

Recovery as penance

Review

The core of democracy is free choice. Drug users & abusers do not have a free choice. Their choice of rehabilitation has been decided for them by custodians of the puritan ethos. It is total abstinence to prevent the sin of intoxication. Drug recovery today is penance. It is based on the values of cultural Puritanism. Puritanism, the first American religion, is what makes drug recovery about religion. Anything else would be sin.

If a person displays some behaviour which warrants closer scrutiny or arrest, our justice system (embedded in our puritan culture) will allow for the forgiveness of sin if the person converts to the semi-secular religion known as AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) & other Twelve Step 'pogroms': Narcotics Anonymous, Cocaine Anonymous, Marijuana Anonymous & even Sex Addict Anonymous.

The Recovery Book (Mooney and Eisenberg, 1992) is a general orientation to Alcoholics Anonymous and other Twelve Step Recovery Groups. On page 253 of this 600 page book, those addicts who are on their deathbed are encouraged not to take any "mood altering" drugs which may compromise their sobriety and lead to relapse.

"Even if you know your condition is terminal, work hard with your doctor to find relief from your symptoms without mood changing drugs." (253) Does this sound a little extreme... as in extremely inhumane? Such a statement affirms the cult like status of AA. Should people stay drug free on their deathbed due to a possible relapse in heaven? Are there Twelve Step meetings in heaven?

A favoured expression of AA is the term "drug free". This expression applies both to the individual remaining drug free ("clean") as well as working toward a drug free society i.e. prohibition. There should be a strict rule of no alcohol or drugs in the house even if one of the members is using but is not an alcoholic or an addict. (493)

AA wants you to make your home a drug free zone. No other family members are expected to drink or drug while a member of the family is in recovery. AA wants all people to be drug free.

Twelve Step programs abhor any drug or anything that alters consciousness... or even makes one feel too good: "Just remember that feeling too good can masquerade as a drug high." (177) Additionally, all mood-altering drugs are bad for alcoholics and addicts. It does not matter what the drug is or how the mood may be altered:

It does not matter whether your drug of choice has been alcohol, cocaine, Valium, or another mood altering substance. The problems you face in recovery will, for the most part, be the same. To bring this fact home, we refer throughout this book to the disease of alcoholism and addiction and to anyone afflicted with it as an alcoholic or addict. (6)

Understand with your heart as well as your mind that alcoholism/addiction is a disease. People who drink or use are sick..." (316) There are two key conflicts and contradictions in the AA abstinence mantra. The first is from AA literature and the second from the science of pharmacology.

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AA literature: the dry drunk

Now that you're in recovery, 'dry drunk' is a term you will hear fairly often... a person who acts intoxicated—giggly, hysterical, uncontrollable without having used a drug or had a drop to drink. The second type of dry drunk is the person who behaves like an active addict—resentful, inconsiderate, not attending AA meetings, denying his addiction, and neglecting family responsibilities—while remaining sober. (161-164)

The dry drunk is the Achilles heel of AA as it involves behaviour that is unrelated to a drug induced mood alteration. It belies the premise of AA that mood-altering drugs cause abusive behavioural changes. In the case of the "dry drunk", abusive behaviour occurs due to the individual and not the drug of choice.

The second issue involves what is called in psycho-pharmacology the "placebo effect". This refers to substances, which do not produce the required physiological effect necessary to be effective but are perceived by the user to create the desired psychological effect. Such is the case when alcoholics in research settings respond as if intoxicated when alcohol is withheld from their drinks but were told they were drinking alcohol. Alcoholics got drunk on plain orange juice with a disguised (alcohol) taste. (Drugs, Society, and Human Behaviour, Ray, 2002:285-86)

How does this happen? According to AA theology, it is not suppose to happen. Any "mood altering" drug can place the alcoholic at risk of relapsing... and it seems also any chemical which is thought to be "mood altering". It's all in the mind!

However, Twelve Steppers in Recovery will never be allowed to try the "placebo effect" themselves or they may start to behave like a "dry drunk".

While AA will acknowledge that it is the user who raises the glass of wine to his lips or the "blow" to his nose, he or she is not responsible for doing so. It is the disease that forces the person into denial... that there is no problem. With other true diseases, the disease will progress regardless of whether or not the person admits to having it. Furthermore, practitioners of AA so vigorously proselytize the idea of denial that to question whether or not one is an alcoholic/addict is equivalent to denying the divinity of Christ.

Such a comparison is not that far off the mark. One thing that becomes evident after just a few meetings is that while AA commits to viewing AOD (alcohol and other drugs) abuse as a disease, its treatment is more like the penance.

While AA claims to be “religion free and non denominational”, in fact it is its own religion... a secularized form of evangelical Christianity. The AA God is a HE God as in Step Three: “Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood HIM”. In fact six of the twelve steps are about this male God. In addition, closing meetings with the Lord’s Prayer—a Christian prayer—is hardly non-sectarian.

Whether its 90 meetings in 90 days recommended for those in early recovery or those “addicted” to AA, the meetings themselves have a special, almost sacramental status:

The treatment of any other disease is not dependent on whether or not one becomes a “good and moral” person, but according to AA alcoholism & addiction are diseases of dishonesty, lying, and manipulation.

AA’s treatment of the disease of alcoholism and drug addiction is character rebuilding. AA was originally known as: Moral Rearmament. This was a Christian evangelical self-help (from sinning) group, which formed after prohibition. Prohibition had ended and according to Moral Rearmament, Satan had a headlock on the United States.

A successful recovery is impossible without honesty. Since lying is one of the trappings of alcoholism/addiction, continuing to make it a way of life is very likely to lead right back to the well. (543) Be honest. Dishonesty is the soil in which the seeds of addiction germinate... (478) Remember he’s still an addict and (even in recovery) will always be an addict. Part of the disease of addiction is the need to manipulate others... (524)

AA’s “understanding” of alcoholism and addiction is a kind of “bait and switch” game in which those in recovery are first told they are not responsible for their abuse—it’s a disease—and then later told that they are entirely responsible due to a character defect

Triggers and temptations

According to AA, craving for drugs or alcohol occur due to “triggers” in the environment and it is best to avoid such triggers. In fact Chapter Nine of The Book of Recovery deals exclusively with triggers and is very telling called: “Thwarting Temptation”.

If you take a vacation, for example, where you might let your guard down, it is good to plan that vacation only in relation to the number of AA meetings you can attend while on it. Most cruise ships have AA meetings on board. (210)

If you’re flying alone, explain your situation to the flight attendant. Ask if he or she can help you change your seat if anyone next to you orders a drink. (179) And a final example:

“Loose sugar, baking soda, corn starch... when spread on a table or dish is uncomfortably reminiscent of cocaine. So whoever does the cooking should avoid leaving these lying around, and should supply sugar in packets rather than a bowl. (174)

Avoiding such temptations is certainly going to place the person in a sheltered environment with a limited circle of sober only friends. Persons who require such “high maintenance” are also going to

be perceived as supercilious complainers with lots of rules and restrictions to be imposed on others i.e. “You can’t drink because I have a problem.”

AA places a great emphasis on social support as part of continuing recovery. The reason why is due to social isolation. Twelve Step disciples are not part of mainstream society and must associate only with other abstinent AA members in order to avoid the near occasion of triggered temptations. AA life is life in a sheltered body... exactly what the puritan ethos demands.

The unverified assumption of the AA orientation is that any drug that passes the “blood brain barrier” causes a “mood alteration” which will automatically trigger a craving for alcohol or drugs. Popping a pill for an allergy or using an antihistamine for a cold could have relapse results. Ephedrine or even Pseudo Ephedrine, found in many cold medications is just one such profane drug.

Nitrous oxide is another. It is a common aesthetic in the dentist office. If you are in AA, don’t ask for it. Rather choose a general aesthetic that will render you unconscious and thus not tempted. Insomnia? Forget taking any medication; all are “mood altering”. Read the Big Book of AA instead or call your sponsor.

Pain? Anxiety? Deal with it. All medications except for aspirin (which is thought not to pass the blood brain barrier) are barred. Mouthwash? Careful it might have a trace of alcohol in it.

Surgery? If you are having surgery... asks your surgeon to request the anaesthesiologist to omit the pre-op medications (usually tranquilizers)... instead choose... meditation, soothing music, or repeating the AA Serenity Prayer. (274) Well could I at least have a piece of chocolate? No! Chocolate contains the bromine, a stimulant, off limits to alcoholics and addicts.

If you are an AA alcoholic/addict your life is a constant state of penance and sheltered from the pollution of a profane but real world.

One of the curiosities of AA programs is the degree that members feel comfortable with drinking coffee (303-304) which is offered at meeting and smoking tobacco which is tolerated at meetings (445) when these substances contain drugs that cross the “blood brain barrier” and have “addictive” potential and in the case of tobacco, considered by psycho-pharmacologists to be more “addictive” than heroin.

This contradiction is based on AA’s focus for living a chemically sheltered life that is “middle of the road”. These two drugs are legal, and culturally ubiquitous. They are part of the fabric of American society that AA supports—the puritan ethos. What AA does not support is critical thinking about drugs that would bring to mind the conflicts and contradictions previously described in AA philosophy. As it stands now, many people who are in need of help for “chemical dependency” do not get it as they are turned off by the “ceremonial degradation” as well as the conflicts and contradictions of the AA “pogro

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Conflicts of interests

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.