

## ***The 12 Steps for Anyone: How Alcoholics Anonymous Changed the Spiritual Landscape for Everyone***

Ken Wilson 4.8.18

New series called *The 12 Steps for Anyone*. Those battling alcoholism have given us all a great gift: an understanding of a spiritual path that has helped millions of people worldwide.

Next week, start the steps. Today, **understand the movement** that produced the steps. It's no exaggeration to say AA has **affected all of us** whether or not we've been part of 12 Step group. (And I'd wager that nearly everyone has a loved one in their life who has been powerfully affected by participation in a 12 Step group)

Short list of things that can be traced to AA or spread by AA:

- People identifying as spiritual but not religious
- The power of intentional and focused small groups
- The value of telling your story
- The importance of being “selectively vulnerable”—sharing your struggles with supportive others
- Getting help, not just from experts, but from those who have been through what we're going through
- Seeing God as someone who wants to help us not judge us
- Realizing that experiencing help from God is more important than defining God.
- A gazillion handy slogans: *one day at a time, easy does it, keep it simple stupid, stuff happens*

As a Jesus-person, I'd say AA is a **prophetic** voice to the church, calling her back to the original gospel impulses

Much that characterizes culture of Blue Ocean Faith comes from AA. I'll review one these, Centered Set, a little later.

AA is first-foremost a **fellowship**, a community of suffering people helping each other. 12 Steps are **signposts** along a path, but the path is not a solitary one—power AA is **in the company** of others.

AA began in Akron, OH in 1935 when two struggling alcoholics,

**Bill W.** a NY stockbroker and **Dr. Bob** an Ohio surgeon found sobriety together. Both part of a **pre-cursor to AA called Oxford Group** that used Christian principles for daily life.

Oxford Group wasn't for alcoholics per se, but it helped Bill W. get started on path to sobriety after he had a **turnaround spiritual experience** (surrounding white light). Dr. Bob, part of Oxford Group chapter in Ohio, wasn't getting anywhere with his efforts to stop drinking until he and Bill W. met and started to help each other: **one drunk helping another to stop drinking**. AA was born and now has millions of members worldwide.

Bill W. and Dr. Bob first articulated 6 Steps for recovery, which Bill W. broke down into the 12 Steps we now know.

- admitting one cannot control one's alcoholism/addiction/ compulsion;
- recognizing a higher power that can give strength;
- examining past errors with the help of a sponsor;
- making amends for these errors;
- learning to cope with pressure-stress in new ways;
- helping others who suffer from the same alcoholism, addictions or compulsions.

Later Bill W. wrote ***The Big Book*** and ***12 Steps & 12 Traditions***—together these are foundation for AA and other 12 Step Groups.

To **zoom out** to the 50,000 ft. level: this is how Phyllis Tickle, an astute observer of religion situates AA in *The Great Emergence*.

She says Christianity has a tendency to hold **rummage sale** every 500 years. (Back in day churches would raise money in what they called a rummage sale—rummage around in your house, bring stuff you don't sell it at church.) By "rummage sale" she means a major re-think: what to keep, what to pitch, what to fix.

We just celebrated the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the previous major rummage sale called Protestant Reformation. 500 years before that, Great Schism between the West and the East as Roman Catholic Pope and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarch issued mutual anathemas (exclusion bans). 500 years before that you have the fall

of the Roman Empire and rise of monastic movements, 500 years before that founding of Christianity.

In case you didn't notice, that places us in a once- every-500-year transitions. 500 years ago, Protestant Reformation said we could settle disputes by appealing to Scripture alone as source of authority (not RC hierarchy)—Scripture alone was clear and answered all the important questions. We know that claim to be unsustainable today. Christianity having another rummage sale.

Tickle says the founding of AA in 1935 was a seminal event on the spiritual landscape, marking beginning of our present rummage sale. (One of 3 major factors: scientific breakthroughs of Einstein, rise of Pentecostal movement, AA.)

Situation leading to AA: no effective treatment for people who couldn't stop drinking. After **WW I** a generation traumatized by trench warfare, mustard gas. They come home using alcohol to deaden their undiagnosed PTSD. Soon their sons would have same reaction to **WW II**. This describes my father and his father. (Patton saw "shell shock" as a moral failing—thought soldiers who couldn't fight any longer should be shot.)

Double whammy: PTSD was a function of **moral weakness** and so was the alcoholism that suffers developed to treat their PTSD.

Church/society ignorant about alcoholism. Moral approach—Drunkenness is a sin! Stop it! Try harder!—made things worse.

In this era, Christianity had a highly **rationalistic** view of faith combined with a **suspicion** of spiritual experience. It was all about right doctrine & right behavior: a moral code enforced by God.

**Dogma**, or inflexible-correct doctrine becomes all-important, and experiencing a God who can help you is marginalized.

When we **dogmatize God**—reduce God to an inflexible set of dogmas/doctrines/definitions—we then use God to **traumatize** people. Sound familiar?

That is a classic **perversion** of God--antithetical to Jesus view of God: He was all about experiencing a God who can help us, not make things worse. Why his message was called good news.

Early on, though AA had roots in a Christian movement (Oxford Group) the church-at-large was a **toxic place** for alcoholics.

**Alcoholism is not a moral disorder, but an addiction-compulsion-disease.** You can improve problem-drinking by intention and effort. But alcoholism is another cat and moral effort is about as effective with alcoholism as it is with cancer.

You could say AA took a practical, results-oriented, therapeutic approach to God—laser-focused on helping people who couldn't fix themselves, connect with a higher power who could help them.

AA did this at a time when the church was treating everything like a moral problem and had lost its ability-interest in helping people connect to a God who could be experienced.

Reason AA had to separate from organized religion. AA wasn't anti-religion, but form of religion was harmful to alcoholics.

The "Anonymous" of AA refers mainly to the practice of guarding its members' confidentiality. Your story is yours alone to tell. But AA also took an **anonymous approach to God**—not naming God as the Christian god, but using term "God as we understand God" or "Higher Power." More important to get alcoholics surrendering to a higher power than naming higher power or arguing about who the higher power really is and what he likes to be called.

Early tension or rivalry between the church and AA, but AA mostly meets in church basements-social halls, and AA encourages its members to connect with clergy when their God questions go beyond the wisdom-traditions of AA. And AA has since had a big impact on the church. Friendlier relationship.

I said earlier that AA has had a big impact on the culture of Blue Ocean Faith. Example is something we call centered set.

We have a centered set approach to being a faith community. Describe what I mean with help of a nifty graphic.

For serendipity do-dah moms online, new to Blue Ocean—I think this will be helpful orientation.

*[START VIDEO SEGMENT HERE]*

Many churches organized as **bounded set** groups.

Defined by a boundary—a set of **prescribed beliefs and rules**. Ascribe to beliefs, abide by the rules, you're in. Clear who's in/out.

In bounded set groups a lot of **energy** goes into boundaries—enforcing them, arguing about them, getting things right.

**We are centered set church, not a bounded-set.**

Defined by a **center** that either **draws people** or doesn't.

Our center is the Jesus vision of God. It's all about **connection**: to God, self, others, wide world. We're about helping people make those connections. The Jesus way of doing God.

Belonging in a centered set way, is more about **motion** than it is about **position**. It's all about **taking the next step closer**.

Whether you're out some distance, or close to the center doesn't matter as much as where you're headed? Are you drawn to the center? Great! Take a step closer!

**One-step-at a time approach to spirituality.**

We like centered set because in matters of spirituality, people are more like **cats** than **cattle**.

AA is an early example of centered set. The center is clear: AA is about helping people who want to gain sobriety to do so. To be part of AA all you need to do is want to be sober. Not an accident that the 12 steps are called **steps** not **beliefs**, and not **rules**.

If used to a bounded-set approach centered set can be a dicey. What's to keep things from falling apart? Nothing but the center. We're putting our eggs in the basket of center that can draw us, rather than in a boundary that contains us.

QUIET REFLECTION

AA is famous for its use of slogans—pithy phrases or sayings that convey a mood/approach that helps us connect to a higher power when life itself feels overwhelming or out of control.

A slogan is something you tell yourself when you're getting wound up. A simple form of meditation.

Take a minute today with one of these—maybe you've seen the bumper sticker:

EASY DOES IT

Spiritual depth and wisdom to easy does it.

God is big and all encompassing and ultimate.

We are the opposite: not big, small; not all-encompassing, limited; not ultimate, we're just trying to get by.

Only way we can possibly engage God is with an EASY DOES IT approach. Jesus version: ***"Come to me all whose work is hard, whose load is heavy and I will give you rest."*** James Alison says its all about "relaxing into God."

So, let's mull over that phrase for 90 seconds. I'll say it to begin, then at 30 second mark, 60 second mark.