

**0:00:00 John:** My name is John. I'm an alcoholic. And I'm from Washington DC. I'm not from here, a few of you may have heard me speak in other venues or seen some of my screeds on the internet or some of my other protestations but I'll briefly tell you a little bit about who and what I am and then maybe go into the direction that I thought this particular panel might take. Suffice it to say, I've been around for a long time. I went to my first meeting in DC in January of 1987 and I was a desperately sick 38-year-old puppy when I first came into these rooms. Unfortunately, I was in the type of career and work for the type of company in a type of business where any kind of association with a psychiatrist, a treatment center, or any other kind of medical professional, would have meant career suicide. And that's one of the things that kept me from getting a little bit of help long before I needed it. And even though I will have some highly critical things to say about various aspects of Alcoholics Anonymous, I'll talk about the good parts first. I genuinely believe that Alcoholics Anonymous saved my life. There's no question that I had reached a point in my sobriety where I was either going to kill myself or do something about it.

**0:01:28 John:** I was not the type of person, I was so ego driven and so completely egocentric that it was absolutely impossible for me to even consider falling down the social scale. So, I reached my bottom in a pretty nice condo at 17th and R Northwest with a paid up car in the basement and a career that took me many different places. And when I saw my... Both personal life and my professional life, eventually going away, it became obvious to me that I wouldn't put up with that, and I was gonna either just end it or do something. And the fact that I picked up the phone and made that call to the Washington Area Intergroup Association office and found my first meeting, which was really bizarrely enough the infamous Midtown group in Washington. My first meeting was at Midtown. And those ladies that have researched some of the negative aspects of AA, this was long before years before Midtown washed up on the rocks of a real scandal. But I only went to that group once or twice, it wasn't one of my regular venues. But when I first walked down the stairs into that meeting. And in those days, those of you that are old like me, you'll remember the smoke, remember the smoke that my asthma... And I was a two-pack a day Lucky smoker and it was too much for me when I went into...

**0:03:01 John:** There was so much smoke in the room. It's like the incredibly younger ones don't even know what I'm talking about but it was incredible. And I walked down the bottom of the stairs and sitting at the bottom of the stairs was a defrocked Episcopal priest who I used to drink with years before in the old Admiral Benbow Bar on Connecticut Avenue in Washington back in the '70s. And he had disappeared, I didn't know what had happened to him. And Brother John's sitting at the bottom of the stairs and he said exactly the right words to me. He said, "What in the fuck took you such a long time to come down here?" And that was precisely what I needed to hear. I didn't need to hear, "Oh, poor me, poor you, you're such a broken unhappy person," just... "Why did it take you so long to figure it out?" And I immediately knew right from the beginning that I was in the right place. Just like the doctor just described in the... I loved his chart by the way. It was a great chart. The red cloud... The pink cloud chart. I just immediately, when I stopped drinking, I was so relieved that I wasn't gonna kill myself.

**0:04:06 John:** That I just went right up into the stratosphere on a pink cloud and managed to detox myself and find a group of like-minded people on Rhode Island Avenue in the Cathedral on Rhode Island Avenue, that famous church that JFK was buried out of, St. Matthew's Cathedral right at Connecticut and Rhode Island. And next to that church was this broken down old church building that the AA meetings were held in. And I found a group of like-minded people that really, really had my sobriety as their number one priority. That's what I felt right from the beginning. And this was a conventional AA meeting, that was wonderful. Then the problem started. Okay? I started going to lots and lots of AA meeting.

**0:04:56 John:** And I remember one day in late 1987, early 1988, I was sitting in a meeting. I don't know why I had such an affinity for Catholic churches but I was in this catholic church on V Street Northwest, which is in a very dangerous neighborhood at the time. It's only yapped up now. But you could hear the gunfire from the street over. Okay? Sometimes, you hear gunshot, it was a bunch of shooting galleries and drug dealers on the next block, near 14th in V Northwest. And at the end of this meeting, they would actually chant when they got to the end of the passage, "would or could if he were sought," okay? "Would or could if he were sought." I won't go into... I won't traumatize you with the rest of it.

[laughter]

**0:05:48 John:** But I just said I can't do this shit. If they're gonna... And they chanted it in unison, would or could. I said, "What have I gotten myself into now?" Alright? "What is this?" Basically, "What is this shit?" Alright? And by the time the summer of 1988 rolled around, I was about 18 months in, I was on my way out, and I had one afternoon sitting in my office, which was downtown on 23rd Street. 23rd and M. And I'm sitting in my office and I said to myself, "I'm going to the Childe Harold, and I'm gonna order two shots of Jack and a Heineken, and then I'm gonna get started, and because I just can't do this shit anymore." Right? That's the last time I had a very serious moment when I was gonna go out and do it. And for some reason unknown to me instead of going to the Childe Harold, I left my office and went to a 5:30 PM meeting. This one in a black Evangelical church, a step up from the Catholic. And the music's much better, and not to mention the company, but I went there and I didn't drink but I knew that I was in trouble. And then a miracle happened. Two atheists showed up and it's a secular miracle in my life. Two atheists showed up, two retired atheists, people about the age I am now, showed up at the WAIA office on Connecticut Avenue, and they were volunteering on the phone. Two of them sitting side by side, Maxine and Tom, both of them unbeknownst to each other were militant atheists.

**0:07:33 John:** I know that some of you are going to cringe at the term militant atheist and probably report back to headquarters in Canada or whatever up to Roger's place, or wherever, to Sheldon's place or something. Huey said, "Yeah, tell them." I said militant atheist once again. Our group was founded by two militant atheists, one from the University of Chicago, a brilliant man who had worked on the Manhattan Project had just an incredible career and another lady, kind of wealthy lady that owned art galleries in Georgetown. The two of them got together and Tom had been to this meeting in Chicago and said, "There's this meeting in Chicago called Quad A, atheists agnostics whatever in Chicago, we should start one here."

**0:08:16 John:** And they put an ad in the local AA newsletter, and two weeks later, I'm sitting in Maxine's living room at this incredible apartment building, which I actually later got a place in, a place called The Broadmoor, Connecticut and Porter. And I'm sitting in Maxine's living room and I'm saved, okay? Because the first things out of their mouth is, "We don't do that f-ing 12 Steps, we don't pay any attention to the Big Book and what we're gonna do here, what our intent is here is to share our experience in sobriety with our fellow alcoholics." That was the nut shell and "Oh, we're gonna read the AA Preamble, right, the real AA Preamble, not the fake one that we came up with, but the real one."

**0:09:02 John:** Okay? The real AA Preamble at the beginning and at the end, 'cause that's what AA really is, the fellowship of men and women, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And then we're gonna get up and we're gonna leave, and we're not gonna have anything else in the meeting but that and our

sharing." And they literally saved my ass, because I was... The next time... 'Cause I travel a lot, I've always traveled a lot. I don't travel as much now as I do for various reasons but I still... I'm around, I've been around a lot. I got around. And I knew that sooner or later something was gonna happen, out on the road, or because of work stress or personal stress or whatever. I knew I was headed out the door and those two saved my ass. And I haven't had to make any compromises with AA since. No bullshit about the 12 Steps. No bullshit about the Big Book. No revisions, theories, or any other kind of rationalization from that day to this. They saved my life. If I sound emphatic and I take these things to what some people might call extremes, there's a reason for it because I would have gone out and finished the job, good and proper if these folks hadn't have come up with a few simple ideas and here were the ideas in a nutshell.

**0:10:21 John:** And it's not written down anywhere, I don't have any books to sell, I've got a book though. You can buy, get my website up, but it has nothing to do with AA. [laughter] Okay, it has to do with my years in Moscow, but if you wanna buy my Moscow book come to me, I do, but you won't see any of my stuff, books on the table out there. Okay? Because it would be a very short book. It would have less than half a page on it because what I learned from Maxine and Tom, and our meeting's still ongoing by the way, that meeting still exists and is still doing very well, will have its 30th anniversary this coming September. But the fact is that if you make a decision about your drinking, that's the one part that's thorny. That's why I've got to talk to the professor, the doctor, because I'm very fascinated with this idea of making a decision.

**0:11:11 John:** Because if you don't make a decision, there's no hope of any kind whatsoever. That comes from within. But once you make a decision, you pick up the phone, you'd go to a meeting, you learn how to share, honestly share what's going on with you in your life. And then, once you've learned how to honestly share, you attempt to help another alcoholic. If you don't, you make a decision, you don't drink, you go to meetings, you share, and then you help another alcoholic. You're going to have a meaningful life. And that's what my two late friends, Maxine and Tom showed me. Because they came to this thing very late in life. Tom was a very senior US government official, whose... If his alcoholism had ever been known it would... He was a master at concealment and hiding thing, and he had about 20 years when he died. Maxine came to AA relatively late, when she lost one of her businesses because of her drinking. And she went to a rehab, and she came in relatively late, but had about 10 years of really useful life.

**0:12:23 John:** And what these guys proved to me, because I sat there and watched them do it, was that if you do a couple of simple things and you throw the rest of this crap out and don't even consider it because it's irrelevant, you can have a meaningful and a useful life, which is what I've attempted to have in the 31 years that I've been around. Now, some of these people in AA, and even some people in Secular AA, I've heard them talk about it, are gonna tell you, poor sufferers, that you have to have something called the personality change. Guess what? I'm the same ornery MF I've always been. I've never had a personality change. I never wanted to have a personality change and I didn't. But what I had was a behavioral change, and the behavioral change led to progress in my life, very similar to what the good doctor put up on the screen, and it's still going on. But I've never changed who I am because, personally I believe, that doesn't happen.

**0:13:36 John:** We do not change who we are. We can change what we do. And once we change what we do then who we are goes to different places. Why do we now, in Secular AA, have to come up with an alternative liturgy just to be acceptable to these people in the mainstream portion of our movement? I have... I was just... I had a interesting experience up in Canada. I don't know if there are any Canadians in the room today. I suspect there might be, given our location. But I was at the regional meeting with my dear friend, Joe C. And my buddy Sam here was there as well, and Larry

Knight, couple other people I know. I should say Larry K. But I was up there and I hadn't been shocked at a secular meeting in a long, long time. But I was shocked when in that meeting, during the course of that conference, at the beginning of every session, they read something called the alternative 12 Steps. And that blew my mind. I had in all my experience and all my years in a Secular AA down here, I'd never seen such a thing. And then at the end of every session, they read this thing. We have a perfectly good thing called the AA Preamble. It's the AA document. Its really, really good, right? But they read this thing called the Responsibility Pledge. I don't know what that is.

**0:15:08 John:** It's some kind of thing they're reading. And they were chanting it in unison, saying it in unison, and I said, "Am I back on V Street in 1987, listening to the gun shots over on the next block?" Excuse my language, Rogers, other people have criticized me for using bad language, but "Where the fuck am I? Okay? What's going on here?" Right? Are we gonna take one set of liturgies that didn't work for a lot of us and replace it with another, and then give the newcomer the impression they've got to do that? Now, I don't care what anybody reads. I don't care what anybody believes. Every individual member is absolutely free to do what they wish, and believe what they wish and read what they wish, as is every group. I didn't get up there in Canada and start yelling at the Canadians 'cause I was a guest. That wasn't my group. It wasn't my place to do that. But what I'm postulating is that, in the theme of this talk, which is basically the Big Book and the 12 Steps are utterly irrelevant. Having postulated that, why would we come up with an alternative set of liturgies or steps or books? I even hear somebody's rewriting the Big Book now. How can you rewrite a book that bad? It's just, it's mind-boggling. They've got a book out here that's called the Annotated Big Book.

**0:16:40 John:** They've got the Big Book with a... They've got blank pages. I don't know where these people come from, but they've got these blank pages that you annotate and write. And I said to them, they were shocked, when I said, "You should print one that has all blank pages in it." What are we doing here? We have to have a primary purpose, and the primary purpose I've always had is to stay sober and help another alcoholic when I can. I don't have any other primary purpose. My primary purpose is not to kowtow to a group of principles that I don't believe in, by somehow modifying them and making them acceptable to a mythical majority. I refuse to do that as an atheist, as a lifelong atheist, I refuse to do that. But now I've got to the part where I have to talk about compassion for our other sufferers. I've been very lucky in my life, like the doctor said, I grew up with a lot of white privilege, white male privilege, which we all know about and people write about all the time. But I was particularly lucky in that there was something in the United States called a Liberal Republican, they're an extinct species of people. I grew up in a home that had two Liberal Republicans that had... And my mother was a Liberal Republican feminist, which is... If you watch CNN, just doesn't compute these days, but there were such people.

**0:18:12 John:** They're all dead now like my mom and dad, but there were such people. And I was very lucky. One morning I woke up, I was 12 years old and like Bill Wilson, I was a good Presbyterian. I'm also a salesman and went to college in Vermont. I got a lot of ways of identification with St. Bill. But I woke up one morning and I told my mom, I said, "Mom." She says, "Time for church." I said, "Mom, I'm not going." And she says, "Why?" And I say, "Well I just don't believe that stuff anymore." And the Liberal Republican looked at me and said, okay, and went off the church and left me alone. That was a very fortuitous event. The other event was, I didn't have to consider any of this stuff until I came to AA, but I had two very understanding old time members of AA that knew me when I showed up, and they didn't propose that I do anything other than go to meeting when I first came.

**0:19:15 John:** And at the time I was having all kinds of romantic and emotional and other kind of problems, and I would call these guys up, two of them, and I would call, and they were both the same, both crusty, old time, old timer guys, and I would say, I'm going on and on about my problems, and they'd somehow get to the point of the conversation where they'd say, "Uh, did you have a drink today?" And I'd say, "No." And they'd say, "Oh, you're having a wonderful day. Goodbye." I don't need to consider your heart worn problems in life. The fact that you're having a, you're not having a drink today is what our relationship is all about. And that really worked for me. Nobody tried to reform me. Nobody tried to force any mythology down my throat. And when I did start to go out in the wider AA world and the mythology got too much for me and I said I could no longer, internally I was saying, more and more, I can't associate myself with people that basically are an arm of a religion, which is what AA is and has been found to be so in many courts of law in this great land of ours that I can't be associated with religion.

**0:20:30 John:** These people came up with this meeting and they saved my life. So I've been very fortunate. Others that are members of Secular AA have struggled in conventional meetings for many, many years, have only come to their atheism very late in life, and they may have a attachment to this mythology because that's what they were inculcated with, that I don't have, and they have to make some kind of internal or external accommodation with that. And I have to understand that. Not every story is like mine, but I will postulate that for the hardcore atheist like myself, any form of steps, any form of Big Book reductionism, any codification of the traditional AA program in that way is toxic and poisonous and destructive, because I think it could have killed me, but it didn't. So I guess that's basically what I have to say about the topic and will continue on with some other perspectives and the young lady on my right, Mary, will speak to us next.

**0:21:45 Mary:** My name is Mary, I am an alcoholic.

**0:21:46 Audience:** Hi, Mary.

**0:21:48 Mary:** Hi, everybody. I'm here visiting from Tucson, Arizona. It's great to be in the Pacific Northwest. My sobriety date is April 7th, 1987. I got sober in San Francisco and when I came into AA, I had five weeks of sobriety. It was more like being on the wagon for five weeks. My husband and I decided to stop drinking. And I was so excited when I walked into my first meeting to see all of you sitting there [chuckle] and realizing that there was a, I didn't know anything about AA, I didn't know anything about recovery. I never knew anybody that was in recovery. I mean I vaguely knew about headlines in the National Enquirer about some actors that might have gotten sober in Hollywood, but I didn't really understand anything about it. And I had thought it was for men basically. So when I walked in and I saw your happy faces and men and women together that looked a lot like the people I had been drinking with and working with, I was thrilled and I was often running and in thinking back on my recovery, it seems to me it was very secular for me.

**0:22:57 Mary:** I don't know if that's because I was in a big city, or if I really heard that idea of take what you need and leave the rest. I wasn't introducing myself as a newcomer 'cause I was past the 30-day mark. But after my second or third meeting, some woman came up to me and I've never heard this said to anybody else in the 30, next week it'll be 31 years, I've been going to meetings, but a woman came up to me and she said, "Well, you're new?" "Yeah, new." And she said, "Work the first three steps on your own, and then get a sponsor when you're ready to work the fourth step." I said, "Okay." So I was listening to what people said, I thought, "Well, I just worked this on my own Okay. I'm 32 years old, I'm an adult, I can figure this out." I basically looked at it as honesty, open-mindedness, and willingness as steps one, two and three. I wasn't, I didn't identify as an

atheist, agnostic, really anything. I just, I was kind of a secular person. I didn't go to church. I hadn't been to church since I was about 12 or 13.

**0:24:01 Mary:** And so I just thought... I guess I took it to heart that I should use the program as my higher power, and I thought "Okay, that's fine. That works for me". I didn't agonize over it very much. I basically thought "Okay, honesty is I'm an alcoholic. Open mindedness is there's a program here. There's meetings, there's a recovery community. And the third step was willingness and that was I'm willing to give this a try. I'm willing to embrace this recovery community." And shortly thereafter when I was ready to do the fourth step, I thought I didn't have a sponsor. I was kinda making half-assed attempts to get a sponsor. Mainly going up to women, asking them for phone numbers and then never calling them, which I think is pretty common for a new person. So there was this place called the Dry Dock where they had a four-step workshop.

**0:24:52 Mary:** It was in a room, maybe half this size with about 50 people in it. It was really crowded. We met once a week for four weeks. And this British guy led the group on how to do the fourth step exactly according to the Big Book and we'd all have our notebooks. We go home and write, with the columns and the questions. He said, "Don't tell people about this workshop. Sit down and show people how to work the fourth step according to these columns and these questions." Each one, teach one. Take this out into the community and use this method. He talked a little bit about the... At the end of the workshop, he talked a little bit about doing the fifth step and on six and seven, he said, "Don't linger on six and seven. Just get into action and keep going." I found a woman to hear my fifth step. I met her at a meeting. I asked her if she could hear my fifth step, and it was perfect because she was moving 3,000 miles away shortly thereafter.

[laughter]

**0:25:47 Mary:** So I was like great. She was... I don't even remember her name. It's sort of like they talk about meeting a stranger and doing the fifth step. I found my fourth step the other day, by the way. I hadn't looked at it in 30 years. That's an interesting exercise.

[laughter]

**0:26:04 Mary:** Looking... I mean it was very thorough. It was... This poor gal, we sat down a couple times for me to go through it all, but it was such that that young woman, that 32-year-old was so filled with fear and anxiety and it's been really interesting to look at that and see me now. After that, when I started thinking about the eighth step, to be honest with you I went to therapy for the first time in my life. I started to feel that it was very shame-based and I sought out outside help for the first time in my life, found a therapist who understood the 12 Steps. The first woman I went to... I thought I'll shop around for a therapist who's gonna understand me. I think in retrospect, I never said I'm gonna reject the steps the way they're written, but I think when I look back on it, I basically did them my way, and I continued... To me, just looking at the rest of the steps is about developing my ethics, cleaning house, maturing. Just growing into an emotional maturity that I needed to have, learning how to play well with others and helping others. And I think of course I went to a lot of step meetings. I went to a lot... One reason I think that my relationship with the steps has not been traditional is that I also kind of rejected the sponsorship model.

**0:27:32 Mary:** And one reason I felt really uneasy about the sponsorship model was when people talked about being fired by their sponsor. That just, I thought that... I don't think it's supposed to be that kind of relationship. What's kept me sober without a sponsor is having... Always having some

close-mouthed friends that I could confide in, and then they could confide in me and keeping a really close knit group of women in my life. I've lived in a couple of different places. I've been in Tucson now 20 years. I have a really core group of women in recovery that I connect with. And in a way, they have been my sponsors. I just haven't had that, "Oh, will you be my sponsor?" kind of relationship with one particular woman. And if I'd had that, I probably would have had more of a defined system of going through the steps, one by one. But I think over time, I've addressed all the principles of the steps in my own way. And I love the talk that we just heard even to today, talking about... When you talked about becoming a citizen. Now I'm doing service not just in AA, but I do things in the community.

**0:28:43 Mary:** To me it's about being a part of the larger community than just the recovery community. And I only really came out as secular a couple of years ago. I've been sitting in traditional AA meetings for at that point, 28 years. And I heard a woman talk about being an atheist, and it was an 11-step meeting and she said "Well I certainly meditate, but I don't pray 'cause I'm an atheist" and the top of my head kind of exploded. [laughter] I'd never heard that in a meeting before. And I realized "Oh my gosh". That's when I discovered this sort of the Secular AA. To me that was an oxymoron. I didn't understand that it even existed. So I don't throw out the 12 Steps 'cause I know they've helped a lot of people. I've heard over the years how much they've helped people. But for me, they weren't a core part of my recovery. To me, it's been more finding my tribe and Secular AA is kind of my tribe within my tribe, I think and it's totally energized my recovery as far as really getting more into the history of AA and discovering...

**0:29:57 Mary:** We have three secular meetings in Tucson. Two of which have been going on for about three years and one that's just started, women's meeting. As far as the Big Book is concerned, I never warmed up to the Big Book. The only thing I really was blown away within the Big Book when I first came in, was that more about alcoholism, where they describe all the things we tried before we got sober. That really got my attention 'cause I thought, "Wow, these people really understand alcoholism. [laughter] This is where you come to really understand the addiction." I never really embraced it. I never read the Big Book on my own. Of course, I've heard it and I've heard the stories. It's like I didn't avoid Big Book meetings, but I didn't ever sit down and read it on my own. It seemed very constipated in the writing, and I just see it more as a historic document. I have respect for it, but I don't have a copy of the Big Book that's all underlined and highlighted and notated. I just see it as a historical document that's really, it is what it is.

**0:31:08 Mary:** I read the 12 and 12, of course. I finally got my home group to read the Traditions in addition to the 12 Steps. They had never read the Traditions before in the meeting. I mean I'm talking about the chapters, chapter by chapter. And I got a lot of flack for that. And I said, "Well, why are we taking this book and reading it halfway through and starting over again, and reading it halfway through year after year after year? Let's read the second half of the book." I became sort of a tradition thumper and sure enough there was people in that meeting and they were like, "Man, this stuff is really interesting." They had never read the second half of the book, but I think this discussion is very healthy about what's going on with Secular AA. Are we within AA? Are we outside AA?

**0:31:53 Mary:** I think it's a very healthy discussion. What I see for myself is that in the... Especially in the women's group that we started. It's in an independent bookstore called Mostly Books. So we named the meeting Mostly Agnostics. A lot of newcomers that walk in there. What I'm discovering is a lot of the young women that come into our meeting are already agnostic atheists. It's like not a discussion in their head about, am I or am I not? They're just thrown by the faith-based program, is what I call AA. I don't call it religious, but I call it faith-based. And I just

felt like we do say the Responsibility Declaration at the end of the meeting. It's not a pledge 'cause we don't do pledges in AA. I decided to take the Responsibility Declaration to heart and to take it very seriously, that when anyone anywhere reaches out for help, I want the hand of Secular AA always to be there. And for that, I am responsive because I want these gals to realize that there is hope for them.

**0:33:03 Mary:** I'm more upset about the stories I hear from these gals, that they're fired by their sponsor, if they can't have a higher power that looks like their sponsor's a higher power, or they get flack in meetings for talking about being agnostic or atheist. They get dirty looks. I talked in a traditional meeting about being an agnostic. I purposely did it at the end of the meeting when I came out because I didn't want everybody to be talking about their higher power. So I just said it at the end of the meeting. It was kind of a newer women's meeting that I hadn't been to before. And people came up to me. They were so condescending. They were going, "It's okay. I've been there before. That's happened to me. You'll come back around." I don't mean to say this, but not realizing I'm 30 years sober. Like, "Don't drink over this kind of thing." It was... "And I wish us all... Thank you, thank you." You know like, "You'll be okay. Don't worry. You'll get your higher power back" is kind of what they were saying. "This is just a phase you're going through."

**0:34:07 Mary:** But my main thing is how to reach out to the new people. Large percentage of millennials are coming in secular people. They're not converting to secular atheism. They already are. And a lot of people say, "Well, they have other places to go. They have SMART Recovery. They have SOS. They have this, they have that." But they don't have the number of meetings that we have, those other groups. We can be there for them. And for that, I am responsible, and I take that very seriously. If they wanna work the steps a secular way, I'd be happy to do that with them. I think it's a very personal choice. If you wanna change the wording. Josie says, "Change the words, the words won't mind." I'm ready to meet people wherever they are.

**0:34:56 Mary:** If they don't wanna work the steps, fine. If they wanna read the 12 and 12, fine. I tell people when they want me to sponsor them, I say, "I'm not gonna read the Big Book with you. If you wanna read the Big Book cover to cover, chapter by chapter, I'm not your sponsor material, but here's my number, give me a call." And I've gotten flack for that from people. People saying to me, "I heard you don't read the Big Book with your sponsor, with your sponsee." It's like, "Well, what business is that of yours?" [laughter]

**0:35:25 Mary:** It's kind of my attitude 'cause I've also been sent back to the literature and one thing I will put a plug in for the sponsor, question and answer sponsorship pamphlet, which I think is really very good. It says, "We're not here to tell people how to work their program as sponsor." And it also says in the great section, it says, "What about the spiritual side of the program? What if my sponsee doesn't get the spiritual side of the program?" And the pamphlet says, basically, there is no separate spiritual side of the program. The spiritual side is one alcoholic reaching out to another. It doesn't say that you have to believe in a higher power, that your higher power has to look like mine. I've gotten so I don't even use that terminology. But I love that section that says, "If you don't understand this, that spiritual means us helping one another, then that's really what it is." So with that, I'll stop, and I'll look forward to hearing from someone else. Thanks.

**0:36:26 Bill:** Okay. My name is Bill. I'm an alcoholic.

**0:36:28 Audience:** Hi, Bill.

**0:36:29 Bill:** It's kind of a couple of tough acts to follow here. But just thinking when I was a child, my mother left me out in the rain, and my brain worked, and things haven't been the same since.

[laughter]

**0:36:40 Bill:** But John mentioned something earlier that really resonated with me because I've heard around the tables, "The only thing you have to change is everything." And I never bought into that. I'm basically the same person that I have been for a long time. I'm very easy to buy for, at Christmas time, because everybody knows what I like, and so forth, and so that works pretty easily. But I got to thinking. And I called John, Thursday night as a matter of fact, and we talked for a while. And it was really pretty neat. The conversation we had just it was a few minutes, it was a pretty lively conversation, and I enjoyed that. But two of my favorite comics are Lenny Bruce, and George Carlin. And one of my favorite things I remember, is you said, "Okay, if there is a God, may He strike us dead." And you went off to the audience. We're good, 'cause now I'm gonna up the ante. He said, "If there is a God, may He strike me dead." Well, I did get a little cramp in my left leg, but other than that.

[laughter]

**0:37:34 Bill:** So that's why... Actually, I belong to an atheist website. And there's some really funny stuff in there. And so, probably throughout my life, I've kinda gone back and forth. I grew up in kind of a crazy situation. And there were people from my church that did very good things for me when I was a teenager, an inspiring hoodlum back in New Jersey. And they kept me out of trouble. But I never did buy into the God thing. Matter of fact, even Jesus was easier for me, 'cause I saw pictures of him, or at least what pictures people thought he looked like. He looked like a surfer dude.

[laughter]

**0:38:08 Bill:** But I just couldn't buy into it. But in AA, I had gone through the motion for years, because well, I spent 20 years in the Army. I remember the German extraction, so I had to follow the rules. I found that it was getting more and more difficult to buy into it. And like I said, having listened to people like Lenny Bruce and George Carlin, and people that were doing religion. And not just funny stuff, but smart stuff, and funny stuff about religion and so forth, I found it more and more difficult. As a matter of fact, last night, I started reading a little bit of 'We Agnostics' to kinda get the juices flowing for...

[laughter]

**0:38:50 Bill:** I think, as Mary mentioned, one of my favorite parts of the Big Book is that part that talked more about alcoholism. Because it talks about all the ways that we try to drink, and all the ways we failed. There's another part, I can't remember exactly where it is, but it talks about how many times we've found ourselves sitting at the bar, pounding on the bar, saying, "How did this happen again?" So that part I can relate to. But I found the parts about being religious and so forth, or not being being able to accept God as your higher power, it could be really condescending. And I was talking with some folks last night, and I did the research, because I hadn't pulled the book out in years. I had this little 12 and 12 book, little blue one. About that big. And I wasn't even quite sure where it was, but I finally found it. Because I'd given her some information that I remembered from that book, and I said, "Well, I'd better check it, and make sure that I've given her the right

information." And this is one of the things that put me over the line. There was this thing in there said... It talked about different types of people who had difficulty believing. And there was the last one, said, "Let's start with one who had no faith at all. This is the belligerent one. His thinking can only be regarded as savage." Something along those lines.

[chuckle]

**0:40:00 Bill:** And then later on, on page 31, it says... The word defiance is mentioned about three times. And there's also a portion that I read... It's interesting, there's a meeting that I go to, that I went to a long time ago. The First Step Hall, and I go there primarily because I have a lot of friends there. And it always make me feel better when I go into a meeting. And I disregard the chanting and that... I participate, but it doesn't really mean a whole hell of a lot. But one of the things that I found going there was, well, they read a portion, and I think it was from Dr. Bob. And if I can interject something very quickly, and I don't know how anybody else feels about this, but I do not feel that the first 164 pages are a sacred document, or that Bill and Bob are... It's funny, this First Step Hall that I go to, there's almost an altar at the place. There's the podium, and they have a picture of Bill and Bob, and there's the 12 Steps, and it's all through different shades.

**0:41:03 Bill:** And so, if you're a newcomer, you might be a little concerned about all this. But the one comment that Bob made was that... Something along the lines of, "If you have any kind of intellectual or philosophical difficulties with accepting God as your higher power, then I feel sorry for you." And that kinda goes back to what Mary was talking about, 'cause we talked a little bit last night. One of the most offensive things I've ever heard, or heard said to me in a meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous is, "You'll fake it until you make it." Like, "Oh, you're still atheist, you'll come around." And I found that to be a little troublesome also. So I was at my wife's home group. I didn't normally go there, but I had a rare Saturday off, and so I went to the meeting. And I'd just gotten to a point where I was starting to talk at meetings about my atheism. And not only have I lost AA friends, but I've also lost family friends for my atheism.

**0:42:00 Bill:** So I had mentioned it at the meeting. I said, "30, 40 years ago, it was very uncomfortable for gays and lesbians to go to a lot of meetings." And I would be naïve to think to think that that still doesn't go on, but it is still, I think, from my experience, a lot more safer, particularly in a city like Seattle, where folks can be much more uncomfortable. But then I felt very often as an atheist, that's why I've often used the term "coming out as an atheist," because, it's been already mentioned, people kind of sneer and glare at you when I talk about not believing in any kind of supernatural power that controls anybody or anything. Well, it's like a fart in church. That just doesn't go over well at all. So I'd mentioned that at the meeting, and a woman came up to me and... I probably shouldn't say this, but anyway, I will. But a friend of mine in the program, and this woman came up to me and her nickname got to be Sister Mary Margaret, and she kinda read me the Riot Act. Actually it wasn't 'til about maybe four or five days later at another meeting, and she came up, read me the Riot Act, because I had mentioned about how very often gays and lesbians were beat up, and sometimes as an atheist, that's what I was concerned about, 'cause I'd had some pretty nasty things said to me. And she came up later on. She said, "Well, my dad was an atheist, he never got beat up." And blah, blah, blah, blah. And I started to explain...

**0:43:21 Bill:** I said, "No, I'm not even gonna... I'm just gonna let this one go." So after that, we went out for lunch the next week and we were talking about it with my friend Tom, who had been very instrumental in putting a lot of this together, and also started the Many Paths group in Burien. So we were all talking about that, and I mentioned it to him. I just kinda was talking about it in general. But we went home, and I mentioned to my wife, and she said, "Well, don't worry about it

'cause Tom's gonna start a meeting in about two or three weeks," and he has been a real go-getter as far as getting meetings started. Secular meetings started. We have one in Burien Community Center on Sunday mornings. There's one at the Solution Bookstore in Burien on Wednesday nights. And so there was a real... I felt comfortable for the first time, and it's probably already been mentioned. And it's ironic, because our Sunday morning meeting is in the Burien Community Center, which we also share with a rock band church group. It's like they're swaying back and forth and that sort of thing. But what I was thinking about, that I had to be careful about, is that I don't come on as self righteous to them about my non belief. "Hey, you guys are idiots. What, are you kidding?"

**0:44:36 Bill:** It's funny when I think about it. There was a cartoon that I saw on one of the atheist websites that I look at, and there were some pilgrims, and there were Indians out there doing rain dances, and they're like, "Savages are crazy. What are they doing out there?" Then they walk into the church, and they kneel down and say, "Please, God, bring us some rain." And so that sums up a lot of the feelings that I have about God and religion. One of the first things I read was, "Well, gee whiz, if God is so omnipotent, why didn't he just flick Hitler's head off?" And so those are the kinds of things that started to form my thinking. And so, I found this stuff in the Big Book and also in the 12 and 12. The 12 and 12 can be the essays that Bill wrote, I guess, in the '50s, those can be pretty condescending also. As a matter of fact, that's where I... The part about the belligerent one and the savage... There's defiant, savage, the whole bit. And so that certainly affected my thinking. Like I said, I went along with a lot of it in the very beginning, and it's funny, I just thought about this.

**0:45:37 Bill:** John had mentioned it, and I had someone in early sobriety that was like that. It was a guy named Jay Slavin, passed away a couple of years ago, and I'm from Elizabeth, New Jersey, and if there's some folks that have ever seen the opening credits to the TV show The Sopranos, well, that's my old neighborhood. And he was from Brooklyn, New York. So we hit it off right away. And Jay always seemed to have a cigarette hanging from his mouth. Back when you could smoke at meetings, and I was pretty new.

**0:46:02 Bill:** I only had about maybe five or six months, and I'd be going on and on about this, that and the other thing. And he would go, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And finally we stopped and he'd say, "Well, did you drink today?" I said, "No." He'd say, "Well then what's your fucking problem?" [chuckle] And that's kinda put it in perspective for me that there was a lot of self-centered whining that I was doing, and that's one of the things I think that sobriety has helped me with. And I certainly agree with John that, for instance, my home group, we don't hold hands and we don't chant. And the group is pretty new, so we have to tell people who come from other AA meetings that we don't chant or hold hands for our meetings. So thank you for being here, and your help with picking up the chairs and tables is appreciated. But as far as joining hands or doing any kind of chanting, now, this meeting that I go to, the First Step Hall, that's... They do hold hands and chant, and you have the option of going to large prayer or serenity prayer. I suggested the hokey pokey, that didn't go over very well at all.

[chuckle]

**0:47:09 Bill:** But what I do, particularly at that meeting, 'cause like I said, I enjoy the meeting. I enjoy the people there. I don't always enjoy what I hear, but on page 84 of the Big Book, it says, "Love and tolerance is our code." And so I try to practice that a little bit. So when they... During serenity prayer, I'll kinda bow my head. But I won't say the prayer. And then when the meeting is over and they join hands, whatever prayer they say, I just bow my head and I don't say anything. And that seems to have worked pretty well. But the group that I go to, my home group, I really feel so much more comfortable in that environment. And I think the doctor mentioned it about AA

becoming... Or the secular part of AA becoming a part of mainstream AA, and I hope that's the case. I'm really concerned about that though.

**0:48:00 Bill:** And, I guess, any change is kinda slow. But, and it's already been mentioned, there's still that kind of sneering and glaring and condescending attitude that goes on. When I'd mentioned about... Like I said, when I talk about not believing in a supernatural being, that doesn't go very well. So, I have rambled on long enough here, and thank you for listening.

**0:48:26 Audience Member:** Thanks to all of you. I'm one of those folks down from Canada, by the way. But I've got a question, or a comment, on something that I've hoped to hear in an AA meeting for a very long time. I've heard it this morning, and I heard it from you. When I did my First Step groups in traditional AA, God as you understand Him and all that, I remember getting to the end of Steps groups, I was always this rarest position in the group, I was always the last to be asked to comment and that. And then in Step 12, we went around in the group. In the group, Oliver was like, "So, have you had a spiritual awakening?" And everybody enthusiastically, "Yes! Yes!" You know? Dancing.

[laughter]

**0:49:12 Audience Member:** Over the top. I thought to myself, "You know, I think I've failed the course." I felt no different. And now, I'm currently, every Wednesday night, I'm in a Secular Step group, which is strange in a number of ways. One thing is, the first time I've ever been in a mixed Step group, which throws a different sort of curve into how things proceed, and not a bad one, it's a positive thing. But the point I wanted to make is that I agree wholeheartedly with the point that you made, that being in AA doesn't require a personality change. My career background is in psychiatry and psychology. So, I have some stuff in my head that I could never apply to myself, otherwise I wouldn't be in AA.

[laughter]

**0:50:07 Audience Member:** I could tell everybody else how they get sober...anyway. But what I fully agree with is that it's about the change of behavior and the personality is what you have. And, for me, being strung out on coke or whatever, or drinking myself into the gutter, it just suppressed certain aspects of what was already there, as behavior change and sobriety and being clean has brought out the ability to bring forth behavioral changes in myself. And it's been very refreshing listening to you highlight them. 'Cause I've never heard it before stated so well in an AA meeting, so thanks.

**0:50:53 John:** Thank you, sir. And I have to admit, I did have a spiritual experience. You know when it was? It was at a Prince concert in DC, in 2003. I was dancing and I was like an African American church lady. The Purple One got me up and dancing. So, I have had a spiritual experience, the late great Purple One who desperately needed us, unfortunately. Yes?

**0:51:17 Audience Member:** I loved all the sharings, it was fantastic. I, like you, had this kind of awakening and found Secular AA. It's wonderful. I have a little inner conflict though, 'cause my tolerance towards this traditional AA is getting less and less. I feel sometimes it gets me more and more angry. It gets me more and more frustrated. I feel like I should be... I'm mellowing in almost every other area in my life. And yet my tolerance for the traditional AA is getting less and less. So I'd love to hear how you handle conflict, how do you moderate that to them? And do you have any

of that inner turmoil? It seems like, as I've become more and more aware, the angrier I get, which is not what I wanna be as I advance in getting sober. So, I'll just share that.

**0:52:00 Mary:** I'll just say, my women's meeting, that's called Mostly Agnostics, there was an announcement made in another women's meeting in the same room that, "Oh, there's also an agnostic meeting in this room on Tuesday nights." And somebody in that meeting said, "Oh. That's a cult. Don't send women there. You shouldn't be announcing that meeting." I overheard this through the grapevine. So I thought, "I'm gonna go to that meeting and see who's saying that kind of thing about the agnostic meeting." And nobody mentioned it, I think it was a visitor that was there that said that, that they were passing a thing around for a speaker. So, I signed up to be a speaker two weeks later.

**0:52:36 Mary:** So, it was the first time in a regular meeting that I told my story. I went in there, I didn't wanna be the belligerent one. I wanted to be calm, quiet, not on my soap box. I just wanted to tell my story, to tell my story about coming out as secular. And then I braced myself and I thought, "Oh, God. I'm gonna hear everybody's version of their higher power." The first four women that shared said they were agnostic or atheist. And a couple of them said they had never heard somebody say in a meeting that they didn't believe in God. I was like, "Oh my God," it was such a great feeling. And I think that's why I wanna continue to go to traditional AA, 'cause I wanna start to come out to those people. 'Cause I'm not sharing in those meetings anymore, and I need to, because I'm worried about the young people who are turning around and walking out.

**0:53:26 John:** Yeah. And when it comes to the traditional stuff, you can ignore it because they're irrelevant and meaningless to people like us. They don't mean... The other thing is they have no power over you. They have no power. They are powerless over you. There was a hand in the back of the room.

**0:53:50 Bradley:** My name is Bradley I'm a member of the Night Owls group in Asheville, North Carolina.

**0:54:00 Audience:** Yey.

**0:54:00 John:** Great.

**0:54:02 Bradley:** It's a secular group if you are ever in town, we meet at 10 PM, Sunday through Thursday evenings. So my question was about... So as this meeting has expanded, it's been a little bit over a year, since me and a couple other people started it. There's 25 to 30 people in there just about every night in this meeting, simply because of the timeframe, 10 PM, there's not any other 10 PM meetings other than two nonsecular ones, Friday and Saturday nights. But we get this influx of people that are maybe not... Maybe they are traditionalists. So they come to our meetings simply because of the time, and I feel like more and more, we have these business meetings, that were... They want more of our meeting, secular meeting, become not that way. They're trying to bring in more of the traditional ways. Like, "Oh, we should reimplement this or that." And we've made some pretty good... Like, one night in a month we'll have a speaker in meetings, simply sharing one story. I think that's making stride... Taking strides to go in the other direction, more of a secular direction. I was just wondering about your experience, any or all of your experiences on any people coming into secular meetings, and trying to make it the traditional way.

**0:55:50 Mary:** Well, I know in our meetings, we do have people that have said they are actually

identified as a Catholic, but they like coming to our meeting because they like keeping it like separation of church and state. They wanna keep their religion over here, and their recovery here, and they're very open about that. We had another guy who was there for weeks, not even realizing it was an agnostic meeting. He thought... He had never been to AA, it's close to where he lives, and it was like it only dawned on him that it was a different kind of meeting. We thought, "Wait 'til you go to the other. Wait 'til you go to the other one." But I thought that was interesting, that not everybody there... They were finding it more... You talk about the core of recovery as the title of this... People who are seeking community. And I've had people say to me, "What do you talk about at an agnostic meeting?" It's like, "Well, fears, resentments, joy, serenity, how to stay sober one day at a time. It's still an AA meeting."

**0:56:50 John:** Some of them are dangerous. Very few. We did have a couple of dangerous ones show up in our early years. But now they seem to be more like auditors. They show up from the... I can spot them. I know some of the type of people and they come in. It's great. I think I told Sam this earlier. They come in, they have a notebook, and they start to write. Okay? And about halfway through the meeting, they close the notebook and they start to listen, because they understand, it's just a bunch of alcoholics sharing without any of their mumbo jumbo. In all the years we've had our meeting though, we did have one serious incident with a mentally unstable person who... It being America, I know in Canada you probably wouldn't even think about this. But when he started speaking, the first word that came into my mind was gun. And he had a gym bag next to him. And it's the only time I ever actually had to go and sit down next to... I moved and I sat next to him 'cause if he went for the bag, I was going for the bag too. That's one time. He was just nuts. But mostly they're just people from traditional AA that don't like the idea and they leave. Okay? And some of them actually may go away with a positive impression, but just like any other mentally ill person, you treat them with respect and the dignity that they are... Should be afforded, and they will take their mental illness somewhere else.

**0:58:38 Audience Member:** Just a comment, I guess. The problem I have sometimes is being open-minded, honest, open-minded and willing to receive other people's outlooks on their traditional AA ways.

**0:58:56 John:** You have no obligation to accept stupid.

**0:59:03 John:** Okay. No. I'm under no obligation to accept lunacy and stupidity and prejudice. And I'm not gonna accept those things. I don't care who they come from. If that's what's going out, the reaction is gonna be... It's gonna be commensurate with what is given. It's our responsibility to be polite and welcoming to every member that shows up at our door. But if someone is not polite and welcoming to you as a human being, you have a perfect right to react in an appropriate kind of way.

**0:59:50 Audience Member:** Thank you.

**0:59:51 John:** Oh, by the way, speaking of behavior, the best behaved person I've seen all day is this pooch. That's a wonderful dog. I think we should give a round of applause for that dog. That dog is...

[applause]

**1:00:00 John:** I really know I'm on the West Coast now. I got the pooch in the meeting. It's like going to San Francisco for the first time all over again. Here we go. I love it. Okay, who's next?

Willow.

**1:00:14 Willow:** Two minutes.

**1:00:15 John:** Two minutes. Do you want us to... Yes, ma'am.

**1:00:18 Willow:** Thank you for mentioning my dog. His name is Utah, and he's happy to come around and say hello.

**1:00:24 John:** He's great.

**1:00:24 John:** He's great.

**1:00:25 Willow:** You don't need my permission. People have been asking all morning. I wanted to say that I think because I was a child in the old version of the Roman Catholic church, and I was cognizant when... I remember when they stopped speaking in Latin. I know what ritual is. I have experienced it, and I know how empty it can feel. But when I'm in a meeting, in a 12 Step meeting, and people start doing that, it's like immediately I just start to fold up. I can tell when people mean what they're saying. I have experience listening to people going through the motions, and it doesn't get me anywhere.

**1:01:08 Willow:** It just feels so odd to me that... The beauty of this program is about being authentically human with one another, then we turn it around and say, "Let's stop for a minute and fake it 'til we make it." It's like, "Why would you do that? This is what we're focused on. We know how to do it. Let's just do that, and don't try to turn it into something else." It's beyond me how this happened, and I really hope things like this trickle everywhere.

**1:01:39 John:** Thank you. And we're coming to the end. And I will invite anybody in the room, if you happen to come to your nation's capital for any reason. And who knows, you may have a real good reason to come and speak up very soon. Please come and see us on Sunday at We Agnostics, the Hill Center near the Eastern Market Metro stop, 11 AM. We're in all of the directories. So please come and see us. We always love visitors. Okay. And come to Washington when you have to.

[chuckle]

**1:02:10 John:** Is all I'm gonna say, which is not part of the topic. We're done. Thank you very much. Okay, alright.