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Season 02. Episode 04

AA is a Boys' Club, Right?

In this episode # 4 of Season 2 which makes it 17 episodes to date, and more to come, I want to take you through some attack and defend on an issue that women care about. But if you're a man, don't tune out because you might be the one to help a woman into recovery by being better able to bust some myths that women believe in about AA, also known as Alcoholics Anonymous. And also learn about AA for yourself, the most democratic fellowship you could possibly imagine. AA is not a secret society. It simply honors the privacy of those who wish to remain anonymous, but nothing prevents me, for example, from disclosing that I am a grateful member.

Back in December 2019, a woman reader of the New York Times blasted AA as a boys' club, or in her words, a patriarchy, apparently misunderstanding the concept of powerlessness, and using this twisted logic to turn the argument against AA, claiming that AA was a bastion of male chauvinism whose main purpose was to deny power to women and keep them in their place.

When I read that, I said: well that calls for a reasoned response and even though I didn't rise to the bait, several readers who demonstrated a solid understanding AA did, in fact, offer a defense in far more eloquent ways than I ever could.

Here is just a sample of what they said:

“For anyone who has attended more than a handful of AA meetings, Ms X’s opinion that the organization is patriarchal makes little sense. While it was founded by a group of men almost a century ago (we know it be 1935), today’s AA is non-hierarchical and run by diverse groups of volunteers, including many women.”

There's more. This writer goes on to say something that clears up a misunderstanding about the concept of powerlessness – over alcohol.

He goes on to say:

“Moreover, Ms. X mischaracterizes the central tenet of AA’s philosophy entirely when she writes that it is designed to break people down. To the contrary, it raises people up through group therapy and community support.”

End quote.

To be fair, AA meetings are not exactly group therapy because they are not moderated by anyone; rather they allow each attendee to share their experience, and/or discuss a group topic without interruption or as we say, without cross-talk. This gives the one taking the space to share whatever’s on their mind in a safe, non-judgmental environment.

The writer then gets at some powerful truths about his early experience:

“Indeed, walking into my first AA meeting was the single bravest thing I have ever done”...There goes an accurate take on powerlessness...his courage gave him the power to come in and admit that alcohol had kicked the sht out of him, that’s what, and in the language of recovery: he was powerless over alcohol and his life had become unmanageable, and that he for sure could not do and could never do this alone.

This is what happened when he came in for the first time:

“I was in a terrible emotional place and I shared my story, publicly breaking into tears.”

I remember what it was like. When I started sharing my story for the first time, I felt the emotional dam break wide open after having stuffed my feelings of remorse and shame for years and years. I felt that, finally, I was among people who understood. I no longer felt alone: that's one of the promises made to new members: to watch loneliness vanish is a bright spot in our lives.

And if you haven't ever been in this state, that is, if you are lucky enough not to have become an addict or an alcoholic, then this should give you a little taste of what it is like to live a life of fear and desperation.

Let's get back to this business of AA as a patriarchy.

Another reader of the same article takes on the patriarchy issue in more direct terms in her written response to the charge that AA is essentially a boys' club:

She writes: "Ms. X's blithe takedown of AA (don't you just love that blithe takedown part?) does a grave disservice to millions (yes, millions) in this country desperate to quit drinking or using (yes, AA meetings are typically open to addicts, too, and some of us are both alcoholics and addicts), but too paralyzed by fear and shame – oh so true- to ask for help. Ms. X has given them an easy excuse to cross AA off their list of potential resources. "

And here's the clincher - the writer goes on to say, in her critique of the charge, the myth, as it were:

"Most egregiously, she doesn't mention that thousands of women meet every day in this country whose distaste for patriarchy is as fierce as hers."

Close quote.

Fact is, there is an AA meeting for everyone and anyone: there are mostly come one, come all meetings, but there are men-only, women-only, LGBTQ meetings, Spanish-speaking meetings, and many more types of meetings. Like impaired professional meetings, and meetings with down and outers, with dopers nodding off in the corner – one of my favorite meetings in the early days was one called Here and Now, Saturday night at 9:00PM at the Alano Club in the inner city, prime time as it were. It was a reminder to me that I could be back out there any time I chose. I used to introduce myself as "Hi I'm Bruno, and I'm an alcoholic and an

addict just like you.” Just to keep my feet on the ground and not pretend I was floating above anyone, even the lowliest drunk in the room.

We might be different on the outside, but we are alike in some very important ways... once we start, most of us can't stop or stay stopped on our own. This is an equal opportunity disease. If you're human, you are eligible. It respects no one. It is a universal, global disorder.

Yes, there are some who go it alone, or use other means to stay clean and sober, and we encourage them to stay sober any way they know how. We can only speak for ourselves – men, women, gay, straight, white, black, brown - when we say: this is what it was like (it was hell) , this is what happened (we woke up and joined a 12-step program) and this is what it's like now (we are living inspired and joyful lives).

As our co-founder once said: “If a man can do an about-face and drink like a gentleman, our hat's off to him.” Of course this statement is a man speaking to men, but if we take the times into account – it was 1939 when it was written – then we can forgive and better understand the sentiment behind it – that if you can find sobriety another way, go ahead. Didn't work for us, but maybe it'll work for you. That's how brilliant this philosophy is: we don't pretend to have all the answers.

We simply say: this is how we got sober; perhaps you'd like to join us. And if you don't like us or don't buy what we believe in, then you are free to go. No dues or fees, no obligations. We like it when you throw a buck or two in to help pay the rent, but you don't have to. And you can come back any time. Or come and go as you please. And yet, at last count, there are approximately 2 million AA members around the world.

The writer I just referred to states that “AA's diversity reflects its ability to respond to cultural change.”

AA does stay with the times. It is actually a 501C3 not for profit with open books and a list of officers, a head office in New York where it got its start along with Akron, Ohio, and a decent online presence at www.aa.org, simple enough.

There's even a meeting app I just downloaded called Meeting Finder where you can find a meeting near you any day of the week and any time of day.

Here's a good one on the value of the AA program among woman.

Another woman writes this:

“i am a feminist and sober 35 years. AA has done for me what I could not do for myself. By working through the 12 steps with other people like me, I was able to finally stop drinking and become the best version of myself.”

What she is addressing here is something that people who are not fully familiar with AA don't quite understand. That is, that AA is not just about not drinking. We say that our drinking was only 10% of the problem. We didn't have a drinking problem so much as we had a thinking problem. We were the problem.

The writer goes on to say something at the heart of recovery using the twelve steps:

“Ms. X missed the point. Being spiritual does not mean giving into a patriarchal structure. It means letting go of the need to control. The irony is that when I stop fighting using my ego, I am able to find my deepest power as a woman in a patriarchal world.”

So for this woman, the world, or AA, might still be a patriarchal place, but it is in the opinion of many that it is about compassion and healing for all who have the need for it, whoever you are and wherever you come from, even why you came here to begin with.

I spent decades in the ad business in Chicago and New York. I may have mentioned this before, but at the height of my so-called career, I enjoyed a beautiful corner office on the 26th floor at 1515 Broadway. It all came crashing down one rainy day when I learned that we had been acquired by a big British network and it became really clear really fast they needed to unload some salaries. And even though I never drank or smoked dope on the job, my drinking and using made me an arrogant, unlikeable, afraid character. So who do they fire first? Not the incompetent. They fire people they don't like, first.

So even though I was educated, high up in the company, a man of stature with a Senior VP to my name, it didn't matter a lick. I was as vulnerable to the disease as the guy going home on the subway to his small apartment in Queens, above the bar, making just enough to get by. I may have fallen further, but the result was the same.

So what did we learn today? We learned that:

1. There are many myths out there that need to be dispelled if we wish to give as many alcoholics, and I would say addicts, fewer reasons to cross us off the list.
2. The charge against AA went public, in the New York Times January 3d 2020, of all places, but I give the Times credit for publishing two very wellreasoned defenses.
3. That AA is a patriarchy, or a boys' or mens' club has been thoroughly debunked and is simply not true. There are meetings that are women-only, men-only and many other types of meetings that offer a safe, nonjudgmental way to participate in healing.
4. The larger and great truth is that alcoholism and addiction are equal opportunity disorders, respecting no type or class or gender.
5. The parallel truth is that we believe that AA can help those who seek it, and we encourage those who need help to get it wherever they can. For few can do this alone.

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