

# Spirituality and Addiction Recovery: An Interview with Ernie Kurtz, PhD

By William L. White, MA



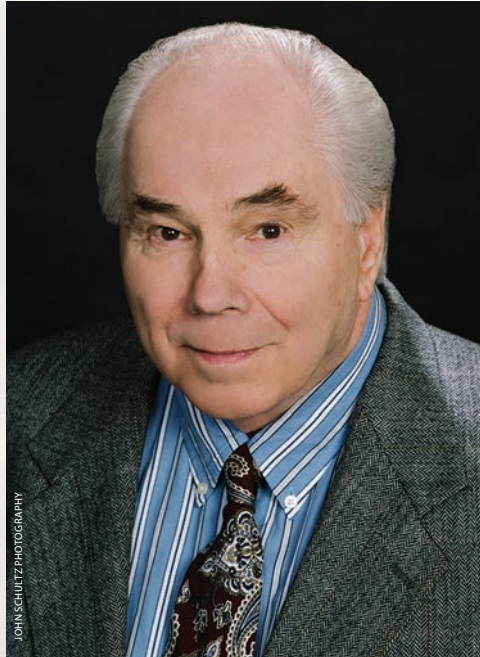
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In 1979, Dr. Ernest Kurtz published his now classic work, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*. In the years that followed, he mentored a generation of addiction recovery historians, including myself, and broadened his investigations into the growing varieties of spiritual, religious, and secular frameworks of addiction recovery and the roles shame and guilt play as obstacles to addiction recovery. During those years, countless numbers of addiction professionals deepened their understanding of the workings of A.A. through attending presentations by Dr. Kurtz at the Rutgers Summer School of Alcohol and Drug Studies and numerous other professional venues. Dr. Kurtz's studies of spirituality led to collaborations with Katherine Ketcham that produced two landmark books: *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (1992) and the just-released *Experiencing Spirituality*. I interviewed Dr. Kurtz about some key aspects of his life's work and its implications for addiction professionals. Please join us in this engaging conversation.

## The History of Alcoholics Anonymous

**Bill White:** Based on your research on the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, what were the most important discoveries early A.A. members made about the role of spirituality in addiction recovery?

**Dr. Ernie Kurtz:** There were two main proximate sources of the early A.A. members' understanding of spirituality: the Oxford Group, which viewed itself as a manifestation of "First Century Christianity," and some books urged by the Oxford Groupers but especially William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience*, which Ebby Thatcher gave Bill Wilson during his last detoxification in Towns Hospital in New York City. As the language of the 1930s-composed A.A. "Big Book" attests, most of the earliest members had been conventional but not very deep Christian believers and had, like Wilson himself, fallen away from membership and practice. Jimmy B., who is credited with the insertion of the words "as we



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understand Him" after the word "God" in the 3rd and 11th of the 12 Steps, and the deletion of the phrase "on our knees" at the beginning of the 7th Step, was apparently the one exception.

The stories in the first edition of *Alcoholics Anonymous* confirm this, offering a picture of individuals raised in religious backgrounds who had fallen away from religious practice. But essential to their recovery, according to their stories, was a discovery of some personal power greater than themselves. This discovery of the reality of some kind of "Higher Power," some kind of *beyond* was, for most, the key to their newfound sobriety.

This is especially clear in the "We Agnostics" chapter, which is probably the last thing it would be wise to recommend to any agnostic or atheist looking over *Alcoholics Anonymous*. That chapter supposedly described Bill Wilson's own experience. But unlike Dr. Bob

Smith, who became at least nominally a Presbyterian, Bill never joined any church. He did take instructions in Roman Catholicism from then-Monsignor Fulton Sheen, and the tale among at least some Catholics in A.A. was that Bill never became Catholic because he feared that such a step on his part would injure A.A. Actually, as Bill's correspondence with the Jesuit Father Ed Dowling attests, Bill dropped out of instructions because he had an intellectual difficulty with Catholic teaching on the sacraments, which struck him as seeming "too much like magic."

That is intriguing, given Bill's later explorations with ouija boards and more in what came to be called the Stepping Stones "spook room" and what he found in his experimentation with L.S.D. I raise those points because, though it is not elsewhere in general as clear as it is in Wilson's own life, the main characteristic of the spirituality of those earliest members seems to be open-mindedness. And though I am not aware of any research on precisely this point, it seems to me that one characteristic of the active alcoholic is a stubborn close-mindedness.

The earliest A.A. members, then, discovered that some kind of spirituality—some kind of sense of the reality of some "beyond"—was essential to their sobriety but that another aspect of that same spirituality was the acceptance that they did not have all the answers, even about "the spiritual," especially about "the spiritual."

**BW** How has the story of A.A. spirituality changed since the publication of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous in 1979*?

**EK** A.A. co-founder Bill Wilson died in 1971, but that date is a hinge in A.A.'s story for larger reasons. A.A. is of course its members, those who come to it, and as you have documented in *Slaying the Dragon*, the 1970s saw the beginning of the spread to dominance of what became the alcoholism and addiction treatment industry, and so for some years progressively more people began coming into Alcoholics Anonymous by way of treatment. Using the concept of "chemical dependency," some treatment people blurred the line between alcoholism and not only chemical, but also even "process" addictions. This should not have directly impacted A.A. spirituality, but in many groups, it became a distraction at first troublesome but then, most often, helpful and useful.

A.A. sobriety and spirituality grow and are spread by *identification*, which is why story-telling is so central to those processes. At first, then, in many groups, some wondered whether the influx of those whose experience was mainly with difficulties caused by chemicals other than alcohol could themselves benefit or, more importantly, could help others in their quest for sobriety. Some who were active in A.A. at the time of my initial research commented that it seemed to them that more and more of the stories told at meetings seemed to be focusing on the externals of the stories, on what went on with other people or in scrapes with the law than "on the inside," what the alcoholic was feeling and thinking and hoping and dreading.

"Spirituality is an inside job," some sponsors and speakers remind their listeners. I'm not sure when this shift took place, but it seemed to me through the late eighties and nineties that speakers moved from describing the spectacular to accenting the vivid, from outside to inside. The change was also shaped, I think, by changes in the frequency of kinds of meetings. My experience may be a bit twisted because I moved several times during those years: from Massachusetts to Georgia to Chicago to two different locations in Michigan. Although I always looked for "speaker meetings," I had a progressively more difficult time finding them. Step-discussion groups and Big Book discussion groups, large gatherings that after the opening split into smaller groupings, predominated. Some localities offered only one large speaker meeting a week, for the whole locality.

What did all this mean for "A.A. spirituality"? We, of course, have already written on "the varieties of A.A. experience," of which there are many. Over time, many more and different people have found sobriety in Alcoholics Anonymous—women, individuals from the LGBT community, African Americans, Hispanics, members of various ethnic groups, the partially employed and the newly unemployed, the surprisingly young and the ever older—and even beyond these artificial groupings, of course, each individual's spirituality is the unique product of that person's whole life.

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## Studying Spirituality

**BW** How would you describe the journey between your work on the history of Alcoholics Anonymous and your broader explorations of spirituality?

**EK** Well, it wasn't much of a "journey." In some ways, in fact, it began backwards. As a student of American history, I was interested in how people located values over time—in how Americans found meaning in a culture whose trajectory was one of generally secularizing. It was in that context that I came across Alcoholics Anonymous, largely accidentally. A.A., I was told, had Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and "none-of-the-above" members, some of whom were even clergy of one or another of those groups, and they all not only "got along" but even agreed in claiming that the A.A. program and fellowship had saved them from more than mere drunkenness, had brought new meaning into their lives and opened them to a very real spirituality. That, I *had to* explore.

I discovered that Alcoholics Anonymous had begun in the very religious but carefully non-denominational Oxford Group, since re-christened Moral Re-Armament. That whetted my intellectual appetite—I was a teaching fellow at Harvard Divinity School at the time, and so I enjoyed the challenge of tackling the off-base topic. And so I began to research A.A.'s history—its story—and discovered in the stories told by its Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, and "none of the above" members that they viewed spirituality as essential to their recovery. But what was that "spirituality"? That, in a sense, is what I have been exploring ever since.

President Dwight David Eisenhower has sometimes been mocked for his 1952 post-election, pre-inauguration observation, "... our form of government [makes] no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is." Well, change that to "our fellowship" and "a genuinely lived spirituality," and you have Alcoholics Anonymous. And it is not to be mocked. For despite all the justified derision heaped on various New Age, pseudo-Eastern, and other quasi-spiritual fads, including such aberrations as "adult children" and their ilk, Alcoholics Anonymous is simply not one of them. A.A. comes by its spirituality genuinely, by plugging into the long history that I detailed in Part Two of *Not-God* and whose rich story Kathy Ketcham and I explored in *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Our new book, *Experiencing*

*Spirituality*, carries that exploration forward by way of an admittedly jagged path that nevertheless retains the centrality of story.

Most recently, as you know, I've been pulled in the direction of investigating the possibility of spirituality in the lives and practice of recovering people who even more than "none of the above" are explicitly atheists or agnostics. Some in Alcoholics Anonymous would deny their right to be members, forgetting A.A.'s Third Tradition, "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking." Others raise the question, "If spirituality is essential to recovery, and A.A. is as virtually all members claim 'a spiritual program,' how can non-believers belong?" Well, externally, recent books by Marya Hornbacher, Robert C. Solomon, Andre Comte-Sponville, and Sam Harris clarify and illustrate the very real possibility of an "atheist spirituality." And intrinsically, that is the cutting-edge that I am currently exploring in the ongoing, fascinating story of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is, in fact, one road that has led to my formulation of and fascination with those two very richly loaded prepositions, *beyond* and *between*—of which we will see more later in this interview.


**BW** Describe the major themes around which the stories and discussions in *The Spirituality of Imperfection and Experiencing Spirituality* are organized and how you came to settle on these themes?

**EK** Well, the text is of course richer, but the very Table of Contents of *The Spirituality of Imperfection* offers a decent outline. All spirituality begins with the acceptance of finitude, of limitation, the recognition "I am not God." For the alcoholic, it is the admission, "I am an alcoholic—I cannot safely do something that my culture regards as normal and that most other people can happily and safely do, drink alcohol." There follows on that the realization that some other kind of spirits/spirituality is essential to recovery, and that that spirituality is different from what most think—that it involves not magic but miracle, and that it is both open-ended and pervasive of one's being. And then the unfolding discovery that spirituality is lived in six experiences: the sense of being freed/released, a real gratitude, a genuine humility that opens to a generous tolerance, a pervasive forgiveness, and a deep discovery/sense of "being-at-home," of having found a communion that is more than mere community.

How did I discover these? Very simply: by listening very carefully to all the A.A. stories I could manage to hear. And let me emphasize that at least for me, it had to be "hear" rather than "read." I have no problem with reading, and God knows I spend most of my waking hours doing it, but, for me, hearing—and hearing live, in person, rather than on any kind of recording—was and remains absolutely essential. And I mean hearing at meetings, not in interviews, as generous as many have been in allowing me to interview them. All stories requires a context, and for the kind of stories told in A.A.—*spiritual* stories, however weird that claim may sound to some—there is something about an A.A. story that makes sense, that can be truly *heard*, only within a community of listeners, of fellow hearers who are making an effort to identify with the story-teller, to absorb her or his story into their own.

In *Experiencing Spirituality*, we pick up and develop other themes, more themes, but again based on and rooted in what we hear talked about and discussed at meetings. These themes, our segment titles, are basic but not as structurally related as in the earlier book. And so such topics as wonder, and memory, and grief, and virtue stand a bit more independently. These themes are less topics than motifs—figures that recur like

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melodic lines. That stage is set by the book's beginning: the first two segments—"Beyond 'Spirituality'" and "Experience"—explain and develop the book's title, so that readers understand what is going on as they move through the stories that develop the themes of the following segments.

## Science and Spirituality

**BW** If there is a central mantra within the addictions field in recent years, it has been the call to move toward evidence-based practices? Do you feel the field is at risk of losing important dimensions within its roots amidst this adulation of science?

**EK** Well, what does one accept as "evidence"? There is much valid protest today against "scientism"—the assumption that becomes expectation and demand that all valid truth can only be discovered and promulgated by the physical, or the physical and the social, sciences. A sub-set of that demand requires that that truth be "useful," productive of positive measurable results that issue in some kind of control. But that expectation and demand, which is really a form of *faith*, is not the whole story. "Evidence," after all comes from *evident*, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as "distinctly visible, obvious to the sight," further defining *obvious* as "plain and evident to the mind; perfectly clear or manifest; plainly distinguishable; clearly visible." In other words, "Keep it simple!"

The need, then, is to look first—in depth and in breadth—at actually recovering/recovered individuals, to examine and study how and why they got that way and stay that way. Now both some of the physical sciences, such as biology and chemistry, and some of the social sciences, such as sociology and psychology, can tell us a great deal in this area. But not if their tools distort in the very act of trying/claiming to "measure." Not all reality can be quantified: "the spiritual," whatever it is, is *real*. Its effects can be readily recognized but only with great difficulty and only indirectly measured. The question always remains how and how accurately what one measures actually bespeaks spirituality. Science deals with the material and therefore quantifies. Spirituality is a reality that is not material, which when you try to touch it vanishes: it can be recognized and viewed but not grasped or measured.

And so using the term "evidence-based" is fine; only what do we accept as "evidence"? There is an old, two-panel *A.A. Grapevine* cartoon, the first panel showing a devilish looking man in an obvious rage, his wife weeping and their children cowering; then, in the second panel, there is a halo over the man's head, and his wife and children are looking at him adoringly as he heads out the door saying, "I've got to get to my meeting, but I just don't understand 'the spiritual'."

The researcher's paradox is, "If you can measure it, it is not spiritual." But in this old and necessarily flawed image, spirituality is like the wind: you cannot see it, but you can readily see its effects. And so meeting the challenge of the demand for "evidence," skilled researchers such as Keith Humphreys, Lee Ann Kaskutas, and John Kelly, to name but three examples that come readily to mind, do attempt that and do come up with evidence that seems at times to have something to do with spirituality.

But when someone demands "evidence-based practice," they must be asked, "What do you accept as 'evidence'?"

**BW** Are scientific studies of the role of spirituality in addiction recovery breaking any new ground of importance to addiction professionals?

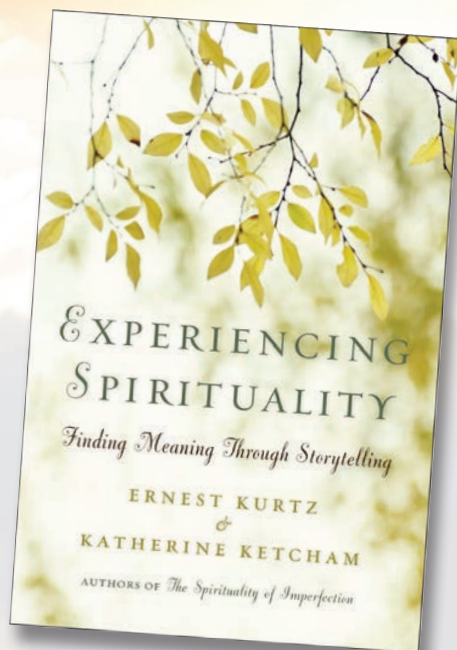
**EK** “Scientific”? Insofar as that term implies materialist assumptions, such efforts necessarily fall short of touching spirituality. But as noted in replying to the previous question, the various sciences can examine phenomena that flow from, and are a result of, spirituality. And sometimes, when applied by researchers respectful of the limitations of their instruments, studies can illuminate, shedding new light on even the very familiar.

The April-September 2014 issue of the *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* (v. 35:2–3) features fourteen contributions that taken together address just about every possible angle of the question of spirituality in recovery, from anthropology to psychology, physiology to psychometric research, from “The Ontological Generality” thru “The Paradox of Powerlessness” to “The Neurocircuitry of Attachment and Recovery.” And while none break dramatically new ground in their own limited areas, most offer significant information and especially helpful new perspectives to the non-specialist.

The articles shed the new light of explicit measurement on the circumstances and sequelae of “Spiritual Awakening in Alcoholics Anonymous,” for example. And a bibliographically exhaustive (and exhausting) article on “Psychological Mechanisms by which Spirituality Aids Recovery in Alcoholics Anonymous” reviews theory and research to suggest specific follow-up studies. The issue, then, is rich, and any addiction professional should carefully study it, but the contributions more explore and illuminate, and plow an already furrowed field, than turn up any surprisingly new information.

Such studies are more than merely “useful.” Several resemble classic literature in that they merit re-reading and pondering, being kept at hand as a resource to which one will return as ongoing experience presents new situations or raises different questions. Especially for “addiction professionals,” I think such reminders and new perspectives will almost certainly enrich practice.

On the other hand, any expectation of or search for some astoundingly new bit of information is doomed to failure. Alcoholism is an ancient problem. “New” solutions for it have always been scarce. At best, at least so far, one can learn how to live with the condition. Even those who reject and denigrate Alcoholics Anonymous only most exceptionally claim to “cure” alcoholism in the sense of enabling alcoholics to again drink alcohol safely. And so far at least, none of those claimed “cures” has cured anything beyond their perpetrator’s bank account. A blind preference for the new, the worship of novelty, ill fit those who have been touched by spirituality. Knowledge may expand, but wisdom deepens. We need both, but as fulfilling each other rather than fighting each other.



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## Multiple Pathways of Addiction Recovery

**BW** You have been a strong advocate of the legitimacy of multiple pathways of long-term addiction recovery. How have your studies of spirituality informed your understanding of these growing varieties of recovery experience?

**EK** Spirituality, by its very concept, definition, and nature, cannot be contained within any boundaries. “The Spirit blows where it wills,” according to one classic formulation. Well, if someone finds, from experience and examination, that some kind of spirituality—some transcendence of “self” and embrace of others, to put the *beyond* and *between* most succinctly—seem not only to be present but indeed to characterize all the recovering/recovered people he has met or studied, that discovery necessarily informs further study.

And yet—or rather, and so, given my ornery nature as well as the canons of research—in approaching any pathway to recovery that is new to me, I look and attempt first to disprove that discovery. I would love to find a way of healing alcoholism/addiction that lacked any *beyond* and *between*; but, so far at least, none have done so. And however the term *spirituality* may be avoided or weakened, that reality of a *beyond*—some kind of self-transcendence—and the experience of a *between*—some kind of bond with others—are always present when spirituality is operative.

What has been especially intriguing is that my ongoing research has reversed your question: the more varieties of recovery experience that I find and investigate, the richer becomes my understanding of spirituality. And that is very good, for, frankly, alcoholism and addiction—and even their sometimes claimed “overcoming”—bore me. They are, let’s face it, literally “sick” phenomena. But “recovery”—Ah! A very different kettle not of fish but of ever more fascinating varieties of spirituality. William James famously wrote of the *Varieties of Religious Experience*; the study of recovery, in all the rich variations in which it presents itself, is an immersive exercise in “the varieties of spiritual experience.”

For even more than religion, spirituality is *experienced*. The practice of religion, sadly, can be rote. But spirituality cannot be faked or routinized. Oh, some might attempt that; but I know of no stories of their success at it. For as we explore a bit under “Experience” in *Experiencing Spirituality*, spirituality is a matter of the heart—the heart symbolizing the whole person—rather than of the head. As John Henry Newman, mottoed, *Cor ad cor loquitur*: depth recognizes depth. So we need to listen, with that proverbial “third ear,” if you will, to any who present themselves as recovering/recovered. Admittedly, that can

be more difficult to study in modalities that do not privilege or at least sneak in some variety of story-telling, but just about anyone in recovery will speak of that experience to the honest listener.

Despite the fact that my explicit studies have for various reasons focused so much on Alcoholics Anonymous—indeed, largely because of that fact—I am fascinated by the diverse ways in which honestly striving people find and live recovery. As I suggested above, spirituality is an immensely rich and varied reality, and I have found spirituality in some form in every recovering/recovered person I have ever met.

**BW** You helped lead a recent study examining spiritual, religious, and secular pathways of recovery. What shared and distinguishing characteristics stood out for you in this study?

**EK** What still strikes me most about that study is the rich combination of similarity/sameness and variety/difference that characterized our subjects. Each, in her or his own way, struck a very definite “bottom,” but the diversity of those bottoms—those experiences/moments of emptying out/being emptied out, of *kenosis*, of confronting the reality of discovering “something wrong with me”—the memory of that variety lingers. From the woman whose children were taken away from her through to the man virtually pronounced dead in the Emergency Room, that pivotal moment in each so-different story testified to the basic oneness of the crisis point in a history of alcoholism/addiction.

And then the starkness of each one’s discovery of the bondedness, the fellowship, the *between-ity* that marked the beginning of their recovery: the African American addict who accidentally rambled first into a 12-Step meeting composed mainly of white homosexuals; the professional who, quietly confronted by his physician, began to discover new layers of richness in and with the people with whom he worked; the so-alone woman from two of perhaps the most dysfunctional families who was able to bring so much healing to so many very different women.

Finally, here are the ways in which—though we labeled the pathways “spiritual,” “religious,” and “secular”—very diverse but real spiritualities peeped through each story. It got me thinking again about my bugbear topic: Is there such a thing as “generic spirituality”? For we set out in designing the study, you will recall, to find as diverse a population as we could. Our purpose was to find *difference*, and I think we met that goal as well as it could be met.

What impressed me in working on that study and one reason I wished to participate in it proved no different from what has struck me over many years now: how in the meetings I attend and the articles that I read, the reality of the spiritual is always almost tangible yet never exactly

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the same. Insofar as the diversity of people is virtually infinite, so too are the varieties of spirituality manifest in their however different lives and experiences.

I noted this most recently in what may be to some a surprising source: the book *Don't Tell: Stories and Essays by Agnostics and Atheists in AA*. An examination of “atheist spirituality” must await another publication. Still, I would borrow and bring forward this much here, for it does speak to what, however diversely, appeared in the story of each of our subjects. First, the reality in recovery spirituality of a *beyond*, of some kind of transcendence, not a mere “getting out of the prison of self,” though that is an essential facet of it, but a true reaching for something that until now, even if perceived, had precluded even attempts to grasp. And second, the discovery and implementation of a very real between, some kind of bond with other suffering human beings. No one, it seems, gets sober by herself or himself: not idly does Alcoholics Anonymous style itself a “fellowship.”

*Beyond* and *between*: both themes appeared in each of the stories of those we studied.

## Spirituality and the Addictions Professional

**BW** What lessons drawn from your study of spirituality do you feel are most important to frontline addiction professionals?

**EK** “Frontline addiction professionals”: “counselors in the trenches”—but trench warfare went out with World War I! Except, perhaps these days, less with alcohol than with prescription opiates and heroin, the frontlines seems to be getting bloodier and bloodier. Especially given the apparent abandonment of heroin relapsers by conventional medical practitioners, addiction professionals who deal with this population need all the help they can possibly find. And what the study of the place of spirituality in the reality of recovery has to offer is the simple truth that it is necessary...just about absolutely necessary.

But how to implement this? For “spirituality” is a loaded term, most often confused and confusing. Although trained in theology as well as the history of religions, I find the current cutting edge of the study of spirituality to be its place in the lives of those who are atheists or agnostics. For there is, as a virtual explosion of literature in the past five years attests, a very real atheist spirituality, a spirituality for atheists. And that literature, varied though it be, and presented as it is by writers far from familiar with 12-Step programs, captures and offers a spirituality so congruent with the understandings of Alcoholics Anonymous that the reader may wonder about its authors.

André Comte-Sponville’s *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, for example, develops familiar themes, such as the reality that communion-community is a reality that can be shared without being divided. And the necessity

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of conviction, action, and love . . . or, in another formulation, of attachment, commitment, gratitude, and love . . . and of fidelity: truthfulness to oneself and one's story.

Sam Harris's new book on "atheist spirituality," *Waking Up*, offers this:

"Spirituality must be distinguished from religion—because people of every faith, and of none, have had the same sorts of spiritual experiences. While these states of mind are usually interpreted through the lens of one or another religious doctrine, we know that this is a mistake. Nothing that a Christian, a Muslim, and a Hindu can experience—self-transcending love, ecstasy, bliss, inner light—constitutes evidence in support of their traditional beliefs, because their beliefs are logically incompatible with one another. A deeper principle must be at work."

The ultimate Oxford Group, early A.A., summary ran: "Trust God, Clean house, Help others."

AAAgnostica suggests, "Let go, Clean house, Help others."

In another setting I have suggested that the program of Alcoholics Anonymous can be summarized in four words, two of which state the problem, and two of which propose the solution. "Selfishness, self-centeredness," is presented as the root of the alcoholic's trouble. And the solution for that? "Help others," especially by "carrying this message" to alcoholics who still suffer.

Most recently, active alcoholics and addicts whom the counselor meets may have had some religious upbringing but currently engage in very little religious practice. For some of these, the "We Agnostics" chapter of the A.A. "Big Book" may be of help, though it is probably the very last thing one would want to give an actual agnostic or atheist to read.

I would like to think that for most people—especially those in the broad middle ground between pious religiosity and militant atheist—the books that Kathy Ketcham and I have written might be of help. Both *The Spirituality of Imperfection* and *Experiencing Spirituality* set forth and develop and explore themes with which a wide variety of people might identify. Yes, the frontline trenches are a tough place to have to work, but there are certain themes, certain ideas, certain words that might help to bridge to the experience of the sufferer who is finding it difficult to find the words to describe what she is going through. That, at least, is one goal that we had in mind in writing those books. Check out the Tables of Contents.

**BW** What do you think are the most important unanswered questions about the role of spiritual experience in addiction recovery?

**EK** I'm not sure that it is an "unanswered question," though the answers may diverge. The first "asked question," of course, is whether spirituality—some kind of spiritual experience—is important, even essential, to

recovery. This is not the place to argue with those who deny that: few who actually work with recovering/recovered alcoholics and addicts do deny it, though understandings of spirituality of course vary. The active, relevant question is how to convey this, get it across in an effective way, to the individual on the cusp of recovery.

My suggestion, as noted, is to think in and employ the two simple prepositions, *beyond* and *between*. And, I think, to supplement or convey their reality with the simple six-word formula that summarizes the power of the Twelve Steps: "Trust God; Clean house; Help others." For the atheistically or agnostically inclined, it will be useful to substitute "Let go" or "Show up" in place of "Trust God." Some may suggest an even simpler, four-word, formulation of how A.A. works: it tells us what's wrong—"selfishness, self-centeredness"—and how to fix it, "Help others."

"Spiritual experience": I am not sure about the utility of that term, or the phrase "spiritual awakening" that the earliest A.A. members substituted for it in the Twelfth Step. Especially to the newly sober/clean, I think, it may sound so heavy as to be frightening. Its placement in Step Twelve may also be taken as suggesting that it occurs only at the climax, as sort of a high point, in the program/process of recovery. Than which nothing could be falsier: genuine recovery begins at bottom, with the sneaking suspicion that "there has to be something other than this." And that is the first glimpse of the possibility of the "beyond" that is the beginning of spirituality.

To the less unanswered than too frequently confusingly answered question, "How do I get across to this suffering alcoholic/addict for whom 'bottom' is probably having to sit here and listen to me tell his/her that the central truth that recovery is founded in spirituality?" I offer the simple suggestion of the two prepositions, *beyond* and *between*. The next layer—the graduate course, so to speak—can be the four words of diagnosis and remedy, followed in especially dire cases by post-graduate immersion in the six-word summary appropriate to this individual.

"[U]nanswered questions about the role of spiritual experience in addiction recovery?" I think that more significant may be the unasked questions. Because they are there. The implicit but always present question that too many self-styled scientists harbor is: "How do people *really* recover?" Those who do not accept the reality of spirituality come up with some pretty fanciful as well as fancy explanations/understandings. The main theory seems to be positing some kind of mental/emotional weakness in those who recover: if they were really smart and strong, they'd see through the rigamarole of A.A. Most are too polite (or something) to say that out loud in so many words, but watch the commentators that *The Fix* seems to relish publishing.

I have argued elsewhere that the surest evidence that Alcoholics Anonymous is, as its members claim, "a

spiritual program,” is the viciousness with which it is sometimes attacked. That, I think, is worth thinking on. In this area as elsewhere, an observation generally attributed to Gilbert Keith Chesterton too often holds true: “Those who cease believing in God do not believe in nothing; they believe in anything.”

## Experiencing Spirituality

**BW** What do you hope addiction professionals will draw from your latest collaboration with Katherine Ketcham?

**EK** As we set down and developed in our first collaboration, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, spirituality is one of those realities like beauty and love and all the names in the segment-headings of the book: it cannot be conveyed directly, and certainly not by talking about it, in words that in one way or another try or claim to capture it. Spirituality is not only conveyed but even only really in any way “talked about” only by and in story. Not so much “the best way” but the only way of approaching spirituality is by somehow experiencing its reality, and that can be done only through story. And so what we hope and tried to do is to empower the reader to some richer appreciation and use of stories.

*Experiencing Spirituality* even more than *The Spirituality of Imperfection* not only relies on but even consists mainly in stories. A few readers have complained about that, saying they wished for more expository text. So, in a way, did we. But it seemed to us that we did say in exposition all that could be transmitted in that form. We also realize that in casting a very wide net for a variety of stories, some that we offer will seem to some readers inappropriate. Just about every reader will ask, at one text or another, “What is *this* story doing here?” Three responses: (1) work on it; (2) different strokes for different folks; (3) maybe we goofed. Please accept that we have done our best to convey our points as appropriately as possible.

Those familiar with 12-Step meetings may be in the best position to understand that. I attended an A.A. meeting once in which a speaker, on temporary “therapeutic leave” from a well-respected treatment program, told of all the things he had learned about alcoholism—its likely genetic basis, the stages of alcohol metabolism, the physiological bases of loss of control, and so forth. The attendees sat quietly and even applauded gently as he finished. The next speaker told, mercifully, what he used to be like, what had happened, and what things were like for him now.

In how many is it possible to say that one does not get sober by knowing about alcoholism? In how many ways is it possible to transmit *experience*? Not all stories, of course, take the format of “what we used to be like, what happened, what we are like now,” except: in every story we tell, there is an implicit message of “once upon a time I did not really understand this, and then I came across this story, and so this is sort of how I understand it now.” Not everyone will “get” every story. And so we multiply

stories, telling different stories from diverse angles, trying to capture or at least to approach some plot, some detail, some *whatever* that will resonate with each of our listeners or readers.

What do we hope addiction professionals might gain from reading *Experiencing Spirituality*? Mainly, some confidence in their own storytelling power. Some stories will always “grab” us; others will sometimes drop like lead balloons. We discover “what works” only by trying. We also discover that what works on one day may not work on another. We never know, and so we try. A comedian who had been gravely ill was once asked, “Is it easier to die in real life or on stage?” Without a moment’s hesitation he replied, “In real life.” And so we say to our counselor friends, “Risk it!” The life you save may be that of the poor bastard cringing in that chair opposite you next session. Even if she laughs at you rather than with you, at least she is laughing.

Secondly, I think, Kathy and I hope that many readers will argue with our choice of topics, of themes, of segments. Some—forgiveness, for example—are carried over from *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. Others were suggested by things that happened to us in the twenty-two years that separated the two books. But we hope that readers will be stimulated by our efforts to a sensitivity to the spiritual themes that emerge in their own lives. We are, in part, spiritual beings, and to be alert and attuned to our experience *as* experience can open doors to a more real and deeper spirituality.

We each are living our own story. To be aware of its progress can be a rich blessing.



William L. White is a Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems/Lighthouse Institute and past-chair of the board of Recovery Communities United. Bill has a Master’s degree in Addiction Studies and has worked full time in the addictions field since 1969 as a street-worker, counselor, clinical director, researcher and well-traveled trainer and consultant. He has authored or co-authored more than 400 articles, monographs, research reports and book chapters and 16 books. His book, *Slaying the Dragon – The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*, received the McGovern Family Foundation Award for the best book on addiction recovery. His collected papers are posted at [www.williamwhitepapers.com](http://www.williamwhitepapers.com).

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1. What year did Bill Wilson, co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.), die?
  - a. 1963
  - b. 1968
  - c. 1971
  - d. 1975
2. The \_\_\_\_\_ saw the beginning of the spread to dominance of what became the alcoholism and addiction treatment industry.
  - a. 1960s
  - b. 1970s
  - c. 1980s
  - d. 1990s
3. Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) began in the very religious but carefully non-denominated \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. Harvard Club
  - b. Keely Foundation
  - c. Mitcheline Boys
  - d. Oxford Group
4. Which President of the United States said "... our form of government [makes] no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don't care what it is."?
  - a. Dwight D. Eisenhower
  - b. George W. Bush
  - c. Abraham Lincoln
  - d. Franklin D. Roosevelt
5. "The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking" is the \_\_\_\_\_ Tradition of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.).
  - a. Second
  - b. Third
  - c. Fourth
  - d. Fifth
6. According to this article, "spirituality is lived in six experiences." Which of the following is not one of those experiences?
  - a. The sense of being freed/released
  - b. A real gratitude
  - c. A genuine humility that opens to a generous tolerance
  - d. An inability to forgive
7. \_\_\_\_\_, by its very concept and definite and nature, cannot be contained within any boundaries.
  - a. Spirituality
  - b. Science
  - c. Math
  - d. History
8. According to Ernie Kurtz, "...even more than religion, spirituality is \_\_\_\_\_."
  - a. Measured
  - b. Scientific
  - c. Routinized
  - d. Experienced
9. The phrases that some use to describe how A.A. works is "selfishness, self-centeredness," which tells us what is wrong, and "help others," which tells us how to fix it.
  - a. True
  - b. False
10. Ernie Kurtz hopes that addiction professionals might gain from reading *Experiencing Spirituality* some confidence in their own storytelling power.
  - a. True
  - b. False

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