**October 2012: Finding Our Way**

**An agnostic discovers his place in the Fellowship**



After being in and around the AA program for more than 30 years, I now have 17 years of continuous sobriety. I was not able to get sober and stay sober until I became honest with myself about “the God thing.”

Religion and church attendance had been a significant part of my early life. We lived across the street from the Methodist church that my grandfather had helped establish, and I attended Sunday school regularly. I frequently attended church with my grandfather and became a member when I was 12.

In junior high school I was introduced to the sciences and adopted them as my sources for understanding the world and myself. Math and the sciences were my primary focus in high school, and I majored in mechanical engineering in college. Church attendance was only at Christmas and Easter, if I went at all.

With marriage and children, church again seemed the thing to do. We joined a Methodist church, enrolled the kids in Sunday school, and began attending regularly. For me, it became just a good way to kill an hour until sports programming started on TV and the convenience stores could sell beer. When the kids were old enough to have the option of not going, we reverted to Christmas and Easter attendance. Asked if I believed in God, I could truthfully answer, “Yes.” However, I viewed the Bible as no more than a collection of legends and fables, and religious practices as having some benefit, but holding no real significance for me.

There was nothing unusual about my drinking history—for an alcoholic. From a few beers in high school, my drinking progressed until alcohol took control of my life. Finally, largely thanks to my doctor’s (a neighbor) and wife’s nagging, I consented “to do something about my drinking.” My doctor identified several treatment options, and I selected the one that sounded most compatible with my lifestyle. That I might be an alcoholic never entered my mind. I didn’t fit the profile, I thought. They put me in the backseat of our car with a six-pack of beer, and off we went. After a brief interview, I was admitted on the spot.

It was a total surprise to me that the treatment program turned out to be very AA-oriented. In addition to AA meetings held at the facility, we were transported to two or three other meetings a week, so I received a good introduction to the program.

When I was discharged, I was given a list of AA meetings in my small city. I started attending a couple of meetings a week and performing minor service work, but mostly just sat as an observer. The only thing I was doing right was not drinking, but I was a long way from being sober. That lasted a little over two years. Then I drank for four months and returned to the program after a brief “rehab refresher.”

Convinced that I had to get more serious, I started following directions. I read the Big Book, memorized its prayers, and recited them in my morning meditations. I joined a group and got a sponsor, studied the Twelve and Twelve, and worked the Steps. I attended at least five meetings a week, and did service work in my home group. Feeling good about my progress, I was confident my sobriety was solid.

Eight years later, domestic and job-related problems arose and I got drunk. After 11 weeks of drinking, I went back to the program totally demoralized. I was sure I had learned my lesson. A little over two years later, I got drunk again.

Feeling that I must be one of those “hopeless drunks,” I immediately started going to AA meetings again, but there was something very wrong. If asked, I could still honestly say that I believed in God, but God had no real meaning for me.

I stayed in and around the program for several months, but nagging questions kept haunting me. Was I constitutionally incapable of being honest with myself? What is it about AA that works, when the best theological and medical minds have tried for centuries to find a solution? Why would a loving God wait until Mother’s Day, 1935, to plant the seed that grew into the AA program when alcoholism has been a problem for thousands of years? What was it about that meeting between Bill W. and Dr. Bob that was so special?

All I knew for certain was that something had to change or I was going to start drinking again. In desperation, I finally got honest about “the God thing.” Only to myself at first, I admitted that I did not believe in God. That was the lowest point of my life. I was not drinking, but now I did not feel comfortable in AA either.

Fortunately, I realized there was one thing I did believe without reservation: AA works! In all those years in and around the program, I had seen too many “drunks” get sober—and stay sober. So, if there is no God, why does it work? I have found my answer, one that enables me to stay sober. AA works because only an alcoholic trying to stay sober can help another alcoholic wanting to get sober. It works because only a recovering alcoholic can identify with, have credibility with, and thus help another drunk. And the bonding that can occur between them is a spiritual experience! They help each other stay sober. That, I believe, is what really happened in Akron between Bill and Dr. Bob, and it is still how it works today.

We need to remember that AA, with or without God, does not cure us of our addiction to alcohol. If we were truly “cured,” wouldn’t we be able to drink normally? AA gives us the hope, the will, and the tools to live without drinking—but only for one day at a time. It gives us a philosophy and the support for living a life that is healthy, happy, joyous and free. That does seem like a miracle, especially to a suffering alcoholic.

There are now six “free thinkers” meetings a week in our city. It started with the “We Agnostics Group” and three or four drunks showing up. Today, we have three groups meeting in different parts of the city and often have over 20 recovering drunks in attendance. We continue to grow in membership and in acceptance in the greater AA community. Our meetings follow the usual formats: we have both open discussion and literature study (Big Book and Twelve and Twelve) meetings. The main difference is that there are no prayers. We read Appendix II from the Big Book at the beginning of our meetings and close by reciting the AA Responsibility Declaration: “I am responsible. When anyone, anywhere, reaches out for help, I want the hand of AA always to be there. And for that: I am responsible.”

There are “freethinkers” groups all over the country with increasing numbers of sober agnostic and atheist drunks, proving that there is a choice. In working with newcomers, we stick to the basics and encourage them to work the Steps, but also to find their own understanding of a “power greater than themselves.”

So, to all AAs, please judge us “freethinkers” by the quality of our sobriety. We are not trying to tell anyone not to believe in God. What we do believe in is working for us.

-- Jerry S. Austin, Texas