

Spirituality: The Key to Recovery From Alcoholism

ROBERT D. WARFIELD
MARC B. GOLDSTEIN

The authors suggest that a condition of "negative spirituality" underlies and sustains alcoholism, and perhaps all addictions, and that a secure recovery is not possible unless a "spiritual awakening," such as is envisioned by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), is achieved. A broadly applicable conceptual model of spirituality is inferred from the AA 12-step rehabilitation program.

Alcoholics Anonymous' "Big Book" states, "Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this simple program . . ." (AA World Services, 1976, p. 58). The simple program referred to is AA's twelve steps. They represent the actions taken by the founders of AA to assure their own recovery from alcoholism. AA calls its twelve steps a program of "spiritual awakening" (AA World Services, 1976, p. 60).

THE AA REHABILITATION PROGRAM

Alcoholics Anonymous is both a fellowship and a rehabilitation program. The fellowship provides alcoholics with a supportive peer group. It is designed to instill in them the level of trust necessary to risk exposing their vulnerable selves to honest examination and correction of their dysfunctional behaviors and beliefs (Kurtz, 1979). It is the twelve step program, not the fellowship, which is primarily responsible for the rehabilitation of the alcoholic (AA World Services, 1976).

This study investigated the spiritual implications of AA's twelve step program in an attempt to understand the value of spirituality in achieving a secure recovery from alcoholism. A better understanding of AA spirituality will aid those rehabilitation programs currently, but ineffectively, employing the twelve steps (Booth, 1984a; Kohn, 1984). It might also encourage recovering alcoholics to better use the AA program and thereby reduce their risk of relapse.

Several studies reveal the success of AA in promoting recovery from alcoholism (Bradley, 1988; Cook, 1988; Emerick, 1987; Hoffmann, Harrison & Belille, 1983; McLatchie and Lomp, 1988; Shereen, 1988; Thurstin, Alfano & Nerviano, 1987). Gorski and Miller, among the foremost of relapse prevention specialists, asserted, "Alcoholics Anonymous is the single most effective treatment for alcoholism" (1986, p. 52). Nevertheless, relapse (the unintended abuse of alcohol during recovery) even while involved with AA is a distressingly common phenomenon (Blum, 1991). Stories of relapse are often reported by alcoholics who claim to have been active in AA at the time of relapse. Upon questioning, it is usually found that they avoided step-work meetings and attended mostly large "fellowship" meetings at which they could risk less self-exposure. Even for those who claim to have had a "sponsor" to shepherd them through AA and its twelve steps, little effort was made in this vital area.

Relapse Risk Factors in Alcoholism

What is it about alcoholism that makes relapse such an ever-present risk? Khantzian and Mack (1989) referred to alcoholism as "a complex disorder in which problems of self-governance malignantly interact with other vulnerabilities such as disabilities in regulating feelings (i.e., affects) and self-care to cause biologically susceptible individuals and others to become hopelessly dependent on alcohol" (pp. 79-80). This definition recognizes the importance of personality and behavioral characteristics that are subject to change (AA World Services, 1976; Whitfield, 1984c) as well as biological and genetic factors for which effective treatment has not yet been developed (Blum, 1991; May, 1988).

Alcoholics suffer from what AA calls "character defects" (AA World Services, 1976, p. 59). These are feelings, beliefs, and behaviors that dispose them to seek a sense of well-being by abusing alcohol. Such "character defects" are frequently reflective of a pathological narcissism, in which those addicted to alcohol behave as though they were the center of their universe or their own God (Kurtz, 1979). Alcoholics also possess an underlying codependency involving an alienation from their true selves and an inability to establish functional relationships with significant others in their lives (Whitfield, 1989). The combination of these biological and character risk factors makes alcoholism difficult to treat and makes the recovering alcoholic vulnerable to relapse.

SOME SPIRITUAL IMPLICATIONS OF ALCOHOLISM

If alcoholism is to be effectively treated, the nature of well-being that is sought by the alcohol abuser, no less than by all human beings, must be understood. Well-being can be thought of as meeting one's basic needs.

Robert D. Warfield is director of Addiction Services Programs at Stanley J. Radgowski Correctional Institution in Montville, Connecticut. Marc B. Goldstein is chairman of the Department of Psychology at Central Connecticut State University. Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Marc B. Goldstein, Department of Psychology, Central Connecticut State University, 1615 Stanley Street, New Britain, CT 06050.

ome might say it means satisfying our wants. But, as many rich and "successful" people will agree, achieving our wants frequently results in a dissatisfying quest for more and more wants. If we were created for a positive purpose, and it makes little sense to think otherwise, satisfying our basic needs should produce a state of well-being.

What, then, are our basic needs? Glasser (1984) seemed to be largely on target, with one exception, when he listed them as survival, belongingness, power, freedom, and fun (or more correctly, pleasure). The survival need, he said, is physical, but the concept could be broadened to include possession of the means to function effectively in the world. The other needs, he said, are psychological. In fact, with the exception of power, which seems culture-bound and compensatory, all the other needs seem to be spiritual in the broadest sense. It is highly likely that our Creator endowed us with these needs for our spiritual development. Therefore, no less than for the rest of us, the quest of the alcoholic is for spiritual well-being. Of all the basic needs—survival, belongingness, freedom, and pleasure—the most spiritual is belongingness, which can be described as enjoyment of loving, accepting, and trusting relationships with one's self, other people, the world in all aspects of life experiences, life itself, and the God of one's understanding. These relationships seem to be the primary means of achieving well-being for alcoholics and for us all.

Alcoholism is best understood and treated holistically (Wegscheider, 1981). It affects every aspect of the human condition. Abuse of alcohol damages a person physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, and spiritually. The central element in holistic healing is spirituality (Chandler, Holden, & Colander, 1992; Witmer & Sweeney, 1992). Unfortunately for the alcoholic, it is the spiritual aspect of well-being that is usually overlooked or de-emphasized in most treatment programs. The reason appears to be both a lack of understanding of the role of spirituality in rehabilitation and a reluctance to become involved in what is presumed to be religion (Booth, 1984a; Kohn, 1984). The result is an incomplete and relapse-prone recovery for the alcoholic.

Carl Jung observed of one of his patients, "his craving for alcohol was the equivalent, on a low level, of the spiritual thirst of our being for wholeness, expressed in medieval language: the union with God" (cited in Sikorsky, 1990, p. 14). Did he mean that spirituality is the same as what we today call religion? Probably not; for the more prominent thinkers of medieval times religion encompassed all aspects of life, both sacred and worldly (Moore, 1992). This broad view of spirituality is similar to that recognized by Booth (1984b) and Whitfield (1984a) as the essential but largely missing element in alcoholism treatment.

Spirituality is concerned with whomever or whatever is most important in a person's life (George, 1990). Essentially, spirituality involves attitudes that are based on beliefs about our relationships with our self, with other

human beings, with our world (including our physical and social environments), with life (as to its meaning and purpose), and ultimately, with God, a Higher Power, or "Universal Consciousness" (Whitfield, 1984a). If those beliefs were formed in circumstances of unconditional love, acceptance, and trust, we probably exhibit attitudes of unconditional love, acceptance, and trust in all of our relationships. Prezioso called this positive spirituality, which, he said, reflects, "a sense of gratitude and acceptance, a sense of connectedness with others and with a benevolent power greater than self . . . anchored in the belief that life has meaning and purpose and that, although imperfect, each of us is acceptable, lovable, and worthwhile" (1987, p. 239).

When we experience positive spirituality, we tend to view ourselves as lovable, capable, and deserving. We allow others to enter and enrich our lives without feeling a need to manipulate, use, or abuse them. We find our world (job, school, community) to be a largely safe place wherein we are able to develop toward our full potential. Life has positive meaning and purpose, and many of us find a loving God who guides our lives, shares our joys, and sustains us when we are in pain or in need. When positive spirituality dominates our lives, we have no need to alter our moods with addictive substances or behaviors.

The opposite is true for active alcoholics and sober but nonrecovering alcoholics referred to in AA as "dry drunks." Their lives are dominated by a negative spirituality (Prezioso, 1987). They are insecure, defensive, and lacking in self-esteem. They try to fill their unmet relationship needs by using and abusing others whom they fear and distrust. They see the world as unsafe and use that as justification for conning and manipulating their way through it. Life for them is not only devoid of positive purpose; to quote an often-heard comment, "Life sucks, and then you die." And the god, if any, of their understanding is either harsh and unforgiving or has no relevance to them. Nevertheless, they seem to be constantly striving to realize the joys of positive spirituality, albeit through a substitute relationship with alcohol. Unfortunately, their strivings are doomed to failure because the relationship with alcohol is unnatural and the problems alcohol abuse creates causes them increasing unhappiness.

A NEW LOOK AT AA'S SPIRITUAL REHABILITATION MODEL

As the human personality develops from a preoccupation with the survival, passion, and power needs of its "lower self," toward the understanding, compassion, and unity strivings of its higher self (Whitfield, 1984a, 1984b), it also grows spiritually. As the lower self is transcended, life's relationships become more fulfilling. Without that transcendence, life's relationships are predominately troublesome. Maslow (1954) held that psychological illnesses occur when the attainment of the higher nature of the individual becomes blocked. For alcoholics, mainly because of attitudes of negative spirituality,

relationships with self, others, the world, life, and God are unsatisfactory. Indeed, they are primary sources of stress, which initiate and prolong alcohol abuse.

Most alcoholics began drinking abusively in their teens. From that point, alcohol became their method for coping with stress, and they apparently failed to develop much beyond the adolescent personality stage. The twelve step rehabilitation program of AA helps to complete that personality development process. It also instills attitudes of positive spirituality, which will allow recovering alcoholics to deal effectively with the stresses of life and bring about a fulfilling and even joyful recovery. It does so by promoting the growth of a healthy ego in a nurturing environment.

According to Khantzian and Mack, "The spiritual dimension of AA helps to move a person from a less mature, childish self-centeredness toward a more mature form of object love" (1989, p. 79). Essentially, the founders of AA understood that the transcendence of ego stimulates in the alcoholic a corresponding growth of positive spirituality. The process duplicates, in part, the early childhood and subsequent relationship influences intended to promote positive spiritual development in us all but which often fall short of the mark. AA also serves as a kind of surrogate family to provide alcoholics with consistent unconditional love, trust, and acceptance, coupled with reality-testing and a respectful amount of direction and guidance. Although AA exerts no pressure on alcoholics to change, it provides every encouragement and assistance necessary for them to do so if they are willing, open-minded, and capable of being honest with themselves and others.

The Twelve Steps

A listing of the twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and their implications for ego-transcendence and positive spiritual development is found in the publication *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (AA World Services, 1952). The steps are introduced as follows, accompanied by interpretations provided by the authors of this study.

Step 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable. The "self-centeredness" of a willful and irresponsible ego is recognized as the root cause of the destructive use of alcohol, and dependence on self-confidence or willpower in its treatment is seen as a "total liability" (AA World Services, 1952, p. 22). Acceptance of being "powerless" prepares the groundwork for the eventual transcendence of the narrow ego-self.

Step 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity. The "character defects" that generate and sustain alcoholism are a form of mental illness that is not amenable to self-treatment. Only a power greater than the ego-self is capable of curing the alcoholic condition. That

power is ultimately God, as one understands God. But, until that realization is made, AA or some other therapeutic agency is an acceptable substitute.

Step 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him. A commitment is made to transcend the narrow ego-self and embark on a course of spiritual growth by giving up one's willfulness and surrendering to a power greater than self.

Step 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves. An honest accounting is made of "character defects." Personal assets and strengths are also noted. An awareness of acceptability despite one's imperfections is created and is reinforced by an accepting fellowship. Ego defenses begin to be surrendered.

Step 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs. Responsibility for "character defects" is accepted and acknowledged. The ego shrinks as its defenses are overcome: honesty increases self-esteem.

Steps 6 and 7. Were entirely ready to have God remove all those defects of character, and humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings. Willingness to depend on God and the humility involved in that dependence are further evidence of the lessening influence of ego and increasing spiritual growth.

Steps 8 and 9. Made a list of all persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all, and made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others. Positive spiritual growth is tested in the humble acceptance of responsibility for wrongs done to others. The making of amends, or just the willingness to do so, increases self-esteem as it erodes egocentricity and constructs positive spiritual connections with others.

Step 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it. Behavior is continually appraised and responsibility is taken for it. Living a life of commitment to honesty in one's relationships ensures further development of self-esteem.

Step 11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for the knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out. A willful ego is forsaken in the total dependence on God's will and grace. The highest level of AA spirituality has now been achieved.

Step 12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs. (AA World Services, 1976, pp. 60–61) Ego-transcendent spirituality is practiced in all relationships and strengthened through helping other alcoholics. The process of ego-deflation and positive spiritual development is, thus, complete. But because the brain never forgets what it has learned, spiritually negative patterns remain that can still act as relapse triggers. Therefore, the recovering alcoholic remains in the fellowship and continues working and reworking the twelve steps while new and more powerful patterns of positive spirituality beliefs and attitudes are established.

THE EFFECTS OF POSITIVE SPIRITUALITY ON RECOVERY

As recovering alcoholics "work the steps" of the AA program, guided by their sponsors in the supportive family environment, they begin to develop positive spirituality. This is reflected in blossoming attitudes of unconditional love, acceptance, and trust in relationships with themselves, others, the world, life, and the God of their understanding. They come to believe that they are fundamentally okay even if their behaviors sometimes are not. They begin to love, accept, and trust themselves.

Feeling more secure in themselves, they find the confidence to risk reaching out to others. They find that many other AA members are worthy of their trust and friendship and need not be manipulated to provide them with satisfying personal relationships. They come to believe that other human beings are fundamentally okay even if their behaviors sometimes are not. They begin to experience loving, accepting, and trusting relationships with others.

As they see others in AA succeeding in the world in ways that are satisfying to them, even if not necessarily valued by society at large, and as they find that they too are beginning to fulfill their potential for personal development, they come to believe that the world (nature, community, work, school) is generally a safe place for them to enjoy life and become all that they are capable of becoming or wish to become. Accordingly, they come to love, accept, and trust the world.

As they begin to live life through satisfying relationships with themselves, with others, and with the world, they come to believe that life is okay. They no longer see it as a purely biological happenstance or some kind of cruel joke, but rather as a condition that has profound meaning and purpose for them. They come to love, accept, and trust life. For most members of AA, it is inconceivable that such life is not ordered and supported by a loving God. Accordingly, they come to love, accept, and trust God.

Those who achieve this level of spiritual development show the greatest happiness in recovery and seem to have the greatest sobriety. They seem to have a special presence about them, a kind of light in their eyes that draws newly recovering alcoholics to them like a magnet. They are the role models for all who are serious about their recovery. The most effective sponsors come from their ranks. They inspire all who are resolutely working the steps as well as those who have newly entered AA and have not yet committed themselves to its program. Unfortunately, many of the latter will find AA's spiritual focus a threat to the sick ego that is ruling their lives and will stop going to the meetings. They may continue to destroy themselves through alcohol abuse, or they may find other solutions that are less ego threatening but probably also less spiritually satisfying. A secure and joyful recovery will likely elude them until they reach out in desperation and surrender their will to the spiritual renewal inherent in the program of Alcoholics

Anonymous. Once they do, they will no longer need mood-altering chemicals to feel good about their lives.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Alcoholism is a psychological illness (American Psychiatric Association, 1987). Observation of alcoholics and the process of alcoholism suggests that this illness is essentially cognitive (what AA members call "stinking thinking"), behavioral (habitual and dysfunctional actions), and spiritual (relationship-centered) in nature. It could be argued that a resolution of the spiritual problem would ultimately resolve the other two. But any attempt to achieve or influence wellness in the short run must involve all three components. Most treatment programs focus heavily on cognitive and behavioral change and pay little more than lip service to the spiritual component. Recovery is thus jeopardized. The rehabilitation program of Alcoholics Anonymous incorporates all three components, assuring recovery if its "simple" (not necessarily easy) program is thoroughly followed (AA World Services, 1976).

Alcoholics Anonymous provides alcoholics with both a fellowship and a program of rehabilitation. The fellowship supports the program by creating a safe and supportive environment that allows for building the trust necessary to work the program and overcome negative spirituality. Contrary to the belief of many, it is not a program of conversion to religion, although a religious conversion is probably unavoidable as one becomes positively spiritual. It is, rather, a sophisticated process of rehabilitative personality development. The twelve steps are designed to confront a diseased ego and promote its transcendence through creation and maintenance of positive spirituality, shown by loving, accepting, and trusting relationships with the self, others, the world, life, and ultimately, with God, as one understands God.

The alcoholic personality is grounded in a destructive negative spirituality. The AA program reverses that negative spirituality and provides the conditions necessary for a higher level of personality development to help recovering alcoholics satisfy their basic needs without alcohol and achieve a sense of well-being in their lives. If that development ultimately includes a joyful dependence on God, it seems far preferable to a destructive dependence on alcohol.

The spiritual component essential to rehabilitation continues to be misunderstood and misapplied. This article will have served its purpose if it stimulates further inquiry into the nature and impact of spirituality in recovery from alcoholism, and perhaps other addictions as well. Nevertheless, there exists a need for measures that will demonstrate the therapeutic effectiveness of positive spirituality in the twelve step rehabilitation program of Alcoholics Anonymous. Such measures should include a questionnaire to determine the effectiveness of positive spiritual attitudes in achieving a

sense of wellness that precludes the use of mood altering chemicals and other instruments designed to assess the development and rehabilitative effectiveness of positive spirituality in the twelve step program. The hope of the authors is that more reliable scientific proofs will be accumulated to buttress the voluminous anecdotal and heuristic evidence already documenting the central role of spirituality in treating alcoholism. Perhaps then, the concept of spiritual awakening promised by Alcoholics Anonymous and other similar twelve step programs will be better understood, accepted, and effectively applied by addiction sufferers as well as those who would aid in their recovery.

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