

## Higher Power

### *Lessons for Social Change Organizing from The Twelve-Step Movement<sup>1</sup>*

Justin Ruben, July 2014

#### Introduction

We can often learn a lot by looking outside our own field at others who've faced—and solved—similar problems.

The success of the twelve-step recovery movement, beginning with Alcoholics Anonymous, offers interesting lessons for social change organizers wrestling with at least two pressing questions:

- How to organize more people, with fewer staff, and still achieve significant depth of engagement?
- How to do personal transformation, at scale?

The first question is an eternal one. It has extra urgency now, as funding for traditional organizing is shrinking, even as technology offers us new ways to communicate and collaborate.

Those of us who practice “scalable” organizing, especially, should ask ourselves what we can learn from one of the most successful scalable organizing efforts in history—one which required nothing more technologically sophisticated than the printing press and the telephone.

The second question has taken on increasing relevance as more and more organizers look for ways to intentionally combine personal transformation with the political and social transformation that has traditionally been our focus. This, too, is an old idea, but it's increasingly popular—thanks in part to decades of groundbreaking work by visionary practitioners working at the intersection of social justice, leadership development, healing, spirituality and personal growth.

In my experience, that work has proven extremely powerful, but hard to scale up, usually relying on extremely skilled individuals who can hold a transformative space with a small group, or create a regenerative culture in one corner of an organization or movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Support for this paper was provided via the Distinguished Taconic Fellowship at the Center for Community Change. Thank you, CCC!

Twelve-step programs have been vehicles for deep transformation (or in the language of the Twelve Steps, “spiritual awakening”) for millions of people—without gurus or professional facilitators, in a democratic model rooted in collective decision-making.

I think that’s pretty cool.

And so as an organizer who’s obsessed with scale, including personal transformation at scale, I’ve tried to ask some good questions about the Twelve-Step Movement, to see what useful insights that might yield.

## My approach

I come to this inquiry with equal parts admiration for what the Twelve-Step Movement has accomplished, and humility, rooted in a keen awareness of my limited understanding.

I’m not a member of AA or another twelve-step program. This means I almost certainly know less about it than most of the millions of members worldwide.

To learn more, I’ve read books and materials from AA and other twelve-step programs, read histories, interviewed people I know in twelve-step programs, attended open meetings, and listened to recordings of twelve-step events. But I carry no illusions about how much I still don’t understand.

I’m deeply grateful to the folks who’ve taken time to share their experience, hope, and strength with me, and to answer my endless questions. Many of the insights and much of the wisdom here is theirs – but the misapprehensions and errors are mine alone.

## Some basic background on twelve-step programs

(Note: Pamphlets are still pretty common in the twelve-step world, and this one provides an excellent introduction: [http://aa.org/pdf/products/p-1\\_thisisaa1.pdf](http://aa.org/pdf/products/p-1_thisisaa1.pdf) if you want slightly more depth.)

The original twelve-step program, Alcoholics Anonymous, was started in 1935 by co-founders Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob. AA currently claims 2 million members in over 100 countries – about half of that in the US.

Early in its history, AA decided to remain focused on helping alcoholics, but to share its steps, traditions and literature with programs aimed at other addictions and compulsive behavior. Narcotics Anonymous was founded in 1953, and many others followed. [One website](#) lists 56 separate twelve-step programs.

AA still remains the largest and most widespread by a significant margin. Most other twelve-step programs are based relatively closely on AA, so AA offers a useful window into

the movement as a whole.

AA is a fellowship of recovering alcoholics, built around a program of recovery. That program, the Twelve Steps, represents the first AA's (as members are called) effort to describe the process that had actually worked for them in stopping drinking. At their core, the Twelve Steps are about surrendering ego, asking for help from a higher power, being fully honest with yourself and key others about your "defects of character" in hopes of overcoming them, and putting yourself in service. (See Appendix). Dr. Bob famously summarized the Twelve Steps as "Trust God, Clean House, Help Others."

The Twelve Steps are part of the Big Book, which along with other key pieces of AA literature, lays out the AA program for recovery. This is the written DNA of AA. And around that written core has evolved a rich culture of practices, sayings and traditions. Other programs often use AA literature, and have their own as well.

Pragmatism and humility are deeply held values in AA. Accordingly, the program and the culture are rooted in a rich body of accumulated experience – an "All I can share is what seems to have worked for me" ethos. The sharing of personal stories, as vectors for practical experience and hope, is key.

When it comes to "working the program," sponsorship is a crucial practice. Sponsors are generally members with more experience and sobriety than you, who guide and support you in working the steps, and provide human-to-human support, which is especially intense during the extremely difficult first days and weeks of sobriety.

AA's are organized into local groups, which have frequent meetings. Many AA's attend meetings every day, or multiple times per week.

The functioning of AA as a group is guided by the Twelve Traditions (see Appendix for the full text.) They were formulated, based on experience, after the fellowship's first nine years of growth. They're a fascinating, ingenious and overwhelmingly practical set of principles that allow groups to thrive with relative autonomy, diverse membership and no professional leadership.

They hold that the only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking, there are no dues, and AA's single purpose is "to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers."

According to the Traditions, local groups are self-supporting -- they accept no outside contributions. They don't take positions or engage in any larger controversies (even about alcoholism), and don't endorse or affiliate with any institutions.

Another tradition, anonymity, protects AA members from the stigma still attached to alcoholism and creates a safe(r) space for honesty and sharing. But AA also holds that, "Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." Anonymity is also understood to mean that AA's should never use last names in the media, or appear on camera as members.

The ultimate authority in all things is understood to be a higher power, as expressed in “group conscience.” The Twelve Traditions hold that groups are governed by group conscience, and are autonomous except in matters that affect other groups or the fellowship as a whole.

The principles by which AA coordinates itself nationally and internationally, via conferences, are spelled out in the Twelve Concepts for World Service, the lesser-known cousin of the Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions.

There are local, regional and national structures for coordination made up of volunteers. Specialized functions like distributing literature, maintaining hotlines and publishing meeting lists are supported by staff who are part of the AA “General Service Organization.”

AA is served by several related national entities which do stuff like print AA literature, staff the national conference, maintain the AA website, publish the AA magazine, and answer requests for information.

National direction is set by the collective group conscience, as embodied in the ~100 person General Service Conference. This group is made up of regional representatives serving two year terms, plus the staff and boards of the national entities. But rather than a typical hierarchy where the leadership governs, leadership is construed via the image of an inverted triangle, where individuals and groups are “on top,” e.g. have primacy. Local intergroup and regional bodies, rather than being *in charge of* local groups in any sense, are understood to *serve* them. The General Service Conference serves the regional bodies in turn.

The national entities are supported by a mixture of contributions from local groups and royalties from the publication of literature. Legally, the national entities are independently governed by their boards. But, by tradition, they receive guidance from the General Service Conference. This is reinforced by the fact that they’re dependent on funds from the local groups, as represented by the Conference. So the local groups, collectively, hold the power of the purse.

### What can we learn from the Twelve-Step Movement?

In this paper, I address two separate questions. At the end, I take up the question of whether some version of the twelve-step model *as a whole* could work in a social change context. But first, I want to look at a question that I think is probably more broadly useful: are there *particular* innovations and lessons from the Twelve-Step Movement that could be directly adapted to our work as social change organizers, or serve as inspiration for us?

Here are some of the things that I think make twelve-step programs work well and are worthy of our consideration:

1. **It’s built around a process.** We often come together around values or principles.

And those are good. But, by organizing around a process, twelve-step programs give every single person who joins a clear roadmap to participation, and ultimately to getting what they came for. It's never an easy process. But at any given point, folks know what to do next. This also allows more senior members to guide newcomers, based on their own experience.

- 2. The process is asynchronous.** Everyone works it on their own, at their own pace. That means folks can come in at any time, and groups contain a mixture of new folks "counting days," and others with years of sobriety. Thus, hope and experience can be shared.
- 3. The process works.** "It works if you work it, so work it, you're worth it" is often said at the end of meetings, and with good reason. I think one of the core achievements of AA was coming up with a sequence of steps that work as well as they do. And the way that the founders figured it out was through years of trial and error.

The founders got sober themselves, and then set about trying to reproduce, with others, their own experiences: first "hitting bottom," then coming face to face with the hopelessness of their situation, turning themselves over to God, and learning that the key to their own sobriety was passing it all on.

It was not an easy process. After four months of hard work in Akron, the co-founders had just two sober alcoholics to show for their work—along with, crucially, their own ongoing sobriety. How many of our organizations would stick with an initiative if that was the early track record? But they felt they had little choice – their own sobriety required them to pursue the work. So they kept iterating, until they had a process that was working for others.

Three years later they decided to write it down, to keep the message consistent as it spread. Thus the Alcoholics Anonymous Big Book was born. And in the course of writing it, Bill Wilson first enumerated the Twelve Steps as an attempt to capture what was working for them, in simple and clear terms, without "a single loophole through which a rationalizing alcoholic could wriggle out."

It's hard to imagine twelve-step programs being successful without the painful but productive process that led to figuring out the steps themselves.

And it's worth noting that when we organize scalably, we often scrimp on time to get the process right before we roll it out. In politics, three years is an eternity. But three weeks would often be an improvement over how much time we actually take to figure something out and roll it out nationally.

- 4. No Gurus.** Personal transformation efforts are almost always pegged to charismatic leaders, who then become tragic single points of failure (usually of the "sleeping with adherents" variety). Instead of charismatic leadership, AA substituted a

process that works, and a fellowship built around mutual support and storytelling. The principle of anonymity in twelve-step programs helps protect against cults of personality, local or national—to the point that, in AA, local groups are even discouraged from naming themselves after anyone, living or dead. It seems quite likely that if AA had been truly built around a single charismatic leader, it'd be long gone by now. Founder Bill W., while he remains a major inspiration and influential figure, took pains to ensure that he wasn't AA's focal point.

5. **Pragmatism.** Given that “spiritual awakening” is the core of twelve-step programs, what's amazing is how deeply pragmatic the fellowships seem to be. This was an early feature of AA. Humility, combined with a focus on what actually works in practice to reach and help alcoholics, allowed AA to iterate their way to dramatic success. And the “here's what, in our experience, has worked” approach keeps the programs accessible to skeptical newcomers.
6. **Spirituality vs Religion.** The Twelve-Step Movement predates (and may in some way have contributed to) the growing number of Americans who describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious.”

And in fact, many observers have pointed out the deep influence of Christianity on AA and thus the other programs. The structure of the steps and the fellowship were both heavily influenced by the practices of the Oxford Group, a non-sectarian Christian movement with roots in [Pietism](#).

But AA's founders very self-consciously sought to position AA as spiritual, but not connected with, or committed to any particular religion or religious doctrine.

In an appendix to the Big Book added after its first printing, Bill W. even defines “spiritual awakening” as “a personality change sufficient to bring about recovery from alcoholism,” during which people tap “an unsuspected inner resource which they presently identify with their own conception of a Power greater than themselves.”

The intent of all of was to make AA accessible to as many alcoholics as possible, and that seems pretty clearly to have worked.

But from the start, the role of God and religion was been contested. Within AA, this old debate has often been mapped onto the initial divergent evolution of the program in Akron (religious) vs. New York (less so). There is still significant debate and regional variation in how religious AA feels. Some meetings end with the Lord's Prayer, even as others are aimed at atheists and agnostics, and there's growing sentiment for making more room for non-believers.

Meanwhile, other programs have changed or broadened further the language used to discuss a higher power.

- 7. Taking the business out of most meetings.** How many progressive meetings have you been to that were about as nourishing as a bowl of sand? How excited were you to go back?

The business of figuring stuff out together is often dull and annoying. But it seems like in progressive organizing, that's often 95% of what we do. And when professionalized, middle-class-ish folks are involved, our attachment to being efficient and results-oriented that can make this reality particularly hard to change.

There are multiple solutions to this problem. But, too often, we don't solve it.

In 1938 and 1939, as Bill W. was writing the Big Book, he was bringing each new addition back to the New York meetings for debate and discussion. According to *Not God*, [Ernest Kurtz's wonderful history of AA](#), the old-timers apparently loved hashing over what should be included, but the newly sober and still drinking folks found it unhelpful to the point that "no one was getting sober" and they felt like "their own sobriety was endangered."

So the emphasis on storytelling in meetings was institutionalized as a reaction to the temptation to focus on business, and as a pragmatic way to offer hope and transmit the program.

There are now multiple meeting formats, including "speaker meetings" where someone relates their own experience, and "discussion meetings" where members reflect on a particular reading, step, tradition, or tool.

But while there may be announcements, and the passing of a basket or an envelope, the business of making the program work is for the most part relegated to specific business meetings that occur periodically after regular meetings.

It seems to me that, in our own organizing, if we insist that each person's growth, as well as the relationships that bind us, are explicit objects of our work, it creates a context for doing stuff in meetings that is actually nourishing and rewarding. And, among other things, that would help greatly with retention and growth.

- 8. Anonymity.** As noted above, anonymity protects twelve-step members from stigma, and provides an important check against the inflation of ego. But also, especially when combined with the twelve-step tradition that leaders *serve* rather than *govern*, it largely protects the programs from individuals or groups who do or say crazy stuff in their names. If anyone stands up and speaks on behalf of AA, for example, well, right off the bat they're violating one of AA's core traditions, so they're not likely to be taken too seriously.

It's an elegant solution to one of the core challenges faced by leaderless distributed networks operating under a single brand.

It's not necessarily one that would work in a political context, though.

Of course, we're used to, and value, anonymity in the voting booth.

But anonymity in political organizing is usually linked with secrecy. (Think about the hacker collective Anonymous, or people blogging under a pseudonym in Iran). This kind of anonymity can be particularly useful in the face of repression. It also generally precludes accountability, to the grassroots, or anyone else. That can sometimes lead to all sorts of bad outcomes.

What's interesting about anonymity in twelve-step programs is that it's serving a totally different purpose. It isn't enabling secret tactics or evading repression—it's just discouraging people from acting like people usually do when they amass power.

In other words, it checks ego without precluding transparency or accountability. AA and other programs are transparent—you just have to be in the room. And that's not hard. AA started with all kinds of membership rules, but quickly evolved to having one single requirement for membership—the desire to stop drinking. In effect, anyone can walk into a meeting.

Once you're in the room, it's not about secrecy. People are real human beings, who build trust and relationship over time, while constantly welcoming new folks to join in.

(Interestingly, anonymity in mass media also means that twelve-step programs' representation in media is often via fictional narratives – in books, movies, and TV shows.)

All of it makes me wonder whether this kind of selective anonymity could work in a social change context. It's hard, but not impossible, to imagine. As one small, partial example, when MoveOn.org includes a story from a member in an email, their practice is to use just first name, last initial, and hometown.

- 9. Plain language and repetition.** The language in twelve-step programs can feel pretty dated. But it's plain. If you speak English or the other languages the program has been translated into, the programs are extremely accessible.

This language generally comes from AA. And unlike many traditions of self-help or spirituality, AA hasn't borrowed much terminology from psychology, or cloaked itself in mystifying neologisms. The program is spiritually deep, but still communicated in slogans, metaphors and sayings like "hitting bottom" or "one day at a time." (Here are [many more](#)). These can seem trite, but are pretty easy to understand. And although they annoy some folks, they're also an extremely powerful way to reinforce and reproduce a shared culture.

As Bill W. left Akron for the first time after becoming sober, to bring the program to



New York, Doctor Bob advised Bill to “Keep it Simple,” and this proved to be an extremely useful injunction. The simplicity of the language in the Twelve-Step Movement is anything but accidental.

**10. The conception of leadership.** From what I can tell, the way leadership is constructed in twelve-step programs—via an inverted triangle, based on “service to” vs. “power over,” and in rotation—checks some of the worst excesses of ego that normally plague leadership. And the rotation forces groups to develop leaders on an ongoing basis, to boot.

**11. The group comes first.** “Personal recovery depends on AA unity.” This tradition is rooted in the understanding that, without their programs, members would in many cases literally die. And so the group’s common welfare *has* to come first. But, needless to say, as an articulated principle of group life, it’s a strong safeguard for the group. And, in an era of individual autonomy, it’s pretty counter-cultural.

**12. People need it.** To point out the obvious, a big part of what makes AA work is that its members need it so badly. As one friend said to me, in describing the laborious process through which they rigorously apply the steps to every facet of their life, “Justin, why would anyone want to do this unless they *had* to?”

For me, this serves as both a caution against assuming that aspects of the program would work without this crucial element of deep existential need; and also an injunction to be creative about the ways in which our organizing can meet similarly deep needs in the folks we organize.

**13. Sponsorship.** Sponsorship was one of the earliest innovations in AA, rooted in the 12<sup>th</sup> Step understanding that each AA’s sobriety required them carry the message to others. I haven’t experienced a sponsorship relationship myself. But it’s clear from listening to folks who have been sponsors and sponsees (the somewhat unfortunate term for people who have a sponsor) that it’s an amazing structure.

It seems to provide a level of support and accountability that most of us rarely get in our lives—someone who at first may drive you to meetings, take you to the movies, have you check in with them every day by phone or SMS; someone who you can call at any hour in a crisis, and who will guide you through the program, but insist that you take responsibility for your own recovery; someone who understands that they need to be sponsoring you as much as you need a sponsor.

When I compare this to the experiences I’ve had as a member of an activist group, or a union, or an outdoor club, or a synagogue ... there’s literally no comparison.

Spend 10 days at a meditation retreat, and when you walk out the door, you’re expected to just go it on your own. Despite the fact that we all know, that’s not how personal change really works. But in twelve-step programs, you are encouraged to find someone, right off the bat, to guide you through the whole experience.

The core of sponsorship is simple: reading the Steps and “working them” with sponsees. One friend says that the questions she most often asks when her sponsees come to her with a problem are “Have you prayed about it? Have you gone to a meeting? Have you talked to [the person at the center of the problem]? Have you written about it?”

Less common, but ingenious, are practices vaguely reminiscent of Yoda or Mr. Miyagi. “Go clean your bathroom, then call me back” becomes a way to help someone center themselves in activity. “I want you to blow bubbles for five minutes every day” helps test whether folks are really ready to do whatever it takes to recover—and becomes a form of meditation for a tightly wound, newly-sober alcoholic.

There’s an official pamphlet on sponsorship. But for the most part, you learn how to sponsor from *your* sponsor. Who learned it from *their* sponsor, and so forth, all the way back. Sponsorship is largely a set of practices that have evolved, and are transmitted orally, through lineages.

It’s a pretty awesome system, and one that seems worth experimenting with in other contexts where there are folks with something really difficult to figure out, and others further along the road who can help them.

14. **A welcoming community.** Ernest Kurtz describes AA as both a program *and* a fellowship. The community twelve-step programs provide is a crucial part of folks’ recovery. People in groups know each other. They provide a new social network when folks are trying shift away from patterns and social circles that will lead them back to the compulsive behavior they’re trying to avoid.

A set of widely shared practices makes it pretty easy to join the community. People come early, or stay late, to drink coffee and catch up. In fact, the official AA pamphlet lists a “coffee pot” as one of the few things you need to start a new group.

In my experience, twelve-step members are friendly and open and deeply welcoming. At many meetings, folks who are new to the meeting or new to the fellowship will be asked if they want to introduce themselves. Afterwards, folks will come over, strike up a conversation, and offer to talk more. (Contrast this with a synagogue I visited where new people were asked to “use one of the blue mugs” during the after-service refreshments. The anxiety it provoked to visibly mark myself as an outsider was dramatically reinforced when the vast majority of members clearly noted my blue mug, and then went out of their way to avoid all contact).

There’s a belief that the newcomer is the most important person in the room. The Big Book even says, “We meet frequently so that newcomers may find the fellowship they seek”. Newcomers are the point, and it shows. In one Overeaters Anonymous

meeting I went to, when I identified myself as a newcomer, I was given a Newcomers Packet that was passed around the circle. Every single person in the room wrote their name and number on it, along with short messages like “Call anytime ☺” And “Welcome and keep coming back!” It’s hard to overstate how touching this was, and how welcoming it felt.

The community is knit together by calls. In AA and other twelve-step fellowships, there’s a culture of calling each other on the phone, which is rooted in the understanding that mutual support is how each member stays sane. I’ve heard folks say that, in early recovery, they made 5 or 6 calls a day to other members of the fellowship in order to stay sane.

**15. Flexibility within a framework that’s relatively resistant to change.** Each AA group is autonomous. And even the Twelve Traditions are framed as guidance from experience, not absolute rules. This means groups are theoretically free to do most anything their group conscience dictates.

In some respects, the flexibility within the program has allowed it to evolve with the times. For example, as technology has evolved, everything from SMS to YouTube to the web has been adapted as a tool for spreading the message (though, to paraphrase one friend in AA, many wonderful people in recovery need a good graphic designer.)

These things have happened in part because no one needs to ask permission of the GSO to do them.

On the other hand, core elements of the program are extremely difficult to change. When people feel like the program is what keeps them alive, there’s a strong bias against messing with what has worked. Change is especially difficult since general twelve-step practice is to look for consensus or at least “substantial majority” (e.g. supermajority) support for decisions.

So far, this combination of tactical flexibility with fidelity to core principles has allowed AA and some other programs to survive and grow—and in fact, much of AA’s growth has come since 1970.

On the other hand, I can’t help but wonder if the resistance to change of core elements and literature is so great that it will prove to be a liability in the longer term.

Will the Big Book ultimately come to sound as stilted as the King James Bible? As the science of addiction evolves, will AA and other programs be able to incorporate, or at least complement, useful insights, therapies or discoveries?

As long as the core literature and principles work, then fidelity is an asset. But when the environment changes to the point that they need to as well, will the Twelve-Step

Movement be able to meet the challenge?

**16. Stories.** The power of storytelling has been extolled and explained by people far smarter than me. Suffice it to say, storytelling works. And it's at the core of the twelve-step fellowship and therapeutic process. Program members' stories provide hope, evidence that their program works, and reinforcement of all the important cultural principles. They help make the meetings compelling, and they bring people together. They are also a practice that is relatively easy for anyone to engage in—we all have stories.

The Big Book says, "Our stories disclose in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now." And there's a strong emphasis on sharing "experience, strength, and hope."

It's interesting to note the strong parallels with the Public Narrative Model developed by Marshall Ganz—which emphasizes stories in which people face challenges, and make choices that demonstrate values and inspire others to action.

**17. You can't meet your own needs without meeting others'.** To work the program, you have to serve. The 12<sup>th</sup> Step, and the entire culture, pushes people to service, and to carrying the message to other alcoholics specifically.

Indeed, the entire program is rooted in the understanding that each member's own abstinence/sanity/sobriety requires that member to "pay it forward." This has undoubtedly helped assure a ready pool of volunteer labor to keep groups running, as well as an orientation towards welcoming new folks and spreading the word. (Though how the latter is done is shaped by the tradition of Attraction Not Promotion).

Of course union organizing and arguably *all* forms of organizing are, in theory, based on the same principle: each of us can't get what we came for without supporting others. But I'm struck by how much more immediate, and real, this feels in the Twelve-Step Movement than in most organizing contexts.

In this sense, the twelve-step model pushes us to consider how, in our organizing, we can look for situations and strategies where people viscerally understand that their own needs can only be met by supporting others.

**18. Deep transformation without skilled facilitation.** In AA people are confronting deep trauma without the assistance of professionals or even particularly skilled facilitators. Normally, that's a pretty hazardous thing to do. But from the outside, I've noticed a few simple things that seem to make this work in AA and other twelve-step programs:

- a. There is no crosstalk. People can't talk back and forth in meetings, give each other advice, etc. This creates a safer space and seems like it reduces the potential for the kinds of interactions that are particularly triggering;

- b. Time pressure. Many meetings employ 3-minute time limits that are enforced to varying degrees. This makes it hard to get TOO deep. (Meetings tend to also observe strict time limits, something progressives could *definitely* learn from.)
- c. Generality. Because members traditionally share “in a general way,” and perhaps also as a result of anonymity, people often leave the details out of their stories. Telling or hearing a somewhat sanitized version of a story provides a useful level of cognitive distance. In my experience, the pain is often in the details.

These are the practices and principles that have been inspiring to me as an organizer, and I hope they can provide the same inspiration for others.

To be clear, there are *plenty* of critiques of twelve-step programs, as (dis)organizations and as treatments for addiction. Among other things, some folks argue that the Twelve-Step Movement’s present still reflects its roots in a fellowship of primarily middle and upper class white men. Also, the growing practice of courts requiring people to attend 12-Step programs has created a host of challenges and led to a number of important criticisms.

But my approach here has been appreciative inquiry – to ask, given the undeniable success of twelve-step programs, what **does** seem to be working and what can we learn from them.

### Could you map the entire twelve-step Model directly onto social change organizing?

As the previous section suggests, I think there’s a lot we can *learn* from the Twelve-Step Movement. Now I turn to a different question: could the model *as a whole* be used for social change organizing?

To be clear, I’m not in any way suggesting that existing twelve-step Programs should change in this respect. They are a lifeline for millions of people as they are currently structured. Rather, I’m asking whether something new and social change-oriented, could be built on the DNA of the Twelve Steps.

It seems clear that at least some things about the model would have to change – and whether at that point it would still hang together, I have no idea.

The Twelve Traditions almost certainly wouldn’t work in a social change context—not in their entirety.

The injunction against taking positions on any issue has been essential for maintaining unity within twelve-step programs, but is antithetical to organizing. (The only exception I can imagine is a fellowship explicitly understood as a healing space that supported movement members and enabled them to do their work in the wider world--an apolitical space to support people who do politics).

Even if you scrapped the prohibition against taking positions on outside issues, the mechanisms for collective *decision-making* seem inadequate to the task of social change organizing—and there really aren't mechanisms for collective *action* across groups, beyond things like planning a conference.

Given the care with which questions like whether to employ timekeeping at meetings, or whether to revise the wording of a pamphlet, are treated within twelve-step programs, it's hard to imagine the same process working for decisions as murky as whether to adopt a risky new campaign strategy, or which position to take on a complex social question.

So I think you would also need more efficient mechanisms for decision-making and coordinating action than those provided for in the Twelve Traditions and Twelve Concepts.

But what about the Twelve Steps themselves?

There is something deeply analogous about the seemingly hopeless situation we face as a society, and the seemingly hopeless addictions the Twelve Steps have helped millions overcome.

Wouldn't many of us agree that we personally feel powerless over the enormous challenges humanity faces? That we need, and would welcome, the aid of a power greater than ourselves? That our own fragile egos, and sense of separation, are at the heart of many of the problems we collectively face? That to create the world we envision, we need fearless honesty, deep fellowship, a commitment to serving others, and the help of a higher power in removing our shortcomings?

So maybe it's not so crazy to think about modifying the Twelve Steps for social change.

Beyond that, there are plenty of destructive behaviors that we all engage in, simply by virtue of living in a society that is badly out of whack: overconsumption, unconsciously enacting our privilege, allowing our fears and insecurities to leak out into our work, allowing our dollars to support companies we violently disagree with, using way too much energy, and many, many more.

The Twelve Steps are all about changing destructive behavior. So maybe they could be useful here.

But, but, but ... the Steps are constructed as a tool for people who are trying to control *their own* compulsive behavior. It's a process for spiritual awakening driven by a deeply felt need to change unwanted personal behavior.

The Twelve-Step Movement carries an embedded notion that the vector of change is personal, not social – even as it's understood that we need each other to change ourselves.

At the core of AA and other programs is the combination of humility, a deep aversion to any kind of absolutist thinking, and the notion of giving up any sense of control or

responsibility for others' behavior (and even the illusion that we can control our own). "Live and let live" is a maxim.

In contrast, as organizers, we might believe that changing ourselves is necessary, but we generally hold that it's not sufficient.

To transform society through collective action requires, in the words of Parker Palmer, both "humility and chutzpah." We may root our actions in love and reverence for others, including those with whom we disagree, but we still believe in the right—the necessity—of acting together based on our beliefs, however incomplete our own understanding might be.

That seems like a pretty big shift away from the culture of the Twelve-Step Movement. Indeed, it would be a clear and present danger to the existing twelve-step programs, which hold that kind of thinking to be hazardous for recovering addicts.

The question is whether, in the context of a re-imagined twelve-step program focused on social change organizing, changing this core orientation of the program would render the larger model unworkable. I have no idea.

Given the success of the Twelve Steps, I think it's worthwhile for organizers to discuss this question, along with the broader set of lessons AA and other programs can teach us. (And I hope the conversation will include those who know the twelve-step world far better than me).

The burning need to both grow and deepen our organizing means we can't afford to overlook this unique organizing model, being used right under our noses, in church basements and community centers across the country.

## Appendix:

### Twelve Steps

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God *as we understood Him*.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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### **Twelve Traditions**

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon AA unity.
2. For our group purpose there is but one ultimate authority—a loving God as He may express Himself in our group conscience. Our leaders are but trusted servants; they do not govern.
3. The only requirement for AA membership is a desire to stop drinking.
4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or AA as a whole.
5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.
6. An AA group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the AA name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.
7. Every AA group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.
8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever non-professional, but our service centers may employ special workers.
9. AA, as such, ought never be organized; but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Alcoholics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the AA name ought never be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films.
12. Anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities.

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### **Twelve Concepts for World Service**



1. Final responsibility and ultimate authority for A.A. world services should always reside in the collective conscience of our whole Fellowship.
2. The General Service Conference of A.A. has become, for nearly every practical purpose, the active voice and the effective conscience of our whole Society in its world affairs.
3. To insure effective leadership, we should endow each element of A.A.--the Conference, the General Service Board and its service corporations, staffs, committees, and executives--with a traditional "Right of Decision."
4. At all responsible levels, we ought to maintain a traditional "Right of Participation," allowing a voting representation in reasonable proportion to the responsibility that each must discharge.
5. Throughout our structure, a traditional "Right of Appeal" ought to prevail, so that minority opinion will be heard and personal grievances receive careful consideration.
6. The Conference recognizes that the chief initiative and active responsibility in most world service matters should be exercised by the trustee members of the Conference acting as the General Service Board.
7. The Charter and Bylaws of the General Service Board are legal instruments, empowering the trustees to manage and conduct world service affairs. The Conference Charter is not a legal document; it relies upon tradition and the A.A. purpose for final effectiveness.
8. The trustees are the principal planners and administrators of overall policy and finance. They have custodial oversight of the separately incorporated and constantly active services, exercising this through their ability to elect all the directors of these entities.
9. Good service leadership at all levels is indispensable for our future functioning and safety. Primary world service leadership, once exercised by the founders, must necessarily be assumed by the trustees.
10. Every service responsibility should be matched by an equal service authority, with the scope of such authority well defined.
11. The trustees should always have the best possible committees, corporate service directors, executives, staffs, and consultants. Composition, qualifications, induction procedures, and rights and duties will always be matters of serious concern.
12. The Conference shall observe the spirit of A.A. tradition, taking care that it never becomes the seat of perilous wealth or power; that sufficient operating funds and reserve be its prudent financial principle; that it place none of its members in a position of unqualified authority over others; that it reach all important decisions by discussion, vote, and whenever possible, by substantial unanimity; that its actions never be personally punitive nor an incitement to public controversy; that it never perform acts of government, and that, like the Society it serves, it will always remain democratic in thought and action.