Educating Desire
Autobiographical Impressions of Addiction in Alcoholics Anonymous

Peter Waldman

This impressionistic autobiographical inquiry is an attempt to connect the personal with the socio-historical—addiction with Addiction; it is also an attempt to demonstrate that knowledge production can be generated through radically non-traditional means. Narrative serves as method and methodology in a mostly first person account of a fictional open AA meeting. A suspicious hermeneutics is applied to addiction, to AA, and to the phenomenon of total medicalization, which the author and narrative finally succumb to, in the interest of questioning common sense assumptions about these themes, and as jumping off points for literary and philosophical exploration.

Highlighted is the semi-fictionalized storied nature of reflected upon lived experience—the personal telephone game of (Paul Ricoeur's) narrative identity—and the role of institutions like AA in grafting onto lived experience new narrative forms that allow for new ways of structuring self and identity.

All the made-up aspects of the narrative—the multi-tracked narrator's voice, shifts in point-of-view, and the semi and sometimes totally imagined characters encountered at the meeting and elsewhere—are the fiction the author makes of his personal history as an addict and newcomer in AA, which complicates the relation between knower and known (author and reader) while enriching and enlivening the narrative, drawing the reader into a literary representation of imagined and lived experience.
Educating Desire
Scope:

*Bold Visions in Educational Research* is international in scope and includes books from two areas: teaching and learning to teach and research methods in education. Each area contains multi-authored handbooks of approximately 200,000 words and monographs (authored and edited collections) of approximately 130,000 words. All books are scholarly, written to engage specified readers and catalyze changes in policies and practices. Defining characteristics of books in the series are their explicit uses of theory and associated methodologies to address important problems. We invite books from across a theoretical and methodological spectrum from scholars employing quantitative, statistical, experimental, ethnographic, semiotic, hermeneutic, historical, ethnomethodological, phenomenological, case studies, action, cultural studies, content analysis, rhetorical, deconstructive, critical, literary, aesthetic and other research methods.

Books on teaching and learning to teach focus on any of the curriculum areas (e.g., literacy, science, mathematics, social science), in and out of school settings, and points along the age continuum (pre K to adult). The purpose of books on research methods in education is not to present generalized and abstract procedures but to show how research is undertaken, highlighting the particulars that pertain to a study. Each book brings to the foreground those details that must be considered at every step on the way to doing a good study. The goal is not to show how generalizable methods are but to present rich descriptions to show how research is enacted. The books focus on methodology, within a context of substantive results so that methods, theory, and the processes leading to empirical analyses and outcomes are juxtaposed. In this way method is not reified, but is explored within well-described contexts and the emergent research outcomes. Three illustrative examples of books are those that allow proponents of particular perspectives to interact and debate, comprehensive handbooks where leading scholars explore particular genres of inquiry in detail, and introductory texts to particular educational research methods/issues of interest to novice researchers.
Educating Desire

*Autobiographical Impressions of Addiction in Alcoholics Anonymous*

Peter Waldman

SENSE PUBLISHERS
ROTTERDAM/BOSTON/TAIPEI
To My Brother, Josh Waldman
in Loving Memory

1966–2000
This book was adapted from my dissertation research. Different versions of chapters 1 and 8 are in various stages of publication in other venues.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prologue: An Introduction to an Introduction</td>
<td>xi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Welcome to AA: The Twelve ‘Suggested’ Steps</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Confessions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Seventh Tradition Stretch</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Non-Drug Induced, i.e., Literary Flashback…</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: “Bill’s Story”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: Flash-Forward—Meanwhile, Back at the Meeting…</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Waiting for Bob, or, Philoctetes in AA: A Play in One Scene</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characters</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scene</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 8: Bob D. and the Ethics of Alterity</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What We Used to Be Like</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Happened</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What We Are Like Now</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Fables</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue: Poor Josh, “Addiction Trajectories,” or, a Terrible and Magnificent Lesson</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor Josh</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Addiction Trajectories,” or, a Terrible and Magnificent Lesson</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes: Impressions of Impressions</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If not for the open-minded/heartedness of Presidential Professor Ken Tobin of the CUNY Graduate Center, this book would neither have been written nor published. Thank you, Ken, for allowing me the freedom to try for new forms in narrative research, and for nurturing in me the courage to write autobiographically while also blurring the lines. You’ve been a steady hand and a calm, guiding presence through a quite difficult and sometimes painful process. You are an authentic mentor.

To Doctors Phil Anderson and Mark Zuss, both of whose influences are felt on every page. Thanks to my colleagues in the Urban Education department at the CUNY Graduate Center for the productive critique and approbation, which means more to me than they could know: Mitch Bleier, Dr. Olga Calderon, Karim al-Ganj, Hiro Komatsubara, Andre Poole, Dr. Malgorzata Powietrzynska, Rafael Rosado, Corinna Zapata, and others I’m sure I’m forgetting. Thanks to Doctors Gene Fellner and Helen Kwah for their encouragement and collaboration.

This book was something of a family affair. Thanks to my father, Stuart, for his love and support, for his sage editorial advice, for proving definitively that people can change, and for telling me I’ve proven the same. To my mother Bonnie, whose unconditional love has been my foundation, and whose expert proofreading has saved me on more than one occasion. To my prodigious brother, Lucas, for his urgent inspiration; and to my stepmother, Liv, for the expert editing.

To Carolyn Ellis, Victor Villanueva, and Harry Wolcott, whose non-traditional research narratives I took as a command to move forward with my own.

Of course I owe a debt of gratitude to Alcoholics Anonymous for the many things I learned there and for the people I met who helped to create the memories I draw upon in narrating these tales.
PROLOGUE

An Introduction to an Introduction

Why then have I been arranged with such desires?
—Dostoyevsky (1864/1993, p. 30)

As a kid, I assumed introductions, forewords, and prologues were written before the texts they preceded, as their prefixes seemed to indicate. But like most of these often useless appendages, mine was scratched out at the tail end of a years-long process of research and rewriting. This “prologue,” which I wrote last (the epilogue was the first thing I committed to paper), will trace a path toward an imagined place in an imagined time, which is where and when my narrative properly begins. It will serve as an introduction to an introduction, just before the start of an AA meeting—to AA, to addiction, and to narrative.

This book tells a story, a narrative—a sequence of events arranged according to temporal logics—about the lived experience of addiction in AA from a newcomer’s points of view. Similar to theory, however, narratives shine a light on one or several aspects of lived experience while leaving the rest of the landscape dark or obscured. Here, and in the epilogue, I aim to shine a light on aspects of the study that might be invisible to a “faithful” reading of the story (Josselson, 2004).

Consider the story of a life, which is a story that involves continuity and change as well as ‘truth’ and artifice. Likewise, “narrative identity,” according to Paul Ricoeur, is a twin dialectical relation between sameness \((\text{idem})\) and selfhood \((\text{ipse})\), and between history and fiction. In the first pages of the first volume of *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984) writes: “[…] time becomes human to the extent that it is organized after a narrative; narrative, in turn, becomes meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of [human] temporal experience” (p. 3). In the conclusion to Volume 3 of the same title, Ricoeur (1988) writes of narrative as a “guardian of time, in so far as there can be no thought of time without narrated time” (p. 241). Narrative is a “guardian of time” and of memory (the raw data of personal history) in relation to one’s social interactions with others in the lifeworld, and to the quality of those interactions, which determines “character” in Ricoeur’s ethics of narrativity (Ricoeur, 1992; Reagan, 2002). That memory (history)
is in a dialectical relation with fiction is an important point for Ricoeur and for the purposes of this semi-fictional study.

For example, consider the relation between history and fiction in the representation of the character Odysseus by two ancient authors. In Homer’s *Odyssey*, the first work of historical fiction, Odysseus is cunning but honorable. In Sophocles’ drama, *Philoctetes*, written at least three centuries after Homer, Odysseus is cunning and *dishonorable*, not merely ignoble and un-heroic, but totally lacking in what we now would call a moral sense, which is set in dramatic opposition to the honor of Neoptolemus, Achilles’ son, in securing for the Greeks both Philoctetes and his famous bow, without injury to either and without which the war would have been lost (Beye, 1970). Did the audience at the Festival Dionysus notice the shift in perspective? Or was it invisible like ideology? Of the two heroes whose names lend themselves to the twin Homeric epics, Achilles and Odysseus, the latter’s “narrative identity” in Fifth Century Athens is negatively valenced in comparison with the former.

Now consider how a metaphor speaks across millennia.

Whatever the Lotus Eaters and Sirens meant to Homer's audience (crouched around the fire, Dionysus looking on), in our sociocultural landscape the former seems to signify an acquiescing to the sensual temptations of the flesh and an overindulgence, misuse, and abuse of this or that substance or “process,” e.g., overeating, gambling, even *under*-eating which poses unique conceptual problems for “addiction” (Kosofsky Sedgwick, 1992). The Lotus Eaters are a totalized forgetting of self, others, and world; the Sirens are a craving for that forgetfulness—and Odysseus welcomes the temptation! He is bound to the mast, his ears left purposefully unplugged while his crew stuff theirs’ with beeswax. Are we to assume that, were it not for a few knots and the loyalty of his men, Odysseus would have abandoned ship as he did with the Lotus Eaters earlier on in Book IX? And would he have the courage and strength to resist and return before what we would now call “addiction” set in and he is lost forever, never to return home? And why do these unanswerable questions get my juices flowing? Why should imagining a three thousand year old mythological hero as a slave to the same passions and desires as a 21st Century me—Lotus Flower, Siren Song, fill in the blank—why should this get me so amped up?

A full description of “narrative identity” in literature and in the lifeworld must include not only “who” but “when”: history in a dialectical relation with fiction, or the telephone game of personal and narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1992). The stories of our lives change as we change, as do the
way we tell our stories (their structures). That I am also not my story (the one presented and represented in this narrative); and that AA cofounder Bill Wilson was also not his story (the one presented to ‘newcomers’ in pages 1–16 of Alcoholics Anonymous (Anon., 2001)), are crucial for understanding the fluid framework of narrative this study works within.

Just as Odysseus’ cunning takes on different meanings according to temporal and fluid sociocultural particularities, so too does the concept of “addiction.” Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) narrates:

Once upon a time, the story goes, back in the old country, some people sometimes took opium. For many of these people, opium functioned as a form of control: it brought into realistic conformity with the material exactions of their lives, their levels of concentration, their temporality or their alertness to stimuli such as pain. For some it may have been a source of pleasure—if a vice, then a commonplace one. For all of these people, it was a behavior among other behaviors [...] Then [...] something changed. (p. 582)

What changed was the socio-historical construction of addiction, which included, according to Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992), the “taxonomic pressure of the newly ramified and pervasive medical-juridical authority of the late nineteenth century” birthing new categories within which “what had been a question of acts crystallized into a question of identities” (p. 582). Like the “homosexual,” whose genealogy Michel Foucault (1978) traced, the “addict” was an invention of a new set of discourses and power relations emerging in and from new institutions of custodianship and ‘care.’

In “The Discovery of Addiction,” Levine (1978) pins the beginnings of alcoholism in the US to the late 18th and early 19th centuries when “a new paradigm was created.” Citing Foucault first and foremost as Kosofsky Sedgwick (1992) would fourteen years later, Levine (1978) argues:

[…] in Foucault’s terms, the ‘gaze’ of the observer shifted then to a new configuration—a new gestalt. This new paradigm or model defined addiction as a central problem in drug use and diagnosed it as a disease, or disease-like. The idea that alcoholism is a progressive disease—the chief symptom of which is loss of control over drinking behavior, and whose only remedy is abstinence from all alcoholic beverages—is now about 175 or 200 years old, but no older. (p. 493)

Valverde (1998) reminds us of the historical construction of the criminal addict (e.g., Acker, 2002) in which, “Drugs were linked to crime and drug
issues were kept separate from questions arising from the consumption of legal substances […] It bears reiterating that this was not because of new pharmacological knowledge, but simply because illicit drugs were governed through a different set of institutions than either legal drugs or alcohol” (Valverde, 1998, p. 5). For the purposes of this study, then, I am collapsing the important historical distinctions between alcohol and alcoholism vs. drugs and (other “processes” of) addiction, as well as the divergence in their respective treatments, because I am interested in the phenomenology of “addiction” that is, in disclosing through narrative phenomenological description the mental and emotional processes of the consciousness of addiction, which is a consciousness of unconsciousness.

Etymologically, “addict” is a Latin verb meaning “to bind to the service of” (O.E.D.), or, to be a slave to a creditor. In the domain of addiction, the creditor would be the master of the exploitative relation that undergirds the structure—the relation between dealer/doctor and client/patient for example—as well as the substance itself. I’m not thinking of the Marxian critique in tracing the substance back to the material relations that produced it as a fetishized commodity, which indeed it is, the demand built into its very molecules; my interest in it as a material thing involves me as a material thing where its molecules interact with mine to form a synthesis of progressive destruction disguised as euphoria.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a return to the memory of, and a reaching towards a better self. That the self-transformational rhetoric of AA (Swora, 2004) is achieved partly through storytelling is not as remarkable as it might seem given AA’s roots with the 19th century Christian lay movement, the Washingtonians, and with Frank Buchman’s 20th century Oxford Group, also explicitly Christian. Both groups relied on the confessional narrative, as AA later would, as the discursive genre within which personal and institutional memory, history, and identity were nested and structured (Wilson, 1988; White, 1998).

AA co-founder Bill Wilson would have something to say about the Washingtonians later in his life. He would speculate as to why AA lasted while the former had gone the way of the Dodo (Anon., 1957; Wilson, 1988). According to White (1998), the Washingtonians were defeated by, among other things, inter-group conflict (between religious and other Temperance groups), “weak organizational structure,” a lack in leadership and of a viable program of recovery, and credibility problems owing to charges of hyperbole and “sensationalism” in the confessional narratives of reformed
‘drunkards’ “who competed to outdo one another in describing the depths to which alcoholism had taken them” (p. 13). (In AA, these are called ‘war stories.’) But a young Abe Lincoln stopped by to congratulate them in 1841, and their organization was the first of its kind in the US, founded and run by lay people. No clergy allowed thank you very much. The Washingtonians were a spectacular affair, with outdoor, parade-like revivals featuring drama and music, and even a children’s Temperance league called the Cold Water Army (Gusfield, 1986).

In Wilson’s (1988), The Language of the Heart, a collection of his contributions to the AA periodical Grapevine, the author assured his readers that AA’s anonymity had kept it humble, out of the spotlight, and away from the temptations of money and “big-shotism” (p. 210). He writes: “As we surveyed the wreck of that movement [the Washingtonians] we resolved to keep our society out of public controversy” (Anon., 1957, p. 125). The function of anonymity in AA was not only to protect members from stigma, but to protect AA from harming itself, to protect it from becoming the spectacle the Washingtonians became. According to the Eleventh Tradition, AA works by attraction not promotion (Anon., 1952, p. 180).

So much for the social construction of addiction. For the deconstructionist Avital Ronell (1992) the phenomenon we call “addiction” has actually been with us in other guises and known under different names in the multitude of forms that untrammeled desire has taken beginning, in the Judeo-Christian world, with Eve’s consumption of the forbidden fruit (and with the birth of “Eve(i)l.” It takes the form of Flaubert’s (1965) Emma Bovary and her “destructive jouissance” for the vapid fallacy of the Romantic (Ronell, 1992), which is finally quelled by a fatal dose of arsenic stolen from the pharmacy, “the mastery of drugs” (p. 93). On the page and on the stage Hamlet’s dark obsessions form a tangle of crisscrossing desires, poisons too, resulting in the death of everyone except Horatio whose job it is now to tell Hamlet’s side of the story: “Oh God, Horatio, what a / damaged reputation I’m leaving behind me […] If you ever loved me, then please / postpone the sweet relief of death awhile, and stay in / this harsh world long enough to tell my story” (V, ii). A corrective to his “antic disposition,” perhaps, and a narrative for the world that is, presumably, the same as the drama we’ve been witness to. Horatio’s tale would be the play itself, a ‘True’ subjective history.

At the macro scale, narrative forms are grafted onto national, ethnic, religious, and ideological divides, and are therefore both “structure[s] of power” (Taieb & colleagues, 2008) and of resistance, ideological weapons
used not only to construct claims to knowledge, identity and community, but also to debase others’ similar claims. Narrative is a prism for social and cultural information as well as a tool for domination and resistance.

So what about this narrative? What is it a tool for?

I had an idea that an AA meeting was like a classroom and the Program was an education. Lave and Wenger (1991) were describing an educational relation, or, to be more precise, a pedagogical relation in the apprenticeship model they set up between AA’s “peripherally-participating newcomers” and its “fully participating old-timers.” I wanted to reveal AA’s pedagogical structures as unspoken emotional information to be felt by the reader rather than conceptually apprehended.

Just as the novel works on several levels, some of which obviate elaboration or exegesis, Van Maanen’s (1988) “impressionist tales” function to draw a reader into a world, and not necessarily to keep him or her fully informed. Impressionist tales are glimpses into subjective consciousness in the lifeworld, which, for Van Maanen (1988), require “standards [that] are not disciplinary but literary ones, the main obligation of the impressionist is to keep the audience alert and interested” (p. 106).

In October 2011, a draft of potential research questions to Ken, my dissertation advisor, went something like the following; it was to be an ethnography on “the pedagogy of addiction” in AA:

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is a formal educational institution and I am to treat it as such, using the language and categories of educational research, which leads to questions like:

1. What is the pedagogy of AA? How is it disclosed in meetings?
2. What is AA’s “curriculum”? How is it disclosed/used?
3. What counts for knowledge in AA (epistemology)? Bearers of knowledge? How used?
4. What is the “creed” of AA (collective beliefs, negotiable?)?
5. What are AA’s tools and/or resources and how are they used (literature, etc.)?
6. What are AA’s values (“axiology”)?
7. Rituals and practices?

All of which would have made for a tidy study in the 1980s. This sort of AA ethnography has been done before and done well, only using the nomenclature of symbolic interactionism rather than education (see Denzin, 1987). I felt I wouldn’t be adding anything new to the many conversations surrounding addiction and Alcoholics Anonymous.
Were there other ways of getting into an AA meeting besides the nondescript front door?

I showed Ken a fictional story I’d written about a septuagenarian alcoholic, sort of ‘raging against the dying of the light’ and with a lot of silly plot twists. He said he liked it very much. Then I sent him something that was basically a conversation between a drug and alcohol counselor and his patient. Not a lot of scenery, just barebones dialogue, the counselor trying to convince his patient to stay in treatment. I remember walking into Ken’s office and being told and asked at once: “So you’re a storyteller, mate. Is that it?”

I wrote more stories, which I came to call “impressionist tales” but which were in fact quite different from Van Maanen’s (1988) ethnographies. For my purposes, impressionist tales became “autobiographical impressions” of addiction in and around a fictionalized AA meeting, with flashbacks and flash-forwards, shifting points-of-view, and even a short play in the middle. The epistemology of the impressionist tale, what James Clifford calls, “the poetic dimension of ethnography” (in Van Maanen, 1988, p. 101), is to “braid the knower with the known” (p. 102), which happens when we are transported by literature into a pretend lifeworld conjured solely through the printed word and a reader’s interaction with it.

For data about AA meetings I relied on memories of my own lived experiences there, as well as on the organization’s voluminous literature, in order to create a fictionalized, composite meeting from the twenty or so I attended in earnest when I struggled with a nasty addiction to prescription painkillers. The “characters” at the meeting are fictionalized, impressionistic composites of some of the people I met there. They are not “subjects” in an empirical study as they are largely figments of my imagination.

Then there is Bill Wilson, the cofounder of AA, one of the two biographical components of the study. The data for Bill were taken primarily from AA literature including the 4th edition of Alcoholics Anonymous (Anon., 2001), known colloquially and henceforth as the Big Book (especially pp. 1–16, the autobiographical “Bill’s Story”), Twelve Traditions and Twelve Steps (Anon., 1952), known colloquially and henceforth as the 12 & 12, Alcoholics Anonymous Comes of Age (1957), known henceforth as AACOA, and Bill’s officially authored writings in the AA periodical Grapevine collected in book form in The Language of the Heart (Wilson, 1988). I skimmed the various biographies of Bill including Susan Cheever’s (2004), Francis Hartigan’s (2000), and Robert Thomsen’s (1975). I do not attempt to bring Bill to life or to represent him in any realistic sense. (These are impressionist tales.) In the narrative, I approach him as any newcomer would—from the vantage point
of the page, specifically page one of the Big Book where his official story begins.

For data concerning the other biographical component of the study—the story of Bob D—I relied exclusively on the Internet. There’s a YouTube channel called “Odomtology 12 Step Recovery Media” with dozens of AA speaker audio files for streaming, including one titled “Surrender” by “Bob D.” I found the same audio file with the same title on a different site, www.xa-speakers.org where I downloaded and transcribed it using ExpressScribe software for Mac. While I portray Bob’s talk as a more or less typical AA life story ‘qualification,’ it actually has more in common with a speech. I used other audio files of Bob D. on both sites to fill in the gaps of his life story, but not much. And the rest I made up.

Which brings us back to where we began: an introduction to an introduction of AA.

What was I thinking before I entered that first meeting? I have absolutely no idea. And that’s because, I think, I didn’t graft a story onto it. Again, narrative identity is not history so much as it is historical fiction, a term that is, from my point of view and for the purposes of this study, redundant. What we can’t or refuse to remember is jettisoned or else substituted, like a cloze exercise. And we are continually re-editing, revising, re-organizing, or completely rewriting our stories. Finally, the sameness (idem) of death being the common end to all our stories is reconciled by the selfhood (ipse) of agency, i.e., right and ethical action in the lifeworld, which AA espouses in its Twelfth ‘Suggested’ Step (for individuals to carry the AA message to suffering alcoholics and to practice its principles in all affairs), and which I found to be a productive analog toward understanding Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) ethics of alterity. Levinas is the one thinker who helped me understand AA as a promise of right and ethical action for and toward those who cannot yet help themselves.
CHAPTER 1

WELCOME TO AA

The Twelve 'Suggested' Steps

I here present you, courteous reader, with the record of a remarkable period in my life: according to my application of it, I trust that it will prove not merely an interesting record, but in a considerable degree useful and instructive. In that hope it is that I have drawn it up; and that must be my apology for breaking through that delicate and honourable reserve which, for the most part, restrains us from the public exposure of our own errors and infirmities.

—Thomas De Quincey (1822/1949, p. v)

De Quincey is essentially digressive.

—Charles Baudelaire, Artificial Paradise (1971, p. 87)

To be as such is, from the first, to be preoccupied with being, as if some relaxation were already necessary, some “tranquilizer,” in order to remain—while being—unconcerned about being.

—Emmanuel Levinas (1998, p. xii)

But really he was working on the First Step—that is to say, hallucinating.

—John Berryman, Recovery, (1973, p. 23)

The icy branches of a plane tree form a crystal palace awning over the concrete court within which the church is recessed. The tree is a question mark, bending over and leaning into the sacrosanct building, like a teacher, expectant. I move in closer as if straining to hear, aping the tree’s interrogatory stance, finally ducking into the church basement like a cliché. A mere diversion I tell myself, an excursus on a minor point. I can leave anytime. Not really. This is the logical progression of one of the colossal personal blunders of the pharmaceutical age: Getting hooked.

It’s my third day of sobriety. I’ve quit on my own, cold turkey, no detox. Please don’t misunderstand: I’m no hero, no Junky-reading-Burroughs-paperback-stabbing-at-my-back-pocket-wannabe-Beat-Grunge-square. I’m neither a cut-up nor an adventurer. I’m no Coleridge penning “Kubla Khan” with the narcotized hand of God, that’s for sure. The truth as I see it? I’m
weak and quite stupid, a momma’s boy: white, middle-class, Jewish (so called), and privileged—consider my privilege in simply writing this thing—and life was sort of fine until one day it wasn’t. But I’m not certain of that. It’s part of a story I tell myself.

AA recommends the alcoholic continue drinking until medical treatment, i.e., Librium, becomes available. Otherwise you can die. Not so with opiate withdrawal. You can get very sick, like the worst flu you can imagine, but you won’t die.

The drug is gone from my body, flushed from my system via involuntary excretion processes of which I’m totally ignorant and unaware, but I’m not experiencing any withdrawal. No stomach cramps, no nausea, no headache, no vomiting. I imagine a gang of opioid molecules clinging to the desperate receptors of my oozy, cross-wired brain…and letting go. Still, my mouth is dry. My palms are like wet sponges. My heart is banging in my ears. I can’t eat. I slept the first night, but last night I got two hours, tops. I feel like a raw nerve the world is scraping against.

A small foyer leads to a large, rectangular room with metal folding chairs arranged in columns and rows, four by six on either side with a narrow aisle running down the middle. The black linoleum floor is spotless. The chairs slowly fill with talking, animated bodies. Tobacco-scent lingers momentarily as the room settles. Nicotine is a tolerated addiction in AA.

Six bare light bulbs bulge from a high ceiling, fixtureless. Framed messages hang against the russet-colored paneling: “One Day at a Time,” “Keep It Simple,” “Easy Does It.” These phrases might as well be in Cyrillic for all they mean to me.

I’m in the back row closest to the door with my coat on. Two rows in front of me a woman whispers in a man’s ear and he laughs out loud like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard.

I begin to perspire for no reason (except for the effort of fixating upon my own emotional discomfort and obsessive mental processes), the result a paralyzing self-consciousness. This is par for the course. The flood begins along the pale ridges of a former hairline long in retreat and pours into my eyes and down the back of my neck from behind my ears. I’m drenched in seconds. I stand to find the bathroom, leaving my coat hanging over the chair.

My shirt is soaked in sweat, which chills my skin and my glasses fog up in the cold air of the foyer. I repeat to myself: *idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot.* To my left at the end of a long hall stands a plywood door that says, ‘Toilet.’ I race to it and jerk it shut behind me, jamming the hook through the eye in one blind motion. No paper towels, only toilet paper, but the cheap kind that
crumbles when it gets wet. I pull a knot off and tamp it against my forehead. The sink spits scalding water. No mirror. I sit on the toilet to organize myself, swabbing my glasses with a shirtsleeve and picking bits of toilet paper off my forehead.

In my attempt at affecting a casual ease with an untroubled gaze and restful gait I fool exactly no one. The coat hanging over the empty chair is the perfect metaphor. I am nobody. I am nothing. An empty frame, a negative presence, I produce nothing, I merely consume.

A woman with braided brown hair and kind, curious eyes approaches and introduces herself as Evelyn. She offers me a laminated sheet of white paper, a list, and says, “Are you a newcomer? Would you mind reading this when I ask you to?” To my grinning, sweaty silence she nods her head approvingly and dashes across the room to harass another newbie into voluntary public suicide.

Wait a minute.

I grab my coat sleeve planning for a break when a fit of stabbing cramps seizes my guts. Withdrawal? I swallow hard waiting for the bitter creep of nausea. I forget how to breathe. I count to ten. I resign myself to indignant passivity which dissolves into weak-kneed submission.

Screaming across the top of the page are the capitalized words, “THE TWELVE TRADITIONS OF ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (SHORT FORM).” Then, numbered one through twelve are the (shortened) Traditions:

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends on AA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but servants; they do not govern. ²

Evelyn’s measured voice interrupts my perplexity at the God language. She sits in front of the group at a small blue desk upon which one daisy staggers from a thin glass vase. She’s about to read from a laminated sheet that looks just like mine.

“Hi, my name is Evelyn,” she says, “and I’m an alcoholic.” In unison the room greets her: “Hi Evelyn!” Collapsing into my seat I barely whisper it under my breath but my mouth moves dutifully.³

She continues, mostly off-book: “Welcome to the ____________ group of Alcoholics Anonymous. This is an ‘open’ meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. We are glad you are all here, especially newcomers.”⁴
I smile, then cover my mouth embarrassed for having smiled, then smile embarrassed for having covered my mouth. Extraordinarily self-conscious, I am not in the world. I am a being for whom Being is an issue for itself…a big issue. I’m a being with issues. No contemplation going on, nothing Greek. I am where desire goes haywire. Action without thought. Thought without thought.

Evelyn says, “In keeping with our singleness of purpose, and our Third Tradition which states, ‘The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.’ We ask that all who participate confine their discussion to their problems with alcohol.”

I’ve always thought of addiction as a grab bag of vice. Stick your hand in and take your pick. One’s predilection for this or that substance—booze or barbiturates, codeine or cocaine—is less important than the phenomenon itself.

Besides I tried a few NA meetings (Narcotics Anonymous), and felt completely out of place. All the talk was of chasing dragons, freebasing, skin-popping, and shooting up. I felt like a kid with my clean white pills manufactured in government-approved laboratories. But I was no different than any of them, really. I could match anybody out there in my total lack of renunciation.

Evelyn’s voice strolls along. She reads from the “AA Preamble”:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for AA membership; we are self supporting through our own contributions. AA is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy, neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety.

Aside from the words ‘alcoholics’ and ‘alcoholism,’ which will require some mental substitution, I feel I could get with all that. Sharing ‘experience, strength, and hope’. Of course I’m feeling short on strength and hope. I’ll concentrate on experience. That’s a start. Still, my experience has yet to be transformed. That’s what AA does, it transforms you.

Evelyn nods in the direction of a longhaired man with a greying ponytail and mustache who also holds a laminated text. He’s sitting next to a large orange bear of a man with an orange wildfire beard. They’re both smiling as
if they’ve heard a joke; in fact they look high, and they’re obviously friends. There’s a comfort between them that’s palpable in their body language. They lean into each other like conspiring kids, the way that flowers bend toward the sun, and I take an instant liking.

The guy with the ponytail says, “Hey, I’m Jeff and I’m an alcoholic and addict.”

“Hi Jeff!”

Okay. An alcoholic *and* addict. Maybe we’re not so rare after all.

Jeff is possessed of a velvety baritone like an anchorman. He says, “I’m going to read from the fifth chapter in the Big Book called, ‘How It Works,’ or part of it anyway.” His friend is really listening, eyes closed and nodding his head here and there as Jeff reads his part. And unlike me, he has to have heard this stuff a thousand times before. They seem like old-timers, the pair of them, even though they’re barely in middle age; they look like they belong.

Jeff’s unnamed friend is wearing a maroon and gold vertically striped soccer jersey that matches his overall solar effect, and he’s listening, and he seems very, very happy—or content, or whatever you want to call it. He seems like a man satisfied *in* and not merely *with* life.

I remember Jack Klugman’s black-clad, furrow-browed worrywart, Jim Hungerford, in *The Days of Wine and Roses*, the complete opposite of this guy, hounding poor Jack Lemmon, the impressionable Joe Clay, at every dry-out tank he wound up in. I must admit this particular AA stereotype makes me uncomfortable: the Brylcreemed hair, the narrow suits and skinny ties, the Cold War black-and-white world.

But that’s not the way it is now, Jeff’s Day-Glo friend a case in point. And maybe I’m the jerk. After all, Klugman’s Twelfth Stepper was doing a good thing, he was working his Program, doing his service work, which is the ultimate object of AA besides one’s own sobriety, and one’s own sobriety is maintained only by giving back to AA. In helping others stay sober, one helps oneself stay sober ‘one day at a time.’ AA is a collectivist ethics of care with an individualist rationale.

Jeff reads from his laminated card:

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, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping and developing a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. (Big Book, p. 58)

Jeff continues: “Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now. If you have decided you want what we have and are willing to go to any length to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps."

“Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power— that One is God. May you find Him now!”

I knew this was coming, but I was told that God could be anything: the group itself, the ideals of honesty, compassion, and forgiveness, the Buddha, Shakespeare. But the explicitly religious sense that the word “God” evokes in me is unpleasant.

The actor’s oomph that Jeff puts into that last evangelical line, “May you find Him now!” (cued by the exclamation point) is probably replayed thousands of times in thousands of meetings every day of the year, but for Jeff and his buddy it’s as if it’s being spoken and heard for the first time. I wonder if, like me, the God language ever leaves them perplexed, or unconvinced, or if they are disoriented at His ubiquitous masculine gender assignment. Maybe they take what they need and discard the rest, which Bill Wilson himself suggests we do in The Twelve Steps to Sobriety.

Jeff continues: “Half measures availed us nothing. We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon. Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a program of recovery (emphases in original):

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
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” (Big Book, pp. 59–60). 

The Deity mentioned six times! Including capitalized masculine pronouns and twice “as we understand Him.” What if I don’t understand Him? At all? Meaning, I have no concept of Him, Her, or It whatsoever? From the back row I wonder exactly what AA practice is without the shared balm of belief.
CHAPTER 2

CONFESSIONS

Evelyn asks if there are any newcomers or people with thirty days or less.

*Of what?*

Two hands go up.

“I’m Mike, I’m an alcoholic, I got twenty-seven days back today,” says a head of thick salt and pepper hair in the front row.

The room explodes with applause. Then from the fourth row:

“Tessa, alcoholic, twelfth day back.”

*Back?* More applause. I close my eyes and it sounds like rain.

“Thank you, Mike, thank you, Tessa,” Evelyn says.

Tessa is beaming in profile. I imagine Mike is beaming, too, but I can only see the back of his head. Slips and relapses, it seems, are part of the AA program.¹

Rhetorically, Evelyn petitions Tessa—indeed, all of us: “Cold out there, isn’t it?”² And she adds redundantly: “I know I don't have to say it because you both already know, but please stay after to get reacquainted with everyone and maybe even to meet some new people, okay?”

I’m praying for her not to call on me.

She asks, “Is anybody from out of town? Is it anybody’s first time here?”

Screw it! I’m not hiding anymore. Better to be executed by firing squad than drowned in a drainage ditch. I want my life to matter. I don’t want to die without having lived. My hand shoots up like a target student’s, but I’m too late. One row down and to the right a middle-aged man with curly blonde hair and an impish, curly grin has Evelyn’s attention.

“Hello everybody, I’m Paul, I’m an alcoholic. I’m from Glasgow, in Scotland.”

As opposed to Eritrea? I rebuke myself. Enough with the one-liners and the cynicism. It’s transparent. You’re frightened. Sarcasm is the basest form of humor and the best defense. Let your guard down. Open up.

“I’m really happy to be here,” Paul says. “The Rooms are my family, my life, and I think of all the Rooms in the world like One Big Room, if you get my meaning.? One big family.” Wun beeg fam-ee-lay...
There’s a singsong joy to a Scots accent that gets me giddy. You can be the biggest jerk in the world and say the most awful things to the nicest people, but roll a few R’s, stretch the /i/ sound to its snapping point and you’ve got a friend in me.4

“I don’t want to take up too much time,” Paul continues, seems to incant. “I just want to thank everybody for being here. I’ve got sixteen years come March 5th.” (Resounding round of applause.) “But I wouldn’t have sixteen minutes if it weren’t for all of you.” A’l o’yee. “Because you’re never alone if you’ve got the Rooms.” (Nods of assent, yeahs, yeses, and yeps.) “I’m feeling very grateful right now, grateful for my sobriety, and I just wanted to share that, to say hello, and to just give thanks. So, thank you.”

“Thank you, Paul,” Evelyn says, and “thank you for sharing.”

“Thank you,” says Paul.

The gratitude is so thick you can smell it.

“Is there anyone else? Any newcomers?”

She is seeking out my hand, but it’s balled up in a fist in my lap. Then, as if unconsciously, like an invisible string being pulled, I raise the offending appendage limply. “Hi,” I say, but in a volume and pitch reserved for nocturnal rodents. What am I doing here? I should be in bed. I should be in rehab or in detox at the very least because I am not well, and everybody here would probably agree with me.5

“Hi, I’m Peter,” I say, finding my voice somewhere in the hollows of my shame. No more cowering, no more lies. Honesty is key.

I say the words dutifully, as I’m expected to, as if the meeting were a performance and this was my part to play along with everyone else, provided I stick to the script.

“My name is Peter and I’m an addict.”