

RUNNING HEAD: Spiritual Recovery in AA

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Spirituality and Alcoholism

It is widely accepted that drugs have been used by mankind to access mystical consciousness since early times. Alcohol and other intoxicants have been traditionally referred to as “spirits” and have been historically associated with ritualistic, spiritual exercises. In the context of alcoholism, spirituality is understood as a duality that influences an alcoholic's life either negatively or positively. French (1992) conducted a phenomenological study of twenty AA members which demonstrated this duality and documented the power of spirituality in recovery from alcoholism. In her review of the literature, French found that alcohol, along with other drugs, has a long history related to spirituality.

Dependency on alcohol that goes beyond acceptable use, however, is seen as spirituality gone awry. Both French (1992) and May (1988), as well as others (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1976; Brown, 1992; Brundage, 1985; Fowler, 1993; James, 1936; Jones, 1970; Kurtz, 1979; Siaghail, 1992; Tiebout, 1944), who include free will and self-responsibility as etiologic components of alcoholism, write about the dark spirituality of the alcoholic's journey into addiction, and the holistic spirituality that is pivotal to the alcoholic's return to sobriety.

James' (1936) discourse on religious experience directly applies to the alcoholic's spiritual recovery experience. James posited that religious life and related experience lead people to an intellectual uneasiness which is the first step toward its own solution. He wrote, "1. The uneasiness, reduced to its simplest terms, is a sense that there is something wrong with us as we naturally stand. 2. The solution is a sense that we are saved from wrongness by making proper connection with the higher power" (p. 497).

The connection between James' (1936) concept of religious "wrongness" and "salvation" and the alcoholic's recognition of her or his spiritual desolation and subsequent conversion is made from James' observation that wrongness seems to stem from a lapse in moral character and salvation from the influx of a higher power. James made a definitive statement concerning the higher power's influence:

The individual, so far as he suffers from his wrongness and criticizes it, is to that extent consciously beyond it, and in at least possible touch with something higher, if anything higher exists. . . . Along with the wrong part there is thus a better part of him; even though it may be but a most helpless germ. With which part he should identify his real being is by no means obvious at this stage; but when stage 2 (the stage of solution and salvation) arrives, the man identifies his real being with the germinal higher part of himself; and does so in the following way. He becomes conscious that this higher part is coterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save himself when all his lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck. (pp. 497, 498-499)

Spirituality and Recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)

James' (1936) understanding of spirituality greatly influenced Bill W.'s (co-founder of AA) originating philosophy of the processes of AA recovery, and the concept of contact with a higher power is integral to AA's contemporary spiritual teachings. Caught up in the "miraculous" effects of his own spiritual salvation from alcoholism, Bill W. immediately

recognized the importance of James' insight that "deflation at depth" (Kurtz, 1979, p. 21) of the ego was necessary for spiritual conversion.

This "ego deflation" concept of conversion would become inextricably associated with AA's spiritual recovery processes of "hitting bottom", "surrendering", and practicing humility through service to other alcoholics. AA (1976) states its basic spirituality to be this: "Most of us think [the] awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience . . . [and] [w]illingness, honesty and open mindedness are the essentials of recovery" (p. 570).

AA and Twelve Step Spirituality. When exploring themes of spiritual conversion and recovery, there is much that AA can teach. Several of these specific spiritual themes have been explicitly identified in the work by Thiele (1992). Thiele set out to identify the common themes in contemplative spirituality and AA's Twelve Steps. He defined the themes and processes he analyzed in relating the two. These themes were identified as contemplative spirituality, spiritual awakening, spiritual union, conscious contact with God, pastoral counseling, and spiritual direction. In his review and qualitative analysis of the literature, Thiele produced a phenomenological account of the nature of the relationship between the implicit attitudes found in contemplative spirituality and Twelve Step practice.

Thiele's (1992) work makes an important contribution to understanding the processes of spirituality in AA recovery. He found that successful spiritual contemplation required the cultivation of six primary spiritual attitudes: communion, willingness, awareness, honesty, humility, and simplicity. In comparison, Thiele found five primary spiritual attitudes in Twelve Step spirituality: openness to a spiritual awakening, willingness, honesty, humility, and dependence on God.

Thiele (1992) cited important qualitative evidence that spirituality in the recovery process of AA is very similar to the experience of spiritual contemplatives. This evidence indicated that the spiritual attitudes identified and their associated practices appear to have the power to transform lives and to support the recovery from addiction. Thiele concluded that AA's experience of a spiritual awakening seemed to be a significant first step in the process of spirituality and was comparable to the contemplatives' descriptions of spiritual awareness or being spiritually awake and of the experience of God's presence and activity.

Thiele (1992) found that the central spiritual attitude toward God differed for the Twelve Step approach and for the contemplative approach. For the contemplatives, the major objective of their spirituality was to achieve union with God through continuous prayerful and meditative communion. For the Twelve Step approach, the central objective was to achieve humility - a willingness to "let go and let God" - through surrender and service. Despite this difference, Thiele found consistent duplication of meaning, value, and belief in the apparent attitudes found in the literature of for contemplatives and for Twelve Step practitioners.

Similar to the work of Thiele, Hopson (1996) uncovered a remarkably succinct theological anthropology in the Twelve Steps and was able to directly relate the psychosocial aspects of alcoholism recovery to the transcendent. Hopson wrote:

Twelve-step programs offer a view of the human being as in process, as continually becoming human. . . . Human existence is seen as relating oneself to oneself, others, and transcendence (God). Maturity is achieved through the recognition of the full subjectivity of the self and others. Self and others are not viewed as a means to an end (I-it), instead, self and others are viewed as ends in themselves (I-thou, Buber, 1958). The

objectification of the self and others that is the consequence of alienation is avoided through conscious contact with oneself and others. (p. 546)

It is also clear that AA and the practice of the Twelve Steps is not a specific religious practice (Hopson 1996; Gorsuch, 1993; Jones, 1970). While the fellowship of AA is religiously diverse (members come from all of the world's major religious traditions), it is not considered to be a religious organization because it does not teach theology, nor does it practice overt religious rituals. Hopson and Thiele (1992) are in agreement that the spiritual character of Twelve Step practice – as distinct from religious practice – is one of its most salient features and is considered to be the central condition for recovery from alcoholism in AA.

To be sure, Hopson (1996) noted that Twelve Step programs are not without their critics. These critics voice skepticism about the effectiveness of AA. There are four general points of criticism: (a) AA effectiveness has not been conclusively supported by empirical results; (b) AA is culturally biased in favor of white, middle-class men; (c) AA, itself, is anti-scientific and anti-professional; and (d) AA merely substitutes substance dependency for dependency on the program and does not address intrapsychic pathology. While there is evidence to support these general criticisms, Hopson also reported that fellowship programs (e.g. Rational Recovery) that were developed in reaction to AA generally ended up using the same underlying spiritual principles as the Twelve Steps.

These spiritual principles are specifically derived from the work of St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* (Kurtz, 1979). From this origin, the Twelve Steps have an inherent faith practice that is singularly instrumental in the "spiritual awakening" many sober AA members report experiencing and to which they attribute their continuing sobriety. In addition to

the evident spiritual foundation in AA recovery, the extent of involvement in AA has been shown to be causally related to length of sobriety in AA (Kaskutas, Ammon, Delucci, Room, Bond, & Weisner, 2005; McKellar, Stewart, & Humphreys, 2003). Further exploration of the importance of AA involvement is discussed in a related article by this author in this journal issue. With respect to intrapsychic issues, AA organizational guidelines encourage its members to seek the help of professional clinical psychotherapy when warranted (AA World Services, 2005).

Returning to the positive effects of Twelve Step spirituality, the research of Siaghail (1992) supports Hopson's and Thiele's qualitative analyses as described above. Siaghail was interested in understanding the change process in AA. Her qualitative analysis focused on the AA recovery experience from the psychological perspective of Carl Jung and the theological perspective of Paul Tillich. Siaghail observed that both Jung and Tillich alluded to a healing "centre" in the recovering person:

Jung calls the centre "the self" and Tillich calls it "the ground of being." The AA experience of recovery may be considered analogous to the experience of psychological growth which Jung calls "individuation" and the experience of religious maturation or salvation which Tillich describes as "essentialization." (p. 56)

Siaghail (1992) conducted a comparative analysis using Jung's and Tillich's perspectives on the process of change in AA. The primary conclusion drawn from her work is that the change process is profound and mystical. This spiritual change process appears to have the power to restructure personality and has components of surrender, conversion, trust, and humility.

Spiritual Conversion and the Twelve Steps. Since conversion is seen as an indispensable process in spiritual recovery in AA, it is an important concept to emphasize here. AA's (1976) understanding of the experience of conversion of its members is consistent with the conversion concepts given by Fowler (1993), James (1936) and Gallo-Treacy (1993). AA termed the so-called conversion experience a spiritual awakening to avoid any religious connotation. AA specifically prefers the "educational variety" of conversion described by James. Accordingly, AA defines the kind of transformation or spiritual awakening experienced by most sober AA members to be one that develops over time rather than the frequently reported, and equally valid, member conversion experiences of sudden and spectacular upheavals that are followed by vast changes in personal feeling and outlooks. AA is clear that successful member affiliation is dependent on the capacity to experience ". . . a conversion with its attendant emotional components source" (Kurtz, 1979, p. 183). In counterpoint, however, social science and alcoholism research have indicated other major factors other than conversion for affiliation with AA (see Bebbington, 1976; Beckman, 1980; Emrick, Tonigan, Montgomery, & Little, L., 1993; Galanter & Kaskutas, 2008).

While AA (1976) avoided the direct use of the word conversion, Dr. Harry Tiebout, one of the AA fellowship's renowned early advocates, was quite explicit about the use of the term. Tiebout (1944) described as conversionary the change alcoholics went through as a result of their association with AA. Tiebout defined conversion as a psychological experience where there is a major shift in observable personality. Before conversion, the alcoholic is influenced by a set of predominantly hostile, negative attitudes; then after the conversion process, the alcoholic's attitudes become predominantly positive and affirming.

Tiebout (1944), himself a psychiatrist, concluded that AA's success in helping alcoholics to obtain sobriety when many medical efforts had failed, empowered AA members to teach the psychiatric profession about spiritual conversion as a psychological phenomenon. According to Kurtz (1979), Tiebout identified four essential elements in the AA conversionary process: hitting bottom, surrendering, reducing ego, and maintaining humility. These elements are identical to the spiritual processes in AA as previously defined and Tiebout's definition is a typical example of the interchangeable treatment of spirituality and conversion.

Another important contributor to the spiritual philosophy of early AA was Carl Jung who exchanged letters with Bill W. Similar to Tiebout's (1944) experience with conversion in alcoholics, Jung had also observed sudden, dramatic shifts in the personality of alcoholics which led to their maintaining sobriety. He identified the shift as spiritual and described the causal experience as conversion. In AA (1976), Jung is cited as follows:

Here and there, once in a while, alcoholics have had what are called vital spiritual experiences. To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of high emotional displacement and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces of the lives of these men are suddenly cast to one side and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them. (p. 27)

Even Bill W. claimed a peak experience which led to his sudden, complete conversion from alcohol abuse. In the AA publication, Pass It On (1984), Bill described the profound spiritual experience he had during his last hospitalization:

Suddenly, my room blazed with an indescribably white light. I was seized with an ecstasy beyond description. Every joy I had known was pale by comparison. The light, the ecstasy--I was conscious of nothing else for a time.

Then, seen in the mind's eye, there was a mountain. I stood on its summit, where a great wind blew. A wind, not of air, but of spirit. In great, clean strength, it blew right through me. Then came the blazing thought, "You are a free man." (p. 121)

Bill never drank again after that experience, and his search for the understanding of what had happened to him eventually led to the founding of AA and the development of the Twelve Steps.

For Hopson (1996), it appears that the alcoholic goes through three distinct conversions as a result of Twelve Step work: (a) a spiritual conversion, (b) a characterological conversion, and (c) a lifestyle conversion. The process may be glimpsed through this AA mnemonic as cited by Hopson: "a) Steps 1 to 3- *Give up*; b) Steps 4 to 7- *Own up*; c) Steps 8 to 9- *Make up*; d) Steps 10 to 12 - *Grow up*" (p. 543).

According to Hopson (1996), the first three steps present a paradox of will to the alcoholic. He must willfully choose to give up his will (surrender) in order to find his true will. The promise of a larger agent (higher power) that will repair his own broken will is the incentive. Steps four to seven intervene into an alcoholic's sense of shame and guilt through confession and acceptance. Steps eight and nine introduce forgiveness to the process, and Steps 10 to 12 calls the alcoholic to a spiritual practice and to a life of service.

Summary and Conclusions

From the evidence presented above, one can conclude that spirituality seems to be a necessary element in the successful recovery from alcoholism. The founders of AA recognized the significance of spiritual recovery and developed the Twelve Steps to facilitate the spiritual development of recovering alcoholics. Conceptualizations of spirituality by William James' (1936) and the Jesuit founder, St. Ignatius of Loyola were foundational to the original recovery philosophy of AA recovery, and James' construct of "a higher power" is integral to AA's contemporary spiritual teachings.

Additionally, the processes of spiritual recovery in AA can be generally understood from philosophical and phenomenological perspectives. These perspectives include several cognitive-behavioral-affective traits such as surrender, trust, conversion, humility, faith, tolerance, love, honesty, prayer, and meditation. Further, conversion is often used interchangeably with spirituality and appears to be multidimensional as well – using the same cognitive-behavioral-affective processes of spirituality. In AA, conversion is seen as a spiritual awakening process that generally occurs over time, although dramatic and sudden shifts are not uncommon. Lastly, AA members often report conversionary experiences which they consider to be indispensable to their spiritual recovery from alcoholism.

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