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0:00:16 John S.: Hello, and welcome to AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I'm your host, John S. Today, I'll be speaking with Joe C., author of 'Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Lifea' a co-founder of Canada's first agnostic AA Group, host of Rebellion Dogs Radio, and the person who most inspired me to get involved in general service. Here's Joe, talking service. Oh, hello, Joe, how you doing?

0:00:43 Joe C.: Hey, good to hear you. I haven't really talked to you since Austin, and I'm still smiling from our Austin conference.

0:00:54 John S.: Yeah, I have to say I am, too. I had a good time there, and seeing everybody and meeting people that I've never met before. It was a good experience. Looking forward to Toronto in... Actually, I'm gonna go to the Toronto... Your regional one in 2017. Then I'll be up there in 2018 also. Okay. Well, you are one of the founders of the very first agnostic AA group in Canada. And I thought it might be interesting to go into that history, Joe, if you'd like to talk about that a little bit. How did that come about, and what has been your experience with that?

0:01:30 Joe C.: Sure. I'll talk to you about that. Let me start with a story. I was visiting a friend, an AA friend. Lisa and I were up north. Imagine living in Toronto and going further north, but... So that's what we would do for fun. And we went to a meeting and they were reading about the 12 traditions, something I haven't done for a long time, sat in a meeting where we read from the 12 and 12. And it's going on about God Almighty this, and how God works in our life, and how every boy dreams to be our country's President, and we just... That line was in there. If other people find that frustrating, because these same people in meetings are the same people that make me roll my eyes when I'm working with them on public information, or making groups more accessible to people with disabilities, or putting on a conference.

0:02:27 Joe C.: We've got our sleeves rolled up. It's a more concrete, action-oriented discussing. It's not that abstract explanation of a phenomena of addiction and the phenomena of recovery, which, honestly, none of us can really explain well. Okay, so... Yeah, so, the... Service work is very secular. If you read the traditions, they only mention God once and it's really just talking about group conscience, and this idea that when the group makes an informed group conscience, that that's God working in His mysterious ways. And I don't believe that so, but it doesn't really matter. It talks about tradition, too, about the group, how they come about their decision-making process. And where there's no leaders, we're trusted servants, yada, yada, yada. You get to the concepts of world service, and it doesn't mention God at all.

0:03:32 Joe C.: I was at a committee meeting on accessibility, and we're talking about how to properly identify groups. What we were talking about is some groups are semi-accessible, they've got a ramp where there's stairs, and they've a got power door at the front. But maybe the washrooms, you couldn't fit one of those motorized scooters in there, or maybe the actual room that the group meets in doesn't have an automatic door. So it's not as accessible as it could be. So, we spent a whole hour. Nobody talked about turning this problem over to God we understand him. So, you avoid all of that. And the other great thing about getting involved in service is people don't fear what they know. People fear what they don't know. And if there are some groups or members that have a sorta knee-jerk hostility towards the idea of secular AA, a lot of that, not all of it, but a lot of it can be overcome by working side-by-side with carrying the message to newcomers, working at a treatment center, putting on a meeting together, working in a workshop together or a committee for two years. You're gonna just get to know each other as people, not as conflicting ideology.

0:05:04 John S.: Yeah. I agree with that. When we started our group in Kansas City, and it was really partly because of listening to your podcast and some of the things that you wrote, I decided that I was gonna get involved with our district here in Kansas City and even the area assembly and all of that. And I had no idea what I was getting into, but I was expecting that when I got there, that I'd be greeted with some hostility because I was in agnostic group and everything, and it was just completely the opposite. They welcomed me. They actually applauded. And at the very first meeting, one of the people there apologized for saying the Lord's Prayer [chuckle] at the end of the meeting. They were just really, really great to me. And then over time, I started pitching in with them and helping them with just projects. And it didn't matter what I believed or didn't believe. None of that mattered. It was just what the work that needed to get done, I helped them with, and we just became friends. And now, I love my district and my area assembly. I feel like that's almost as much as my home group, as my regular home group is. It's something I wasn't expecting. So now, I don't even have a voting position at our area assembly, but I'm still gonna go there and participate. I'm gonna help with the archive committee by recording stories, so yeah.

0:06:18 Joe C.: Well, wonderful. And that... I really think AA history isn't something which happened way back when. You've heard me say that before. It's going on right now. We're approaching our second century. And so, things are gonna be very different in the second century of Alcoholics Anonymous than they are now. And it's what we do now that's gonna influence how newcomers are greeted at the door in 2035 and 2050. And not all of us'll be here when that happens, but we still have an impact on it. Or we can, if we want to. And... I say my sobriety is a phenomena. And it's a phenomena because I know what sobriety is. I can identify my sobriety, I can even see sobriety in others. But I can't tell you why I'm sober. Yes, I did the steps. Lots of people don't, and they stay sober. So that isn't it. Yes, I went to meetings, but plenty of people go from the meeting, like they do 90 in 90 days and then go to the liquor store.

0:07:32 John S.: Right.

0:07:32 Joe C.: Right? So that can't be it, in a nutshell. I don't believe in God, but some people who do relapse. That can't be it, right? What is it that keeps me sober? I'm not sure, but they keep talking about this plan of action. So, I do my praying on my feet. I'm gonna do stuff, I'm gonna get active. And thinking about AA's future, you don't get as bogged down in our dogma as you do looking at what was recorded in the 1930s, '40s, or '50s.

0:08:10 John S.: But you talk about being a... That we have a responsibility of being stewards of AA. And the way that I see that is, AA, Alcoholics Anonymous, is going to change, like everything in the universe changes. And we have a responsibility to help guide it through that change. But sometimes, I wonder if maybe we might be able to push it a little bit. And if we should. It seems like AA's kind of resistant to changing its basic recovery literature, or just revising it, or updating it, or making it more secular. And it seems like we should be able to do that. And do you think it's okay to try to do that? Or for us to even try to organize our groups in an effort to do that? Or is that not right?

0:08:54 Joe C.: I think it's absolutely right. Especially at the group level, there is no approved literature list. So, our groups can read whatever we want, choose whatever rituals we want, and the more groups that do more progressive things, the more progressive AA is. It's not like we should petition General Service to tell us what to do and make sure the other group does it, too. Who cares what the other group does? We control our own destiny. And our group, for instance, the personality has changed greatly over the last few years. We started in 2009, and most of us, three-

quarters of us, were sober over 10 years. And now, half of our group is sober less than a year.

0:09:44 John S.: Oh, wow.

0:09:46 Joe C.: So, it's obviously working, because there are people who came to... They've never known a Toronto AA without Agnostic AA. Like, "What are you complaining about, Joe?"

[chuckle]

0:09:57 Joe C.: I go, "Oh, yeah, you're right. I got lots of meetings to choose from, where I don't have to fight with anybody about ideology."

0:10:04 John S.: Yeah.

0:10:05 Joe C.: And some of them go to other meetings, and some of them don't. But the point is, at our group, we're doing something that the writing is on the wall. It's working. Could we reach more people by changing this or changing that? Why not try it? The way we... We rent our room from the University of Toronto. And so we have to apply every semester, it's four-month increments. And they put us where they can, because all of the academic requests get handled first, and all of the outside groups get filled in whatever slots are available. And our Thursday meeting, which has always been 6:30 to 7:30, they had nothing, Thursday at 6:30. So, it's gonna be moved to 8:30. Is that gonna attract more people? Are other people gonna not come? We don't know. We'll find out, right?

0:10:57 John S.: Right.

0:10:57 Joe C.: But you can always change things. You talked about AA as a whole, and their resistance to change. It's not that there's a cognitive dissonance that... They try, but they also resist. I'm gonna just read something from the 66th Annual Meeting of the General Service Conference of Alcoholics Anonymous. So, this was April 2016, where all of our delegates in Canada and the US, and trustees, and all of the members of the General Service Conference met, and there were advisory actions. So these are the things that we decided on. And one of the advisory actions was that the 2017 conference, which'll be this April coming up, the theme is gonna be 'Supporting Our Future.' That's progressive.

0:11:55 John S.: Yeah.

0:11:56 Joe C.: That's a great idea. But there was another advisory action brought up, and it was rejected. And that advisory action was... Let me just find it exactly. Yeah. PI wanted a better social media presence. They wanted a not-for-profit YouTube page, and a Twitter account, and Google not for profit page. And at least on some of that, they were told, "No," and on others of it, "Well, come back with a proposal next year." So, on one hand they're saying, "Let's think about the future," and it just doesn't seem to make sense to think of the future and not think of the internet as being the roadway, the highway, to the future.

0:12:50 John S.: Yeah. It's interesting, I was reading the report from the General Service Conference, the last one, and I actually was reading Aimee, the executive editors' talk, and she was talking to the conference. And she says, "Imagine if we had a YouTube page. Imagine if the Grapevine had its own podcast. Imagine if we had a forum where our readers could interact on our website. Imagine if... ", and all this kinda stuff. But she never really proposed or asked or anything

like that, but she was just asking the conference to use their imagination and ask, "Is this stuff possible?", or "What would happen if we did this?" I don't why we are, I guess, we, AA, are so afraid of the internet. I think you once pointed out, "We're all over the internet anyway. We're already on YouTube. We're already on Facebook." [chuckle]

0:13:45 Joe C.: Exactly. And I have some of the old AA dogma and that I've grown up with. Like the anonymity thing is strictly at the level of press, radio, and films. And at the Austin conference, I participated in a panel with a blogger and another podcaster on living cyber, sort of online recovery. And they... Chris, who runs Since Right Now was simulcasting it at his website. And it's an open meeting.

0:14:29 John S.: Yeah.

0:14:29 Joe C.: Right? So it's a violation of anonymity. Well, I said, "Anyone who wants to participate who doesn't want their mugshot appearing, just say so, and we'll point the camera somewhere else." But anyone can walk into an open meeting and see me at the podium.

0:14:45 John S.: That's right.

0:14:46 Joe C.: I'm not gonna tell you my last name, or where I live, or what I do for business, or if you record on this. Give me a call. Operators are waiting. So, I'm not trying to use my cache, or my currency of AA, for personal gain. But open meetings are, you see the people.

[chuckle]

0:15:11 John S.: [chuckle] That's right.

0:15:12 Joe C.: So, let's try this. And that was outside of my comfort zone, but in one day, over 2,400 people saw that, at an AA meeting. And that's four times as many or six times as many people that went to whole conference.

0:15:29 John S.: Yup. And how was that so different? Like you say, it's an open meeting, what if we were just in a big auditorium somewhere, and the public, the city was invited. It would be the same thing, wouldn't it?

0:15:39 Joe C.: Yeah, absolutely right. Or you put on a public information meeting for medical students, or what ought to be CPC maybe, or you put on... Yeah. Any sort of community-based thing, where you're there, right?

0:15:57 John S.: Yup.

0:15:57 Joe C.: Yeah. It's the principle of anonymity. Not the actual... Well, what are the rules, what do you have to do, and what must you not do, right? So, everyone has to define that for themselves. And I'm pretty strict on that, actually. A lot of AA authors use their last name. A lot of AA authors were well-known authors before they were sober. So, what are they gonna do? All of a sudden, disappear from their audience? It doesn't make sense for them. Even though it does makes sense for me to just be "Joe C." And some of the magazines I write for want a mugshot, and maybe I'd be on page two or three if I did that. And I don't provide that. And maybe that means I'm in the back of the magazine.

[chuckle]

0:16:48 Joe C.: But there, I'm not... It's not a popularity contest. I just... It's a privilege to write for them. And they respect my boundaries, and I respect theirs. For now, it works out. So, none of these things are cast in stone. So we could put our AA meeting on YouTube right now, if we want. We don't need to ask General Service's permission. If we want their opinion, we'll give it to them.

0:17:17 John S.: You know, there's also a change in attitude, generationally. This is something that I've noticed. Like our group has its own public Facebook page. And every once in a while, we'll get a person, who's never been to AA before, will send us a message and ask us about coming to a meeting. And sometimes, they do so, even publicly. And what I'm finding is they have absolutely no stigma attached to the idea of getting help. And in fact, they often wanna bring a friend with them for support to the meeting.

0:17:52 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:17:53 John S.: And so that's what happens. So, I guess these people are like in their 20's or so. This type of generation. That's what'll happen. They'll post on Facebook that they're going to a meeting, and they let all their friends know, and then some of them will join them for support.
[chuckle]

0:18:06 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:18:07 John S.: [chuckle] And it's totally normal.

0:18:09 Joe C.: And that is... One of the questions we talked about at our panel was, "Is your smiling face and your one-year medallion, or your three-month chip, on your Facebook, is that a violation of anonymity?" Well, that depends whether you call Bob's Facebook page a "public media." Who goes there? Is CNN combing through people's Facebook for news, and would that be news to them? Or is it just his friends? Is he just like having dinner to celebrate his one year sober and inviting his friends in and outside recovery? Lots of people do that, right?

0:18:58 John S.: Right.

0:18:58 Joe C.: "Let's go out to dinner. Let's celebrate." And you haven't booked a whole restaurant, there's people at other tables that aren't in AA, they're gonna overhear your conversation. We talk recovery in the subway and in public spaces. It really, when you get to treating the traditions as strict rules, it gets silly, because all of these things are more abstract and more complicated than that.

0:19:29 John S.: And the whole ideal behind anonymity, really, I think, was for public relations. You didn't wanna have a person say that they were speaking for AA, that they were the AA spokesperson...

0:19:41 Joe C.: Exactly right. And they were right to do that, and they were also right not to make it a rule. They had famous baseball players who were on the front of the Cleveland newspaper, or whatever it was, AA member. And the problem with that is these people could get drunk, and then everyone's mocking AA. "Oh, yeah, look at this, look at what happened to so-and-so." That's the risk. That was one of the risks and why we encouraged anonymity. Let's make it about the fellowship, not the individuals. But it's not a rule. Plenty of people have found AA because a rock

star they knew, or a journalist they knew, wrote about or talked about being in AA, or going to some 12-step meeting and getting sober, and they thought, "Well, if they can do it, maybe it's not the culty, uncool place that I thought it was, and I'll try it, too." So, every time these traditions are broken, so to speak, and I say that with... Good things happen, and bad things happen. So what do you gain and what do you lose from each of these indiscretions?

0:21:00 John S.: Yeah. And how do you know if you still need the tradition if you don't break it once in a while, anyway?

[chuckle]

0:21:06 Joe C.: Exactly. That's the thing about it, you can't unring a bell. Once you put it out there, you can't take it back. So, using prudence and common sense, and asking around, is a really good idea. But yeah. It's just not hard and fast rules, that's what... People seem to crave authority more than ever. We have a fellowship that gives the ultimate authority to the member, unlimited autonomy to the groups, we only ask that you consider other groups or AA as a whole. "Yeah, but no, no, we want GSO to rule on whether this group has it right or that group has it right." [chuckle]

0:21:52 John S.: Right. And they're not going to.

0:21:54 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:21:55 John S.: Well, I know, in Western Missouri, they're very, very conservative about the whole internet thing. There was a vote... Not a vote, I guess. Yeah, there was a request for the assembly about the idea of putting the state convention on Facebook, so that people could sign up for it. And the reason they decided not to do it is because they say, "It's one thing for you to break your own anonymity, but if you..." Like, if I were to sign up for the state AA convention, and then somehow, a friend of mine is somehow... [chuckle] I'm outing a friend of mine or something, is what they were concerned about. So they decided not to do it. It didn't make sense to me. I thought, "Wait a second. It's just a Facebook page, and it's up to somebody to decide if they wanna say they're gonna go to the convention or not." I don't know, maybe next time, if something like that comes up, I'll try to speak out for it. But they're very conservative about that here.

0:22:50 Joe C.: Well, and that's not a wrong decision, but is AA growing in that area? Are younger people coming in? If they can't answer yes to those questions, then maybe it's worth the risk of trying something new.

0:23:06 John S.: That's what I enjoy about this. 'Cause actually, I have to say that at our area assembly, they listen to everybody. If you're the lone voice for something, you get to speak again after the vote, to see if other people changed their minds. So, it's very orderly, it's very respectful, everybody is really trying to do what they think is best for the area and for AA as a whole. And I don't know, I... I've just have fallen in love with that whole process. I don't always get my way, but I always come away feeling like I've been heard.

0:23:45 Joe C.: Yeah, in other words, you don't always get your way, but you always get your say.

0:23:48 John S.: Yeah!

0:23:49 Joe C.: And that's the ultimate democracy at work.

0:23:53 John S.: Yeah.

0:23:54 Joe C.: Like I... I get it from both sides. Am I critical of AA? Sure. Do I want certain things to change? Yeah. But when other people rag on, "AA is this way," or "AA is that way," I say, "Hey. Look at me, buddy. Right here. I'm AA. Tell me I insist on someone believing in God. Tell me that I'm against harm reduction. Tell me that I'm gonna tell my sponsee exactly what to do. Those things aren't true of me. So you can't say those things are true of AA, 'cause I'm AA."

0:24:38 John S.: Right. That's the genius of AA, as far as I'm concerned, because it all boils down to the personal freedom of, every AA member is as free as they can possibly be to practice the AA program in any way that they want to, and then every group is totally on its own to do its own thing without anybody else telling them what to do. And that's really what makes this whole thing work. But it's hard for people to understand that, especially if you're outside of AA. But even sometimes, people inside of AA, people always assume that there's some top-down structure that says, "Okay. These are the rules," that "This is the program. This is what we all must do." And it's not that way. And sometimes, even people in the fellowship, I think, don't quite get that, that you can make this whatever you wanna make it.

0:25:26 Joe C.: People do have these preconceived ideas, and that's why I think public information is important. Some people are against public information at all. "We're attraction rather than promotion. Let people find us. So if they want it enough, they're gonna find us." But people have preconceived ideas, and that is a barrier to recovery. And if we can eliminate some of those preconceived ideas, we're eliminating a barrier to recovery, and isn't that what our primary purpose is?

0:25:57 John S.: That's interesting. You said that it was actually the public information committee that was wanting to do the Twitter account?

0:26:04 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:26:05 John S.: Right. That does make sense in this day and age, actually, doesn't it? To have that?

0:26:09 Joe C.: Yep. It does, and other people are concerned with it. And the people who are concerned with it are the people who probably don't use the medium. And so, in essence, what you have is people, who aren't social media savvy, making a decision about how social media savvy people should find out about AA. It doesn't make any sense to me. It's not like, "Now, we're eliminating meetings, and we're eliminating our inter-group. They'll have to go to Twitter." No one's saying that. [chuckle]

0:26:46 John S.: Right.

0:26:46 Joe C.: [chuckle] They're saying, "Let's add this other layer, where people go for information, and we'll provide information to them." It's not promotion. I've said before in 19... I guess, the first time I was working the phones at inter-group would have been 1977.

0:27:05 John S.: Wow.

0:27:06 Joe C.: There was no internet. But AA ran an ad in the personal columns of the newspaper. Newspaper, it's made of paper, people write stuff... Anyway. [chuckle] Ask your grandparents.

0:27:19 John S.: Yeah. [laughter]

0:27:23 Joe C.: So they ran this newspaper ad that said, "If you wanna drink and can, that's your business. If you wanna quit but you can't, that's our business. Call AA," and it had the phone number. So, that... The equivalent of that today would be to have a Twitter page, where AA put out this month's Grapevine, blah, blah, blah. Right? Or AA survey shows there are now this number meetings in America, and this number of meetings worldwide.

0:27:57 John S.: No, you're right. I actually had that experience. I was 19 when I was first considering calling AA, and it was from a newspaper advertisement in Lawrence, Kansas, that I saw and I kept it, and thinking about calling, and I just told myself, "Oh, no, this is silly to think like this." [chuckle] I didn't do it. But had the internet been then, I would probably gone online and tried to find something, which I know people do now. Nowadays, if you get online, you can find so much conflicting information, or there's a lot more, I guess, more options for people now than what I had back then, anyway, and what you had. Which is good.

0:28:35 Joe C.: Yeah. Absolutely great. I'm opening my eyes to things like treatment. I never went to a treatment center, but many of the people I work with in recovery, whether it's going through the 12 steps or some other capacity, they're either counselors, there's a lot of counselors [chuckle] in recovery that are still into growth and expanding their self-awareness, and they're... Or they've been to treatment centers. So I've got this accumulation of preconceived ideas I have about the treatment process that isn't based on any personal experience. So I'm volunteering now, and I'm keeping my mouth shut. Largely, I'm just hearing people going through their process, and lots of people, they go to after care, but they don't go to AA, or they go to AA and they go to after care, or they're doing cognitive behavioral therapy. And I just... We never wanted to be the one-stop shop for everybody.

0:29:47 John S.: And that's something that I have learned, actually fairly recently, and have opened my mind to, by talking to John Stewart, 'cause he's like... He has a site that's called "Leaving AA," but he's definitely not anti-AA. He's more pro-choice is what he says.

0:30:02 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:30:02 John S.: He says, "Why do you have to just do only one thing? Why does it have to be AA? Why can't you do AA and SMART? Or why can't you do AA and LifeRing? Or AA and whatever?" He even takes it as far as the Sinclair Method. I'm like, "Well, maybe you can do that, too. [chuckle] I don't know." So, yeah. I've kind of open to that. I think that people should do that. You should do whatever you need to do to help yourself, because I've seen too many people die from thing, so you gotta do what you gotta do.

0:30:34 Joe C.: I read a really interesting article. There's a guy named Terry Gorski who has been blogging as long there's been blogging about recovery, professionally, and the peer-to-peer community-type articles. And he was talking, just to talk about carrying the message and institutions, about there are all these agnostics steps. Maybe that's what we should... AA should be bringing into institutions. And that's like... He's not a member of our community, who knows what he believes, but he's just saying that people are getting sued, they're saying, "Why don't you have SMART instead of this, because there is no SMART... There's SMART in our Phoenix treatment center, but there's no SMART in our Buffalo, New York treatment center. We need... " So, why not use the secular AA, you're covered on the First Amendment issues...

0:31:39 John S.: Right.

0:31:40 Joe C.: It separates church and state. And he did succinctly point out how, whether you believe AA is religious or you do not, legally, the 12 steps have been deemed to be religious content by circuit courts. The big book has been deemed to be a religious... And I don't agree with that.

0:32:07 John S.: You don't?

0:32:08 Joe C.: But that's what the law is. That's what... The law can change, right? Some people can challenge those things, but right now, that is the reality. So, offer only this option, you run the risk of violating someone's First Amendment rights. And he's just saying that AA already has a way to overcome that, right? A, we didn't ask to be in those institutions. We didn't ask treatment centers to do 12-step facilitation, where they're encouraging their medical patients to go find a sponsor. We didn't ask them to do that. But if they're gonna do that, why don't they use this sort of neutral way of doing things?

0:32:56 John S.: Usually, if we go into a treatment center, it's an individual group that decides... That takes on the responsibility, or maybe a district. And there's nothing that prevents an AA group from going in there and saying, "Hey, this is how... This is one way that you can interpret the steps. And here they are. Read them." There's absolutely nothing wrong with that. That would be just like reading outside literature or something, I would think.

0:33:23 Joe C.: Sure. And we go into treatment centers and we, in Toronto, we read outside literature. There's a very popular poem called "Just For Today," that isn't AA, it hasn't been written by an AA member, I have no idea, but it certainly wasn't conference-approved. But it appears on the 'Toronto Beginner's Pamphlet,' which includes 'The John Hopkins 20 Questions,' which isn't AA, 'Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow,' which isn't AA, the steps which are and the traditions that are... So Toronto inter-group uses non-conference approved literature.

0:34:01 John S.: Right.

0:34:02 Joe C.: And in the treatment centers, this is one of the readings, right? So, we're already doing that, right? So, to say, "While we... We can argue that we're in support of this, but we're not in support of that." Well, if you've got a good reason not to do it, state it, but if you have some sort of slippery slope or opening the floodgates argument, just try it, and see what happens, right?

0:34:29 Joe C.: Our agnostic group puts on meetings in detoxes. And... We were having this discussion, some of em' would, "Hey, come to the detox." "Okay. And oh, I don't wanna read the steps. I don't believe in that." I would say, "Anyone here wanna read the steps?" And there's always someone who's been there, they put up their hand. "Here!" It doesn't offend me to listen to them. It doesn't represent me in any way, shape, or form. So, that... Our AA steps, but there is also in the format, if I'm sharing that meeting, that I'm to tell them where I come from, my home group, my story. And of course, I'm gonna tell that in my own words. So, people can figure it out. It might be a good idea, and this is something we've all talked about before, if as a collective, as the collective of secular AA groups and members, doing some sort of communication in the same way AA does. Not "separate from." But "as part of." Like, the International Lawyers' Association for AA, they do advocacy for lawyers with addiction, with alcoholism, and they're not separate from AA. The International Doctors' AA Convention also does advocacy for doctors. And if we're doing advocacy for atheists and agnostics, we're not not AA because we're catering to a specific group any more than a young people's video is not AA because there's nobody the average AA age of 50 in the video.

0:36:20 John S.: Right. [chuckle] It is sad when you see the age in a AA meeting. [chuckle]

0:36:27 Joe C.: Well, it's, what do you know about someone with two black eyes? Well, they had to be told twice.

0:36:35 John S.: [chuckle] Yeah. So, when you talk about changing the steps, this is gonna be interesting, I think, because I wonder, do you think after the Human Rights Tribunal that there'll be a change in attitude about the idea of groups using different forms of the steps?

0:36:56 Joe C.: My concern is about what is now in the Toronto area, and maybe in some other areas, is what I would call, and the Human Rights Tribunal would use this language, "a poisonous environment," where there's micro-aggression or overt hostility towards a certain under-represented population. So, my perfect solution is, we look into the future and we see, nobody cares about agnostic groups any more than they care about LGBT groups or young people's groups or women's groups or men's groups. And to this day, some people think women don't need and shouldn't have their own meeting. Men and women feel that way.

0:37:46 Joe C.: Some young people, "Why would I wanna... If I wanna get laid, I'll go to a young people's meeting, if I wanna get something else, I'll go here." But where someone else, "No, no. I'm... I need people who speak my language," and each generation has its own language right? And that's the secularists' argument, too. "Don't blame sobriety in terms of some supernatural force that helped me out, because I don't believe in that. And I'm certainly not gonna talk in God acronyms, just to make everybody else feel comfortable." So, to get back to answering your question, which was about five minutes ago, I think it will always be controversial. AA was born in riots.

0:38:35 John S.: Yeah.

0:38:36 Joe C.: There were controversy before there were agnostic groups. There will be controversy in our dying breath of Alcoholics Anonymous. I just hope that we have less fear, 'cause it's really the fear, that this is going to confuse the newcomer. That this is going to water down AA. This is going to cause a divide between secular AA versus religious AA. And I don't think any of that is necessarily so, although the loudest voices are these polar opposites. The majority of AA are in the middle, and they couldn't care less what somebody else does at their own meeting. They wouldn't even think about it. They're apathetic to what young people do in their meetings, or whether they go bowling or go dancing or work through the big book exactly as the first 100 members did. [chuckle] They don't care what they're doing at their group, 'cause they don't go to their group. But they care about, "What our rituals are in my group, because this is what I depend on for my recovery."

0:39:46 John S.: Right. You were talking about under-represented groups, the Grapevine, I think, right now, if I understand what they're trying to do, is trying to reach out to under-represented groups, us being one of them.

0:39:58 Joe C.: Yeah.

0:39:58 John S.: But there's a lot of under-represented groups in AA. And one thing that we're dealing with in Missouri is there is only, I think, in AA population, there's only like 4% African-American representation in AA, I believe, and in the United States, I think they make up like 15% of the population. So, that's a real problem. For some reason, we're not reaching the African-

American community in AA. I don't know why that is, but we had an issue in Missouri, where there was a racist incident at one of our conventions, where some idiots showed up in black face. So now, we're having a... We're gonna have a conversation, starting in January, about what to do about being more inclusive and... I don't know, unity is what they're talking about. So they wanna include the agnostics and atheists, but also talking about other minority groups. And the black population is definitely one of those.

0:40:58 John S.: And I was talking to some people about it, and they think that one issue might be, and it's really complicated, but a lot of it might be, 'cause NA doesn't seem have this problem with black population like we do. They've represented proportionally, I guess, whereas AA isn't. And it's like AA has this resistance to letting people talk about whatever drug use that they might have been involved with. And maybe that might be a part of the problem.

0:41:26 Joe C.: Yeah. And again, that's a meeting-for-meeting thing. Nobody bats an eye or frowns if someone in my home group says, "My name is Joe, and I'm an addict," and then goes on and talks about whether we're talking about step two, or if you're sober in the holidays, or family issues, whatever. They go on and talk about the topic. Who cares how they identify themselves, and what they did? Right? What is an outside issue? Politics and religion.

0:42:01 John S.: Right.

0:42:02 Joe C.: Are drugs other than alcohol an outside issue? Not as far as your story goes.

0:42:08 John S.: I don't think so, either. And they always go hand-in-hand, it seems, with alcohol.

0:42:13 Joe C.: Yeah. Yeah.

0:42:14 John S.: And you go through these epidemics that we have, whereas... We had a crack epidemic, which was primarily affecting the black community, and we in AA, we, AA members, weren't really, I think, doing what we could've done fully to address that. And now, we're having a heroin epidemic.

0:42:37 Joe C.: Yes.

0:42:39 John S.: And I get calls occasionally from the WAF central line of people that are starting groups, like in New England and upstate New York. Really, it's all over, but in that region in particular, they're having a terrible heroin problem. And they're telling me that these kids are dying, and they just wanna have a meeting where people can feel welcomed and comfortable. And they want to have these drug addicts in their meetings. I say, "Well, there's no problem with that."

0:43:10 Joe C.: Well, so you're asking why is NA doing a better job than we are?

0:43:16 John S.: I guess so, yeah.

0:43:18 Joe C.: I would say, part of that is systemic, because we rely so much on early AA literature, which is white American middle-class men. Right? That seems to be who's attracted to AA because... I'm agnostic, and I was gritting my teeth through some of the reading about step 12. Anyone who was gay would have done the same thing, talking... It's all talking about the male alcoholic in the household, and how the wife would be.

0:43:52 John S.: [chuckle] Yeah.

0:43:53 Joe C.: And... How can we read this without being embarrassed? [chuckle]

0:44:01 John S.: I know.

0:44:02 Joe C.: And NA literature has been written more recently. At the Ontario regional conference, which is our big AA conference we have, it's just the way we've always done it, a picture of Bill Wilson, and Dr. Bob. Two white guys. And that sends a message. You walk into that room for the first time, right?

0:44:28 John S.: Right.

0:44:28 Joe C.: Where's the first lesbian in AA?

0:44:31 John S.: Right.

0:44:32 Joe C.: Where's the first African-American? Where's... Like, if we're honoring these people, and maybe we should, maybe we shouldn't, then we have to honor all of the firsts.

0:44:44 John S.: Yeah.

0:44:45 Joe C.: Our co-founders, great. Our first member with a disability, our first this, or... All of those things have to be revered in the same way. Otherwise, we're going to systemically discriminate, and that seems to be how... The statistics don't lie to us...

0:45:08 John S.: No.

0:45:08 Joe C.: Through our membership survey, and we have more men than women. We have more older people than young people. We have more Caucasians than we have people of color. That is telling us... And that isn't true with the people who are being shipped to our rooms from treatment centers. They're more diverse. They still have problems, too, because they cater to people of healthcare, and there's some systemic discrimination there, too. Right?

0:45:38 John S.: Right.

0:45:38 Joe C.: Most Anglo-Saxons have healthcare than people of color. But they're still doing a better job, and they're sending the bus load to us, and some of those people make friends in AA and feel comfortable, and some of them don't. And our statistics can tell us what we need to do to change that. And...

0:46:01 John S.: I'm looking forward to what happens in Missouri. I think that we're taking that very, very seriously, and it was interesting to hear the discussion at the area assembly. Because there was a lot of really serious misunderstanding from some of the people in different parts of the state about how it was affecting the black membership. Because they were totally offended by what happened, totally offended, and there were people from other parts of the state that were saying, "Oh, this guys was just... Having a sense of humor. You guys need to have a sense of humor." And it's like they weren't even trying to understand why people were offended by it. So I think it's gonna be good when we all start sitting down together and start discussing these things, because when you do it at that level, at that service level, people are forced to listen, and listen again, and listen again,

until you finally, I think, come to some understanding and resolution.

0:46:53 John S.: And I'm very interested in this, because I do think that there's a serious problem with under-represented groups. And it feel silly sometimes, for me, as I might be the only open atheist there, but my problems aren't near as bad as the African-American, 'cause I can walk into the room, and everybody else in the room is white like me, and I don't have a big A on my forehead to let them know I'm an atheist. So, there's just a lot of stuff that's going on. So I'm glad we're dealing with that. It's difficult stuff to talk about.

0:47:29 Joe C.: It is difficult stuff, and it's easy to scapegoat and talk about, how could this person this, or how could that person that, when the AA way is to say, "What can I do? Maybe I should be standing at the door and greeting people as they come in, 'Are you new here?' Just, there are things that I can do to make people feel more comfortable." And then with our outreach, we don't just have to go and just start talking until the time's up. We can ask questions. You invited us here. Thank you. AA always wants a hand of AA to be there whenever someone reaches out. So we're glad to be asked, but you already knew about alcoholism in your community. What are you doing about alcoholism? What is there that AA could do to alter or improve the way you deal with alcoholism in your community? What's your experience with AA? You knew where we were in the phonebook, so you called us. Tell us your experience. And then listen. Instead of going, "No, no, no. You misunderstand." [chuckle] You shouldn't tell them what their experience of AA is. We should listen to what their experience of AA is.

0:48:49 John S.: Before we run out of time, Joe, I was gonna pick your brain on something. Going back to your group, 'cause you were one of the founders of that group, and I also am a founder of a group. And it was a very interesting experience, 'cause in the beginning, it was just me and one other guy, and we could just plan it out and do whatever we wanted to do. But we also decided that we were gonna have regular business meetings every three months. And over time, what happened is the group really kinda took over. It's done its own thing. And to this day now, I don't even have to be there anymore, and it's a weird feeling of being, in the very beginning, having all total control, basically, to now, I'm just watching this thing take off on its own. And I'm starting to see some personality conflicts every once in a while, and just to have to watch the group handle it out. How did you experience that? Did you have any difficulty, witnessing that? Or did you notice any...

0:49:51 Joe C.: Well. My early AA, the first group I ever was involved in starting, was a young peoples' group called the "YES Group," Youth Enjoying Sobriety, it was called, in Montreal, and there was about half a dozen of us that started it. It didn't all go my way. I brought up motions and someone else would second it, but it'd get defeated and then someone else... That's the great democracy of AA. The... One person is not a founder of anything in AAs, in a meeting, until there's...

0:50:28 John S.: That's right, [chuckle] that's right.

[chuckle]

0:50:34 Joe C.: It's like, "Oh, that's Bob's group," or "That's Lance's group." I squirm when people say, "Oh, Joe started this group." I did not. I could not. I couldn't call it a "group" if I was the only one there, right?

0:50:50 John S.: Right.

0:50:51 Joe C.: So, yeah, these things do take on a life of their own, and it's good to wear sobriety like a loose garment, and it's good to just encourage well-informed group decisions and not care about the outcome, 'cause it really doesn't matter if you read this or you don't read this, or whether you meet on Tuesday night or...

0:51:15 John S.: Yeah. It really doesn't. It truly doesn't. And I'm starting to understand that. I think, at the beginning, I was little bit too concerned that people were gonna change the way that I wanted to go. Hasn't changed too much at all. But one thing, it's been interesting, I used to go to every single one of our meetings and I don't anymore, because now we have people that will just chair the meetings. And so there's a lot of people that are coming to our group that I haven't even met yet, that I don't really know that well, and that's interesting. And they don't even know me. And I like it in a way, because it's just like I'm just... It's just a meeting I can go to or not go to, whatever I want to, and I'm not even responsible for it, really, except for how as much as I wanna be.

0:51:57 Joe C.: Yeah. Well, and that's the sign of a healthy group. We talk about, AA is self-supporting and we all think we know what that means, we know... Throw a couple of bucks in the pot, and that's gonna go toward some good things. It's more than that. We share our money, but we also share our time and our talent. So, for two years, I'm gonna be the General Service rep and devote some time there, or I have a particular... I knew how to podcast, so I started podcasting, and other people that started podcasting. That was just a talent that I was able to offer. Some people like to write. Some people like to do public speaking. Some people like to put on dances. All of those things are useful things, to have mocktail parties, where they sort of replicate social life of drinking without alcohol. So, it's important that we do that. And if we wanna be part of the future of recovery from alcoholism, we need to also do some outreach with the rest of the community talking about these sorts of things. When I work in a committee, I'm working with... Nobody else is in my home group. So I'm no longer in an echo chamber, listening to a very tightly defined ethos.

0:53:40 John S.: Right.

0:53:42 Joe C.: So, we have to make decisions based on people that I might not ever go to their group, but guess what? Every once in a while, they ask me to speak at their group. I invite them to my group to participate. And you get... You grow from that. Your group grows from that, too. And when we put on meetings in treatment centers, of course, sometimes, people will, "What's the name of your group?" "Well, here's a card. Here's all of the agnostic groups in Toronto. Come any time you want. Bring a friend." And they do. And two years later, they're your General Service rep. [chuckle] And if it doesn't grow, don't be discouraged. We're not on a membership rally.

0:54:27 John S.: That's right. That's right. I've gotten used to that, too. 'Cause I used to go to the meetings, I count the number of people on every meeting. And I'm trying not to do that anymore just to say, "Oh, wow! This month, we got 15. This month, we got 20," or whatever. I try not to do that anymore. That's not what it's about. That's not it at all. Some of the best meetings are just the smaller ones anyway, and as long as our group can take care of each other and serve a purpose in our community, then I'm happy with that.

0:54:52 Joe C.: Yeah. Everyone want something different. Some people like the big meetings, where people dress up, and sex going on, and you're just attracted to the buzz of it, right?

0:55:05 John S.: Right.

0:55:05 Joe C.: Other people, they would rather stick needles in their eyes than recover from

alcoholism exposed to that, and a group of six people around the table talking is perfect for them. They don't need eye candy. They don't need a lot of pomp and ceremony. They just need a clique of people where they're gonna come back next week, maybe there'll be seven, maybe there'll be five, but the group's gonna be there. They're gonna be there. That's what they need, right? When I was young, I needed different things for my recovery and from the groups I chose than what I want and need now.

0:55:48 John S.: Yes. And I'm recognizing that, too. 'Cause sometimes, I criticize what I've done in the past, but what I did in the past was actually helping me at that time and the person I was at that time.

0:56:00 Joe C.: [chuckle] How soon we forget.

0:56:00 John S.: Yeah! Yeah. And so, who am I to criticize someone who's doing what I did back then now?

0:56:05 Joe C.: Yeah. And things snowball. You never know what action you're gonna take. I'm getting involved with AA history lovers. I've been doing my own research and learning about other people who are playwrights, who talk about AA history, and the plays they put on, or write about the history of Stepping Stones, or someone also was doing... I'll try to get you a linked up with this research that was done, sort of Midwest, the first African-American members in the Midwest, and the chain of how that developed. So it's been Indiana to Chicago, this...

0:56:52 John S.: Oh, I'd love to see that. I'm gonna be speaking at a group on Christmas Day, it's a "Black Group." It was the very first black group. It was the very first group... It's actually the very first inclusive group in Kansas City, because at that time, black people were not allowed at group number one. So they started their own group, and they called it the "Interracial Group," because they wanted everyone to be welcome there, whether you're black or white. And that group still exist today. They're called the "Paseo Group." I'm gonna go speak there, and I've got their group history. I'm really interested in their history, 'cause I think that what they did, I'm just really impressed and moved by it, because they... Boy, what they experienced was really harsh. The treatment they've experienced is very harsh, but they didn't give back harsh treatment. They were just very open and welcoming to everybody. They said, "Hey, you don't want us? We'll take you."

0:57:44 Joe C.: Yeah. And it's not like they all thought or felt the same way. Every movement needs its agitators, and it needs its ambassadors. There's gotta be different... Every hockey team or football team or bridge team needs people with different talents to succeed. And AA is that way, too. It's a chaotic thing, and the results are quite unpredictable. [chuckle]

0:58:21 John S.: Yeah. Boy, there's still a lot history to be uncovered, isn't there? 'Cause we haven't really even delved into a lot of that stuff. That's very interesting, to look at that part of it.

0:58:31 Joe C.: And the important thing is people are looking back 50 years from now, let's make sure we've documented what we did. And that we can undo some of those missed opportunities in the past. Because yeah, it is a shame. There's so much I would like to know about. The first different language groups, I would love to get direct translations back from the first Russian big book. What artistic liberties might have been taken and how it works?

0:59:05 John S.: Interesting.

0:59:08 Joe C.: And it might surprise a lot of people, right?

0:59:10 John S.: Yeah.

0:59:11 Joe C.: And because every time you widen the gateway, you change something. It affects some sort of change. And some of the more secular countries where we have AA, it's not just expat Americans that are filling the meetings, it's people who grew up in a very different society. And... Anyway, I would love to see, in all of these communities, whether they're minorities by language or by gender or by sexual orientation, how they personalized it, because I think that's every bit as fascinating as a secular view.

1:00:00 John S.: Yeah.

1:00:01 Joe C.: Secular recovery, yeah.

1:00:02 John S.: Very much so. Well, Joe, I just wanna thank you for everything that you have done. For participating in this podcast, but for your own podcast, for everything that you've written. We read your book at our meetings. You've been an inspiration to me. And when I was first starting in this journey with agnostic AA, I think I learned from you, probably more than anybody, of how I wanted my group to be, and how I wanted to be as an AA person. So I wanna thank you for that.

1:00:30 Joe C.: Yeah. And I hope it inspires. I think we need more literature. We need more... Maybe, if we were talking about service, right? Like, if we, maybe, AA Beyond Belief, can put together a compendium of stories of people sharing. "I went to a treatment center where I told my talk, and can someone came up to me and said this, and thought AA wasn't for them, and now they're sober." Just sort of a outreach or service journeys. If we did a collection of books, of those stories, it would be interesting to a small demographic, right?

1:01:12 John S.: Yeah.

1:01:13 Joe C.: I wrote a reflection book, but if I was in it for the money, I would've written it for all of the rest of them.

1:01:18 John S.: [chuckle] Yeah, right.

1:01:21 Joe C.: Because they buy hundreds of thousands of those books every year. And they buy, maybe, 1,000 or 2,000 of mine, a year.

1:01:29 John S.: That's funny.

1:01:31 Joe C.: And I didn't know it would even be that in demand, right? So, it covers bus fare, and it's a rewarding thing to do. And then it leads to other things. I've worked with a theologian, and we've done workshops together. A priest and an atheist talking about AA. I'm part of the Sedona Mago Retreat series. They do all these different... And they're all cutting-edge stuff. They talk about relationships and sobriety for husbands and wives. They talk about meditation and Buddhism in recovery. And they invited to do something in October next year, of the steps and traditions...

1:02:19 John S.: Cool.

1:02:20 Joe C.: From a secular point of view. And you don't have to be one of our club to find that

interesting. Any person in AA is gonna work with people who are queer. Any person in AA is gonna work with people who don't believe what they believe.

1:02:41 John S.: Right.

1:02:41 Joe C.: Right? So, it's good to get together, sometimes, for a weekend, or sometimes, for an hour, with people who aren't like us. And say, "Tell me, again, why you do this and why it makes sense to you? 'Cause I just don't get it."

1:02:57 John S.: Well, you do a lot of stuff. Thank you again, very much, Joe. It's been nice talking to you. I will be editing this today, and we're gonna publish it on Wednesday. I have these... I do these quick turnarounds, I don't know why I do that, but I don't know. [chuckle]

1:03:12 Joe C.: Yeah. We're all glad you do. It's a great community. We need bloggers, more podcasters, as... Yeah. That way, there will be a future.

1:03:28 John S.: Yeah.

1:03:29 Joe C.: And Bill Wilson would be doing it.

1:03:32 John S.: Yeah.

1:03:33 Joe C.: If he was alive today.

1:03:35 John S.: Yeah, he would.

1:03:35 Joe C.: Yeah.

1:03:39 John S.: Alright, Joe.

1:03:39 Joe C.: Thank you, John.

1:03:40 John S.: Have a good one. Take care.

1:03:41 Joe C.: You, too.

1:03:41 John S.: Bye, bye. Well, that's it for another episode of AA Beyond Belief, the podcast. I hoped you enjoyed it. And I hope you all have a very merry Christmas, coming up in just a couple of days. We'll be back again next week. If everything goes well, it'll be a podcast of me speaking at the Paseo Group, here in Kansas City, Missouri. So, until then, you all have a very merry Christmas.

[music]