

Experience Reports

REFLECTIONS ON RESEARCHING AND WRITING— THE HISTORY OF GAY PEOPLE IN ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS: FROM THE BEGINNING: AN EXPERIENCE REPORT

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ABSTRACT

A first person description of the author's experience researching and writing the book, *The History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous: From the Beginning*, describes the author's background, inspiration for the project, research methods and experiences locating and interviewing sources, and the impact of the project on her life today. She addresses the role and importance of anonymity in working with interviewees and the development of the manuscript, and some of the ways anonymity both helps and hinders attempts to reduce the effects of alcoholism on society.

Key Words: Alcoholics Anonymous, gays and lesbians, history of A.A.

INTRODUCTION

The absence of knowledge about the past perpetuates myths about it and contributes to maintaining the status quo. Denied a sense of history, people feel individual guilt about problems that may in fact be shared. . . . Collecting data from ordinary people contributes to developing a shared sense of what happened.

Envelopes of Sound: The Art of Oral History, 2nd Edition,
Revised and Enlarged by Ronald J. Grele, 1991, Praeger Paperback, NY

I may be best known for writing *The History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous: From the Beginning*. Today I am 55 years old, but back in 1974 when

I was 19 and first realized I was gay, women like me seemed to inspire disgust in normal, decent people. In 1974, if you wished to be employed, or get along with your neighbors, or remain in the good graces of your family, you kept who and what you were a secret. Though I eventually did find a community of other young gay women to be with, in my early 20s I discovered that alcohol seemed to permeate every aspect of our lives: it dominated every outing, every social event, every relationship. Bars were the only place gay people could congregate in public.

In 1979 I finished college and moved to take a job in Sacramento, California. There I met a lesbian woman who told me she didn't drink any more. I didn't believe her at first, she might as well have told me she was a lesbian from Mars! But I was soon accompanying her to AA meetings to see these unusual gay people for myself: men and women who spoke openly about alcoholism, went out for coffee, socialized, had fun, and didn't drink. In 1985 my career as a writer and systems analyst in the computer engineering field took me to San Francisco.

It was in 2002 that the inspiration for my book project arrived. At the time, I was newly married, the mother of a toddler, and freshly unemployed in the bust following the dot com boom. It was in June that my mother-in-law nonchalantly handed me a copy of *Mrs. Marty Mann: First Lady of Alcoholics Anonymous* by Sally and David Brown. On the cover was a 1940s era photo of a self-possessed looking woman in a business suit. It looked and sounded terribly boring. However, not wanting to appear impolite, I took it and leafed through absentmindedly until I came upon an elegant portrait of Mrs. Mann and her life partner Pricilla Peck.

Wait a minute. This *Mrs. Mann* was *gay*?

I took that book home and inhaled it. I was thrilled to learn that Marty and Pricilla were among the first women in AA to stay sober, to say nothing of being AA's first lesbian couple. Together they helped found the *AA Grapevine* magazine. I learned that AA co-founder Bill Wilson was Marty's mentor in sobriety, that is, her AA sponsor. Mrs. Mann went on to become an internationally renowned educator in the alcoholism field, and founded the National Council on Alcoholism in 1944. She and Bill Wilson testified before congress in support of the Hughes Act, the landmark legislation that established the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) and provided the first federal funding for alcohol treatment and prevention programs. And she was gay, like me!

The day I finished the Brown's book I listened again to a recording of a talk given at an AA meeting in 1985 by a man named Barry L., in which he shares his experiences in AA from the 1940s to the 1980s. Barry's *Gay Origins of AA's Third Tradition* is a phenomenal talk by a gifted speaker, and a treasury of AA history (Leach, 1985).

As AA's 12 Steps guide recovery for the individual, its 12 Traditions guide the organization as a whole. In the 1930s and 1940s the ideas and principles

that would become the 12 Traditions were still forming in Wilson's mind. He formally presented them to the AA membership for the first time in a series of articles in the *Grapevine*, between 1946 and 1948. Two years later, in 1950, they were officially adopted at AA's first International Convention in Cleveland, Ohio.

Until the Traditions were firmly established in AA, different groups in different areas had widely varying requirements for membership. AA's Third Tradition concerns exactly who is allowed to join Alcoholics Anonymous. It states, "The only requirement for A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking," and Wilson describes its origins in his essay on Tradition Three in the AA's *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*:

At one time . . . every A.A. group had many membership rules. Everybody was scared witless that something or somebody would capsize the boat and dump us all back into the drink. Our Foundation office asked each group to send in its list of 'protective' regulations. The total list was a mile long. If all those rules had been in effect everywhere, nobody could have possibly joined A.A. at all, so great was the sum of our anxiety and fear. (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, pp. 139-140)

In Barry L.'s presentation on the Third Tradition, he plays a recording of Wilson telling the story again in 1968, and revealing that it was a gay man who was the inspiration for him and AA co-founder Robert Smith to formulate the profoundly simple, yet radical principle behind Tradition Three. In Akron, Ohio, in 1937, it was AA's first gay member who approached Smith and asked if *he* would be allowed to attempt to find sobriety in AA. "Since I am the victim of another addiction even worse stigmatized than alcoholism," Wilson writes in *Twelve Steps & Twelve Traditions*, "you may not want me among you. Or will you?" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, p. 142)

Though I'd listened to the *Gay Origins of AA's Third Tradition* before, it wasn't until I'd finished the Browns' book that I had enough information to interpret Barry's description of being gay in AA in the 1940s, because he'd couched his experiences in the most obscure terms. When Barry said:

I was lucky enough to fall into the hands of two homosexual persons in AA, one man and one woman. [I]n those days we were not closeted, in 1945 we were sealed in vaults! But we had that x-ray vision. We spotted each other. . . . And we held hands desperately together. Because we were the only three we saw staying sober and that was very frightening, very frightening indeed. (Leach, 1985)

Aha! He was talking about Marty! And when he said:

I want to tell you about a couple of experiences I had in my first year. I had this woman member and two other good women members who were friends of Bill's, older women. They had no doubt that I was a gay man and I didn't mind them knowing—they had lived in Paris much of their lives. One of these three women, by the way, was a lesbian, but this was never

announced. She was always in the closet except to her very closest friends. Bill knew, of course. “Barry, we keep seeing fellows turn up here and not stay sober and it has been suggested that maybe there should be special meetings for gay people. What do you think of that?” (Leach, 1985)

Aha! Barry was describing the heterosexual allies around him in AA, people who thought gay alcoholics ought to have the opportunity to get sober too, not just AA’s founders, Smith and Wilson. Here was proof of people in AA advocating for gay and lesbian alcoholics, right from the very beginning!

That’s when it hit me that my ideas about what it had been like to be gay and sober in early AA were entirely wrong. I’d thought gay alcoholics had existed in an isolation so encompassing, so complete, that it would have been impossible for them to find one another, or to find any support at all. I’d thought no heterosexual member of AA, much less Bill Wilson, would have supported a gay person’s right to participate in AA if they were known to be a homosexual. As we all know, it is one thing to articulate a principle of inclusion and something else again to practice it.

Though Mrs. Mann may have distanced herself from all but the most protective and tight-lipped gay circles in AA, in the 1940s other circles of recovering gay men and women were forming, interconnecting, and expanding. Allies were present and included. My new awareness that my old assumptions were wrong, and the urge to know how a handful of gay AA members in the early 1940s had become a community of thousands in the 2000s, is what compelled me to start looking for answers.

THE JOURNEY

My research covered everything I could get my hands on about alcoholism, Alcoholics Anonymous, gay history, oral history and narrative, and the challenges of writing history, and gay history in particular. I studied treatment models past and present; William White’s *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America* was a key resource in this process (White, 1998). I explored the ground where the history of treatment for alcoholism and homosexuality intersect, which led to a foray into eugenics and the treatment of alcoholics and their families in Nazi Germany.

But, despite the wealth of published material, I quickly noticed some very large gaps in the record. Principal among them was that books about alcoholism rarely mentioned gay people and books about gay people rarely mentioned alcoholism! No one had examined the idea of a gay recovering community with pioneers, key figures and events, and a history all its own.

I began the process with a long list of questions and a temporarily short list of people who might have answers. The Browns generously provided me with an initial list of contacts and I found that all of them wanted to be interviewed. Each in turn referred me to others who could provide more information.

My search for narrators evolved over time. I began by looking for gay or lesbian members of AA with long term sobriety because they could tell me about their experiences in AA in the 1940s and 1950s. I was very curious about how they had found one another in AA before the development of meetings for gay alcoholics in the late 1960s. How had they gotten the word out about these new gay groups before any local AA service office or newspaper would print the word “homosexual?” How had they found a meeting place when no organization—and certainly not a church, where many AA meetings convene—would permit a homosexual on the premises? How and where and when had the first gay AA meeting come about?

Then I found I wanted to talk with professionals in the addiction field: researchers, administrators, counselors, doctors, and community organizers who could tell me about developments in the social service structures that served alcoholics in those years. The search expanded again when I began looking for people who had witnessed the events and developments within AA as the number of gay AA meetings began growing exponentially in the late 1960s and early 1970s. What was happening at the AA General Service Office in New York? At the annual AA General Service Conference issues facing the organization were discussed and addressed. Here again, the tape of Barry’s presentation was instrumental in providing leads in these areas.

I’d been conducting interviews for about 2 years when I noticed that the people I’d found with the most sobriety had all gotten sober on the east and west coasts in large cities, like New York, Boston, Washington DC, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. I wanted to report on a broader range of gay AA members’ experience. Not surprisingly, the resources available to gay people vary drastically depending on their location, for example, in urban, to suburban, to rural areas. Location would effect their reception in AA as well. Using materials and contacts I’d collected thus far, I began searching for people outside urban areas in the rest of the United States, away from the two coasts. In Part II, “Building Sober Communities,” Chapter 14 describes the experiences some gay AA members living in rural, semi-rural, or far-flung suburban communities have had.

METHODS

My research, as mentioned before, was extensively broad and simultaneously extremely pinpointed. Illustrative of the persistent pursuit and serendipitous events of the research was finding Nancy T., a pivotal figure in the 1980s. In attempting to locate her, I’d spoken to scores of old-timers but learned only that she had been a member of the first gay AA meeting in Washington DC. One night, in desperation, I tried cold-calling all the Nancy T—s in the Washington DC/Arlington VA phone directory, but to no avail. It wasn’t until another 6 months had gone by that I happened to mention my search for Nancy to an interviewee who happened to have an old phone number for her. Within 2 days

I had a meeting scheduled with Nancy, not in Washington DC but at her home not 30 minutes from my own!

Information came in randomly and seldom in an organized fashion. I needed a way to keep everything I was collecting organized. I purchased several packs of 3 × 5 sticky notes and began using them to record quotes, events, dates, topics, links, pointers, and source notations. This system proved easy to use, flexible, and (to my wife's consternation) endlessly expandable: sticky notes soon covered walls all over our home. Fortunately, my wife's patience proved expandable as well!

I found I could record anything without having to know what category or categories it belonged to, or where in the timeline it went. I simply noted it down and stuck it on the wall. Once something was logged I could move it to different locations in the puzzle to evaluate and re-evaluate its relationship to the items around it. I also created a wall of bibliographic sources. Being self-financed, most of my interviews were conducted by phone. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed, analyzed, and edited.

ANONYMITY

For people who have been forced to keep their family and social lives hidden, their romantic and community relationships under wraps, it is usually a wonderful thing to be asked, "What happened?" With few exceptions I found people were very happy to share their AA experiences with me. What's more, my narrators and I knew the history we were compiling told a story with a very happy ending, as we'd watched the gay recovering community emerge and grow exponentially over the last 50 years. Many of the people I talked with expressed gratitude and relief that someone was collecting and organizing information about the community's history. Some expressed regret at the passing of friends who could have contributed.

The issue of anonymity came up in many contexts on this project. Overall my experience was that it opened doors. For example, when contacting narrators and potential narrators I assured them at the outset that, in accordance with AA's Traditions, their anonymity would be protected. For example, the Eleventh Tradition suggests that AA members "need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio and films" (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, p. 180). In my book this meant that only the first name and last initial of any individual identified as an AA member would appear in print. For further protection, some narrators asked to use a pseudonym, and in several instances I asked narrators if they'd agree to use one. This was done when someone had a unique name or if the information included in their story made it possible for readers to identify or contact them.

If AA's Eleventh Tradition addresses anonymity at the public level, its Twelfth Tradition addresses its spiritual application: "Anonymity is the spiritual

foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities” (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, p. 184). This aspect of anonymity is AA’s response to the very human desire (especially for those in their early years of recovery) to place one’s own interests above those of others or their AA group. For example, by claiming another’s action or accomplishment as their own. Thus, anonymity protected the people I spoke with from their own hubris, and the risk of potential accusations of hubris by others.

AA’s Fifth and Sixth Traditions address anonymity as it relates to problems of money, property, and prestige (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, p. 155) that might divert AA from its primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers (Alcoholics Anonymous, 1953, p. 150). These Traditions help assure current and future AA members, as well as the public, that no one individual ever speaks for AA. The official voice of Alcoholics Anonymous is found in its literature, and in the decisions made by the Fellowship at its annual AA General Service Conference in New York.

Be that as it may, my personal experience with anonymity has been that it can be a double-edged sword because it is essentially an adaptive response to something fundamentally wrong: social stigma. Erving Goffman was the first sociologist to describe the extra work that people with a concealable condition have to do to manage their “spoiled identities” (Goffman, 1963). People in recovery from alcoholism and gay people do this extra work every day.

Looking at the history of gay people in the United States, as well as at my own experience, it is plain to see that “coming out” has been central to our success in addressing the social issues behind the stigma. Coming out is the act of reclaiming one’s true identity, of refusing to pretend that you are something you are not.

It is staggering to think of the social change that the people I interviewed had experienced in their lifetimes: the open hostility and persecution of the McCarthy era in the 1950s; the Stonewall Uprising in 1969 and the growth of the Gay Liberation Movement in the 70s; the development of a gay press, the AIDS crisis, and the explosion of gay organizations in the 1980s. In the 1990s, city and state governments began passing laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, a trend that continues to this day in the acrimonious debate that revolves around the legitimacy of marriage rights for people with same-sex partners.

While anonymity can address the symptoms of a problem, it can hinder a society from addressing the problem itself. Too little anonymity and people are vulnerable to attack; too much anonymity and people collude in their own oppression. What would happen if a group of people in recovery started talking about their alcoholism and how they were recovering from that illness? What if that admission were met by a group of non-alcoholics who were willing to listen, and to acknowledge that alcoholism and recovery existed in their midst? Frankly, that sounds like a scary proposition! Alcoholism causes unspeakable

harm and is a common denominator in some of societies' most egregious evils. No wonder people are scared to talk about it. How are we to begin? Yet we must begin, I believe, if we are to be effective at reducing the damage addiction inflicts on individuals, families, communities, and society as a whole. For example, without an open forum, how can we expose or explore the culpability of the alcohol industry that lobbies extensively against adequate taxation of alcohol? For every dollar collected in alcohol taxes, the society expends nine dollars (Cook, 2007). The costs are staggering.

The process of telling the truth occurs more readily and successfully in a safe social forum. Guided by the principles embodied in the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous, 12 Step programs provide exactly this kind of environment.

Fortunately, within the safe forum of AA, the recovering community—gay and straight—is alive and kicking. Today there are gay and gay-friendly AA meetings in cities and towns across the United States, and in countries all over the world. While every meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous is open to any member of AA, many alcoholics find their first home group in a meeting comprised primarily of their peers.

At last count there were over 50 annual AA/Al-Anon gay conferences a year across the United States. While there are still AA service offices in some areas that refuse to include gay meetings in their directories, their numbers are dwindling. Areas with established gay communities often have multiple meetings for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered alcoholics. For example, San Francisco's meeting directory lists 68 gay AA meetings a week. Among them is the first group for gay people in the United States, the Friday Night Fell Street Group, which has continued to meet weekly in its original location since February 1968.

AA is a powerful organization. Anyone can join. Anyone can be a leader, anyone can start a new meeting. Anyone can serve at the group, intergroup, regional, or national level. People in 12 Step groups mix in ways they generally don't mix in regular society. Ongoing AA participation provides support and community for as long as it is needed or wanted. It has helped many people, both gay and straight, transform their lives. AA has been in advance of the general culture in the adoption of gay rights. The inclusive nature of AA's Third Tradition has helped both gay and heterosexual people in AA to affirm LGBT social and personal identity.

When we admit that old ways of coping no longer serve us, when we tire of being less than we are and start thinking about who we could be, we arrive at the point where change begins. Writing the *History of Gay People in Alcoholics Anonymous* was the result of my curiosity and the desire to write about a topic close to my heart after years of writing about software. If it was the hardest work I have ever done I believe it is also the best work I've ever done, and certainly the most delightful and rewarding.

I find this work has now brought me to a point of personal and professional transition. I've moved out of the high tech field into the social sciences and addiction field; I'll receive a drug and alcohol counseling certificate in May of 2011. I don't know where this new work will lead me but I know I must pursue it, wherever it leads.

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