

# **Alcoholics Anonymous and Addiction – A Potted History, Some Personal Observations, The Twelve Steps and Some Myths**

*A Member's Experience*

Anton Smith

*The motivation to write this is a result of being both an AA member and having trained and currently being involved in the counselling and Psychology Fields. I've experienced a sufficient number of misconceptions about what AA and addiction are and what AA does and how it does it that I was delighted to be offered this opportunity to give my own personal experience.*

The origins of AA are very little known to the vast majority of people and, in my experience, this includes those who work in the medical, psychiatric, psychotherapeutic, psychological and other healing professions. It is also perceived solely as a grass-roots, self-help fellowship with a 'religious' bent (often exaggerated and misinterpreted) and that the programme of recovery has no scientific basis.

Whilst AA is indeed very much a grass roots fellowship and is the sum total of individual experiences, it's surprised many whenever I've mentioned the involvement of Carl Jung. Whilst Jung had no direct involvement in AA's formation, it was his experience with an alcoholic

patient which formed the basis of the AA recovery programme, The Twelve Steps.

Jung had been working for many years with a wealthy American, a chronic alcoholic who, despite intensive psychotherapy, simply couldn't stop drinking. At one point he asked Jung whether there was any hope for him. Jung replied that there was. He knew that throughout history there were instances of alcoholics recovering by undergoing phenomena which he described as 'vital spiritual experiences'.

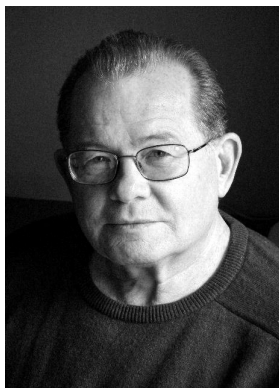
What Jung meant by this was that such alcoholics experienced huge emotional rearrangements and displacements, whereby ideas, attitudes and emotions

that were at the very core of their natures and beliefs were replaced by a completely new set of conceptions and motives.

Jung went on to say that he had been trying to create such rearrangements in his patient but had been unsuccessful. He told the patient that he had not yet undergone the spiritual experience necessary to bring about the change. The patient then sought such an experience and stopped drinking. He then passed this experience on to a friend, another chronic alcoholic, who stopped drinking as well. The experience was then passed on to another man by the name of Bill Wilson (Bill W) who became one of the two founder members of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Together with other early AA members, Bill W incorporated these experiences, together with some ideas from the moral re-orientation movement, including the Oxford Group, into what were to become The Twelve Steps. In my view and in the view of some eminent psychologists and psychotherapists, these constitute a sophisticated blend of behavioural, psychotherapeutic and spiritual principles which have led to millions of alcoholics experiencing sobriety for life.

There was a degree of correspondence between Jung and Bill W, once AA had become established in the 1950's and in which Jung expressed pleasure that his patient had done well and that AA had been formed as the result. He also expressed that he had always wondered why it was that we refer to alcohol as 'Spirits' and AA members often



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talk about having mistaken alcohol for the true Spirit.

I believe that the early members and others they sought in order to help the movement forward recognised that alcoholism is not a one dimensional disease. It exists at a number of different levels. There are behavioural, attitudinal, psychological, sociological, emotional, (possibly) genetic and spiritual roots to the condition. The reason that the AA programme of recovery has and continues to be so effective for me is that it addresses all these levels.

It is not just a matter of not drinking but of addressing the underlying nature of the alcoholic. I believe that Jung was the first to recognise the true nature of addiction. He realised that addiction is *not* anything to do with the substance. It stems from a mix of causes, as above, in varying degrees. There are many addictions which do not

involve a substance at all – addiction to power, security, work, gambling, for example which, in themselves, are potentially just as serious and dangerous, if not more so, than the substance addictions.

In the fields that I work in I see very little difference between an alcoholic and any other person affected by any of the roots mentioned above. Many experience such difficulties but do not become alcoholics – they may well exhibit other forms of dysfunction and other forms of addiction (workaholism, co-dependency and the like) but they do not turn to alcohol. Alcoholism is a very visible expression of inner pain, anguish and dis-ease. It's as if the pain of being can't be hidden any more nor as effectively as with the use of other coping behaviours.

The AA programme, to paraphrase M Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Travelled* and other titles, '...is a highly sophisticated body of psychological and spiritual wisdom...'. I feel it very effectively creates the circumstances brought about by Jung's psychotherapeutic element (personal and emotional awareness) with his patient, bolted on to a spiritual element that gives the vital spiritual experience that Jung advocated.

The most important thing that the programme has done for me is to remove the *need* and therefore the *compulsion* to drink. Many agencies, particularly those that advocate controlled drinking, seem to believe that an alcoholic can

learn to enjoy drinking if done in moderation, the assumption being that alcoholics would like to continue drinking, provided they didn't get into trouble with it. I and many others have all tried controlled drinking but the basic dis-ease remained. The Twelve Steps have helped me to address the underlying causes, which means that I do not feel this dis-ease.

The truth for me is that, as a recovering alcoholic in AA, drink simply doesn't hold anything attractive, worthwhile nor enjoyable. It's pointless and only serves to create a false sense of being in me. This is not a conscious attitudinal matter. Something has shifted at a very deep level by practising The Twelve Steps in my daily life, accompanied by a deep sense of wanting and needing to be the real, true self.

As a practising alcoholic, I used drink, knowingly or unknowingly, to change the way I felt about myself, my emotional state and to block out pain. When all this was revealed by the Steps, I was able to recover pieces of myself that I'd lost, buried or denied and the need to drink was removed.

For me, this is a continual process of self-actualisation and I'm able to own my total life experiences, however painful some of those are. I feel good about myself, am emotionally stable, have self-belief and a positive mind-set. I'm realising my full potential as a human being and have become emotionally independent. From a position of feeling *dis-eased*, I've moved to being *at ease* with

myself, my relationships and my environment.

I conclude this section with some strong personal opinions about the approach to alcoholism and so-called 'binge-drinking' held by Government and various agencies involved in the field.

There is a view that education about alcoholism (and addiction in general) - what drink does to the body, the social, employment and family consequences and the like - is helpful and will serve some useful purpose in stemming the increase in alcoholism. It won't. My mother was an alcoholic and many of my AA friends also had an alcoholic parent. Between the ages of 15 and 27, I witnessed her demise and death through alcoholism. I knew all there was to know about the condition. I knew what drink did to the liver, the brain and that once an alcoholic takes a drink, he or she can't stop. I knew all about the strength of various drinks. Yet I became an alcoholic. There are many similar stories. Time after time I hear alcoholics say that they knew that they were killing themselves, that they were ruining chances of staying in employment, destroying their relationships and yet they couldn't stop.

An alcoholic continues to believe that he or she isn't an alcoholic, that 'tomorrow' or when the condition gets 'serious enough' they'll stop. Alcohol is, however, a very cunning foe. However much a person knows about the effects of drinking heavily, either in the short or long term, once a drink is taken, any reason departs. When sober, an alcoholic will believe that the next time

they have a drink, they won't get drunk. They believe they'll be alright. Alcohol will always tell people lies, (whether alcoholics or not), that they're not drunk, that they're alright to drive, for instance.

The other very subtle trick that alcohol plays is that it doesn't let you know you're an alcoholic until you are one. There's some invisible line between heavy drinking and dependent drinking that is virtually impossible to spot until it's been crossed. Here there **is** a difference between alcoholism and drug addiction. When someone starts drinking, they nor anyone else can ever know whether they'll become an alcoholic or not, whereas it's a near certainty that anyone who takes heroin, for instance, is going to become an addict.

There is a very different drinking culture to the one I grew up in. Drink was the accompaniment to a meal, something to be enjoyed at a party and to be taken in moderation just to 'loosen up'.

What seems to be occurring nowadays is that people are going out for the sole purpose of getting drunk. I wonder why this is and believe this to be a very serious malaise of escaping from reality, in part or perhaps primarily caused by the fact that people have no true sense of self. Some, if not all, aspects of life are unsatisfactory and disempowering. Emotional needs are not met, society is fragmented and there is no true community anymore. Instant gratification has become an expectation. The myth that the pursuit of materialism, acquisition, working hard,

achieving kudos and status will create happiness is beginning to be felt as a form of dis-ease, even though this is not necessarily consciously recognised.

They, like I did, are chasing the wrong spirit.

I became a very successful businessman. I had all the good things in life. Yet the more successful I became, the more empty I felt and the worse my drinking became. The only way I can explain this is that I fell for the illusion that if I gained things outside of myself, all would be well. If I got married, had children, got a good job, had lots of holidays, had respect and looked good, all would be well. All that happened and yet the end result was misery and alcoholism. I never attended to myself and the inner journey I needed to take.

### **My experiences with the Twelve Steps.**

#### Admission.

Accepting powerlessness over the condition.

#### Behaviour.

Stop drinking.

#### Support.

Sober AA members – non-professionals, experiential. Sharing of experiences.

#### Recognition.

That alcoholism cannot be conquered by the use of self-will. That it is a form of insanity, in the pure sense of unsoundness

of mind, not in a psychotic sense.

#### Hope.

That there is a solution, as evidenced by many recovering alcoholics with long-term sobriety and who are happy, contented and leading useful lives.

#### Self-Awareness.

Examination of past relationships and experiences. Admission of harms done to self and others. Gaining insight and understanding of emotional disturbance, low self-esteem, dependency and co-dependency. Realisation of attributes. Gaining of self-esteem through knowledge of self and admission of wrongs done. Gaining emotional sobriety. Owning emotional pain and past traumas. Change of mind set from pessimistic to optimistic. Gaining courage in order to change behaviour.

#### Reparation.

Amending relationships.

Taking new awareness of self into the world. Repairing broken, fractured and damaged relationships.

#### Attitudinal change.

Belief in a power greater than self.

Gradual change towards an ability to 'let go' and detach from the ego. Experiencing the benefits of changing behaviour. Acquiring faith and courage to manage life effectively instead of defectively. To be true to oneself.

Greater tolerance and acceptance of the world and those in it as they are, not as one would like them to be. Growing sense and acceptance of responsibility for one's life. Becoming less self-centred and narcissistic. Helping other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

#### Community.

Sense of safety, togetherness, purpose, shared experience.

Ability to share experiences without fear of ridicule, abuse, contradiction, opinionation. Differences of a sexual, cultural, racial and sociological nature are celebrated, accepted and welcomed. One common primary purpose keeps the community in being – the need to stay sober and achieve personal and spiritual growth. On the same row of chairs in an AA meeting may be sitting a QC, a company director, a housewife, an ex down and out and a celebrity rock musician. They are all there to support each other.

#### **Myths about AA.**

##### It's a secret society

My understanding is that anonymity was brought about by early members recognising that they could be overwhelmed by demands for help from suffering alcoholics if their full names and contact details were widely available in the community or at the workplace. The anonymity concept subsequently took on a deeper spiritual significance, in that it is a means by which all members are regarded equally and not differentiated by virtue of their status, class, social background, employment etc.

This is documented in AA literature.

##### It's a Cult.

I have never experienced any cultism. To me, it's a self-help group, a fellowship, without any rules or compulsory observance but with guidelines and traditions. There is no insistence to follow any specific doctrine. As I see it AA is, if anything, anti-doctrinal in as much that one of its fundamental principles is open-mindedness.

There is no insistence that members *have* to follow The Twelve Steps. Members are left to form their own conclusions. Contributions are voluntary. No member's contributions are ever known by others. Each group and indeed the whole fellowship is entirely self-supporting. One of our traditions is not to accept outside contributions.

##### AA costs a lot of money

Unfortunately there is a perception brought about by the media that one has to be wealthy to join AA. Stories written about high-profile celebrities who have accessed AA at exclusive and expensive treatment centres can imply that that is the only way to join AA. AA is open to anybody, irrespective of income, who sincerely wishes to stop drinking. There are a variety of ways in which newcomers can join – by simply turning up at an AA meeting, phoning the AA helpline, being put in touch with a member who will take them to a meeting or through a family member, a friend or workmate who may be a member themselves or who know someone who is.

### It's compulsory to stop drinking.

The only requirement for membership is a *desire* to stop drinking.

### AA is a Religious Sect.

AA's refer to a 'Higher Power' or 'A God of my/your Understanding'. This can be anything an individual member chooses it to be. It can be a concept or it can be something physical, such as the AA group, where the collective experience of the group certainly has more power, knowledge and wisdom than the individual possesses. AA does have agnostic and atheist members.

### That it's a substitute addiction

AA is a community where, for the first time in my life, I've been able to communicate socially and emotionally at levels and with degrees of honesty never before experienced, without judgement, criticism or attack. The quality of my relationships far exceeds

previous experience in all areas of my life, *not* just within AA. I don't regard this as an addiction – it's simply a means by which I continue my personal and spiritual growth and, most importantly, pass on my experience of recovery to others so they may benefit.

### That the programme of recovery is unscientific

My experience as a practising counsellor tells me otherwise. The AA programme incorporates many aspects of current psychotherapeutic models, particularly Jungian, humanistic, existential, person-centered and transpersonal psychologies. This is confirmed by a good number of AA members I've know who've also taken up counselling or psychotherapy. All those I've talked to on the subject report that they've already met many of the principles taught on their courses, albeit without the scientific label attached, in experiencing and practicing The Twelve Steps.

## **Want to know more?**

If anyone reading this article wishes to know more about alcoholism and AA, please contact me. Literature is available all over the UK, as are members of AA who regularly give talks to schools, colleges, the prison and probation service, employers, health professionals and counselling and therapeutic services. There are no charges. Members offer their services voluntarily. All you need to do is call your local AA phone number, which should be in the front of Yellow Pages or equivalent and ask to be put in touch with the PI (Public Information) Representative. If you have any difficulty, please contact me, I have an AA National Directory.

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