

## WAAFT's Relationship with Traditional AA

By John S.

The entirety of Alcoholics Anonymous, secular or otherwise is bound together by AA's three legacies: Recovery, Unity and Service. So, I think it's appropriate to discuss our relationship with "traditional AA" within the context of each legacy.

### Recovery

There's a great deal of diversity among secular AAs. There are freethinkers who form their own opinions based on evidence, there are atheists who have no belief in a god, militant atheists who have no belief in a god and feel an obligation to speak out against religion, and there are agnostics for whom the existence of a deity cannot be known. The diversity among us is so great that even these definitions are inadequate to explain who we are. Our experiences and understanding of recovery in AA also vary. There are those of us who practice AA's Twelve Steps and those who don't. There are those for whom a spiritual experience is essential, and others who prefer a more practical approach.

This diversity of experience is not unique to us agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. The recovery experiences of **all** AA members vary from one to the next. The only requirement for membership in Alcoholics Anonymous is a desire to stop drinking. The individual AA member has total freedom to experience and express his or her recovery in any way they so choose. We should celebrate our differences, and encourage and support each other in our desire to stop drinking. Recovery for ourselves and for the suffering alcoholic who is seeking help in AA, should always be at the forefront of our thoughts and actions.

Secular AA members have and will continue to form special purpose AA groups for agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. These groups are totally autonomous and are free to present Alcoholics Anonymous to the newcomer in whatever manner they so choose. Individual AA groups, governed by the collective conscience of its membership may decide on any format for their meeting, they may read any literature they choose, and they have a right to present versions of the 12 Steps that are more compatible with a secular world view. No other AA group has a right to pass judgement on any other group regarding how it chooses to carry the AA message to the newcomer.

Now I understand it is controversial even among our secular AA community to consider altering the Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous, but this should not be controversial at all. What must be understood is that **we** are Alcoholics Anonymous, and **we** inherited the Twelve Steps, they belong to **us**, and **we** have the freedom as individuals and as groups to interpret and express the steps in whatever manner we so choose, and in my opinion, this only serves to broaden the appeal of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is a reasonable accommodation for secular people, as well as those who have been harmed by religion. The nonbeliever who has been sober in AA for many years has a lot of practice interpreting the steps, but this is not the case with the newcomer who may not believe in a god and doesn't wish to be converted. Most of these people see the 12 Steps hanging on the wall, dripping with God, and walk away from AA, never to return. Secular AA groups reach out to these alcoholics and provide them with a viable option. Having secular versions of the Twelve Steps available, makes it easier to reach and help these alcoholics.

Never-the-less, there are some in traditional AA who say that an agnostic AA group that interprets the Steps into secular language is in effect changing the Steps, and that the group has no right to do this and

still consider itself AA. The traditionalist will often tell the agnostic group to go start their own recovery organization. These groups are sometimes punished by being removed from an Intergroup's meeting directory.

This can be a real obstacle between us and traditional AA. No AA group has the right to insist that another group conform, and we in the secular AA movement should always defend the complete freedom of individual AA members and individual AA groups to practice the AA program in whatever way they choose, free from harassment or judgement from other AA members and groups.

Recovery must always come first, and all of us in AA should support removing as many barriers to recovery as possible. We have much more in common with "traditional AA" than not. The actions, the things we do and the resulting experiences are essentially the same, it's just that we use different words to describe what is happening.

I believe any philosophical differences we have with traditional AA can be addressed through the legacies of Unity and Service.

## Unity

I agree with the overwhelming experience of AA that our survival as a Fellowship and as individuals depends upon AA unity. This doesn't mean we fall in line, but it does mean that we exercise our responsibility as a minority within AA to have our opinion heard. AA is not a tyranny of the majority, unless we allow that to happen. Unity means that we participate fully in General Service, that we fight hard for what we want, but at the end of the day, we respect the collective group conscience.

I fought for something that I presented at my Area Assembly, and although I lost the vote, the voice of my group was heard and respected, and I was given the opportunity to speak again should I have something to say that might change someone's vote. I strongly disagreed with the Assembly, and the things that were said during the discussion. However, I accepted the outcome and I still love and respect the Assembly. I know that everyone was doing what they thought was best for the Western Area of Missouri and AA.

The We Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers International AA Convention (WAAFT IAAC) can play an important role in promoting unity both within our secular AA community and the greater AA Fellowship. This convention provides an opportunity for us to gather together every two years to share our experience with each other and hopefully continue widening the gateway to recovery in AA, by inspiring the creation of new secular AA meetings.

WAAFT IAAC also provides an opportunity for us to reach out to traditional AA. At the convention in Santa Monica, Phyllis H., then manager of GSO and Rev. Ward Ewing, past Chair of the General Service Board were invited to participate at the convention, and this year we are honored to have Ami Brophy, the Executive Editor Publisher of the AA Grapevine join us.

Just the fact that so many of us heathen AAs gather together in a somewhat organized fashion demonstrates to the rest of the fellowship that we exist. Perhaps it might also serve as a biennial reminder that the Chapter to the Agnostics is due for a rewrite!

I think it's important for WAAFT IAAC to be completely autonomous. The convention exists solely for purpose of bringing us together in one place so we may share our experience, strength and hope with each other as secular people in AA.

There are some in the secular AA community who seem to think of WAAFT IAAC as if it is the General Service Conference for secular AA. It is not! There is only one service conference in AA, and that is the annual service conference that takes place in New York every April, where all groups are represented by their Area Delegates.

It is dangerous to think of WAAFT IAAC as a decision-making body or to elevate its stature above that of any other secular AA convention. This can foster disunity as individuals fight to assure that it is their message and their vision of secular AA that is presented at the convention. WAAFT IAAC is nothing more than an international gathering of secular people in AA — but that is enough! If it tries to be more than that, then it won't last for many more years.

WAAFT IAAC should always seek to serve the fellowship with humility and gratitude. It should always be inclusive, and never exclusive.

### Service

We agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in Alcoholics Anonymous ought to form an organization similar to Gays and Lesbians in Alcoholics Anonymous (GaL-AA). A beginning was made when shortly after the convention in Santa Monica, a handful of secular AAs created WAAFT Central. Borrowing from GaL-AA, this is how WAAFT Central describes itself on their website:

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*WAAFT Central is a international service network and a central location for sharing resources to support agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA, and to make AA as a whole more inclusive. We hope to eliminate the cultural bias against nonbelievers that sometimes exists in AA, and we feel that through sharing our experience, strength and hope as nonbelievers, we will help widen the gateway to recovery for all, making AA even more accessible and welcoming to a greater number of people.*

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WAAFT Central's website receives approximately 2,000 visitors per month and maintains a state of the art international meeting directory, resources for starting meetings, and links to other special purpose groups within Alcoholics Anonymous such as: Birds of a Feather, International Doctors in Alcoholics Anonymous, International Lawyers in Alcoholics Anonymous, International Conference of Young People in Alcoholics Anonymous, and the Native American Indian General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Some have suggested a name change for this organization. Perhaps it should be Secular AA Service Board or We Agnostics, Atheists and Freethinkers in AA, or AA Atheists and Agnostics. Whatever the name, the organization should provide a service to the secular AA community and it should comport to the traditions and concepts of Alcoholics Anonymous. Like GaL-AA, it should be governed by the group conscience. Voting for GaL-AA board members takes place via emailed ballots and this seems to work well for them.

What WAAFT Central is not doing that I would like to see it do, is encourage involvement in the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous through participation at all levels of service; the group, the district and the area. This participation in General Service is critical, as this is where our voice is heard and this is the only way to effect change in Alcoholics Anonymous. Would you like a new pamphlet for nonbelievers? That needs to be approved by the General Service Conference. Would you like to see a

book published that addresses our program of recovery in entirely secular language? Again, that requires approval from the General Service Conference. I believe that we have the technology and ability to organize an International effort to improve participation in General Service among our membership. When we do this, we can make a real difference for the good of AA.

Another function for WAAFT Central is to provide an official presence for secular people in AA at the International AA Convention as well regional roundups and conventions. We can encourage our membership to set up tables at conventional AA conventions to provide information to the broader AA community about secular AA.

### The AA Grapevine

Something unique about us secularists in AA that separates us from other special purpose groups is that our difference is one of philosophy. Most of us don't believe in a personal god having anything to do with our recovery, and it can be difficult for us in the rooms of AA because our literature, the original conference approved literature perpetuates the idea that we must open our mind to the idea of a god or a "spiritual awakening", and it unfortunately makes us feel that we don't and can't belong. The AA literature places us firmly on the outside looking in. It simply does not work for us, which is why so many of us have written our own literature.

This philosophical difference with the rest of AA, places us in a good position to help move AA forward into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond. We have no desire to cling to or try to replicate the past. Instead, we respect our past, learn from it and build on it. Our imaginations have been stirred just as were the imaginations of those early AAs in the 1930's and 40's. We are doing what AA World Services should have been doing for the past fifty years. We are writing about the program of recovery in contemporary language that anyone can relate to regardless of their belief or lack thereof. Now, we need to act through the General Service Conference to recommend AAWS publish a new book that addresses our program of recovery based on what we have learned for the past 80 years. Namely, God is optional!

Publishing a new book that is approved by the General Service Conference may take time. However, there is a medium available to all AA members to share our experience in more contemporary language —the AA Grapevine.

The Grapevine receives about 150 to 200 story submissions per month. We could easily launch an effort to ensure that a greater percentage of their submissions include the experiences from our membership. The October issue of stories devoted to agnostics and atheists shows that we truly are not outside of the mainstream of AA. We need to continue sending our stories. If we get involved and engaged with the Grapevine, the magazine will begin to mirror our experience.

I believe that we are on the right side of history. Our secular AA meetings will continue to gain in popularity and as our numbers grow, so will our representation at the General Service Conference. That is when we will make a difference, and a difference we will make.