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"HEALING OURSELVES AND OUR PLANET": THE EMERGENCE AND NATURE OF A GENERALIZED TWELVE STEP CONSCIOUSNESS¹

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ABSTRACT

In the course of the 1980s, many of those who participated in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups came to think of themselves as members of a more general "12-step movement" or "recovery movement" transcending AA or the other particular groups which they attended. Included in the infrastructure of this movement, centred particularly in the western part of the U.S., are 12-step club and meeting houses, specialty stores, books and literature, and monthly newspapers. Primarily drawing on the letters column of one of these newspapers, *Recovering*, some features of the emerging 12-step consciousness are described. Members frequently think of themselves as multiply addicted. Thus, although AA retains a special status as the heartland of the movement, many members shift their primary affiliation from one 12-step organization to another as they perceive their major life-problems changing. The fragmentation inherent in the separation of 12-step organizations by problems is for some a source of strain, and there are reports of unofficial "All Anonymous" meetings. There are strains, too, between the original 12-step ideology of service, with its practices of 12-stepping and sponsorship, and the ideology of codependency, which fosters skepticism about overcommitment to relationships and to others. On the other hand, a developing political consciousness based on 12-step thinking draws particularly on codependence ideology. At least in *Recovering*, based in the San Francisco Bay Area and apparently in the generation of the 1960s and 1970s, the tone of the political discussion is ecology-minded, feminist, pacifist, oriented to community building, and against the excesses of marketing-driven consumerism. There are discussions of stages in the development of 12-step consciousness, moving from inward and personal to outward and social concerns, with an evangelical and even millenarian streak in some discussions of how the movement can "focus on the healing of the planet".

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In the course of the 1980s, many of those who participated in Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12-step groups in North America came to think of themselves as members of a more general phenomenon, a "12-step movement" or "recovery movement" transcending AA or the other particular groups which they attended. This shift in consciousness came in the wake of the growth of the Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) movement, which got under way in the early 1980s. Where earlier 12-step movement members shared a struggle with a specific obsessive behavior of their own, ACOAs, drawn together by the idea that their life problems were attributable to the specific behavior of someone else in the past, found themselves applying the 12 steps to general problems of living. The shift in consciousness may also have been associated with the personal odysseys of many ACOA members. Some, for instance, moved on from the ACOA movement to AA as they became concerned about their own drinking, and then to Women Who Love Too Much groups or Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA) groups as they moved to do something about their current pattern of relationships. In the 1980s, it became common and praiseworthy to shift from one 12-step group to another in a sequential process of facing up to different issues in one's life.

This paper describes some of the features of this emerging 12-step consciousness: its growing institutional substructure, its social location, some points of strain in its ideology and organization, and the emerging amalgamation of 12-step ideas and ideologies of social change. The main window on the movement's consciousness used in this paper is the letters column ("Crosstalk") of Recovering, a newsprint monthly serving the San Francisco Bay Area. As discussed below, the social and geographic location of Recovering's readership no doubt imparts some special tints to this window, but "Crosstalk" offers a relatively uncensored and unusually wide-ranging medium for movement members to express what is on their mind.

INSTITUTIONS OF A GENERALIZED 12-STEP MOVEMENT

Associated with the emergence of the "recovery movement" and of a generalized 12-step consciousness has been a loose but growing network of institutions. Connections between groups in different 12-step movements are often a natural result of sharing a common meeting space. A single building may host a wide diversity of groups. For instance, Dry Dock, a "recovery-oriented, non-profit membership club" in San Francisco, hosts 85 meetings serving 2500 people each week, covering "Alcoholics, Cocaine, Debtors, Narcotics, Overeaters, Sex and Love Addicts, Smokers, and Workaholics Anonymous, as well as A.R.T.S. (Artists Recovering in the 12 Steps) Anonymous, Addicted Parents, Adult Children of Alcoholics, Al-Anon, Cocanon, Codependents Anonymous, Parents Anonymous, and Women Who Love Too Much" (Taylor, 1988). The logistical organization of such shared space throws members from different 12-step groups together; thus each of the 60 12-step groups meeting each week at a Seattle United Church of Christ sends a representative to a 12-step council which "deals with the day-to-day problems of storage space, scheduling conflicts and space allocation" (Doherty, 1991). Sometimes a generalized 12-step consciousness takes over the host organization itself. A Baptist church in San Francisco reorganized itself as a community center in recognition of the fact that, while its Sunday services attracted about two dozen people, a total of 500 attended the 15 different 12-step meetings held six nights a week at the church. The ex-pastor, now executive director of the community center, commented that

our society, especially cosmopolitan places like San Francisco, [has] an impersonal, alienating flavor. Many people don't have family here, or a lifelong network of friends, so it's real hard to build trusting relationships. There's a real longing for a place where you can talk about the dark side of your life, confess about the despair and

anxiety that creeps around the edges of your life. (Lattin, 1990)

An eager ancillary to the growth of a generalized 12-step consciousness has been the publishing industry, with the "virtual explosion of 'recovery' publishing" (Zedaker, 1989a). Hazelden, long established as a distributor and publisher of AA-oriented books, broadened its scope and expanded its operations in the 1980s; by 1989 it was publishing 20 books on recovery a year. Health Communications, established more recently (by former staffers of the Addiction Research Foundation) and built around books for adult children of alcoholics, was publishing 30 new titles each year in 1989, along with 3 monthly periodicals. Such mainline publishers as Harper and Row had also moved, somewhat belatedly, into the field. "The big boom" came in about 1987, in one distributor's opinion, "when just about everybody started getting into what is now called stage two recovery.... More and more people want to get totally into their recovery -- not just deal with the symptoms". A Harper and Row editor concurred on the switch away from "symptoms": "What seems in common among all the people who buy recovery literature is a quest for the real self.... There are lots of people out there looking for that real self... and looking for how that self relates to the larger universe -- the larger community of people and the larger universe in a cosmological sense" (Zedaker, 1989a).

The fruits of this publishing boom can now be seen in most general bookstores in the U.S. Where 10 years ago a bookstore might have had, at most, a few books in a small "alcoholism and drug addiction" section, these days it will have a substantial "recovery" section, occupying several shelves and often a whole bookcase or more. Alongside the general bookstores, a whole new category of stores specifically devoted to a "recovery" market has emerged, stocking not only books but also movement-related cards, tapes, sweatshirts, buttons, jewelry, and talking bears. "Warmth, it would seem, is the primary component of a recovery store," notes a reporter. "Customers walk in looking for help in the form of an inspirational book, a relaxation tape or a medallion to commemorate their sobriety, and they like to know they're among the converted" (Smith, 1990). But where the first such stores in the mid-1980s "started out selling the few toys and tokens and literature available from the 12-Step groups at the time", now they carry "a lot of other self-help material that doesn't necessarily relate to alcoholism or drug addiction". According to the owner of what is now a chain of three stores in San Diego, "the old concept of a 12-Step shop as being primarily a drug and alcohol recovery shop is vanishing.... More people want to find out what's wrong with them, and they no longer have to be alcoholics or drug addicts" (Zedaker, 1989a).

According to a listing of "Where to Find It" in the November 1991 Sober Times, recovery stores can be found in 29 of the 50 U.S. states. Twelve stores are listed in the northeast region of the U.S., 10 in the south and southwest, 11 in the north central region, and 12 in the mountain states of the western region. The bulk of those in the listing are in the Pacific states: 8 outside California, 17 in northern California, and 51 in southern California. The geographical weighting of the list undoubtedly partly reflects that Sober Times is published in southern California, but it also reflects something about the geographical base of a generalized recovery consciousness. "Back there [on the west coast], they have at least one store in every city if not on every block", said a spokeswoman for a New York City book and gift shop newly opened in 1989; "the mere fact that a shop like this exists out here at all is very unusual" (Zedaker, 1989b).

Sober Times and Recovering are examples of another movement institution: the generalized "recovery" newspaper or magazine, usually appearing on a monthly basis. The earliest of these, the Phoenix of Minneapolis, got under way in 1981. Some, like Recovering,

aim at a limited geographical area. Others, like Sober Times or a new Toronto-based slick-paper magazine, Pathways, would like to have broader horizons. The newsprint periodicals are generally distributed free, and thus depend for their survival on advertisements, particularly from treatment centers and recovery stores and mail-order houses for movement books, tapes and paraphernalia.

The institutions specifically serving the recovery movement are enmeshed in a wider network of friendly institutions. One profile of this network can be seen in the listing of places where Recovering is distributed without charge in Berkeley (a city of about 110,000). Included are 9 therapy centers, 5 health and service institutions, 7 bookstores, 2 bakeries, 4 other retail stores, and 3 other public agencies ("Berkeley distribution sites", Recovering March 1991).

RECOVERING AS AN ORGAN OF A GENERALIZED 12-STEP MOVEMENT

The first issue of Recovering, initially appearing every two months, was published in the summer of 1987. Its beginnings were described in a 1988 article.

Over the year of 1986, three people came together who shared an idea about writing a newspaper for the growing community of people in recovery from alcohol and drug addiction; a community to which they belonged. The focus of the paper was to be addiction, the scope would include all the many manifestations of the disease. Stories from the recovering alcoholic would be run next to the gambler next to the cocaine addict next to the overeater, and so on. (Faulkner, 1988)

By the time this account appeared, the three original founders had already moved on. Despite continuing turnover in the staff of Recovering, it has moved to monthly publication, and appears to be well entrenched in the San Francisco Bay Area scene.

Recovering set out to be a non-profit organ covering diverse points of view in the movement. In response to a reader's complaint that "Recovering is mindlessly goose-stepping twelve-by-twelve to the cult-beat of AA", an editor noted that "We DO have a point of view: We're pro-recovery. We think Twelve Step programs are great. They've saved and enriched countless lives. But we also think that Twelve Step programs are not the sole answer for every recovering addict. Many other paths for healing are available to be employed along with or instead of the Twelve steps" (Recovering, May 1991, p. 3). The editorial viewpoint is, indeed, relatively broad-minded and eclectic.

But the perspectives presented in Recovering do bear the marks of a specific place and time. Northern California has a long tradition of hospitality to spiritual seekers and movements, particularly those with an Asian orientation. The San Francisco area is also a stronghold of left-liberal thinking and political power, well to the left of the rest of California and indeed of the general U.S. spectrum. Historically, these two traditions often operated in quite distinct frames, with different demographic bases. But connections and cross-overs can be found: in the 1950s, for instance, Alan Watts' seminal talks on Zen Buddhism were broadcast over KPFA, Berkeley's left-oriented community radio station.

It was in the late 1960s and early 1970s that the two threads most clearly converged, in the time of the counter-culture (hippie) movement and the civil rights and anti-Vietnam War movements. Though the leadership of these movements was often specialized, their followers were much less differentiated: this week a Be-In, next week a demonstration at the Draft Board. Even some in leadership positions oscillated between counter-culture and politically-oriented phases. There was also a great deal of drug-taking and drinking, particularly but not only in the counter-culture.

Most of those who were then young in the Bay Area were at least peripherally touched by both threads, and for some their participation in one or both movements were defining moments in their lives. Many young people came from elsewhere to the Bay Area because of one or another of the movements, or because of the social space that opened up in their wake, for instance for interracial families and for the gay and lesbian communities.

The editors and writers for Recovering appear to be primarily drawn from these generations of the 1960s and 1970s. Indeed, the editorial in the introductory issue (Summer 1987, p. 4) noted that the "modern recovery movement ... is growing as those of us in the 'drugged generation' discover that the 1960s promise of 'better living through chemistry' has turned into the drug epidemic of the 1980s". As they and many of their readers found themselves struggling against drug habits formed in their youth, or as they came to terms with their relationship with their parents from America's "wet generations" (Room, 1984), they came into contact with 12-step groups. In the groups, perhaps sometimes to their surprise, they have found qualities reminiscent of the values and best experiences of their youth: a sense of community, a commitment to participatory democracy, an autocephalous, non-hierarchical and improvised organizational style, a rejection of professionalism and commercialism, a preference for the immediate and experiential and spiritual over the instrumental and rational. In The San Francisco Bay Area of the 1990s, and in the hands of the generation of the 1960s and 1970s, the arguments and the rhetoric of 12-step thinking take on some resonance with the Teach-Ins and the Be-Ins of their youth.

We may suspect, then, that the consciousness and opinions expressed in Recovering are tinged with particular Northern Californian and generational attitudes which might not be so apparent in a generalized 12-step consciousness elsewhere. On the other hand, it can be argued that Recovering's base makes it a particularly useful window on the features of such a consciousness, since the consciousness seems to have appeared first and most strongly in the generation of the 1960s and 1970s and in California.

RELATIONS BETWEEN 12-STEP MOVEMENTS: FRAGMENTATION AND HOLISM

In the beginning was AA, and AA's seniority clearly still carries great weight in the recovery community. Those coming into the movement who are not themselves alcoholics are nevertheless routinely encouraged to go to AA meetings as a pilgrimage to the heartland of the movement. But this extra weight can sometimes become a burden on other 12-step groups. A Narcotics Anonymous member complains:

So many AA members have taken over service positions as secretaries of NA meetings that from 60 to 90 percent and more of the speakers they are bringing in to carry the message of the program of Narcotics Anonymous, are carrying the message of Alcoholics Anonymous. I listen to speaker after speaker start their share with either, "I hardly ever come to NA..." or, even worse, "I've never been to an NA meeting before".... This gross overabundance of AA speakers is giving out the message that NA is a secondary, less-than program.... And, God forbid anyone who would ever dare to question an AA oldtimer who's sitting in an NA meeting and saying from the chair or floor that the newcomers in NA "MUST" go to AA. (A.R.A., Recovering July 1991, pp. 3, 16).

It was to preserve itself from AA domination that Al-Anon adopted a rule that AA members could not be Al-Anon group representatives. But this rule has itself been a stumbling block for a group of couples where both members of the couple were "in recovery":

Jeanne and I were having difficulties as a new couple. We are both in recovery from alcoholism.... Jeanne was curious to know if there were any 12-step programs available for couples. Through many phone calls, we found one in Brentwood [80 kilometers away] that was Al-Anon based.

Jeanne suggested that we start one here in Oakland.... It was AA format.... After a couple of months,... we decided that having an Al-Anon format would allow us to include more people, so the group voted to become Al-Anon-based.

Around June, someone pointed out that to be a group representative in Al-Anon, you can't be a member of AA. This didn't sit well with many members. We started discussing changing affiliations again for that reason.

What we were really looking for was a singleness of purpose. One member, Vicki, found an article in a magazine about a program called RCA -- Recovering Couples Anonymous....

We decided that RCA dealt best with couples' issues: the singleness of purpose was right there. We decided to change affiliation again. Co-Dependents Anonymous was discussed as well and came in a close second. (Mike M., Recovering May 1990, p. 4)

As this letter shows, the proliferation of 12-step organizations reflects not only the precedent set by AA's single-minded focus on alcoholism, but also continuing aspirations by participants for "singleness of purpose" in a group and the movement with which it is affiliated.

Ironically, the search for singleness of purpose has led many in the movement to multiple memberships in 12-step organizations, as they find one life-problem after another coming to the fore.

Having been sober in AA (albeit at times a rather sordid dry drunk), I stumbled into some of the other fellowships when it became apparent that I couldn't hide out in how long I'd been off the street drugs and alcohol.

In O.A., a fellowship pioneered mostly by women,... men off of alcohol for a considerable period like myself are in increasing numbers struggling to get spiritual release from compulsive overeating, too....

[I have also been] experiencing considerable release from addictive sex and love entanglements myself, and genuine welcoming of more conventional heterosexuals and lesbians and gays in the SLAA fellowship.... (P.G., Recovering September 1991, p. 4)

Many become convinced that they have multiple dependencies:

AA is not just people dealing with their alcoholism. It's a lot of people like me. I'm a victim of sexual abuse and rape. I'm the adult child of alcoholics, I qualify for Al-Anon, I'm a co-dependent and the list goes on and on. I have met people in AA with a list like that. (L.W., Recovering July 1991, p. 3)

The conventional response to this conviction has been to attend a different 12-step meeting for each problem, often tackling the problems one at a time (as in the quotation from P.G. above), so that the individual's group membership is serial or cumulative. But the result of this for some is an increasing sense of fragmentation:

Sixteen years ago there were three 12-Step programs. There are now upward of 260 and that number increases rapidly. The proliferation of programs means each member is no longer singly committed, but divides his/her time, energy, and contributions among several programs.

Recovery today often means juggling programs. I belong to several programs

because I see how one addiction balances another.... (V.R.M., 1991).

Many people attend more than one fellowship, dealing with different issues at different meetings. The lack of interaction between programs makes it difficult to experience a larger sense of fellowship that would be all-inclusive, so our experience is often fragmented.... If I deal with my codependency at one meeting, my addiction at another, my abuse issues at yet another, where, when and how do I put it all together? When am I just me and not my issues?... (Mary W., 1991)

No formal solution to this problem has yet emerged. But it is reported that "there are unofficial 'All Anonymous' meetings where sharing on any addiction is allowed. There are unofficial Twelve Step meetings where those from many programs gather for step study and don't discuss individual diseases" (V.R.M., 1991).

Even in the absence of formal general 12-step organizations, the heightened sensitivity to the possibility of multiple personal addictions, along with the growth of a generalized 12-step consciousness, is raising the threshold of what is expected of the movement member. In its early decades, AA differed fundamentally from previous spiritual approaches to inebriety in that it did not ask its members to give up anything except their drinking. A haze of tobacco smoke hung over the typical AA meeting, and the meeting coffee-pot took on totemic significance. Now, instead of having a master status as an "alcoholic" or "overeater", and organizing oneself around recovering from that addiction, movement members increasingly feel held to account for a wide variety of behaviors.

An example is the OA person telling the recovering alcoholic that he or she is not really sober if they still drink coffee, eat sugar, or smoke. The flip side is the alcoholic bashing the OA or Al-Anon member for having a drink or smoking a joint. Love addicts bash sex addicts for being low-down sleazers. Sex addicts intimate that if only love addicts would get over that romantic hogwash and honor the more animal side of their natures, all would be well! Finally, the total judgement from the generic addicts: If you are not working all 12-step programs perfectly, you are a failure.... (P.G., Recovering September 1991, p. 4)

At an institutional level, Recovering has felt constrained to limit its advertising to events or behaviors which would not feed any of the recognized addictions of its readers.

In our events listings, we have been running an announcement for a bingo game which is a benefit for a detox center. We recently decided that, out of sensitivity to readers who are in recovery from addiction to gambling, we wouldn't run bingo ads anymore. Likewise, we turned down an ad for (get ready for this) sober phone sex. We decided that while it might be sober in the AA sense, it was not necessarily sober in the SLAA (Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous) sense.

During our discussion on this, some staff members said that they felt it wasn't up to us to figure what was addictive for other people.... [But] since many sex and love addicts report troubles with phone sex, it didn't feel right to advertise phone sex in Recovering, just as it wouldn't feel right to run Budweiser ads even though some of our readers aren't alcoholic. What do you think? Write and let us know! (Atkins, 1989/1990)

CODEPENDENCY CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE 12-STEP MOVEMENT

As its name denotes, the 12-step movement is founded on a world-view and a set of practices derived from AA. But its ideology and practices increasingly draw also from other

sources. One major stream of influence has been the ideology of codependence and associated ideas. The term "coalcoholism", denoting that a family member (initially the wife) of an alcoholic was herself suffering from a disease which needed treatment, first arose among alcohol treatment professionals in the early 1970s, providing a justification for treatment of the alcoholic's family member in the absence of the alcoholic. In its identification of the family member as having a disabling condition, the coalcoholism concept fell well outside the ideology of Al-Anon, the 12-step organization for the family of the alcoholic. As diagnostic terminology shifted from alcoholism to alcohol dependence, "coalcoholism" was replaced by "codependence". The latter term also had the advantages of broadening the concept to include family members of those with other addictions, and drawing in connotations from general psychotherapeutic usages of "dependence" in the sense of overdependence in personal relationships.

"Codependence" has played a central role in the thought of the Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA) movement, through which large numbers came into 12-step organizations in the 1980s. In a further development, codependence is now often generalized beyond family processes, into "a general tendency toward being too other-directed". Alongside the various strands of the ACOA movement, Co-Dependents Anonymous, which began at the end of 1986, had grown to 1600 meetings by mid-1990; an observer wondered: "Is CoDA what we've all been waiting for, an opening to the general population, the 12-step program for everybody?" (Chuck W., 1989).

The ideology of codependency tends to conflict with AA's original ideology in its emphasis on external explanations of one's own behavior. Where AA members are taught to be suspicious of any rationalizations of their behavior ("your best thinking got you here"), the "co" movements start from a rationalization and interpretation in terms of external factors -- the behavior of others. In emphasizing the effects on one's current life of patterns in the family of upbringing, the ACOA movement also chooses a psychodynamic view of life problems, akin to the psychoanalytic views of the 1930s, as opposed to AA's more phenomenological view (Roizen, 1977). Hand in hand with this epistemology, the thinking of the "co" movements is much more heavily dominated by professional therapists. The central texts of the movements are not anonymously compiled, but are written by therapists who have acquired a celebrity status. Some groups, such as Robin Norwood's Women Who Love Too Much groups, are organized explicitly around the writings of a particular therapist. Quite a few "co" groups have deviated from 12-step practice in having a professional-led or hierarchical structure.

Potentially the most crucial divergence between the original 12-step precepts and the ideology of codependency, from the point of view of the future of the movement, is the contrast between the individualistic emphasis of codependency thinking and AA's emphasis on mutual support and building community. "Our primary responsibility is to ourselves, rather than to others" sums up an ACOA member's adaptation of the AA 12 steps (Peter W., 1991). Putting such an ideology into practice tends to put in question any altruistic or community-building behavior. Indeed, some Recovering correspondents have noticed signs of a breakdown in the ethic of mutual support in 12-step groups.

Recently, I have observed a change. Clients are having increasing difficulty connecting with the fellowship. Colleagues reported that their clients were having similar problems....

One day a few months ago, an attractive 15-year-old I had worked with for four months came bouncing into my office, all smiles and giggles. "Look!" she cried,

holding out a small scrap of paper, "a lady at the meeting gave me her number"... She was the first person, although my client had been attending meetings for four months, who had reached out to her, who had offered her number without being asked. This was so opposite my own experience with the fellowship that I found it hard to believe. I began asking around....

One woman, an AA member, summed up the response I got from many. "The meetings have changed", she said. "I'm not sure when it happened. There used to be a core group holding everything together. Now we're more like individuals". A fellow therapist, active in AA and CODA said simply, "People don't reach out as much anymore. I don't know why". (Mary W., 1991)

During the summer of 1986 I was in crisis, isolated, and in pain. A psychotherapist recommended that I attend Al-Anon meetings ... with an Adult Children of Alcoholics focus. I found a group of isolated, depressed people,... people who were victims. Nevertheless, they seemed to be struggling with their problems and making some progress....

The summer of 1988 found me back on recovery's trail [in] another fellowship, a hybrid Al-Anon/A.C.A. simply called Adult Children of Alcoholics.... The people looked stylish, sophisticated even.... And these people had smiles on their faces and laughed frequently. Another difference was sponsorship. I was told that this fellowship did not believe in sponsorship. However, the most striking difference was the creed of irresponsibility, unsupportiveness and self-indulgence that threaded through all steps, processes, behaviors and shares of this fellowship.... They spent vast sums on self-indulgences,... all in the pursuit of the "inner child"....

The next meeting I brought up my concern. We were supposed to get support from fellowship members; yet, we were congratulated when we declined support to others in the group. Several people shared that I was being controlling; rather, I should pray to my higher power for support and it would materialize. Support would come not necessarily from people in the program, but from somewhere....

I don't know if it originated with Adult Children of Alcoholics, however, ACA, with its lingo, jargon, categorization of most behaviors into a few negative categories, and the single-minded obliteration of these so-called destructive behaviors in its members is dangerous and it is contributing to the destruction of community, accountability, and responsibility in our society. Further, it destroys the connectedness felt in recovery groups of the past. (B.B., Recovering August 1991, pp. 4, 6)

Codependence ideology thus potentially subverts important features of 12-step groups -- 12th-stepping, sponsorship, and the empathy and service ethics -- features which are, in fact, likely to be crucial for institutional survival. We might guess that 12-step groups built around codependency concepts will not find it easy to maintain themselves as self-governing nonhierarchical organizations. To the extent codependency ideas influence the 12-step movement as a whole, they may well weaken it as a movement.

RECOVERY CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

One recurrent complaint from the U.S. left is that "self-help is a psychologically focused diversion from societal criticism and structural change" (Riessman, 1990). As Rapping puts it,

if you are going to several meetings a week and focusing on spiritual and personal issues you are, by necessity, switching priorities from social involvement to personal healing.... We are living in an era where the very thought of progressive institutional restructuring smacks of pie in the sky. In such times, people tend to focus inward and concentrate on the only thing they can imagine themselves controlling -- their personal life....

The Twelve-Step Programs provide a kind of substitute for what most of us want and lack: intimacy, sharing, a sense of belonging to a community of like souls.... But ... this is not an authentic but a facsimile version of community and intimacy. It's based on a sense of common illness and weakness that is troubling. I still believe we should be looking outward to the social causes of "addiction". That way lies potential liberation; the Twelve Steps, on the other hand, even at their best ... are ultimately mere Band-Aids for a wounded world. (Rapping, 1990)

Reading the pages of Recovering suggests that the reality of the relation between 12-step movements and social consciousness and action is more complicated. The general political framing of many articles and letters would sound quite familiar to anyone acquainted with general left-liberal thought in the San Francisco Bay Area. The framing is anti-war and antagonistic to great-power triumphalism, ecologically minded, and occasionally with some recognition of class and poverty issues.

President Bush has made much political hay of the war on drugs. In the context of this consciousness, I would invite him -- and Recovering readers -- to consider the United States as an active addict in thrall to its institutionalized dependence on cheap oil....

As a nation we also suffer a disease far more insidious than any mere substance addiction -- the United States is a power and control addict.

I urge Americans to accept the fact that our nation is the biggest addict the world has known and to insist that we begin the process of withdrawal.... If we are to survive and flourish, American must come into recovery. (Martinovic, 1990)

Codependence is part of the explanation why, in 1991, we have gone to war in the Middle East. The real economic, social, and environmental problems that threaten the future of our children are here at home, not in Iraq. It is very difficult, however, for codependents to face the truth about the bona fide causes of our distress.... War is an ideal non-solution for our collective codependence....

The most ludicrous and dangerous form of denial is the government's ongoing effort ... to pretend that there are no important national problems that are poverty related. In the perspective of codependent denial, economic deprivation has nothing to do with crime, violence, graffiti, mental and physical illness, illiteracy, drug addiction and trafficking, vandalism, and so on. These problems are viewed, rather, as being caused by bad people whose "badness" is some kind of absolute or essential character trait....

Dysfunctional America isn't going away, and we can't control it. But we can get into full codependent recovery.... Might one, then, realistically expect that as full codependent recovery occurs, violence and death and the brutalization of children by poverty and war might become unacceptable? As more of us are able to emerge from denial, we might at least take some determined steps to stop enabling social dysfunction. (Brennan, 1991)

Correspondents generally favor nonprofit community enterprise over competitive capitalism, particularly in the context of the 12-step movement itself:

The commercialization of the recovery movement is a blight. Let us err on the conservative side. We will all rue the day we discover it was aborted in a shopping mall. (Anonymous in Santa Rosa, Recovering May 1991, p. 3)

The article on AA's trademark lawsuit [demonstrates] the unexpected and uncontrollable problems that often result from property ownership. Why does AA own a trademark? Doesn't that ownership violate the [Traditions]?... AA does not need to add problems of property ownership and civil lawsuits to the criticism already being directed at the fellowship.... Lawsuits and public controversy? That's not How It Works. (Sue W., Recovering June 1991, p. 3)

Judging from such materials, Recovery's readership seems to be centered in the general left-liberal community, and those writing for Recovery seem to see their political consciousness and their 12-step consciousness as complementing rather than competing with each other. Indeed, there is a strong tendency for Recovery's writers to infuse their political analysis with 12-step ideas and analogies.

Beyond this, a strong note of evangelism and even millenarianism can be detected in some of the writing.

We have been given the privilege of participating in the birth of an exciting change in mindset at a time of world crisis. The 12-Step programs, with their emphasis on a spiritual way of life, on process not product, and on equality, not hierarchy, are our best hope for healing ourselves and our planet. Now that we are no longer ignored or ridiculed, but publicized and respected, let's hope we can meet the challenge of our success. (V.R.M., 1991)

In the most ambitious formulations, the movement stands on the brink of setting out to reform the world: "1990 marks the beginning of the third stage [of the recovery movement] as we focus on the healing of the planet" (Jed Diamond, Recovering August 1991, pp. 6,11).

Analyses like Rapping's assume that basing an affiliation on a "common illness and weakness" is necessarily debilitating with respect to social action. But this seems to me to fly in the face of history. In European history, religious movements, including those with a strong commitment to changing the world, have commonly built their sense of internal community around an ideology of common sinfulness and weakness. This is as true of those with an evangelical and militant orientation as of those with a quietist and pietist cast. Working-class movements commonly started with a realistic evaluation of the political weakness that was their members' common heritage. An illness that is defined in terms of a "spiritual sickness" seems to me not terribly far from such ideologies. A "spiritual sickness" defined as in AA's Big Book, in terms of a mysterious affliction of a minority of the population, does point away from social action and towards individual redemption. But when the "spiritual sickness" changes to something characterizing most of the population (as in popular discussions of codependency), it begins to lend itself instead to arguments for social change. When people begin to talk about "the community as coalcoholic" (as treatment providers were in California by the beginning of the 1980s), the concept is on its way to serving as a structural critique of the society. The book When Society Becomes an Addict (Schaefer, 1987) completes the transformation, in an idiosyncratic melding of feminist and codependency ideologies: for her addiction is the White Male System of the society, and codependency the Reactive Female System. The writers in Recovery give further evidence of how 12-Step movement disease

concepts can be and are being transformed into powerful metaphoric arguments for major social change.

In some of these writings, indeed, the idea that 12-steppers are brought together by common faults has been reversed; instead, 12-steppers become an elect who have seen a light hidden from other mortals: "while we in recovery are learning there are no easy answers, and that the path to sanity is a long one, the rest of the planet has been living by quick fixes and instant gratification" (V.R.M., 1991). This drew a stinging riposte from another reader:

It's nonsense.... We have no special insight into either the "path to sanity" or other people's Higher Power. We join 12-step groups because we're screwed up. As soon as we get a little better, we think we can figure out what's wrong with the world and it never fails to amaze me how many of us end up thinking what the whole world needs is the Twelve Steps. I am sick of hearing "normies", "them and us", and "out there", meaning outside the program. This is "soberism" or "recoverism".... Most people are decent, hard-working, well-balanced people who do not need to be in 12-step groups.... (D.A., Recovering September 1991, p. 3)

But the perspective of the first quotation is more common in the pages of Recovering. The perspective has an older history in the movement: AA had not been in existence very long before a counter-theme to the public presentation of AAs as humble and abased began to find occasional voice. In this view, AAs had a special virtue because, unlike ordinary people, they had had special demons and trials to wrestle and win (Room, 1989).

The Recovery writers have demonstrated, then, that 12-step ideology is capable of being used as an argument for social and structural change. Their discourse shows that 12-Step ideologies and analysis are not always depoliticizing, and that through the 12-step movement, as earlier through the women's movement, the personal can become the political.

THE FUTURE OF 12-STEP MOVEMENTS IN THE U.S. AND IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA

All movements eventually reach a saturation point, where they have exhausted the population pool from which they draw. Usually, the high-water mark of a movement is still only a small fraction of all those who were eligible.

From this point of view, the 12-step movements, and particularly AA, may be approaching saturation in the U.S. Comparing the 9% of the U.S. adult population who have ever attended an AA meeting with the one-fifth or so who ever drank at all heavily, we might guess that the upward curve of AA membership in the U.S. cannot long continue. As a whole, the broad spectrum of 12-step groups must be seen as further from saturation, but it is worth keeping in mind that already about as many U.S. adults went to a 12-step group in the last year as went to any kind of psychotherapist or counselor (Room and Greenfield, 1991). A precondition or accompaniment for much further growth of the movement would have to be a radical redefinition in recalcitrant cultural circles -- male Ivy Leaguers, fundamentalist Protestants, military officers, to name a few such circles at random -- of the acceptability of sitting in a group and talking about one's feelings.

It should nevertheless be noted that the growth of the movement even to its present levels in the U.S. was not predicted and must be seen as an astonishing phenomenon.

Is the movement already decaying from within? This would be a possible interpretation of a couple of the quotations above, and of the finding in reports like Lee Kaskutas' study of AA in Marin County (Kaskutas, 1989) that it is getting harder and harder to get people to fill the minimum service positions to keep the meetings operating. It may be that the topping-out

of the movement will come not from exhausting its population pools but because its attractive power lessens as meeting structures and processes weaken.

In the context of Northern California, the organization of the movement into a myriad of parallel 12-step associations must seem increasingly anomalous to many participants. It is interesting that little attention is paid by Recovering's correspondents to the nuances of difference between different groups -- for instance, there is silence about the fact that the ideology of Gamblers Anonymous is substantially less spiritual, and the code of practice quite different, from AA's (Browne, 1991). The divergences between ACOA groups and AA which are noticed are at the level of practice rather than ideology. It is doubtful whether ideological differences would thus offer much impediment to a combined approach.

The biggest impediment to any unification of the 12-step associations lies in their polity. Group-level consensus decision-making, with little in the way of a hierarchical decision-making structure, is among the most conservative forms of organization: innovation can be effectively blocked by a small minority at multiple levels. Neither a solution in which AA expands its scope to cover other problems, nor one in which there is a substantial merger of associations, seems at all likely. If a unified 12-step association of groups were to emerge, it would probably be as a new organization which gradually drew strength away from existing groups.

A more likely scenario for greater unification is in terms of a continuation of present trends: of the growth of facilities formally outside the 12-step groups but providing services across associations. As we noted earlier, these trends are already well established.

What are the possibilities of the 12-Step movement acquiring a political face? Given the Traditions, certainly any such innovation would happen well outside the formal structure of 12-step associations. There are already longstanding precedents in the specific field of alcoholism treatment provision for informal political alliances of AA members. Such informal and sub-rosa alliances can be expected to function, too, for the specific focal problems of other 12-step groups.

But what about a more general movement, loosely based on the recovery community, with the kind of politics we have outlined above? In the first place, such a movement might face a substantial contradiction. The parts of 12-Step ideology most easily adaptable to structural and societal analyses tend to be derived from the "co" strands of the movement: the society as enabling and codependent, or the society as addicted and its members as codependent. But, as noted above, it is the "co" strands of the movement which have deviated the farthest in ideology and practice from general 12-Step principles, in ways which may threaten their survival.

In the second place, it is a long stretch from using 12-step thinking in political analysis to building a 12-step-based movement explicitly dedicated to social change. In my view, the odds of this happening, even in Northern California, are not great. It is quite possible, however, that we will see the gradual coalescence of a somewhat more formally organized 12-step-based movement as a continuing critical voice for ecological, feminist, pacifist and community-building interests, and against the excesses of marketing-driven consumerism.

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