

Chapter 4

WE AGNOSTICS, ATHEISTS, AND BELIEVERS

Early on in our practice of the Steps, we members of EDA are required to establish a foundation on which we can begin to build a durable and resilient recovery, one that does not leave us vulnerable to triggers or easily blindsided by unexpected “mental blank spots.”¹ For many of us, this means a growing reliance on God. For others, it is a willingness to consider our own conception of God—a Higher Power—with which we can feel comfortable. Still others must find something else—a higher purpose, such as service to the greater good, that is more important to us than we are to ourselves. Any of these can provide a context for the development of objectivity about ourselves and our place in the world—a perspective that enables us to respond and act rationally regardless of circumstances. In order to recover, all of us need to find something greater than ourselves on which we can consistently rely. The purpose of this chapter is to help you find a way to get started on this vital and necessary step.

Clearly, we are a diverse group of people with differing views, so it is critical to emphasize that we follow a *shared process* (working the Twelve Steps) to a *shared goal* (recovery from our eating disorders). Accepting that there are many ways to describe the power or purpose as we have come to know it, we wish to point out differing paths that some of us have taken. Any one of them can,

¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 42.

and will, lead to recovery if you follow the process outlined in this book.

First, we present a statement from our members who consider themselves to be atheist or agnostic. We recognize that many of our readers struggle with the spiritual orientation found in Twelve-Step fellowships. We hope to show that this needn't be the case!

From Agnostics and Atheists in EDA:

In defining the Twelve Steps as we know them today, the founders of AA adapted and expanded the premises of the Christian Oxford Group to ensure that as many people as possible would be able to grasp and apply the solution they had found. The authors of AA's "Big Book" stress again and again that the message of recovery extends not only to people who can readily grasp and apply spiritual principles, but to those for whom a spiritual experience seems utterly impossible: the atheist and agnostic. The entire fourth chapter of the AA text, "We Agnostics," is devoted specifically to such individuals. Our main purpose in writing this statement is much the same: to carry the message of recovery to those who still struggle, regardless of what they currently believe, or can believe.

Authors of the AA chapter "We Agnostics" advance a series of arguments for why one ought to have faith. We will not refute, dispute, or disparage anything you may have read there. On the contrary, atheists and agnostics in EDA should have profound respect, appreciation, and gratitude for the spiritual approach employed by so many people in recovery, including the authors of the seminal text, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. Without the AA and EDA programs as written, many of us would never have found recovery at all.

If you have not yet read the AA chapter “We Agnostics,” we encourage you to do so.²

We want to make clear that we are not here to convince anyone that atheism or agnosticism are goals to which one should aspire. Without a shadow of doubt, having such a position does complicate and strain efforts to work the Twelve Steps. Yet, many who fully understand the reasons why the AA text declares one should have faith remain fundamentally unable to agree with the underlying premises that the universe needs a God to explain it, or that any problem, no matter how big or overwhelming, requires a deity or spiritual force to solve it. We are neither “evil” nor inherently different from others in recovery, yet we cannot find evidence of what the AA text refers to as “the fundamental idea of God” deep within ourselves.³ Our statement is dedicated to those for whom no arguments for the existence of a spiritual entity make sense. If our many years of recovery in Twelve-Step programs have taught us anything, it is the value of honoring our own truth.

For those who have found a spiritual connection that works for them and are reading this section out of interest in helping others who suffer from an eating disorder (such as sponsees who are struggling with Steps 2, 3, 5, 7, or 11), please understand we atheists and agnostics in EDA and other Twelve-Step programs take no issue whatsoever with anyone’s faith or spirituality. We admire and applaud those who are able to work the program without accommodation. We ask your forbearance. We are not attempting to “water down” the power of the spiritual approach; we are pushing the envelope so it can encompass more of those who suffer as we once did.

² An online version of the chapter (published by the General Service Office of Alcoholics Anonymous) is available here: http://www.aa.org/assets/en_US/en_bigbook_chapt4.pdf.

³ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 55.

Our main purpose in writing this is to convey to non-believers a message of recovery that will work for them, exactly as they are. We are convinced that no one need take anything on faith alone: we can recover using an approach that is based solely on logic and common sense.

As described in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, the famous doctor, Carl Jung, explained to Rowland H. that the only antidote to lifelong, chronic alcoholism for someone of his description must entail “a vital spiritual experience.”⁴ Dr. Jung is quoted as saying, “To me these occurrences are phenomena. They appear to be in the nature of huge emotional displacements and rearrangements. Ideas, emotions, and attitudes which were once the guiding forces... are suddenly cast to one side, and a completely new set of conceptions and motives begin to dominate them.”⁵ The Twelve Steps are designed to produce exactly the type of “vital spiritual experience” described by Dr. Jung.

Step Twelve begins, “Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps...,” clarifying that the founders of AA laid out the Steps to produce exactly the kind of “huge emotional displacement and rearrangement” that Dr. Jung understood to be necessary for the hopeless alcoholic to recover. The good news for atheists and agnostics is that while the Twelve Steps are defined as a path of “spiritual progress,” they serve equally well as steps to growth of perspective and to recovery—regardless of one’s position on God or spirituality. Thankfully for people like us, the principles of love, tolerance, gratitude, humility, and service are not exclusively religious or spiritual. The attitudinal and behavioral changes that are the hallmark of recovery need not depend on faith and prayer, but rather on changes from irrational to rational thinking, and especially on daily action based on self-reflection and service to others.

⁴ Ibid., 27.

⁵ Ibid.

To help those who trip over the word “God” in Twelve-Step literature, we are pleased to share our experience, strength, and hope. As we have noted throughout EDA literature, it does not matter whether you use the word “God” to mean the Deity, a deity, a spiritual entity (a Higher Power), or a non-spiritual conception (a higher purpose). The fact of our recoveries demonstrates that reliance on any one of these conceptions confers a perspective that transcends our immediate physical, social, and emotional circumstances and allows us to “keep calm and carry on” with what really matters. Our advice is to honor your own truth. And although your understanding will necessarily grow and change over time, you only need to focus on whether or not your actions honor that truth in the here and now.

We have found that working the Twelve Steps is a discipline much like the practice of yoga: one does not have to be especially spiritual for it to be profoundly effective in reducing pain and stress. The benefits we experience as a result of working the Twelve Steps go much farther, however. The joy we feel at being able to turn bad experiences to good, the delight we know as we become happily useful, and the exhilaration and connection we feel as we appreciate the deep bonds we establish with others, all serve to remind us how much we have to offer.

Allow us to make clear that our approach is grounded in the same actions one finds in the Twelve Steps with very few changes. Note that this is no easy alternative to the hard work required for recovery. In the following chapters, “How It Works (Steps One through Four),” “Into Action (Steps Five through Eleven),” and “Working with Others (Step Twelve)” we have attempted to provide guidance not only for those who are able to apply a religious or spiritual solution, but also for those who cannot. We trust no one finds this unduly offensive. We hope that those who have

taken the principles of the Twelve Steps to heart will take what they can use and leave the rest, understanding that our approach reflects our best effort to carry the message of recovery to all who may need it.

The message provided in this book—that one may find recovery without needing to consider another’s conception of a Higher Power—is sure to bring “luster to tired eyes and fresh courage to flagging spirits.”⁶ Those who would otherwise have avoided Twelve-Step recovery altogether may be encouraged to know that their own conception of a greater good is all that is needed to commence a journey towards recovery from an eating disorder.

But what about those who have faith, yet find it lacking in terms of healing from their eating disorders? As is mentioned elsewhere in this book, what had been missing from our faith was action, specifically *spiritual* action working towards the removal of eating-disordered thoughts and behaviors. Our purpose in writing this EDA text is to show other people with eating disorders precisely what spiritual action we took, in agreement with the AA text which reads: “To show other alcoholics precisely how we recovered is the main purpose of this book.”⁷

Some of our more spiritually inclined members would also like to emphasize the “Big Book’s” other stated purpose: “...that’s exactly what this book is about. Its main object is to enable you to find a Power greater than yourself, which will solve your problem.”⁸ Let us hear from them.

⁶ Ibid., 53. Spelling of “lustre” Americanized for readability in the US.

⁷ Ibid., xiii.

⁸ Ibid., 45.

From Believers and People of Faith in EDA:

When faced with the proposed writings of the EDA “Big Book,” we who are more religiously inclined could not accept many of its secular precepts without mentioning some of our thoughts on the matter. Those of us with a deep love for God didn’t like the thought of downplaying the importance of faith and reliance upon a Higher Power. We had our faith and we loved it. As stated in the AA book, “When we became alcoholic (eating-disordered), crushed by a self-imposed crisis we could not postpone or evade, we had to fearlessly face the proposition that either God is everything or He is nothing. God either is, or He isn’t. What was our choice to be?”⁹ We chose that He was.

Further, how could we ignore believers who consider God to be the most important aspect of their lives, or casually reduce this power down to a “greater good?” We feel so strongly about faith and our love for God or our Higher Power that we proposed that this response be included in the EDA volume for the believers and for the way of faith.

Interestingly, some religious enthusiasts find the “Big Book” of Alcoholics Anonymous to be too secular, believing that it allows you to choose your own God. We who study the AA “Big Book” do not hold this to be true. It doesn’t state you can choose your own God, but rather that you can choose your own conception of God—whatever that may be. And often that turns out to be God, with a capitol G. After we commence our spiritual growth, “we found ourselves accepting many things which then seemed entirely out of reach. That was growth, but if we wished to grow, we had to begin somewhere. So we used our own conception, however limited it was.”¹⁰ It also states in the AA book, Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, “Relieved of

⁹ Ibid., 53. Parenthetical element added.

¹⁰ Ibid., 47.

the (eating disorder) obsession, their lives unaccountably transformed, they came to believe in a Higher Power, and most of them began to talk about God.”¹¹

It has been our experience that no matter what faith a person comes into the Fellowship with, that faith will grow. The AA “Big Book” discusses the many avenues through which people come to faith in AA when they accept their need for a Higher Power. Some had no faith, some had faith and found it lacking, some had resentments against faith or against people of faith, and some thought they had evaded the God idea altogether. We find no problem working with individuals (such as during sponsorship) who have a different faith than we do. We do our best to share what has helped us, and hope they adopt a similar way of life—whether or not it includes the same conception of God. We who are more religiously inclined are happy to work together with those who are more secular for the common purpose of recovery from an eating disorder. But it is no secret that those of us with faith wish for others to experience what we experience—although we push this on no one. We only serve to be helpful and share our hope and our stories of recovery. Ours is a program of attraction, not promotion.

We would like to point out that some of us who have a strong faith didn’t always have it. Many of us acquired faith—or went back to it—when we got sober from our eating disorders through working the Steps of EDA. Many of us had some level of faith and some had none at all, yet we found that without seeking our Higher Power—God as we understood Him—we could find no recovery. Since our eating disorders deal with food, which is necessary to life, many of us found that we had to draw even nearer to God than we had previously. And our relationship with God has

¹¹ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*. (1981) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 28. Parenthetical element added.

indeed become the most important aspect of our lives. That is why we wish to share the Great Reality, the great wonder that is our faith, and why we feel uncomfortable when it is reduced to a level of “greater purpose.” Many of us have come to feel that conscious contact with God is something that we cannot ignore or evade if we wish to maintain recovery. While respecting that others find recovery through reliance on other conceptions, we think it critical to share our personal understanding with newcomers.

Those of us with faith believe that anything is possible with divine inspiration, though God does require our participation. We need action, for “...it is only by action that we can cut away the self-will which has always blocked the entry of God—or, if you like, a Higher Power—into our lives. Faith, to be sure, is necessary, but faith alone can avail nothing; we can have faith yet keep God out of our lives.”¹² Thankfully for us, no matter where we are spiritually, “God does not make too hard terms with those who seek Him.”¹³

We people of faith want to highlight how deeply rooted we are in our reliance upon a Higher Power and we encourage everyone to seek out and explore their faith. As it says in the Eleventh Step section of both the AA “Big Book” and our EDA text, many of us return to religious practices we may have held in the past. We are encouraged to be quick to make use of what religion offers.¹⁴

Many of us took comfort from the story in the AA book, *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, about the sponsor who explained that he “took it (meaning spirituality and Step Two) piecemeal”¹⁵ himself. In fact, none of the Twelve Steps can be taken or understood all at once. But

¹² Ibid., 34.

¹³ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 46.

¹⁴ Ibid., 87.

¹⁵ *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, (1981) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., 26.

if we are doing what is suggested, a new way of life starts infiltrating our lives and slowly we shift our way of thinking and doing.

We who have recovered and found our faith in God want to share that which is the deepest reality for us, the core of our being, our inspiration for life, the giver of life, the one who makes all things possible. We wish to honor Him in all our endeavors and give credit to Him where we feel credit is due. We encourage those of you with faith not to be dismayed, and not be downtrodden by anything in this book you may find is not in line with your own conception of God; know that we, too, are out there, and we pray for all of you to recover from your eating disorders and grow closer to God.

We hope that you do not find these statements offensive in any way. We wish to give all sides equal representation, not wanting to divide or make recovery seem too daunting of a task for those who struggle with faith. Most of us struggled with faith ourselves. However, we in EDA believe that, as reflected in the AA text we must all “hang together or die separately. We (have) to unify our Fellowship or pass off the scene.”¹⁶ Faced with the thought of excluding any of our fellowship from finding hope in EDA, we embrace common ground. We do not want anyone to miss out on this journey of recovery; that is our primary purpose.

Some of you may be troubled by the secular tone of this text, while others, hoping to find a more secular experience, may be dismayed by what seems like constant references to God. In either case, you are not alone! So we emphasize again that even though we EDA members have

¹⁶ *Alcoholics Anonymous*. (2001) New York, NY: AA World Services, Inc., xix. Verb tense changed from “had” to “have.”

divergent positions on faith, *our common ground is obvious*: the fact of our recoveries and the process through which we achieve peace and freedom.

Our strength lies in our diversity. We acknowledge that your experience may lie anywhere along the spectrum of faith. Whatever it is, EDA welcomes you, embraces your position, and cherishes your recovery. Regardless of your beliefs concerning God or a greater good, you will find yourself reflected in this text. We encourage you to take what you can use and apply it. Trust your truth, respect others as you would like to be respected, and remember that your example counts. If we are open, honest, and empathetic, we can effect real changes in ourselves *and* we can help one another.

In summary, though we may have differing ways of faith, there are two things we absolutely agree on: life with an active eating disorder is no life at all, and the Twelve Steps show a way out that is so powerful we need never return to the dark days. In the next three chapters we describe exactly what we did to recover from our eating disorders. We hope you find the courage to carry on: recovery is worth the effort!