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Reflections on the History of Alcoholics Anonymous An Interview with Ernie Kurtz

Introduction

What appears below is a transcript of the first interview in a three-part interview series that was filmed and distributed as a DVD by the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center (ATTC) and the Addiction Technology Transfer Center Network. Capturing Ernie Kurtz in interview format was the idea of Lonnetta Albright, Director of the Great Lakes ATTC. I thought the idea was brilliant and was delighted when I was chosen by Ernie Kurtz to conduct the interviews, which were edited and released in 2009. The DVD is available at <http://www.attcnetwork.org/regcenters/productdetails.asp?prodID=499&rcID=3>.

Harvard Dissertation on AA

Bill White: Ernie, since it was first published in 1979, your book, *Not God: The History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, has been the definitive history of AA. How did your research into the AA fellowship begin?

Ernie Kurtz: It really happened by coincidence. You know what they say in AA about coincidence, of course. I began graduate school in psychology and started getting curious about where these ideas originated, and I started asking questions about their history. I hated history when I was in college, you know dates and battles, but I found at the University of Rochester this course on the history of ideas and this marvelous history professor, Marvin Becker. I was in his class, and I just got excited. And so I started applying to graduate schools, not in psychology, but in history. I got accepted at Harvard among other places and in Harvard's History of American Civilization program. In the late '60s and early '70s, urban history was the thing, so I started studying the city of Cleveland, Ohio.

I had never been there, never visited there, did not live there, therefore, it was new knowledge. Oscar Handlin, who was my mentor, was sort of excited about this, but it just couldn't hold together, so I started looking for groups of people that gathered not based on their ethnicity or on religion but on some other kind of affiliation.

Someone told me that AA had begun in Cleveland, and I knew a cop who said he'd take me to meetings. So I went to meetings, and I started hearing these things that I knew couldn't be true, like AA came out of the Oxford Movement, which was in 19th century England. It just didn't fit, and so I went back to Cambridge and started going to some other AA meetings and again hearing these things that I couldn't explain and began looking at them. Then the Cleveland dissertation just fell apart.

I don't remember who I was talking to exactly, but it was 1975 by this time. Bill Wilson had died in 1971. I'd overheard the name. I didn't know who he was really. I guess I'd heard his name mentioned at AA, and they said that they were putting together an archive and that Bill's letters were being organized. This sounded very interesting, and after a few inquiries, I learned from Dr. Dan Anderson at Hazelden that AA was putting together its archives and Nell Wing, who had been Bill's secretary for many years, was the Archivist. Now this is a History graduate student's dream—a trove of never-examined letters by a historically significant person!

Bill White: And a movement about which no book had been written.

Ernie Kurtz: It was the beginning of a new movement at that time, so I had curiosity and applied. Dan Anderson told me how to do so. I wrote to the AA General Service Office, the trustees, and the two academics, George Gordon and Milton Maxwell, on the Trustees Archives Committee. Then I went and met them and we got along very well. They gave me access to the AA Archives. It was just incredible. Nell was arranging them strictly chronologically, all of Bill's letters. She never had received any training as an archivist. She was a secretary. She'd been known in AA as a temp. You'd really have to read her book to understand her story, marvelous!

And so, you know, one of the first things I did was suggest that Nell be sent to graduate school for archival studies at least for a summer, which happened. So I was on the ground floor of organizing these AA documents, and I kept seeing these letters and by this time, I'm totally into this. I mean, Cleveland had gone by the way, and I just got into this new topic.

It was a different world then, I mean, when it got very hot and humid at Cambridge, I'd go up to Maine on daytrips and haunt the book barns. I'd see these first edition AA Big Books on the shelves in used bookstores for 50 cents, 75 cents, and I didn't bother buying them. I had a copy of that book, *Alcoholics Anonymous*. I knew the first edition was important, but that was available for me in

the AA Archives. I could have been rich if I'd bought them! I had just totally lucked into the topic at a point where there wasn't this interest in AA, and *Not God* got published at a time this interest was just beginning to burgeon. Again, it was luck.

Bill White: How did your view of AA and the co-founders in particular change through your research?

Ernie Kurtz: That's certainly been interesting. Of the little that I knew of Bill Wilson, I didn't like him. He'd been a Wall Street "hanger on" and a runner; he wasn't really a broker. He did some nice investigative work, but he clearly worshipped rich people and loved capitalism and thought that Franklin Roosevelt was betraying America. If we met, I'm sure he wouldn't have liked me. At this point, I thought I was so smart. And so I began going through the letters looking for the intellectual threads. There was sort of this background impression of mine that this guy Wilson, from my Cambridge perspective, was probably a jerk.

And I'm not sure when . . . I was faithfully going through a lot of documents and I was setting up interviews. But first there was the immersion in the letters. People would write Bill about their concerns and their problems. Somewhere, probably before the thousandth letter and reading his responses, I slowly began to recognize the deep understanding and compassion of this man. He obviously could read between the lines of the letters sent to him. I'd read a letter he'd received and then I'd go to his reply and say, "What's he responding to?" I hadn't even noticed it in that letter, and here I was trained in psychology. And there was his compassion.

Bill did have this streak of grandiosity in thinking he was great and wanting to be on top—with which I could easily identify. But he knew it and he kept shooting himself down. He sort of made fun of himself, a "there I go again" type of thing, which I think is one of the saving graces of AA. Bill probably was in the position to have become a charismatic leader—you know, one of these dynamic people who have cults eventually. He recognized his own flaw, his tendency to grandiosity, which was tremendously significant in protecting AA from what Bill would call his "big shot-ism." He was aware of himself. Nell virtually worshipped Bill, and I was wondering at the beginning why and of course, I came to understand why. Nell did not have a great deal of formal education, but she had a great sensitivity and the fact that she was so impressed with him also influenced me.

Bill White: I remember at one point you saying that one of Bill Wilson's greatest contributions was that he saved AA from himself.

Ernie Kurtz: Exactly. Well, yes, he said that. He said, “I saved AA from myself.” I think it was in a *Grapevine* article too or maybe in a private letter or in *As Bill Sees It*. One of the unique aspects of AA is precisely that it didn’t become what other groups became before AA or after.

Bill White: You’ve talked about the chemistry of the co-founders at times in some of your writings and the unique combinations of what Dr. Bob and Bill brought together in terms of that founding process.

Ernie Kurtz: It’s interesting. They’re both Vermonters. And in Susan Cheevers’ book, she develops the significance that both co-founders came from Vermont. We have some stereotypes of Vermonters, but Dr. Bob, he was a surgeon. He went to medical school and became a surgeon, and surgeons work on one person at a time. They don’t have a lot of outside interests especially, and they’re very focused, and this is very good. I think that’s important in a surgeon. Bill, on the other hand, is this glad-hander. He’s making a living on Wall Street because he’s able to read people, and he traveled around with Lois on a motorcycle to General Electric in Schenectady and hung out with the guys at the bar and was able to understand and sort of figure out what was going on at the plant that he could report back to those who were going to invest. So Bill was this glad-hander, and it’s amazing that these two people, if they had met in a bar, wouldn’t have even looked at each other.

You cannot think that Dr. Bob did much bar hopping, of course, because surgeons don’t usually drink in public, but they had nothing in common despite their common roots. There’s nothing in common in the way in which their temperaments and personalities developed. Bob’s great contribution was, “Keep it simple.” I think when they first came up with what became AA, if it had only been Bill Wilson, AA would have been more franchised than McDonald’s, and if it had been only Dr. Bob, AA would still be operating out of a roadside stand in Akron. The impact of these two on each other, even to the point of the tension between Akron and New York: there was divergence in the co-founders, but in the midst of that divergence was a tremendous respect for each other.

This is the amazing thing: today we talk about people in early sobriety as, “Oh, they only have one year.” You know, these were two people who were just months dry who developed this profound respect for each other.

Public/Professional Response to *Not-God*

Bill White: You pulled the history together of the founding moments of the AA movement and offered the first scholarly treatment of such depth on AA. What was the response of both the AA community and the professional community to the book?

Ernie Kurtz: It's really interesting. I wasn't writing a book; I was writing a dissertation, and you know, if you're writing a dissertation, you're writing it for three to five people because you want those letters after your name and you want to get a job. After I received my PhD in 1978, Hazelden expressed an interest in publishing my dissertation. Oscar Handlin wanted to see it published. He thought it was a good study, and that always helps. I sort of went with Hazelden because they said they would keep it in print whereas commercial publishers wouldn't. I'm very glad that I made that choice because they have kept it in print.

When I was first doing the research at the AA archives, the archives were on a different floor than the general service office (GSO). The people at GSO saw me as something of an intruder. They're very generous if any ordinary AA walks in there; they are that person's servant. They're marvelous. But I wasn't a member; I was there as a researcher. I got the cold shoulder, although Nell, of course, was very warm. This was okay. I mean, you're doing research; you don't necessarily need to be loved. So I did the dissertation.

I gave a copy to Lois, and it went through the process of becoming a book manuscript. Milton Maxwell, who by that time was the head of the trustees, called me and said, "You know, early in the book, you mention Bill's experimentation with LSD, and the other trustees have asked me if you would cut that from the book. You know we had the agreement that in the dissertation there can't be prior censorship but now this is not a dissertation, you're going to a book publication." I said, "Wow." I went to my academic mentors, Oscar Handlin and Bill Hutchinson. I said, "You know, this is what I've been asked. And out of respect for AA, I don't want to do something that would be injurious to them, but on the other hand as I told them, I don't think there's anything that I can do that can injure AA."

Both of them, but especially Oscar Handlin, said, "Well, this is part of your story. The way in which you treat this is that Bill's thirst for alcohol became the thirst for alcoholics. This thirst ties him to this part of his story." And so I gritted my teeth and prayed over it and decided to leave it in the book, and so the book was published. From what I heard, they were holding their breaths at 468 Park Avenue South, which was where GSO was located then. (I wasn't exactly holding my breath; I was looking for a job at that point.) The first 300 calls that got to New

York were people saying how wonderful the book was because it doesn't turn Bill into a Tin God or some kind of a saint. We see Bill and all of his flaws. And this was such a wonderful description and of course since AA is the fellowship, the folks at GSO were happy.

And then I could visit AA and they were nice to me [laughing] at the desk when I stopped by the office. In the professional world, there are some advantages to going to Harvard. This was a dissertation approved by Harvard University and by one of the leading historians of our time, Oscar Handlin. I worked hard, and it was a good dissertation. I did have someone question, "Why didn't we hear about this [AA history] sooner? It has this depth to it." And my response was that nobody had studied it before, and that's in part because these documents became available at this time, and I was the fortunate one to do it.

Bill White: The depth of the book seemed to create a means of connection between AA and the professional community. Was that an intended or an unanticipated side effect of the book?

Ernie Kurtz: It wasn't an intent. Well, I guess it was in the back of my mind. It bothered me as I was doing my research and also as I was researching alcoholism to understand something about what this was about that professionals and members of AA didn't trust each other and didn't like each other much. This sort of bothered me because I knew good people in both camps. So I didn't aim the book that way, but I think my whole career professionally has been aimed at bridging that gap. These are people who speak two different languages. The language of recovery is basically a language of spirituality; this is different from the professional language, which comes from the various disciplines and the sciences.

There are wonderful, caring people in both places, and the alcoholic doesn't have too many people who care for him. Alcoholics in their drunkenness are not very attractive people. So if anybody's in this field, they are compassionate people, back in those days especially. There wasn't any money in this field. I think my greatest joy about going around and teaching about AA is I would go in to a strange city and go to a hall to do a presentation and it would be half professionals and half alcoholics who were AA members. And they'd usually be sitting on opposite sides of the room. There would be a literal separation. I'd walk in and they'd be talking to each other on one side and they'd be talking to each other on the other side. If when I left, they were talking back and forth, I knew I had been a success. I saw there was a bridge built. In fact, Oscar Handlin once called me a bridge builder. I

felt so much that these two caring communities needed to be more respectful, needed to really know each other, not just go by superficial stuff.

AA's Historical Context

Bill White: As you think back on the development of AA, could AA have occurred anytime other than when it did?

Ernie Kurtz: Oh dear. This is my bias as a historian I guess. You know at the beginning of the book *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* in the discussion of Step One, Bill talks about being bankrupt. AA I think could have only come out of the American 1930s—after the crash of 1929 and the Great Depression taking effect. For the first time, this “go get ‘em” optimistic American culture hit bottom. Some people who had been titans of business and were doing very well—suddenly they were rummaging through garbage pails outside of restaurants. Some restaurants were cooking food even though there was no one there to buy. There was an attempt to put on this illusion where everything’s okay, when really, it wasn’t. This effused the culture.

Nineteen twenty-nine was to the United States what 1914 was to Europe. The outbreak of World War I and the Great Crash, the end of this idea of, “All we have is ongoing progress.” Europe suffered this with the outbreak of World War I. We didn’t that much. World War I didn’t mean that much here. We entered, and rather quickly the war was won, so if anything, the ’20s were very optimistic. But in the 1930s, during the Great Depression, people were really depressed, psychologically as well as economically. The culture hit bottom.

People who had been used to controlling things learned that they were powerless, and I think that it was in this clash that some first discovered AA . . . that level of business-people who had to confront their powerlessness. So, to me, AA could have only come out of the American 1930s. I’m sure all the historians would bring different perspectives, but I see it so much as coming out of that era. And it’s the era out of which neo-Orthodox thought comes in and the theology that goes on—Niebuhr’s realism and the recognition of powerlessness. There are other threads that go on at this time, but this is the culture of the moment, and AA is born into this and takes its early nourishment from it.

Formulation of the Twelve Steps

Bill White: I'm thinking of the 1935 to 1939 period when the experiential building blocks of the steps are going to come into place. What are the elements that came together in this crystallization of the steps and what do they tell us about recovery?

Ernie Kurtz: The acceptance of powerlessness and the importance of honesty are the two things that come out especially. I think that those are the two ideas. Honesty with self and honesty with others you see in the inventory. The Steps were derived from practices of the Oxford Group. You see this emphasis on recognizing powerlessness, admitting the fact that there was nothing you could do about this directly, except being honest with one's self and others about this. Samuel Insull, the great utilities mogul, was in jail for embezzlement. Business is based on trust, and suddenly the trust had been betrayed. People had money in the banks that they thought was secure. And the bank doors were locked and there wasn't any federal deposit insurance in those days, and people lost their savings. And so the importance of honesty became highlighted. And I think those are the two most powerful elements that would come through. If you page through "How it Works" in the AA Big Book, the word "honest" appears five times.

Bill White: We've both referenced in some of our writings that many pre-AA recovery mutual aid societies didn't survive their founding generation. What do you see as the real key to AA surviving and thriving when so many of its predecessors did not?

Ernie Kurtz: I think that question might be beyond a historian's reach, but there are things that can be pointed to. The uniqueness of AA, I think, is the vulnerability of its leaders and their recognition of their own vulnerability. I think Bill and Dr. Bob realized that they were one drink away from another drunk. Dr. Bob supposedly had the craving to drink at least until very late in his life. He died in 1950, but as late as 1948, he talked about the craving to drink. The way he managed that was by going out and working with another alcoholic.

Bill did not have this craving experience, but I think it's very ironic that apparently on his deathbed in sort of a delirium, he asked for a drink. Some people have said, "Oh, how terrible. That invalidates AA." No, that proves that this disease is "cunning, baffling, and powerful." Here's this alcoholic out of his mind really at the moment of death—how natural to be asking for a drink. I think it's a beautiful conclusion. But during their lives, there was this recognition that in this group, the power comes from the ordinary members. Power flows upward. Other democracies supposedly work that way. I know in a democracy, we get the best government we can afford, but AA is the only institution that genuinely has not

imposed anything on its members. I think that one of the many unique aspects of AA is this freedom.

AA's Twelve Traditions

Bill White: That democracy and that freedom really got tested in the '40s when AA went through, as you've written in your book, the explosive growth period and all the troubles local groups were experiencing. How do you describe the process out of which the Traditions emerged and their subsequent importance?

Ernie Kurtz: Again it's almost a providential thing. AA's Big Book was published in 1939. AA begins to sort of flourish, and then we get into World War II, and this is a big deal. World War II ends, of course, but I think we too easily forget how it ended—except for those who are as old as I am: atomic power, the atomic bombs, which no one had even conceived of except for the physicists. We didn't understand. We knew it was a new world. And then the soldiers come back and because there'd been a depression, the idea was to demobilize slowly or else you're going to overwhelm the economy with all of these unemployed ex-servicemen. And it didn't work that way because people wanted their boys back, but also during the war years, people saved their money in savings bonds and suddenly money was available and they were able to purchase consumer durables. No refrigerators were manufactured, no automobiles were made in the war years. And suddenly, the industry that had really geared itself up, modernized itself, to produce war materials turns to producing consumer durables.

The soldiers just came back, and being normal young men, they wanted to get married and start raising families and they started exploding out into suburbia and building homes. And of course, those who are alcoholics start AA meetings wherever they go. And then there's this thing that everybody seems to think that the best AA group is where they came into AA. So you get somebody from Vermont and somebody from Virginia who meet out in Missouri, and they decide to start AA, and they have very different ideas about how to run AA. But of course, all you need to start an AA group is two alkies, a pot of coffee, a Big Book, and one hell of a resentment. So they went on and there were a lot of new AA meetings. Bill once said that if AA had adopted all of the rules that people submitted, no one would be able to qualify for membership in AA. The rapid spread is providential because otherwise there might have been the tendency to impose rules about who can and cannot be an AA member and what you can do and what you cannot do in an AA meeting. In fact, that's what happened; but it happened so quickly and in so many places at once that it was just totally

unmanageable—a different aspect of progress. Bill and Dr. Bob realized this and didn't try to manage it.

Earl T. from Chicago is credited with suggesting to Bill that out of this massive experience that was being gathered together by people in AA, maybe they could put together what became the Twelve Traditions. For example, at the beginning, the only requirement for membership was “a sincere desire to stop drinking.” But after not too long, some alxies started asking, “What does ‘sincere’ mean? How do we decide who has a *sincere* desire?” So they cut out that word and all that was required was a desire to stop drinking. The Traditions are to the spirituality of the fellowship what the Steps are to the spirituality of the individual. There is a spirituality in the AA fellowship, and that spirituality is fostered and safeguarded by those Twelve Traditions. This is AA's uniqueness. For AA, these Traditions have proved to be utterly protective.

Bill White: Ernie, you've also talked about some of the close calls AA's experienced, particularly through the '40s, in terms of money and professionalism and ego and the importance of the Traditions in surviving managing such issues.

Ernie Kurtz: This is how AA evolved. They found out what worked and what didn't work. It's interesting. It's the same thing with the Steps; people forget this. Some of the early members of AA came into AA before the Steps were formulated. They tried doing different things, and they didn't work and they went out and they drank and they died. And so we honor the people who came round and made it into Oldtimers status, but part of what keeps members sober today was learned by people who drank again and went out and died. Those who were left behind said, “Oh, that doesn't work.” It was the same thing with the Traditions. Some of these groups tried to do some of these things that they were suggesting, and they fell apart or the members drank again. There was this one group down in Arkansas; you may remember the classic story: one of the AA members from Cleveland was traveling and stopped in on this group, and at the meetings, they had a big pitcher of beer on the table and they drank beer throughout the meeting. And there was the question of what AA should do about this? Basically, Bill's answer was, “We don't have to do anything. The beer will take care of it.”

When Father John Ford was criticizing Bill for the fact that AA was an anarchy lacking in discipline, Bill said, “We have one great disciplinarian, John Barleycorn.” So some of the groups did go off the deep end, and in fact, that still happens. Recently in the Washington, DC area, there was a group that had clearly fallen away from the AA tradition, and there is this marvelous way in which the

fellowship handled that situation. When such groups veer off course, everybody else sees how important the Traditions are. The Traditions were formed that way. Just as with the Steps, they saw what worked by observing what didn't work. And that's why we have the power of the Traditions. They are truly founded on experience.

“Real AA”

Bill White: Those Traditions were also tested by the explosive growth of treatment. AA members began to worry about the relationship between treatment and AA and about whether the historical AA was being lost. That prompted you to write about what you called “real AA.”

Ernie Kurtz: I always wince when I say “real AA.” What started bothering me was professionals were saying, “Well, you know, what you describe is great but that's not what happens here. That's not AA around here.” There are varieties of AA, and there are, especially in the era of treatment, counterfeits of AA. There's a possibility of confusing spirituality and therapy: these are two good realities, but one is not the other and if you mix the two and confuse them, they both suffer. And so as guidelines, I evolved these five things that will help you recognize a real AA meeting. And the first one is the vocabulary that's used. In AA, they use the vocabulary of the Steps. They talk about powerlessness, and they talk about inventory, and they talk about making amends. There are 200 words exactly in the Twelve Steps, and real AA is centered around those words.

If you go to a meeting and they're talking about being the child of an alcoholic or co-dependence or some of these esoteric “my psychiatrist told me,” “my norepinephrine is not in balance” stuff: this might be marvelous and it might be helpful, but it's not an AA meeting. In real AA, the language is the vocabulary of the Steps with the vocabulary of spirituality, not of therapy, as important as therapy may be. The two are distinct. Real AA uses what Bill called, “the language of the heart”—the language of recovery, the language of spirituality.

Second, there's the prevalence of humor in AA. People who are not alcoholics have a hard time understanding what these guys are laughing at.

Bill White: I've heard you share the story about how when you were doing your research, you could tell in which rooms AA and Al-Anon meetings were being held.

Ernie Kurtz: In the Boston area, a lot of the meetings were held in church or school basements, and I got this meeting list, and I'd go to these Catholic churches where I knew that there was an AA meeting and an Al-Anon meeting both going on. This was before I knew enough to come early. The important thing when you go to a meeting is get there early. The important part of the meeting is before and after. But then I would arrive a little bit late and I'm wandering the halls with the doors closed and I'm thinking, "How do I tell which one is AA and which one is Al-Anon?" Very easily, I learned. I'd wait until I heard a burst of laughter—that was the AA meeting, come on in. There's not much to laugh about in the Al-Anon room. It's probably more difficult to be married to an alcoholic than to be an alcoholic. It's more difficult to love an alcoholic than to be an alcoholic, so this is not a criticism of Al-Anon at all.

The greatest contribution of AA humor is the juxtaposition of incongruities, putting together two things that don't belong together. You know, the pompous person falling on a banana peel. There's no funnier combination of words in the English language than "sober alcoholic." Stop and think: these two words, before AA, could not be used together. And alcoholics recognize these incongruities as part of their storytelling. We cannot see our own incongruities, but storytelling holds up a mirror so that you're not laughing at the person telling the story, you're laughing at glimpses of yourself that you get when the person is telling their story.

Third, one person I was consulting years after the book was published was telling me about meetings he was going to, and I said, "Well, you know, at these meetings, do people tell what it used to be like, what happened and what they are like now?" And he said, "Well, we do some of that but mostly we come in and we talk about how we're feeling that day." Well, this is good and there are groups that vary, and it's very important to go in and tell what you're experiencing in the way of emotion that day and all, but the format of an AA meeting is that we go in and we tell our stories. "Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now": that is the AA story style.

The fourth element of real AA is what we talked about earlier—loyalty to the Traditions. You probably have to stick around for a while before you can tell if a group is following the Traditions. I think that if you realize a Tradition is being violated, it's a sign that there's something wrong here.

And the last element of real AA is the most impossible one to emulate. The word "community" does not capture it. People are in AA meetings, not because they want to be there but because they *need* to be there. No one ever goes to AA

because they want to. They go because the judge told them to. They go because their loved ones said, “You go or I’m gonna kick your sorry whatever out of this place.” And this idea, it’s so difficult for those who’ve not been in desperate circumstances. I think maybe that for some people with certain terminal diseases or medical conditions that get them to a mutual-aid group, it’s the same sense. They don’t get in there because they *want* to; they get there because they *need* to. The person who captured this for me I met on an early visit to Michigan. He said, “Yeah, you know, I didn’t come to AA to save my soul. I came to save my ass. But then it was about two years before I learned that they were connected.” And so a different kind of community is formed. The word, “community” almost doesn’t capture it. We are here because we *need* to be here. The very real sense of, “I’d die if I wasn’t here.” That is powerful, and again, if you’re attentive at any meeting, you’ll get this sense. Not from everyone, but it’s been at every meeting I’ve ever gone to. I’ve been in a lot of diverse meetings in a lot of diverse places, and that sense is always there in some way.

AA Scholarship since *Not-God*

Bill White: Ernie, we’ve talked about the development of the Steps and Traditions and the ongoing history of AA. Can you talk a little bit about the scholarship that’s been done since the publication of *Not God*?

Ernie Kurtz: Again, the interest exploded at just about that time, and some wonderful scholars came in from the more general alcoholism field and from psychology and sociology, especially Bill Miller and Robin Room. We started getting serious studies of AA and other people started writing dissertations. After *Not God* was first published and I first started teaching, they’d say, only Harvard would have the chutzpah to accept Alcoholics Anonymous as a dissertation topic. Well, this proved that it could be done, and soon other students were approaching various aspects of AA. I became sort of a node for people who were seriously studying AA. They would get in touch with me, which was marvelous because I was able to connect people with each other. You know, this is how we met, and look what we’ve done for each other.

The scholarship has continued although the dissertations have slowed down a bit because graduate education in the humanities and even in some of the social sciences has slowed down considerably. The scholarship is of varying quality. I mean some of these 160-page send-it-in-by-mail doctorates by some people have included very shoddy scholarship on AA. But I think that especially the presence of people like Bill Miller, Robin Room, you, myself, even those who are not as

much directly about AA like Alan Marlatt are making good contributions, though I think the scholarship has fallen off a little more recently.

Bill White: What do you think of the biographies of key AA figures that have been added since the publication of *Not God*?

Ernie Kurtz: I think it's great that we have the biographies of non-alcoholics like Dr. Silkworth and Sister Ignatia and how these people were able to become honorary alcoholics. Some used to say only an alcoholic can help an alcoholic, but if you look at AA's history, you find these non-alcoholics like Silkworth and Ignatia. What did they have? They had experienced in their life what mystics have called "a dark night of the soul." Something happened in their lives where they hit bottom and the great thing about those biographies is we read these stories, and we come to understand that you don't have to be an alcoholic to help an alcoholic. You don't have to have a disease to be curing others of that disease. You have to somehow touch your zero spot—the hole in the center of your own being—and the biographies that have been done I think convey that. They vary in quality, and you know we scholars can nitpick. We can tell you what's wrong with all of these other works, and I can even tell you some things that are wrong with *Not God*, which is why I keep waiting for it to be replaced.

Future of AA Research

Bill White: Let me ask you to elaborate on that last point. I've heard you say many times that you hope that there will be an updating of your research on *Not God*.

Ernie Kurtz: I'm embarrassed. Something that's authoritative for 30 years, there's something wrong. And part of it is no one was ever allowed access to the AA archives like I was. It was just impossible — I was there on the ground floor and nobody else is going to get to rummage through the letters the way I did. You can't do that after a certain time. But so much has been discovered. The AA History Lovers listserv and a lot of other people have discovered so many things about AA.

Not God is a history of ideas, but we do not know a lot about the economics of early AA. We do not know much about the interpersonal actions or relationships among people in early AA. It is really time for the whole AA story to be told from a different perspective than the history of ideas. I did a pretty good job on the history of ideas. Somebody maybe will revise that eventually, but I think what's

needed is a history that will incorporate all of these things that have been learned since and coming from different perspectives. I discovered something in the middle of my work: I stopped writing the dissertation, and I started telling a story. And that's why you've got Part One and Part Two. [Laughing] Basically it's a story, and we just need that story told from different perspectives because there is no single story. I'm sure that the story that your wife would tell of Bill White and the story that your daughter would tell of Bill White would be the same Bill White but would be two very different stories. Well, the same is true of AA. I came at it from just one perspective.

Bill White: I think one of the most interesting articles you've done since the publication of *Not God* is one you co-authored with Bill Miller on popular and professional misconceptions of AA. Could you talk about some of those major misconceptions?

Ernie Kurtz: I knew you were going to ask this, so I took out the article because it's hard to remember eight things. I'm at the point of senior moments right now, having had my seventy-second birthday recently. But these are the points that we made in that article— "AA writings do not assert that there is only one form of alcoholism or alcohol problems. They do not assert that moderate drinking is impossible for everyone with alcohol problems. They do not assert that alcoholics should be labeled, confronted aggressively or coerced into treatment and being helped. They do not say that alcoholics are riddled with denial or other defense mechanisms."

That vocabulary is totally meaningless.

"They do not say that alcoholism is a purely physical disorder. They do not say that alcoholism is hereditary. They do not say that there is only one way to recover."

In fact, Bill explicitly said that AA would perhaps help best those alcoholics who needed it.

"They do not say that alcoholics are not responsible for their condition or their actions."

And these are misconceptions that people have about AA because some AA members have said things that convey them. The problem when you have over two million authoritative sources is that they're not all going to agree, and New York

[AA General Service Office] is not going to say: “this one is right and this one is wrong.” New York says nothing. New York collects them. Read the A.A. Grapevine, if you want to hear diversity. Go to a meeting if you want to hear diversity. People have opinions about some of these issues, but these are opinions. AA does not say any of these things.

People should read that Big Book chapter, “More About Alcoholism.” “If you think you can drink like a gentleman and you can do it, our hats are off to you.” And some people have said, “Oh my God, how terrible. I mean, this is a fatal disease. Someone might die of that.” Yes. You’re right. It’s a fatal disease. Well, you know, if someone needs to discover their powerlessness and they’re not doing it, this may be the only way they will. And it says that in the Big Book.

And not everything in the Big Book is necessarily right. There’s something else to remember: this is not sacred scripture. These are ideas pulled together by a bunch of drunks who had less than four years’ sobriety. The Big Book was not handed down on stone tablets from on high. Not too long ago, an early version of the manuscript became available. An investor had held in a vault one of the late drafts of one of the multilith copies before they sent the final copy to the publisher, and there are a lot of marginal comments that people made on the original draft. Well, everyone who has seen that multilith draft notes some differences from the book itself. Apparently, there are some ideas floated that did not make it into the Big Book. That draft makes it very explicit what ideas were floated that were not incorporated.

Bill White: I’m wondering also about factual details that would change in a new edition of *Not God?*

Ernie Kurtz: Later digging by hobbyists as well as scholars has uncovered a few small factual errors, but I think the most intriguing one is the question of AA’s founding date. All the sources I used, including the words of Smith and Wilson themselves, said June 10, 1935, was the date of Dr. Bob Smith’s last drink, and I accepted that.

But eventually, a history-buff attorney in New Jersey who wanted to write a very exact story of AA in that state researched that medical convention that Bob went to and returned home from drunk. And as it turns out from the dates of that convention, Bob’s last drink had to be June 17th. Everything had to happen a week later. I suspect that the way in which this error was made was very simple. One problem in researching the AA story is that Bill and Bob often contacted each

other by telephone. There are few records of their exchanges in writings: Bill was a writer, but Bob wasn't. So I'm pretty sure it went something like this. Bill is writing up the story and he calls Bob and says something like, "Bob, when was it, you know, you came back from Atlantic City and we picked you up and we took you home and we dried you out... Okay, early June, so let's see, uh, uh, June, June 10th, yeah, sure, Okay." I mean, people don't remember dates. In those earliest years, people in this "day-at-a-time" program did not think in terms of anniversaries. I think it's very funny that for all of the calendar-worship in some later AA, it's ironic that AA doesn't even know its own founding date, which is Dr. Bob's last drink on June 17th, 1935.

Bill White: You mentioned the multilith manuscript. We also seem to be getting additional archives beyond what you had access to in your research.

Ernie Kurtz: Other people's papers are coming together. Sue Smith's materials, Dr. Bob's adopted daughter, Sue Smith Windows' papers are at Brown University where the collection of my materials is and Marty Mann's materials reside. Marty was not the first woman in AA, not the first woman to stay sober in AA, but the first woman to really make it big in AA and then of course start the National Council on Alcoholism. A lot of correspondence from her goes back, so yes, there are more materials. I saw some of Marty's papers in Syracuse but not the whole, but there are clearly many more things available now that I did not have access to because I didn't know about them or they weren't available. And then there are all the things that those who contribute to the "AA History Lovers" listserv continue to dig out. That marvelous tool, begun by Nancy Olson and currently moderated by Glenn Chesnut, contains far more material than any one person could master. And it is all the more valuable because these findings can be and are discussed on that listserv.

But again, I was writing a dissertation. If you talk about everything, you'd never finish. There are a lot of ABDs (all-but-dissertations) in the world and this is a trap. I warn the future researchers to decide what you're going to do and do it. Don't get dragged off on the side, however interesting some distraction may seem.

I think one of the great moments of AA history—you know Dr. Bob's specialty was proctology—was June 17, 1935. Dr. Bob awakened in withdrawal and said to Bill, "I'm gonna go through with this thing." Bill thought he meant the surgery and Bob replied, "Yeah, and I'm going to go through with these things we've been talking about." So Bill and Anne drive Dr. Bob to the hospital, and they gave him a bottle of beer before they let him out of the car so that his hand would be steady.

He's in withdrawal. See the potential for a malpractice suit here? [Laughing] So Dr. Bob goes into the hospital and performs the surgery. Now remember that his specialty was proctology. I would like a picture of Dr. Bob's patient from that last day from Dr. Bob's point of view of that patient. I think a picture of that person's posterior as viewed by Dr. Smith on June 17, 1935 should hang in every AA clubhouse. It's one of my lasting hopes that someone will come along and do that.