

[music]

**00:16 John S:** Hello, and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I'm your host, John S. Today we meet Chris R., originally from Saskatchewan, Canada. Chris has been living in Japan now for over 25 years, and today, he attends AA meetings at the Free Thinkers AA Group, in Tokyo. This was a fun conversation. You'll find Chris is smart, thoughtful, with a great sense of humor. I think you'll enjoy this episode very much. And without further adieu, Chris R.

**00:48 Chris R:** Originally actually, I'm from Canada.

**00:50 JS:** Oh, really?

**00:51 CR:** Yes. I started kind of drinking when I was in high school. I had a somewhat, religious upbringing, 'cause my father was a priest in the Anglican Church, in Canada. So, I did some drinking in high school, didn't get... Nothing too out of control, but of course I never really drank more than normally. And then, in 1985, I was an exchange student to Japan.

**01:23 JS:** Oh, really?

**01:24 CR:** Yeah. And I found out...

**01:25 JS:** Was that in college?

**01:26 CR:** Just before college.

**01:27 JS:** Oh, okay.

**01:28 CR:** Yeah, that was a high school exchange student. And I found out... Because Saskatchewan, or where I was living, actually the city I lived in, was originally founded as a temperance colony.

**01:42 JS:** Oh, wow.

**01:42 CR:** So, [chuckle] and a lot of that was still... These days in Canada, it's pretty wide open, in terms of drinking, but at that time, there was still a lot of hangover from this temperance movement. And so, you couldn't buy liquor. Until I got out of high school, you couldn't buy liquor on a Sunday, and no bars were open on Sunday. There are all kinds of restrictions. And so, I came to Japan, and they don't have any of that [chuckle] Liquor is everywhere, and most people... Because most Japanese people don't really have much... It's not that it doesn't exist. But the rate of alcoholism is much lower in Japan. And so, they don't have many restrictions on it. In fact, the thing that really just blew me away was they have beer vending machines. It's not as popular now, but that's only because there's 24-hour convenience stores that sell liquor all hours. So, it's not really so much practical but the first time I saw this 'beer vending machines', I was just like, "What?" I just couldn't believe it. So, obviously, I had to be in Japan.

**03:02 JS:** Yeah [laughter]

**03:03 CR:** Then, I came back to Japan on the JET program, the Japan Exchange and Teaching

program, and I, of course, drank quite a lot then. Still pretty in control. Now that I reflect on it, just ridiculous. [chuckle] It's ridiculous quantities. Of course, I didn't really... I think that's one of the reasons, I have to say, like "I'm alcoholic", because I didn't really ever think, "Well, this is totally crazy." There were times where things would get out of hand, right? And then, I'd think, "Well, this is kinda crazy." But for the most part, it just never occurred to me that... I remember the first time I took... They set up like a booth for responsible drinking. I was at the University of British Columbia at the time, studying Japanese, and I took it. Took this little quiz they had, it was self administered on a computer. And I was really shocked at the end of it, because it said like, "You have a severe problem with alcohol." [chuckle] It asked me my opinions about things, and I just like, "What?" It's like, I couldn't believe that. And so, I would say, actually, though, in my story, the first time I really had an inkling, was actually not so much from drinking, but from trying not to drink.

**04:34 JS:** Yeah.

**04:34 CR:** Because when I started law school, I was like, "Okay, well, now I did this partying, or whatever... " It's just kind of a stage, I guess, a lot of people I was around went through. And then I tried to stop completely, and I just started going downhill, mentally. I was having all these, anxiety attacks. I just felt really crappy. But then eventually, I started drinking again, and that all kinda went away. But because I was in school, that kinda disciplined me. I didn't drink every day. I would just go on binges, every now and again. Then after law school, I got the Monbusho scholarship, to study in Japan. I went to the Hokkaido University. Then things really kind of started to get out of control [chuckle] Because I didn't really have to apply myself, because compared to being in law school, the graduate school was kind of a joke. Most of the stuff... I would take courses where the materials were in English, but because everybody's Japanese, and so they've got to translate everything. It's like, instead of reading hundreds and hundreds of pages, it's like 20 pages. [chuckle] Something I would read it in a couple of hours, and that would be all the work for the semester. For the seminar, then you just gotta show up. And you don't even have to be awake, really.

[laughter]

**06:07 CR:** I slept through a lot of it. But yeah, anyway, then I graduated from... But still, I guess because, I guess 'cause it still hadn't built to the point where it was really a problem. And then, I kind of really reached a new point, when I was in... After 2001, after 9/11, in October. I just remembered, because this is how my mind was working at the time. Because somebody drove me... I went out drinking, and then, I got a cab with somebody. And I got dropped off at the right place, but then, I was blacked out. And so, the next day, I was in jail [chuckle], which was kind of like, "Wow", because that never happened to me before. So it was very shocking.

**07:02 CR:** But then, what I thought was, "Oh, well, this is because of your reaction to 9/11. [chuckle] You're very sensitive." Not that I had any real connection to 9/11, particularly. Like, I didn't even know a person who knew a person, kind of level. [chuckle] That was just my rationalization of it, and so I continued. And then, after awhile, you think, "Oh well, it's kind of a funny story", or whatever. But then, it became more common. And I remember, in the year that I quit drinking, which was 2005, on St. Patrick's Day, I ended up in the drunk tank, or whatever. It was kind of a relief, 'cause in Japan, you're in an individual cell. And so, I was just lying, then I got up, I go, "Oh, okay, this is jail." [chuckle] And I thought, "Good, cause they got all my stuff at the desk, and so, I don't need to worry about anything." And I just went back to sleep. And then, finally, they woke me up, but I... Yeah?

**08:10 JS:** So, culturally in Japan, and legally, how seriously do they take drinking offenses?

**08:18 CR:** Not seriously.

**08:19 JS:** Okay, alright. Not like in the US, or Canada?

**08:22 CR:** No. No. I mean, I kinda wonder... 'Cause in Canada, yeah, you gotta stand before the man [chuckle] when they charge for you public disorderly conduct, or public drunkenness, or whatever. In Japan, each time, it was just, like I would get a warning. They would say, "Don't come back." [chuckle] They don't generally, they like... Well, I mean, that's just the trend of their criminal system. They don't really, as much as possible, they don't prosecute crimes. So, yeah, I mean the one thing I knew though is... The one thing they like to do is get you fired. And so, I never had any, I never carried any name cards with me. And if they asked me if I had a job, I would say, "I'm unemployed." [chuckle]

**09:06 JS:** There you go. Okay. That's interesting.

**09:08 CR:** Yeah. Well, 'cause that works much more than just a fine, or whatever. 'Cause they tell your employer, and then you gotta straighten up. 'Cause it's kind of, more of a shame society, particularly if they fire you from your job.

**09:23 JS:** Oh yeah, which is what happened to me.

**09:25 CR:** Then you're supposed to straighten up. Well, actually, though, that's funny, 'cause I'm a lawyer and so, I was working for this law office as an editor. [chuckle] And then they picked me up. I had this argument with a taxi driver, kind of a Bill W thing.

**09:43 JS:** Right. It sounds like right out of the Big Book.

**09:46 CR:** Yeah. And then, so they took me to the police station. And I said, I was just really wasted, I said, "You guys don't know who I am." And I gave them my card, and I said, "You should call these guys. They're lawyers, they'll tell you. They'll set you straight." And then, when three lawyers show up, you get let out real quick [chuckle] But then I kind of realized, "Oh, wait a minute, these are the guys I work for. I kinda realized that... But I managed to get out of that. They're very lenient in Japan with these kind of things, as I say, 'cause it's not... I think the main reason is, it's a genetic thing, because about half of Japanese have what's called 'oriental flush.' I don't know if you've heard of that?"

**10:36 JS:** I've heard of that, yes.

**10:37 CR:** Right. So they can't properly metabolize alcohol. And so, it makes them very sick. So most people could never become, really... Some people, even with that, do have developed problems with alcohol. And, in their case, it's really bad for them, because the enzyme doesn't properly digest alcohol. But yeah, but most people couldn't do it. It's kind of surprising, because they don't allow any other competing drugs, but it's very obvious, from the way they use alcohol, that they understand it to be a drug. They're not like the Italian. They're not like have a few aperitifs, or whatever. Usually, if they drink, they do it to get intoxicated. And therefore, it's really against, it's

very bad... Considered to be really awful to be seen drinking during the day.

**11:33 CR:** You can't get off from work and have a few beers. You'd get fired. You can't go at lunch and down a few beers, or have a few pints, or whatever. You would get fired for that. Actually, yeah, and they fired a teacher for that, recently. So yeah, so anyway, they have quite a different... But, at the same time, it's ubiquitous. You'll never have any problems getting booze in Japan.

**12:00 JS:** Yeah, that's interesting. I never... I guess I never really thought of it as a drinking society. Although I guess I would think of them as drinking at dinners and stuff, Sake. I guess I thought of them as working all the time and drinking after work was my impression.

**12:16 CR:** Yeah, yeah, that's it, but when they drink, they drink to get drunk. So it's more like Scandinavians, that way. They don't think about drinking as... They're not like the French, they're not like Italians. There's not much... It's kind of changing 'cause of course now Japan's like really rapidly aging, but generally their idea for most people, drinking equals getting intoxicated to various degrees. Although, subsequently what I found interesting like most people when you quit drinking and then you find out so many people don't drink. Most people drink so little and in Japan it's a little tricky because to an extent it's kind of considered rude if you refuse drinking from people. I think that's kind of changing now so people do little tricks. They'll take a sip, or something or even pretend just to take a sip.

**13:21 CR:** If you're at a party you can't have an empty glass 'cause that's an invitation for somebody to fill your glass so... [laughter] But I've been kind of lucky, as I said, with my timing because I finally, after being arrested and being handcuffed and having my legs taped together [laughter], came to the conclusion that... The jumping-off point, kind of like... But I didn't quit drinking immediately. I just wavered in this area and then finally I had another blackout and I thought, "This is bullshit." And that's when I started going to AA in Japan, English-speaking AA.

**14:10 JS:** Okay. And is that pretty prevalent? Is it easy to find a meeting?

**14:12 CR:** In Tokyo, yes. They're on the internet and so... Subsequently the number of people has greatly decreased, but that's basically because there's not as many ex-pat people anymore 'cause of the... Two things. One, the Lehman... After the economy collapsed in 2008 a lot of financial people left. And then more people left again after the earthquake, in 2011 so compared to back then, the number of people going to meetings has dropped. And then also our fellowship is also very split now, because at the time when I started there wasn't a lot of... There was a few people doing the Back to Basics. The Big Book or whatever you wanna call it and then subsequently we had a person from the Pacific group come in.

**15:06 JS:** Oh, really?

**15:06 CR:** Yeah.

**15:07 JS:** For English speaking AA?

**15:10 CR:** English speaking.

**15:11 JS:** Okay.

**15:11 CR:** English speaking AA, but they're very involved in Japanese AA too.

**15:15 JS:** Okay.

**15:17 CR:** Yeah. Japanese AA is kind of curious because... So they have a competing Japan-based sobriety group called Danshukai and you hear a lot of different things. There's not good statistics on it. Sometimes I hear that this Danshukai is much larger than AA and sometimes I hear they're smaller than AA. I don't know. I've never really gone in to investigate it myself, but I would say basically AA in Japan doesn't really stand much of a chance at really expanding because it's dominated by Christians in a society which is not Christian at all [laughter] So yeah, the Japanese really they don't... All the meetings are in churches. It's funny 'cause one time this Pacific group person she was complaining. She goes, "Oh, all the Japanese people think you need to be a Christian to go." And I told them, "No, no. That's not the case." It's like maybe you would try to learn something from that. If that's what they're thinking, there might be a reason for that, but it's the same thing in typical mainstream AA where they're like, "Oh, no. We're not religious, not religious. Now let's pray."

**16:33 JS:** "Hold my hand as we say the Lord's prayer."

**16:35 CR:** Yeah, we're not... That's the one thing that that even the Pacific group people haven't been able to bring in is the Lord's prayer. We only use the serenity prayer at ours. Sometimes some of the other Big Book prayers, but nobody uses the Lord's prayer.

**16:56 JS:** Right, okay.

**16:58 CR:** It's just so obviously a Christian prayer.

**17:01 JS:** Sure, yeah.

**17:03 CR:** That's what surprised me when I heard about that debate in the United States. I was just like, "Are you serious?"

**17:08 JS:** Oh, man. Yeah. I'm in Missouri, and so 99% I would say of the meetings here close with the Lord's prayer. I'm in Kansas City which is a metropolitan area. They all say the Lord's prayer here.

[laughter]

**17:26 CR:** Well, that might be an interesting debate 50 years ago, but come on, this is 2016  
[laughter]

**17:34 JS:** It's crazy. It's kind of funny. I don't even bring it up. Although I think I'm gonna start. I'm gonna start being a bit more vocal about it. First of all, I don't go to the regular meetings anymore, but I think I might bring it up at our area assembly or something that, "Hey, can we stop saying this prayer?"

[laughter]

**17:48 CR:** Well, it's totally... If you can't see that that's completely opposite of the message that you're trying to say that you're not religious and you're not any specific religion. You're trying to say you're not part of any, sect or denomination, but come on.

**18:03 JS:** They recite something right out of New Testament. I know it's crazy.

**18:06 CR:** It's like... [laughter] And then what's the great story in the Big Book, we'll say it in Jewish.

[laughter]

**18:17 CR:** Do they have a Jewish guy, gives us a story and he'll say like, "I don't like to say the Lord's prayer." And it's just basically dismissed as well. You're just... He laughs at himself for being uptight [laughter]

**18:33 JS:** So, you're saying there was a split in the fellowship then in Japan, because of the Back to Basics people?

**18:40 CR:** Yeah, I would say now we're split into three groups. We have Back to Basic, and PG. PG even have their own meeting, and then we have milquetoast mainstream AA that probably... Well, they wouldn't be like mainstream from where you are [laughter] But if you were in New York or if you were in Los Angeles or someplace it would be mainstream. So, they have the Serenity Prayer, people tend not to talk about spirituality so much, but still it comes up, they're insistent on it. And then we have a Free Thinker meeting. We're a definite minority.

**19:38 JS:** When did you start the Free Thinkers meeting?

**19:40 CR:** Well, I didn't start it, but I started going to it. It started off very small, it was just me and this other woman, I think that was in 2010. And then because as I said the fellowship split, and so one of the mainstream meetings at a Catholic Ex-pat Church was gonna fold, and that was in 2012. And then we said, "Well, we'll take over." There's basically one person left, they said, "Fine, go ahead." And so that's when we came into our own. So, I think we've existed as a meeting, since 2010, but we've really come into our own as a meeting since 2012.

**20:30 JS:** So, what kind of meeting format do you use there?

**20:35 CR:** Well, I don't know where... Cause I wasn't involved in starting the meeting, so I don't know where they got it from. But it's kind of evolved overtime but one thing was, at first we said, "This is a secular meeting. There will be no prayers." But we've revised that subsequently. Now we say, "This is a secular meeting, there will be no group prayers."

**20:56 JS:** Oh. Okay, that's kind of good.

**20:57 CR:** Because I thought that was overbearing 'cause you could pray in your mind [laughter]

**21:01 JS:** Sure, you can't prevent someone...

**21:03 CR:** Thought police. You can commune with your higher power all you want. Just that we're not going to join you.

**21:12 JS:** There you go.

**21:13 CR:** That's the whole Christian thing. They tell you, "Jesus said."

**21:18 JS:** You pray quietly in your closet.

**21:19 CR:** Go pray in a closet, yeah. So, I don't know why they always need... [laughter]

**21:25 JS:** We started our meeting that way. We were afraid when we started our meeting that... We didn't want people to start coming there and expect to pray, or make us start praying. [laughter] So, we were really clear, we did the Agnostic Preamble to let people know and I think we even added in there, "We do not pray." Just simply 'cause we were afraid that people were gonna turn us into... Try to change our meeting, but that never did happen.

**21:47 CR:** Yeah. Well, actually in the early days we had to struggle to control our own meeting.

**21:52 JS:** Really?

**21:52 CR:** 'Cause people would come in and they'd go, "No, this is not how AA is done." [laughter]

**21:56 JS:** Okay, great. See, that's how I was afraid it was gonna happen here. And fortunately it didn't happen.

**22:00 CR:** Yeah, fortunately because I guess the other people are focused, 'cause I've heard people come in and they take over meetings. But no one's tried to take over our meeting, and I think the nature of it changed maybe around 2014. About then, we actually... The bulk of the people going there were non-believers. And we've never been able to get... It's ostensibly a bilingual meeting. We've never been able to get Japanese people to come consistently. They show up and they come for a bit. And we had people come, on and off, but the thing with the Japanese people is, because they are used to the idea of religion as just a cultural thing. And so they don't really care one way or the other. And it's probably very frustrating to the true believers because Japanese people are often willing to give lip service to something basically to fit in. But when push comes to shove, then they go like, "Well, actually we don't believe it." It's very frustrating for the Christian Missionaries here. The people are... Basically, it's rude to say no, instead of saying, "I accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior."

**23:33 JS:** Just to be polite.

**23:35 CR:** Yeah, it happens, it happens. But then eventually they have to say, "Look. Actually..."

**23:43 JS:** "I don't believe that."

**23:45 CR:** "I don't really believe in it, I just like your choir."

[laughter]

**23:50 JS:** So, they don't have...

**23:51 CR:** I'm here to practice my English.

**23:52 JS:** So, they don't really feel like the need for a secular meeting, then. So, are they just as comfortable at a regular AA meeting as they would be at a...

**24:00 CR:** I don't know because as I said, it's just been all the energy we could take just to keep ourselves together, and much less try to change Japanese AA. But for the most part, it tends to be dominated by Christians, but mostly I think there's a split now because they've started to have Back to Basic meetings in Japanese, and because a lot of Pacific-group people were brought into the Pacific group in Los Angeles, a lot of Japanese people who were there. And they're trying to bring that over to Japan now. But primarily, for the most part, they don't really use literature. I've only been to but a few Japanese meetings, my first sponsor was a Big-Book thumper, and he started a Big Book based Japanese meeting. But it was still soft compared to other ones. In my first year of recovery I decided to become a believer. Basically... [laughter] I was in a very unstable mental state, particularly in the first weeks. And I had all these things that I thought were religious experiences. In reflection, no I don't think that anymore. And also I just really wanted to fit in and basically, being either soft or being an atheist, you don't fit in, you can't. You can't fit in the normal group.

**25:46 JS:** I was the same way actually, I wasn't religious at all, but when I got to AA it didn't take me long to start praying and talking about God.

**25:54 CR:** Well it's all so easy to do because I think it allows people... The one thing that's always attracted me... Because I was in Toronto in 2014, and so that's when I really became hardcore, 'cause I went to the Beyond Belief meetings in Toronto. And I met Roger C and Joe C. So that was... Yeah, because before that we didn't really have... I think when I came back, I think we had a lot better direction. 'Cause before that we actually did spend a lot of the time, we would spend a lot of time talking about trashing religion, and religious AA. Which I think we needed to do, but that was a phase that we went through.

**26:48 JS:** Isn't that interesting? Every single group, I think, goes through that.

**26:52 CR:** Yeah, 'cause it's so overbearing.

**26:55 JS:** Yeah it is. You have to get it out of your system.

**26:58 CR:** One of the funniest things that happened was one time, so I brought these alternative steps, I'd printed them out and I copied them down from the AA agnostic site from somewhere. And I printed them out and then brought them and then we were very careful not to talk about the steps because that's how the Toronto groups all got de-listed. We can't really afford to be de-listed 'cause it would be very hard for us to function otherwise. We rely on visitors [chuckle]

**27:30 JS:** You guys do have a website though, you guys have your own website?

**27:36 CR:** Yes we do. It doesn't really get a lot of traffic. So this woman who was very enamored with the Twelve and Twelve and then she told us... But one thing I didn't like about it... Cause it



wasn't gender neutral, so I just went into my computer and then I made a gender neutral version of the 12 and 12.

**27:57 JS:** Oh cool.

**27:58 CR:** Which is kind of funny. But then so we had these alternative steps that I'd printed up, and she says, "Oh, you can't have that here." "What are you talking about?" She goes, "That's not conference approved literature, I don't think you're really allowed to keep it." And then we said, "Well we made a group conscience to have this, and so we're gonna..." It was so funny because her whole thing was, "Oh I love AA because you're free to do whatever you want." And then it's like, "You can't have that here." [laughter] It's like censorship, "Oh okay. You're free to do whatever you want, within a certain confine."

**28:36 JS:** Right. And that's such a misunderstanding, too. In AA, you can read whatever you want to, you really can. There's people around here that also think you can't read non conference-approved literature. That's completely false.

**28:50 CR:** Well we don't wanna get into the debate. And also, not only are we a Free Thinker meeting, but we're the last main prime time, or whatever, topic discussion... Actually, we are the last true topic discussion meeting in Tokyo. So that's another reason we don't use literature, 'cause, personally I believe that the topic discussion meetings are very valuable. People give up on it because it takes energy. "Oh just give us the topic, we don't care if it's taken from Daily Reflections." Which is so super religious.

**29:32 JS:** Yeah, it's ridiculous.

**29:33 CR:** It was funny, I tried to start a morning meeting using Joe C's book, and then it just wasn't taking off and I just thought, "Well, it's not gonna work out." And so I gave up on it after about two months. And then as soon as I gave up on it and stopped going, they went to Daily Reflections.

**29:52 JS:** Oh no.

**29:53 CR:** It's just like, how ironic. What they said is they didn't like Joe C's books 'cause it demanded too much thinking.

**30:03 JS:** Yeah, we like his book but we sometimes laugh because we do have to think a lot when we read his stuff.

**30:12 CR:** Well I think as a reader, it's good. But for a meeting, it doesn't work because it doesn't compete with what we're used to. I think that's the main thing, is people are used to the Daily Reflections where they just throw out a few ideas, primarily they're all religious.

**30:30 JS:** Exactly, exactly.

**30:32 CR:** Particularly, if you... So in February, it's all second step stuff.

**30:37 JS:** Yeah, that used to drive me crazy. You'd have to sit through an entire month of one

particular step or whatever.

**30:42 CR:** Yeah, so we're... And it's funny because a couple of times, we have atheists who've come from other places and they're like, "We love the Big Book." And I'm just like... There is some good stuff in there obviously. My take on it, over time, it's just become well, it's just too... You can't separate it out. I don't think you can use it, discreetly. I was surprised in Toronto because they always were reading the... What is it, the spirituality thing.

**31:14 JS:** Spiritual Experience, yeah.

**31:15 CR:** The spiritual Experience. And I just don't even wanna set up the Big Book as any kind of authority. And I've even departed more radically, and this is another thing, because we don't really want to, in our group, we kinda decided that we just let people pick their own kind of recovery. And so we don't say, "Do the steps," we're like "Work the steps." It sounds like it's very horrible-sounding. [chuckle]

**31:47 JS:** I agree.

**31:48 CR:** It sounds horrible. It's like putting the work on the... Anyway, just as a person who loves the English language, I've got to...

**31:58 JS:** It's actually, very freeing to have a meeting without reading from something because after a while, if you just have these readings, they get repetitive, after a while. I went to a meeting once in New York where all they did is, they had someone talk for like 10 or 15 minutes then everybody went around the room, and the meeting was all based upon what that person had to share. I really like that meeting. I thought, "That's really cool" And I thought if I were to do something maybe, in Kansas city to do something like that someday, they don't read from any book or anything.

**32:30 CR:** Yeah, that's what really... When I went to the first Beyond Belief meeting in Toronto, the experience just really blew me away because somebody put out the topic, "Can you take responsibility for your own recovery? Can you say that 'I recovered based on my own resources' kind of thing?" And that just blew me away. And then Roger C. Shared and he said, "What you have to understand is that this program was created by these people who thought that God is everything and people are nothing." And then I was like, wow! [laughter] It's like being in an alternative world. It's very powerful. If you can go to a meeting where... There, there's like 40... There are 30 to 40 people, and they're all non-believers of varying stripes. We had this one person who would say she's a believer and then she said, but she thought Believer AA was bad.

**33:31 JS:** Right, that's funny.

**33:33 CR:** Well, no, we have that actually in Tokyo. We have a believer who comes to our meeting and says it's the best meeting.

**33:40 JS:** Yeah, we did too for a little while. We had some believers come, but one of them got a little ticked off and didn't come anymore because we were going through a phase, where we had some people come in who were upset with the traditional AA and they were just venting a lot. And so, it scared some people away, I think.

**34:03 CR:** Yeah, we've had that experience too, but I think now, what people appreciated about it is, we're very non-judgmental, because we don't have any... Basically, it's because we developed it this way where we don't have a fixed idea of recovery other than not drinking.

**34:22 JS:** Right, right. Just something.

**34:23 CR:** Just something basic that you could confer. I think that's the other thing I don't like about it, because with the AA... It was good that I started with the Big-Book thumper, because he was like, "Take action, do stuff." And, belief isn't action [chuckle]

**34:42 JS:** No, I agree with that 100%.

**34:44 CR:** Belief isn't any kind of action and basically, people giving you kudos for saying, "Okay, I believe," It shouldn't really 'cause like... I had a sponsee, and then he was saying all this stuff to me about, "Oh Chris, I became an atheist." I don't really care, actually. [chuckle] I don't really... I'm not out to try to bring people around to my viewpoint. I just hope people recover. Though recently I had a really heavy experience 'cause I did a podcast interview for a secular podcast called, Secular Sexuality. And the guy who runs it, Dr. Darrel Ray, he totally blew me away 'cause he said, "I can't believe you're involved in AA 'cause AA is horrible." I was like, "What?" These guys, they're totally unredeemable, but I'm trying to do atheist that says it doesn't matter. It'll never work.

**35:46 JS:** Isn't that something, yeah.

**35:47 CR:** Woah, I didn't realize there's that hostility. I don't know if that's... Is that widespread? 'Cause I'm in Japan...

**35:53 JS:** I think so.

**35:54 CR:** Yeah, with secular community which is... That gives me pause, because the religious community gives huge support to AA, generally.

**36:04 JS:** Yeah it's really interesting. I've never really been involved with the atheist movement, or atheist community overall. But one time I went to an atheist convention, I guess, in Omaha, Nebraska. It was kind of funny. Neil deGrasse Tyson was there, and he gave a really wonderful talk and everything. And afterwards, he was up there and you could go get his autograph. And anyway, so I was up there all happy, hanging around some people, waiting in line to get Neil deGrasse Tyson's autograph and everything. And people were drinking cocktails. And they were just having a great old time. And for whatever reason, I decided to tell all these people that were sitting their drinking their cocktails, these atheists thugs, at this atheist convention that I was in AA.

[laughter]

**36:50 CR:** Well I mean... It's...

**36:52 JS:** It was like... It was like I ruined their little cocktail hour I guess. I didn't mean to do that. And then they looked at me like I may as well have told them I was a southern Baptist or something. I was like so out of place. And they were just like they couldn't believe it. I said, "Yeah but, well it's agnostic AA and everything." And yeah, they thought, "No, AA is horrible, it's a

religion." And they wouldn't even open their mind to the idea that we were doing something different, that we were trying to have a secular support of each other within Alcoholics Anonymous, but they just couldn't get it.

**37:24 CR:** Yeah. Well it kind of became obvious 'cause I had a couple of email exchange with them. In that they don't really understand, and I think this is typical. 'Cause if you ever watch a movie where there's AA in it, they impose a structure which doesn't exist right? They have some guru guy...

**37:40 JS:** Right. Exactly. [laughter]

**37:42 CR:** John...

[laughter]

**37:44 CR:** "John how did that make you feel?" Kind of thing which doesn't... Because it doesn't make sense because we're so... It's so lacking in organization. They think there must be this huge top-down thing. And I kinda tried to say, "We run our meeting there's no God in it." I mean, as I always say, "Well you can talk about God if you want, but don't expect anybody to applaud."

**38:09 JS:** Yeah. There you go.

**38:11 CR:** I mean I'm not, I'm not against people, if you wanna come in if that's your thing. We've had a few people, one person told me... That I was gonna drink. I was in danger of drinking. [chuckle] It was quite, it was quite, I don't think he quite got that we're like an atheist... I thought he was just thinking I'm much like a random atheist.

**38:35 JS:** Right. Right. [laughter] He doesn't understand he's in a room full of them.

**38:39 CR:** Yeah, I don't think he quite... Well, actually, that was still in the day when we were kind of struggling. And now that's the good thing is we... It occasionally comes up and I've been able to see like everybody's... Of course they approach it in different ways, but they're all... That's why I use the term 'non-believer'. They're not, they're not basing it out... The other thing is I've been trying to... One thing I've moved away from is, I no longer talk about having a higher power. 'Cause for a while I was saying my higher power is reality. [laughter] Which is good 'cause you're not gonna mess with reality. [laughter]

**39:22 JS:** Right there you go, yeah.

**39:24 CR:** That's kind of the thing is basically... It's a rigged game right? And so I just don't wanna get involved in that. 'Cause in the Twelve and Twelve where they say, "Well, you can start off with your group as a higher power". Right. But that's not... But then you become God and so... So it's the equivocation, right? They're using it in... Well, the fact that you can get support from a group. There's nothing supernatural about it at all.

**39:55 JS:** Right. Exactly.

**39:56 CR:** [laughter] That's just very... That was the funny thing about this Dr. Darrel Ray, is he's

got his own group which... Recovery from Religion.

**40:06 JS:** Oh I've heard of it yeah.

**40:08 CR:** Yeah but they do, basically they do kind of an AA thing. [chuckle] 'Cause he was very hostile. As soon as I... "Well, if you're gonna talk anything about AA, you're gonna have to back it up with statistics."

**40:19 JS:** Oh great. Yeah.

**40:20 CR:** And I go, well I was thinking like...

**40:22 JS:** We don't keep statistics. [laughter]

**40:25 CR:** Do you demand the same thing about your group? It's just a... I don't know, 'cause the other thing was, I could figure out is with these secular people that are so hostile is that they can't separate out that AA is not the Twelve Steps.

**40:41 JS:** Exactly.

**40:42 CR:** It is not actually a step program. Although it's become to be defined that way. And I guess you know de facto, yeah it is, 'cause most groups if I shared like I'm sharing, I would normally, well now I do. [chuckle] Now I do go to normal AA and just... I just lay it on the line because... I kinda changed my opinion on that 'cause I used to be like, 'cause it says in the big book, "We avoid argument and retaliation. We wouldn't treat sick people that way." [laughter]

**41:16 JS:** Right. Exactly. Right.

**41:21 CR:** But now, kind of... Cause as I hear from other people, is basically... 'Cause there's so many people who may be... Well I mean, I guess the first point is to say that we're here. It's kind of like the homosexual community and what they went through. 'Cause you hear a lot about that and of course in the secular movement. And I think that's important to say like, "No, we actually exist. We're here." [chuckle] 'Cause I heard one person share at a meeting, they said, "Yeah these agnostics or atheists, they recover, but basically they're very sad people and they usually kill themselves."

**41:55 JS:** Exactly. I used to have a sponsor used to tell me that.

**41:58 CR:** What? [laughter] I would say, my recovery really took a more solid grounding after I went to Toronto, and I became very active in Agnostic AA. 'Cause I think... Well one, I became more forgiving of myself because this is another thing I guess a lot of people had become secular, and the religious people kind of ridicule us 'cause it's like "Well, you don't believe in God. What more is there to talk about, right?" Yourselves and like, "What do you guys do?" We used to talk about, "Well, yeah, that's totally right." Because a lot of my thinking... Cause I was raised religiously, and so it's hard to break away from it easily. But I think that was one step. So I think I became much more comfortable with myself and the way I'm living, and my choices.

**43:03 JS:** Yeah. I had the same experience.

**43:05 CR:** And also... I don't have any doubts. The one thing I always found very strange about being in AA, and I think something chemically, changed in my mind or I don't have any reason for it. But I almost never experience any anxiety. It's very strange. I think... I'm not sure 'cause I think the main thing was because I had this fear of being an alcoholic, which is now I got... It's the most cockamamie fear. And then I had a fear like I was gonna go to hell. One of the things that I found really interesting was... Sometimes I give this in my share, which in 2011, March 11th in Japan, there's a massive earthquake, that I was in. And when it really got to quaking, the thought came to me, I was like, "I could die right here and now." And I found that it didn't really bother me. Of course, I don't wanna die, but I think I was able to reflect on... The main thing that I could figure out was, because I stopped drinking, and then I started to do the things that I wanted to do or I thought about doing, and because I'm living my life in that way, I think I'm much more comfortable with death. And then also because... As I say, because I was raised religiously, but now I realize I'm just gonna stop. I'm just not gonna exist. It's not a comforting thought.

**44:56 JS:** No.

**44:56 CR:** But on the other hand, there's nothing really to worry about.

**45:00 JS:** Isn't it interesting though, because I had the same thing? Although I wasn't raised religious, I still had that concept of hell. And then the whole idea of thinking about my non-existence was really freaky. But with me, it was like I got really interested in science, and particularly with, cosmology, and so I don't know. I just kind of liked being part of the universe, and I know the universe is some day... Everything and the Sun and all the stars are gonna burn out, and it's just the way things are. And I'm just part of nature, and I can accept that. So I'm okay with it actually.

**45:32 CR:** Yeah. So yeah, it's... Yeah, and also, accompanying my... Except it was kind of funny, because I can kind of remember the moment that I finally went back to being an atheist. I have to say when I was drinking, I was not a very good atheist in the sense that basically, it was just all reaction. It was like, "I reject this." But there's nothing... I didn't try to find anything positive. I was watching, on YouTube... I just finished watching Jonathan Miller's the History of Disbelief.

**46:17 CR:** And then I thought, "Oh." 'Cause I was kind of tweaking it, and saying, "Well yeah, okay I got a concept." Not likely. But there's something out there or ultimate... Paul Tillich Ultimate Concern in whatever, try to fudge it. And then I just realized, "No." [laughter] And I didn't really come out with it in the AA meetings until a good couple of years later. But I mean, that's also a positive experience because... Well actually, I've been very surprised because a lot of people are very accepting of it. And that kind of surprised me.

**47:06 JS:** By the way, I had a hard time with it. I was like that, too. I think that was very slow coming out as an atheist in my home group. I went to that group for 25 years as the guy who quoted the Big Book all the time. And they weren't real happy. They weren't real accepting of me. They kept trying to get me to start talking the way I used to talk. And it was kind of sad, really. But I never really openly said, "I'm an atheist." And what happened, I left the group and helped start this Agnostic group. And I was gone for a year, and I never heard from a single person. So I went back and I just wanted to let them know why I don't go to their meetings anymore. And I told them, "I just don't believe in God. I wasn't comfortable here with the way you guys are talking. And so I

started this Agnostic group. Y'all can come over and see us some time." Well, some people were pretty nice about it. But, a lot of people started talking about how only God can save us and sometime there's gonna be a time and place when no human power can save us and all this kind of stuff. And then...

**48:11 CR:** Well, we'll just see. Won't we?

[laughter]

**48:13 JS:** Yeah. And then they close with the Lord's prayer, as they always do, and I was really nice. I stood up and I just stared straight ahead, but one guy just stared at me, like a really mean, menacing stare, and I couldn't believe it. But that was after 25 years of going to meetings at that group. And that's how they treated me because I didn't believe like they did.

**48:36 CR:** Wow [laughter]

**48:37 JS:** So much for that [laughter]

**48:39 CR:** I didn't... I didn't really... 'Cause the nice thing about being in Tokyo, 'cause we're such a small group, is usually every year we have a main speaker meeting on Sunday night and so usually every year if you're a sober person, then you would give your talk. Right? And I think I decided from last year, I came out, and I was just very open about it. Because previously, I would mostly only talk about my drinking story. I didn't really talk much about my recovery because I didn't feel comfortable, because it didn't fit in with what you're supposed to be doing, right? And I was very surprised that people were very accepting. And then last time I got even more out [laughter] And so I don't really go to so many regular meetings any more but, yeah, usually when I do, I'm out, and it's interesting. I can see also... I feel like sometimes I'm planting a seed because... So when people get really disturbed, it doesn't bother me, because I know that that's the start of the process, right? Not that I'm trying to convert anybody but...

**50:09 JS:** Right. But it is good to get out there just to let people know that, yeah, "You really don't have to believe in God. You can be sober and it's not a big deal." There's a lot of new people that need to hear that, I think.

**50:22 CR:** Well, I just remember... 'Cause from the AA Agnostic site, there's a connection where all the agnostic and atheist meetings are listed. I just remember... I think it was in 2014 or 2015 or early 2015, I can't quite remember, but I looked on it and there was... On AA Agnostic that was like... "Now we have over 200 meetings or something like that." It just blew me away and I just shared that at the group. I said, "We're not alone."

**51:02 JS:** No, and now we have over 300.

**51:04 CR:** Yeah. Yeah. It's quite amazing. I'm really looking forward the next time I get to go to the US, and it's funny. The other good thing about this meeting in Tokyo is... So locally, we've only got a consistent membership of about five or 10 people of various... Ranging from, "There could be a higher power but I really don't care." Or "I'm kind of indifferent, or Buddhist or whatever" We always tract the Buddhists, they love us [laughter] Anyway... But we get lots of visitors and for a lot of people it's their first exposure. And in the past, it was often very negative, as I said, a lot of

people would say like, "Well, I don't know if I like this."

**51:55 JS:** That's what Shawn says in Paris, too. Same thing. He gets there and visitors come in and they don't know they're getting a Free Thinker meeting and sometimes they don't like it.

**52:02 CR:** Yeah, some... But that's more unusual. I think, well, maybe... Well, also because we pick the name 'Free Thinker' which people don't really understand but I think now probably more people are understanding that we're atheist or agnostic. And then that... I think also because... I think 'cause most people are coming from the United States and so society is rapidly changing there. Yeah, a lot of people were like... I remember we had this one guy came for several meetings and he goes, "I have to say, I didn't really know what you guys were talking about, but now I get it and I'm going back to California and I'm going to try to go to the atheist or agnostic meetings there."

**52:45 JS:** Oh, cool.

**52:46 CR:** So, yeah, I feel optimistic even despite this kind of... I didn't realize the degree of hostility within the secular community. I can kind of understand it because they're right, to an extent, but they don't quite understand how...

**53:06 JS:** They don't. It'd be interesting to reach out to them a little bit just to try to educate them a little bit more. We have a huge secular organization here in Kansas City that I have often thought...

**53:18 CR:** Oh, yeah. The Kansas City Free Thinkers?

**53:20 JS:** Well, the Kansas City... It's called Oasis, and it's a secular... It's like a church for atheists, basically. They have a fellowship and they meet every Sunday and they have speakers and stuff. And I've often thought about reaching out to them just to educate them about Agnostic AA. And they're aware of us now because we had some of them come to our meeting; some of them that were wanting to get some help with drinking and they found out about our agnostic meetings and they came to some, but I don't know. I'd like to...

**53:53 CR:** Yeah, we've gotten a few people from... 'Cause I'm involved in a skeptics group, here in Tokyo. And we've had a few people come from the skeptics group, but yeah, it's unfortunate that... And they're not wrong, so I can't... But there's just this image that basically it's a very kind of religious...

**54:22 JS:** Yeah, and a lot of the language that we use even in our secular meetings, the words like if you hear the words, Higher Power, powerless, unmanageable, just all kinds of language that we use that people think... And even all, everything we do... When we introduce ourselves, "My name is so and so, I'm an alcoholic." We have a lot of customs and habits and that's just kind of a little freaky to someone if they're a Free Thinker or if they're weary about cult behavior, or whatever. I don't think we're a cult but we act kind of like one sometimes.

**54:55 CR:** Right. Well that's... Those are kind of very deeply fundamental things but I think, there, once again, there's an understanding 'cause they think if you're identifying yourself as an alcoholic that you think of yourself then as a broken person. I think that's their misunderstanding of it. For me it's kind of more of an empowerment. I see it like, "Yes, that's part of my experience but it's something that I built strength from." I think that's what they miss out on.



**55:29 JS:** Yep. I agree with that.

**55:30 CR:** Wow. We covered a lot ground.

**55:32 JS:** Yeah. We did cover a lot of territory. This is gonna be an interesting podcast, I think, for people to listen to and I thank you very much, Chris for doing this. It was so nice to talk to you and I'm gonna mention to Joe and Roger that I talked to you. I didn't know that you got to meet them. That's so cool.

**55:48 CR:** Yes. Yes...

**55:49 JS:** Roger's actually gonna be in Kansas City, August the 6th.

**55:55 CR:** Yeah. I don't know if he'll remember me, but yeah, I'm in regular contact with Joe C.

**56:00 JS:** Cool.

**56:01 CR:** Yeah. Okay. Well you have a good rest of the night or whatever it is in Kansas.

**56:06 JS:** You too. Well that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief the Podcast. I hope you enjoyed the program. We'll be back again real soon with another interesting guest and until then you be well and take care.

[music]