

# A HISTORY OF AGNOSTICS IN AA

Roger C



*to think own self be true...*

# **A History of Agnostics in AA**

**Roger C**

**AA Agnostica**

# Table of Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Preface](#)

[Introduction: Time to Rally](#)

[Part One: Our History](#)

[Chapter 1: An Agnostic in AA](#)

[Chapter 2: Rejection](#)

[Chapter 3: The “God Bit”](#)

[Chapter 4: Early History](#)

[Chapter 5: More Rejection](#)

[Chapter 6: Changing the 12 Steps](#)

[Chapter 7: Agnostics and Human Rights](#)

[Part Two: Problems in AA](#)

[Chapter 8: Accepting Special Composition Groups](#)

[Chapter 9: Back to Basics and Other Religionists](#)

[Chapter 10: Conformity and Conventional AA](#)

[Chapter 11: Conference-approved Literature](#)

[Part Three: Moving Forward](#)

[Chapter 12: Literature for We Agnostics](#)

[Chapter 13: Santa Monica Convention](#)

[Chapter 14: Progress not Perfection](#)

[Chapter 15: Austin Convention](#)

[Chapter 16: A Growing Secular Movement](#)

[Conclusion: Who We Are](#)

[Appendix I Secular Versions of “How It Works”](#)

[A New “How It Works”](#)

[An Updated “How It Works”](#)

[“How It Works”](#)

[Appendix II Histories of ten agnostic groups in Canada](#)

[A Broad Highway](#)

[Sober Agnostics](#)

[We Agnostics](#)

[Beyond Belief](#)

[Beyond Belief](#)

[All are Welcome Group](#)

[The Broader Path AA Group](#)

[The Secular Step Meeting](#)

[Freethinkers Group](#)

[The Only Requirement Group](#)

[Appendix III Five Stories from AA Agnostica](#)

[The “Don’t Tell” Policy in AA](#)

[Responsibility is Our Theme](#)

[Hallowed be the Big Book?](#)  
[Father of We Agnostics Dies](#)  
[We Are Not Saints](#)

## **A History of Agnostics in AA**

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## *Preface*

In case it is not clear early on, the author of this book, Roger C, has managed the website, AA Agnostica, since it was first created in mid-June 2011. The site is described as “a space for AA agnostics, atheists and freethinkers worldwide”.

Two of the sixteen chapters are written by life-j. Over the years, he has written a number of articles about secular AA including one called “Open-minded” which was published in the October 2016 issue of the AA Grapevine, an issue devoted to “Atheist and Agnostic Members” of AA.

We do not claim to have written about every one of the individuals, groups, meetings, websites, conferences, etc. which have been a part of the history of agnostics in AA.

Roger C would especially like to thank all of the “non-believer” alcoholics he has met via AA Agnostica articles and comments, at the conventions in Santa Monica and Austin and in the rooms of AA. They have provided the “you are not alone” experience so crucial to long-term sobriety.

## ***Introduction:***

### ***Time to Rally***

A few days ago I got an email from a woman, Emma. It was not at all an unusual email and followed a rather common motif. Emma had spent a bit of time reading various articles on the AA Agnostica website and wanted to know why we agnostics, atheists and free thinkers didn't start our own movement, our own organization.

She even suggested that we might not be real alcoholics.

After all, she insisted, "a common problem requires a common solution". And the solution to alcoholism was very clear: it was AA, as she understood it: the first 164 pages of *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the 12 Steps, God and "Conference-approved" literature.

If we agnostics didn't accept that, if that didn't work for us, then perhaps we were not real alcoholics and we were certainly not legitimate members of AA.

I replied with a brief email:

*My answer is simple, Emma. Tradition Three is very clear: "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking."*

*And AA is meant to be a helping hand for any alcoholic who reaches out for help, and for that each AA member is responsible, according to our Responsibility Declaration.*

*As for the solution, well, as Bill put it: "It must never be forgotten that the purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous is to sober up alcoholics. There is no religious or spiritual requirement for membership. No demands are made on anyone. An experience is offered which members may accept or reject. That is up to them." (Letter to Father Marcus O'Brien, written in 1943, and quoted in *The Soul of Sponsorship* by Robert Fitzgerald)*

*If you don't understand or accept this, I really have nothing to add. If you want to impose a specific solution on people, well, AA is the wrong place for that.*

The conversation was over. She had shared her understanding of AA. I had shared my understanding of AA. We were not going to come to an agreement; that was certain.

It got me thinking though. About AA and the 12 Steps and God. And about another quote from the co-founder of AA, Bill Wilson:

*In AA's first years I all but ruined the whole undertaking... God as I understood Him had to be for everybody. Sometimes my aggression was subtle and sometimes it was crude. But either way it was damaging – perhaps fatally so – to numbers of non-believers. (Grapevine Article, "The Dilemma of No Faith", 1961)*

And that led me to question whether AA had become more inclusive over the past eight decades. Specifically, had Alcoholics Anonymous become more accepting towards non-believers since Bill W wrote about his aggression and the perhaps fatal

consequences that might have been its result?

What could our Fellowship do to be more accommodating of we alcoholics who attribute our sobriety to an inner resource (Appendix II of the Big Book) rather than to a Higher Power, whom many in AA choose to call “God”?

Big questions.

“God”, I thought (pun intended), “It would take a book to answer those questions!”

And so here’s the book.

*A History of Agnostics in AA* has actually been in the works for the past six years. A much shorter version was published in 2011. At the time, my home group had been booted out of Intergroup in Toronto and I thought it would be helpful to find out how agnostics had been treated over the years in AA. The research could be done online and it would take – what – a weekend or two?

It would take three full months. Very little information about we agnostics in AA had been written, recorded or preserved anywhere. With the support of some wonderful people – specifically William White, the author of *Slaying the Dragon: A History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, Ernie Kurtz, the author of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* and Michelle Mirza, the Chief Archivist at the AA General Service Office in New York – a 27 page essay called “A History of Agnostic Groups in AA” was put together and published online in September 2011.

This book contains most everything that was in that essay. And much more, including information shared over the years in articles posted on AA Agnostica.

And this book is divided into three main parts.

The first part is called **Our History**. It begins with a bit of an overview, “An Agnostic in AA”, and then recounts our early history beginning with Jim Burwell, one of the very first agnostics in AA, and moves on to the launching of the first agnostic meetings in cities like Chicago, Los Angeles and New York.

It also deals with the not uncommon and relatively recent “rejection” of agnostic groups and meetings, by Intergroups in Canada and the United States. It has a chapter on “Changing the 12 Steps”, as they were written and published in 1939, as that issue has often generated controversy. Finally, Part One deals in some detail with the expulsion of agnostic groups by the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup and how this matter was brought before a human rights tribunal and ultimately resolved.

The next part is about **Problems in AA**. There are a few of these for we agnostics, atheists and free thinkers. First, we look at “special composition groups” such as women, black and young people and the LGBTQ community for two important reasons: so that we secularists in AA understand that we are not alone in sometimes being treated as outcasts and in order to understand how the problems faced by these groups were dealt with by AA, both at the local level and by the General Service Office. Also discussed is the emergence of religious movements within the Fellowship as well as some characteristics of conventional AA, such as its religiosity and tendencies towards conformity. Finally we write about the lack of “Conference-

approved” literature by, about and for non-believers in AA, in spite of efforts to produce such literature that go back to the 1970s.

As it should and must be, the third and final part of the book is called **Moving Forward**. We begin by looking at the explosion of “Non-Conference-approved” literature for non-believers in AA. We then have chapters about our first two conventions, in Santa Monica, California and Austin, Texas and, in a chapter between these two, “Progress not perfection”, we admit to having had our own imperfections in the planning and organization of these two remarkable and historical conventions. The final chapters deal with the growth of our secular movement in AA and “Who We Are”.

The appendices contain secular versions of “How It Works” as well as the histories of the launch and growth of ten secular groups in Canada. In 2009 there was one agnostic group in Canada while today there are twenty-five in five different provinces. The stories of these groups engage and inform in an encouraging sort of way. A third appendix shares a few articles originally posted on AA Agnostica.

The whole book is all about two things. First is the identification of the problems faced by we agnostics, atheists and freethinkers in AA. And these can be broken down into one simple fact: we don’t attribute our sobriety to a supernatural Higher Power. Nor need we in AA. Read Tradition Three. And as Bill W put it, “All people must necessarily rally to the call of their own particular convictions and we of AA are no exception. All people should have the right to voice their convictions.” (General Service Conference, 1965)

And second, the book is about how these problems could and should be dealt with as our secular movement gains momentum within AA. There is no longer a “fake it until you make it” approach to being a non-believer in AA. That’s over. That’s history. Let us all acknowledge that “To thine own self be true” is a healthy and essential approach to long term sobriety.

It’s time to rally.

And we shall rally to the call of our own particular convictions and we shall do that within our AA Fellowship.

***Part One:***  
***Our History***

## *Chapter 1:*

### *An Agnostic in AA*

I went to my first AA meeting when I was in rehab back in 2010. It was a speaker meeting and there was a fellow on stage who talked about how he owed his sobriety to “the Guy in the sky”.

I thought, “Are you kidding me?” But, of course he wasn’t. I was soon to discover that there was a lot of God talk at AA meetings. That is the first thing that bothers we agnostics and atheists in AA.

I should say that I am not speaking for all agnostics and atheists in AA. Nobody can do that. But as the editor of the website **AA Agnostica**<sup>1</sup> for the last six years and having been heavily involved in secular AA meetings, I am in contact with many agnostic members and know that many of them feel and react much the same as I do.

But back to the God talk: the God that is talked about at meetings is often a Christian God, an anthropomorphic (created in man’s image – “Father”, “He” or “Him”) and interventionist (who can solve a problem with alcohol “if He were sought”) supernatural being.

That doesn’t work for me or other atheist alcoholics.

Most of us believe that what works in AA to keep us sober are two things: first, tapping an “inner resource” (see Appendix II of the Big Book) that makes us strive to be sober, and better, human beings. And, second, the fellowship. Going to an AA meeting and talking with others who understand the problem of alcoholism is a wonderful form of group therapy. The support of others (Step 12) plays a key part in our recovery, according to our more secular AA members, not a God.

The God talk might even be tolerable except for one thing and that is our second problem: we agnostics in AA are often not allowed to be honest at “traditional” AA meetings and even suggest that we personally don’t believe in this God. There is apparently an unofficial policy in Alcoholics Anonymous for non-believers at AA meetings that might well be called: “Don’t Tell”.

And if you do talk about your lack of belief, you will often be subjected to a rebuttal, or an outright attack. It is one place at an AA meeting where crosstalk will sometimes happen. Or you will be confronted after the meeting. When that first happened to me I was stunned. You see, I have a Masters degree and spent years at McGill University working on my doctorate in Religious Studies. I taught ordinands (women and men studying to be church ministers). I was the “resident atheist” at the Faculty of Religious Studies and was treated with genuine respect. Not so much in AA. Many agnostics and atheists are treated with disrespect in AA, if not outright contempt.

That’s a real problem.

And the last, the third problem, that many of us experience in AA are meetings that end with the Lord’s Prayer. To say that AA is “spiritual not religious” and then recite

the Lord's Prayer, well, that just doesn't wash. The Lord's Prayer is found in the New Testament in the Gospel of Matthew (6:5-13) with a shorter version in the Gospel of Luke (11:1-4). It was said to have been taught by Jesus to his disciples and is considered the essential summary of the gospels, of the religion of Christianity.

Because it discriminates against those with other beliefs or with no religious beliefs at all, the Lord's Prayer was eliminated from public schools by the Supreme Court in the United States in 1962. And in 1988, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that the "recitation of the Lord's Prayer, which is a Christian prayer... impose(s) Christian observances upon non-Christian pupils and religious observances on non-believers" and thus constitutes a violation of the freedom of conscience and religion provisions in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. That was the end of the Lord's Prayer in public schools in Canada.

Agnostics and atheists believe that the Lord's Prayer does not belong at AA meetings. It's fine at a religious church meeting but to say that AA is "spiritual but not religious" and then end a meeting with the Lord's Prayer is a real contradiction.

After getting out of rehab, I went to a lot of AA meetings. And it got to the point where I just couldn't stand them. Too much of the "God bit". I realized I could no longer go to them and I was terrified I would start drinking again.

But, almost accidentally, I went one Saturday to my first ever agnostic AA meeting: Beyond Belief, in Toronto. It was, for me, a superb meeting.

When I got out I threw my hands up in the air and I shouted, "I'm saved!"

I have been going to secular AA meetings ever since. There was only that one meeting for non-believers in AA in Canada in the summer of 2010, when I went to Beyond Belief. Today there are more than twenty-five in five provinces. These secular meetings are now growing with great momentum.

These secular AA meetings – without any doubt at all – have been the main source of my sobriety. I know and feel that "I am not alone" and that I am free to express any doubts or disbeliefs I may have and that I can be totally honest.

For me, as for many other agnostics in AA, it's the fellowship that makes the difference. It's the frequent "remember when" stories that help to keep me from going back. It's learning so much from others about how they are able to deal with their alcoholism and to maintain their sobriety, truly, "one day at a time". It's the understanding, caring and support of the people at these AA meetings. Back in rehab, and in my early days and months of recovery, the word "gratitude" meant nothing to me at all.

Today I experience it every single day.

AA is meant to be here for all who reach out for help. We are a "kinship of universal suffering" as Bill Wilson put it and we need to let everyone who attends an AA meeting know and feel that they are welcome, regardless of belief or lack of belief.

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<sup>1</sup> AA Agnostica: <http://aaagnostica.org/>

## **Chapter 2:**

### **Rejection**

Two agnostic groups – We Agnostics and Beyond Belief – were booted off of the official list of AA group meetings in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) on May 31, 2011.

This was done by the GTA Intergroup.

Beyond Belief had been around for more than a year and a half. Twelve people attended its first meeting on September 24, 2009. It was, officially, the first agnostic AA group in Canada. We Agnostics had its first meeting almost a year later, on September 7, 2010. And both meetings were growing. To give more people an opportunity to participate, Beyond Belief had recently added a second weekly meeting on Saturdays.

The GTA Intergroup passed a motion that the two groups “be removed from the meeting books directory, the GTA AA website, and the list of meetings given over the phone by Intergroup to newcomers.” The motion passed 24 to 15 with 9 abstentions.

The groups were also excluded from participating in, and voting at, the regular monthly Greater Toronto Area Intergroup (GTAI) meetings.

The next day, on Wednesday, I emailed the Toronto Star newspaper and later that day talked to a reporter, Leslie Scrivener. Later that weekend an article appeared on the front page of the Toronto Star. On the very top of the front page. The title was perfect, **Does religion belong at AA? Fight over ‘God’ splits Toronto AA groups.**<sup>1</sup> It came with a picture of a Catholic Priest in a church, Reverend Peter Watters, 50 years sober, who claimed that “belief in a higher power, God, is essential to getting sober in Alcoholics Anonymous”.

#### **Individual vs. group conscience**

Many might consider contacting the Toronto Star a taboo. It has been argued that it was a violation of Traditions One and Ten. And it has also been argued that it was solely up to the group conscience – of either or both of the evicted groups – to decide how to deal with their expulsion.

Tradition One states: “Our common welfare should come first, personal recovery depends upon AA unity”. Tradition One was indeed violated, and that was done by the GTA Intergroup.

Our common welfare should without a doubt come first, and it includes the welfare of agnostics, atheists and freethinkers. It is appalling – the word “sinful” jumps to mind – that Intergroup didn’t understand this basic AA principle. But clearly it didn’t.

Tradition Ten states: “Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy”.

To begin with, the expulsion of these groups was not an outside issue. Clearly, it was an inside issue.

And it was not an issue that could be allowed to be buried in the basement of a church. There are standards that AA has to meet, and not just standards within our fellowship. The Ontario Human Rights Code, adopted in 1962, prohibits discrimination based upon an individual's beliefs, or lack thereof, and goes on to say that this principle "extends to situations where the person who is the target of such behaviour has no religious beliefs whatsoever, including atheists and agnostics".

Was Intergroup violating basic human values, fundamental human rights?

A good question. An important question.

Finally, the question is raised as to whether or not dealing with this expulsion should have been left to the conscience of the two groups.

But I, too, have a conscience. Every human has a conscience. And perhaps the most important part of a person is his or her conscience: how she or he feels about the world and what is right or wrong in it. And that too needs to be acknowledged. And respected. To do otherwise is wrong and invariably a part of authoritarianism.

When my home group was booted out of the AA Intergroup, my conscience screamed at me to act. To act immediately. As noted earlier, I was determined that this would not be an issue buried in a church basement. Any delay in a response was going to be a problem that would further hurt those already victimized. And so I acted.

And I have no doubt that it was the right thing to do.

## **Fallout**

On Thursday, I went to the evening meeting of my home group Beyond Belief, one of the two groups booted out of the Greater Toronto Area Intergroup (GTAI).

There were, as usual, some thirty people present. They were, to put it mildly, broken hearted. There was a fear in the room that the group and the meeting were as good as dead. If it did not die immediately it would wither away over time. After all, we were not now on any lists.

"Where will I go?" "But I love this meeting!" "They hate us." "What am I going to do now?" That was the mood as I entered the room.

Some were crying. One of them was a wonderfully talented Canadian actress. I had sat beside her and chatted with her at her first Beyond Belief meeting, some six months earlier. After that first meeting she had given me a big hug and told me, "Roger I have a new home!" Now her head was on the table and she sobbed uncontrollably.

Joe C, the author of *Beyond Belief: Agnostic Musings for 12 Step Life* and one of the co-founders of the group Beyond Belief, described the expulsion of his group this way:

*I was crushed by Toronto Intergroup's decision. I grew up in AA. I have been sober since I was a teenager. I have always been outrageous. I have always pushed the envelope. I have always been tolerated and loved. When I was told that I was no longer welcome here it was an innocence lost that I cannot properly express. It was like having my family tell me to leave and never come back. For*

*weeks, I was flabbergasted. I was angry and I was hurt.*

Larry K, one of founders of We Agnostics, the other group booted out, put it this way:

*The decision prompted tears and shock among the three dozen or so people who had embraced the secular groups. “It was painful. It’s shunning,” said Knight. “It was unbelievable that an organisation that can’t kick anybody out, and that prides itself on that, had kicked us out.”*

The action taken by the GTA Intergroup was extreme. But let us be clear: there has always been tension between agnostics and the Christian members of Alcoholics Anonymous. What happened at the Intergroup meeting in that church basement in Toronto merely exposed a long-festering wound within AA.

So, what’s it all about, dear friends? Why did they do it? Why did Intergroup boot the two agnostic groups out?

We shall return to this topic in due course but first, well, we need some history.

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<sup>1</sup> **Does religion belong in AA? Fight over ‘God’ splits Toronto AA groups:** <http://aaagnostica.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Toronto-Star-Article-2011.pdf>

## Chapter 3:

### *The “God Bit”*

The “God” part in the 12 Steps comes from Bill Wilson. The rest of it, “as we understood Him”, was Jim Burwell’s contribution.

But let’s start at the beginning...

AA’s soon-to-be co-founders met on May 12, 1935 (Mother’s Day), with Bill trying to help Dr. Bob sober up at Dr. Bob’s home in Akron, Ohio. Wilson worked away at that for almost a month: it would historically turn out to be one of the most significant recorded examples of one drunk helping another. Dr. Bob took his last drink on June 10, 1935 (a beer to steady his hand for surgery), and this is generally accepted as the founding date of AA.

In January of 1938, Jim Burwell joined the fellowship. AA consisted of two groups: one in Akron and the other one in New York. The latter group held one meeting a week, at Bill’s home in Brooklyn, which was attended by six or eight men. Only three men in that group, including Bill, had been sober more than a year. AA was a fledgling organization, to say the least.

Bill and Bob were both members of a Christian revivalist movement, the Oxford Group. “The early meetings were quite religious, in both New York and Akron. There was always a Bible on hand, and the concept of God was all biblical,” Jim reported.

Into that mix came Jim, “their self-proclaimed atheist, completely against all religion”.

Jim presented quite a challenge to the group, as he later wrote in *Sober for Thirty Years*. “I started fighting nearly all the things Bill and the others stood for, especially religion, the ‘God bit.’ But I did want to stay sober, and I did love the understanding Fellowship.”

At one point, his group held a prayer meeting to decide what to do with him. “The consensus seems to have been that they hoped I would either leave town or get drunk.”

Jim was part of a big battle which took place in 1939 over *Alcoholics Anonymous, The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (the name of the 1939 edition), commonly known as the Big Book.

Thanks to Jim, two key changes were made: First, the word “God” was changed to “God as we understood Him” in two of the 12 Steps.

Second, and most importantly, the word “suggested” was added to the phrase: “Here are the steps we took, which are ‘suggested’ as a program of recovery.”

It is impossible to even try to explain how important that word has been over the years.

There is no question that Bill came to very much appreciate the contribution of Jim Burwell and the other atheists and agnostics in early AA. As he put it they “had widened our gateway so that all who suffer might pass through, regardless of their belief or lack of belief.”

But was the gateway widened enough? Looking back some eight decades after the humble beginnings of Alcoholics Anonymous, the question has to be asked.

Indeed, the divisions in AA at the time were significant, and they do reflect current problems within the fellowship.

Robert Thompson's biography, *Bill W.*, written in 1975, touches on these problems as he describes the late 1930s meetings at Bill Wilson's home in Brooklyn:

*There were agnostics in the Tuesday night group, and several hardcore atheists who objected to any mention of God. On many evenings Bill had to remember his first meeting with Ebby. He'd been told to ask for help from anything he believed in. These men, he could see, believed in each other and in the strength of the group. At some point each of them had been totally unable to stop drinking on his own, yet when two of them had worked at it together, somehow they had become more powerful and they had finally been able to stop. This, then – whatever it was that occurred between them – was what they could accept as a power greater than themselves. (p. 230)*

Many of the nonbelievers in this new century are not at all comfortable with the language of the Big Book or of the 12 Steps, language which pre-dates World War II.

And so it is asked, today: What about this “God bit”?

Jim Burwell went on to start AA groups in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and San Diego. Among the first ten members of the fellowship on the East Coast, he is often considered the third founder of AA. Jim is the first agnostic AA member to die sober: His sobriety date was June 15, 1938, and he died on September 8, 1974.

## **Chapter 4:**

### **Early History**

#### **Chicago**

Our movement – the growth of secular meetings within AA – began, ironically enough, in a church, the Unitarian Universalist Church.

And it was started by a guy by the name of Wilson, but not Bill, Don Wilson.

Don was a member of the Unitarian Universalist Church and had been for a number of years. He had first joined in his mid-teens, in his home town of Omaha, Nebraska. “I joined this church free of dogma or creed, and have ever since shared in the music-making and the Sunday services of one or another Unitarian-Universalist congregation.”

He was also an alcoholic and a member of AA.

It hadn't always been easy for Don. In the early sixties he had tried AA and had attended meetings for six months but left, put off by all the religiosity. “I was unable to work it, because of the religious language in which the 12 steps are couched,” he said.

He came back a decade later. His drinking had almost killed him. This time he decided he had to tough it out, no matter how hard.

After about four years of sobriety, in the autumn of 1974, he gave a talk at the Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street on the topic, “An Agnostic in AA: How it Works for Me”.

The talk was well received by the congregation, and he ended up delivering it in several Unitarian churches. In fact, one of the ministers encouraged him to start an AA meeting especially for atheists and agnostics.

The first ever meeting in AA explicitly for nonbelievers was held on January 7, 1975. In Chicago. In a church.

And thus was born Quad A: Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics (AAAA).

Don not only founded the group in Chicago, but he also played a role in starting the Quad A groups in Evanston and Oak Park.

On February 22, 1995, The Chicago Tribune published an article with the headline, **A Different Road: Quad A Offers Help to Alcoholics Who Don't Buy Into God.**<sup>1</sup> It begins like this:

*Six o'clock Saturday night and the drunks are having a party.*

*This is news?*

*It is when the party is in Chicago's Second Unitarian Church on Barry Street. The drunks are sober, and the party is to commemorate the 20th anniversary of a controversial 12-step recovery group - Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) for Atheists*

*and Agnostics, known in AA circles as Quad A (AAAA).*

A brief history of Quad A in Chicago, it ends most appropriately:

*"These (12) steps are but suggestions," the early AA members wrote in Alcoholics Anonymous, dubbed "The Big Book" in AA circles, but inevitably a churchlike push for orthodoxy began in some quarters. Perhaps it was just as inevitable that a group for atheists, agnostics, humanists, free spirits and "bad attitudes" would be created for those who wanted sobriety without conformity.*

More than 30 years after the first ever AA meeting for non-believers, a Quad A Unity Conference was held on September 13, 2009, in Chicago. More than a hundred people attended. By their very presence, they were able to “bear witness to the reality that there are hundreds of atheists and agnostics who are working the program and staying sober,” Chuck K, principal organizer of the event, told those in attendance in his welcoming remarks.

The Conference also came with a sixteen page leaflet which contained the Conference schedule and included other terrific speakers. It had an article about Don Wilson, “A Man of Distinction”. It contained a copy of the 1995 article written in the Chicago Tribune, “A Different Road”. It also contained several versions of secular Steps and in the end it described AA in eight words, organized as four times two words. The first two words were “Quit Drinking”. The second two words “Trust AA”. The third two words “Clean House”. And the last two words “Help Others”.

A pretty simple understanding of AA.

The keynote address was delivered by Lisa D, and it was called, “How a Humanist Works the AA Program”.

Lisa described how she had come to understand that human values – “empathy, compassion, integrity, mindfulness, honesty, open-mindedness, diligence, excellence, serenity, courage, wisdom, and of course intimacy” – were the “greater power” to which she must strive to align herself.

Her talk was about how she worked the 12 Steps. Humanists, atheists, agnostics, secularists work the 12 Steps and, like everybody else following the suggested AA program of recovery, each does it according to his or her belief or *lack of belief*.

Early in her talk, Lisa expresses her gratitude that “the very first meetings I ever attended were Quad A”. Otherwise, if she had heard the God bit in her early attempts at sobriety she might have “run out the door screaming” and picked up again.

The “Man of Distinction”, Don Wilson, hadn’t been so lucky. There were not any such meetings when he stumbled, and was back out for a decade. However, having stumbled, having picked himself up, he started the first ever group and meeting explicitly for agnostics and atheists.

He defined his agnosticism very simply: “I could never believe in a God small enough to fit inside my head.”

And it is also clear that without him Quad A would not have been born.

Chuck K, the organizer of the Quad A Unity Conference mentioned earlier, reported at the We Agnostics and Atheists Conference in Austin in 2016 (more on this later) that Don was both a musician and he also loved to play cards. He became very well known within Chicago AA because of his reputation as a card player and musician. He was also a very sociable and outgoing guy.

The Quad A meetings were not listed in the Chicago AA directory until the 1980s, more than five years after they had been launched. A lawyer, John K, pushed for that and wanted them listed, but the Central AA Office was reluctant to list these groups. "This is Don's group," he told them. And so as Chuck reported: "Everybody knew Don and so the atheist / agnostic group became Don's group in the minds of many of the people who were in the Central Office. The next directory, there we were. Officially listed AA, Quad A: Alcoholics Anonymous for Atheists and Agnostics".

Don expired with the old millennium. Fittingly, a memorial service was held for him at the Second Unitarian Church.

Today Quad A is going strong. There are thirteen meetings in Chicagoland. They are listed by the Chicago Intergroup and in fact one of the search options when you are looking for a meeting on the Chicagoland Intergroup site is called "Atheist / Agnostic". So you can actually look for those secular meetings in Chicago.

### **Los Angeles and Austin**

"I am the daddy of all the 'We Agnostics' groups!"

The man who spoke those words, Charlie Polacheck, died on February 27, 2012, at the age of 98. They are ten words that no other human being could have ever uttered, which places them in a rather unique category.

And Charlie may indeed have at least partial ownership of the "We Agnostics" brand in Alcoholics Anonymous.

He co-founded the very first AA group ever to be called "We Agnostics," in 1980 in Los Angeles. Of course the name "We Agnostics" is also a chapter in the Big Book.

When I talked to Charlie, he was quite surprised. I told him that I was writing an article "A History of Agnostic Groups in AA" and his response was almost a shriek: "Really!" It was so exciting to him that we go public on this. It was so exhilarating to him that this would cease to be a secret within AA.

The other co-founder, Megan D, was new to sobriety. She remembers starting the group with Charlie:

*I got sober on Jan. 1, 1980. My first regular meeting took place immediately. I met Charlie about a month later. We spoke of our mutual atheism and he told me there were many of us in the program, but that we kept a low profile. About three months later he came to me and asked me to help him start a meeting for people like us. We were so cute trying to decide what to call ourselves. We finally decided to name our meeting after Chapter 4 of the Big Book.*

At the time Charlie was 66 years old and had been sober in AA for nine years. "I was a nonbeliever and I felt that it was only fitting and proper to have a meeting which was