

The Agnostic movement in AA

AA recovery is centered around the concept of a higher power. To an innocent newcomer the meeting appears as a group of people imploring him to get on his knees and pray to God to help him stop drinking. Many people in these modern times are turned off to the idea of God. Even those who are trying to believe in God are struggling to come up with a concept that makes sense and is acceptable to them. This book demonstrates a program of recovery that is consistent with the 12 steps of Alcoholics Anonymous but does not require or invoke any belief in the existence of a higher power or God.

In recent years, the agnostic movement in AA has taken strength. Even though it is a small minority, many people are beginning to realize that AA is essentially an agnostic approach to recovery. What do we mean by agnostic? Any person who rejects a clearly defined notion of God could be termed agnostic. People who believe in a mystical god, people who reject the notion of a punishing God, and even people who do not believe in a higher power orchestrating the happenings of the universe—all these could be called agnostic. There is much diversity in the Agnostic approach. The agnostic movement is essentially a rebellion against authoritative religious beliefs.

AA in its essence is an anarchistic and agnostic group. There are no leaders, no authorities, no one handing down beliefs; you are invited to look at the steps that are suggested as a program for recovery. The fact that God is freely mentioned, in early AA literature should be seen as the writers struggling to name a certain sense they had—of something mystical, something transcendent—that they could appeal to for help.

The agnostic approach explores how such an appeal assists in recovery, without necessarily regarding this as proof of the existence of God. The agnostic approach protects the total freedom of the individual in defining to himself the notion of the transcendent. AA calls this, "a higher power of your own understanding." When AA talks about the necessity of believing in a higher power, the agnostic perspective on this is that connecting to a sense of the transcendent is an essential ingredient of recovery. But it does not imply the existence of any mystical forces in the universe.

Man, has a mind that is constantly chattering. This is the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind. This mind has debated the use of alcohol, has often declared its intention to stop drinking and has also often provided rationalizations for continuing to drink. This mind promises to stop drinking, generates apologies for despicable behavior, strategizes on how to lie to the boss and the family, schemes on how to generate money to continue drinking and so on. It participates in debates on whether we really need to stop drinking or simply to control drinking. It argues that we are not really alcoholic, but we just sometimes drink too much. This Conscious-Rational-Ego mind thinks it makes all the decisions; it thinks it is in charge here. This is what AA refers to as the Ego.

AA realizes that the decision to drink is often coming from much deeper than the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind. A

person who had been sober for six months, suddenly finds himself drunk and is asked about it later. "What happened? You were doing so well?" He is at a loss to explain what happened. His Conscious-Rational-Ego mind hastens to come up with an exclamation, "Oh, I just thought I could take one drink. I was with some friends... etc.." This is coming from a person who has acknowledged repeatedly over the last six months that it is impossible for him to control even if it takes one drink.

The obvious conclusion is that the decision to drink came from somewhere deeper or higher than the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind. But this Conscious-Rational-Ego mind cannot accept that it is not in charge. The first step in the AA is the acknowledgment that the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind is powerless over alcohol.

Is there more to us than our Conscious-Rational-Ego mind? Certainly, a little contemplation will convince us that there are many processes and decisions that are made for us without even consulting the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind. An infant knows what to do without the benefit of rational thinking. Our likes and dislikes, our emotions, our fear of public speaking, who we instinctively attracted to (sexually or spiritually), our thirst for water or alcohol, our hunger—these are all governed by a higher level than our Conscious-Rational-Ego mind.

AA was one of the first programs to acknowledge that any human change has to occur at the level much deeper. If our Conscious-Rational-Ego mind was in charge, everyone would be eating exactly the way they wanted to, everyone would be precisely the weight that the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind decided was ideal, and everyone would be scrupulously following the exercise program that they had decided on.

Similarly, if the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind were in charge, nobody would get drunk except specifically in those instances that they set out to. If they decided they should quit alcohol, they would do so without needing any outside help. Experience has shown that the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind is not in charge when it comes to alcohol.

This understanding is what is behind the first two steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. The notion of powerlessness and the concept of a higher power should both be taken simply as statements about the power limitations of the Conscious-Rational-Ego mind. Nothing mysterious or magical needs to be read into this.

The agnostic approach is simply one that is rational and scientific and rejects mysterious and magical concepts. However, we will try and understand the role that belief in mysterious and magical forces may play in recovery from alcoholism. And we will explore how to tap into these without necessarily accepting that recovery involves magic.

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