, I had felt completely alone and incapable of solving the problems I kept creating. The article described a recovery program that held out the promise of positive change. The effect was so powerful that I burst into tears.

I began attending that program. It was my first exposure to the Twelve Step approach to recovery from the effects of alcoholism. In March of 1987, I attended my first meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. On March 18, 1988, I marked my first day of sobriety, which continues up to the present day.

One of the most striking aspects of attending Alcoholics Anonymous meetings was the vernacular language practiced by those who had attended regularly over time. Being an

inveterate student, I kept a notebook[5] with me at meetings and took careful notes of slogans, clever sayings, pithy insights, and anything else that might help me learn what these people knew. I wanted to both understand all the subtleties and to be competent to jump into the stream of narrating as soon as I could. I had a sense that gaining mastery over this vernacular was an important component in learning a new set of behaviors and beliefs. At perhaps my tenth meeting, a woman advised me gently to put away the notebook and, in a conversational way, to directly experience the narrating. She told me that I would hear it all again many times and that I would learn it as I went. She was right.

I remember being struck by the saying, "You can't think your way into right action, but you can act your way into right thinking." Sharing and storytelling at meetings and conversations with other members, along with instructions from my sponsor, supplied suggestions for right actions. Between the narrating and the actions, I began to change. I bring to this current work all the changes that shape my cumulative recovery as well as the stubborn persistence of alcoholism in all its manifestations but active drinking. I speak as scholar and member, both at once, fully immersed in and fully adapted to the expressive behaviors of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Literature Review

I documented my scholarly and scientific reading over the years in a bibliographic database. I conservatively estimate that for every three articles I reviewed, I saved and entered into my database one article. The full database numbers about twenty-six hundred items. I

[5] I was admonished by a woman at a meeting that I should not write anything down. I was told that it was more important that I listen and learn it by experiencing it. In the intervening years, I lost that notebook, which I regret, as it would have been a valuable resource in my current research.

winnowed that down to a smaller database of about twelve hundred items to keep on hand for quick reference as I wrote this work.

The articles in the database fall into the following topical categories. I will list some key articles in each topic.

Alcoholism

It seems that no matter how far back our scholarly and scientific investigations reach into human history; we find evidence of alcohol production and enjoyment. I have already mentioned concerns about alcohol misuse and the search for treatment in ancient Greece, including Aristotle's writings on the problem of inebriety (Rolleston 1927). Molecular archeologist Patrick McGovern documented wine and beer production in pre-historic China over 9,000 years ago (McGovern et al. 2004). After taste-testing a batch of beer made according to McGovern's modern adaptation of the ancient ingredients and methods, the archeologist admits to wobbling a bit on his feet – not evidence of alcoholism, but an interesting start.

An historical, scholarly, and scientific review of alcoholism and treatments for it through the ages is beyond the scope of this work. The earliest research that relates to the development of A.A. as treatment begins with the development of the "disease concept."

The use of the term "disease" for the condition of alcoholism is the flashpoint for riotous controversy. Scholars and scientists alike work to examine the notion of disease in order to controvert, prove, dismiss, define, support, refine, or position it within medical, social, political, legal, and other contexts (Rettner 2011, Glatt 2005, Kurtz 2002, Fox 1999, Yalisove 1998, Valverde 1997, Erickson 1992b, a, Lehman 1990, Caetano 1987, Schneider 1978, Jellinek 1960, Trice 1958, Kurtz , Swora 2001). Medical researchers in genetic, neuroscientific, and

physiological research seek to discover and understand bodily mechanisms and characteristics according to scientific criteria (Pandey June 2005, Alexander Pabst 2012, Alromaihi, Zielke, and Bhan 2012, Holmes et al. 2012, Swagell et al. 2012, Leggio et al. 2008, Smith et al. 2008, Mulholland et al. 2007, Sinha and Li 2007, Heilig and Koob 2007, Wang et al. 2007, Chanraud et al. 2006, Jeanblanc et al. 2006, Janak et al. 2006, Crews 2005, Saito et al. 2005, Martinez et al. 2005, Schuckit 2005, Heinz et al. 2004, Sullivan 2004, Carpenter-Hyland, Woodward, and Chandler 2004, Nixon 2004). Only Ernest Kurtz' work approximates (but does not match) the consensus of narrative use of A.A. terms for alcoholism, which include "disease," "malady" (as in "a spiritual malady"), and "sick[ness]," among others.

Fieldwork

Michael Owen Jones' "Studying Organizational Symbolism: What, How, Why?" (Jones 1996) accomplishes, among other objectives, a meticulous and careful study of the work of many scholars, as well as Jones' own contributions, to the description of methods and techniques of observation and the effects they have on the production of data. Notable are his explication of the channels of communication, sources of meaning in performance, and stylistics of narrating. His integration of research on asides and digressions, context, and his examination of examples of symbolic construction of situated events make this section of the longer work a veritable handbook for fieldwork at narrating events.

Anne Scott Waterman, in her 1993 dissertation "Masters of the Ordinary: Integrating Personal Experience and Vernacular Knowledge in Alcoholics Anonymous" (Scott 1993) directed by David Hufford, views A.A. practice as "medical folklife" interpreted through Medical Anthropological views. In one reference, she captures the underlying value of direct

experience of long-term practice of folklore. Inspired by Edith Turner (1992), Waterman states that this direct experience of folklife "…is an exercise in letting the phenomenon reveal itself to the researcher as it reveals itself to the informant." Later, she argues for acceptance that "the beliefs that informants hold are empirically grounded, and the experiences that they have are logically articulated." I would add that as folklorists we are well-positioned to point out that the models and language of logic and its articulation in a folk group are hardly likely to match academic models and language of logic, but nonetheless can and usually are sturdy representations of logical processes nonetheless.

Folklore: Event Analysis Approach

I have briefly mentioned researchers who founded the event analysis approach, two of whom, Robert Georges and Michael Owen Jones, were also responsible for formulating a folkloristic perspective that views folklore as a personal resource. I follow these two lines of research in my work herein.

I will now address a third essential folkloristic concept, the cornerstone of which I see as an article by Michael Owen Jones, "'Tradition' in Identity Discourse and an Individual's Symbolic Construction of the Self." Several features set this article apart from similar work.

First, Jones studies tradition in the life of an individual, Gary Robertson, whose traditional practice is isolated from the active practices of a folk group. Although this condition seems to defy the tautology I have mentioned that "folk groups make folklore and folklore makes folk groups," Jones recognizes that some of Robertson's traditions were learned in face-to-face transmission in the past (those related to his grandparents, such as prayers, icons, and songs). In

this, Jones establishes that folklore of a folk group can be practiced by an individual separated in place and time from the folk group.

Second, in this work, Jones' writing embodies compassion itself; he records details of Robertson's past – abuse, abandonment, neglect, witnessing of his parents' sexual, violent, and alcoholic acts and behavior, and more – as relevant historical data without filtering out or diluting these difficult passages by use of distancing academic language and without retreating to the objectification of pity. The writer's implicit attitude seems to be, "This is what happened. This matters. I observe, report, and give this material the proper weight. I neither judge nor recoil." Having read many medical articles related to abuse, neglect, and childhood trauma among alcoholics, I can compare this to the medical model for describing such events. Jones' treatment represents the best work I have seen among such efforts.

Noting the relationship between Robertson's anxiety and the soothing relief generated by Robertson's folklore practice (in one instance, traditional singing and chanting), Jones resists the temptation to essentialize folk practice into a kind of untutored psychology, which would obscure the key role Robertson's aesthetic choices and generation of variants play in shaping the folklore practices that soothe him. I believe Jones would agree that Robertson is practicing folklore, not propping up his broken mind with home-made psychological props. Jones incorporates these individual experiences as part of the story of Robertson's life without defining Robertson's identity by those experiences by calling him a victim of his past, while still recognizing that his past plays some part in generating Robertson's need to create an active personal tradition of folklore practice and in shaping that practice.

Third, Jones notes that Robertson expanded on those traditions (his grandparents' folk medicine remedies) by incorporating the results of his own experiments and experiences in

trying commercial herb preparations, growing herbs, or harvesting them in the wild. Thus he documents the process by which an individual adapts traditional practices to form a unique personal resource that, by the form of folkloric expressive behavior, still relates to a group identity even if the individual and the group never meet.

Fourth, Jones includes that most vital element of fieldwork, asking the practitioner what the practice means to him or her. Robertson's reply contains a nugget of gold as regards my project here when he explicitly connects his folklore practice as accomplishing something alcohol and marijuana use could not: "…nothing is as rewarding as the silence and praying or singing and praising God." It is tempting to load much freight onto the similarity of Robertson's comment to the use of folklore by alcoholics as a treatment for alcohol. To do that would be to ignore the more valuable discovery Jones preserves, which is that some individuals develop and rely on folk practice as a remedy for the deep pain of the human condition.

The fifth gem in Jones' article is the connection he draws between aesthetic and pragmatic choices and/or adaptations an individual makes from among the many available expressive behaviors in the panoply of tradition and the resultant individual identity created and enacted in folklore practices over time. Jones specifically relates the folkloric identity as an anodyne to the pain of what Jones calls Robertson's troubled childhood but which I dare to expand by naming it the human condition.

Along the bumps and potholes on the road of human development, no one escapes pain. The comfort Jones documents that Robertson finds in his individual folklore practice is necessary to, and available to, any and every human. My statement here echoes Jones' closing, which hearkens back to similar findings in many articles on individual folklore tradition bearers, and which calls for further investigation of the process of and means and methods for choosing

among folklore traditions to establish symbolic identity. Jones' work in this article sheds light on the processes by which individual A.A. members build individual practice and develop by enactment a new identity as a recovering alcoholic.

In analyzing A.A. narrating events to demonstrate how practitioners gain and perform competence, how narrating works to transmit narrating traditions, and what the behavioral outcomes are, I draw on contributions to narrative theory by Michael Owen Jones, Robert Georges, Donald J. Cosentino, and Rachel Fretz, among others, for methods, techniques, and concepts beyond those article listed in the section on Fieldwork. Here are a few.

Communicative Role and Social Identity in Storytelling Events (Georges 1990) Georges emphasizes the discrete roles of storyteller and story listener, and says these roles get stronger (I believe he means they become more defined and that individuals more fully inhabit the roles) as narrating continues. In A.A. storytelling, the narrator is aware of the listening and more accomplished A.A. listeners in the meeting work as almost a shadow narrator. I have witnessed narrators working hard to phrase some comment the way a leading narrator does, looking to that A.A. member for approval, for example, and receiving a nod, shrug, or no response, or narrating that "I know I'm gonna hear about this from Dan later, but I'm gonna say from the podium that I used heroin, too." Georges' well-drawn observations about much of what constitutes story listening in daily life highlights differences in A.A. listening that point to it being a more active, generative, responsive practice with instantaneous observable affects on the stream of narrating. Georges explores some of these aspects of listener response and its effects on the narrator in "Feedback and Response in Storytelling" (Georges 1979).

A more in-depth explication of the interplay between narrators and active listeners appears in Georges' "Do Narrators Really Digress? A Reconsideration of 'Audience Asides' in

Narrating" (Georges 1981) In this article, Georges establishes the term "narrating" as preferable to "storytelling," He takes note of utterances with purposes other than the simple sending of the story-as-message, attending to their purpose and use. Thus begins a research method of examining all utterances in the narrating stream as important constituents of context, which, being inseparable from text, makes them important constituents of the story that has now become a stream without beginning, middle, and end.

Donald Cosentino's examination of three women "pulling domeisia" (telling stories) during a Mende narrating event in Africa (Cosentino 1988). Cosentino tracks the storytelling of Hannah, the first narrator, a well-established woman in the village, delivering her variant of a tale about a young girl's transition into womanhood. He carefully observes evidence in the second storytelling of a variant of the same tale by Mariatu, a sort of bad girl of the village, that Mariatu has listened to what and how Hannah has said in her narrating and then changed it for Mariatu's own purposes. Here Cosentino points to a special kind of listening, the listening by another narrator in order to gain material for future narrating.

Cosentino continues by showing the process recurring, as Manungo, an elderly woman of the village with some status but without the care and protection of a family, narrates a version of the young girl's tale that answers, disproves, and destroys the effects of both prior versions.

The audience might be listening attentively, but the narrators are studying intently; that is, with intent. As they listen, they gather threads they will weave or re-weave, connecting the narrating into a larger fabric of community.

Of course, the meta-listener here is Cosentino, who has learned by fieldwork who the narrators are to each other and can reveal to us the reshaping each narrator wreaks on her predecessor's work.

Another work that reveals listening at work during narrating events is Susan Kalcik's "Like Ann's Gynecologist or the Time I Was Almost Raped: Women's Narratives in Rap Groups" (Kalcik 1975). She notes three narrating techniques seen in turn-by-turn narrating at women's liberation consciousness raising groups; filling in, tying together, and serializing. Of special interest is her term "kernel stories," which she applies to stories so evocative of a useful experience or conclusion that the audience members give them a short title by which they are invoked when needed. She regards personal narratives in the group as a personal resource for the narrator and a resource for the group, which might add to it, shape it, or even change it. She sees these kernel stories as emergent structures. Her work applies especially to narrating in A.A. women's meetings, but is equally useful examining group narrating at all A.A. meetings where members narrate turn-by-turn.

As Cosentino's analysis did, Kalcik's writing reveals that the listeners attend to the speaker's utterances not only as passive recipients but as active narrators forming narrating intent and content even while attending to another's narrating.

Listening

Cosentino's work prompts me to list other articles that aid in considering the role of story listening and the listener.

Jeff Todd Titon, in "The Life Story," (Titon 1980) assumes either a sympathetic listener or one who (after Gertrude Stein) chooses to listen or to not listen (not "not to listen.")

Susan Ervin-Tripp clarifies the roles of "sender" and "receiver" (Hymes' terms) by noting unequal distribution of time, attention, and direction of message among and between

sender(s) and receiver(s) (Ervin-Tripp 1964). The rest of her article proceeds into linguistic examination, but the brief section mentioned is useful for discussing A.A. listening.

Sturm describes the "story-listening" trance (Sturm 2000), a phenomenon which occurs frequently to newcomers, but more rarely as A.A. members accumulate time.

Listening: Imitation and Insight

In considering the role of print in A.A. narrating, Roger Abrahams' article on "Complicity and Imitation in Storytelling" (Abrahams 1986) offers insights based on his evaluation of performances of narrating rooted in a rich tradition among urban African-Americans. His detailed look at imitation sheds light on the high rates of repetition and imitation in A.A. narrating.

Neurological researchers have provided an array of findings about mirror cells (or mirror neurons), which are responsible for the "monkey see, monkey do" ability of humans to imitate one another without reversing action. If a child imitates the child sitting across from her at the table, when one child scratches her cheek with her right hand, the second will also scratch her cheek with her right hand, thus enacting the imitated action as if she were actually sitting in the place of the first child. This ability is a skill reserved to higher primates.

Kaplan and Iacoboni (Kaplan and Iacoboni 2005) assert that the mirror neurons responsible for imitation of action also function in the imitation of auditory language and thus are at play during listening and watching; this equips a listener with the necessary biological properties to "walk a mile in the other person's moccasins," to imagine him or herself having the experience the narrator describes and enacts (even in a limited fashion, by facial expression and postural/gestural movement.)

Imitation and Inference

Many other researchers provide evidence that learning through imitation takes place by use of mirror cells. Marco Iacoboni's work, as first author in many articles and as part of a team of researchers in many others, focuses on the function of mirror cells. In "Grasping the intentions of others with one's own mirror neuron system" (Iacoboni et al. 2005), Iacoboni extended prior work on imitation of action to show that the same neural system also interpreted intention of other actors. This finding relied on work he did that confirmed the neural circuits in play during imitation ,which led to the question of intention, reported in "Neural mechanisms of imitation," Iacoboni establishes that (Iacoboni 2005, Iacoboni et al. 2005) he and many other researchers assiduously pursue these questions.

Insight and Empathy

More recent findings in mirror neuron circuits have established that this part of the brain is the seat of empathy. In "Imitation, Empathy, and Mirror Neurons" (Iacoboni 2009), Iacoboni interprets "cognitive models of imitation, constructs derived from social psychology on mimicry and empathy, and recent empirical findings from the neurosciences." He asserts that "Neural mirroring solves the 'problem of other minds' (how we can access and understand the minds of others) and makes intersubjectivity possible, thus facilitating social behavior" (Iacoboni 2009). In an earlier article, "Mirroring emotions in others relates to empathy and social conscience in children," Jennifer Pfeifer and a team including Iacoboni report on an fMRI study that tested empathy and interpersonal competence (Pfeifer et al. 2008). Pfeifer asserts that "the capacity to [establish the understanding that "you are like me" by] analogy between self and others may (sic) represent a basic prerequisite for the development of social cognition." The findings of the fMRI

study support this contention and indicate that the mirror neuron circuits are active in responses to human facial expressions of emotion, and that the brains of children who had scored higher on the Interpersonal Competence Scale showed more activity during emotional interaction. An important consideration in this study is that it shows that human development in children fosters the mirror neuron circuit as a contributor to understanding and experiencing emotion in the brain's limbic system, a finding already established in adult studies.

I will refer to neurology findings about the work of mirror cells as I examine how A.A. practice over time, especially learning to narrate by listening to others, and then narrating about one's own experience as one alcoholic talking to another, might build the kind of compassion that constitutes the high sobriety condition of old-timers.

Alcoholic Identity/Self/Personality

A common problem of perception and interpretation regarding A.A. narrating and its affect on self and identity obscures the nature of that narrating. In A.A. narrating events, one particular category stands out because it looks very much like the old category of "story-telling" that folklorists once applied to narrating. A.A. members call it "my story" or "my pitch." When a narrator "tells his story" or "gives her pitch," he or she usually is performing in the role of the "Speaker" at a meeting. This role requires that the narrator tell in a general way "what it was like, what happened, and what I am like now."

This "story" is frequently mistaken by researchers as being akin to what is meant by the term "story" in most English Literature courses: a text with a beginning, middle, and end containing a plot; characters; a conflict whose resolution draws on the personal resources of the

protagonist; and, finally, some change that brings the plot to rest so that an end can be neatly tied up.

In his dissertation, "Alcoholics Anonymous: Personal Stories, Relatedness, Attendance and Affiliation" (Strobbe 2009), Strobbe analyzes a set of these "stories" as they are published in one of the editions of the Big Book. He relies entirely on text that has been polished, copy-edited, selected by an editorial process, and finally printed. Even taking these factors into consideration, he finds and argues for a "normative model" and discusses how this model affects the "individual and the community" and the "storyteller and the audience," although he does not include performances in his data. If he had attended a sufficient number of meetings, his then-revised conclusions would have been as different from what he published as a picture of a real adolescent girl is from the photographs of fifteen-year-old fashion models that appear on the pages of Vogue magazine.

I do not mean to dismiss the overall achievements and usefulness of Strobbe's dissertation, which goes on to examine other aspects of A.A. and interpret relatedness in A.A. according to nursing theory. This one section of his work simply serves to illustrate the problem of finding useful scholarly or scientific conclusions about A.A. narrating. Without considering the essential elements of performance, growing proficiency of narrators in A.A. specific lore, and the effects of performance over time, his representation of A.A. narrating is so compromised that no interpretive tool could produce useful conclusions.

The following articles exemplify work that does consider A.A. personal or identity narrating as ongoing, personal, performative, context-rich, at once innovative and traditional, and as separable from the fabric of other narrating only for the purposes of making it manageable for study.

"Personal Stories: Identity Acquisition and Self-Understanding in Alcoholics Anonymous" (Cain 1991) By contrast, anthropologist Carole Cain's excellent work here accurately describes how learning and performing the A.A. personal story-telling form works to help an AA member make sense of the past in terms of an identity ("the way a person understands and views himself, and is viewed by others, a perception of self that is fairly constant.") She addresses the need to accept the label of "alcoholic" and other concepts used as elements of the story, such as "bottoming out," that is, losing everything that matters.

"Personal Construct Theory and the Transformation of Identity in Alcoholics Anonymous" (Young 2011)

Lance Young challenges the presumption of "linear, causal relationships between individual cognitions and behavioral outcomes," a wonderful argument for the consideration of contextual date in performance over time if I have ever heard one. In arguing for a more inclusive holistic approach, he introduces George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory as an analytical tool for investigating how A.A. members transform deviant, subjective, unique, fluctuating identity into normal, objective, common, permanent identity; note that my brief summary over-essentializes his work. He places his work within the necessity for fieldwork, for primacy of what he calls "recursive relational processes" and I would call "being a practicing member of the A.A. folk group," and notes that factors in identity transformation will be more multidirectional, interactive, and variable across time and individual members than a pure model can predict.

"Acquisition of a Speaker by a Story" (Linde 2000) Charlotte Linde defines narrative induction as a process by which an individual takes on an existing set of stories as his or her own and proposes that this is a key way an institution acquires new members. She focuses particularly

on the story of the founder of a company and the way agents learn to model their own personal history on the form of the founder's story. Her notion of the narrative induction process accurately describes part of the transformation A.A. members demonstrate.

"Self, identity, and the naming question: Reflections on the language of disability" (Zola 1993) Alcoholism is covered by the Americans with Disabilities Act and thus legally defined as a disability. Active alcoholism disables many essential human functions in the alcoholic, especially those required for cooperation with and contribution to his or her family and/or work group. Stigma attaches to the identity label "alcoholic" or "drunk" and use of these labels can hide the individual behind the label. Irvin Zola discusses these considerations and more, such as "disability pride" and the notion of "normal."

Zola makes a key point about the implications of naming. A label is "connotational and associational," he says. "Call a person sick of crazy and all their behavior becomes dismissible." My experience and observation of the experience of others verifies that this is true of the label "drunk."

A.A.-specific Narrating

Two scholars, Illka Arminen and Maria Swora, have done such fine research into the particular forms, styles, and mechanisms of A.A. narrating that I find myself almost entirely relieved of the task of description and definition of subjects such as "Organization of Participation in Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Arminen 1998) and similar discrete topics, such as "The Construction of Topic in the Turns of Talk at the Meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Arminen 1995), among a wealth of others. Maria Swora's focus on rhetoric

supplies several articles, chief among them "The Rhetoric of Transformation in the Healing of Alcoholism: The Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Swora 2004).

Finally, Lianna Erickson's undergraduate publication "An Ethnographic Study of the Communication Practices of a Recovering Alcoholic During the First Month Of Sobriety" (Erickson et al. 2005), provides fine reporting of fieldwork covering an essential period in the affiliation of A.A. members.

Repertoire: Clusters of Meaning

Several scholars write cogently and accurately about the content of items in the A.A. narrating repertoire. Among them, Mariana Valverde and Kimberley White-Mair stand out (Valverde and White-Mair 1999). They refer to A.A. practice as "teaching that is done through practice rather than through ideas" and call A.A. groups "bottom-up, non-expert-led networks" that work by means of "popular pragmatist ethics."

She explores several foundational A.A. concepts. Her summary and discussion of the concepts are useful in understanding how A.A. slogans in practice enact these concepts.

Misconceptions about foundational A.A. concepts abound. Part of the objective of writing about content is to clarify some of those misconceptions. The report on a recent study, "What Members of Alcoholics Really Believe" (Sifers and Peltz 2012), provides a recent and fairly accurate (when compared to field data) view of A.A. members' agreement with statements available on the survey instrument. As is almost always true of survey instruments, the wording of the choices and lack of sufficient investigation to what falls betweens questions diminishes the degree to which the conclusions predict expressive behavior that enacts these putative beliefs.

John McPeake does an excellent job of showing slogans at work in A.A. members in therapy, giving a Cognitive Behavioral view of the use of these pithy sayings (McPeake 2004). Finally, Sarah Randall takes on the use of slogans by therapists, a slippery slope, indeed (Randall 2011).

How A.A. Works

In "Course of Recovery from Alcoholism" (Venner 2006), the authors give a thorough overview of findings from a symposium at the 2005 Research Society on Alcoholism meeting which focused on the assertion that "*sustained* recovery is often influenced by an individual (sic) interactions with others within a social context." (Italics in original) The emphasis of the writers on recovery practice as a personal resource and on transformational processes makes this useful in discussing sobriety among A.A. old-timers.

I include "Abstinence and Well-Being among Members of Alcoholics Anonymous" (Kairouz and Dube 2000) for two reasons. First, it confirms that A.A. members with long-term abstinence have higher measures of well-being than A.A. members with short-term abstinence. Second, I thought perhaps it would amuse my readers to know that A.A. members with long-term abstinence have, by a statistically significant measure, higher levels of well-being than university women (such as the one writing this dissertation, perhaps?) As I fall into both groups, I will claim my long-term abstinence as the definitive condition and take my well-being where I can find it.

Chapter Two: Alcoholics Anonymous

This chapter talks about the history of A.A. in general and about the program itself. I describe what alcoholism does and how the program is designed. I discuss the general condition of newcomers and the areas where I performed fieldwork. Research by other scholars and scientists is noted and examined as it relates to alcoholism, folkloristics, A.A. narrating, neural mechanisms of recovery, and listening as empathy.

Chapter Three: Lore and Its Uses

I introduce a variety of narrating items in light of folkloristic ideas about repertoire items. I discuss how members innovate, reshape, and use common utterances to perform the work of recovery. I discuss how utterances and terms travel and demonstrate a version of the Finnish method to identify the source of a shibboleth in A.A. narrating.

Chapter Four: Talking About God

In this section, I explore slogans and sayings, the bullet points of recovery, examining the way narrators use sets of slogans in various ways to express the multi-valent nature of some A.A. concepts. I perform an analysis on the slogans and saying about God in A.A. because the use of this term is opaque to those unfamiliar with A.A. usage. The word “God” keeps many away from A.A. practice. I suggest that this form of analysis could uncover more about A.A. foundational concepts.

Chapter Five: If I Get My Heart Right

This chapter analyzes listening as an active skill in narrating performance and examines how A.A. listeners learn A.A. and N.A. specialized listening practices. The role of listening and mirror cells in the development of empathy and identity is elaborated.

Chapter Six: Typical Meeting

This description of a fictionalized meeting uses simple text markup to indicate some of the performance aspects of A.A. narrating. Relationships between meeting attendees are depicted. Verbal and non-verbal behaviors are explicated as they relate to A.A. practice.

Chapter Seven: Workshops for Sobriety

A.A. narrating occurs in three kinds of settings. The settings and how their characteristics shape narrating opportunities and possibilities are described. A special kind of A.A. narrating event is discussed to illustrate one way that the concept of the "rooms of A.A." comes to life in daily interactions between individuals.

Chapter Eight: From Newcomer to Old-Timer

Chapter Two: Alcoholics Anonymous

Brief History

Alcoholism plagues humanity by crippling and sometimes killing its victims. Alcoholics walk through their lives carrying the burden of compulsive drinking, its effects, and the increasing necessity to hide the drinking and disguise its effects. This life sentence of quiet desperation sometimes turns into a death sentence for the drinker when physical damage (such as cirrhosis) overcomes the body. Sometimes the execution of the death sentence that is severe alcoholism takes innocent lives along with the drinker's life, as in multiply-fatal drunk driving incidents. Sometimes the alcoholic causes misery and death to others, while he or she largely escapes harm. The burden of guilt and shame this leaves behind sometimes drives the alcoholic to suicide; sometimes the increasing hopelessness of alcoholism is enough to cause the drinker to end his or her life. The suicide rate among alcoholics in the United States is sixty to one hundred twenty times higher than that of the general population (Murphy Ge 1990). Overall, male alcoholics die at a rate two to six times higher than the general male population. Men who achieve and maintain abstinence die at the same rate as that general male population; however, those who relapse into active alcoholism die at a rate of 4.96 times that of the general male population (Bullock Kd 1992). Women alcoholics followed after a hospitalization died an average of fifteen years earlier than the general female population; those who established and maintained abstinence lived longer than the general female population (Smith, Cloninger, and Bradford 1983).

A sign of alcohol dependence is that as it progresses, the body's tolerance to the effects of alcohol grows. Physical conditions and continued use compromise the body's ability to handle the toxicity of alcohol (Alexander Pabst 2012, Alromaihi, Zielke, and Bhan 2012, Edwards and Gross 1976). The consequences of neglect of loved ones, compromised performance at work, failing memory, and financial mismanagement accrue until catastrophes begin to bring the alcoholic's life down about his or her ears.

The main product of active alcoholism is human misery. A.A. members of tell each other that every active alcoholic negatively affects the lives of eight others. Children grow up lonely and angry, made so by lack of sufficient parenting because alcoholism removes or renders ineffective their parents. Adults live out years of obligation to a spouse or family member whose drinking destroys trust and intimacy. Great works of art go unfinished or un-attempted, necessary research fails or is never begun, great adventures go unlived and great loves unfulfilled. The most painful misery of alcoholism lies in the heart of the alcoholic, who struggles to deny or forget the knowledge of all that is lost, both actual and potential, of the richness of life.

Concerns about alcohol misuse and the search for treatment have been intertwined throughout the course of Western Civilization. J.D. Rolleston in "Alcoholism in Classical Antiquity," examines descriptions of problems of alcohol misuse and attempts to mitigate them written by Greek philosophers and poets, including Aristotle. He lists six categories of treatment, including a recommendation to put pepper in one's wine (Rolleston 1927). A.A. oral history traces the roots of the A.A. program through organizations such as the Oxford Group and the earlier Washingtonians back 1840. White documents Native American temperance societies in North America as early as the 1750s (White 2001).

This dissertation is not, however, about the problems of alcohol misuse, but rather about a particular treatment for alcoholism, the program of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), which began in 1935 and, according to the World Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous (WSO) is now used by over 115,000 groups worldwide and an estimated 2.5 million members (WSO 2012). I focus on using folklore fieldwork and methods to explore the success and failure of this "program of action," the only long-term treatment nearly universally available and easily affordable to individuals struggling to move past "white-knuckle" abstinence to a more integrated life of happy sobriety.

Alcoholism is – unpredictably – a recurring, relapsing, chronic condition. Alcoholism can also be brief, self-limiting, and acute. Spontaneous remission sometimes occurs without treatment (Sobell et al. 1993, Sobell, Ellingstad, and Sobell 2000). Some alcoholics who succeed in short-term treatment might go on to successful lifetime abstinence, with or without sufficient help to repair the negative consequences to frayed interpersonal relationships and/or personal mental and behavioral health that heavy drinking leaves behind.

Others return to drinking. Research continues on the causes of relapses, some of which occur even after long-term abatement of active alcohol misuse (Sinha and Li 2007, Norman et al. 2007, Administration 2012). Further, some physical consequences of alcoholic drinking respond to short-term treatment, but other physical and some mental and behavioral health problems might linger (Bartels et al. 2007). The misery they produce in the heart of an abstinent alcoholic can trigger a return to the self-administered anesthesia of alcohol.

In sum, two factors complicate treatment of alcoholism throughout the life of the afflicted individual. First, the course of alcoholism and harm to self and others throughout a human's life is unpredictable; therefore the need for long-term treatment is difficult to reliably rule out.

Second, many consequences of alcoholism to the behavioral and mental health of an alcoholic are best healed by, and often require, long-term treatment (Reed, Grant, and Rourke 1992, Sommer 1997, Nicholson 2010).

Estimates of membership from Alcoholics Anonymous General Service Office (over two million worldwide) and Robin Room (over six million) suggest that many find recovery a sufficient challenge to seek out the A.A. program's long-term treatment (WSO 2012, Room 1995).

Despite the need for and established benefits of long-term treatment, current corporate economic models that shape the health-care industry, unmitigated by the failed political will of some segments of American government to ensure sufficient health care for all citizens dictate that most research into treatment must focus on brief intervention and short-term treatment with perfunctory follow-up, if any. Many helpful treatments exist which, with varying success, help alcoholics stop drinking; that is, achieve abstinence. These treatments tend to last from twenty-one days to a few months, or (rarely) a year or more for the alcoholic who has enough money to afford it. The health-care insurance industry standard for mental-health services, which might support continued recovery, is twenty visits a year.

Many alcoholics might get what they need in the long-term support of A.A. but are reluctant to attend a meeting, hampered by false beliefs about what the A.A. program "requires" or "does to" a participant. Those in the counseling community find it hard to accept some concepts of the A.A. program; reliance on a Higher Power, accepting powerlessness over the disease itself [Author's note: though not one's own actions], identifying as an alcoholic, and reliance on the A.A. folk group for support. The discomfort and distrust of some counselors are well known and often mentioned by A.A. narrators, who report that their therapists tell them that

if they work hard in therapy, they do not need A.A. On the other hand, some of the most rigid A.A. members who narrowly interpret the A.A. program will insist that by working the program, any ill can be cured and A.A. members do not need therapy. This leads to dangerous – though happily rare – instances of renegade A.A. members insisting that others discontinue much-needed medication, such as anti-depressants (Summers 2007).

This mutual distrust, though representing only a portion of therapists and A.A. members, doesn't serve the recovery of the individual. A fair and informed view of the A.A. program, as well as a realistic sense of how to navigate the pitfalls inherent in any human endeavor and not absent in the A.A. program, would best equip the counseling community to support their clients in recovery. Almost as many alcoholics in distress learn about the A.A. program from sources other than A.A. (32%) as learn about A.A. from an A.A. member.(Office 2011) One aim of this work is to disseminate some of what A.A. members say in their own words about what the A.A. program requires, and about the outcomes of participation so that other workers in recovery can contextualize their knowledge about A.A., a process best accomplished by a period of regular attendance at local open meetings to acquire specialized awareness of local practices.

Herein I draw on twenty-seven years of fieldwork as an active member of Twelve Step programs, twenty-four of them sober in A.A., and on over a dozen years as a UCLA folklorist to present material "straight from the horse's mouth" – that is, by use of the expressive behavior of A.A. members themselves – to document, illustrate, and interpret what A.A. members do when they practice the A.A. program, the outcomes of that practice, and, drawing on that data, to discuss how the A.A. program works.

Fieldwork Locations

Before they discover their similarities as alcoholics, Los Angeles alcoholics share commonalities as citizens of one of the world's largest metropolitan areas. Characteristics of life in Los Angeles County create experiences shared by most who inhabit the region. Outsiders usually first note the extraordinary horrors of commuting and delights of celebrity sightings; both of these become tedious but ordinary for the residents. Nonetheless, an examination of these and other factors pertinent to life in Los Angeles can provide insights common to many people in Los Angeles that underpin more specific insights into the people who attend A.A. meetings.

Geographic Range

Main Fieldwork Sites

Beginning September 24, 1985, and continuing up to present day, I conducted fieldwork in Los Angeles County largely in the cities of Beverly Hills, Culver City, Los Angeles, Malibu, Venice, and West Hollywood. In the city of Los Angeles, I worked in three areas defined by the Los Angeles City Planning commission as "Central LA," "West LA," and "South Valley."

Central LA includes the following neighborhoods: Downtown, Chinatown, Hollywood, Temple-Beaudry, Beverly-Fairfax, Melrose, Hancock Park, Koreatown, the Miracle Mile, Larchmont Village, Windsor Square, Westlake and many other areas. Of these, most of my fieldwork concentrated on Hollywood, Beverly-Fairfax, and Melrose.

South Valley includes the following neighborhoods: Sherman Oaks, Woodland Hills, Canoga Park, North Hollywood, Valley Village, Studio City, Van Nuys, West Hills, Encino, Reseda, and Tarzana among many others. I also attended meetings in Sierra Madre.

West LA includes the following neighborhoods: Westwood, Pacific Palisades, Brentwood, Mar Vista, Palms, Westchester, West Los Angeles, South Robertson, Bel Air, Cheviot Hills, Venice, Beverlywood, and a few more small unnamed areas.

Comparative Fieldwork within LA County Sites

I attended a few or more meetings of other Twelve Step fellowships in Los Angeles County for comparison. These included Narcotics Anonymous (N.A.), Cocaine Anonymous (C.A.), Al-Anon, Overeaters Anonymous (O.A.), Marijuana Anonymous (M.A.) Emotions Anonymous (E.A.), and Debtors Anonymous (D.A.). I do not report findings from these meetings; however, attendance helped highlight what is unique and/or central to A.A. practice of the Twelve Steps. For example, N.A. narrating emphasizes the fatal nature of addiction more frequently and with more emphasis than A.A. does; its meetings also include more frequent reports of death by relapse than A.A. meetings do.

Comparative Fieldwork Sites

My fieldwork in the State of California includes work done in San Francisco, San Diego, and Sacramento.

Fieldwork in cities in other states in the United States of America includes work done in Berkeley and San Diego, CA; Pensacola, FL; Atlanta, GA; Kona and Lahaina, HI; Louisville, KY; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, LA; Chapel Hill, NC; Albuquerque, NM; New York, Irvington, and Rochester, NY; Columbus, OH; Seattle and Olympia, WA; Milwaukee, WI.

I conducted fieldwork in cities abroad, including Dublin and Waterford, Ireland; and Rome, Italy.

Attending meetings and talking to A.A. members in these cities allowed me to conduct comparisons with data from my main research locations in California. The common A.A. folk claim that "A.A. recovery is better in Los Angeles than anywhere else in the world" was, in part, supported, and, in part, modified by my experiences. Three observations hold up across sites other than Los Angeles County: 1) A.A. narrating in Los Angeles is more highly elaborated and often more entertaining in performance; 2) More A.A. and other Twelve-Step meetings are available in Los Angeles County than in every comparison site I visited; 3) Being a member of a Twelve-Step group in Los Angeles County appears, in my admittedly small and brief series of samples, to carry less stigma and potential for socio-economic harm than in other places.

Effect of Neighborhoods

Los Angeles has been called a city of neighborhoods by so many that I am unable to attribute the original utterance. The infamous freeway system, necessary to and the cause of sprawling suburbs and long commutes, segments residents into navigable subsections studded with resources for daily life. Many Los Angeles citizens commute to and from work in a distant location and spend the remaining hours of their days within the confines of a neighborhood. Ergo, many A.A. attendees choose meetings convenient to work location and hours, to home location and hours, or both. Meeting attendees thereby usually find themselves among people whose choices led them to a similar work situation or living situation. Some features of meetings (that it is in one's native language, or that it provides child-care, etc.) or reasons for attending (to see a friend, sponsor, or special speaker) motivate attendees to travel outside their usual commuting circuit.

My early fieldwork in West Hollywood and parts of Hollywood introduced me to a mixed population of A.A. members. The socioeconomic position of Hollywood residents tended, twenty-five years ago, to be lower middle class and blue collar. A number had criminal backgrounds. Meetings in West Hollywood included more middle class individuals. During later years, my research moved to Beverly Hills, Santa Monica, and the Westside of Los Angeles. The meetings in those areas are solidly middle and upper middle class. Meetings in Beverly Hills, Brentwood, Pacific Palisades, and Malibu include upper class, wealthy individuals.

Still, humans tend to coalesce into like groups. Certain socio-economic groups tend to populate certain meetings, each with its distinctive character. Several meetings attract mostly aspiring musicians, and attending one of these can be a bracing experience. The requisite black clothing, piercings, and tattoos make for a colorful crowd whose salty vocabulary and credo of rule breaking (irony intended) create a lively mood. The featured speakers recruited for this meeting tend to be highly entertaining, usually comedic, reflecting this crowd's preoccupation with performance. Narrating styles are heavily influenced by entertainment norms; those who celebrate sobriety anniversaries make what the meeting format calls "an acceptance" speech, usually strikingly similar in form to Academy Awards acceptance speeches.

A women's meeting in a prosperous neighborhood populated by actresses and entertainment industry professionals is remarkable for the elaborate and expensive food and coffee supplied by the members. Atypical for most A.A. meetings, references to professional activity are frequent. The A.A. members who attend form a close-knit and sometimes exclusive group; when they choose who will speak in the turn-taking portion of the meeting, they call on members by name. At this meeting, to be unknown to the regulars is to remain unheard.

At some meetings, many regular attendees share a common background, which can affect narrating. A meeting held mostly by and for the benefit of Salvation Army regulars takes on a different tenor. The "shares" (what members say during turn-taking) contain unusually frequent Christian phrases and narrating styles. Some groups maintain closely-guarded boundaries to protect members from notoriety. Meetings of celebrities, practicing medical professionals, and others whom the media would consider rich targets often convene privately in members' homes and are open by invitation only.

Los Angeles County Demographics

Population

Los Angeles, one of the world's most sophisticated and culturally complex cities, sprawls over 4,084 square miles, with a population of 10,441,080, a number larger than the population of forty-three of the fifty states.(County 2010)

U.S. Census Racial Categories

The U.S. Census Bureau reports percentages of the population of Los Angeles County in racial categories(Bureau 2011) determined by the U.S. Census on its forms as follows:

U.S. Census Bureau Racial Category	Percentage
White	71.8
Black	9.3

American Indian and Alaskan Native	1.5
Asian	14.2
Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific	.4
Persons reporting two or more races	3.6
Persons of Hispanic or Latino Origin	48.1
White persons not Hispanic, percent	27.6

Continuing to use the racial categories established by the Census Bureau, I can attest that a very high percentage of the attendees of meetings in LA West appear to be white. At some meetings, an unusually high percentage of non-white participants attend, often when clients of a rehabilitation program in another area arrive in a group by bus. A.A. in Los Angeles County seems to be viewed as, for lack of a better term, "higher class" than N.A. (I am told by informants that the reverse is true in England.) For reasons I suspect to be rooted in sociopolitical causes and conditions, within my fieldwork site, blacks and Hispanics attend meetings of Narcotics Anonymous far more frequently than they attend A.A. I have documented narrating that addresses this: N.A. narrators say, "Witness the miracle. Come to N.A. and watch the whores become ladies." An informant explained that this refers to why women do not stay in NA as long as men do. He explained that they get clean, recover their social dignity and then

"graduate" to A.A. meetings, often in hopes of finding a life partner there. Male N.A. members express resentment at what they see as a defection.

Persons from every walk of life are welcome in A.A. meetings. People of color who have attended the largely white meetings on the Westside are greeted with a warm welcome. So are people of every apparent gender or sexual identity. Ex-convicts are welcomed and even respected in most meetings, although there is an occasional exception[6].

Gender

As of the 2010 Census, the population of Los Angeles County is 50.7% female.(Bureau 2011) The gender distribution of gender of members of A.A. in Los Angeles County differs greatly. The A.A. World Service Office conducts a head count every three or four years. The report on the latest survey claims A.A. membership is 65% male, 35% female.

I first noticed a discrepancy in these figures when I had been involved with A.A. for about ten years. My frequent attendance at meetings in the LA West area had by then been supplemented by occasional but repeated attendance at meetings in San Francisco, San Diego, San Fernando Valley, and Riverside County, California; Albuquerque, New Mexico; New York, New York; Baton Rouge and New Orleans, Louisiana; and Pensacola, Florida. Consistently I observed that the usual ratio of men to women was three to one, and often higher. I began to

[6] I attended a meeting in the basement of a wealthy church in Uptown New Orleans. On the podium there was a sign banning the use of profanity. I witnessed a young black man struggling to share without using his accustomed vernacular speech. My conclusion, after gathering information, was that this rule existed to discourage attendance by those of lower socioeconomic status. I am sure similar situations exist in Los Angeles County; I just haven't found them yet.

actively note the behavior of meeting attendees during the head counts conducted in succeeding years.

I have observed postural, gestural, and narrating evidence that women attendees pay much closer attention to the instructions for the head count procedure. Most women remain in their seats, listen carefully, conduct colloquial conversations checking in with each other to be sure they are all complying correctly. ("Oh, honey, no, you don't raise your hand here. Remember, we raised our hands last night at the Step Study? No, they only count you once.") Usually during the opening of the announcement of the head count, several men get up and leave the room, while others conduct colloquial conversations on other topics. The postures and gestures of the men indicate that they are, at best, disinterested and, at worst, annoyed at the interruption. Many take this as an opportunity for a cigarette or other break.

After observing attendance at meetings in over forty cities in the United States for twenty-seven years and behavior during head counts for about seventeen years now, I compared my observed attendance ratios to the ratios produced by the A.A. WSO-conducted head count, which reports only the ratio of men to women who respond to the head count, not the ratio of men to women who attend meetings. Even accounting for a number of women who attend only women's meetings, my conclusion is that, in the A.A. WSO-conducted head count, men are undercounted and women are more accurately counted. I can confidently assert that, at minimum, the ratio of male attendees to female attendees is much closer to three male attendees to every one female attendee. That ratio is as high as four male attendees for each female attendee at roughly five to ten percent of the meetings I have attended. I have, on five or six occasions, been the only woman in a meeting of twenty to thirty attendees. Other A.A. women report similar experiences.

Economy: The Creative Economy

The bulk of the glamorous creative economy (once known as the entertainment industry but now expanded to include media such as electronic games), in the form of jobs, buildings, offices, studios, equipment rental, homes for employees, and more, are located in the area in which I conduct fieldwork.

At any given A.A. narrating event, many of the attendees arrived in Los Angeles County to pursue a career in one of the arts, trades, and/or crafts of the creative economy. In short, in any roomful of A.A. members in my fieldwork site, many have stars in their eyes. Training, talent, and love of being center-stage have a certain effect on narrating practice. It is not unusual to hear gifted narrators speak at a meeting; some of them are celebrities, and a few are world-class entertainers. The skill they bring to narrating might enhance or detract from the efficacy of their narrating practices as a means of bringing about improved sobriety; in either case, the effect is distinctively characteristic of A.A. narrators in my fieldwork site, and worth noting.

Gender, Redux

Men at A.A. meetings in Los Angeles cross the usual boundaries of appropriate behavior more frequently than they do in other areas, although no area seems free of this. Women at meetings have attested that in Los Angeles they have to fend off an unusually high degree of unwanted touching. In meetings, I found myself unhappy with the amount of unwanted inappropriate touching I experienced at the hands of men I had never met. I researched this behavior carefully for years to be sure it was not an experience singular to me or caused by me. I received confirmation from both men and women that this problem is endemic to L.A. A.A. Men told me that, at one time, the Los Angeles Central Office circulated pictures of known sexual

predators who attended meetings. On another occasion, the men of one meeting took aside a man who constantly touched women despite their outspoken protest. The men asked him to attend another meeting, preferably a men's meeting. He refused. No one in A.A. has any authority to enforce, so the man kept attending the meeting. Some women left the meeting; others devised strategies to avoid him.

Some men at meetings are just coming out of prison, rehabilitation centers, or live in sober living homes, crowded in with other men. Not every meeting attendee is clean and sober; it is not common but not highly unusual for an attendee to be drunk or high. Some men arrive at a meeting with certain goals in mind and find women not as plentiful as they would like. There are other men who are in their early months of sobriety and are unstable. There are some men who are sociopathic predators, the kind who were pimps and dealers when they were drinking and using. A.A. meetings are not full of saints.

Many women, after years of drinking, are traumatized and demoralized by their drinking behavior. They are more vulnerable than a woman in a similar but non-drinking demographic category. The power differential socialized into contemporary American men and women has a disproportionately larger effect in A.A. than it does in the rest of society because the women, especially in their first two years before cognitive recovery gains strength, are less resistant to predation.

Many attractive women live and attend meetings on the Westside because they work in the entertainment industry. I believe the pronounced degree of this sexually predatory behavior in Los Angeles is partly due to the strong influence of the entertainment industry, whose exploitation of women is legendary and need not be reiterated here. What readers might not know is that the exploitation of actresses on the creative side is replicated exactly by the

exploitation of women on the business side. The failure of the citizens of Los Angeles, activist women, and the entertainment industry itself to right this degrading and antediluvian wrong leaves women just entering the rooms of A.A. meetings vulnerable to the sociopathic behaviors of entitled men.

Los Angeles is simply the worst case of this behavior I have seen in all my fieldwork; sadly, Los Angeles meetings are not unique in hosting this phenomenon. The practice of men who have years of A.A. time taking sexual advantage of vulnerable newly-sober women is so prevalent that it has a name. "Thirteenth-stepping" is the A.A. term for a particular kind of manipulation, wherein, under the guise of offering help with and instruction about A.A. practices, a man with more time seduces a woman with less time, often a newcomer with only a few days of sobriety.

This behavior at one meeting in Washington D.C. was so offensive that Newsweek magazine covered the story of one group, the Midtown Group, where male exploitation of younger women was so bad other A.A. groups pressured the offending group to disavow A.A. or disband. Having no authority, they could not enforce this wish. The group continued, but members of the press, the recovery community, A.A. members, and counseling professionals began a word-of-mouth campaign to warn newcomers of the dangers at Midtown meetings. This kind of "information about the things we cannot change" folk narrating is common in Alcoholics Anonymous. More about this will appear in [the chapter on Narrating Behaviors.]

I attribute the prevalence of this behavior throughout A.A. meetings at least partly to the example set by founder Bill W., whose extramarital affairs and inappropriate behavior with young women are documented and known within the oral society of A.A. in the United States, yet rarely appear in A.A. narrating. (Hartigan 2000)When the topic arises, A.A. members of all

stripes (formal, informal, old-timers, et al) urgently discount and hush those who speak frankly about this.

Non-Mainstream Religious and Spiritual Traditions

Near the center of West Hollywood sits a small bookstore called the Bodhi Tree, an epicenter for the so-called "New Age" movement, now called the Human Potential movement. Many citizens of Los Angeles, A.A. members and normies (those without a drinking problem who are thus not members) alike, embraced that movement in droves, many attending classes and workshops to dabble in an admixture of Asian-Celtic-Native American religion, freely-interpreted mythology, alternative medicinal practice, and pop psychology. Many A.A. members at the height of that popular phenomenon supplemented their A.A. practice with materials from the Bodhi Tree and like sources, or attended lectures, workshops, and classes they learned about from fliers at such bookstores.

The New Age movement generated its own repertoire of spiritual practice and oral tradition. As the movement matured, yoga, trips to ashrams, practice of Asian martial arts and spiritual, and many more aspects of that movement became integrated into the fabric of life in Los Angeles, most especially in the glamour industries of the creative economy. Buddhist practice is fairly common among A.A. members west of the 405 freeway. In my fieldwork, I found more crossover into A.A. practice and repertoire from the New Age/Human Potential movement than I did in other locations.

In sum, characteristics of the location of my fieldwork that affect folk practice, folklore production, and the nature of the folklore include geographic, demographic, economic, social, and traditional aspects of the city. Other locations might share one or more characteristics; for

example, Santa Fe in New Mexico and Sedona in Arizona embrace the Human Potential philosophy as entirely as the Westside of Los Angeles. Los Angeles, however, combines these characteristics to create living conditions that affect many, if not most, Los Angeles denizens in similar ways before they walk in the doors of Los Angeles A.A. meetings.

"When I Came in…"

As A.A. narrators accrue days, months, and years of continuous sobriety, in narrating they often compare their present state to their condition when they first arrived at A.A. meetings. Members refer to joining A.A. as "coming in" and refer to leaving A.A. to drink as "going out." When someone leaves A.A. for other reasons, it is said that "He stopped coming [to meetings]."

A member will say, "When I came in, it was all I could do to sit still long enough to hear the speaker. I always left after that." "When I came in, all I could think was, '…these people are all low-life drunks. What am I doing here? I was president of the best sorority at USC!' Imagine my surprise when I found out the secretary of the meeting had been president the year after I was." "When I came in, I would shake your hand and steal your wallet. Now I'm the trusted servant of the meeting; I'm the treasurer." These kinds of vivid details about the condition of alcoholics and the state of their lives reveal that A.A. narrators cast socio-economic factors as unimportant excepts as points of departure for change. Narrators advise newcomers, "Listen for the similarities, not the differences." The similarities are the details of drinking and desperation. The differences are the demographic details.

I have described the demographic pool of the Los Angeles County population. Alcoholism affects every segment of that population. I can draw no profile of a "typical" A.A. member that would be distinct from a description of a "typical" Los Angeles County resident. I

can safely make one observation: Most new A.A. members come in beat up and cognitively challenged.

In this section, I will describe the most important characteristics of the assortment of problem drinkers as they enter the rooms of A.A.; that is, the effects alcohol misuse has had on any one individual that will affect his or her recovery and/or career in A.A.

Most of the people who attend A.A. meetings have experienced undesirable consequences as a direct result of alcohol misuse. These consequences range in severity and urgency from, for example, nagging by a close friend or family member to near-death from advanced cirrhosis. A few who attend open meetings are there to learn more about A.A. Each person attending a meeting has the opportunity to become a member of A.A. According to a long-established tradition, the only requirement for any person to become a member is that the person has a desire to stop drinking and is willing to state that out loud in a meeting. This gives rise to the practice oft-depicted in media of a person saying, "Hi, my name is ___, and I'm an alcoholic." A.A. members tell new attendees, "You're a member when you say you are," and that "No one can tell you you're an alcoholic except you. That's a decision you and your health caregiver can make together. Decide for yourself." Although some members use strong-arm, dominating, boot-camp style methods to intimidate and bully newcomers, this is frowned upon and discouraged. (Summer, 2007)

Qualifying according to this single determiner of membership tends to select for people with a history of alcohol misuse that they consider to be an ongoing problem. No other characteristic holds true across a meaningful segment of A.A. members; despite many attempts to define an "alcoholic personality" (and despite the claims scattered throughout A.A. literature that "we alcoholics are ____), in "Alcoholism and Personality," R.T. Mulder states plainly,

"There is no alcoholic personality nor are there personality measures which are specific to vulnerability to later alcohol dependence."(Mulder 2002) Continuing research investigating many personality traits that interact with alcoholism and recovery, none definitively so, yields atomistic results applicable to specific segments of the population, but none apply to all.

This established, much evidence supports the damage alcohol misuse inflicts on the body, brain, and mind (and, dare I say, even soul) of the alcoholic beginner. Those characteristics include learning deficits such as memory problems, the prevalence of which perhaps gives rise to the high number of repetitions in constantly-changing context of the simple slogans and sayings. Many studies have established that chronic alcoholism negatively affect cognitive performance. (Mann et al. 1999)

Problems focusing attention might be the force that shapes the rhetorical strength of slogans; for example, structural repetition is often used. "We are not bad people trying to be better; we are sick people trying to get well." Pithy, vivid sayings abound: "If you commit suicide in the first year, you're shooting the wrong person." Humor is highly valued: "If you're not sure if A.A. is for you, try attending ninety meetings in ninety days. If you decide after that that it's not for you, we'll cheerfully refund your misery."

The ability to learn, create, and use folklore originates within the body as electrochemical activity in the brain. As such, known principles of how the brain's electrochemical activity works in learning, memory, creativity (variance), and communication (by performing) can inform examination and analysis of a folklore behavior. Neurological studies have documented brain activity and neural change associated with religious practice (Saver and Rabin 1997, Joseph 2001, Azari, Missimer, and Seitz 2005), meditation (Chaube 1974, Lutz et al. 2004, Lazar et al. 2005, Lutz 2008), and empathy or compassion (Singer 2006, Iacoboni 2009, Bzdok et al. 2012).

While these neural studies do not address religious activity, meditation, or empathy/compassion in alcoholics, these lines of research investigate elements of human brain activity engaged in tasks foundational to A.A. practice. Research into meditation and empathy/compassion in particular is ripe for collaboration with researchers familiar with A.A. recovery practices that might help identify specific neural sites or circuits involved in these tasks.

A group of researchers co-authored an article that summarized years of research on the neurobiological damage alcohol inflicts and the neural repair recovery supports. (Crews 2011) An overview of a few specific descriptors of these factors gives a rudimentary outline of the variety of conditions affecting individuals who arrive at the door of A.A., each with his or her own unique "fingerprint" of damage and baggage.

Genetic Factors

When A.A. members narrate as the "main speaker" at a meeting, they "tell their story" according to the formula "what it was like, what happened to change me, and what it is like now." When they tell "what it was like," they often describe the onset and development of their drinking.

A.A. members who call themselves "real alcoholics" sometimes accuse others of not really being alcoholic at all. "I spilled more than you drank," these (usually male) narrators sneer. In years of listening to A.A. narrators tell "their stories" (histories of drinking, change, and recovery), I noticed a pattern. Some narrators consistently used phrases such as "I had my first drink at nine years old and I was off and running," or "I had my first beer and I was home," or "I drank that scotch and I knew I was going to be doing this for the rest of my life." The remainder of the narrating following this phrase was strikingly predictable. These alcoholics drank fast and

hard, piling up consequences to which they gave little heed, pursued drinking up to the gates of hell (and sometimes beyond), and often lost absolutely everything before recovering.

Another broad group, I have noticed, include in the "what it was like" section stories of violence, abandonment, exploitation, abuse, and privation in early life that chill the listener. While most of these stories include alcoholism in the child's environment, the development of drinking can be very different for these narrators. They often describe drinking as a resource for numbing pain, withdrawing from an ugly world, escaping to a better world (of fantasy or of parties and bars), and a kind of medication that made them able to handle fear and aversion to the responsibilities of daily life. The escalation of their drinking is often entangled with escalations of drama and problems caused by violence and other factors as much as by alcohol abuse.

The rest of the narrating of the "what it was like" section by A.A. members falls somewhere in-between these two essentialized descriptions.

I have read a number of articles over the years following a line of research into the genetic contribution to alcoholism and how it might control or affect development and severity of the disease in relation to other contributing factors. Many indicate associations between different genetic profiles and alcoholism. In an article published in May 2012, Swagell et al report that, in testing combinations of different alleles (units of genetic contributions, for our purposes), they were able to determine that some combinations of alleles increase risk for and severity of alcoholism up to twenty-seven fold, and that this effect occurs only in men.(Swagell et al. 2012)

This seems to me to point to an association between genetic etiology of disease and folk narrating that identifies the lived experience of the alcoholic. Investigation into the role genetic contribution inherent in the individual might play in relapse and recovery is ongoing. Thus, one

factor that shapes the history of the newcomer can be genetically-facilitated escalation and degree of his or her worst drinking episodes.

Psycho-social Factors

The relationship between child sexual abuse and increased risk for harmful substance abuse is well-established.(Nelson et al. 2002) Trauma, in the forms of violence, sexual abuse, abandonment, neglect and more, compromises neurobiological, physical and emotional health, behavior, and cognition, leading to use of alcohol to anesthetize pain or minimize distress of memories. (McHugo et al. 2005) Such traumas often lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is linked to greater risk for relapse. (Norman et al. 2007) Alcoholics are more likely than the general population to have mental disorders. The risk of also having an addiction to another substance increases seven-fold for alcoholics.(Regier et al. 1990) These are only a few examples of what societal violence can do to a person to weaken his or her ability to resist alcohol or to recover from alcoholism.

The factors briefly noted above are a few of those which most powerfully shape the degree and kind of damage newcomers carry with them into early recovery. Most arrive unaware of all that converges upon their alcoholic "bottom" (A.A. term for the moment when life falls apart – or together – enough to induce a "moment of clarity" or insight that motivates an alcoholic to seek treatment). As members progress through recovery, however, some become aware of changes in the early years and can look back and characterize their progress. The following is an example of A.A. narrating about those early years. I am re-constructing this fictionalized example from many similar descriptions, applying to it an extended metaphor that helps the message cohere.

Narrating about Coming in Damaged

"When I first got here, it felt like I had been asleep for a long time. It was like waking up to find myself lying on floor of a kitchen with a broken linoleum floor, a few dirty dishes, a frightened cat, and a single bare light bulb above me. Once I got up, I realized that I had been living in the kitchen of a big, beautiful Victorian mansion, but that all most of the doors were locked and boarded up. I stayed in that kitchen for months, cleaning it up and learning how to live again. By the time I was two [a vernacular usage meaning "by the time I had achieved two years of abstinence"], I had managed to open up and clean up a few rooms, so I could sleep in a bed and eat at a table and hang my clothes up. Then, slowly, I found keys and tools that helped unlock one door at a time. What I found were huge rooms full of furniture and beautiful things shrouded in sheets and covered in dust. I began working my way through the house, one or two rooms at a time. Sometimes I would unlock a door and find a whole hallway; an entire wing of the house that I had forgotten was there. By the time I turned five, the whole house was open and clean and friends visited me regularly. Those friends were other members of A.A."

Whenever I hear a version of this account being told, many heads are nodding, some quite vigorously. Since A.A. in LA forbids crosstalk (colloquy or utterances by anyone but the attendee who has the floor), nodding is the preferred gesture for registering assent or agreement. Degrees of agreement are indicated by the length of the nodding, the vertical height of the nod, and the speed of nodding. An enhancement of nodding is to turn to another attendee and nod together or say, quietly, "Yep. Me, too," or to look across the room at a friend and nod together.

When an A.A. audience attends this particular item of narrating, the soft murmurs, compassionate gaze-seeking, leaning-forward postures, and gentle bobbing of heads confirms that for many alcoholics in recovery, this experience defines the early years of recovery for those

who stay and work the A.A. program. In subsequent chapters, I will provide the reader with a fly-on-the-wall perspective of what attending meetings, narrating, and becoming a proficient and accomplished performer of A.A. folklore is like, and bring to life, as best I can, the cumulative outcome of long-term practice: Sobriety.

Chapter Three: Lore and Its Uses

Concept of Repertoire

Robert Georges notes that a folklorist's description of a narrator's repertoire identifies only those items that the folklorist knows that the narrator knows. (Georges 1994) When documenting slogans in A.A. narrating, the folklorist must know which utterances are considered slogans and which are the narrator's own pithy statements. I will add that a folklorist's ability to analyze an item of repertoire in performance relies partly on his or her understanding of how an utterance is supposed to work. My presentation and analysis of A.A. narrating repertoire in Los Angeles County relies partly on my own repertoire and performance experience.

Further, Georges points out that many folklorists have documented repertoires of individual performers with the implicit assumption that a complete repertoire could be documented, or was in that instance. Part of the difficult of documenting repertoire is that it constantly changes. Kenneth Goldstein points out the need to recognize repertoire as emergent, dynamic, and growing.

In A.A. narrating, having a dynamic and growing repertoire is a point of pride. An A.A. member will hear another make an apt statement and say, "That's great! I'm stealing that. Can I use it?" The speaker's response, "It's yours," or "Nothing in A.A. is original. I probably stole it from someone else," indicates that both see a particular utterance as a useful item that one "has" and collects for future use.

Role of Print

In considering the Big Book in light of A.A. repertoire, it is important to remember that the Big Book is a record of the oral tradition developed in the first five years of A.A. practice. Further, most A.A. members spend little time reading or memorizing passages from the Big Book, as attested to by the A.A. saying, "If you want to hide something from an alcoholic, put it in the Big Book." Many phrases, sentences, and motifs exist in the Big Book alongside their cognates in oral tradition. Most A.A. members would be surprised to learn that a favorite A.A. proverb could be found in the Big Book. Newer stories in the Big Book certainly capture current oral tradition; in one, the saying appears, "Most people change their behaviors to fit their expectations. Alcoholics change their expectations to fit their behaviors." As this example attests, the Big Book is a living text that both captures and generates oral tradition, functioning as part of narrating rather than controlling it.

The basic text of A.A. practice is the book called "Alcoholics Anonymous," now in its fourth edition. Most A.A. members do not learn what they narrate by reading it in the Big Book. In my observations, I have seen that by far the majority of A.A. members begin to master some knowledge of the book's contents only after their fifth year. Until then, they learn what the Big Book has to say by hearing those with more years of recovery quote it.

Phrases and sentences flow easily between page and oral folklore. The Big Book is full of phrases that have become slogans, or sayings, or catch-phrases. A.A. narrators use this humorously on occasion. At an early morning meeting, I saw a phrase from the Big Book enter the vernacular. The fourth edition was still new in January. At an early morning meeting, someone quoted the phrase "Normal people change their behavior to fit their goals. Alcoholics change their goals to fit their behaviors."

Exhibits of knowledge of the Big Book are seen as displays of proficiency. To confirm their own status, two people followed who said they had "heard it at another meeting" or "read it in the stories," to make sure that others in the group knew that they were at least "as sober" as the first speaker by virtue of having obtained the new edition and become familiar with it already.

Knowledge of the contents of the Big Book allows a highly adept narrator to recombine bits and pieces of it to produce humor. A narrator did this to great effect at a meeting one afternoon.

An item on page 449 of the Big Book, Third Edition, contains the phrase "And Acceptance is the answer to all of my problems today…" There follows a wonderful meditation on how acceptance, and the dangers of refusing to accept. The section is so powerful that many A.A.'s quote it. At least one A.A. printed it on business size cards and gave them out. I got one in the early 90s. Wallet cards printed with this section circulate. The phrase "Page 449" became a shorthand way of referring to this. "I need to read page 449," or, "So I page 449'd it and now I don't care who she fucks."

Another item prominent in the A.A. repertoire is the Serenity Prayer. It also speaks about acceptance in its first line: "Grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change…"

The narrator's turn to speak came after a heated exchange occurred. The Fourth Edition of the Big Book had recently come out recently. A.A. tradition dictates that the first 164 pages of the Big Book are kept identical in every edition of the book. The pages beyond that are individual stories of anonymous members' stories of their path to and through recovery. In each edition, some are kept from the edition before, and some new ones are added. In the Fourth

Edition, changes to the stories necessitated re-paginating that moved the "acceptance" section to page 417.

The speaker's comment followed a discussion of complaints about some of the changes to the book. A very large tempest occurred in a very small teapot about a few commas that were "corrected" in the Doctor's Opinion by some hapless A.A. member. The person changed the comma placement in that portion to conform to modern usage; some versions of the rumor held that Microsoft Word's Grammarcheck had corrected the commas. Many A.A. members put up a fuss, insisting that the resulting prose changed the meaning of that portion. Such a hue and cry was raised that some A.A. members began to poke fun as those purists. The narrator seemed to be changing the topic when he began discussing his recent attempts to become more tolerant, a prized attribute of sobriety. He summed up by saying that he knew what to do; he would pray, "Grant me the serenity to accept the fact that page 449 is now page 417."

The laughter of many in the room marked those in the audience who had enough experience to infer the meaning or had been around long enough to know the old formula and to have learned the new page number.

I heard a newcomer's story of refusing a beer by telling his friends, "I have no mental defense against the first drink." He said that he didn't know where the phrase had come from, that he had just thought it up. He was asked to repeat it as several people wrote it down. It happens to appear in Chapter Three of the Big Book. Most likely, he'd heard that phrase read or quoted by someone at a meeting. Much later in his sobriety he will notice the phrase in the Big Book and perhaps exclaim, as many do when they actually read it, "So that's where that saying comes from!"

A.A. Repertoire

The A.A. repertoire is extensive, coded, and highly diverse from the repertoire of common speech, partly because some A.A. narrating represents complex concepts that are not frequently discussed in common speech or that are constructed in ways unique to the A.A. program, such as the concept of God or a Higher Power.

The phrase "the A.A. repertoire" implies a superset of expressive behaviors exists which contains all those used by all A.A. narrators beginning in June of 1940 and extending each day into the future as A.A. members continue to practice folklore and thus to generate exemplars. This notion could only exist only in a virtual sense. Despite local differences, a common core of narrating repertoire exists.

I will characterize what I call A.A.'s repertoire as items used frequently by A.A. narrators to express meanings particular to A.A. narrating. That is, while "serenity" is a word used by many writers and speakers of English, when an A.A. narrator uses the word serenity, he or she means a kind of peace and calm beyond what is meant in common usage. Serenity in the A.A. repertoire signifies a peace that comes from spiritual growth. Being serene is regarded as a spiritual achievement.

The repertoire I describe, report, and analyze herein contains the utterances I have heard in the space and time of my fieldwork as described in Chapter One. Certainly there are expressive behaviors outside my experience, and expressive behaviors whose usage and meaning differ greatly for A.A. narrators in another time and place.

Beyond the core repertoire of narrating shared by all, the amount of additional material active in repertoire varies. As the Internet became available and then more essential to daily life, this amount increased overall, since the Internet provides a specialized kind of face-to-face

transmission and serves as an archive and site for A.A. narrating. Online meetings, active forums, pages listing slogans, jokes, and more abound. In the last years, repertoire in any location seems to equal the core repertoire plus additions from Internet sources plus local additions.

Slogans from popular culture that prove useful are promptly appropriated. Some A.A. narrators adapt popular lore simultaneously but independently. The sayings "Da Nile [denial] is not a river in Egypt" or "Just call me Cleo [Cleopatra], Queen of da Nile" arose in popular self-help culture in the 1980s and were quickly seized upon by A.A. narrators. Much like witty utterances by celebrities, the more apt the slogan, the faster it spreads and the longer it is remembered. There is no principle of exclusion at work in its canon, but rather a test for inclusion that A.A. members use to test the success of any and all behavior under consideration: "If you like what you're getting, keep doing what you're doing."

Individual Repertoire

In discussing the folkloristic perspective on folklore as a personal resource, Georges and Jones point out that each individual has his or her own repertoire, although it is part of a larger communal repertoire shared by two or more people. In discussing Gary Robertson's repertoire, Jones records an individual repertoire drawn in part from at least one larger communal repertoire (his grandparents' Orthodox religious traditions) separated from Robertson in time and space. In A.A. practice, I have developed my own personal repertoire of items I use often and can recall quickly; from my observations, all A.A. narrators do this. Kenneth Goldstein says that "not all items of repertoire are of the same import to the tradition bearer." The items that are in current use and come easily to the speaker's mind are often those closely related to the speaker's current

experience. I remember a time when I was working with an A.A. member who was helping me to change certain behaviors. My favorite A.A. saying became "If you keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you're getting." Perhaps my frequent use of that saying was because "We teach best what we most need to learn."

Goldstein mentions that "At any particular time, certain items are active and inactive in [a narrator's] repertory." It is also true that certain items become active or inactive in certain groups. In the past when I lived farther east, I spent time in meetings in parts of L.A. County where attendees more frequently have had experience in jail or prison. Certain narrating items more frequently or solely found in those meetings exist as part of my repertoire. If I attend groups where members have had those experiences, those items are more likely to become active. In other locations, they never come to mind. (Goldstein 1971) (Georges 1990, Georges 1987, Georges and Jones 1995)

Some Examples

An A.A. member called the slogans and sayings the "bullet points of recovery." Some are in the style of slogans, some are sayings, and some items in the A.A. repertoire are single words or a few words in a phrase that are frequently worked into utterances.

I chose these items at random from lists I have made of repertoire items, because listeners who attend A.A. meetings for the first time wander into an ongoing stream of narrating with no primer, glossary, or phrase book.

Attitude of gratitude

Simple but not easy

Progress not perfection

No half measures

Just for today

One day at a time

Principles before personalities

Keep coming back.

It takes what it takes.

It's a simple program for complicated people.

Poor me, poor me, pour me another drink.

Rule 62: Don't take yourself so damn seriously.

One is too many and a thousand is never enough.

It's alcoholism not alcoholwasm.

Resentment is an acid that burns the container that holds it.

If you want to keep it, you have to give it away.

Holding on to a resentment is like taking poison thinking it will kill the other person.

A man takes a drink. The drink takes a drink. Drink takes a man.

I came for my drinking and stayed for my thinking

Stay in the solution.

You don't go to a brothel to get kissed.

Expectations are recipes for resentments.

If nothing changes, nothing changes.

Don't compare your insides to someone else's outsides.

How many alcoholics does it take to change a light bulb? Change? What do you mean, change?

These fragments, slogans, and sayings appear in A.A. narrating in the same way bits of ingredients appear in stew. After a look at this list, one might well ask, "What is the difference between slogans and saying?" No one knows. It is certain that the first five slogans are those printed and distributed by the World Service Office. Beyond that, it is doubtful that consensus could be reached on any other utterance.

The meanings of some are self-evident. The "rule number sixty-two" saying refers to an apocryphal meeting in A.A.'s early days that developed a whole list of rules over time until it became clear that the rules were attempts to control others and more tolerance of each other was called for. Realizing this, they passed "Rule Number Sixty-Two." I have heard A.A. narrators call this out as a response to criticism by another member.

"Holding onto a resentment" reveals an unusual usage of the word "resentment." In A.A. narrating, "a resentment" is a kind of a grudge. A grudge tends to result from a particular event; often there is a narrative attached about a loss or injury. A resentment is a negative feeling or attitude about a person that continues unabated. A.A. members usually use Steps Four through Nine to resolve resentments.

Newcomers often ask about going to an event that involves drinking on the part of others. Sometimes the event is a wedding or other important event; other A.A. members respond with suggestions based on experience from their own early days when they felt less than certain about being around alcohol. Other times the newcomer wants to go to a Super Bowl party with all of his former fraternity drinking buddies. In that instance, his older male friends in A.A. might respond, "You don't go to a brothel to get kissed."

One saying is linked to the only gestural routine in the A.A. repertoire that began sometimes in 1980s. When I first began attending meetings in 1985, the custom was to hold

hands at the end of the meeting and say a prayer in unison. I was startled one day when the some of those present, at the prayer's end, lifted and dropped hands in time to the phrase, "Keep coming back!" I was a bit dismayed and didn't care much for it. The practice became more prevalent at meetings and finally saturated the meetings I attended in Los Angeles County. Over the ensuing years, the phrase at the end was extended to "Keep coming back, it works," and then to, "Keep coming back, it works if you work it." The trend continued. In early 1997, it reached the peak of extension that I witnessed at meetings in Hawaii. At several meetings there, a friend and I had learned that the ending chant was longer than it was in Los Angeles. One evening, we participated in the longest chant we had ever heard. "Keep coming back, it works if you work it, it won't if you don't, and work 'cause you're worth it, so work it!" All of the pumping up and down of hands and the emphasis of rhythm reminded us of square-dance calling and we spontaneously spun each other around, still holding hands, saying, "…and swing your partner, dos-i-do, and around your partner, round you go…" before laughing until we had to sit down. No one took any notice of our silliness and hilarity nor any offense. A.A. members like to have fun.

After a time, the extended phrases began to drop away in practice. At present, one usually hears "Keep coming back. It works."

These commonly used slogans and sayings show up in many passages throughout this work wherein I represent A.A. narrating. Readers might notice that some slogans show up outside A.A. narrating, as well. Here is a list of items used by A.A. narrators that take on a different

Shibboleths and Variants

A term in A.A. narrator can be a shibboleth, indicating its provenance. I found this to be true in a usage of the term "Chair," short for chairperson. Because a friend had regularly attended a meeting near my home for many years and enjoyed it, I visited it two or three times in his company. He introduced me to a few friends, including the two men who had started this particular meeting by organizing the time, place, and format.

As the meeting began, I noticed immediately that the position Los Angeles County A.A. groups usually call "Secretary" was called, in this group, "Chair." This struck me as unusual, as positions of responsibility in A.A. groups are explicitly and repeatedly called "positions of service" or "commitments" (meaning that one commits to fulfilling this duty of service at weekly meetings for a particular length of time). The phrase used for fulfilling a duty, such as organizing the details of the meeting, is "being of service." Use of the word "Chair" implies authority, and a greater amount of authority was in evidence at this meeting than is considered desirable by those A.A. members who devote themselves to spiritual recovery as well as physical, mental, and socio-economic.[7] During my second visit, I asked around after the meeting, searching for an explanation for the use of "Chair" when "Secretary" is used almost exclusively in Los Angeles County.

[7] With no space to fully examine this notion, I will simply note in passing that I was first made aware of the socio-economic aspirations that contribute to the drive for recovery by an extremely bright and astute observer, a journalist who told me, "Quiet as it's kept, a lot of people come to A.A. to get their corner offices and BMWs back." This conversation dates to the early 90s, when A.A. meetings were brimming with the wreckage of the downward spiral of the cocaine craze, which had taken more hostages more violently among the higher socio-economic classes than alcohol usually does.

Folklorists have used what is called the Finnish, or historic-geographic method, to trace the route traveled by a variant of a text item. While the underlying notion of finding an original or ur-form has been largely abandoned by folklorists (Goldberg 1984), on some occasions it is useful to investigate the possibility that a variant is a transplant from another time and/or place, a task for which a touch of the Finnish method is appropriate.

Tracking the Wild Shibboleth

An opportunity to use this method occurred after the third visit I made to this meeting. I went home and turned on the television as I prepared dinner. By chance, I saw part of an episode of "West Wing" in which three of the characters convene an ad-hoc A.A. meeting. One says to the other something resembling, "Who's gonna be Chair? You wanna be Chair?" Another replies, "Okay, I'll be Chair." The designated Chair then begins narrating in the role LA County A.A. members would recognize as "Secretary" of the meeting. I realized that it was possible that use of the term "Chair" was a shibboleth, a word in such common usage in a particular location that its inclusion in an utterance indicated that the speaker had learned and used the word there.

I called my friend and asked if he could find out whether the two men who had started the meeting were from Washington, D.C. (D.C.) and had "gotten sober" (entered A.A.) there. Word came back that they were, and that they had originally started the meeting for others from D.C. To get corroboration, I called an A.A. friend who regularly traveled to D.C. She replied that, yes, in A.A. meetings in D.C., what we in L.A. call the Secretary is there called the Chair. Within the next three months, another A.A. member confirmed this as fact from her attendance at D.C. meetings. Thus I was able to trace the likely source of the variant.

Remodeling a Transplanted Item

One way A.A. members teach and learn these complex concepts is by use of slogans, short phrases that rhetoricians would call "idioms." These phrases originated in early A.A. and many found their way into the Big Book, written in the fifth year of the existence of the A.A. program. Five slogans used since the early years are available from the World Service Office printed in a traditional black and red Old English-style typeface design. They are: Easy Does It; Live and Let Live; But for the Grace of God; First Things First; and Think, Think, Think.

The slogans are short, pithy, and elegant in the sense that scientists and engineers use the term. An elegant formula, model, or design uses the least possible materials and structural elements to achieve the maximum possible effect. The slogans' forms have the elegance of well-handled items worn of all extraneous material through hard use. These have their variants; one hears "Easy does it, but do it," once in a while. The elaboration adds nothing essential and so does not become intrinsic to the form.

The World Service Office sells prints of these five slogans, which are often displayed in various A.A. meeting rooms across the United States, including those in Los Angeles County. Of the five, "Think, think, think" stood out to me because I never heard anyone actually utter the slogan in narrating. Early on I asked around about what that slogan meant. Several times I was greeted with a shrug or "I don't know." More frequently, I was told something like, "I don't know why we have that slogan. My best thinking got me here!" "Yeah, my sponsor tells me my head is a bad neighborhood and I should never go in there alone." "My alcoholic mind is cunning, baffling, and powerful. Whatever it comes up with always seems like a good idea at the time, but that's how I ended up in jail for my third DUI. Now I pray first and think later instead of the other way around."

During informal narrating at meetings, when a narrator refers to "thinking about," or "figuring out" or "planning my actions" on some subject such as an employment or romantic dilemma, other members counter with utterances from the "Don't Think" cluster.

"Make God laugh, tell Him your plans for the day."

"After I found out my wife was seeing my best friend, I thought and thought about what to do, but my best thinking got me here, so I decided to pray about it instead. That worked out better, since I didn't really want to be a guest of the state in a cell with a three-hundred pound gang member named Tiny."

These utterances cluster around a central notion I call "Don't think!" This notion is so prominent in L.A. A.A. groups that, in a rare example of material culture in A.A., some Los Angeles County meetings customarily display the "Think, Think, Think" placard upside down. Underlying the "Don't think!" concept are several assertions, each born from A.A. members' experiences. First, A.A. members narrate that alcoholism is partially constituted of a habit of thinking that leads to drinking. This kind of thinking might be resentful ("stinking thinking"), irrationally impulsive (the example in the Big Book of the alcoholic who thought that drinking a shot of whisky couldn't hurt him if he drank it in a glass of milk), or otherwise, but it leads to at best the temptation to drink and at worst to a relapse into active alcoholism. Second, the American antipathy for intellectualism (which in my opinion and experience is amplified in Los Angeles) abides in A.A. "You might be too smart for this program," or "Intellectualism is a downfall," are utterances commonplace enough that they come to mind easily when I need such examples. The third and most important meaning is that living by a spiritual practice requires that one reach first for a connection to a greater mind than one's own, whatever one might call it

or however one might conceive it. (For example, on occasion, I recall Joni Mitchell's lyric, "We are stardust" to remind myself of my connection to the vast universe and its power.)

An understanding of the counter-slogan, however, still leaves us in the grip of the mystery of why or how the original slogan earned its place among the five placards.

Mindful of the possibilities implied by the historic-geographic method, I put the word out that I was searching for an answer. Finally I stumbled across three informants who knew the meaning of the Think, Think, Think slogan. They are, variously, from Detroit, the East Coast, and Long Beach. They tell me that A.A. members in other locations use the slogan to mean, roughly, "If you're about to drink, think about your last drink to remind you of your low point. Think about the life you have now and how great it is because you're not drinking. Think about the way you drink after the one drink you plan to take now [and don't drink.]" Those A.A. narrators found that concept to be useful to them and thought of the slogan as a worthwhile item in their repertoires.

Not so with the L.A. A.A. members. When I passed along this explanation to different members over time, the replies came back with unanimous agreement: "When I'm tempted to have a drink, thinking isn't going to save me. I don't care how many slogans I memorize; if I want to drink, I'm gonna drink. It's meetings that keep me sober."

A final example of variance arises in the humorous use of slogans. "This, too, shall pass," [8] is slogan A.A. members use to remind each other that no condition is guaranteed to be permanent (especially sobriety). In a lively conversation with two other A.A. members who have long-term sobriety, both writers, a woman mentioned that she was attending Overeaters

[8] "This, too, shall pass," is associated with one of only three parable-like tales I have been able to collect in A.A. For some reason, parables do not seem useful in A.A. narrating.

Anonymous, another Twelve Step program, where she had been told, “Nothing tastes as good as abstinence feels.” She reminded the man we were with that he had once helped her to quit smoking by telling her, “The urge to smoke will pass whether you light the cigarette or not.” He responded that he hoped that someday he could learn that “The urge to correct someone’s poor grammar will pass whether I insult them or not.”

Our laughter on that occasion responded to more than the cleverness of his wordplay. Beneath his self-referential humor lay the sincere wish to become more tolerant of others so as not to behave badly or become resentful. What was funny was his frustration at both the bad grammar and his own inability to let go of what he realizes should be a petty and easily ignored concern.

Stability & Accuracy in Performance

Having discussed variability, I will now address its other half: stability. One sign of an A.A. narrator’s increasing proficiency in the use of slogans is increasing accuracy in deploying the most efficient form of the slogan. I will pick up from the last sentence of the previous paragraph the words, “Let go.” The concept of letting go is important to A.A. members; it has to do with releasing one’s conviction that the world and its people must be or behave in a particular way in order for one to be happy.

In use, the phrase “let go” can be transitive or intransitive, as needed. When a narrator is filled with generalized anxiety, depression, and fear, and most especially when that narrating is desperately casting about for a plan of action that will “fix everything” by attempting to control an already out-of-control situation, another narrator might say, “Let go, man. Let go and let God.” What is meant by the notion of God is a topic I explore in depth later in this chapter. In

this instance, the second narrator is telling the first that the situation is already in complex motion and that to try to pilot it at this point is a fool's errand. The second A.A. member is advising that the first A.A. member allow the situation to unfold as it will while observing attentively and watching for an indication of what A.A. narrators call "the next right action" or "the next indicated action."

Another, similar slogan is "Let it go." In this case, the transitive case, there is an "it" of which one could choose to let go. This is often used to refer to a grudge, a former lover, or a loss that still stings, for example. In this case, the second narrator is advising the first to let go of the grudge entirely, leaving it behind and moving on without the weight of the memory.

At a meeting recently, I heard a narrator say, "Let it go and let God." This mix of "Let it go" and "Let go and let God" is simply unworkable. It conveys neither meaning. The two similar slogans are distinct and stable in their distinction.

A.A. listeners assess the accuracy of production by A.A. narrators of items in the common repertoire. Unless a narrator has set up context which produces meaning from an utterance that varies the form of a particular slogan, such sloppy production is seen as a marker. Inaccurate production might be seen as a sign that the narrator is fairly new to A.A. narrating overall because he or she has only been participating for a short time. It might be a sign that, while the member has "been around" for some time, the slogan is new to that narrator (highly improbable in the case of the "let go" items, which appear too frequently to have missed for more than six months.) It might be a sign that the narrator attends infrequently or is inattentive, indicating that he or she has poor A.A. listening skills. Finally, inaccuracy might indicate that the individual has "problems other than alcohol," such as a psychological or other condition that slows or impedes learning.

If the narrating before and after the inaccuracy offers no further clues, some A.A. members will seek out the individual to find out more, perhaps asking, "How much time do you have?" This is considered an appropriate conversational gambit. From there, the A.A. listener will seek to complete his or her assessment of the reasons for the inaccuracy.

Why would a listener work so hard to complete the assessment? A.A. members work to build, maintain, and support each other's sobriety. If the inaccurate narrator is revealed to be very new, the listener might weave some helpful instruction into the conversation, such as using the slogan in its most efficient form, the one multiple uses has shaped it into. Inaccuracy misshapes the form of the utterance, weakening its ability to invoke the necessary understanding that proceeds inevitably from the simplest form in constant use.

Further, listeners maintain knowledge about the usefulness of A.A. narrators. This can be observed by attending a particular meeting for long periods of time. Learning the cast of character who attend and assessing their narrating skills and proficiency in repertoire helps interpret listener behavior as expressive of narrator assessments. At such a meeting, one might observe that a particular fellow holds certain attitudes about what an A.A. narrator should or shouldn't say. After hearing some regular attendees narrate and making mental note of how they score on his scale, he might express his opinion by timing his trip to the coffee pot in the back of the room to coincide with the turn-taking of particular narrators, for example.

A Slogan and Its Cousins

Some slogans seem to generate whole sets of variants. As the example above shows, sometimes a variant contains a subtle distinction that creates a related but not identical meaning. Let us continue this analysis with other variants related to "Let go and let God."

Narrators improvise using repertoire items so that more than one layer of incipient meaning emerges. I have heard selections of variants from the "let go" group recited as a litany of progressions.

"Let go, Dave. Let go and let God."

Dave narrates on the "Yeah, but…" theme.

"Dave. Let go before you leave claw marks."

Dave narrates on the "But you don't understand. My case is different. I'm special. I'm unique. The rules don't apply to me."

"Dave! Let go or be dragged, man. She's already packing her bags. If you don't let go now, you'll be hanging on to her ankles as she walks out the door."

Dave's shoulders slump. He jams his hands into his pockets. "Yeah. You're right."

"Of course, I'm right. Now, are you ready to meet that redhead who spoke tonight? She asked me who you were. If you're done obsessing over what you can't have, I'll ask her to go to fellowship with us at the Starbucks on Sunset."

Later, after fellowship is over and Dave's friend is driving him home, Dave begins to obsess over the ex-girlfriend again.

"Dave, you gotta let go of her. She was never yours to begin with."

"What are you talking about? She moved in with me!"

"While she was still dating that buffoon she went back to. She has a Higher Power and you're not it. She's not yours. She never was. Let. It. Go."

Another combination of variants derives from the relatedness of two variants, "Let go" and "Turn it over." To "turn it over" also can mean to rotate it on its horizontal axis; that is, to

turn the bottom side up and the top side down. The overlapping meanings of "Turn it over" and "Let go" connect in the saying, "If you turn it over and don't let go, you end up upside down."

A variant I quite like is "Let go with abandon." I like the way two connotations of "abandon" work in this variant. To abandon something is to leave it behind. To act with abandon is to let go of one's concern for the consequences. To let go with abandon invokes both meanings; to go and not look back and also to let go without concern for consequences.

Each variant invokes a slightly different shade of meaning, creating a differently slanted insight into the concept. The list represents multiple closely related utterances that overlap and imbricate a central meaning. If moments of insight produce, as I think they do, useful neural connections, I think use of highly connected variants produces sturdy and multiply connected neural nodes in the synaptic network.

Mariana Valverde and her co-author Kimberly White-Mair noticed this quality in A.A. practice, which they call "teaching that is done through practice rather than through ideas." They rightly consider A.A. groups to be "bottom-up, non-expert-led networks" that work by means of "popular pragmatist ethics" (Valverde and White-Mair 1999).

The slogans teach through repetition. The repetition is not identical, however, and it's delivered just in time, at the teachable moment. Over time, one member experiences many variations of a single concept by hearing many slogans that relate to each other but do not exactly duplicate meaning, each one applied directly to a particular situation suited to it. As these experiences accrue, potential meanings accrue to each variant. Eventually, a single experience crystallizes all those shades of meaning into a moment of satori, a Eureka!, a Copernican revolution of comprehension wherein the fundamental concept is *experienced* in all its

metonymic variations, each one essential to the fundament, but at once discrete and adaptable for use on demand.

Chapter Four: Talking about God

The concept of God as expressed in A.A. narrating has been difficult for outsiders to understand, leading to suspicions and doubts about the practice of the A.A. program. Many attempts have been made to interpret exactly which God or what kind of god the God of A.A. might be. The best of the lot is "'One Day at a Time' and other Slogans for Everyday Life." Their presentation of several concepts related to the A.A. program is accurate, fair-handed, and useful. In the section discussing the A.A. Higher Power, Valverde and White-Mair refer to a "shift" in A.A. narrating from "'the' Higher Power…to 'my' Higher Power." The authors report that they attended only fifteen meetings. Their data is insufficient to support their claim that narrators once referred to "the" Higher Power and now refer to "a" Higher Power. In all of my attendance at meetings, I have heard both usages everywhere.

Their analysis of their unfounded data nevertheless ends up in the right place. Quoting Paul Antze's conclusion that the Higher Power is benevolent, they add that A.A. members "develop a sense of a powerful and protective force that is always available, always beside them." Their suggestion that perhaps "A.A. is converging with New Age spirituality" matches my observations in the 1980s and 1990s. They emphasize that each individual has his or her own Higher Power, and that there is no contention among A.A. members about this. They seem surprised by this and comment on the lack of contention as a paradox.

When A.A. narrating is seen as a larger repertoire from which to draw expressive behaviors for one's personal use, the contribution of A.A. narrating about God and the concept of a Higher Power to an individual's Higher Power might be legible.

What A.A. Narrating Says about God

One of the biggest challenges to many who could benefit from A.A. practice and fellowship is the use of terms associated with institutions of religion, such as "God." On first contact with A.A. literature, many are put off by the language used by a small group of white Anglo-Saxon Protestant men from the 1940s, riddled with "God" and many scarcely-disguised references to what is often called "first-century Christianity," a phrase referring to the practices of the apostles of Christ in the hundred years following his death. Text in the Big Book draws from the New Testament book of James, the writings of Paul the apostle, the Gospels, as well as general Christian sentiments. One of the most striking is the saying, "Wherever two alcoholics are gathered, that's a meeting," which echoes verse eighteen in chapter twenty of the Gospel of Matthew, in which Jesus says, "Whenever two or more are gathered in my name, there I am."

Many A.A. members use the term "Higher Power," many interchangeably with the term "God." Some A.A. narrators use "Higher Power" constantly to avoid use to avoid the Judeo-Christian implications of the word "God." Many use the word "God" as a generic term for "something bigger than me." Some members decide on an alternate term they like and continue to use ever afterwards. Many of these, though, eventually return to use of the word "God." The reason most people give is that it is easier and shorter to say "God" than to use a longer term or to explain the term they use. When reading A.A. material aloud in a meeting, some change the gender of pronouns referring to "God," or substitute "Higher Power" instead of "God," but eventually abandon the practice because it makes reading aloud harder; I tried it and found that it takes longer and that it is awkward to re-phrase the material on the fly.

A.A. meeting formats frequently call for recitation of the "Lord's Prayer," often at the end of the meeting as the members hold hands in a circle. Some members choose to remain silent

or to leave early to avoid the prayer. It is customary in Los Angeles County for the leader of the meeting to ask that someone lead the prayer. When I am asked, I say, "I don't say the Lord's Prayer." The leader simply chooses someone else.

The tone of the written language partially obscures what the A.A. program actually means when it talks about a Higher Power – but only if one focuses on the Big Book and ignores the copious A.A. narrating about the principle of having a Higher Power.

Clinical View of God in A.A.

A large number of articles conducted using scientific methodologies supplemented by no or very little fieldwork attempt to assess "spirituality," "religiosity," and spiritual or religious beliefs and behaviors. I have read these articles and paid special attention to the articles that describe the design and verification of the tools, such as surveys, used in to produce the data those articles report. I have found little correspondence between what the surveys (as an example) offer as possible responses and typical A.A. narrating about spirituality, religion, beliefs, and behaviors, especially as regards to that hot-button term, "God." I followed the suggestion made by Michael Owen Jones and echoed by Goldstein: "Ask 'em."

Here is what they told me about God or the Higher Power.

The God of A.A.

I gathered many slogans that refer to the fundamental notion of "a power greater than" one's self. The closest A.A. narrating comes to defining God, god, a god, gods, or anything beyond human experience doesn't get much farther than a) those of us who rely on an idea

and/or experience of Something Bigger Than Us do better than those who do not, and, b) We do not say much about what that Something is. Each of us figures that out for himself or herself.

The slogans and sayings, though, reveal some consistent spiritual concepts at work, though highly abstracted and devoid of dogmatic details.

You're Gonna Need a Higher Power for This to Work.

Ebby Thatcher conveyed to Bill Wilson the dual notion that a lone human individual needed more than his or her own resources to prevail over alcoholism, and that a Higher Resource was available without dogma. Bill made this a central concept as he helped form the A.A. program. A.A. narrating repeats this concept in everyday slogans and sayings, such as the following:

A.A. works for people who believe in God. A.A. works for people who don't believe in God. A.A. NEVER works for people who believe they ARE God.

There is a God and you're not it.

There is a God. Get one.

The first saying points out directly that many A.A. members arrive accustomed to trying to control their lives. As detailed in chapter one, many alcoholics experience severe consequences due to drinking before they arrive in A.A. meetings. Also, most alcoholics have spent a great deal of time and effort trying to hide their drinking and the consequences of intoxication. These individuals have often developed an elaborate system of defense against facing the truth about any situation, a desperate need to control any situation so they can hide their many secrets, and the habit of trying to gain control. The notion of "letting" the universe run itself and of living in accordance with the rhythms of the world and its people rather than

attempting to "run the lights, the show, and the ballet" (a much-quoted line from the Big Book referring to alcoholics' tendency to want to be in charge) is fear-inducing anathema.

The second pair of sayings confronts and comforts the listener with the fact that he or she does not control the universe. While these sayings appear to be harsh, they are usually spoken gently and with a sense of humor. So many times I have seen a woman with sobriety in the company of a young woman who has tearfully revealed a complicated drama in progress, one which she has tried to resolve with courage, self-sacrifice, anger, revenge, compassion, insight, stubbornness, and everything humans bring to a crisis of the heart. At her wit's end, the young woman finally asks for help.

This is the time to say, "Sweetie, there is a Higher Power and you're not it. In fact, your ex has a Higher Power, too, and you're not his Higher Power, either. You have to let him work this out for himself, and you have to concentrate on staying sober. How close are you to a drink right now?"

A fresh supply of tears answers that question.

"So, do you think your Higher Power wants you breaking your probation?"

A hesitant shake of the head, perhaps accompanied by a sniffling, "No."

"Okay, so, there's another meeting in half an hour. We're going to get coffee and open the book to page sixty and turn it over. Come on, I'm buying."

Page sixty explores the Third Step, which recommends that we turn our lives over to the care of a Higher Power. Going over the text together will give the older woman a chance to narrate about how she learned to turn loose of what A.A. calls "self-will."

Pick a God, Any God.

To begin to learn the skill of making a personal connection to a sense of Something Bigger, most newcomers will need to form a concept of God A.A. narrating has customary sayings for this. “Take the group. This group of A.A. members has managed to stay sober, some of us for more than ten years, by coming to meetings here every Friday and helping each other. Can you do that? No? Well, let the concept of the group be your Higher Power.” The acronym *G.O.D.*, described as meaning “Group Of Drunks” is sometimes mentioned.

“Go to the beach. Try to stop the waves. You can’t? Then the ocean is a higher power than you are. Take the ocean as your Higher Power.” [I’m a bit less fanciful than that; I remind newcomers of the feeling of powerlessness they experience almost daily in L.A. traffic and point out that “That’s a power greater than you.” This usually gets a laugh, which always helps.] Some A.A. members talk about turning on a light bulb. “Can you make light? Electricity is a power greater than you.” These simple metaphors of the ocean and the light bulb persist in A.A. narrating because they work. In their narrating, newcomers embrace this as a basic building block of the notion of Something Bigger and build on it.

One newcomer took Imagination as a Higher Power. Old-timers often remind newcomers that “Your concept of God can be anything but a living person.”

One of my most delightful breakthroughs in fieldwork came one day when I was focusing on kinesthetic and physical cues while listening in a meeting. I noticed that several young women in the room were wearing dance or exercise clothes. I was struck by a question and soon got a chance to ask it. I queried them about how they experienced their connection to their Higher Power, making the question as open-ended as possible. One mentioned yoga, another dance. I prodded a little. “So, movement, then?” “Yes,” the answers came. Several women tried

to use words to explain that they had a direct experience of connection with a Higher Power, a sense of calm clarity, through physical movement.

In narrating, they utter slogans and A.A. sayings that tesserate and reiterate representations of what they mean when they talk about God.

I collected and sorted A.A. talk about God. When they talk about God, A.A. narrators employ slogans and sayings that cluster around the concepts of chaos, order, and their relationship. Order that seems oppressive will eventually be broken by chaos. Chaos that seems unbearable will eventually be organizes by a force beyond our control and direction.

Here are a few examples, grouped under subheadings by subtopic.

Chaos

Chaos Happens.

Life begins right outside your comfort zone. Life on life's terms. Life's in session.

Do Not Try to Order Chaos.

Resign from the debating society. Live and let live. Cease Fighting Everything and Everybody.

Things Will Change.

Expect a miracle.

That Change That Just Happened? That Was God.

(Some instance of good luck) was a God shot. That was a miracle. God's fingerprints are all over that. Coincidences are God's way of staying anonymous. A coincidence is a miracle in which God chooses to remain anonymous.

The Pain of Chaos Has Value.

I got to [it was my privilege to] walk through [some experience].

Order

H.P. Is Benevolent.

G.O.D. is Good Orderly Direction. God didn't bring you this far to drop you now. God won't give you anything you can't handle. Let God love you. God's will not mine. It's gonna be ok; it already is. You're right where you're supposed to be.

Do the Work.

We have a daily reprieve contingent on maintenance of our spiritual condition. If nothing changes, nothing changes. If you keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you're getting. If you like what you're getting, keep doing what you're doing. If you want what I've got, do what I did to get it. It works if you work it.

RTFM[9], or, Live According to the Directions.

First things first. Suit up and show up. Trust god, clean house, and help others Work a step. Put down the weapons and pick up the tools. Do the footwork and stay out of the results. Show up and be of service.

Be Patient.

One day at a time. In God's time, not yours. Don't get impatient with God. Don't quit before the miracle. Little by slowly. Take it easy. Keep coming back. It'll happen when it's supposed to.

…Yet. This works as a rejoinder; for example: A.A. #1: "I just can't find a job! A.A. #2: "…yet."

Synthesis

As I worked over years of fieldwork to gather and sort the slogans into patterns that seemed to me to emerge from A.A. narrators' own patterns of use, I developed a way to talk about this notion of God in AA. I would narrate this to anyone who would listen with the willingness to respond, to tell me whether it made sense, or matched their experience and/or observations, or if it seemed wide of the mark, and if so, how?

I had a notion that the heart of change in A.A. narrating is the ability to synthesize the seemingly irreconcilable forces of Order and Chaos. I began to form the sense that what A.A.

[9] Read the friggin' manual.

members develop is an ability to constantly monitor the levels of Order and Chaos in their lives and to make good decisions about when to go along and when to act as an agent of change.

The sensation of maintaining balance along a dynamically changing valance, something many of us know from riding a bicycle or weaving through fast-moving traffic, is the internal feeling of spiritual balance in connection with Something Bigger. I began to consider these kinds of metaphors as I continued to work towards this balance in my own life.

The Serenity Prayer or the Short Version

The famed Serenity Prayer, attributed by A.A. narrators to Reinhold Neibuhr, asks, "God, grant me serenity to accept the things I cannot change (Chaos), courage to change the things I can (to create or comply with Order), and wisdom to know the difference." A.A. members utter this prayer or pray in silence as a direct request to connect to a Higher Resource so as to regain their balance between Chaos and Order. The ability to know when and how to shift from accepting Chaos and letting it play itself out into creating or complying with Order, or vice versa, is the wisdom the Serenity Prayer requests from some Higher Source.

N.A. narrators offer what they call the short version of the Serenity Prayer. This utterance is highly useful when an A.A. member narrates about challenges he or she is struggling to face with spiritual tools. Often the narrator might cite all the writing, calls to other A.A. members, meeting attendance, and service he or she is performing. This kind of narrating is frequently replete with mentions of attempts to accept aspects of the situation that the individual would rather protest or control.

At the moment when the weight of the struggle seems to have drained all energy from the one struggling, the listener can respond by saying, "You're saying the wrong prayer. You're

saying the long version of the Serenity Prayer. You know, Grant me the serenity to accept the things…yada, yada, yada, blah, blah, blah. You need to say the short version."

The question comes quickly. "What's the short version?"

The second narrator grins and say, "Fuck it."

Change in Thinking

The laughter that ensues is evidence of something Buddhists might recognize as *satori*, a moment of atomistic enlightenment. In laughing at the coarse language, the narrator-turned-listener sheds the heavy frock of a monkish seriousness about his or her dilemma, instead allowing the bare skin of an earthy human being to show.

A.A. narrating is filled with such moments. Highly proficient narrators are skilled at producing them. I have watched in admiration as a narrator drew a newcomer to tell more and more of a story, gently setting up the moment when a short phrase would induce that burst of light and sound in the eyes and mouth of the newcomer, that smile wreathing the face as the newcomer shouts, "Oh! That's what they mean when they say 'Live and let live!' That's perfect!"

Those moments are highly pleasurable for both narrator and listener. The resolution of cognitive dissonance, the laughter, and the sense of achievement I have experienced when I have been the one incited to insight have always made me crave more. The times when I have been able to induce that crucial spark to leap across the synaptic distance between two lonely neurons and create a new path for understanding in a fellow A.A. member have given me a feeling of accomplishment, delight in helping another, and a sense of giving back some of what has been so freely given to me.

As years pass, many of these moments accrue in what William James called (and Bill Wilson quoted in the Big Book text) a "spiritual experience of the educational variety.) Instead of the sudden and entire change a religious conversion experience induces, the educational variety is the cumulative experience created by many small triumphs of understanding.

Neural Hypothesis

I suggest that each of these moments creates a change in the neural network in the brain of all participants. I suggest that the reward felt at the moment of change drives all participants to seek more experiences like that and that investigating activation of the reward circuits during this kind of narrating would be fruitful. I believe the cumulative change called sobriety in long-term practitioners is partly due to the cumulative change in neural networks, perhaps in the hippocampus which researchers "believe forms a kind of spatial scaffold for memories," giving them a frame that allows them to make sense of experience.

Change in Feeling

In the "short version" narrating pattern, the lofty language of "wisdom to know the difference" becomes an everyday Anglo-Saxon epithet that universally communicates "I've had enough of this. It isn't worth all this trouble. I refuse to worry about all this anymore and I'm outta here." The utterance of the epithet both discharges the frustration and frees the speaker from entanglement in the drama producing the frustration.

This illustrates the kind of detachment that both Buddhists and A.A. practitioners prize. The emotional bondage of anxiety disappears and leaves the now-detached individual free to respond to whatever is happening in his or her own life instead of being consumed by the

responses of another individual, an obsession sure to throw him or her off balance and right into the drink, as it were.

The Balancing Act

Detachment without resentment is the first step toward A.A.-style serenity. A.A. narrators achieve this by talking about "my part in it," a narrating or writing exercise in which the individual considers objectively which actions he or she took that contributed to conflict rather than to resolution.

This is not confession. This is not undertaken for the purpose of assessing blame, creating a sense of guilt, and resolving guilt through penance.

This is a simple fact-finding mission to uncover behavior that doesn't work, to identify "what I'm doing that keeps me getting what I'm getting." The behavior, once identified, can be modified. The desire to modify behavior that does not work is not driven by blame and shame. It is driven by a pragmatic desire to have a life that works better.

The next narrating or writing exercise is to identify the harm done to others by the undesirable behavior and identify a way to repair the harm if at all possible.

This is not penance. This is reparation for harm done, as simple as paying to replace the window pane one's golf ball broke when one's putting practice in the back yard went horribly wrong. Reparations are carried out with the dignity of a mature adult righting a wrong.

The actions described above are known as Steps Four through Nine in the Twelve Steps. They are considered "action steps." Through the emotional work of detachment and the actions of working Steps Four through Nine, the sober alcoholic balances Chaos (the attempt to putt that unexpectedly lofted the ball right through a nearby window) with Order, thus restoring Order.

Testing the Notion of Spiritual Balance

I have worked to understand and use these concepts in my own practice of the A.A. program, apart from my analytical understanding of what A.A. practitioners talk about when they talk about God. In that, I have spent time talking to other members. We have traded ideas and concepts. One member liked the terms Chaos and Order which I chose for my analytical writing. She adopted those terms as part of what she called her "spiritual wrestling match" with her sense of a Higher Power.

I heard her share at a meeting about her ideas. I asked her if we could work together to reproduce what she says when she talks about Chaos and Order. I went with her a couple of times to hear her share. This is an approximation of how she shares about her Higher Power.

When she performs a version of this narrating, the listeners grow still as she speaks. More of them focus their eyes and orient their faces directly towards her. The sound of attention in the room changes; the silence that exists between her utterances becomes more focused.

"The God thing can be hard for me sometimes. That whole 'Father' thing, well, not all of us had the greatest dads, did we?" At this prompt, some listeners shift in their seats, some nod, some freeze and glare at her. These responses suggest that she has stated something that rings true in many listeners' life experience.

"I love all the religious stuff and music I learned when I was little. But a lot of what they said about God doesn't help. I just can't get behind all that judgment. I'm trying to learn tolerance and acceptance.

"So I listen to what we say around here when we talk about God. When we talk about God, we say, 'God happens. Life is in session. Life on life's terms.' Pretty much, we talk about

Chaos in life. We also talk about suiting up and showing up, about following good orderly direction, about doing the next right thing. So we talk about Order, too.

"I listen to what we say and I realize that we're saying two things at once. First, life goes in order. Learn the steps and dance the dance and things will go well. Second, we say that chaos shows up when we least expect it. Sometimes we call that a miracle, and sometimes we call that a tragedy, but life is random sometimes.

"People tell me around here to take things as they come, one day at a time, to accept whatever happens and make it work by using the Steps to stay above resentment and by being of service to stay connected.

"It's like learning to surf. It's like Order keeps changing into Chaos, and Chaos keeps changing into Order, and it doesn't matter whether I'm riding a wave of Chaos or a wave of Order; what matters is that I stay up on my board. It's like the edge of the wave is change, and my job is to balance me and my board right there where the edge of the wave is and to keep moving forward.

"That's how I deal with the God thing. I imagine I'm surfing. That's my conscious contact with my Higher Power. I don't think I have to maintain perfect Order. I don't think I have be Chaotic and be some rebellious art hippie or something. I think have to stay balanced on my board. I think have to get good at surfing."

When she finished, the listeners responded positively by clapping (customary in most meetings) or by a visible release of the posture of listening, a relaxation into nodding and whispering to one another. One man came up to her and said, "I was ready to leave A.A. over the God thing. I just couldn't get it. What you said made it possible for me to stay. Thank you."

Notice that she never arrives at any dogma about a Higher Power. What she arrives at is a conscious connection, a mode of thinking, perhaps, or a particular kind of electrochemical activity in a particular area of the brain. This is what another A.A. narrator meant when she said, "It's not the Guy in the Clouds we're talking about. We're talking about the connection!"

Talking about the Connection

A.A. members perform actions such as being of service, praying, and meditating to connect to Something Bigger. One said to me, "For me, God is a feeling." Some A.A. narrators have told me that they do not use verbal modes to made conscious contact with a Higher Power. They tell me that they use yoga or yoga-like movement, postures, or dance. Some do not describe movement but report that their sense of connection is a physical experience. One A.A. narrator experienced a breakthrough when she was able to discard her old notions about a distant, judging, punitive god and take on a new understanding of a Higher Power as an universal good. She said, "It felt as though the ceiling had blown off and there was nothing but blue sky above me, as though that old god had been shutting me in and now I was connected to a sense that everything is possible."

Getting a Feeling

Another slogan worth examining is "This, too, shall pass." This slogan holds both order and chaos in its four little words. Chaos and Order are both inevitable. If Order gains too much ascendance for too long, the world can seem small, tedious, and oppressive. If Chaos ascends, the world can seem dangerous, futile, and lonely. "This, too, shall pass," reminds the listener to

savor the peace and safety of Order moment by moment, knowing that Chaos will break through and then to thrill to novelty and chance when Chaos reigns.

This phrase is connected to one of only two A.A. parables I have been able to collect in twenty-seven years of exposure to A.A. and A.A. derived narrating. I heard it a few times around 1986-1990. I have told it a few times. In reporting this version, I will attempt to re-create the first narrating event at which I heard it.

A woman spoke so beautifully at a meeting one morning that a group of young women gathered around her. She invited us to her house, which she called "God's little quarter-acre" and gave extraordinarily detailed directions to get there.

I remember so clearly driving to her house in the San Fernando Valley on a beautiful late Spring morning, finding her house (a difficult feat, impossible without her instruction) and walking around the house into the large back yard dotted with old oak trees. I remember that we all teemed about, setting up lunch as she directed. I remember the moment when she mentioned the saying, "This, too, shall pass," and referred to the story. "Story? There's a story? Please tell us!" came the response.

The memory has a filmic quality to it. I know where I stood, with the light slanting into my eyes, lighting her halo of white hair. I remember the Fifties style neat blouse and slacks she wore. I remember her animated face and fluttering gestures as she spoke.

"There once was a king, a powerful, wealthy king, who had a great and peaceful kingdom. He was well-loved by his people and lacked nothing. Still, he had an unquenchable desire. He told his people, 'I want someone to make me something that, when I feel joyously, rapturously happy, will remind me that there is still great sorrow in the world. I want that same

thing to remind me, in the depths of pain and loss, that there is beauty and peace in the world. I will give my fortune to the one who can bring me this.'"

"His wizards and sorcerers and magicians each did his best. They tried spells, potions, and charms. Nothing worked. Then the scientists and engineers tried. They made formulas and engines and medicines. Nothing worked. Then, one day, when the king had given up on ever satisfying his heart's desire, a poor and unknown man asked to be admitted to see the king. He said that he had what the king wanted.

"Eventually he found his way before the king. The man took out a small bag and shook it out into his open hand. He picked up the gold ring that fell out and put it on the king.

"The King said, 'It's a plain gold ring! How could this be the answer to my desires?'

The man said, 'When your heart is heavy and you seek to remember joy and laughter, take off the ring and look inside. When your heart is high and you seek to remember the shadows in the depths of sorrow, take off the ring and look inside.'

The King, looking doubtful, drew the ring off of his finger and peered at the inner surface of the ring. There, in tiny script, were the words, 'This, too, shall pass.'"

To the best of my ability, I have reproduced the kind of careful, artful language she used. She spoke rather fast, as though she had told the story many times. Her gestures, especially when she described the business with the ring, were practiced and smooth. The rise and fall of the pitch of her voice was controlled and the pacing (slowed to just the right speed in the crucial final paragraphs) was sure and deft.

The women around me and I sighed in admiration, praising her and the story. I have narrated it a few times, once recently. A couple of listeners asked me for details so they could re-tell the story.

Many readers will recognize the similarity between this and stories about popes, Roman emperors, and Roman generals who, as they proceeded along the route of a parade celebrating their successes, were accompanied by an aide who repeatedly whispered in their ears, "Sic transit gloria mundi. Memento mori," or similar phrases indicating that glory is fleeting and we are mortal.

Its use in A.A. narrating seems straight-forward enough, as it teaches the listener the concept of understanding that difficulty and success, Chaos and Order, are two sides of the coin of life, and that a constant awareness of this bittersweet truth is the thing to be most desired in life. It evokes the tension between the first two phrases in the Serenity Prayer and extends it to an ineffable feeling, an experience of the poignancy of joy and the glimmer of hope in sorrow.

Six-Foot Chopsticks

The second parable that I have uncovered in the A.A. repertoire is known as the Six-Foot Chopsticks.

A man lying on a hospital bed hovered on the brink of death. He saw a bright white light and moved towards it. He was greeted by a man who led him to a grand building. He was led down the central hall, a long hall with identical doors spaced evenly along each wall. He was brought into a room on the left-hand side.

Marble floors, rich velvet curtains, plush rugs, and beautiful furniture greeted his gaze. The room was so large it was hard to make out the details of the scene at the other end of the room, but he could see that a large banquet table, loaded with food, stood on a raised dais. Many people sat around the table, the bright colors of their clothing drawing his attention. He got closer to the table and began to discern that despite the heaps of food on the table, the diners were thin

and wan, listless and seemingly dying of starvation. With dawning horror he realized that to each person's hand was bound a pair of six-foot long chopsticks, with which he could not use to get food to his mouth.

He turned in anger to the man who had led him in. "This is horrible! Take me out of here! How dare you bring me in to witness such a terrible thing!" The other man silently led him out into the hall, farther down the hall, and then opened a door on the right-hand wall.

As the first man entered, he saw an identical room, down to the raised dais and the brightly-clothed people. He turned to bolt, but the other man grasped his arm firmly and pulled him closer.

The diners at this table were hearty, laughing, healthy folk who were busy enjoying the sumptuous meal. Each one had the same six-foot chopsticks tied to his hand. In this room, however, they were feeding each other.

There is another parable of which I have found only tatters and remnants. The saying it generated is, "Drop the rock," which refers to letting go of whatever large heavy item from the past is pulling you under the water and keeping you from getting into the lifeboat. I have asked many skilled A.A. narrators over the years. Some remember having heard it; none could reproduce it.

The meaning here, again, is straight-forward and fairly simple. If each seeks only his own satisfaction, we all suffer want together. If each one helps the other, we all prosper.

What to make of these two intact parables? Why would parables exist in the A.A. repertoire at all, and only two, and why these?

The reason I love these parables is that I remember so vividly my first hearing of each. I remember how it felt to puzzle over the idea that the king would want to remember sorrow in joy

and joy in sorrow. I remember wanting to know how it would end. When it did end, when it landed squarely on a phrase I knew from A.A. narrating, I *felt* the meaning of "This, too, shall pass." I had thought I understood it before, but as many who practice L.A.-style secular spirituality say, "The longest journey in the world is from here [pointing to the head] to here [pointing to the heart]."

Similarly, I remember the disgust and horror I felt when I followed the narrator on the journey to the first banquet table to make the terrible discovery of the emaciated diners at the feast. The cruelty of the self-limiting equipment they were forced to use was an affront to humane sensibilities. When the moment arrived full of insight and relief at the discovery at the second banquet table, I *felt* the sense that my fair-world hypothesis was intact, that we humans can get by in a universe that seems random and vicious at times if we work together.

These parables work to call up a strong emotion and tie it firmly to an A.A. experience and an A.A. concept. Physiologically, strong emotion in the brain activates the amygdala. Memories formed when the amygdala is active are stronger than memories formed otherwise. I believe that the use of dramatic narrating activates a stronger mnemonic property in the brain and thus aids in learning important A.A. concepts.

Examples here show that through the use of slogans and other items in the A.A. repertoire, narrators seek to induce an experience of understanding in listeners. Narrators choose from personal knowledge of individual slogans and sayings, sets of related slogans and sayings, and longer items. In using these items, they might repeat, vary, or combine the item(s). A fuller understanding of the concept develops when a listener hears it applied to his or her own life in many different narrating events, and when the concept is applied by the narrator in a vivid, dramatic fashion.

Chapter Five: If I Get My Heart Right

Listening to a Newcomer

More than once I have attended a meeting, unknowingly sporting whichever pair of blinders I do not realize I need to doff and been startled by marvelous narrating from what at first glance (that is, at a glance restricted greatly by my blinders) seemed an unlikely source.

I remember the people at the meeting vividly. I do not remember where in Santa Monica we were, but I do know it was a meeting room usually populated by socio-economically and educationally privileged individuals who all appeared to be of the racial identity we call "white." On this particular day, though, two attendees came in who appeared to be from a different background. The two men both appeared to be of the racial identity we call "black." From their clothes and demeanor and my knowledge of visitors of similar appearance, I made a guess that they might be residents of the nearby Salvation Army residence. One of the men seemed comfortable and relaxed. The other seemed shy and unsure.

As the meeting proceeded, turn-by-turn narrating began. When it came time for the shy fellow to speak, I wasn't sure he'd be able or willing to. He seemed, perhaps, a bit physically uncomfortable. I guessed that he might still be suffering from the effects of withdrawal.

I smiled reassuringly at him. I ache for those in meetings who are clearly in pain, especially the ones with the look in their eyes that his now held, a look of confusion that seems to ask, "Why does this hurt so much? When did things get so bad?"

He stood and kept his eyes lowered, fixed unseeing on the middle distance as if imagining every word before he spoke it. He began speaking so softly that the room went

completely still. I do not think anyone wanted to interrupt him to ask him to speak up because he seemed so fragile.

He spoke about his pain, just a little, and his confusion. His hands shook a little; maybe I was right about the withdrawal, or maybe this crowd intimidated him. If it did, then he and I had something in common.

Then the miracle happened that some newcomers seem to have the rare grace to bring down. He talked about the A.A. meetings he had been to and the hope he had found that there might be a way out for him. In a few words, he sketched the essence of the principles with a profound insight I rarely see even in old-timers. A phrase came to my mind, an exhortation: "Listen as only the dying can." I knew that this young man had listened that way to every word in the few meetings he'd attended.

Then he taught me a lesson about A.A. practice I will always be grateful to have learned from him. He said, "It seems to me that what they're saying is, if I get my heart right, then I can help others. If I get my heart right."

In those six words, that young man captured the essence of the work of listening in A.A. practice. To help others – which is to help ourselves and thus to survive a fatal disease – we must get the listening right. The essential quality of right listening is compassion.

How to Listen

I first became aware of the importance of listening when I attended N.A. meetings in Hollywood. I had befriended and become part of a group who rode, bought, repaired, and sold motorcycles. Hanging around with them in meetings, I began to notice that they had narrating routines for talking about how narrators spoke. As I began to pick up on the terms, they noticed

my interest in learning to evaluate narrating and coached me more directly in the skill of listening to a narrator to evaluate the quality of the narrating.

Listening as Evaluating: Lessons from Hollywood N.A.

"That guy was telling someone else's story." This refers to a narrator who, while telling his personal narrative about what it was like, what happened to change him, and what he's like now, digresses into a tale of someone else's adventures. This is seen as wrong for three reasons. 1) A narrator only has the right to tell his or her own story. Authority and authenticity derive from speaking only from direct experience. By telling someone else's story, the narrator was seen as a kind of thief. 2) The time a narrator spends telling someone else's story decreases the time the narrator has left to tell his or her own story. Telling someone else's story is seen as a way of hiding from the necessary truth-telling that brings about recovery. 3) If the other person's story was told for its entertainment value, the narrator is seen as a "people-pleaser," someone who wants the approval of others rather than recovery.

When my friends heard this sort of narrating, they would withdraw their attention from the narrator. One fellow was given to expressive gestures. He would likely make the hand gesture men use to imitate what the English call "wanking." He'd grin when someone saw him and look for a girl to flirt with, flagrantly signaling to the narrator that his narrating had failed. Another friend would sit stock still, arms folded, face in his habitual scowl, unmoving. The denial of sympathetic facial expression and unbending posture was sufficient to convey his disapproval.

"You & We vs. I & Me"

As part of telling his or her own story, a narrator is expected to speak only for himself or herself. A narrator who says, "We like the easier, softer way. We're just lazy bums in here. You know how on Saturday, you just don't want to clean out the garage, even though you promised your woman for two weeks that today would be the day? See? You're a lazy bum. We're all lazy. That's why this program is simple but not easy. 'Cause you gotta work at it."

Hearing this narrating, my friends would sit stiffly in their chairs indicating anger or insult. Use of "we" and "you" is not considered a mere colloquial convention. It is taken literally. The narrator's utterance, "You're a lazy bum," is considered accusatory and is called "finger-pointing."

The sterner of my friends would likely confront the narrator later and very politely inquire as to why the narrator thought he could get away with calling my friend a "lazy bum." He would explain patiently that the narrator should speak only for himself in the future. His demeanor would be polite, friendly, and benignly instructive. His tough exterior, however, generally commanded attention and got results.

Double-edged Narrating

Learning specialized Twelve Step narrating skills can backfire occasionally. The lesson I learned in the anecdote above has an interesting effect in the non-Twelve Step world. Using "I" too often and speaking of one's own experiences can be misinterpreted as being egotistical or self-centered when, in fact, in N.A. narrating, it is considered respectful of others not to assume to know what another thinks, feels, or experiences without verification.

In the mundane world, people use the inclusive "we" and "you" forms constantly without examination or qualification. It can cause miscommunication to interpret "you do thus-and-such," as meaning "you, the individual who is listening to me," as sometimes the speaker means the generic and inclusive "you," expressed sometimes as "one does thus-and-such."

Should-ing All Over Them: Opinions

My friends taught me about the use of opinions in narrating. After hearing some speakers, they would complaint afterwards that he or she had "just been giving her big fat opinion up there." This kind of narrating was seen as useless and a waste of time. A look of disappointment similar to the look one gets when seeing the traffic jam ahead would dawn on their faces, a look of, "Oh, man, we have to put up with this for the next twenty minutes." Their demeanor during that kind of narrating demonstrated boredom.

I had become aware of their use of "opinion" but had not fully understood what they were talking about. One memorable night I got a wonderful lesson.

One of the fellows in the group was the guitar player for a rock band that had some fame at the time. He was the heartthrob of the group, but they'd kicked him out because of his drug use just before they released a Top Ten hit song. He was sweet and funny and a real heartbreaker because no one tried harder to stay clean than he did. He worked the actions of the N.A. program harder than anyone I ever knew. He just couldn't stay clean.

We passed him around from couch to couch, each housing him for a week at a time. It was my turn to host him and we'd gone to a Late Night meeting. The Late Night meetings were attended by musicians who had band practice after their day jobs and needed a meeting before

going home at midnight to do the sleep-job-rehearsal-meeting shuffle for another day. We both had lots of friends at the meeting.

Meeting leaders often ask if there are any newcomers in the room, meaning anyone with fewer[10] than thirty days clean (in N.A.) or sober (in A.A.) If so, the person receives a key tag with a symbol of N.A. on it. My friend raised his hand, walked up to the podium, and accepted a key tag, announcing "My name is Ryan and I have thirty days."

After the meeting was over, he spoke to his friends and I spoke to mine and then I found him listening patiently to a young woman. I stood waiting for him to finish so I could drive us home.

The young woman was so short had to bend her neck back to see him, as he was tall. It made a comical sight, her shaking her finger at him, telling him all about how he should be working his program. She said if he went to more meetings, he wouldn't use again.

I watched her, bemused. I remembered that she had taken a key tag for having six months. I smiled to myself, remembering what a haranguing little know-it-all I had been when I had only six months. It is a phase many newcomers succumb to. There's no zealot like a convert.

My friend stood there, a half smile on his face, his blond hair hanging in his blue eyes. He waited until she had run down like a clock unwinding. When she finished, he gave her a big smile, ran his hand through his hair so he could see her, and said kindly, "Is that your opinion, or your experience?"

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[10] Week in, week out, I hear this at every meeting. "Anyone with less than thirty days? Anyone want a welcome chip?" At a meeting six years ago I knew I had found a kindred soul when a woman sitting next to me whispered viciously, "Fewer!" I laughed and shook her hand. We are friends to this day and we still find it frustrating.

I felt an invisible bullet part my hair. I suddenly realized what an opinion was and why it was so useless. Simply parroting what one heard in meetings was not carrying the message at all. The opposite of giving my big fat opinion was to talk only about things I knew about because I had done them.

She was shocked at his impertinence and told him straight away how much time she had. He gave her his best puppy-dog eyes look and said, "I've been around N.A. for fifteen years. I've had three years clean; I've had three days clean. I've worked the steps so many times I can quote them from the book." He proceeded to do just that. He finished and said with sincerity, "I appreciate your trying to help me. I really do want to know what you've tried that has worked for you. What step are you on?"

I was in awe of his quiet acceptance. He wasn't putting her down; he was simply telling her what his life had taught him. She seemed unsure of herself and of how to save face. I intervened and insisted that we had to go. We left her standing there, puzzling over what the "newcomer" with thirty days had just told her.

I, however, received the rare benefit of learning from someone else's mistake. That doesn't happen often. Usually I have to make my own mistakes several times before I learn a lesson.

I have taken that lesson to heart. I have learned to speak from the "I" point of view, to speak about what I know from experience, and to abstain from spouting unfounded opinions.

N.A. is Not A.A., and Vice-Versa

The skills I learned in N.A. cross over to A.A. largely in the eastern-most section of my fieldwork area. A mix of N.A. and A.A. meetings exist there with much crossover in attendees. I use these listening skills in A.A. to great effect, but they are not often taught in A.A.

A.A. Teaches by Example: A.A. Manners

At A.A. narrating events, the observable listening behavior of each individual during formal narrating, and evidence of attentive, thoughtful listening in conversation during subsequent informal narrating are both considered by others to be evidence of "working a good program." Part of working a good program involves acquiring and using A.A. manners. Narrators use the phrase "A.A. manners" to talk about certain gracious behaviors associated with meeting attendance.

A.A. manners refer to what might be called best practices in meeting attendance. To illustrate, I will describe the path of a young woman with "good A.A. manners" as she attends a meeting. This is a fictionalized, idealized version of meeting attendance. In style, it is comparable to a cartoon as the word is used in fine art; that is, it is meant to clearly depict the outlines with only minimal detail. What I report focuses on Diana's other-directed behavior and her listening techniques. This style ignores much contextual data in order to highlight behaviors that are customarily considered desirable at meetings.

Diana Goes to a Meeting

At four p.m., Diana checks the online directory to be sure of the address and time of the meeting she is attending tonight. She looks up the address on an Internet Map site and prints it out. She checks traffic; it looks like the 405 is a mess.

She is "covering someone's commitment" tonight; that is, the other person could not attend and perform his literature commitment, so she volunteered to take it over for this week only. She finds the bag of literature she took home last week and places it by the door. She thinks a moment and goes to a bookshelf. She pulls out an extra directory, a few pamphlets, and six copies of the Grapevine, the A.A. monthly magazine. She puts them in the bag. Great – more room on the shelf. She showers and dresses and leaves in plenty of time to avoid the traffic and still stop at a coffee shop on her way. She arrives early and drops her keys on her favorite seat: second row, aisle chair, right side. She sets up the literature on the table in the front and goes into the kitchen. Plenty of people are already preparing food and coffee, so she returns to the main room and helps set up the chairs. She goes out front and sits down near the greeter, whose job it is to say hello and direct people to the meeting.

About a block away, a shy-looking girl walks south hesitantly on the sidewalk, checking house numbers and comparing them to a piece of paper in her hand. Diana rises and walks to her. In a low voice, she says, "Are you looking for an A.A. meeting?"

The girl looks startled.

Diana laughs and says, "Don't worry, it's not written all over your face or anything, it's just that the house numbers on this street are screwy and no one can ever figure out where we are. She points two houses down. "That's us. Let's get you a seat before they're all gone."

Diana introduces herself to the newcomer and the newcomer, Anne, to the greeter and instructs Anne to leave her keys on the chair she wants. Then she leads her to the kitchen and tells her to get some coffee and cookies. Diana leaves Anne there to give her some space. She remembers how she felt at early meetings if someone took her over and shepherded her around when all she wanted was to watch and listen and figure it all out for herself.

She sits down just as others are taking their seats. She notices Anne heading to the back row. Safe place for newcomers. The back row seats by the door were always popular. Anne heads for one of those.

The meeting leader starts the meeting as people continue to straggle in. A young man stands in the aisle, searching for a seat. Diana grabs her bag from the chair next to her and stands to let him pass by in the narrow row.

The leader invites the person with the chip commitment to the front, who calls up those with time who qualify to receive a chip (a colored disc printed with the number of days or months under a year of sober time that a newcomer has achieved). Diana focuses on them and applauds as each one says his or her name. She stands again to let the young man, Peter, out when he takes a ninety-day chip. When he returns, she sits and whispers, "Congratulations!" to him. He grins abashedly.

Diana turns her attention to the speaker. His delivery is monotone and he begins detailing his drinking adventures with too much glee. She realizes that she is in for a long drunkalogue before he starts talking about getting sober – he has twenty minutes to go and this is a ninety-minute two-speaker meeting. She settles in to try to school herself to stay attentive.

She uses some techniques she has picked up from fellow A.A. members. She closes her eyes and imagines that she is writing down every word he says. Instead of being distracted by his

monotone and high-pitched laugh, she is able to focus on what he says. After a while, that stops working, so she switches to another technique. She listens to what he says and imagines that she is saying those words. She is startled to realize that his problems with his younger sisters are similar to hers. That catches her attention and she is able to get absorbed in the narrating.

He holds her attention for another ten minutes, and then loses it again when he rehashes his complaints about his ex-wife. She focuses on the two hangings behind him, one displaying the Twelve Steps and one the Twelve Traditions. She reads them from bottom to top, keeping her mind focused. Finally she hears the applause break through and she is glad to realize he is finished. There is a break now and she joins the line to thank the speaker.

Anne approaches her and Diana tells her about the A.A. custom of thanking the speaker. Anne falls in line, too, so Diana asks her to save her place in line and slips away to the literature table. She seizes the spare directory and two of the Grapevine issues and takes them back to Anne. While they inch their way forward in line, she asks Anne where and when she is free to go to meetings and circles a few recommendations in the directory.

After thanking the speaker, Diana grabs the last two chocolate-chip cookies and heads back to her seat. She sees Anne leave through the back door. The lights dim and the second speaker takes the podium. This speaker is funny and polished and the forty minutes of allotted time fly by. The leader takes the podium again and soon it is Diana's turn to make the literature announcement. She stands at the table in the front and makes the usual announcement. She holds up the four remaining copies of the Grapevine. She passes one to Peter. "Congratulations on getting ninety days! You get a free Grapevine." She holds up the other three and calls up three other chip-takers, giving them each a magazine. She applauds each of the other volunteers who perform service duties to keep the meeting running. She positions herself near the second

speaker when the attendees join hands for the closing prayer. She thanks him quickly, takes her bag, and sneaks out the side door so she can get out of the parking lot before it jams up.

How She Does It

Los Angeles' freeway traffic is legendarily bad, a reputation it seems to feel the need to earn all over again every day. Knowing she wants to be on time for the meeting, she considers the traffic, her coffee stop, and the parking situation so she can leave in plenty of time.

Many A.A. manners are just like manners in the mundane world, but often alcoholics arrive years past having abandoned manners in favor of the kind of manipulative or aggressive behavior that seems to go hand in hand with a life of heavy drinking. Many A.A. meeting behaviors serve as practice for people who need to change basic behaviors if they are ever going to reintegrate themselves into jobs, families, and friends' lives.

Diana knows the customs of the meetings and how it operates. She gets her seat and checks to see if she can help. A.A. calls being helpful "being of service." Service to others is specifically recommended for times when the alcoholic cannot stop thinking of himself or herself, obsessing over something he or she cannot control. This is a feature of alcoholism and depression, and many A.A. members struggle with it.

Diana looks for ways to be of service. Going to sit with the greeter was her way of being ready to befriend a newcomer. Rather than force Anne to sit up front, Diana remembered her own early experience and let Anne choose her own comfort zone.

Diana's listening techniques during the speaking portion of the meeting came from tips she picked up from other A.A. members. While a group was drinking coffee together after a meeting, an old-timer talked about how important it was to him to maintain an appearance of

neutrality when listening to speakers and gave two reasons; one, to let other members have their own experience of the speaker instead of influencing them by showing disapproval or boredom; and two, to practice keeping an open mind. The assembled members had traded tips and Diana had liked those two.

Diana taught Anne about a custom (thanking the speaker) and made sure Anne had a directory. She has learned that most newcomers are too overwhelmed for much conversation. She decided that the best way to be of service to a newcomer was to make sure they knew how to get to the next meeting or two. As a bonus, she gave Anne a couple of magazines. The Grapevine always contains A.A. humor and Diana thought perhaps Anne would get a good laugh or two. Every newcomer needs to laugh.

In bringing extra literature and handing it out to those marking significant amounts of time, Diana was acting on an A.A. saying, "Think about what you can put into the meeting instead of what you can get out of it."

Our picture-perfect model of A.A. manners snuck out as fast as she could so she could get home and watch an episode of a favorite television series, which proves what A.A. members say: "We are not saints!"

If Diana were not fictional, she would probably have between five years and ten years of sobriety. It takes a long time to learn A.A. behaviors because there is very little verbal instruction or top-down direction in most A.A. groups. A.A. members generally do not monitor and correct each others' behaviors, as parents do when teaching a child. A.A. members learn as Diana did, from talking to others about A.A. practice, trying things out herself, thinking about how she would feel if she were in the other person's shoes, and staying aware of her effect on others.

This listening habit of putting one's self in another person's place is an important skill in learning to listen to speaker stories.

Listening to the Speakers pitch:

One sign of the importance of listening to recovery is the fact that it is the single activity that takes up by far the greatest portion of the time individuals spend taking action in the program. At meetings, everyone in the room except the person who has the floor is listening for the full sixty or ninety minutes.

Many researchers have written about how an A.A. member constructs an identity as an alcoholic and A.A. member by performing his or her "pitch" or "story." These two terms both name the personal history and A.A. member tells when chosen to be the speaker at a meeting. Being the speaker afford the narrator an opportunity to tell "what it was like, what happened to change me, and what I'm like now." The speaker is allocated between ten minutes and forty minutes, depending on the meeting's length and format (an A.A. vocabulary term for the pre-arranged order of the meeting).

A roomful of A.A. members spends ten to forty minutes focusing attention on that story. A.A. members, in my experience, attend two or three meetings a week. Over a year's time, an A.A. listener has committed, conservatively, at least thirty or forty hours of his or her time to listening carefully to myriad versions of the story-form "what it was like, what happened to change me, and what I am like now."

A.A. Listening: How the Story Shapes Listening Opportunities

In almost every meeting location, A.A. members sit either in rows or in circles of chairs, with tables or without. Some meetings are more casual and rowdy, while others are more formal and subdued. In any case, when it is time for the speaker to begin, most speakers face either rows or a circle of faces that are focused and ready to listen.

The feeling in the room is not unlike the moment before the teacher starts reading during "Story time" at a library or school. As books do, speakers' stories fall naturally into a few categories.

The first feature that categorizes stories is the ability of the speaker to manage use of the three-part form. During "what it was like," the speaker is meant to talk about how he or she began to drink, how the drinking became a problem, and just how bad it got. An A.A. saying characterizes this as "Drinking, drinking with consequences, drinking with problems." The life of a narrator with little sober time has been dominated by and even defined by his or her drinking. Some speakers spend eighteen of their allocated twenty minutes talking about adventures in drinking. This kind of story is called a Drunkalogue.

Listener responses to this kind of story vary. During this kind of narrating, newcomers (and even those with time) who still wonder or are beginning to wonder if they really belong in A.A. meetings get the opportunity to compare their drinking experiences with those of the speaker.

Some listeners respond by saying, "My drinking wasn't nearly as bad as that, so maybe I'm not an alcoholic."

Another alcoholic will say, "I was so glad to get a reminder from you. I drank like you did in the very beginning of your story, but I stopped when I got my first DUI. I haven't been to

jail – yet. I know that if I stay in here and work this program, I don't ever have to do that. So thank you."

An old-timer might say, "It's been so long since I even thought about drinking. I have to say I usually tune out the drunkalogues. But when you started in with the martinis and the trip to Paris, I was laughing so hard I didn't miss a word. You are damn funny, girl. So I got to remember, really feel it again, what it was like back then, and just how much I threw away so I could drink. I'm glad I didn't tune out."

Thus a drunkalogue offers listeners an opportunity to call up a vivid memory that strengthens motivation to continue to work at recovery.

Other speakers spend eight minutes on drinking, eight minutes on getting sober, and four minutes on how they work their program now. When a speaker spends three minutes on drinking, three minutes on getting sober, and fourteen minutes on how he or she works a program today, that speaker is probably an old-timer. Patterns of allocation of speaking time often correlate to length of sobriety.

After a while, listeners begin to be able to tell from listening to a speaker about how much time he or she has. This skill, once sharpened, then becomes useful in general conversation with other A.A. members. Clues in organization of narrating help the listener assess how much sobriety a narrator has. This aids in being tolerant, kind, and helpful. Realizing that a narrator who comes across as highly competent and confident has only a little time helps the listener to have the insight that the narrator might be putting on a brave face but need some support.

Further, features of speakers' stories give insight into what kind of pain a narrator might be in and therefore indicate what kind of support the listener can offer. Many speakers express

fears about their ability to speak well and to offer valuable insight. The astute listener can remember to comment later on a specific insight gained from the speaker's story.

Some speakers do not follow the pattern at all. A speaker might pick a topic about recovery or a then-current event in his or her life and speak about how he or she interprets that topic or about what actions and tools of the program he or she is using to make sense of or move through that event. Often challenging events stimulate narrating about a higher power.

Listener responses to a narrator who doesn't use the three-part story form often center on offering the listener-cum-speaker's own experience with that topic or a similar event. If the event is challenging, support and comfort are generously voiced.

A.A. Listening: Identifying with the Speaker

A prominent and frequently heard slogan on listening advises, "Look for the similarities, not the differences." This slogan comes up in narrating when A.A. members narrate about listening to each other, most especially, when listening to another A.A. member tell his or her story or pitch. "Look for the similarities, not the differences," asks that the listener ignore the biographical details of the narrator's circumstances and focus instead on what matched the listener's experiences.

At meetings that provide a time for individual sharing after a speaker tells his or her story, narrators specify what they found personally relevant.

"When you said you grew up in Beverly Hills, I thought, no way this guy has anything to say to me. But when you got to the part where you were stealing money from your little sister, man, I did that, too. And I still feel bad about it. I send her money for school every month, but I don't know when I'll stop feeling like a jerk. What you said, it helped me, man."

"I've never heard anyone else talk about being prescribed [a brand name sedative.] My doctor gave me that when I was a child, too, and I stayed hooked on it until I was thirty. When I found alcohol at thirteen, I was off and running. You helped me so much by talking about that. I've always been so ashamed."

"What you talked about, you know, the God thing. I didn't learn anything about religion when I was little, 'cause I was in one foster home after another, and then after I started drinking, I was state-raised. But it's weird. I feel exactly the same way you do. I learned about God from this Christian boyfriend I had. I wanted him to stay with me, so I let him teach me the Bible. I hated that damn book. But my higher power is so much like yours. Can I get your number after the meeting?"

"I really identified with your whole story. We had the same family. I didn't get bulimic like you did, but I was a cutter. I could always fool everybody. People around here tell me sometimes, 'I spilled more than you drank.' I tell 'em, yeah, well, if you hadn't spilled so much, maybe you'd have gotten here sooner. But sometimes they make me feel bad, like I haven't earned my seat here. Not any more. You made me see what I was doing. I was just like you. I managed my alcoholism by switching to drugs, and I managed my drugs by switching to cutting, and I managed my cutting by going back to drinking, but in the end, I was out of control and nothing could fix me. I'm really glad you spoke tonight. I feel like now I can stay."

No one has yet considered how identity formation happens in the listener.

In the section above on N.A. members' evaluation of speakers, listeners make explicit features of a process that includes testing for authenticity, honesty, and what a news analyst would call "transparency" but A.A. members would call "openness."

A.A. listeners, in commenting on speakers' stories, reveal that they find similarities between the listeners' own personal histories and speakers' personal histories and felt experiences and are able to bridge the surface differences between them and experience similarity that helps them in recovery.

I believe this experience is crucial. Experiencing similarity moves recovery forward more reliably than being instructed that alcoholics are similar. When one alcoholic in the rooms of A.A. feels a connection to another alcoholic, he or she no longer feels alone. Further, he or she can get a sense of hope; if you and I are alike, then I can do what you are doing and stay sober.

How It Works

It seems to me that listeners scan speaker narrating for features of the narrating about "what it was like, what happened to change me, and what it's like now" that are sufficiently similar to the listener's own "what…what…what" to mark off as "something in common." I assume that having some things in common are more important than having other things in common. For example, there seems to be a bright line between those who have done heroin enough to get physically addicted and those who have not. This points to the assignment of weights and/or values to each "something in common." I think that once a certain weight, shape, or value of similarity is reached, an experience is triggered, that spark of "Me, too!" that enables connections between A.A. members that support recovery.

Successful use of this process connects an A.A. member to another or a few A.A. members. To become more successful, how can a listener improve the performance or efficiency of this process? If the listener's own internal model of his or her own "what…what…what" is more abstracted to only the most foundational elements, then the listener will be able to

experience similarity with a greater number of other alcoholics. Thus, if an alcoholic who drank well-aged scotch in penthouses, on private yachts, and in skyboxes cannot feel similar to those who drank beer at tailgate parties in the parking lot while listening to the game on the radio, he or she reduces the number of possible connections he or she can make with other alcoholics.

The greatest part of A.A. narrating about how to listen focuses on abstracting the notion of one's identity so as to identify with a greater number of individuals. A.A. narrators remind listeners to "Look for the similarities, not the differences." This is efficient; it increases the likelihood that a listener will gain necessary learning experience from any narrating event. I have seen this work: into a meeting whose attendees are homogenized by geography (living or working close to a location in one of LA's highly segregated by socioeconomic status neighborhoods) and time (in regard to family/work schedules), someone arrives who clearly does not fit in. Sometimes the individual is homeless; more often the individual differs in socioeconomic status, race, or ethnic origin as indicated by accent, dress, or other signals.

Sometimes that individual is a young man who teaches a middle-aged university researcher the importance of getting her heart right.

Neurological Development of Empathy: Mirror Cells

Investigators have established a foundation of research supporting the role of mirror neurons in imitation of others. In Chapter Three, I tied this research to the imitation and use of slogans. Research has proceeded on to also tie the action of mirror neurons to social identification, which provides our sense of belonging to a group. "[M]irror neurons…enable social connectedness by reducing the gap between Self and others" (Gallese 2009).

Vittorio Gallese's team of researchers working in this area includes Marco Iacoboni, whose work on mirror neurons was referenced in Chapter Three. Folklorists trained in performance analysis of expressive behaviors have much to contribute to this research. Our knowledge of systems of symbolic behavior, how expressive behavior is taught, learned, changed, and conserved, as well as our understanding of fieldwork, offer resources no other field can match. Recovery research in particular has been and remains a priority for investigators in this field. I believe collaborative work between folklorists and neurologists would be productive beyond the sum of what each can do alone.

Chapter Six: A Typical Meeting

The title of this chapter is meant to be ironic. Thinking back on all the times I have asked a friend, "How was the meeting?" I do not think anyone has ever answered, "Typical A.A. meeting."

What follows is an entirely fictionalized account that is meant to convey some of the narrating interaction that occurs between the individuals usually studied as A.A. narrators (the speakers and those who share) and everyone else in the meeting. Much narrating goes on by those who do not officially hold the floor. Much information is successfully communicated without a word being spoken. Still more information is sent and received without a sound being heard.

In an effort to represent some of that copious flow of expression, I have styled this chapter so that the actions, or kinesthetic aspects of narrating, appear in [brackets.] Words that the speaker emphasizes by tone or volume show up in boldface text. Audience responses appear in <angle brackets, aka chevrons>.

Joe Arrives at his First Meeting

The curious problem drinker – let us call him Joe – often feels a sense of great relief when he first experiences A.A. narrating. The freedom from judgment and the immediate understanding without pity on the part of the narrator, combined with the glimpse of what life can look like without the misery of either active drinking or desperate white-knuckle abstinence, often attracts the problem drinker. If the attraction is strong enough, or the consequences of active drinking grave enough, he attends a meeting.

Driving up to the meeting-place, he will often find parking scarce. After he parks, he will notice that he is one of several or many people streaming toward the building. Some walk with

heads down, shoulders hunched, posture and gait warding off anyone who might approach. Others walk in pairs or threes, chattering amongst themselves, sometimes referring openly to A.A. matters, without guarding against being overheard. A pedestrian who is close to the meeting-place might call to the driver of a passing car, "I'll save you a seat!"

Often the only way to find a meeting is to follow these other apparent attendees. Meetings find space in whatever space they can afford to rent: the public rooms of office buildings, malls, and community centers; rooms in devotional buildings, such as churches; and offices in hospitals and private recovery programs. These rooms are rarely well marked or easy to find, although in some spaces large signs prominently featuring "A.A." or "Alcoholics Anonymous" point to the meeting. Most first-time attendees would be hard pressed to decide which situation is worse.

Usually our newcomer feels panicky and shy, often desperately afraid that he will be recognized by someone he would rather not know he has a problem. A.A. narrators frequently recount that they felt this way in the early days of their attendance, only to realize later that everyone who knew them was already keenly aware of their drinking problem. Often these narrators say, "I was the last to know I had a problem!"

Joe sees several presumptive A.A. members smoking in a small courtyard. He hears a voice call, "Meeting time!" The voice seems to come from upstairs. His meeting list did not mention that the room was on another floor. He hesitates, poring over the meeting list again.

Long-time attendees learn to recognize the hesitant, anxious body language of first-time attendees, who often clutch a piece of paper and look around frequently, apparently trying to orient themselves. On this occasion, an A.A. member we will call Jocelyn, who has sixteen years

continuous sobriety, smiles warmly at Joe as they meet on the sidewalk leading toward the church.

"Looks like we're heading the same direction," she says, nodding toward the piece of paper he clutches. She recognizes it as a list handed out to people enrolled in diversion programs run by the courts. She is seen similar lists in the hands of newcomers many times.

Joe nods hesitantly, not wanting to make what he regards as a shameful admission, but taken by her warm smile and arresting beauty. He thinks he recognizes her from a brief appearance in his favorite indie film.

She nods back. "Come with me. I'll show you where the room is. This place is a rabbit warren, and the first time I tried to find this meeting, I got lost and wandered into a Sodality Society meeting where a bunch of old ladies were sewing altar cloths. You should have seen the shock and indignation on their faces when I asked, 'Is this the A.A. meeting?' One of them started to get up and come toward me. Probably wanted me to accept Jesus as my personal savior. I beat a hasty retreat and wandered around until I heard the Serenity Prayer being said down the hall." Jocelyn exaggerates her story and plays it for laughs. She understands how nervous he is and knows that, if she shares her own initial awkwardness, he might feel a little less uncomfortable.

She glances at him. He is checking the list of meetings again, unfolding the worn paper and re-folding it carefully as they walk toward the church. Still nervous. She continues.

"You picked a great meeting. There's lots of great sobriety here. Will, the secretary, he's got a lot of time. He came in like you – he got a nudge from the judge."

Joe finally laughs. "It was more than a nudge," he says, a little anger in his voice.

Jocelyn shrugs. “Yeah, that’s what Will says, too. It was that or…oh, there he is. You should ask him about it. Follow Will. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Jocelyn artfully raised Joe’s curiosity about Will as a way of passing Joe along to one of the men in the program. She is aware that she is what A.A. narrators call “an attraction,” but also that the A.A. program works best when men work with men and women work with women. She ducks down another hall, drinks from a water fountain to delay her entrance, then slips in by a side door and finds a seat across the room from Joe, but not before pointing him out to Will.

Inside the Meeting

Entering the meeting, Joe might be greeted at the door by an A.A. member who introduces himself or herself, shakes Joe’s hand, and welcomes him. This A.A. member serves as a “greeter,” a role that has slowly begun to appear at more and more meetings in LA West.

He might also wander into a room where no one takes any particular notice of him. After finding a seat, he watches people around him as they drop personal possessions (usually keys) onto chairs to claim seats and then mill about, greeting one another or sitting and talking. Most of the talk centers on A.A. practice and rarely encompasses the mundane or trivial.

Joe hears one woman, a bleached blond in tight spandex and six-inch heels, say, “How’s your divorce going? Have you been reading page 449?” Apparently addressing a woman in the second seat in the row, Blondie stands in the aisle, balancing a Styrofoam cup of coffee and a bagel, leaning past a slender girl with dreadlocks who shrinks back into her seat, eyes forward, ignoring the exchange and staying out of the way of the hot coffee.

The second woman, a plump motherly looking woman in nurse’s shoes, tears up and says, “I tried it, but it’s not easy. Why should I try to accept behavior that’s just unacceptable?”

The first woman says, “No, it’s not easy, but as Bill said, it is simple. One, that bast—oh, sorry, I mean, the father of your children, [A smile breaks through on the nurse’s face, despite the tears that continue to trickle.] has a Higher Power and you’re not it. Two, you have a Higher Power and he’s not it. Three, what you’re praying for is to accept what your Higher Power sends you without getting angry or trying to control it, because if you hold onto a resentment or try to control the situation, you will drink. You don’t really want to give him that satisfaction, do you?”

Another smile, this one bigger, from the nurse, who replies, “Hell, no. No way is that jerk getting my kids away from me.”

Blondie smiles. “See? Acceptance is the only solution because it keeps you sober. Without your sobriety, you got nothing. And when you’re in acceptance, you let your Higher Power run the show. I don’t know about you, but the last time I tried running the show, I woke up in Mexico after a five-day run without my id, my money, or my clothes.” The two women laugh together, hug, and exchange numbers, conducting an artful dance in juggling the coffee, the bagel, purses, pens, and scraps of paper.

Throughout all this, the dreadlocked girl has remained stone-faced. When Blondie moves on, though, she gives the nurse a shy smile and offers a tissue that is gratefully accepted.

Joe notes the exchange of contact information with some confusion. The frankness of their speech and the strength of their connection surprised him. From the conversation, he had assumed that the women were already intimate friends.

Among the informal anarchy, Joe watches as the harried Will, the secretary whom Jocelyn pointed out, ambles about trying to organize last-minute details of meeting requirements.

Will says, “Hey, Barry, can you lead the meeting?”

Obtaining agreement from Barry, Will hands off a worn sheaf of pages and heads toward the coffee pot.

Barry calls out, "Shelly, the Steps," handing a page to a tattooed woman with long blue-streaked hair.

"Kate, Traditions."

An elderly woman takes the next page.

"Anyone want to read the Promises[11]? Where is that kid who got here early?"

Kate points out a young man, arms folded and face dark with worry, near the back door. Barry strides toward him and convinces him to read the Promises, leading him up front to a seat reserved with a yellow sticky note for "Readers."

The Meeting Begins

That done, Barry takes the podium and begins the meeting by reading from the last of the pages, speaking into the microphone over the continuing din of casual conversation, "Hello, my name is Barry and I'm an alcoholic."

Still shuffling toward their seats or getting coffee, most reply, "Hi, Barry." The audience at this A.A. meeting arranges itself in the rows of chairs in a haphazard but not entirely random fashion. Those in the front row are usually the highly involved members, those eagerly participating in the social network of regular attendees of the meeting. Some in the front row have commitments[12] that require their presence near the podium. Others sit in positions favored

[11] "The Promises" refers to a section from "Alcoholics Anonymous…(need cite)

[12] A.A. members volunteer for or are elected to service positions, which are called "commitments," for a period of six months or a year. The term indicates the position itself and/or one

for their acoustic or visual vantage point, comfort, or proximity (lesser or greater) to another particular attendee. Less socially outgoing individuals seat themselves in more isolated spots or in the back. Individuals with long-term sobriety often sit in the back. Latecomers typically take whatever seats remain open, usually in the back, or join a friend who has saved a seat farther forward.

For the next hour or hour and a half, this audience will give its attention to the activity occurring at the front of the room. In general, attendees grant a narrator a certain quiet attention whether or not she or he earns it through the force of performance[13]. This practice of active listening sets A.A. audiences apart and works to develop empathy in attendees.

Opening the Meeting

Barry reads the opening section of the format,[14] which varies from meeting to meeting. Almost every meeting commences with an announcement something like: "This is the 7:00

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individual's term in that position. "I go to the Wednesday morning meeting because I have the literature commitment." A member at a meeting might announce, "The treasury commitment is open. Does anyone want to take that commitment?"

[13] How this is assessed by individuals and by different meetings will be discussed in a later section.

[14] The format is the outline for how the meeting time proceeds, usually a page or two in laminated sheet protectors kept in a small binder along with copies of readings.

meeting of the Back to Basics[15] group. My name is Barry, and I'm an alcoholic. Are there any other alcoholics present?"

Hands are raised all over the room in response. Barry adlibs, "Good, then I'm not as alone as I think I am. And neither are you."

Meet the Newcomers

Barry continues by asking anyone who is visiting for the first time to introduce himself, invoking the oral formula, "This is not to embarrass you, but so that we can get to know you." He nods to a fellow sitting in the front row who has raised his hand.

Rail thin, good-looking although his skin is pale and his hair dyed an unnaturally matte shade of black, he wears black boots, tight black jeans and a torn tee-shirt with an image of Kurt Cobain[16] on it. He stands awkwardly, runs a nervous hand through his hair, and mutters, "Hi, my name is Jet and I have ten days."

The room applauds as it responds, "Hi, Jet."

As Jet takes his seat, the elderly Kate, sitting to his left, pats his shoulder, saying warmly, "I'm glad you're here."

He gives her a lopsided smile, not at all sure that acknowledging the motherly comfort implied by her gesture is not completely destroying his carefully constructed rebellious posture, but feeling a little less desperate nonetheless. The heavily tattooed Shelly, sitting on his right, restores his equilibrium by reaching out a closed fist, inviting him to tap it with his fist in a more

[15] Because humans name things and because meetings are listed in directories, traditionally, most meetings have names.

[16] A popular singer famously addicted to heroin who died of a self-inflicted gunshot wound.

generationally appropriate signal of comradely approval. Her tattoos tell some of her story; between the last knuckle and the back of her hands on each finger, crude and crooked blue lines spell out the words "love" and "hate". This common jailhouse tattoo looks to have been executed in ballpoint ink using a homemade needle. Shelly has been incarcerated as some point in her past, probably as a direct result of alcoholism. Her other tattoos, more artful and professional in execution, include a small triangle in a circle, an old A.A. symbol. When he looks at her a little more closely, Jet is surprised to recognize her as a formerly well-known rock musician.

Then Joe, prompted by unexpected courage or perhaps desperation, stands and says haltingly, "Hello, my name is Joe, and I'm an alcoholic," thus "identifying.[17]" The word is hard to get out; in fact, he stutters when he says it. He feels his face get hot and wonders if he is red-faced. All he can think about are the words of his girlfriend as she told him why she'd sold his tools so she could pay the rent. In an icy voice she'd said, "You're useless. You're just a drunk like my dad. You better hope your wife will take you back, because I'm changing the locks. Get your stuff and get out."

As he sits down again, he realizes that his heart is pounding and his palms are sweating. When he said those difficult words, he kept his eyes fixed on Barry's kind smile, afraid to look around. Overcome at once by anger that his life has come to his and fear that things are too far gone to be repaired, he is surprised to realize that his eyes are growing moist in response to the encouraging murmurs from those nearby.

[17] The term "identify" applies to a performance of the A.A. ritual greeting because the narrator is thought to be expressing the fact that he identifies with the other alcoholics present and/or with the descriptions of alcoholism and alcoholics in the Big Book.

Someone behind him pats his back and whispers, “Keep coming back.” Another soft voice says, “You’re in the right place.” Kate looks back at him, smiles, nods, and says, “Welcome.” He looks down at his hands, unfolding and refolding the list of meetings he still clutches, trying to quell the rising tide of unfamiliar feelings. This is his first experience of the companionship of people who both know the truth about him and find it acceptable.

Meeting Business

The beginning business of the meeting commences, which includes mundane announcements. Barry asks that everyone turn off cell phones and pagers. He reminds smokers to “use the butt cans or we’ll get kicked out of this room. Also, out of respect to our neighbors, keep your voices down when you return to your cars. We like this space because the rent is low and they let us keep our coffee supplies here. [This is no small thing; carting around a coffee urn and supplies to make coffee for thirty to forty can be awkward.] So, unless you cheapskates want to start putting more than a dollar in when we pass the hat, follow the rules.”

Those he designated read from their assigned pages texts such as the Twelve Steps, the Twelve Traditions, and a passage from the Big Book called “How It Works” or one from the A.A. Grapevine[18] called the “Preamble”. As the newcomer stumbles through reading the Preamble, he makes a few mistakes of pronunciation or inflection. The attendees give no sign of this, applauding him as warmly as they do other readers who dispatch their assignments perfectly.

If an A.A. member known to the attendees to have more time made similar mistakes, other members might prompt or correct the reader in a humorous fashion. For example, as Barry

conducts the meeting, if he makes a mistake, a member of the audience might shout out a correction or, more frequently, a punch line that makes of his mistake a joke, probably one unfathomable to Joe, since most A.A. humor relies on items in the A.A. repertoire or knowledge of typical A.A. narrating.

Some frequently-read passages lend themselves to particular misreadings. One passage contains the line, "What an order! I can't go through with it." For many years, I frequently heard the apocryphal story of the newcomer who misread this as, "What!? An order? I can't go through with it!" This misreading is particularly amusing to A.A. members, most of whom narrate about the difficulty they have experienced in fitting in, obeying rules, following through with projects within strict guidelines, and respecting boundaries. A.A. narrating lore encapsulates this in the wryly self-deprecating saying, "I'm special, I'm different, and the rules don't apply."

In the one-liners that occur spontaneously, one very rarely hears topical jokes that rely for their humor on any aspect of the world outside A.A. practice. This is another characteristic of the realm of A.A. folk narrating; it is extraordinarily insular, which supports both "singleness of purpose[19]" and the sense of safety and anonymity. This subtle restriction, never stated but universally observed, creates a sense of privacy, as if A.A. narrating were somehow walled off from other narrating.

The Speaker

Following the meeting's opening section, one A.A. member will take the podium and speak for ten or fifteen minutes, often (about ninety percent of the time, I estimate) following the

[19] Singleness of purpose signifies A.A. members' common desire to concentrate all efforts on achieving sobriety and helping others to achieve sobriety. (need cite)

oral formula of "what it was like, what happened to change me, and what I am like now." This narrator, a different one at each meeting, is called the "speaker[20]."

The speaker's narrating generally includes one or all of the following: a personal history of drinking, a realization of the need to change and the moment when drinking ceased, and a history of participation in the A.A. program. This narrative is peppered with items from the A.A. repertoire, such as slogans. At this meeting, Ed is the chosen speaker.

Ed is a man in his mid-forties, average looking, good-natured and active in meetings in his neighborhood. Will, the secretary, chose Ed to speak because he exemplifies good A.A. practice; that is, he performs service at meetings, participates in fellowship,[21] and demonstrates the kind of tolerance, humility, and compassion that come with long-term sobriety.

Ed's narrating as the designated speaker would typically continue for much longer; however, this sample should suffice as an example. At the end of this section describing narrating at A.A. meetings, an explication of the fictional speaker's narration will help clarify the A.A. terms of art.

[20] Use of the verb "to speak" indicates narrating in this particular role. A.A. narrators say, "I'm speaking at that meeting," or, "I spoke there once," or ask one another, "Can you speak next week?"

[21] Fellowship as an A.A. term names: 1) informal narrating and casual gatherings of A.A. members, usually before or after a meeting; 2) the spirit of unity among A.A. members; 3) (rarely) a designated group of A.A. members as a whole.

Ed Speaks

"Hi, my name is Ed and I'm a real alcoholic. [Leans forward and stares down a fellow in the front row, placing vocal emphasis on 're-ee-ee-al alcoholic'.] <Laughter rises from those in the audience who know Ed, especially the fellow in the front row.>

[Ed leans back, smiles at the front row fellow, relaxes his posture and waves a hand in the air in a dismissive gesture, his tone offhand.] No, I'm just kidding. I'm not crusty enough to be a real alcoholic. I only have sixteen years. <More laughter, this time including those who know the term and now understand that Ed was joking.>

[Ed straightens his posture, his vocal tone becoming more serious.] But I **am** an alcoholic. <The audience settles into a more serious, attentive posture.>

I have that alcoholic mind. I figure, if a little's good, a lot is better. One is too many, a thousand never enough. <During these three sentences, scattered individuals nod in a manner usually described as "sage" or make a small grunt of approval/agreement, indicating one or more of the following: they know the sayings Ed has quoted, understand their meanings, and/or approve of the aptness of their application in the stream of narrating. Often this kind of nod is accompanied by folding the arms and tilting the head, a gestural/postural move best described as evincing a "judicious" affect.]

"I saw a circuit speaker and I identified with him." <A nod or two from audience members.>

[As he says the next seven words, Ed slows his tone and increases emphasis slightly, leaning in slightly.] Then I noticed that after he spoke…

[As he says the next five words, he speaks more slowly, jabbing his finger into the top of the podium to the beat of the emphasized syllables. He maintains a serious tone and facial expression.] **…every wo**man in the **room** [Ed speeds up slightly as he completes the sentence] stood in a line to shake his hand and thank him. [Ed pauses, leans back, smiles, and welcomes the wave of laughter.] <The audience laughs. Some of the men slap their knees or another man's back. Most of the women laugh, many of them shaking their heads. A few men and women, laughing or not, roll their eyes. A couple of men and women fold their arms and assume a slightly aggrieved, disapproving posture, not laughing or amused.>

[As the laughter dies, Ed speaks up, again assuming a serious tone and facial expression.]

I wanted what he had. [His pitch rising on the last syllable, he spreads his hands apart in the universal gesture for "What's the big deal?"] <More laughter.>

[Not waiting for the laughter to die, Ed continues, this time with a shrug and a smirk.] There were a **lot** of actresses at that meeting. <The laughter continues. An audience member says, 'Uh-oh,' indicating that Ed might be going a little too far, as this comment takes the humorous sexism a bit too far. The room settles.>

[Ed continues in a relaxed, less serious tone.] So I got a-hold of the Big Book and I tried to memorize it so I could quote it like he did. My sponsor told me to take it one day at a time. I started reading one paragraph a day. After a week, I got bored and put it down. [Ed shrugs.]

[The first nine words are delivered with a sarcastic tone.] Since what my head tells me works so well, it took me ten years to get back to reading the first hundred and sixty four, and that's only because I went to a book study every week. Hey, **you** would have, too. The secretary was a **truly** spiritual woman. I knew that because she was a **knockout**. She was what **I** call an at**trac**tion. <Scattered smiles and a few chuckles from the audience.>

Up until then, I followed my sponsor's advice that meeting-makers make it, and I went to meetings three times a week. That was when I was a newcomer. I'm much better now. I'm so serene I go to a meeting every morning."

This kind of irreverent self-deprecation characterizes much narrating in Los Angeles A.A., although some narrators are more straightforward in their delivery, employing a simple, conversational style. A few narrators employ a more serious style that tends to address principles and spiritual practice. This style may be reverent and insightful or preachy and heavy-handed. While styles certainly differ from one narrator to the next, these three styles (irreverent, self-deprecating humor; straight-forward conversational tone; and more serious, reverent tone) appear more often than most. Many narrators mix all three styles in one pitch. When this occurs, the first section, or drunkalogue, usually demonstrates irreverent humor, while the other sections might employ one, two, or all three styles.

Ed Closes his Pitch

<An electronic beep sounds. The timer holds up seven fingers to indicate that Ed has seven minutes left. Ed nods.>

So, what's it like now? [His voice changes tone. He has dropped his clownish attempts at broad humor. Even his face changes. He suddenly seems older and sadder.] After four years of working this program, I'm a better husband to my wife. Yesterday I came home early so I could surprise her by making dinner. [His voice has become somber.] <The audience grows still. The charge in the air changes as the attendees sense that something has changed in Ed's message. Some sit up straighter. A woman in the second row taps the shoulder of the man in front of her, whispering to him, a worried look on her face. He shrugs his shoulder, looking concerned and

helpless. They settle back in their seats and turn their attention back to him. Ed is watching the second-row woman, who smiles encouragingly at him and nods.>

I found her crying. [He stands up very straight and arches back a little, holding his head back the better to blink away tears. In a strangled voice, he continues.] Cancer. [He stands perfectly still, his head still back, eyes fixed on a point above the heads of the attendees. His lips move slightly, but no sound comes out. He takes a deep breath and smiles shakily at the room.] I finally wise up and start to make a real living amends[22] to her, and that's the day, [His voice breaks, then he resumes speaking, his voice tight with anger this time.] that's the day God in His [sneering] infinite wisdom and love decides to take her away from me. [He pounds the podium once with his closed fist, shaking his head.] <Some in the room grow restless, even agitated. Someone calls out, "Page 449, man.">

[Ed lifts his head, searching the room with angry eyes.] You fucking 449 this, man. You want me to accept this? All that woman ever did was take care of my drunk ass and raise my two beautiful daughters, and God punishes her with this? [Ed visibly catches himself, relaxing his posture, his shoulders slumped. He holds up both hands, palms out.] Oh, man, I'm sorry. No, you're right, I have to accept this, 'cause you know what? I can't change the cancer. What I can do is work my ass off to bring home the money it's gonna take to keep her alive and comfortable as long as I can. <Murmurs of encouragement and nods greet this turn in Ed's attitude.>

And I gotta get grateful. I gotta get grateful that I came home early and I caught her with the truth in her hands. She had this letter… [He mimes holding a letter, running his finger over

[22] A living amends is a way of making restitution for something that cannot be amended by a single, one-time action. Ed means that his amends to his wife for being a poor husband while he was drinking is that he will be a better husband in the present, one day at a time.

his palm as though tracing the lines he had been reading.] This goddamn letter. [Another deep breath] Well, we've got this letter now, telling us what to do next. But you know what, I've got these steps, [He points to the banner on the wall behind him, the one printed with the Twelve Steps.] I've got these steps, and the meetings, and I have you to help me know what to do, and to help me do it, and today I have a Higher Power – even though I'm pissed off at Him – <For some reason, the sudden scowling pout Ed pulls strikes the meeting-goers as funny and they laugh.> [Ed looks briefly puzzled, then points to himself and spreads his hands, a good-natured look on his face.] Whattya want from me, I'm an alcoholic. I'm pissed at God, but I still ask Him to solve all my problems. [He pulls a funny face, shaking his head as if in disbelief at his own paradoxical behavior, and thumps his forehead with the heel of his hand.] <The attendees laugh louder and harder, partly at the comic relief from the seriousness of the situation, and partly to help Ed relieve some of his pain. Some individuals point and laugh at themselves, others, or Ed in admissions that they, too, behave in similar fashion. Someone calls out "You're a real alcoholic all right!> [Ed smiles gratefully, welcoming the validation and the supportive laughter. He shakes his head again, this time with a look of some relief.]

But that's ok. My Higher Power is big enough to take it. [A mischievous smile plays over his face.] Did I ever tell you who my Higher Power is? Rocky Marciano. I figure he can handle any trouble I get into. [Wagging a finger at a stern-faced man in the front row whose arms are crossed in front of him, Ed continues.] Hey, I can have any Higher Power I want, as long as it's not a living person. <More laughter. Even the stern-faced man relents and gives him a half-smile.>

[Ed straightens his shoulders and faces the room squarely.] I'm a lucky son of a bitch today. I still have a wife, because of this program. I know how to love [His voice breaks a little

on this word but he steadies it and continues.] my wife today. I still have a job because you taught me in these rooms how to suit up and show up and take the next indicated action. I got a raise ‘cause I have a perfect safety record the last three years, ‘cause I don’t run things my way anymore. I know how to follow the rules. So I’m gonna have the dinero to get her the best doctors money can buy because I get all the overtime I want because today I’m the kind of guy you want to have around when things get tough. <The attendees give him their rapt attention, leaning forward, nodding, and making encouraging faces. A few men in the room have that stock-still posture that gives away the impact an A.A. speaker can have on an A.A. listener. This specific posture signifies that the listener is hearing something in the verbal or emotional content – or both – that matches something he or she feels, values, and is taking it in deeply. [His defiant courage has won over his pain. His voice is sure and strong. He feels some strength return as he sees that he is connecting with a few of the other members.]

So now you’re stuck with me. [Ed relaxes, some of the tension leaving his posture as he enjoys the scattered laughter.] This is where I’m gonna be, and I’m going to walk through this with Gracia sober, and you’re going to help me, [He searches out the eyes of the second-row woman, who nods vigorously and makes a thumbs-up gestures. She is his wife’s friend.] because that’s what we do around here. We help each other stay sober, and we help each other with everything that we get to walk through sober, and somehow it all works, one day at a time. [The tone and pace of Ed’s voice indicates that this last paragraph is a closing. As he says it, he visibly pulls himself together, composing a calm, ordinary demeanor, putting away the naked vulnerability he displayed during his narrating.]

Thank you for listening. [He nods to a woman in the front row.] I want to thank our secretary, Eliza, for giving me this opportunity to be of service. To the newcomers, this is a great

meeting and you should come back, ‘cause next week the speaker will be… <The attendees chime in and all say in unison,>…another sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous. <Applause begins.> Thank you! [Ed waves and returns to his seat.]

Seventh Tradition

Barry returns to the podium, adjusts the microphone and while clapping his hands announces “Let’s thank Ed, our speaker, one more time. Thanks, Ed. Great job.” [As the applause continues, Barry gestures to Will, who walks to the podium.] Barry continues, “According to our Seventh Tradition, we are fully self-supporting through our own contributions. Mary will pass the baskets while Will reads the Traditions.

[As Will nears the podium, conversation and movement swell in the room, causing a mild disruption. Barry leans into the microphone.] “People, this is not a break. Let’s pass the baskets quietly.”

[Will takes his place and cannot locate the sheet of paper printed with the Traditions. As Barry and Will search, the noise swells again. Finally Eliza walks up and thrusts her copy of the Big Book, open to page 562, into Will’s hands, as Barry moves aside to stand nearby. Will looks at it in confusion and hands it back to her.] “I’ll just read them off the wall.” [Will turns to the second banner on the wall behind him, reading the Traditions aloud. Because he is facing away from the microphone, his unamplified voice fails to rise above the crowd noise, which rises again, now unhampered by any sense of obligation to pay attention to the proceedings. Barry rolls his eyes and shrugs. Will completes the reading and Barry shakes his hand as he re-takes the podium.]

“Thanks, Will.”

Sharing

Some meetings, usually large ones, consist entirely of speakers' pitches. Customarily, one or two short pitches (ten to fifteen minutes each) precede the main speaker's pitch of twenty to thirty minutes. At most meetings, however, after the speaker concludes, individual A.A. members speak for about three minutes each. Most meeting formats include an announcement suggesting guidelines for topics; my observation shows that members follow the guidelines about a third of the time. Longtime A.A. practitioners demonstrate far more compliance to these suggestions than newcomers. This tendency is so marked that I believe if I could conduct a statistical analysis, I could show a predictable trajectory of deviance from the topic in early recovery to compliance with the topic in later recovery. Less experienced narrators often discuss highly personal topics, relating specific details of events and emotions, often including blame and self-justification, seeking to reconcile their experience with what they are learning about the principles of the A.A. program. More experienced narrators seem to be seeking the same end; that is, to reconcile recent experience or recently recalled experience with A.A. principles uppermost in their minds. Their advanced skill in A.A. narrating, coupled with their greater emotional stability, however, allow them to more neatly integrate their personal concerns with the topic at hand. These narrators report that they regard this as a kind of spiritual discipline.

Chosen according to one of several commonly used methods of selection,[23] various attendees walk to the podium and speak for a designated time, customarily three minutes.

[23] The three most common are: show of hands, from which the leader or the speaker chooses; "round robin" (going around the room); and "tag", where the leader or speaker chooses the first person and each chooses the next.

Choosing individuals for each narrating opportunity proceeds according to some loose guidelines never stated aloud in A.A. narrating, but discernable in observation.

Barry surveys the audience, noting the raised hands. First, partly in recognition of her service to the meeting and partly because he saw her reach out to the newcomer Jet, he calls on Shelly. She arises, whispering to Jet in a joking aside, "Let me show you how it's done." He laughs, feeling a little more comfortable and included, which was her intent.

Shelly Shares

She stands at the podium, adjusting the microphone and surveying the audience, her eyes picking out certain individuals here and there, nodding at some, gesturing to others. When she speaks, she has a warm tone, smiles often, and makes eye contact with various individuals throughout the room. She says, "Hi, my name is Shelly and I'm just like you,[24] There's Marty. He's one of us. He's been one of us since…How long we been rippin' and runnin', Marty?"

Marty shouts back something unintelligible to most of the room.

"Right," resumes Shelly, "since the Nineties. I knew Marty when we were both out there. Now we're both in here." She pauses, leans forward on the podium, looks down to adjust one of the many silver rings on her left hand, then says in an offhand tone, "In here's better." <Several people laugh, two clap, and Marty shouts, "Damn straight." A woman in front of Marty turns to glare at him. He ignores her.>

[24] This is an example of a very rare variant of "I'm an alcoholic." With the exception of "I'm a real alcoholic," deviation from the formal declaration occurs extraordinarily infrequently. Another variant I have heard more than once is "I'm a human garbage can."

"So, let's do the do. Welcome to the newcomers, Jet, Joe. [She nods toward them, holds up her hands and applauds softly four times.] In case you didn't know, you're the most important person in the room. You've probably heard that before or maybe you haven't. Doesn't matter. You'll hear it again. Someday you'll understand it. Might take a while, though, so keep coming back. Thank you, Ed, for a great pitch. [She crosses her hands over her heart and bows slightly toward Ed. Her tone deepens and becomes compassionate and warm.] I send you and Gracia blessings and white light, my friend. You rock my world, you really do. [Ed nods his thanks, his mouth a straight line as he struggles to keep his composure.]

[Her volume rises and she takes charge of the room with a sweeping look around.] So thanks to our newcomers for showing up for me today. You keep it fresh. [She nods to each of them. Her tone changes to a more intense, oratorical tone. She establishes a swaying cadence and emphasizes the syllables in boldface. "See, **I** gotta re**mem**ber what it's **like** to have ten days, 'cause **my-y-y-y** forgetter works **real** good. <Nods, smiles, and scattered laughter from the audience.> I for**get** what it was **like** to **sleep** in my **car**. I for**get** what I **did** to get **more**. I for**get** where **al**cohol **took** me. [She pauses, leans back, and puts a hand on one hip, surveying the room again.] <The audience is silent and attentive, so quiet that the tinkle of the silver of Shelly's many bracelets is audible.> [Shelly puts one hand out in front of her, counting off fingers with her other hand on the beat of three important words.] "It took me to **jails**, insti**tu**tions, and **death**." <One or two audience members shift uncomfortably in their seats. Jet has become stoic and unmoving, arms folded, eyes riveted on Shelly.] "My toes were blue. [Pause] I lost **ev**erything, I was **locked up**, and they took my little **girl** away to live with her **fa**ther, who **I** left because **he** wanted me to **go to A.A.**" [Her volume and pitch rise on the final four syllables. As she utters the final clause, she makes a face I can best describe as "Jerry Lewis-like," using a

humorous tone to indicate that she is laughing at her own idiotic behavior.] <The audience laughs.> "But to**day** things are **dif**ferent. Like Ed says, meeting makers make it and I've been making it to this meeting now for fifteen years. [Shelly speeds up, establishes a rhythm and again ticks off the important points on her fingers.] I **got** a **spon**sor, I **work**ed the **steps**, I **made** the **cof**fee, I **got** a com**mit**ment, [here her pace slows and the rhythm lapses.] "I drove newcomers around." [Her tone and rhythm in the next sentence become conversational and she points first to Joe and then to Jet in an aside audible to the entire room.] "I'll drive you guys around if you want. Get my number if you want to go to a meeting." [She returns to an oratorical tone.] "See, I keep **do**ing what I **did** when I **got** here because I want to **keep** what I **have**. What I have **today** is, I have my **daugh**ter back." [She pauses, tears up, steps back to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand, laughing at herself. Her tone and pace become conversational again in another aside, this time inaudible to the back rows.] "I'm gettin' to be an old fart up here. [Straightening up and facing the audience again, she says in her oratorical tone,] "Yesterday I gave my daughter a cake for two years." [The tears come again, and again she laughs, shrugging, but not drying them.] <The audience applauds loudly. A beep sounds.> [She nods at the applause. She looks toward a man sitting in the front row punching buttons on a small electronic timer. She switches to her quieter "aside" style and volume.] "That's one minute, right? I'll wrap up." [Returning her attention to the room, she resumes her oratorical style and volume.] "See, we get shit **back** around here, if we do it **right**. [She establishes a slight rhythm.] Like **Ed** does. Like **these** folks over here in the com**mit**ment chairs[25] do. [Waves toward them.] [Here she speeds up and strengthens the rhythm, again assuming a slightly clownish demeanor and waving her arm as if

[25] Some meetings (usually those with limited seating and overflow attendance) reserve seats for those who have commitments at the meeting. Commonly such seats are at or near the front.

conducting.] And if you **like** what you're **get**ting, keep **do**ing what you're **do**ing." [Her pitch rises to peak on "like", then falls to a low on "get" then rises again on "do" and peaking at its highest pitch on the final "do." Her volume rises on "what you're doing." She jingles the bracelets on her arm, shaking them down to the wrist and adjusting them, pausing as if to think of the next thing to say. She looks up at the audience again. Her tone is slightly more conversational than it is oratorical, but still clear and loud enough to hear to the back of the room. She speeds up her pace now.] "They're gonna carry me out of these rooms feet first, but this time my toes won't be blue."<The audience laughs. Another beep sounds.> [In a conversational tone, speaking very fast, she says as she ducks away from the podium] "That's all I got. Thank you for letting me share."

As others share, Joe will hear several phrases, such as "work the steps," repeated throughout the narrating and might notice subtle differences in the way different narrators use these phrases in different contexts. More likely, he will note only the repetition of the slogans, the freedom of the frank and open talk, and the warmth of the laughter.

The picture each narrator presents, from personal appearance to body language, communicates as clearly in an A.A. meeting as it does anywhere in human life and newcomer Joe will be as swayed by his assessment of the appearance of each narrator as any human observer is; that is, he will likely be more drawn toward the narrator who seems most like him.

After a few more shares, Barry returns to the podium and picks up the paper.

"Any burning desires?" He shades his eyes against the overhead down-lights, surveying the room. "Last call."

Burning Desire

A slender young man gets up and walks slowly toward the podium. His shoulders are tense and hunched. He keeps his eyes on the floor and his hands jammed deep into the pockets of a too-large pair of paint-stained jeans. He stands at the podium, not looking up.

"Hello, my name is Alberto and I am an alcoholic." [His accent is lilting and pleasant, but he is mumbling. He seems nervous.]

"I got ten days clean, and I…" <The audience bursts into applause, clear and sustained.> [Alberto lifts his head a little and looks at a few people in the front row, nodding.] "Thank you. Thank you."

[He fixes his eyes on the base of the microphone again and says, "I got nowhere to go. I lost my job and I got nowhere to go. A guy over there said if I ask for help, maybe somebody will know a place where I can go. I tried to talk to the police, but they don't wanna help me. I got nowhere to go." [He stops, takes a breath, and seems to realize that he doesn't know what else to say. He looks up at the room once, just for a moment, and then mutters into the microphone.]

"Thank you. Thank you very much if you can help me."

<A few deep breaths are heard. Some members are recalling what it was like to be that desperate. Others are feeling grateful that they fell to such desperation. Still others are reminding themselves that if they drink again, that could be their situation. Jocelyn taps the shoulder of a man sitting in front of her, the former secretary of this meeting, whom she knows volunteers at a rehabilitation home.

"Bill? Can you do something?"

He turns his head slightly and says, "Got it covered." He looks across the room to another man sitting near Alberto and signals. The man points to himself as if to say, "Me? You mean

me?" Bill laughs and points again at the man, then to Alberto, then to himself. The man nods. He understands that he is to make sure Alberto connects with Bill after the meeting.

Jocelyn digs into her purse and hands Bill a twenty. Bill nods.

The Meeting Ends

Barry returns to the podium, looking around the room, scanning several times. Bill raises a finger, catches Barry's eye, and nods. Barry, looking relieved, nods and find his place on the page that contains the directions for the meeting.>

"Okay, that's all the time we've got. Will Eliza please lead us out in the prayer of her choice?"

<The attendees stand, jockeying their way among folding chairs to join hands in a haphazard circle. Eliza starts the prayer by saying the first word of the Serenity Prayer. Others join in; some remain silent. After the prayer ends, they pump their joined hands up and down and chant in unison.>

"Keep coming back."

The meeting then devolves into the friendly informal chatter of fellowship. All around him, Joe will hear attendees make after-meeting or future plans. A few make it a point to pass by Alberto on their way out and slip him a bill or two. As they disperse, departing members frequently comment on what was said from the podium to relate similar personal experience or to express agreement or disagreement with interpretation of an A.A. principle, use of humor or an item from A.A. repertoire, or an aspect of narrating such as digression that included an "outside issue" (a topic outside of A.A. practice, verboten in A.A. narrating within meetings.)

As Joe exits, various A.A. members greet him. Some only welcome him. Some introduce themselves, a few of these offering or pressing into his hand their contact information. One or two might engage Joe in conversation, perhaps to offer further assistance (such as rides to other meetings,) or even invite Joe to join "fellowship" at a restaurant.

If Joe continues to participate in A.A. narrating events, depending on the degree of his participation[26] and length of time, he will eventually become adept in the use of A.A. repertoire to a degree dependant on factors such as Joe's level of interest, frequency of attendance, verbal skills and aptitude, and opportunities for exposure to highly proficient A.A. narrators. Fellowship, the A.A. term for casual social gathering usually held directly after a meeting and less frequently before a meeting, affords an opportunity for practicing A.A. narrating and listening skills, assess other members in personal interaction, and ask questions about A.A. practice. As he gains time in A.A., his goals for participation in fellowship will change. Of course, no matter how much time an A.A. member of any gender has, the search for that perfect romantic partner is never far from the mind of any attendee.

Ed's Share Decoded

The excerpt of Ed's pitch represents accurately just how heavily coded A.A. narrating can be. Once Joe has attained some fluency and depth of understanding, he might translate the example above as follows:

"I'm a real alcoholic. No, I'm just kidding. I'm not crusty enough to be a real alcoholic. I only have sixteen years. But I am an alcoholic. I have that alcoholic mind."

A small group of narrators within the LA West area espouses a strict and rather exclusionary definition of alcoholism, indicated by the identification "a real alcoholic." These members tend to be sixty or older and possessed of a kind of boot-camp sergeant mentality. They believe that only a person who drank alcohol without also using drugs qualifies as a "real" alcoholic. To be a "real" alcoholic, according to this group, one must have consumed very high quantities of alcohol; they talk about people who "drank like I did." When one member of this group has assessed another A.A. member as not being a "real" alcoholic, he might say, "I spilled more than you drank."

Generally, A.A. members who narrate in this fashion are "old-timers," that is, A.A. members of long standing, usually more than twenty years of continuous abstinence combined with demonstrations of A.A. practice.

Other A.A. members identify old-timers who narrate in the "real alcoholic" fashion as "crusty old-timers." Use of this term expresses a kind of affectionate tolerance while simultaneously thus categorizing the old-timer as someone whose zeal for self-appointed authority exceeds the accepted norm for A.A. narrating. One witty A.A. member in LA West, prompted by the "I spilled…" remark, has been known to retort, "Yeah, well, if you hadn't spilled so much, you might have gotten here sooner."[27] This exemplifies the more widely held A.A. belief that the amount of alcohol one drank does not by itself determine whether one is an alcoholic.[28]

In this example, Ed rejects the notion of "real" alcoholism by joking about it. Saying "I only have sixteen years," indicates that he has accrued sixteen years of cumulative continuance

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[28] The degree of consequences and the projected trajectory of the disease factor heavily, as well.

sobriety while practicing the A.A. program. This is called "time," which is considered a thing which one "has," as in "How much time do you have?" or "She's got four years." Here Ed admits that his time falls short of the usual mark. In saying this, he is expressing a kind of ironic deference to those with more time.

"But I am an alcoholic. I have that alcoholic mind." The term "alcoholic mind" refers to a commonly held idea that alcoholism causes the alcoholic to think in certain predictable patterns. A.A. narrating describes those ideas and the results of "thinking alcoholically" as universally negative. Being an alcoholic and having an alcoholic mind go hand in hand.

"I figure, if a little's good, a lot is better. One is too many, a thousand never enough." These two sentences are in the class of A.A. slogans. These two utterances appear frequently in A.A. narrating. They reinforce the theme of the unquenchable appetite of the alcoholic for anything at all. The underlying notion is that alcoholics do not know how to regulate their use of anything, even beyond alcohol, and that they are prone to overindulgence. This inability to regulate or moderate is one attribute of the "alcoholic mind."

"I saw a circuit speaker and I identified with him." Something about the circuit speaker or his narrating prompted Ed to feel that he and the circuit speaker were similar. Ed "saw himself" in the speaker, which in A.A. narrating is called "identifying."

"Then I noticed that after he spoke, every woman in the room stood in a line to shake his hand and thank him. I wanted what he had." In A.A. parlance, to "want what [someone] has" usually proceeds from identifying with that person, from feeling that one is similar to the other person in the ways that matter most. A common phrase one hears is, "I identified with him. He drank like I did."

Ed felt he was like the circuit speaker and that what the circuit speaker "had" was something Ed wanted in his life. This phrase denotes the desire for what is perceived to be a more advanced state of A.A. recovery. By using it in a joking fashion, Ed is both making fun of himself for being motivated by a less elevated desire, and relating a common experience among newcomers: they are often first drawn to participating in A.A. narrating by the apparent social rewards. His self-deprecating humor makes it plain that this human foible is both common among and accepted by more experienced members.

"There were a lot of actresses at that meeting." Los Angeles is home to a great many people in the film and television industry, including many aspiring actresses. The requirements of the profession being what they are, many of these women are attractive and take great pains to look their best at all times. Ed's comment reflects this.

"I got hold of the Big Book and I tried to memorize it so I could quote it like he did." This narrator's overeager response to his initial contact with the Big Book reflects his inability to regulate himself. Further, he is poking fun at his simplistic understanding of what made the circuit speaker's narrating compelling, which was not the speaker's memorization of content, but his apt performance of particular phrases.

"I got some sponsor direction to take it one day at a time. So I started reading one paragraph a day." "Sponsor direction" refers to instruction from another A.A. member with longer recovery practice. A.A. members impute varying degrees of authority to sponsors. Doing things "one day at a time" is an instruction to take things slowly, incrementally, and consistently.

"After a week, I got bored and put it down." Newcomers suffer from physical, mental, and emotional aftereffects of years of alcohol abuse. Typically, they have difficulty paying attention and following through on long-term commitments.

"Since what my head tells me works so well…" This is another reference to the unreliable alcoholic mind. When an A.A. narrator prefaces a sentence with a reference such as this, the audience is forewarned that the rest of the sentence is meant to be considered a bad idea.

"…it took me ten years to get back to reading the first hundred and sixty four…" By referring to these page numbers, Ed signifies a rather high level of knowledge of the Big Book, a rarity among A.A. members and an indicator that he "works a good program;" that is, he practices some of the more tedious and difficult exercises, many of which are seen to produce higher quality recovery. The first hundred and sixty-four pages contain the basic instructions of the A.A. program and remain the same in every edition of Alcoholics Anonymous. The remainder of the book contains stories of alcoholics who got sober in A.A. These stories change with each edition.

"…and that's only because I went to a book study every week. "

A "book study" is a meeting devoted to reading and discussing the Big Book rather than freely narrating about one's life, as one does at most other meetings. Typically, newcomers prefer to share about themselves and show little interest in the quaint prose of the Big Book. Going to a Big Book study represents a more mature effort to develop advanced recovery.

"Hey, you would have, too. The secretary was a truly spiritual woman. I knew that because she was a knockout. She was what I call an attraction."

If his prior reference to his long years and advanced level of practice put some listeners off, this reference to himself as "one of the guys" brings Ed back to earth. An "attraction" is any aspect of A.A. practice that motivates an individual to participate more, or more fully. As is true with use of the phrase "I want what [someone] has," however, use of this phrase often makes plain that the phenomenon occurs at more than one level of human desire. Ed might have been

practicing a more advanced level of recovery by consistently attending a book study, but his motivations reveal him to be quite accessibly human.

"Up until then, I followed my sponsor's advice that meeting-makers make it, and I went to meetings three times a week."

"Meeting makers make it" is an A.A. slogan[29] that reflects the A.A. belief that regular attendance at meetings correlates highly with continuous long-term abstinence. Use of the term "make it" refers to surviving the fatal nature of alcoholism, which A.A. narrating emphasizes.

"That was when I was a newcomer. I'm much better now. I'm so serene I go to a meeting every morning." Ed jokingly compares his attendance in early sobriety with his attendance after long-term sobriety to make the point that A.A. practice tends to increase over time in those who, like Ed, continue to "want what A.A.'s got." "Serene" is used as a term of art in A.A. narrating to denote a higher and more continuous state of calm than is denoted in common usage; further, in A.A. lingo, "serene" includes the practice of acceptance and a spiritual dimension.

<An electronic beep sounds. The timer holds up seven fingers to indicate that Ed has seven minutes left. Ed nods.> At the signal to wrap up his share, Ed faces the truth he has been disguising with his attempts at jocularity.

So, what's it like now? After four years of working this program, I'm a better husband to my wife. Yesterday I came home early so I could surprise her by making dinner. In this section, Ed demonstrates that he has worked the steps, which require making amends to those we have harmed. When he talks about being "a better husband to my wife," he is referring to treating her better on a daily basis to make up for the many days he didn't treat her so well. This is known as making a "living amends."

[29] What are commonly called proverbs or sayings are, in A.A. parlance, called "slogans".

"I found her crying. Cancer."

Ed allows his emotion to be seen by those in the room. This kind of honesty is crucial in A.A. narrating. The saying goes, "You're only as sick as your secrets." Secrets include hidden emotional pain. Without turning his real pain into a dramatic monolog, he reveals in a frank and open manner what he and his wife are facing. That emotional honesty continues in the next few sentence.

"I finally wise up and start to make a real living amends to her, and that's the day, that's the day God in His infinite wisdom and love decides to take her away from me."

His anger and invective at God cause a reaction in the assembled group. He doesn't react negatively to it, because their discomfort is not their expression of discomfort at what he is saying or judgment of how he talks about God. Their discomfort is an empathetic response to his pain. When one person calls out, "Page 449," he is referring to a page in the Big Book where an inspiring passage on how to accept difficulties is found. This is likely not said to admonish Ed, but to offer him a tool for comforting himself.

In his pain, though, Ed takes this as judgment. (In fact, it might be. People in all stages of recovery visit the rooms of A.A.) You fucking 449 this, man. You want me to accept this? All that woman ever did was take care of my drunk ass and raise my two beautiful daughters, and God punishes her with this?

Ed again candidly speaks of his difficulty in having faith during at time of trouble. He stops his angry outburst, though. This is another sign that Ed has worked hard to gain recovery in the A.A. program. He has gained some emotional stability and the understanding that anger is, by and large, an emotion that harms more than it helps. He remembers that it doesn't matter what

the other fellow thinks of him, his job is to remain serene and take responsibility for his own actions. Thus, he apologizes for raising his voice in anger and moves on.

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. No, you're right, I have to accept this, 'cause you know what? I can't change the cancer. What I can do is work my ass off to bring home the money it's gonna take to keep her alive and comfortable as long as I can.

In embracing the need to accept things exactly as they are rather than crying out against his god, Ed is able to move on to the "courage to change" extolled in the Serenity Prayer.

"And I gotta get grateful. I gotta get grateful that I came home early and I caught her with the truth in her hands. She had this letter… This goddamn letter. Well, we've got this letter now, telling us what to do next.

Ed's shift from the image of his wife alone in the house with the letter, him arriving and (implied by his gesture) taking the letter from him accompanies a shift in the pronouns from Ed's "I' and "she." He expresses gratitude that they are together in this, which hearkens back to his theme of being a better husband to her.

But you know what, I've got these steps, I've got these steps, and the meetings, and I have you to help me know what to do, and to help me do it, and today I have a Higher Power – even though I'm pissed off at Him –

Ed's frank expression of his pain causes what A.A. members call "the laughter of identification." Those present know what it is like to be angry at a Higher Power one has made a decision to rely upon for direction. Their laughter draws him in and he gets some relief from both anger and pain. He is able to join in.

Whattya want from me, I'm an alcoholic. I'm pissed at God, but I still ask Him to solve all my problems.

Ed's response amplifies the sense of unity in the room. More people join in with more intensity. He continues by being a bit mischievous, purposefully tweaking the nose of the more orthodox folks in the room.

"But that's ok. My Higher Power is big enough to take it. Did I ever tell you who my Higher Power is? Rocky Marciano. I figure he can handle any trouble I get into. Hey, I can have any Higher Power I want, as long as it's not a living person.

Ed invokes a common A.A. saying about having a Higher Power of one's own understanding. The stern-face man demonstrates open-mindedness (a prized quality in A.A.) by giving in graciously.

I'm a lucky son of a bitch today. I still have a wife, because of this program. I know how to love my wife today. I still have a job because you taught me in these rooms how to suit up and show up and take the next indicated action. I got a raise 'cause I have a perfect safety record the last three years, 'cause I don't run things my way anymore. I know how to follow the rules. So I'm gonna have the dinero to get her the best doctors money can buy because I get all the overtime I want because today I'm the kind of guy you want to have around when things get tough.

This is an outstanding example of the power of gratitude. By looking back at where Ed was when he began the program and considering how far he is come, by enumerating all the good outcomes he has in his life today due to his work in the program, Ed changes from comparing his present life to some imaginary perfect, pain-free life to comparing his present life to his past life.

"So now you're stuck with me. This is where I'm gonna be, and I'm going to walk through this with Gracia sober, and you're going to help me, because that's what we do around

here. We help each other stay sober, and we help each other with everything that we get to walk through sober, and somehow it all works, one day at a time.

In this section, Ed rededicates himself to working the A.A. program and especially to being an active member of this meeting. He makes it clear that he wants help. This is considered a sign of strong A.A. recovery, since most alcoholics arrived consumed by a volatile mix of shame and false pride that prevents them from getting the help they need.

Thank you for listening. I want to thank our secretary, Eliza, for giving me this opportunity to be of service. To the newcomers, this is a great meeting and you should come back, ‘cause next week the speaker will be…another sober member of Alcoholics Anonymous. Thank you!

In this final section, Ed practices his A.A. manners. Notice that he thanks his audience for listening. This is a fine distinction and shows Ed to be fairly advanced in learning about A.A. humility. Many individuals derive pride from being chosen to speak and pretend to a sort of illusory celebrity for the duration. Ed realizes that not only is speaking an opportunity to be of service by being an example, but that the listeners do him a service by giving him the opportunity to pour out his secrets in a room where listeners listen from the heart and practice compassionate response to their fellows.

Shelly’s Share Decoded

In decoding Ed’s share, I stayed close to what any experienced listener of A.A. narrating could derive. In decoding Shelly’s share, I will employ a perspective more reliant on event analysis.

She stands at the podium, adjusting the microphone and surveying the audience, her eyes picking out certain individuals here and there, nodding at some, gesturing to others. When she speaks, she has a warm tone, smiles often, and makes eye contact with various individuals throughout the room. She says, "Hi, my name is Shelly and I'm just like you."[30] Rarely, an A.A. member uses a variation on the oral formula, "Hi, my name is ___, and I'm an alcoholic." Those familiar with Shelly recognize this as statement emphasizing her connection to others in the room. Those unfamiliar with her consider the possibility that she is fairly new to the program and insufficiently familiar with oral tradition, or that she is defiant.[31] So far, she has been a bit unconventional, which might be a sign of disrespect for the conventions of A.A. narrating and this particular meeting.

"There's Marty. He's one of us. He's been one of us since…How long we been rippin' and runnin', Marty?" Marty shouts back. "Right," resumes Shelly, "since the nineties. I knew Marty when we were both out there. Now we're both in here.""

In this section, Shelly works to reinforce her message of connection to the audience members; however, she does this in a slightly unorthodox manner. Beyond a general identification (accomplished in her first utterance,) she reveals a specific connection with another A.A. member. She calls out to Marty, who responds readily, reinforcing the connection and testifying to its length.

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[30] This is an example of a very rare variant of "I'm an alcoholic." With the exception of "I'm a real alcoholic," deviation from the formal declaration occurs extraordinarily infrequently.

[31] "Defiance" is a term of art in A.A. narrating. It refers to rebellion against authority without reason, insistence on being an authority, and resistance to new ideas. A.A. members consider it one of the defining characteristics of the alcoholic mind.

In so doing, she and Marty "break the fourth wall"; by custom, the A.A. member who has the floor speaks only to the group as a whole, never addressing any one individual.

Another tradition Shelly ignored exhorts the narrator to "tell [one's] own story." A meeting attendee might say to another, after hearing a third member narrate as the speaker, "He was telling someone else's story," implying a two-fold criticism: the narrator told another's story, which he had no right to do; and the narrator therefore avoided or neglected telling his own story. In a narrator sufficiently familiar with custom, not telling one's own story can demonstrate unwillingness or inadequate ability to be "rigorously honest."[32] In her comments to and about Marty, Shelly related that she and he abused substances together and when they did it. Her use of the phrase "rippin' and runnin'" is a jailhouse slang term heard more frequently in NA narrating than in A.A. narrating, because NA members are more likely than A.A. members to have "experienced the hospitality of the state (city, county, federal government),"[33] as many of them put it, because of the criminalization of drug abuse and the crimes (such as theft) often associated with supporting a drug habit. This identifies both Shelly & Marty as having likely to have had some experience in NA. "Rippin' and runnin'" refers to stealing and leaving the scene of the crime, although sometimes it refers to wreaking havoc and ignoring the consequences. Shelly's usage might imply either denotation.

Further details she reveals about her adventures might be imputed to be true about Marty as well. No A.A. member has the right to reveal details about another member's history. Her breach is subtle; it is likely that only a few attendees have a sophisticated enough understanding

[32] Practicing rigorous honesty is a requirement for achieving sobriety. It includes telling every part of the story, telling it honestly, and telling it without bias that favors or flatters the narrator.

[33] Refers to being incarcerated in jail or prison.

of this custom to be able to analyze why her narrating seems unorthodox. Most would simply say that it was a little unusual and some would simply feel a little uncomfortable with what they might see as her unusual style.

Another transgressive aspect of telling someone else's story is identifying another alcoholic as such. A.A. narrating firmly holds that an individual can only identify him/herself as an alcoholic. Many would argue that Marty's presence at the meeting and the fact that he raised his hand in response to the customary prompt at the meeting's start identify him as an alcoholic, and that there is no reason for Shelly to refrain from doing so. The A.A. narrators I have known who practice the greatest fluency and proficiency in A.A. narrating while simultaneously demonstrating the highest levels of strong sobriety would, however, refrain from doing this in one-to-many narrating from the podium. One reason to eschew such a practice is that it singles out one attendee as especially close to the narrator, thus delineating degrees of closeness rather than maintaining the egalitarian stance upon which A.A. narrating relies.

Although on this occasion Shelly spoke only to Marty, A.A. narrators who call out one individual often call out another or a few, creating a smaller favored group out of the larger group of attendees. A review of this kind of narrating reveals that it tends to depict the prize of camaraderie in this favored group as a benefit of A.A. membership, dangling it before isolated or lonely members (usually newcomers) as an enticement to participate more actively in A.A. narrating, to "become part of.[34]" Although it certainly plays a part in attracting A.A. members to

[34] "Being part of" is a phrase consistently used without a final noun to complete the prepositional phrase. The phrase denotes both willingness to take part in and action directed toward taking one's place as an equal participant in life's activities.

participate, enticement based on personalities runs counter to the A.A. recommendation to "place principles before personalities."

Shelly's easy posture, willingness to vary a highly regular oral formula, familiarity with the audience, and use of A.A. repertoire, together with her casual "breaking of the fourth wall" when she speaks to Marty, mark Shelly as likely to be a long-term member, one who is "comfortable in her own skin."[35] Those in the room who wondered at first about Shelly's unusual identification ("I'm just like you,") have by now realized that she is an experienced A.A. narrator who is breaking with custom intentionally. By now, some have decided (though rarely consciously) to discount whatever else she narrates. The degree to which Shelly has lost creditability as a narrator depends on several factors (any or all of which the listener might be conscious,) interacting dynamically. First, the degree of familiarity each listener has with the range of acceptable practice interacts with that listener's ability to perceive and judge compliance with acceptable practice. Further, each listener weighs the degree of compliance with customary practice against other factors. For instance, to some listeners, Shelly has far more leeway in playing fast and loose with custom because she has revealed herself to have ten or more years of sobriety. Her warm tone, smiles and eye contact with many individuals communicate a friendly, down-to-earth demeanor that, for some, dispels any impression of defiance her iconoclastic narrating might have created.

[35] This term refers to a key characteristic of good sobriety and/or serenity. It indicates a state relaxed confidence arising from knowledge and acceptance of one's flaws and failures along with one's strengths and successes. Most A.A. members who have achieved this state extend the same acceptance to others.

[She pauses, leans forward on the podium, looks down to adjust one of the many silver rings on her left hand, then says in an offhand tone,] "In here's better."

Shelly's references to "rippin' and runnin'" while she was "out there" set up the image of rather desperate times in her past. When she takes a pause, she sets up her punch line with expert timing. By looking away and occupying herself with the seemingly unimportant task of straightening out her rings, she appears aimless and unthinking. When she leans into the microphone and says, in a knowing deadpan, "In here's better," her artful understatement delights her listeners.

<Several people laugh, two clap, and Marty shouts, "Damn straight." A woman in front of Marty turns to glare at him. He ignores her.>

In speaking out during the time allocated to another A.A. member, Marty takes advantage of his "special" status as a named friend of Shelly's to break a sacrosanct tradition against what is called "cross-talk."[36] Such an outburst would be not uncommon at some meetings, rare at most, and actively discouraged[37] at a few. The woman who glares at Marty makes the point that one should observe the customary silence. Marty ignores her, but the careful reader will note that in the rest of Shelly's share, Marty does not speak again. The glare has done its job.

"So, let's do the do."

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[36] Cross-talk: 1) Saying anything audible to and directed at the audience while another member has the floor; 2) When one has the floor, addressing another member directly; 3) When one has the floor, addressing something another member said without addressing another member directly, often in the form of opinion, recommendation, or judgment; 4) Rarely, used to refer to discussion of outside issues during meeting time.

[37] This kind of boundary is set by use of announcements in the format.

Shelly introduces the next segment of her narrating, in which she is going to practice her A.A. manners, or "do the do," which is a common shortened version of "do the things we do around here."[38] By pointing out that what she is doing is a formality of a kind, she helps newer members identify her narrating behaviors as appropriate, polite, respectful, and slightly obligatory, as all mannerly behaviors are.

"Welcome to the newcomers, Jet, Joe." [She nods toward them, holds up her hands and applauds softly four times.]

Shelly made the effort to remember both newcomers' names and to recognize them from the podium. She signals her approval and welcome with her gesture. This kind of observation of A.A. manners falls into the category of behavior that, in the world of social manners, would be called "very gracious."

"In case you didn't know, you're the most important person in the room."

A much-quoted passage on page fifteen of Chapter One of the Big Book sets forth the reason for holding A.A. meetings: "We meet frequently so that newcomers may find the fellowship they need." Narrating between newcomers and old-timers fulfills a special function in recovery too complex to explain here; suffice to say this kind of narrating is the beating heart of the program for A.A. members new and old. Many A.A. sayings attest to this, a phenomenon I will examine in a later chapter.

[38] "Around here" is a variant of "in here." When an A.A. narrator says "in here," usually the reference is to being sober as opposed to having "gone out," or gotten drunk and continued to drink. When an A.A. narrator says "around here," he or she is referring to an ongoing state of being "in A.A." or "in the rooms" or "in here."

"You've probably heard that before or maybe you haven't. Doesn't matter. You'll hear it again. Someday you'll understand it. Might take a while, though, so keep coming back."

Here Shelly comments directly on the nature of A.A. narrating, a not uncommon topic. In this section, she accomplishes several tasks. First, she subtly identifies the saying "The newcomer is the most important person in the room," as an item in the A.A. repertoire by referring to its repetition. By acknowledging that she knows they might have heard it before, and that they will hear it again, she points out that she is using the quote intentionally, and that repetition of the saying by her and others is not accidental.

For several reasons, Shelly doesn't explain what the saying means. In terms of A.A. narrating (which is the covert topic of this segment of Shelly's share,) she makes it plain that she doesn't explain it because the newcomers will grow to understand it in context as they hear the repetitions she predicted. Further, she makes it plain that this process is gradual.

A.A. narrating, at its most effective, is not didactic. Shelly refrains from explaining the saying because in so doing she would be taking the position of teacher. Jet and Joe will develop an understanding of what each A.A. saying signifies only in use. The meaning of an item in the A.A. repertoire develops in a newcomer by a kind of accrual of meaning; each time an experienced A.A. member directly applies a repertoire item, such as a saying, to the personal experience of the newcomer, that item's meaning takes shape. Meanings of A.A. repertoire items are so dependent on both context and performance that I must classify those meanings as emergent, rather than entirely stable. I believe this emergent contextual quality of meaning works best in A.A. narrators who reject didactic, hierarchical models of instruction. My observations show that A.A. narrators who embrace didactic, top-down teaching modes of narrating appeal to a distinct sub-group of A.A. practitioners.

Thank you, Ed, for a great pitch. [She crosses her hands over her heart and bows slightly toward Ed. Her tone deepens and becomes compassionate and warm.] I send you and Gracia blessings and white light, my friend.

Shelly continues her formal narrating by recognizing the speaker. She pays her respects to Ed and his pain with her gesture and her bow. She reveals her "hippie/New Age" background with her reference to "white light," a symbol of healing meant literally in this instance. Shelly will alter perform a meditation and imagine healing white light surrounding the couple.

"You rock my world, you really do." [Ed nods his thanks, his mouth a straight line as he struggles to keep his composure.]

Her wording implies that this is not the first time she has heard Ed, further confirmation of her long experience and connection to individuals at this meeting. Her effect on Ed implies to onlookers that this behavior of hers is consistent with her past behavior, because Ed takes it to heart and is clearly affected by her warmth and goodwill.

[Her tone changes from offhand to a more intense, oratorical tone. She establishes a swaying cadence and emphasizes the syllables in boldface.] "See, **I** gotta re**mem**ber what it's **like** to have ten days…"

"What it was like" is an A.A. oral formula that refers to one's drinking history. A.A. narrating holds that remembering what it was like in the last days of drinking can help the A.A. member resist picking up a drink and thus reliving those days again. Shelly's reference to "ten days sober" was prompted by Jet's declaration that he "has ten days". This is not considered outright cross-talk, because she does not name him, address him, reveal information about him, or discuss him or what he said. She simply refers to her own memory of being ten days sober. Despite the fact that she does not look at Jet or acknowledge him, she used the reference

intentionally to let Jet know that she has been where he is: confused, anxious, sick, and looking for help.

It is safe to assume that almost everyone in the room, with the possible exception of Joe,[39] has had the experience of being only ten days past the last drink. When Shelly mentions that time point, many audience members think back to what they were doing then. Most were physically, mentally, financially, and emotionally exhausted. Many were sick, some in jail, and a few in locked hospital wards.

A certain faraway look comes over the face of a meeting attendee when he or she recalls that time of life. The individual seems to be remembering a hard passage of great import, usually without bitterness or condemnation. Often the individual will shake his or her head, make a small joke or comment of commiseration to a companion, or perform some small act of self-soothing, such as rubbing one's hands together, reaching for a mint, or distracting him/herself. It is a moment colored by a somber dignity, as if they are war veterans recalling dark days before victory.

"…'cause **my** forgetter works **real good**. <Nods, smiles, and scattered laughter from the audience.> "I for**get** what it was **like** to **sleep** in my **car**. I for**get**…"

A.A. narrators talk about having a "forgetter" that works overtime, as well as having a "rememberer" that doesn't work at all. The "hard-working forgetter/faulty rememberer" is part of what A.A. members call "denial." Memory lapses convince the recovering alcoholic that the consequences of drinking were not so bad, making it more likely that he or she will return to drinking.

[39] Most problem drinkers who attend a first A.A. meeting have stopped drinking many times before they "get here;" that is, "come in" and become sober.

"…what I **did** to get **more**. I for**get** where **al**cohol **took** me."

"What I did" and "where alcohol took me" are oral formulas referring to those final days of drinking before sobriety. They include the usual last refuges of the fallen, such as crime, betrayal, degradation, and violence – as victim, perpetrator, or both.

"Where alcohol took me" refers to a metaphorical state of being lowly, part of the underbelly of society, and so on. It also refers to physical locations, such as cheap motel rooms, dangerous street corners, or in the company of dangerous people committing less-than-legal acts.

[She pauses, leans back, and puts a hand on one hip, surveying the room again.] <The audience is silent and attentive, so quiet that the tinkle of the silver of Shelly's many bracelets is audible.> [Shelly puts one hand out in front of her, counting off fingers with her other hand on the beat of three important words.] "It took me to **jails**, insti**tu**tions, and **death**."

The "jails, institutions, and death" formula is another item in the A.A. repertoire that originated or is more prevalent in NA narrating than in A.A. narrating. Her use of it is another breach of esoteric etiquette; only those in the room who know the origin of the phrase understand that she is using a slogan from NA, and of those, only those on the exclusionary side of the line about drug use will feel the dig. By saying that phrase, she is asserting that her drug use does not exclude her from taking the podium or, while there, referring (even obliquely) to her drug use.

<One or two audience members shift uncomfortably in their seats. In the front row, Jet has become stoic and unmoving, arms folded, eyes riveted on Shelly.>

Despite the terrible history she recounts, no one in the room finds her words inappropriate or extreme. Those who are uncomfortable are those who are remembering their own dark days. Jet has begun to suspect that his despairing conviction that no one in the room could possibly have a problem as bad as his might be wrong after all.

"My toes were blue."

Shelly had a near-fatal drug overdose, of which the blue toes are a symptom, a fact esoteric to drug users. She is gambling on her assumption that Jet will know this.

[Pause] I lost everything, I was locked up, and they took my little **girl** away to live with her **fa**ther, who **I** left because **he** wanted me to **go to A.A.**" [Her volume and pitch rise on the final four syllables. As she utters the final clause, she makes a face I can best describe as "Jerry Lewis-like," using a humorous tone to indicate that she is laughing at her own idiotic behavior.] <The audience laughs.>

The high incidence of humor in A.A. narrating on the topic of the last drinking days and first sober days works to dispel the charge of sorrow. The humor is that kind called "black humor," shocking, irreverent, and as necessary to survival as HazMat suits are to those who handle toxic waste. The enormity of her past anger at her husband for wanting her to take the very action she now proclaims is a great benefit is funny to this audience because they understand her alcoholic thinking; the laughter is the laughter of identification, of regret, and a healthy replacement for re-experiencing the horror of the truth of those past moments of alcoholic insanity.

"But to**day** things are **dif**ferent. Like Ed says, meeting makers make it and I've been making it to this meeting now for fifteen years."

Shelly moves on to "what happened to change me," another common element of A.A. narrating about the final days of drinking. Experienced competent A.A. narrators learn to state specific actions that enhance recovery. Shelly returns to Ed's message about the importance of meeting attendance, reinforcing yet again the length and the strength of her connection to the

A.A. community, this meeting, and to Ed, who has temporarily higher status because he was the main speaker. Shelly enumerates important actions.

[Shelly speeds up, establishes a rhythm and again ticks off the important points on her fingers.] I **got** a **spon**sor, I **work**ed the **steps**, I **made** the **cof**fee, I **got** a com**mit**ment, [here her pace slows and the rhythm lapses.] "I drove newcomers around."

[Her tone and rhythm in the next sentence become very conversational and she points first to Joe and then to Jet in an aside audible to the entire room.] "I'll drive you guys around if you want. Get my number if you want to go to a meeting."

She breaks the fourth wall again, both to make the offer and to demonstrate to others in the room that this is how A.A. members with long-term sobriety help newcomers.

[She returns to an oratorical tone.] "See, I keep doing what I did when I got here because I want to keep what I have.

Shelly makes her first reference to an item from A.A. repertoire that has a particularly Zen-like quality. She will return to it again.

"What I have today is…

When A.A. members narrate about "what I have today," they refer to the general state of their lives as a direct result of the work of recovery. Most narrators make it clear that "what I have today" is not perfect or utopian, but is far better than "where I came from," which refers to those last days of desperation.

"I have my daughter back." [She pauses, tears up, steps back to wipe her eyes with the back of her hand, laughing at herself.]

Shelly reveals a personal story that moves her to an emotional display. Again, no one in the room shows any sign of judgment. Many in the audience get misty-eyed. Some murmur encouragement or congratulations.

Her tone and pace become conversational again in another aside, this time inaudible to the back rows.] "I'm getting to be an old fart up here."

Shelly has enough sobriety to no longer "get into the drama." In early years, many A.A. members revel in emotional ups and downs, complex interpersonal difficulties, and involved triangulations of conflict. Newcomers often cry in meetings, which behavior is considered entirely appropriate. Some A.A. members have "issues other than alcohol;" some of these include serious illness, family tragedy, or other life difficulties. These individual might cry in meetings as well.

In A.A. narrating, this is called "drama," or "the drama." The more time a narrator has, the less likely the narrator is to give in to tears at the podium, no matter how powerful the story, because emotional balance and extraordinary equanimity are benefits of sobriety. These and other benefits are known as "gifts of the program," as are more tangible outcomes such as reconciliation with family members.

[Straightening up and facing the audience again, she says in her oratorical tone,] "Yesterday I gave my daughter a cake for two years."

In Los Angeles, A.A. members celebrate one year of continuous sobriety as an "A.A. birthday[40]," complete with presentation at a meeting of a cake, candles, by a designated person

[40] In most other parts of the country, this occasion is called "an anniversary," and is recognized without the customary birthday trappings. The "A.A. birthday" custom in other locations most often spread from LA.

(or persons) who are said to "give [the A.A. member] a cake." This consists of holding the cake while the entire meeting sings a rendition of "Happy Birthday" and the A.A. member blows out a number of candles corresponding to his or her years of sobriety. After two years of sobriety, an A.A. member is said to "be two."[41] If asked how much time she has, she might respond, "I'm two," or, "I have two years."

[The tears come again, and again she laughs, shaking her head at first, but not drying them.] <The audience applauds loudly. A beep sounds.>

Equal time is allotted for each narrator, usually three minutes for those who share. Most meetings have "a timer," a person who holds a timer and sets it to beep after two minutes to give a one-minute warning that the allotted time is about to expire.

[She nods at the applause. She looks toward a man sitting in the front row punching buttons on a small electronic timer. She switches to her quieter "aside" style and volume.] "That's one minute, right? I'll wrap up."

By acknowledging the timer and taking responsibility for ending her narrating within the allotted time, Shelly demonstrates good sobriety by respecting the meeting's customs and not selfishly dominating the podium. Some of those in the room who were less than charmed by her free-wheeling style when she began narrating might be more convinced now that she is a credible example.

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[41] A.A. folklore holds that an alcoholic stops maturing emotionally when he or she starts drinking, and begins again when he or she becomes sober. If Shelly's daughter started drinking at thirteen (a common age,) she and other A.A. narrators would say that now she "is fifteen."

[Returning her attention to the room, she resumes her oratorical style and volume.] "See, we get shit **back** around here."

A common theme in narrating is regaining what was lost in the worst drinking days.

"If we do it **right**. [She establishes a slight rhythm.] Like **Ed** does. Like **these** folks over here in the com**mit**ment chairs[42] do."

Shelly returns to the task of explicating exactly how one takes actions that lead to sobriety.

[Here she speeds up and strengthens the rhythm, again assuming a slightly clownish demeanor and waving her arm as if conducting.] And if you **like** what you're **get**ting, keep **do**ing what you're **do**ing." [Her pitch rises to peak on "like", then falls to a low on "get" then rises again on "do" and peaks at its highest pitch on the final "do." Her volume rises on "what you're doing."

Shelly plays this repetition of the A.A. saying for the humor inherent in its double meaning. For example, if a newcomer complains, "I still want to drink all the time," an old-timer might ask calmly, "How many meetings a week are you going to?" On hearing the reply, "One a week," the old-timer will smile gently and respond, "Keep doing what you're doing and you'll keep getting what you're getting." If pressed to explain his enigmatic reply, the old-timer will likely clap the newcomer on the shoulder and say, "Keep coming back."

In another example, a newcomer might report, "You know that supervisor at work who keeps pissing me off? I've been writing about it like you told me and I haven't mouthed off to

[42] Some meetings (usually those with limited seating and overflow attendance) reserve seats for those who have commitments at the meeting. Commonly such seats are at or near the front.

him all week!" Another member might respond, "Congratulations! Feels good, doesn't it? Keep doing what you're doing, you'll keep getting what you're getting."

The "keep doing what you're doing…" saying works as a way to encourage an A.A. member who reports successful results as well as to gently remind an A.A. member who reports undesirable results to examine his or her practices to see what is causing the unfavorable outcome.

She jingles the bracelets on her arm, shaking them down to the wrist and adjusting them, pausing as if to think of the next thing to say. She looks up at the audience again. Her tone is slightly more conversational than it is oratorical, but still clear and loud enough to hear to the back of the room. She speeds up her pace now.] "They're gonna carry me out of these rooms feet first,[43] but this time my toes won't be blue."

<The audience laughs. Another beep sounds.>

The beep signals the end of her allotment. Shelly, a talented narrator, has timed her ending perfectly.

[In a completely conversational tone, speaking very fast, she says as she ducks away from the podium] "That's all I got. Thank you for letting me share."

Shelly's final utterances are two oral formulas for ending A.A. narrating when one has the floor. Again Shelly demonstrates both thorough knowledge and gracious execution of the customary duties of an A.A. narrator.

After the meeting, Shelly stands near Jet, giving him time to gather up his courage. She has had her eye on him from the minute he walked in the room. It was at her prompting that, at

[43] Many old-timers make this remark about leaving A.A. "feet first" (i.e., being carried out on a stretcher at the end of life) to assure newer members that "You don't graduate from A.A.."

the beginning of the meeting, Barry handed Jet the reading and gave him a prized seat in the front row reserved for service commitments.

In their black clothes and tattoos, she and Jet stand out in this meeting, which is rather far from Hollywood. Shelly knows that Jet's best chance of recovery will come if she can introduce him to the crowd of young musicians, actors, and other entertainment industry personnel who attend meetings farther east. She geared her pitch, especially the opening of it, toward him, demonstrating a rebellious, carefree attitude, showing her tough side, and her street sensibility. She also held the entire room spellbound and gained their respect and empathy.

Her powerful performance worked. Jet lingers nearby, not speaking to her, but not in any hurry to leave.

She turns to him and finds common ground easily. "Who does your ink? I love that medieval axe on your forearm…" Jet responds eagerly, and they are off and running. She takes him to a coffee shop and marks up his copy of the Los Angeles meeting directory with recommendations for meetings where he will find his peers. She arranges to accompany him and introduce him around.

Shelly is older than Jet and long past going to the lively but rather dramatic meetings he needs. She has no interest in him personally or romantically. She is doing for him what other A.A. members did for her "when she was new," an A.A. phrase referring to the earliest phase of association with A.A. The more time a member has, the longer this phase seems. Individuals with twenty-five-plus years might refer to something that happened in their sixth year as having occurred "when I was new."

When she sees that he is solidly connected to some men who have good sobriety, she will wave goodbye and return to her meetings near the beach, where sobriety is more sedate and

her appearance is a matter of personal taste, not a uniform necessary for credibility among the young and beautiful.

The Art of Seduction

The ballet of human communication I described above between Jet and Shelly occurs over and over in A.A. meetings, many times a day in Los Angeles. Shelly's performance is not unusual in its finesse, nor in it success. Part of the goal of A.A. narrating is to identify with another attendee and work together to improve sobriety. Many succeed well at this. Very few members, however, are fully conscious of how artfully they produce their narrating or how influenced they are by concerns for others in the room. When I have questioned narrators after a particularly adept performance about subtly brilliant turns of phrase or humor, especially when I have connected performance to its eventual effect on one or more attendees, they have almost uniformly been baffled. By my comparison, in the heading above, of the art of A.A. narrating to the art of seduction I mean to imply that, like the art of seduction, much shaping of narrating behavior and text happens naturally and without effort, compelled by the desire for connection with another. The underlying impulse for A.A. narrating, however, is rarely sexual[44] in nature. The impulse, I believe, is empathy.

The notion that empathy drives A.A. narrating offers the first opportunity to connect A.A. with current research into neural phenomena; in particular, with studies of mirror neurons.

[44] A few unscrupulous longtime A.A. members (more often male and but sometimes female) prey on the vulnerability of newcomers, who are lonely, confused, needy, and thus easy to seduce. This practice is known as Thirteenth Stepping, a derogatory term that condemns the A.A. member who practices it. Even the most tolerant A.A. member reserves the right to judge this behavior harshly.

Chapter Seven: Workshops for Sobriety

The greater part of A.A. narrating for most practitioners takes place at A.A. meetings, events shaped so that an individual can create, maintain, and improve his or her own sobriety and help others. Meetings provide opportunities for practitioners to take actions in the company of others

Many actions lead to recovery for an A.A. practitioner, who might pray, meditate, read A.A. literature, write according to A.A. suggestions, or perform acts of service for others. A.A. meetings exist at which each of these activities can be practiced. An examination of how meetings unfold reveals how opportunities to act are shaped, how time is allocated for each activity, and what customary expressive behaviors A.A. practitioners perform at meetings.

Alcoholics Anonymous Narrating Events Are Workshops.

What I call an A.A. Narrating Event is any space and time when two or more alcoholics talk about A.A., alcoholism, or recovery. Within the world of possibilities this definition covers, three event types are common. Meetings are loosely organized gatherings of attendees at a specific place and time that repeat weekly. A set of conventions organize meetings into several kinds that differ mainly in what is discussed and how narrating opportunities are allocated. Meetings range in size from a few attendees to, at the largest L.A. meeting, over a thousand.

The second kind of narrating event, fellowship, is an informal and spontaneously organized gathering of alcoholics talking about alcoholism, the meeting that just occurred, and living life as sober members of A.A. These range in size from a few to as many as can fit around a coffee shop or restaurant table. Fellowship events independent of meetings occur year-round. A.A. members gather for personal enjoyment to celebrate, for example, a sobriety birthday. A.A.

members put together large events several times a year. Holidays are often difficult for A.A. members because of drinking temptations or family stressors. “Marathon meetings” are often held in buildings dedicated to meetings. Meetings are held at regular intervals with breaks in between. These usually start early and end quite late, especially on New Year’s Eve.

The third kind of narrating event takes place between two people. It might be a face-to-face meeting or a phone conversation.

A special case of these dyadic narrating events is the sponsor-sponsee interaction. A sponsor is someone who has worked all Twelve Steps and is willing to help someone who wants to work them, too. “Sponsee” is a back-formed word that replaced an earlier term “baby.”

Old-timers tell me that in the early days of A.A. most newcomers were critically ill in the hospital with end-stage alcoholism and many were incontinent and diapered; hence the name. Another old-timer told me that they were babies because they always cry and a sponsor has to hold them and pat them on the back as if the sponsor were burping an infant. It’s no surprise that A.A. members with sponsors prefer even an awkward term like “sponsee” to “baby.”

Many sponsors become very close with their sponsees. The relationship is that of mentor and protégé, though some A.A. members a relationship more like that of a Boot Camp Sergeant and Private. A bell-shaped curve exists. The sponsor as nurturing, instructive friend who teaches by example and suggestion lies on the far right. In the middle are many good people who help each other mostly by passing along techniques, tips, knowledge, social support, accountability, and friendship.

On the far left are the top-down, dominant sponsors who claim that a need for ego deflation of the sponsee demands that the sponsor demean them. This ego-deflation requirement sanctions many forms of domination.

I wrote earlier of the kind of psychological, neurological, and physiological damage many newcomers carry with them when they arrive in A.A. Many have no psychological defense against dominant forceful personalities. This partly derives from the fact that the harmful use of alcohol co-occurs with domestic violence at a rate of 55% (Abramsky et al. 2011); many alcoholics grew up in violent homes and learned to assume either the dominant or subordinate role common to violent families. Psychological abuse is as harmful as physical abuse, and each is more harmful when they co-occur.

As the tone and selection of data in the paragraph above indicates, I am not in favor of the dominant/subordinate approach. As a scholar and as an A.A. member I should have no opinion about this; failing that, I should keep my opinion to myself. As a compassionate human being with a top-notch education, first hand and fieldwork experience, analytical training, and – most importantly – a voice, I raise that voice here and now.

The approach to sponsorship practiced in the Pacific Group does not represent the best A.A. sponsorship, fellowship, or recovery the A.A. program has to offer. I suggest that anyone who refers alcoholics to Los Angeles A.A. groups make it a priority to learn about the Pacific Group by doing his or her own investigation and thereby form his or her own opinion so that he or she is prepared to pass informed recommendations along to alcoholics seeking recovery.

A bit of folklore: In conversations among A.A. members, when Pacific Group practices or its leader are topics of conversation, someone present almost always closes off the narrating on that topic by saying, "Well, PG has saved a lot of lives." By this they mean that people associated with PG work with homeless alcoholics living on the streets of downtown Los Angeles and save men and women who would otherwise die of alcoholism. I was talking with an old-timer woman about this, and she said, "Yeah, well, PG has taken a lot of people's chances

away, too." At my surprised look, she continued, "You know a lot of people can't take all that abuse and shame they hand out. They go out and they die because Pacific Group says it's the only way to get sober. People get told if they can't make it in Pacific Group not to bother with 'regular' A.A. That leaves them with nowhere to go. They go out, they drink, and they die"

I do not plan to comment further on Pacific Group activities or this style of top-down "recovery" practice in this work.

Each of these narrating events creates a rich and dynamic set of narrating opportunities wherein narrators use vivid and specialized narrating repertoire items within the protected narrating positions of narrating permissions and privileges shaped by traditional practice. The organization of time and construction of narrating opportunities give rise to patterns of expressive behaviors, or folk talking/folk narrating, that become customary among A.A. narrators. These narrating practices afford a laboratory space within which numerous experiments can be conducted free of consequence.

Sites of Recovery

Meetings

The meeting is a site of recovery that becomes a kind of a home; it is no accident that many an A.A. member will choose one weekly meeting to attend regularly and call his or her "home group." Usually other meetings supplement the home group, often a scattering of meetings the member attends according to the changing demands of his or her schedule. These meetings become a resilient map of meetings so that when trouble comes, an A.A. member can go directly "home," to a site of recovery where he or she is known and can count on support.

Meetings form the core of A.A. narrating, and a considerable body of tradition exists devoted to organizing meeting time. A.A. narrators refer to the organization of any meeting as the "format." These (usually written) guidelines set out how the meeting time proceeds. It includes opening formulas such as prayers, readings, and announcements, rules for participation (such as methods for choosing who speaks, when, and for how long,) and closing formulas. Commonly used formats are generally divided into "Speaker meetings" (one or two speakers only, no general participation,) "Sharing" (general participation only,) or literature study. Variants of these three most common forms exist, and a few other forms exist. Another shibboleth rears its head here; in other locales, what L.A. A.A. meetings call sharing, which is turn-by-turn narrating by attendees, is called "speaking" in other locales. In L.A. A.A. narrating, "speaking" refers to narrating as the featured narrator in the meeting, usually allotted a longer time interval than for those who share (ten to twenty minutes rather than two or three).

Fellowship

Observation of A.A. narrating reveals that meetings make up only a portion of narrating time. Members seek out opportunities to engage in A.A. narrating in other venues. For example, attendees often retire after a meeting to a coffee shop, parking lot, or nearby sidewalk for what they call "the meeting after the meeting," or "fellowship." Fellowship narrating resembles a kind of A.A. shoptalk in which practitioners share techniques, challenges, and solutions, or trade war stories meant to inform, entertain, or both.

In informal groups, A.A. members can cast off the formalities of narrating procedures that make meetings work so they can explore common interests in a more ordinary conversational mode. Members seek out opportunities to engage in A.A. narrating in other

venues. For example, attendees often retire after a meeting to a coffee shop, parking lot, or nearby sidewalk for what they call "the meeting after the meeting," or "fellowship." Most fellowship is spontaneously formed. Attendees at some meetings have a custom of going to the same destination every week post-meeting or pre-meeting so that others can join in without inquiring as to time and place.

Fellowship as a site of recovery offers a different benefit from that meetings offer. Fellowship offers the newcomer a social life. One saying in A.A. narrating is "Change your playgrounds, change your playmates." A.A. members encourage newcomers to befriend other sober members in place of drug- and/or alcohol-using acquaintances. In collective A.A. experience, sobriety is hard to maintain on a Friday night in a bar with a crowd of friends one has drunk with every weekend for the last five years. The socializing of A.A. fellowship offers the same release from workday concerns outside of a drinking environment.

A.A. members enjoy the company of their fellows and put a great deal of effort into organizing social events for every holiday imaginable. If there's a reason to have a picnic, party, or holiday feast, an A.A. member in Los Angeles can count on finding one held by fellow A.A. members.

One-to-One

On-going

In a practice called "sponsorship," an individual A.A. member forms a close relationship with another member more experienced in A.A. practice and engages in a specialized form of narrating unique to that relationship and distinct from fellowship narrating. The principle of

anonymity is perhaps more important to that relationship than to any other in A.A. practice. For that reason, I will write nothing further about sponsorship.

Spontaneous

A special kind of A.A. narrating can arise spontaneously and unexpectedly. Just how this works sheds light on a cluster of narrating terms about "the rooms of A.A."

On occasion, an A.A. member is in the company of people he or she does not know to be affiliated with A.A. The gathering might be a business, social, sports, or even family event, and might include some or a lot of alcohol. Such events can be a bit stressful for A.A. members. Seeing, hearing, and smelling evidence of alcohol has been shown to trigger alcohol cravings. (Sinha and Li 2007, Fox 2007) An A.A. member who works a good program and has some time might not begin to crave a drink, but might become a little uncomfortable. He or she might be uncomfortable if someone else begins to exhibit signs of intoxication. He or she might just be bored with the company and wish for the companionship of someone with whom he or she shared something in common.

At some point, he or she might notice that a stranger or acquaintance refuses alcohol without explanation or uses a phrase or saying commonly used in A.A. narrating.

If the A.A. member feels that it would be nice to talk to another A.A. member, he or she might use A.A. narrating techniques to find out whether the other person is a member without breaking his/her or the other person's anonymity.

I will not list those techniques here, since to do so would render them useless.

If the two discover that they have A.A. membership in common, there is a sudden and palpable shift in the two narrators that occurs when they confirm their common A.A.

membership. An opportunity hangs in the air for a millisecond. Within that fragment of a moment, the two will indicate to each other whether they wish to converse in private. If the signals are confirmed, the two will go on as before and then find each other later in a quiet corner where they will not be overheard and begin to narrate A.A. fashion.

Generally, the conversation will be a quick exchange of "credentials," so to speak, such as length of sobriety, where one got sober, which meetings one attends and so on, not unlike the sort of chatter between two people who discover they are attending or alums of the same university. Once identities are validated, narrating in the style of sharing at meetings can begin.

The necessity to agree upon and signal the opening of an A.A. narrating event within the time and space of a mundane event points to a characteristic of A.A. narrating. A.A. narrating proceeds in a context set apart from everyday life, a context marked by the differences in social roles. In A.A. narrating tradition, a narrator learns not to reveal his or her profession or other marks of prestige or property. Social distinctions largely disappear. The respect and counsel of a waitress with twenty years' sobriety might be sought by the owner of the mansion with three months' time who hired her to serve at his party

After this identification, certain conditions are presumed to be in force. 1) Each narrator has permission to speak as he or she would in a meeting; that is, to speak of unspeakable things in a way that would shock most people. 2) Each narrator has the protection of anonymity and the promise that the social roles and identities they just shed in exchange for A.A. identities will remain intact; neither will reveal the other one's A.A. membership when they return to the company of others present. 3) They have mutually created an A.A.-style narrating opportunity. If something is troubling one of them, in this moment, each knows that if he or she speaks, the

other will listen as A.A. members do. That is, anything can be said, no matter how difficult or tragic, with complete guarantee of anonymity, and only support will be offered in exchange.

Each takes a moment to speak. Then, as quickly as the spell was cast, the two use narrating techniques to close out the exchange. Their A.A. identities are tucked back in, safely out of sight, and they resume their mundane roles and identities.

When they leave the narrating space, no sense of connection or special knowledge of each other lingers. For the rest of the gathering, each will treat the other in a manner appropriate to their mundane roles and identities. Unless one indicates a need for another dose of "one alcoholic talking to another," once the gathering ends, they might never discuss alcoholism again. Unless their roles and identities that pertain to their purpose for being at the gathering require it, they might never see each other again.

Certainly some moments like this lead to long conversations, exchanges of contact information, and even long-term relationships. The point of this illustration is to show that A.A. narrating itself has the power to create a meeting wherever a site of recovery is needed, on the spot, with no further obligation.

For those brief moments, the participants are not in an everyday narrating space. There is a sense of a difference, a sense of being apart from others, not at a party or conference or restaurant. Just for the length of that conversation, the participants are in what A.A. members call "the rooms of A.A."

The Rooms of A.A.

When A.A. members narrate about arriving at A.A. meetings, getting sober, and deciding to stay, they often call it "coming in." One narrator said to a meeting, "I've been in here and out

there. In here's better." Narrators say, "In these rooms I found what I had been looking for at the bottom of every bottle." Others say, "Around here I found out that if I was willing to take direction and work hard, I could do anything." "Around here" is another way of invoking "the rooms." The rooms of A.A. are a moveable feast. "You are always welcome in the rooms of A.A." They pop up like protective bubbles or tents whenever two or more A.A. members shed their mundane identities and speak as one alcoholic talking to another. There the narrating protections, permissions, and opportunities obtain as needed.

A special narrating context exists because persistent alcoholism, left untreated, leads to "jails, institutions, and death." For an alcoholic who understands A.A. as his or her last chance before these ends obtain, or who has already had brushes with these sad results, successful practice of the A.A. program is a matter of maintaining life and freedom.

A.A. members listen with stoic acceptance to stories of the extremes of human tragedy, such as suicide attempts, vehicular manslaughter, prison time, mental illness, and loss of family members surface all too regularly. These same life histories testify that problem drinking might lie dormant during long dry periods, only to return with the greater vengeance of a disease taking advantage of the weaknesses age has wrought in the intervening time.

Adherence to A.A. practice becomes a life-or-death matter when sobriety is equated, as it is in A.A. lore, with survival from an often fatal and always costly disease. The importance of achieving sobriety as a topic in A.A. narrating cannot be overemphasized. A.A. members identify adhering to this "primary purpose" as "singleness of purpose."

This theme of incipient mortality underlies A.A. narrating and contributes to the quiet urgency experience by two A.A. members connecting for a moment. Those moments can be like islands of rest for a long-distance swimmer, or a cool drink of water for a marathon runner.

Small comforts aid the larger effort; it always helps to know there is someone around who speaks one's language.

Finding a Meeting

Because of the wide variety of locations, times, and formats of meetings, a newcomer can usually find the "kind" of meeting she/he feels comfortable attending. Even the layout of the room plays a part in helping to choose a meeting to attend: Many newcomers choose meetings with doors and interiors arranged so that they can slip in after the meeting starts and stand or sit near the back wall, only to slip away before the meeting ends.

The anonymity of the program works well in a large population. In larger communities, one can attend meetings in one's neighborhood and find different groups of people at almost every meeting. I could attend a meeting every day of the week in the Brentwood-Santa Monica-Marina Del Rey area without seeing any one person more than once.

Members of Alcoholics Anonymous build maps of narrating events that match their needs. The density and diversity of narrating events in an individual's geographic and chronological range limits the possible time/place occurrences of meetings. Los Angeles hosts three thousand meetings a week. This high number increases the likelihood of finding a good match of narrating events to recovery needs.

In smaller towns, a surprisingly intimate Alcoholics Anonymous community forms. Almost every meeting consists of people who have known each other for the duration of their sobriety. In small Alcoholics Anonymous communities, everyone knows everyone else's story. In Baton Rouge, where I have done supplementary fieldwork for eighteen years, it is easy within

a few meetings to reacquaint myself with the regulars who appear at pretty much every meeting I attend within a given neighborhood.

In a large Alcoholics Anonymous community, the large number of meetings provides a safety valve: If the former lover is at one meeting, go to another one. If one arrives at a meeting only to find that person who rants about religion, somewhere within easy driving distance another meeting begins within a half-hour.

One can still find the small group atmosphere if one wants. A member of Alcoholics Anonymous can drop in to a small meeting and not return with enough regularity to be recognized. This can assure the kind of privacy, anonymity, and "principles not personalities" experience that benefits recovery.

One can go to different meetings to seek, for example, a focus on the Twelve Steps, an opportunity to talk about particular issues (such as homosexuality), or to find a cultural group. Meetings in Los Angeles exist for speakers of Farsi, Russian, French, Spanish, American Sign Language, and more.

Many Meetings

In the greater metropolitan area between Santa Barbara and the U.S.-Mexican border, over six thousand A.A. meetings convene per week. Over four thousand of them are listed in metro Los Angeles. It’s not possible to know how many unlisted meetings exist; many A.A. members hold meetings in private homes or simply do not list a meeting held in a public place. Unlike other areas, here meetings commence almost every hour from dawn until midnight. Generally, even without a car, an A.A. meeting is within easy travel distance at a time one is free to attend.

Los Angeles County offers many kinds of meetings. Depictions in popular media almost exclusively show meetings as being held in basement rooms furnished with uncomfortable folding chairs in rows facing front, the ubiquitous coffee urn, Styrofoam cups, and a podium at which individuals take turns speaking. Certainly this describes a portion of the meetings in LA West. Many, however, meet in community rooms in large office buildings, park buildings, commercial venues such as coffee shops and restaurants (often early in the morning before regular business hours or in a private area), on the beach (yes, on the sand itself), in clubhouses purpose-built or adapted for Twelve Step program use, in yoga studios, school buildings, and even in bars.

A meeting takes place at a specific place and time because an A.A. member arranged at some point to rent space from local facilities or, less commonly, use private homes, to meet at a set time and place each week. Meetings continue to meet because enough people who comply with conditions set by landlords attend to pay the rent and the space continues to be available for meetings. A representative from the meeting serves as liaison with the facility owner to pay rent and stay current on regulations about smoking, parking, and noise, three common neighbor complaints about A.A. meetings. It is not uncommon to arrive at a meeting and see signs on the way in cautioning attendees to refrain from some activity or another. One building adjacent to a popular meeting facility planted a thick, tall row of plants to wall themselves off from those pesky alcoholics. I find it quietly amusing that the building houses offices for therapists.

Sources of Meeting Information

Face-to-Face

I went to my very first meeting because a friend called and asked me to go. She was being pushed by her family members to attend and did not want to go alone. We went together. I stayed; she did not.[45] Sometimes those who want to go to a meeting ask a friend or acquaintance who is known to be an A.A. member for information about a meeting, or to accompany them to one. Social workers and others in the helping professions often supply information. In Los Angeles County and other municipalities, one or more buildings exist which were built for or dedicated to being a space for Twelve Step meetings. Some operate as independent Alano clubs, formed to manage the money and property, as Twelve Step meetings never own any property nor accumulate any money beyond that required to pay meeting expenses, such as coffee and rent. One space in Los Angeles County exists because the owner willed it and a small trust fund to finance its operation for the use of meetings. By visiting one of these sites, one can usually obtain a meeting schedule.

[45] Sometimes someone who is not an A.A. member or who does not remain in one's life after the initial incident is the instrument of getting one into A.A. meetings, sometimes in almost accidental ways. This person is called, in A.A. parlance, one's "Eskimo." I believe the name derives from the notion of being lost in the total whiteout of a snowstorm only to be found by an Eskimo who appears and leads one to safety. My friend, with whom I lost touch after I became a Twelve Step member and she did not, was my Eskimo. I am forever indebted to her.

Phone

It is a custom among A.A. meeting groups to maintain a phone number and a listing in the local yellow pages under the name "Alcoholics Anonymous." Some phone lines are manned twenty-four hours a day; as this requires many volunteers, only major population centers like Los Angeles County can manage this. In other locations, volunteers answer the phone during business hours, or forward the phone number to volunteers' home phones or cell phones. Sometimes only voicemail is available. Volunteers will call back and respect the need for maintaining anonymity.

Online

The ever-expanding reach of Internet connectivity has made finding meetings quite easy. Searching online turns up many listings, some published by local A.A. Central Offices and others maintained by individuals.

Some of the online directories run by individual members are quite useful and accurate. Often they are easier to use because they focus only on meetings of interest to the individual, such as women's meetings, meetings in a particular neighborhood, or meetings with childcare.

In an example of the exercise of "singleness of purpose," the Los Angeles Central Office did not rush to put a directory of meetings online. For years they refused, stressing the importance of those seeking a meeting speaking to another alcoholic by calling the main phone line. As web pages became ever easier to create and publish, however, Central Office realized that individuals were posting information that contained errors or quickly went out of date. They stepped up and posted a directory they maintain and administer.

A paper meeting directory published by A.A. Los Angeles Central Office lists over three thousand meetings a week in the greater Los Angeles area. The pages list the meetings by weekday, location, and time slot. Designated letters indicate special conditions, such as H for handicap accessible, NS for non-smoking, or G for gay. Meeting size (number of attendees) is not listed because this tends to fluctuate over time for any one meeting. Each meeting is listed by the name the meeting group lists on the form it submits to the Los Angeles Central Office.

Some directories list the format of the meeting by including common terms such as "Book Study," "Step Study," or "Two Speaker," for example.

Meeting Formats

Organization

An A.A. document read often at meetings contains the line "A.A. ought never be organized…" in response to which some attendee might call out, "…and we're not." Still, each weekly meeting generally follows a loosely organized set of customary routines that last sixty or ninety minutes. Most meetings write down the order of the meeting in an organizing document called the "format," usually kept in a folder with other documents, such as copies of readings, lists of phone numbers, order forms for literature, and other materials helpful in keeping the meeting series going.

Formats Organize Time

Meeting formats set up time-limited opportunities for members to speak and listen. A.A. members shape and perform existing A.A. repertoire within these speaking and listening opportunities. Because many A.A. members want to speak, meeting formats contain strategies

for assigning A.A. narrators to available narrating opportunities within a given meeting format. The narrating opportunities are shaped by narrating permissions that attach to each narrating opportunity. Thus, the format regulates narrating and listening opportunities.

Depending on the social roles of the participants, however, different kinds of narrating privileges arise as A.A. members negotiate narrating opportunities. Social roles can exist outside the meeting between participants who attend the meeting. Being selected to fulfill certain roles at the meeting itself, though, grants temporary social roles to participants. Members employ interpersonal narrating strategies that have to do with gaining or controlling access to narrating opportunities, though the format remains central to organizing social relationships of narrators and listeners and to organizing narrating itself at any one meeting.

Formats as Transmitted and Innovated Lore

One narrator quoted the common saying, "All you need to start a meeting is a resentment and a coffee pot." He went on to say that since there are over three thousand meetings in Los Angeles, there are over three thousand alcoholics with resentments. His comment was greeted by hearty laughter because it contains more than a grain of truth. Some A.A. members who regularly attend a particular meeting will develop interpersonal problems, often after a romance has ended. Other times, a few A.A. members decide that they would like to attend a meeting with a particular feature, such as the omission of Christian prayers and readings with Christian references. Meditation meetings, also called "Eleventh Step meetings" because Step Eleven recommends prayer and meditation, are rare; new ones have sprung up recently to meet the growing design. Sometimes an A.A. member starts a meeting in a location and at a time he or she needs to attend a weekly meeting.

When an A.A. member starts a meeting, he or she or a group draws up a format, or outline, of how the meeting unfolds. Often the member(s) have attended many meetings and know what customary meeting procedures are preferred. Another source of material when drawing up a format might be copies of or notes about formats other meetings use. As meetings proceed, suggestions for changes to the format to improve it or simply add to it arise from the attendees. Traditionally, A.A. meetings hold separate brief "business meetings" according to Robert's Rules of Order to arrive at consensual decisions about such matter. Most meetings in Los Angeles County remain blissfully unaware of this tradition and decisions are made by those interested enough to participate in the decision.

Meeting Names

The majority of meeting names describe key facts about the meeting itself, such as format (Book Study, Speaker/Participation, Meditation), location (Third and Bolton,) or audience specific details (Persian speaking, Gay Women's Eleventh Step, Women's Stag: Babies Are Welcome, Women's Writing. Formats: Discussion, participation, speaker, speaker/participation, book study, living sober, step study, Newcomers' Step Study, Beginners, Tag topic, meditation or 11th step, Candlelight (or, in Pasadena, Lavalight) Big Book Stories, Speaker Q&A. A look at some meeting names provides an opportunity to learn about A.A. repertoire items in use.

I have found it interesting in attending meetings over the years that, even after a meeting's form and customary procedures have drifted so far from those implied by the name as to be completely unrelated, groups keep names that no longer signify information about the meeting itself. In this, meeting names sometimes resemble street signs such a "Maple Drive" on

a street long since stripped of all green life and built up with wall-to-wall concrete and glass buildings.

Meeting Names as Displays of Repertoire

Architects of Adversity The Architects meetings in Los Angeles are infamous for being places for Alcoholics Anonymous members who want to "dump," that is, talk about difficulties, indulge in emotional outbursts, and display anger. Since newcomers are often still feeling the effects of substance abuse, this is a great place for them to find sympathetic support for their ups and downs, where participants are seen as the architects of their own adversity.

I learned about the meaning of this name as a group of us were waiting for a meeting room to open up across the street from a meeting site where several meetings a week use the title "Architects of Adversity." One old-timer suggested "We could always go across the street to the Architects' meeting and throw chairs at each other." This was a joke: the meeting we were waiting for was a Book Study group, a kind usually attended by more serious and settled meeting attendees. She rightly expected that others in the group would laugh at the idea of going to an Architects meeting. The old-timer who said this was referring to a legendary event at an Architects' meeting in which chairs were picked up and thrown through the air in a fight between attendees. She had been there when this happened. I remembered the event because she had told me about it the time. Although that event is more than fifteen years in the past, it is seemingly forever linked with the "Architects" moniker.

"Rule #62" refers to Alcoholics Anonymous oral tradition that says Rule #62 is: "Don't take yourself too seriously."

WANGL is an abbreviation for a saying invoked in A.A. narrating as a reminder, like Rule #62, not to take ourselves too seriously. The acronym represents the sentence "We are not a glum lot." At the meeting, a member reads that section of the book and the group says the key sentence in unison.

Other names refer to the history of the group. Sometimes a longstanding group will lose its location and move to a new spot. The newly convened meeting's name pays homage to the old meeting, as in "Spirit of Studio Twelve," "Aka Chinatown," and "Martel In Exile."

The "Martel In (sic) Exile" meeting had convened at its Martel Street location for some years when circumstances forced them to move. They changed their meeting name to reflect their exodus. Another meeting followed suit when they were relocated for a time while renovations could be done. The "In Exile" tag became part of the lore for meeting names whose locations have changed.

"Attitude Adjustment" as a meeting name refers to the same phrase used by some bars to name their happy hour. Most meetings using this name meet at the traditional happy hour, or first thing in the morning. Also, the initials for Attitude Adjustment are A.A. This usage of the phrase makes explicit the underlying belief that attendance at meetings will substitute for drinking behavior. "Happy Hour" as a meeting name points to the same thing.

"Marina Maintenance" refers to the "Marijuana Maintenance Plan," a name for the practice of remaining free of alcohol by smoking weed. "Marina Maintenance," a meeting in the Marina area, underscores the idea that a meeting is a substitute for drinking and using.

"Bikin' for Bill" is perhaps my favorite inventive meeting name. It meets at a local motorcycle shop.

Meetings are available in a variety of languages, as indicated by meeting names such as "Armenian Speaking," "Japanese," "Korean," "Russian," "Persian," "Spanish (El Milagro)," and "Hearing Impaired," which supplies sign language interpreters for speakers who do not sign.

Like "WANGL," the name "Happy, Joyous at 3" plays with a phrase from the Big Book (Happy, Joyous and Free), changing the phrase so as to include the time of the meeting.

"South Bay Trudgers" refers to an A.A. saying: "We trudge the road of happy destiny." "Trudging" is an A.A. term of art that refers to practicing an honorable, practical, grounded way of living that proceeds one day at a time.

"White Flag Book Study" refers to the Alcoholics Anonymous concept of surrender. To surrender is to stop fighting the world and everything in it.

"Tuesday AM (sic) Show Up" This echoes the theme of "just showing up," also known as "showing up for your own recovery," and "suit up and show up." The most important place to show up is at a meeting.

"Experience, Strength, and Hope" is a common phrase that characterizes what Alcoholics Anonymous members have to share with one another, especially in the context of being a speaker and narrating one's story.

"Dead Man Talking," "After School Special," "Monday Morning Kickoff" and "In by 5:30, Out by 6:15" draw phrases from popular culture to comment on beliefs (that one alcoholic talking to another saves both from death,) or characteristics of the meeting, such as time (after school, on Monday morning) or length (forty five minutes instead of the usual hour.)

The "Yet Untitled Meeting" and the "Whatever" meeting names wryly comment on the naming process.

"To Thine Ownself (sic) Be True" refers to a bit of material behavior among A.A members. Some carry bronze or silver medallions engraved with the number of years of sobriety on the face and the above quote on the reverse. Ironically, most A.A. members I have asked believe that Hamlet (as conflicted and self-destructive as any alcoholic in his cups) uttered that phrase, not the foolish Polonius.

"A.A. On The Nickel" meets downtown on Fifth Street, where many homeless alcoholics end up. In Los Angeles, being "on the nickel" is equivalent to being on "skid row," a term that originated in Seattle. Another meeting whose name comments on the location is "Santa Anita Winners' Circle."

"Grateful Camel" refers to the A.A. unofficial mascot. Emblems of camels appear on items of A.A. material culture, along with this bit of doggerel: "The camel each day goes twice to his knees / He picks up his load with the greatest of ease / He walks through the day with his head held high / and he stays for that day completely dry."

Building a resilient Map of Meetings

Somehow newcomers stumble through the doors of the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous. Over many years of hearing A.A. members narrating their stories of how they came in, I noticed that many of them mentioned that they had attended a few meetings, stopped attending, and then continued to drink. Within about a year, sometimes as long as two, these narrators returned to meetings and stayed (at least long enough for me to hear their stories.)

An aside here is relevant to demonstrate the usefulness of qualitative findings to those designing quantitative studies. This pattern of attendance does not seem to be well known to quantitative researchers. Research studies evaluating meeting attendance (Kissin, McLeod, and

McKay 2003, Gossop et al. 2003) measure attendance at start point, six months, and one year. At least for attendees in Los Angeles County, a three-year evaluation would reveal more reliable results.

Meeting Pathways Through the Years

Once that newcomer finds a first meeting, if he or she is lucky, a member suggests attendance at "ninety meetings in ninety days," a common oral formula, sometimes followed by "…and if you're not satisfied, we'll gladly refund your misery." This strategy works well in Los Angeles County, where over three thousand meetings a week are available. Newcomers are confused, lonely, scared, and usually drained of resources. A recently abstinent alcoholic is not likely to actually attend a meeting every day. If he or she attempts daily meetings over three months, attendance at three to five meetings a week is a likely outcome. This will suffice for a good start. The second benefit to this strategy is that in attempting to go to daily meetings, the newcomer is likely to attend a lot of different meetings. This allows the newcomer to experience the differences between meetings and increases the likelihood that he or she will find a meeting that feels welcoming and comfortable.

Further, visiting many different meetings exposes the newcomer to different kinds of meetings. Over time, what an A.A. member needs from a meeting changes. Early on, most newcomers prefer to be in meetings that provide the greatest number of opportunities for turn-by-turn sharing combined with the greatest number of opportunities for social connections. Finding these meetings often leads to the L.A. newcomer joining a circle of friends of like age, socio-economic background, and career direction, so that within a few months the new A.A. social network becomes strong enough to support the newcomer's social needs. This lessens the

likelihood that the newcomer will return to nightly visits to his or her dealer or favorite bar out of loneliness and the desire to have some social connections.

Another compelling reason for attending many meetings and many different meeting early on is the danger posed by meetings such as the Midtown Group in Washington D.C. (Summers 2007), where sexual predators and domineering personalities formed a perfect storm of intimidation and exploitation for a time. Meetings where human weakness disrupts the process of recovery and highjacks recovery, replacing it with exploitation, share a common characteristic. In my years of experience, the most important warning sign of a dangerous meeting is their message that theirs is the only meeting or group of meetings one should attend.

This message should not be confused with a single meeting attendee saying, "Oh, this is a great meeting. Some of us go to a book study on Fridays; that's another good meeting. Then there's a meditation on the beach I like where Amy – you met her, she was the speaker? – is the secretary. Those are my meetings. I don't much go anywhere else." Another message a newcomer might hear goes something like, "Oh, you went to that women's group? Do they still call the secretary of the meeting 'Madame Chair'? And do they still use a gavel? Yeah, that's not my kind of meeting. A.A. meetings aren't usually that strict. I tried it a few times and I stay away from it now. There's another one like it on Fridays. You might like it, but if you weren't fond of that first one, you probably won't be any happier at the Friday night one. There's a great meeting on Fridays on Fairfax, though, if you want me to write it down for you." These last two comments are normal A.A. meeting chatter, offered from the commenter's own experiences for the listener's evaluation.

The kind of message that signals a meeting or group best avoided is delivered at the group level. In the content of the format and in much of the narrating by many attendees, the group is described as the only chance the attendee has.

Once when my schedule changed for a six-month period, I searched out a meeting near my temporary work site. Attending this meeting would allow me to arrive early, get a good parking spot, walk to the one hour meeting, and be done in time to start work. Perfect. I attended three meetings, only to discover that this group has re-written the Big Book and privately prints and sells the changed version at its meetings. Attendees are required to purchase their book and have it with them at every meeting. The first day I attended, I had no cash with me (meetings do not take other forms of payment) so they found an old extra copy someone had abandoned and insisted that I take it. A.A. principles teach that an open mind is valuable to recovery, so I attended two more meetings before I realized that something was deeply wrong. At the end of the third meeting, an attractive young woman took me aside and pleaded with me to "join" the group (to commit to attending daily morning and evening meetings and follow a prescribed routine for daily activities). She seemed more than a little desperate. I declined. I was too busy to investigate further and found a regular A.A. meeting to attend. I wonder sometimes what drives the members of this insular little group to shut themselves off from the free-wheeling, messy, warm, dangerously dynamic and emergent circus of life that is A.A. in Los Angeles County. In that circus a plentiful supply of clowns roam at will, but beauty, feats of wonder and skill, and a great deal of fun are to be had in the company of eager, friendly participants.

In discussing narrating along the lines of "We're the only game in town," I must address similar narrating by A.A. members in mainstream A.A. meetings. Frequently a narrator will state that working the A.A. program is the only possibility for him or her. Some will go further and

admonish others that working an A.A. program is the only possibility for any alcoholic. This is patently NOT a tenet of the A.A. program.

The Big Book makes it clear that the A.A. program is designed for alcoholics for whom nothing else has worked. A.A. narrating refers to "alcoholics of our kind" as a way of marking off those who cannot get sober by any other means. The view many A.A. members hold is that if something else might work for an alcoholic, he or she should go try it. If it works, good for the now-sober alcoholic! On occasion, A.A. members inform each other that one has seen a former attendee who stopped working the A.A. program and is still sober and doing well. A.A. listeners often shake their heads in wonder; some can not imagine it. Sometimes doubt colors their voices and sometimes they shrug and say, "Well, good for him. I hope that keeps working for him. I'm staying in, though. This works for me."

So, as an A.A. newcomer might best avoid meetings or groups who harangue others with the direction that only attendance at one meeting or group will keep them sober, so, too, that newcomer might best avoid an A.A. member who insists that only the A.A. program will keep one sober. The only way to find out if the A.A. program will keep one sober is to try it. The only way to find out if other treatments will keep one sober is to try them. No one can, as yet, reliably and authoritatively predict what treatment might succeed for any one individual.

The views expressed above are those distilled from listening to many A.A. narrators over many years in many locations scattered through the United States and parts of Europe. I have tested these assertions with my own experience and found them to be reliable. They are not my views alone; rather, they sum up the consensus of by far the majority of the narrators and narrating I have listened to in my fieldwork and in my personal A.A. practice.

In sum, A.A. narrating events are workshops and the A.A. program is not an academy. Working an A.A. program is not an education; it is an experience. No A.A. member makes anything like simple linear progress. Meetings are diverse and offer many benefits in their variety. Because of the great number and many kinds of meetings in Los Angeles County, a recovering alcoholic need not live his or her life around recovery work. Building a resilient map of meetings offers the recovering alcoholic a feast of opportunities to fit A.A. narrating events into a workable human life.

Attending Meetings

Further detailed examination of meetings and fellowship events would launch the beginning of a entire new dissertation. Having described, in a general way, what meetings are like and for, and having detailed ways to find a meeting, I will now leave my readers at the door to decide whether to go in or not. The narrating practices I have detailed in the preceding chapters are embedded in the activity of meetings and take on new significance in that atmosphere. Those with an interest in A.A. meetings on behalf of their research and/or clients should seek out “open” meetings and be prepared to state your name and your purpose for visiting. You will be welcomed.

Chapter Eight: From Newcomer to Old-Timer

A.A. Recovery: The Old-Timer

As I did fieldwork in Alcoholics Anonymous in LA West, I became aware of a quality demonstrated in high levels almost exclusively by A.A. members called "old timers," the A.A. designation for those whose continuous A.A. practice totals or exceeds twenty years. This characteristic might be described by measures such as proficiency, fluency, and competence in repertoire, but is more than the sum of these. It encompasses knowledge of A.A. repertoire, a history of excellence in the performance of A.A. recovery activities, and demonstration of high-level (as assessed in A.A. narrating) behavioral skills for interaction among group members and of a congruent set of beliefs that support both folk group interaction and folklore production. It is a quality of being sanguine, wise, and tolerance, of having insight and compassion. In A.A. narrating, this characteristic is called "sobriety."

A Spiritual Solution

"Sobriety" describes the accomplishment and performance of a palpably different way of perceiving, considering, and reacting to the world. A.A. narrating explains that A.A. recovery is a "spiritual solution." The state of sobriety is depicted as the state of improved spiritual fitness necessary to adequately meet the demands of life without defaulting to drinking. The emphasis is not on "how not to drink," but rather on "how to live so that you don't drink." A.A. members say, for example, "Quitting drinking isn't hard. Every drunk I know has quit drinking many times. The reason I come around here is not to learn how to quit drinking. I come here to learn how live sober." The clearly stated goal of A.A. narrating is to create a net change in the A.A. member characterized as "sobriety," a condition for which abstinence marks a bare beginning.

Alcoholism: The Newcomer

An alcoholic arrives at the doors of A.A. meetings seeking relief from the painful consequences of alcoholism and commits to practicing the A.A. program for a number of years. Flash forward in time and observe the alcoholic, now an A.A. old-timer and you will see a changed human being. What has changed, how, and exactly where does the change take place? How does the newcomer become an old-timer?

When the alcoholic first came into the rooms of A.A., he or she shared something in common with other alcoholics that shaped the alcoholic's experience in ways that matter. That something was a history of drinking that A.A. members characterize as "drinking, drinking with consequences, drinking with problems, problems." After years of A.A. practice, the old-timer shares something in common with other A.A. members that shapes the old-timer's experience in ways that matter. That "something" is the set of personal resources made up of A.A. folklore and folk practice, as well as the ability to acquire and access to an unlimited supply of as-yet-untapped A.A. folklore and folk practice.

At the simplest level, the old-timer knows a lot more A.A. folklore than the newcomer alcoholic. This includes memorization of utterances; narrating forms; lore about A.A., alcoholism, the A.A. program, and other topics; and many instruction routines such as "how to find a meeting." Along the way, by showing up and participating in group activities, the A.A. practitioner has gained a place in a social network that provides consistent support

Further, the old-timer has gained competence in skilled behavior, such as how to narrate effectively within a variety of narrating opportunities; how to "use" the A.A. concept of spirituality and God to draw on a higher ability to maintain balance; how to listen and attend to others so as to dynamically shape an emergent identity as change accrues from A.A. practice;

how to listen with decreased judgment and increased empathy, thus developing active compassion; and how to use repertoire items to induce insight rather than employing instruction when working with others.

The meta-effect of these resources is that an old-timer has gained the ability to continue to acquire and produce more lore and to increase skills in A.A. folk repertoire and folk practice, thereby participating in a just-in-time delivery system for maintaining sobriety as both a supplier and a client. The meta-effect of the social network is that the A.A. program fosters an expectation of change in practitioners. A.A. members who change achieve new identities characterized and earned by displays of other-directed helping behavior, tolerance, compassion, and willingness to serve the common effort.

The constant opportunities to remodel and innovate A.A. folklore and folk practice show that this is a generative system, not limited by novel situations. There is no situation that is unanticipated by the A.A. knowledge and skill set. This stands in marked contrast to religious moral codes, which encounter unanticipated situations beyond the capacity of the code to solve. This is because A.A. folklore is a generative system, not a declarative system. A.A. lore and practice form a "how-to-do," not a "what-to-do" system.

Folk listening helps A.A. members assess practitioners and their folklore production. Folk listening attuned to similarities and commonalities provides a channel of identification that enhances learning. A.A. members self-select lore and practice and so get good at self-selecting and going back for more, making use of the efficiency of just-in-time delivery. Each individual assembles a set of folklore and folk practice into a way of living sober.

Thus, A.A. folklore and folk practice exemplify how a individual can develop personal resources of creative and expressive behavior that connect him or her to a group and a set of

knowledge and practice that support improved intimacy with others, re-integration into the world at large, accommodation of limitations, and personal growth over time.

Suggestions for Further Research: Neural Hypothesis

I have mentioned throughout this work the neuroscientific evidence for physiological mechanisms in the brain that might accompany A.A. practice and work to produce A.A. recovery outcomes. Reading neuroscientific journal articles and studying their findings along with studying A.A. practice *in situ* has led me to characterize the A.A. program as:

1) A network of folk groups that

2) produces folklore in many genres,

(3) the largest category of which is the performance of listening embedded in narrating,

4) the practice of which

5) over time results in

6) abstinence, sobriety, and serenity

7) by the mechanics of neural change.

The ability to learn, create, and use folklore originates within the body as electrochemical activity in the brain. As such, known principles of how the brain's electrochemical activity works in learning, memory, creativity (variance), and action (performance) are relevant to outcomes of change produced by folklore practice.

Learning of the "bullet points of recovery," the slogans and saying, creates a system of related and intersecting concepts which are often combined to produce certain meanings. Neural researchers have documented that the hippocampus is the site of learning similar material in a

spatial scaffold that supports navigation among the material. I suggest that the slogans and sayings might be stored in the hippocampus according to similar mechanisms.

Slogans and sayings are used and combined in critical moments to induce connections between individual experience and fundamental concepts of recovery, and connections between expressions of fundamental concepts of recovery. I suggest that each of these moments creates a change in the neural network in the brain of the listener. Neural research into the mechanisms of Cognitive Behavioral techniques might reveal a related mechanism underlying A.A. listeners' "Aha!" moments. I suggest that the connections made are likely to be connections between the slogans and sayings stored in the hippocampus.

A.A. listeners and narrators express a great deal of pleasure and work to create humor. Moments when narrating produces high-sight "Aha!" moments appear to be especially rewarding. I suggest that the reward felt at the moment of change drives all participants to seek more experiences like that and that investigating activation of the reward circuits during this kind of narrating would be fruitful. Further, I suggest that the reward of A.A. narrating might operate to relieve anxiety and low states of reward system production by stimulating the release of dopamine and related chemicals.

During the intense listening experience created by speakers relating life histories, listeners work hard to see similarities between the speaker's life and identity and each listener's life and identity. This kind of activity has been shown to occur in the mirror neurons. I suggest that investigators examine the mechanism by which speakers' pitches or stories can activate and improve function of mirror neurons in alcoholics and how increased empathy enhances recovery. Further, the intense emotions often stimulated during these story-listening experiences likely involve activity in the amygdala, which is known to enhance retention of memory during high-

emotion states. I suggest investigating how high-emotion states during story-listening enhances and strengthens averse responses to drinking rooted in memories of catastrophic outcomes.

I believe the cumulative change called sobriety in long-term practitioners is partly due to the cumulative change in neural networks throughout the brain, cumulative change produced over time by repetitions of novel variants folklore provides of lore- and skill-learning. Further, I point to the role of the immersive environment of A.A. narrating events as a stimulant for creating robust behaviors capable of responding to novel stimuli as an environmental variable that should be accounted for in experimental design.

A.A. folklore and folk practices enacted at A.A. narrating events within the social networks of A.A. members offer a plethora of opportunities to adopt and adapt styles of expressive behaviors, and unlimited chances to try again. A.A. members and traditional behaviors supply incremental rewards for even small gains. A.A. membership is granted at the first moment of identification, creating access to the social network of support.

In the A.A. social network, practitioners have the opportunity to experience communitas, compassion, and acceptance. With sufficient practice, especially of making the connection with something higher, moments of inner peace bloom. I believe these are the ultimate rewards for practice of the A.A. program.

I am grateful for learning from A.A. practice deep gratitude for the beauty and gifts of my life – most especially the amazing people in it – and for what I have learned from both my academic and my alcoholic friends and fellows. I wish you all the best as you trudge the road of happy destiny.

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