



UNDRUNK

A Skeptic's Guide to AA



A. J. ADAMS

My eyes wandered around the room, taking in the strange collection of humanity seeking to claim me as a fellow sufferer. If variety is the spice of life, this crowd was the jambalaya of affliction. Ted, sitting directly across the room from me, looked like he was taking a break from the Senior Tour: expensive pink sweater, silver hair, nice tan, Belgian loafers. Next to him, Rodney and Ruby looked as though they'd stepped out of the pages of *I'm a Biker and I Kill People* magazine. Matching leather vests were adorned with dozens of little pins, no doubt memorializing some of their more notable crimes. They also sported patches with the mysterious circle/triangle thingy on their matching biker chaps . . .

. . . Buck was retired military, and Pete was a cop . . . I knew that Julie was an assistant district attorney because she'd prosecuted most of my friends' DUIs. She smiled at me. Probably had a concealed carry . . .

Bored with people-watching, I tuned into some of what was being said. The topic was gratitude, and boy, was this hapless collection of human misery full of it! They were grateful that "the obsession to drink" had been lifted, that their "defects" had been removed (a work in progress for some, I could see), that they were conquering fears, returning to health, banishing resentment, saving family life, and filling up bank accounts. The list was endless . . . I looked around for the Kool-Aid and checked my watch.

—From chapter 1

Undrunk

A Skeptic's Guide to AA

A. J. Adams

Foreword by Mel B.

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For Anita

I walked out of the fog and there you were—waiting for me.

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Foreword

There's a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous that nobody is too dumb to follow the Twelve Step program, but some alcoholics are too smart. Writing as an AA member with more than fifty-eight years of continuous sobriety, I can say that I've met my share of people who have dismissed the program because of such unexamined biases—and their lives have not always ended well.

A. J. Adams showed signs of being such a person when he attended his first AA meetings—and he continued to drink. Along the way, however, he began to understand that AA was quietly changing lives that had been all but lost. He studied and accepted the program and found his life miraculously changing for the better in only one year. The experience was so remarkable that he wrote this book to explain what he had found in AA that gave him continued sobriety and a completely new approach to life.

While AA is often described as a simple program, A.J. goes behind the scenes to show that AA has real depth and to highlight how and why it works. By writing in a personal, friendly style laced with a wicked sense of humor, he makes it easy to digest some of the deeper principles that have given AA its lasting power.

Who should read this book? It is certainly aimed at people who think they have drinking problems but are skeptical about AA or are resisting going to a meeting. (I don't know many people who *gladly* attended their first meeting!)

In addition, this book can be a good read for nonalcoholics who want to learn more about AA—especially if they think someone they care about has an alcohol or other drug problem—and how it developed from a chance meeting of two drunks in 1935. And since there have been a number of recent books, articles, and Web sites critical of AA, it's gratifying to have an advocate like A.J. who can lay out sound reasons why AA is still working well, not the least of which being that it saved his life and the lives of millions of others.

I think you will find yourself being pulled in to A.J.'s story with the very first chapter. His first AA meeting in a shabby room in a rundown section of town was the kind of meeting that could be found anywhere in America. But, because he wasn't ready to accept the program and continued drinking until alcohol was, as he puts it, "moving in for the kill," this meeting could have turned him permanently away from the fellowship. Almost against his will, though, he picked up a few good ideas about AA and got the message that he should "keep coming back."

His real recovery started when the pain became excruciating, he lost his job (a common occurrence among unrecovered alcoholics and addicts), and his home life became terribly bleak and miserable. Prodded into rehab and humbled by defeat, he made a new beginning that worked this time. It is a story I've heard hundreds of times in AA, and A.J. gives it new twists that will carry you along.

One of the unwritten rules of AA is that one should utilize the program rather than analyze it, because too much analysis is said to lead to paralysis. I don't think this warning applies to A.J.'s discussion of what the AA program is

and how and why it works, because it comes straight from the heart with no lecturing or proselytizing. Reviewing the history and development of AA, he concludes that AA's early years are a fascinating tale of serendipity and remarkable spiritual intervention. You'll also find him acknowledging the old-fashioned Yankee virtues that AA cofounders Bill W. and Dr. Bob picked up in their Vermont backgrounds. And if you're having trouble understanding the spirituality of the AA program, you'll get some help from his take on the subject in chapter 3. He sees spirituality as its own reward, as a source of energy to face life with confidence.

Beyond that, you'll find A.J. covering almost all of the AA basics in these pages: get a sponsor, attend meetings regularly, help yourself by helping others. You will even learn AA jargon and sayings that have evolved in the fellowship over the years. As he writes about all these topics, they seem to have fresh meaning for me, though I've heard them for years.

When you reach A.J.'s one-year progress report near the end of the book, I think you'll feel, as I do, that he has earned the happiness and success that his AA journey has brought into his life. This book is not only a great introduction to AA for people who are looking for something more than the "party line." It can also serve as a good reminder for newcomers—and even oldtimers like me—of what we need to be thinking, feeling, saying, and doing to stay on the right track as we trudge AA's Road of Happy Destiny.

Mel B.

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Introduction

“Look, A.J., you can either keep on doing what you’re doing and continue to watch your life unravel, or you can give AA a try and take a shot at a better life than you ever imagined. What do you say?”

Hmmm. Well, I’m going to have to think about that.

This was a real conversation. A year ago, I actually believed that AA would just have to wait while I considered my options. It was as though someone threw me a life preserver from the *Titanic*, but I wasn’t sure I wanted it because it was orange.

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) has more than 2 million members in 100,000 groups scattered across 150 countries. No one who knows anything about alcoholism will deny that the AA method is the single most effective treatment available for alcoholism. Yet millions of alcoholics still suffer poor health and ruined lives—and some die—while the AA solution hides in plain sight.

At the end of an astonishing first year in AA that transformed my troubled life into a daily joy, I asked myself why so many alcoholics walk past AA. It’s not as though AA is only for a certain demographic. We are men and women;

old, young, and middlers; struggling to well-off; educated and not; straight and gay; all races; all religions, no religion; introverts, extroverts, pessimists, optimists, realists, skeptics, fools, cynics, and saints. We have one thing in common: we are alcoholics. Untreated, alcoholism gets worse and ultimately can kill us. AA offered a solution and we took it. I haven't met anyone in AA who invested sweat equity in the program and regretted it. Not a single person, and that's remarkable.

So why is AA the most effective treatment for alcoholism in the world and still ignored by millions? I think many who take a pass on AA do so for one of four reasons.

The first is the most obvious. They haven't suffered enough. Think of this as market economics. While the price of a fifth of vodka was \$8.50, I was willing to pay. When it went up to \$12.50, I didn't blink an eye. When the price started to include some friends and co-workers, I still paid. Hard to believe, but when it cost my reputation, I was still buying. It wasn't until I was asked to hand over my family, my health, and my self-esteem that I finally decided I couldn't afford a fifth of vodka.

A second reason for ignoring AA is that it seems old-fashioned. Picture this: a few desperate men get together in the 1930s to self-treat their hopeless alcoholism with a combination of what looked like voodoo therapy, Masonic solidarity, and do-gooderism. Until I saw the results with my own eyes, I was skeptical too. In twenty-first century America, we're used to having a pill delivered by someone in a white coat. AA is nothing like that. In fact, it's so homey it can invite ridicule from the casual observer. Until

I gave it an honest try, AA seemed quaint and a little peculiar to me.

The third reason AA puts some people off is that it seems too difficult. There's an AA saying that the program is "simple but not easy." But it's not that hard either. If it were, I wouldn't have stuck with it. What AA does is appeal to our better selves, which takes some getting used to for a lot of us. First, we have to be honest, and that can pinch in the beginning. Also, we have to have an open mind. Without it, we'll second-guess the program to death in a week. Humility is probably the hardest angel to summon. Like most alcoholics, I was anything but humble. Finally, recovery takes commitment. But most alcoholics do find the strength they need, especially if they've paid a visit to the gates of hell first, as most of us have.

The fourth reason why so many suffering alcoholics fail to embrace AA is also the reason I wrote this book: people either don't know anything about AA or they don't like what they think they know.

Getting to that first meeting can be tough.

I never made it into my first AA meeting. I set out for the appointed place in plenty of time, but I didn't realize that AA meetings can be deviously hidden. They're not hidden on purpose, but many are located in cheap, out-of-the-way commercial spaces and don't have big "Drunks Welcome" signs outside. I pulled up late in front of the meeting hall. I looked through the plate-glass window and saw about twenty people sitting in a circle. The meeting was obviously under way and I didn't know the AA etiquette for tardiness, so I drove to my local saloon to think it over.

The truth, of course, is that I was scared of AA and intimidated by the challenge of getting sober. What I knew about AA was a toxic mix of misinformation, misunderstanding, and caricature. I believed that only down-and-outers ended up in AA, and that the program was a kind of penance for past sins to which unlucky alcoholics were sentenced. None of that is true, but I encourage you to come to your own conclusions about AA, its program, and its people.

I hope this book makes it easier for others than it was for me to get to an AA meeting and stick around long enough to get the message. This two-step process is how most alcoholics *get AA*. Defeating our obsession with alcohol is only the beginning. AA is a fabulous lifestyle, philosophy, and personal code. That is what I mean by living *undrunk*.



CHAPTER 1

A.J. Gets to an AA Meeting

Alcoholics Anonymous.

Even the name put me off. Who'd want to be called an alcoholic, and why the secret-society thing? But I was on my way to a meeting for real this time, whether I wanted to go or not. My wife and kids were on my case about drinking, and I'd started to have a few at work that didn't go unnoticed. Although I dreaded it, I'd known for a while that I'd have to go to some AA meetings to take the heat off. I was running out of takers on my promises to cut back, so I was going to Plan B. I figured if I put in some time at AA, I could throttle my drinking back to a reasonable level and all would be well. Still, I felt a little queasy as I headed toward the address I'd gotten on the Internet.

As I drove through the November chill and the early evening gloom, I wondered why they couldn't put these things in places people could find. The meetings all seemed to be in church basements or out-of-the-way spots in rundown parts of town. And the meeting names—oh, the names: “Seaside Serenity,” “Fresh Start,” “Don't Worry, Be Happy.” Why not just call it “Loserville”?

I turned into a slightly shabby strip mall that seemed to correspond to the address I had. Nothing looked like a

meeting to me. Then I noticed some cars and bikes in front of one storefront. As I got closer, I counted a half dozen very nice motorcycles and a surprising collection of up-market sedans. There were some real junkers there too. It was an odd mix. I parked as far away as possible, so that anyone who might drive by and recognize my car wouldn't associate me with this sad affair.

As I walked toward the storefront, I scanned for a sign. Nothing. But what would an AA meeting sign say? After all, they're supposed to be anonymous. For some reason that seemed very funny, which I attributed to nerves and missing my 5:00 p.m. pint of vodka. A few of what I feared were my new friends were on the sidewalk, braving the cold to catch a smoke. "Is this the meeting?" I almost whispered, not wanting to breach anyone's secret existence. A couple heads nodded toward the door. I was afraid I'd stumbled onto the hearing-impaired meeting. "How come no sign?" I asked. The group chatterbox pointed to a circle with a triangle inside it, inscribed with the words "Recovery," "Unity," and "Service." Apparently this was supposed to mean something to everyone in the world. "Cool," I said and moved on.

I walked into the meeting room, which at least was warm. A few people looked my way with a combination of civility and curiosity. There was a fair amount of chat going on around me among the twenty-five or so people who seemed to know each other well. Laughter bubbled here and there around the room. In my increasing nervousness, I couldn't accept that anything humorous was going on here, and I wondered what moved any of these desperate people to laugh. No one had spoken to me yet, and the silence triggered a familiar

anxiety reaction. I really should have had a couple before trying this out. I was just about to pull out my cell phone to look busy when I noticed a sign on the wall that read “Please place cell phones in silent, vibrate, or stun mode.”

I desperately needed something to do besides standing there and feeling way out of my comfort zone. My eyes settled on the only exception to the 1950s classroom decor: a world-class coffee bar. They probably didn’t call it a coffee *bar* here, but I knew how to pour myself a cup of coffee, so I headed over. At last someone spoke to me. A smiley guy said, “Leaded or unleaded?”

Knowing that the right response would be essential to sustaining this budding conversation, I said, “Huh?”

“With caffeine or without?” smiley guy said.

“Oh,” I mumbled, “I like the real thing.”

“You’re in the right place,” he said, “and I don’t just mean the coffee.” With a Santa-worthy wink, he poured my coffee and moved on to another person.

With my coffee prop in hand, I took in the surroundings. The room was dominated by a large conference table that had seen many conferences. The surrounding chairs gave “garage sale” a bad name. The meeting leader’s place was piled with tattered books—the holy texts, I guessed. On the wall were two large posters with the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions; the language seemed stilted and archaic. World War I–vintage slogans contributed to the funky feel of the place: One Day at a Time. Live and Let Live. Easy Does It. A trio of prayers, also on the wall, addressed the serious business of beating death by liver failure.

Desperate but no fool, I started inching toward the door

to make my escape. I nodded jovially at the people along the way and made little toasting motions with my coffee cup. But I'd missed my chance. Suddenly it was 5:30, and everyone was sitting down. As I considered just bolting, smiley guy from the coffee bar appeared out of nowhere: "Have a seat," he said. "I'm Tim." I surrendered but obstinately did not tell Tim my own name. I checked the wall clock against my wristwatch. I would be out the door at 6:30 on the dot. I started composing the line I'd call over my shoulder as I left, about an important meeting or a rookie babysitter.

My escape planning was interrupted by the leader's voice. "I'm Quincy, and I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Quincy!" the group responded with smarmy cheer.

"This is an open meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. Our purpose is to bring the message of AA to the alcoholic who still suffers and to share our experience, strength, and hope with one another. Please limit your sharing to three or four minutes [*No problem for me*, I thought.] and let your language reflect the quality of your sobriety. Children are welcome, but we ask parents to remove them if they become disruptive. Please place your cell phones in silent, vibrate, or stun mode." The last comment occasioned a volley of polite laughter, as though no one had been reading it on the wall for the past hundred years.

The chair beamed at his loving audience and continued: "I've asked Deb to read 'How It Works,' but before she does, is anyone here for the first time or for the first time since their last drink? If so, I have a desire chip for you."

Absolute terror squeezed my heart into a walnut and sucked my lungs empty. A hundred eyes and fifty warm

smiles focused on me. They wanted me to step up and accept what I could now see was a bright red poker chip. I screwed up my courage, took a deep breath, and . . . did nothing. Well, not exactly nothing. I took a sip of coffee, looked around at no one in particular, and made my little toasting motion.

After what seemed like a really long silence, Quincy moved on: “Okay, let’s go around the room and introduce ourselves.” Oh, shit! This was really turning into a nightmare. I didn’t even like this corny introduction thing at work meetings where I knew everyone. My get-up-and-run instinct switched back on, and I could feel my throat getting dry and tight. As my mind raced through possible escape plans, the introductions and hi’s moved inexorably toward me. “I’m Judy, and I’m an alcoholic.” “Hi, Judy!” “My name is Walter, and I’m a grateful recovering alcoholic.” “Hi, Walter!” “Jake, alcoholic.” “Hi, Jake!”

Smiley guy next to me announced that he was Tim and, amazingly, an alcoholic. Instead of saying “Hi, Tim” with the other ebullient greeters, I just stared at him for what seemed like a full minute and probably was. When I unwound my neck into the forward-looking position, I saw a picture of benign expectation that scared the shit out of me. Every face seemed to be wishing me enough courage to say my name. The pressure was excruciating.

I didn’t recognize the croaking voice that said, “A.J., alcoholic.” I expected a gasp of relief from the assembled, but the howdy train chugged on past me without a hitch. I had survived my first AA crisis. In fact, I had done pretty well—I hadn’t blurted out my last name. Tim leaned over and whispered, “Good to have you here. Keep coming back.”

I smiled my first real smile. I was going to be able to work this room after all!

Deb began to read “How It Works” from what I thought the chair called the “Blue Book” (it was blue). It was actually the Big Book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*: AA’s version of received wisdom and truth. I settled in to listen for the remainder of my hour of penance. I thought it was funny that a secret society would blurt out its main secrets this way, but it was probably all crapola, so what did it matter?

My eyes wandered around the room, taking in the strange collection of humanity seeking to claim me as a fellow sufferer. If variety is the spice of life, this crowd was the jambalaya of affliction. Ted, sitting directly across the room from me, looked like he was taking a break from the Senior Tour: expensive pink sweater, silver hair, nice tan, Belgian loafers. Next to him, Rodney and Ruby looked as though they’d stepped out of the pages of *I’m a Biker* and *I Kill People* magazine. Matching leather vests were adorned with dozens of little pins, no doubt memorializing some of their more notable crimes. They also sported patches with the mysterious circle/triangle thingy on their matching biker chaps.

I could tell that Zack was a real estate agent, mainly because his polo shirt had the name of a real estate company stitched on the pocket. Miranda and Mary Ann were in their twenties. They sat together with infant carriers at their feet. Mandy was a fifty-something blond with a remarkably svelte body crammed into a miniskirt business suit fashioned from a blend of spandex and snakeskin. She kept leaving the room to answer her cell phone. Feeling my confidence and terrific sense of humor returning, I whispered to Tim, “She must be a bookie.”

“Doctor,” he replied, with that same annoying smile.

The mix of people was pretty remarkable. Buck was retired military, and Pete was a cop. I knew David owned the Ford dealership, because I’d seen him on late-night TV commercials. I knew that Julie was an assistant district attorney because she’d prosecuted most of my friends’ DUIs. She smiled at me. Probably had a concealed carry. My favorite was Leon, who topped a five-day growth of beard and a mouth nostalgic for bygone teeth with a jaunty beret. He opened his sharing with excellent advice for us all: “AA is not about showing up, looking good, and sounding smart.”

Bored with people-watching, I tuned into some of what was being said. The topic was gratitude, and boy, was this hapless collection of human misery full of it! They were grateful that “the obsession to drink” had been lifted, that their “defects” had been removed (a work in progress for some, I could see), that they were conquering fears, returning to health, banishing resentment, saving family life, and filling up bank accounts. The list was endless. The showstopper for me was the woman who said with a straight face that she was grateful for being an alcoholic, because the AA program apparently bestows on those willing to “work it” an idyllic life. I looked around for the Kool-Aid and checked my watch.

The centerpiece of a lot of the sharing seemed to be some reference to a “Higher Power.” This was clearly code for God. In fact, the Big Guy was mentioned specifically by some speakers, but it was usually “God as you understand him” or something like that. If you were in a buying mood, you would apparently get a hell of a deal on God in AA. But this was a very personal universal architect—God in street clothes.

People talked about their God like a fishing buddy or a girlfriend from the gym. And the results? Whoa! You would not believe! According to my new friends, God would clean up your messy life, tell you what to do with it, help you do it, and make you feel great about it. All you had to do in return was “work the Steps” and “do the next right thing.” This was called “spirituality” and was not to be confused with “religion.” Beret guy told us that “Religion is for people who are afraid of going to hell. Spirituality is for people who have already been there.” Actually, I sort of liked that.

In fact, I liked a fair amount of what I heard, despite my frantic desire to move the clock hands to 6:30. People spoke with astonishing candor about what had brought them to AA and what was going on in their lives now. The stories could not have been made up. For example, one guy’s wife caught him cheating and ran over him with a golf cart. When he came out of the coma nine weeks later, he acknowledged that it was probably time for AA. The loss of spouses, children, and friends because of drinking was common. Wrecked careers, money trouble, and brushes with the law were popular too. There was also some terrific humor, considering the dark subject matter. Buck, the retired military guy, was recounting all the good things that happened to him after he got sober. He ended with “. . . and I lost 140 pounds.” In the silence that followed, he added, “My ex-wife weighed 120.”

The floor was being passed from one speaker to another through a game of “tag.” Since no one knew me, I wasn’t worried about being called on to speak. And even if I was, I’d noticed that a few people passed, saying something like “I think I’ll just listen tonight.” I’d forgotten about smiley guy, whose

sharing did not inspire me to listen, until I heard my name: “I’d like to call on our newcomer, A.J.” I could have killed him. It’s amazing how fast the human heartbeat can go from 60 to 160. I forced my lips into a smile that surely looked more like a grimace and somehow thanked Tim for the opportunity to spill my guts in front of a bunch of strangers. I was terrified and had no idea what to say.

“I’m a newcomer, and I really appreciate the warm welcome I’ve gotten here tonight. I’m not sure that I’m an alcoholic—probably I’m not one. But I did want to come here and see what AA is all about. This has been a great evening. You are all so honest and frank. And I really appreciated the humor. The humor was really good and funny. I never did anything too bad when I was drinking except a couple one-car accidents, which can happen to anyone. Not that I’m judging any of you for the bad stuff you’ve done. That’s all in the past and none of my business. Also, I just want to say that the coffee is great. It’s better coffee than in the Navy. I was never in the Navy, but I respect any of you who were in the Navy, or in any part of the military. Thanks for letting me speak. One last thing: I’d like to donate some coffee since this was such a rewarding experience.”

Fortunately, my terror had reduced the oxygen flow to my brain and I was unable to hear most of what I said. When I finished, everyone in the room offered the AA ovation: “Thanks, A.J.”

I spent the last fifteen minutes of the meeting like a crazed zombie, smiling at everyone. Further toasting seemed over the top. The collection basket (they just call it “the basket”) came around toward the end and I noticed that most people

tossed in a buck, so I fished around for a single. I had actually stopped looking at the clock when Quincy announced that the meeting was over and asked a very troubled-looking young woman dressed in black and named Evangeline to “take us out.” I hoped she was not armed. Everyone stood and took the hands of the people on either side. I hated this kind of stuff and had a hard time figuring out whether my hand should be offered in the under or over position. All went quiet and Evangeline said simply, “God.”

The group then recited the Serenity Prayer, the original version of which is attributed to the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971) and has become AA’s signature devotion:

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

At that point, everyone (still holding hands) raised and lowered their hands rhythmically, chanting, “Keep coming back. It works if you work it.” My hands were released by the hostage-takers on either side, and people started moving toward the door.

It was 6:30 on the button and I was full of joy. I had made it through my first AA meeting, and I was heading home to tell my wife that serenity and healing were at hand. I had seen the light and the way. Our problems would soon be over. “I’ll drink to that,” I muttered to myself.

I headed for the exit only to find my way blocked by smiley guy Tim. What the hell did he want? “Great to have you

here, A.J. Here's a Big Book and a phone list of AAs who are available to talk anytime you feel the need. You'll like the book. It's a little stiff because it was written in the 1930s, but the message is profound. The first part describes what AA is all about. The rest of the book is stories about folks who've been helped by AA." I took my party favors and thanked Tim with my best attempt at sincerity. After all, I was sincerely glad to be leaving and could hardly wait to swing by the liquor store to secure a celebratory pint. As I turned for the door, Tim grabbed my arm gently but firmly and looked at me without the smile: "Keep coming back."

IN THIS unprecedented book, A. J. Adams uses self-deprecating humor, entertaining anecdotes, and frank descriptions to introduce anyone who “just doesn’t get” Alcoholics Anonymous to the complete “undrunk” lifestyle.

Beginning with the story of his first AA meeting, he takes the mystery out of what goes on behind closed doors, dispelling misconceptions of AA as cultlike, secretive, campy, or lowbrow. He then presents a user-friendly history and introduction to AA, explaining the Steps, Traditions, terms, and sayings—all punctuated by honest, often hilarious descriptions of his own struggles and eventual transformation to “getting” the program.

My eyes wandered around the room, taking in the strange collection of humanity seeking to claim me as a fellow sufferer. If variety is the spice of life, this crowd was the jambalaya of affliction. —From *Undrunk*

A. J. ADAMS is a professional writer with a little more than one year in A.A.

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