

**00:00 JOHN S:** Hello and welcome to AA Beyond Belief-the podcast. I'm your host, John S.

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**00:20 JOHN S:** This episode is going to be a little bit different than what we normally do, because I'm not going to have a guest. It's just going to be me and you talking. I haven't done this since our first episode when we were introducing AA Beyond Belief and laying out our vision and what we were planning on doing. I'm doing this now because I feel like I need a reboot, and I just want to talk about ideas I have for the podcast and website going forward, and hopefully to hear back from you to see if you have any ideas or suggestions on what we can do differently. So yeah, that's what this podcast is all about, is like a reboot to energize me to make a renewed commitment to you to produce these podcast episodes on a more regular basis. Before we start looking forward, let's take a look back at where we came from so that everybody understands why we do this to begin with.

**01:14 JOHN S:** Okay, it wasn't my idea to do this; it really wasn't. What happened was back in 2015, the summer of 2015 actually, Roger C was contemplating retiring from AA Agnostica and he contacted me to ask me if I would start a website that would replace AA Agnostica, that would provide a place for atheists and agnostics in AA to share their stories. So, I said, "Sure." Without even stopping to think about the work involved. I said, "Yeah I'll do it." I like building websites, so I thought it would be fun, and we went and did it. We started AA Beyond Belief, and I had help early on.

**01:57 JOHN S:** Bob K was a huge help. He's the author of, *Key Players in AA History*, and he wrote a lot of the early material for the site. He also allowed us to post stories from his book, *Key Players*. So, we did a lot of Bob K stuff early on. It was almost like the Bob K site. Roger wrote for us early on too, as did Thomas B, a good friend of mine, and John L; author of *A Freethinker in Alcoholics Anonymous*. A lot of people contributed. Steve K from the UK. There are just more people who helped than I could possibly name here in this podcast. Probably nobody helped me as much as my dear friend Doris A from Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Doris was our Chief Editor, so her job was to solicit articles. She would go out and ask people to write for us, and after they would write an article, they would send it to her and she in turn would forward it on to Galen T in New Jersey, or PJ in Sydney, Australia. They are our proofreaders and editors.

**03:11 JOHN S:** What they would do is take that story after they received it from Doris, and they would polish it up to make it as readable and as appealing as possible. They would work closely with the author while they did that, and then Doris also would have Katherine or Cope take original photography that we would use for the articles. It was a lot of work. There would be a lot of the back and forth communication between them and the author to make sure everybody liked the changes made to the story, that they liked the images that were being used. It was just a huge amount of work. It was great that she did that, because I didn't have to worry about the written content at all. All I had to do was focus on the podcast and I used to do a bunch of podcasts at that time.

**04:01 JOHN S:** So yeah, so that's kind of how we got started and we've been pretty consistent about posting our articles. There have been times when we would take a break and maybe not post for a little bit, but by and large, we've been posting every week. The podcast... oh boy, I was going strong on that! I'd do like a podcast week for a good long time, but for almost a year now, I've not been doing them. I've slowed down a lot; I kind of hit a wall, and I'm going to go into that a little bit later. But that just kind of gives you an idea about the beginnings of AA Beyond Belief.

**04:45 JOHN S:** One thing I think is unique about it, is that it's a group effort. That was important to me early on, that AA Beyond Belief to not be identified with me personally, that people do not think of it as my site. I wanted it to be your site. I wanted to create something that would live on beyond me. So, I created a non-profit organization, and I created a board of directors to go with it. My idea was to have a business-side board of directors that would make sure the bills were paid, that we were filing

our paperwork with the state, that we were reporting our finances to the people who contributed to the site. At the same time, we would have this creative side to write the stories, edit the stories, work with people to get their stories published, take care of the website, the photography; all the artistic and creative work.

**05:46 JOHN S:** The idea was that the people on the artistic side wouldn't have to worry about the business side, but what has happened in actual fact is, it overlapped. So, Thomas B, Doris and I were on the board of directors doing the business side, but we were also doing the artistic side. I never could get people who would just do the business side. So, in addition to doing the podcast, I was also doing financial reporting which I used to be really good at, but I just stopped doing. So, it's just a lot of work, a lot of work is involved in putting this thing together, but it's been worthwhile.

**06:24 JOHN S:** I have not enjoyed anything more than my time here at AA Beyond Belief. I have received emails from you that have been so humbling and gratifying. When you tell me how much the podcast and website mean to you and how it has helped you, that is what inspires me to move on. It is just the greatest thing in the world, so if you can think about it and you would like to send an email to let me know how the podcast and website has impacted you, I would love to hear from you, just send me an email at [john@aabeyondbelief.org](mailto:john@aabeyondbelief.org). So yeah, it's been a great experience and I've learned so much, it's just been amazing to speak with doctors that are experts in addiction medicine, to speak with authors, I've learned a lot about AA history from authors and I've learned about recovery from different authors, just... Oh man, all kinds of... Everything and speaking with people from different parts of the world and learning what AA is like in those areas. I've spoken with people from Japan, from South Africa, from Europe, the UK, Canada, the United States, all over the United States, just everywhere, and it's just been the greatest experience ever so it's been great.

**07:53 JOHN S:** Now, there's a lot of work no doubt about that, and it does cost money too. I've not been good about asking for money on a regular basis, and I've tried different things and I just haven't been successful at that. I also had some volunteers to help with the business side, but I was just so overwhelmed with work, I couldn't even coordinate the effort to get them on board to help me so that's something I need to work on. It's hard to balance the work I do here with my other responsibilities and I think that I got a little over-extended because I'm involved with my home group, with my district, with the area, just my regular job that I have to do, I just overextended myself. So, I decided to just focus on my work at AA Beyond Belief.

**08:50 JOHN S:** One thing I want to bring up a that concerns, or something I've been thinking about is I sometimes wonder if we need to re-brand the podcast. I'll tell you a why. It's got the name "AA" in it, and it's not like that's a bad thing because most of us are AA members, but the thing is sometimes I feel like it restricts me a little bit. It hasn't though. We've done a lot of episodes that deal with things that aren't talked about in Alcoholics Anonymous. For example, the Sinclair Method where you actually take a pill so you can drink normally, it's crazy talk in AA, or talking about sugar and food addiction, or sex addiction, or what they call outside issues in Alcoholics Anonymous. We discuss those topics freely here, because I figured we would talk about what you're interested in, and I know that AA members are interested in more than just singleness of purpose issues. We want to talk about a wide array of issues that have to do with recovery, so that's what we do here. I don't know, maybe it's not necessary to rebrand, maybe we're free to talk about whatever we want, but sometimes I feel like having AA in our name just kind of, I don't know maybe it's not a big deal, but let me know what you think about that. Should we call the podcast something else? I don't know. Anyway, that's one concern I have that I've been thinking about. It's probably a moot point, but it's something to think about.

**10:21 JOHN S:** Let's talk about the plans for the podcast and website. I would like for the website eventually to have a redesign, to make it look more modern, use a different theme, have it look better and be more functional on mobile devices than it is currently, to re-categorize some of our articles so it's easier to find something that you're interested in reading about things like that. As far as the

podcast goes, I like what we've been doing. I like the personal stories that that evolve into conversations. The Step podcasts that I did with Benn we're among almost popular, so perhaps I might want to start doing that again, going through the steps. I think it would be good to have co-host again, Benn from Omaha did a lot of podcasts with me early on.

**11:17 JOHN S:** There is also a friend of mine who is interested in helping out. His name is Wes B and he's been on a couple of podcasts with me to talk about some books. He has expressed an interest in helping out, so I thought that would be nice as well. I would also like to start getting back to posting these podcasts in a more consistent regular basis, even if it's just every other week. I like doing them weekly. It's a lot of work, but I'm weeding some other things out, so maybe I can make a commitment to producing more podcasts.

**11:53 JOHN S:** I've got some episodes lined up. The next episode we will be posting will feature a conversation with Mike Collins. Mike wrote a book about sugar and food addiction, basically sugar addiction. He also has a website about sugar addiction and he's going to talk about his experience as an alcoholic and addict who when he was getting off of alcohol and drugs, got addicted to sugar. He learned that by getting off the sugar that he was healthier and happier, and it enhanced his recovery.

**12:27 JOHN S:** It's a topic we've talked about in the past, and I think it's an important one. I think t we could do better in AA, to take a more holistic approach to our recovery. Rarely do we ever talk in meetings about doing things for our physical health, or diet and exercise. It's all about emotional health. Well, our emotions are tied to our physical well-being, so I think it's worthwhile to talk about. I can certainly use it myself. I'm not in a great shape right now, I've not been exercising and eating right, so it's good for me to talk to these people about these things because it inspires me.

**13:05 JOHN S:** Another episode coming up is an interview with the Sober She Devils, which is an online secular AA meeting for women. It's been going on for a couple of years, and the women have become good friends. The last time we had a convention for the International Conference of Secular AA in Toronto, a bunch of them got together and they all had on matching t-shirts. I know a lot of these women; they're really great people and it'll be fun talking to them. I'm going to record it on Zoom which is the software that they use for their meetings. There's going to be a group of them, maybe three, four or five, I don't know how many. We'll all just have a group discussion which I think will be fun.

**13:47 JOHN S:** It's a good way to get the word out about their meeting and it's it is interesting how online meetings can be helpful to a person's recovery, and it's nice for people to know that there's a secular option out there and particularly for women. I think there is a need for women's meetings to this day. After talking to some of the women in my group, it's pretty obvious that there's a need for it.

**14:14 JOHN S:** Another episode I have coming up which I'm actually looking forward to, will be with my old friend John H from DC. John has been on a couple of podcasts. We did a podcast with him early on, "The Myth of The Angry Atheist" and then we also posted a podcast of his talk at the Widening the Gateway conference in Olympia Washington, which was actually very well-done talk. John is... I don't want to put words in his mouth, I'll let him state his position on his own, but from what I understand, he's of the opinion that those of us who participate in secular AA meetings should probably start our own organization, and leave AA for good. I thought it would be interesting to have him on the podcast. We could have a little bit of a debate maybe because I don't fully believe what he's saying, but I would love to hear his views. I can listen to him and respectfully disagree if that's the case, but quite frankly he might convince me otherwise, I don't know. I get a little burned out from the traditional AA crowd, I can barely stand these traditional AA meetings, so I do know maybe it is a good idea that we start off a new thing? I don't know but it'll be fun to talk with him.

**15:35 JOHN S:** I don't have anything planned after that, so if you would like to appear on the podcast, send me an email at <mailto:john@aabeyondbelief.org>, and we can set up a time. All you

have to do is share your story, and from that a conversation will emerge and we'll take it from there. Maybe you have something going on at your group you want to talk about, maybe you want to talk about starting a group that's always a good topic. I get emails quite often from people asking how to start an AA group. I tried to write an article about it, but it's so much work to write an article. I thought, "well it would be fun to do a podcast about it."

**16:16 JOHN S:** I have a lot going on here in Kansas City, but it's good stuff. We started a meeting the KC secular AA speaker meeting, which we turned into a podcast, you can listen to those podcasts at [secularaaspeaker.org](http://secularaaspeaker.org). That's been a lot of fun, but there have been some challenges. Although we have a lot of meetings here. We have eight secular AA meetings a week in Kansas City Missouri, but we don't have a lot of us. We're running out of people to ask to speak and we ran out pretty quickly. Also, our group is pretty young, both in age of the members and the length of sobriety, so there's not a lot of people who are comfortable to get up and share their stories. We may need to reach out and have people like you share your stories remotely with us. That would be a lot of fun, so if you're interested, send me an email at <mailto:john@aabeyondbelief.org>.

**17:08 JOHN S:** That's what is going on over here. I was working closely with my district as a treasurer, but I'm not going to be doing that anymore. I am the chair of the Archives Committee for the western area of Missouri, and I'm going to try to continue doing that. There are some exciting things coming up too. On September 7<sup>th</sup>, I'll be going to SOAAR, the Secular Ontario AA Roundup, where I will participate on a panel that Roger is hosting about the 12 Steps. That'll be interesting. Then on September 21<sup>st</sup>, we're going to be celebrating the fifth anniversary of We Agnostics Kansas City and the fourth anniversary of the Freethinkers in AA group here in Kansas City. We've invited Joe C from Rebellion Dogs Radio to come down and speak. We've already got the date set for September 21st, we have the place at 6425 Wornall Road, so we're set to go. We just have to pay for it, get Joe down here and it's a done deal.

**18:11 JOHN S:** We also started a Step meeting here in Kansas City, a Secular Step meeting, which has been interesting. We're using the book *Staying Sober Without God* by Jeffrey Munn. That's a book that Wes and I did a podcast about. I think it was just the last episode. It's a great book to use for Step work. What we did is to start off with an introduction of AA history because a lot of the people that come to our group don't know anything about AA. They have not read the Big Book or anything, so at the first meeting, we went over what I understand to be the four foundational moments of AA starting with Rowland speaking with Carl Jung, who tells Rowland that he is hopeless, but every once in a while an alcoholic will have a spiritual experiences. So, Rowland goes to the United States and joins the Oxford Group searching for a spiritual experience. He has it, and as part of his effort to stay sober, he helps Ebby Thatcher out of a tough spot.

**19:11 JOHN S:** Ebby Thatcher carries the message to Bill Wilson who ends up having a hallucinatory experience at Town's Hospital, which he thinks is spiritual. He meets Dr. Bob, and AA is born. I think that's the four founding moments. Anyway, we go through that, and then we talk about what are the steps anyway. The steps are a description of the experience of those people at that time. It is their experience, not our experience. They wrote it in religious language because they came from a religious organization, "The Oxford Group". We in 2019, are going to describe our experience a little bit different, quite a bit different than they do. That's why it's nice to use Jeffrey's book *Staying Sober Without God*, because it's written in modern language. We don't have to interpret like watching Turner Movie Classics. We can actually have real modern-day language to discuss the steps. Now I have also used the Big Book in these meetings as a historical reference, but that doesn't come without its challenges. That Big Book is not very well loved by our community. There were two people who commented about not liking the "Doctor's Opinion" that I assigned... I assign reading after the meeting.

**20:36 JOHN S:** One woman said that she thinks it's ridiculous, that Dr. Silkworth from the 1930's seems to be the last word on the subject of alcoholism. Like over the last 80 years nothing else has been learned. She's got a good point. Why haven't they updated that? Another woman, a younger one

Maggie, she hated that he was calling alcoholism an allergy. Those are just little things. Imagine how they're going to feel when they read the "Chapter to the Agnostics." I don't even know if I want to put them through that kind of torture. Anyway, I just thought it would be a good idea to understand the history of AA, and what traditional AA is like so that they understand and appreciate why we have to have these secular AA meetings. We have a lot of people who come to our group in Kansas City who have never been to a traditional meeting. They don't really understand. I'd like them to see that we're Alcoholics Anonymous as Atheists and Agnostics, and we've been around since the beginning. This is where we come from, and this is where we are today. That's what we're doing at the Secular Step Study.

**21:49 JOHN S:** I'm thinking about taking the Secular Step to this podcast. Either with Benn, or Wes or both. We can discuss those steps using Jeffreys book. Maybe even work through the steps on the podcast, and maybe even find a way to have some interaction with you as we do it. That's just a little of what is going on here in my life in Kansas City. Yeah, good stuff. I'm looking forward to the rest of the summer, and I'm going to make a commitment to you to post these podcasts on a more regular and consistent basis. I'm going to try for once a week. I know that's a lot, but I think I can do it. Once I get into doing it, I really love it. I will need some guests though. If you're interested, let me know.

I think that about covers it for today's podcast. I hope this hasn't bored you to death. If you think about it, if you would like to support the podcast, I would love for you to do that. It doesn't have to be a lot of money. Just send us a dollar or \$2, or \$3, whatever. If you can make monthly contributions for a dollar or two that would be great.

**22:54 JOHN S:** If everybody who listened with this podcast, and visited our website gave a dollar, we wouldn't have to worry about money. We wouldn't have to ask for it either, but don't worry about it. We're not here to make money, but if you can support it, please go to our donation page at AA Beyond Belief. It would be very much appreciated. Also, if you are inclined to write, please write something for AA Beyond belief and send us your story. If you would like to participate on the Board of Directors, and do the business side for AA Beyond belief, please I need help. If you'd like to be on the editorial board and do the creative stuff, let me know, I'd love to have you. If you have website experience, and you would like to redesign our website, go for it. Let me know if you want to get involved because this is your site, it's not my site, and I want it to be your site.

Once again, it was great talking to you. Our next podcast is going to be with Mike Collins talking about sugar and food addiction. Until then, you all take care, be well, we'll talk again soon.