6

AA Was Created for Men

The path of renunciation described by certain mystics is women's daily lot.

—LUCE IRIGARAY

A couple of years ago, I attended a symposium called She Recovers, where I sat among five hundred other women in recovery listening to a keynote speech by one of my first teachers, a woman who is in recovery herself. In her talk she repeated some of the central tenets of Alcoholics Anonymous to a roomful of women—most of whom were in the earliest stages of recovery, most of whom were still on their knees. She said that we needed to remember our humility. She said that three or four years in recovery was no time at all, that we still knew nothing, that to heal we needed to *get over ourselves even more,* to get more *right-sized than we already were,* to mind those egos of ours that were out of control and ever scheming, that we needed to *be humble in our recovery.* It was standard AA stuff, and because AA has been more or less the only game in town for nearly a century, I'm sure to enough women in the room it sounded familiar and correct—comforting even. But I had to do everything in my power not to stand up and scream.

I don't know how you're coming to this book, but if you're a woman, you're most likely not wielding an ego so big it can't fit through the door or suffering from a pathological lack of humility. If you're anything like me, you don't need to be told what "right-sized" is because you've been trying your whole life to be impossibly small. You don't need to figure out what the hell a character defect is (or search deep to find the entire list of defects, as Step Four of the Twelve Steps instructs) because you are already the QUEEN of cataloging all the crap wrong with you—just ask your journal, your mom, any ex, your boss, therapist, friends, and cat. And asking God to take it all away (Step Six)? Nope, you've done that, too. Every day of your life you've asked God to not be what you are, to be different, to be perfect, because ever since age five (or four or three or two), you've been told you were wrong.

You don't need to be told not to trust yourself, because you've always been told not to trust yourself. You don't need to be told how to apologize, because you've already been apologizing for everything you are and everything you do to everyone forever. You aren't coming in too big and too proud, you're coming in cratered, and you don't need to be broken the fuck down because you're already broken the fuck down. In other words, the Twelve Steps aren't some radical new way of being; they are your daily lot.

Since the beginning of my recovery, I'd felt that there was something about the AA message that didn't work for me, although I didn't start out with the words to describe my opposition. Way back at the start of all this, I would have told you it didn't appeal to me or I didn't need it. I did eventually attend meetings for a short period of time—*after* I got sober—and it did have a meaningful place in my journey, but I never got rid of the feeling that there was something more to my refusal than,

say, not identifying with the word *alcoholic*. Attending AA felt like heading in the direction opposite of where I was going; or like having my head held under water.

It wasn't until I heard that speech at She Recovers that it came to a head. I was mad at that woman's words, and mad that a lot of my newly sober friends felt obliterated by them. Just a few months later, on a walk with my friend Cath Gray, I mentioned to her, "I fucking hate the word *humble*." She asked me why, and I couldn't really explain it. All I could say is, I suppose because it's one of those words we use on women to keep them in their place.

I'm getting ahead of myself, though. Let me back up a bit.

A Very Brief History of Alcoholics Anonymous

In order to understand how we view alcohol consumption patterns, addiction to alcohol, and recovery from addiction to alcohol—not just practically, but also societally and culturally—we have to go back to the origins of Alcoholics Anonymous, the substratum of American (and thus global) addiction treatment.

AA was the brainchild of Bill Wilson (aka Bill W.), a white stockbroker from Brooklyn with a drinking problem. It was cofounded by Wilson and Bob Smith (aka Dr. Bob), a white proctologist from the Midwest. The story (and now legend) goes like this: In the early 1930s, Wilson struggled heavily with his drinking and found no help through the methods that existed at the time. Then one day in late 1934, a former drinking buddy of Wilson's showed up at a bar and told him he'd found relief from his own addiction to alcohol by finding God via the Oxford Group, an evangelical Christian organization. The story made a

huge impression on Wilson and not long after, he attended meetings of the Oxford Group, checked himself in to a hospital for detox, took some hallucinogens (belladonna), saw a bright light/God, and was freed from his addiction.

For a time, Wilson tried to carry the message of the Oxford Group and worked to free others from their alcoholism within the organization's infrastructure, but he found no success. It wasn't until Wilson met Dr. Bob and was able to help *him* get sober that Alcoholics Anonymous was born—first from within, and eventually outside the Oxford Group. Wilson took the framework being used in the Oxford Group at that time (six steps that eventually grew into the Twelve Steps) and birthed the framework for what we know of today as the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous. AA was founded on June 10, 1935—Dr. Bob's sobriety date.

What is important to understand here is not so much *how* AA was formed, but *who* it was formed for, and *why* the program worked for its members. These were not women or some other marginalized class of people; these were upper-middle-class white Protestant men in 1930s America. This was ten years after women's suffrage, at the height of the eugenics movement, and thirty years before the dismantling of Jim Crow. The basis of AA's program is the same one that asserts Eve grew from Adam's rib; it's one where God is a white-haired white man who men talk to directly and women talk to through their husbands. None of this framework has been addressed, changed, or altered since—it remains intact, as it first appeared eight decades ago.

When it was founded, women were not admitted into AA or even considered capable of being alcoholics; they were the *wives* of alcoholics. Being an alcoholic was an inherently masculine thing, and women who drank alcoholically were not only denied the alcoholic title, they were seen as having failed at

womanhood—they had committed the cardinal sin of female selfishness by prioritizing their drinking above their lady-duties of child-rearing and vacuuming and wife-ing.

It is well documented that the role of women at the organization's inception was narrowed to that of the long-suffering housewife. A chapter in *The Big Book* called "To Wives" was actually penned by Bill W. under the guise of his wife, Lois. The chapter reduces women to servants of their husband's healing. It instructs them to "never be angry," to be patient and of good temper, to not be a "nag or a killjoy." It warns that an unsupportive wife might find her man turning to another woman. The original title of *The Big Book* was *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism.* The first woman admitted to the fellowship was Marty Mann in 1937; the first Black group was formed in 1945.

What I am saying is, This was an organization that began before almost any oppressed person's rights were won. It was created by the oppressing party *for* the oppressing party: for men who were sick from an overdeveloped sense of owning the world, from believing they were God. A 1979 history of AA, *Not-God* by Ernest Kurtz, derives its title from this concept as the basis of AA: "The fundamental and first message of Alcoholics Anonymous to its members is that they are not infinite, not absolute, *not God*. Every alcoholic's problem had *first* been, according to this insight, claiming God-like powers, especially that of *control*" (Kurtz's emphasis).

But women in 1935 America—even privileged white women—had no illusions that they were God. No woman in the history of the patriarchy has that illusion. We are second, always second, if not third or fourth or fifth depending on other intersections of identity. If being reminded of how much we are *not*

God, how little control and power we have, or claiming our fallibility and insignificance and humility was the antidote to a drinking problem, women wouldn't have drinking problems. From Charlotte Kasl's *Many Roads, One Journey:* "If we take Bill Wilson's idea of deflating the ego to its extreme we would have a crushed, nonexistent ego. That's what lots of women and minorities already have, which is not functional."

The Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions

If you're not familiar with the Twelve Steps, they are guiding principles that outline a course of action to recover from alcoholism, first introduced in 1939. They are the heart of the AA program, the path that all of us with a drinking problem are expected to follow in order to find freedom. There are seemingly endless ways to interpret them, and women and men alike have written books to help us translate these unassailable steps in order to make this framework fit. A lot of people will insist there is nothing wrong with the steps, and if you think there is, it is probably you just misunderstanding them.

Here they are as first written:

Step 1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.

Step 2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

Step 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God, as we understood Him.

Step 4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

Step 5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

Step 6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

Step 7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

Step 8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

Step 9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

Step 10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

Step 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.

Step 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.

In addition to the Twelve Steps are the Twelve Traditions, which provide guidelines for the relationship between the Twelve Step groups (local fellowships), members, other groups, the global fellowship, and society at large.

The Traditions are worth mentioning because they require anonymity of group members, for the sake of preserving not just other people's identity but the collective's. Tradition Eleven requires that no individual talk about their own experience of AA publicly: "We need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films," and Tradition Twelve explicitly states, "Principles before personality." In other words, the organizational guidelines state the group is more important than you, and promote that favorite theme: the quieting, censoring, and dissolution of self. Again, not a radical concept for

women, who are conditioned from birth to put everyone else's needs above their own and to not stand out.

The Traditions also do something else: they limit a central power and give individual groups control. This means: There is no central authority to step in when, say, a local fellowship is hostile or abusive to women or any other vulnerable group, or rejects those who use antidepressants or a medication-assisted treatment (MAT)—like methadone or naltrexone—because they don't qualify as sober. This also means: There is no updating *The Big Book*, the Twelve Steps, or the Twelve Traditions. They remain as originally written, like the Bible.

From the outset, AA felt like maybe a sword through my throat or an anvil on my chest or perhaps the most oppressive thing I could do to my already oppressed spirit. The flashing neon sign said this was not my path, and everyone else basically told me *that* was my problem, or rather, *I* was my problem. Having the audacity to believe I knew what I needed and could trust myself to pursue it was my issue, not this simple program that any idiot could do who had two cents and some humility. Because AA—the foundation of addiction recovery the world over—cannot be questioned, least of all by a woman addict. There was something wrong with me; there was nothing wrong with the program.

Which brings me back to my conversation with Cath on that walk: "I fucking hate the word *humble*." It felt like a treasonous thing to say, or perhaps too revealing a thing to say. Like maybe I should have just told her I was a raging narcissist and that would have made more sense. The thing is, though, I love the *concept* of humility. I love the idea of selflessness and service. It was just that I couldn't stand the way humility—and its twin flame, ego—had been weaponized against women in the recov-

ery community. The times I'd been told I wasn't humble enough usually wasn't out of love or to aid me in my recovery; it was typically done to silence me or shame me when I posted a selfie on Instagram, or wrote an article expressing any sort of opinion.

The word *ego* is the Latin form of the first-person singular pronoun; in English, it translates to "I." Sigmund Freud was responsible for bringing the word into popular use by theorizing that the human personality is made up of three parts: the *id* (the part of you that is present from birth), the *ego* (the part responsible for dealing with reality), and the *superego* (the part that judges and is responsible for morality). Using Freud's translation, which is the generally accepted one, the ego is not inherently bad—it's just *human*. It's also absolutely necessary—if we didn't have a part of us that was made to deal with reality, we wouldn't fare so well. The ego can take on as many forms as there are humans; literally, as of today, we are approaching nearly 8 billion flavors of ego in this world.

In recovery-speak, or according to the Twelve Steps and *The Big Book*, the ego is one very specific flavor. It is a monster of a fucker. It is overdeveloped, self-aggrandizing, narcissistic, and exploitative, a megalomaniacal power-hungry ghost. Or the ego, as described by AA, is Donald J. Trump.

Remember when I explained that AA was formed in 1930s America by upper-middle-class white men who were sick from believing they were God, sick from wielding too much power in this world? And that the foundational beliefs of AA came from white, evangelical Protestant organizations? Let's think about what that means for a second. Those who wrote the rules were those who sat (and still sit) at the top of society—a society made in their image and designed to protect them. They enjoyed unquestioned authority and unchecked power, and their ego—or way of dealing with reality—was developed through that expe-

rience. Their ego was formed to believe it was above the law, above reproach, that it was smarter than any set of rules. For an ego like this, the Twelve Steps and *The Big Book* make sense. To be reminded you are not God, to become right-sized, to refrain from questioning rules, to humble yourself, to admit your weakness, to chronicle what's wrong about you, to be vulnerable enough to admit your faults to another person, to shut up and listen: these are all behaviors associated with (and imposed on) women. They are in essence instructions on how to be a woman, and to those men, they were medicine. To act in this manner was a crazy, new way of being, and felt like freedom. But to a woman or any other oppressed group, being told to renounce power, voice, authority, and desire is just more of the same shit. It's what made us sick in the first place.

Prior to 2012, when I started to stop drinking, I had never been explicitly warned—or typically thought—that I needed to fear my ego. That was probably the one thing about myself I had failed to hate, and I don't think I could have defined ego properly if you'd asked me to. That all changed, and immediately, upon deciding that I needed to ditch alcohol. It wasn't because the second I decided on sobriety some welcome committee showed up at my door with some literature on me and my ego. It was more like this: The very fact that I wasn't calling myself an alcoholic and was "doing it on my own" opened a vault of doubt I hadn't known existed until that moment, and I was all the sudden very aware of our societal pact that says people who can't drink are inherently ego-inflated, prone to fooling themselves, and not to be trusted.

Because AA is the pervasive model, and because most people—with or without direct experience—understand AA is

what you do when you have a problem with the drink, society expects you to participate in AA. To a degree, a drinking problem implies you are subject to its rules. It also implies you have lost the capacity, or even the right, to know what's best for you. Once I admitted to having a drinking problem, people had even less of a problem questioning my agency, self-awareness, and ability to tell the truth. If you are a woman, it follows that you can't be trusted with yourself, and if you are an alcoholic woman, this is exponentially true. People, both familiar and strangers, had no issue telling me what I should do to fix my alcoholism, and what would happen if I didn't.

As I continued on my journey, refusing to participate in the traditional means to wellness expected of one who struggles with alcohol, the voices got louder on the inside and audible on the outside. I was told time and again that my "ego was talking," my "ego was running the show," that I was fucked up and would always be fucked up, that I was fooling myself and those around me, that I would drink again if I didn't go to AA meetings, that I was in denial if I didn't submit to a program I saw as oppressive.

In other words, my personal rejection of the "normal way"—of attending AA meetings and working the Twelve Steps—and my hesitation and eventual refusal to call myself an alcoholic, were seen as a further indication of defects in my character. I was in denial, didn't truly want to stop drinking, or just not getting it. My refusal to submit was further proof of my sickness and that my ego was running the show. From the Twelve Traditions: "Over the years, every conceivable deviation from our Twelve Steps and Traditions has been tried. That was sure to be, since we are so largely a band of ego-driven individualists."

Nevertheless, I persisted down a path that felt sane to me, that made sense to me, that was, in fact, healing me—against all the shaming, gaslighting, and fear mongering. It was almost as

if each time someone told me I was wrong or lying to myself, a little part of me got stronger—there was a tension there, a pull between a developing sense of self-trust and agency, and a thirty-something-year habit of abandoning myself for what other people thought. Here is the part of my life where doubt made me more, not less.

Still, I didn't have the words to explain why women needed a different approach, or the exact argument for why AA was so absolutely oppressive. I had ideas, and plenty of them; I just couldn't express why the existing paradigms for recovery were so splintered from what women—especially in the wake of the 2016 U.S. presidential election—needed to heal. Enter Carol Lee Flinders.

At the Root

At the Root of This Longing is a book written by the author, scholar, and educator Carol Lee Flinders. Flinders holds a doctorate from UC Berkeley in comparative literature, with a focus on medieval women's mysticism; she has lived for most of her life in a meditative co-op under the tutelage of Eknath Easwaran, an Indian-born spiritual teacher. Flinders is a feminist and a deeply committed meditation student and teacher, with a profound depth of knowledge about women mystics. Her life is devoted both to the telling of silenced women's stories and meditative discipline, and she set herself on a course to understand why her feminism felt so at odds with her spiritual practice. In doing so, she identified four key areas where feminism and spirituality contradict each other.

According to Flinders, all religious and spiritual traditions and specifically meditative practices—because they were built by men and for men—promote the following: self-silencing; self-

naughting (destruction of the ego); resisting desire; and enclosure (turning inward, sealing off from the world). As a feminist, naming these four requirements of transcendence troubled her. "I realized that however ancient and universal these disciplines may be, they are not gender neutral at all. Formulated for the most part within monastic contexts, they cancel the basic freedoms—to say what one wants, go where one likes, enjoy whatever pleasures one can afford, and most of all, to *be* somebody—*that have normally defined male privilege*" (emphasis mine).

What she is saying is that the underlying precepts of a spiritual path—in every lineage from which there is a path—seek to define a degree of spiritual freedom through reversal of status. And who has had that status in societies all over the world for the last few thousand years? *Men.* "Women, on the other hand," she wrote, "have not been in a position to renounce these privileges voluntarily *because they have never had them in the first place.*" In fact, "they are terms of our subordination."

When I read those lines in her book after that conversation with Cath, every hair on my body stood at attention because finally, *finally,* someone had put into words the thing that had been screaming in me since I was first told that my failure to submit to AA was really my ego run amok. Finally, what I read was: It makes sense that a woman might entirely refuse a program that asked her to give up something she's not only never had, but was finally just grasping: a sense of self, a voice, a sense of her own desires, freedom in a world not made for her.

The opposite of these precepts, as argued by Flinders, is to (1) "find your voice; tell your story, make yourself heard"; (2) "know who you are. Establish your authentic identity or selfhood. Identify your needs and learn how to meet them"; (3) "reclaim your body, and its desires, from all who would objectify and demean it, whether it's the fashion industry, pornographers, or

even the medical establishment. Recognize the hatred of the female body that pervades contemporary culture, and oppose it"; and (4) "move about freely and fearlessly. Take back the streets. Take back the night and the day."

The Missing Link

Alcoholics Anonymous isn't a spiritual or religious tradition, but it was conceived from one. It was born of the framework that is foundational to every single dominant religion and spiritual practice, the framework meant to break down male privilege into spiritual purity. AA grew out of the most evangelical Protestant group in the country at the time (the Oxford Group was later renamed the "Moral Re-Armament," if that tells you anything), and though it downplayed religiosity (by refusing such words as *Jesus* and *salvation* and referring to a "Higher Power" instead of God), it was built on the same tenets of a moralistic, puritanical, and patriarchal religion.

You might think that as a woman you could simply reject AA as your preferred method of recovery, to *just not do AA if you're a woman.* But it's more complicated than that—it's not just about whether or not to use AA, it's navigating an entire system built on its tenets. Alcoholics Anonymous was truly revolutionary, the first organization that helped people stop drinking on a mass scale. It entirely changed the way addiction was thought of, talked about, and treated. AA quickly became, and remains, the default recovery mechanism. At least 73 percent of treatment facilities use the Twelve Step approach, our criminal justice system remands people to AA meetings and Twelve Step recovery centers, and medical doctors go to Twelve Step meetings as part of their training. It has remained for almost a hundred years *the* option. So even if we don't rely on it as our

recovery program, its principles and practices and steps and traditions inform how society collectively thinks about and treats those who are suffering from addiction, and further, how society thinks about alcohol consumption in general.

Addicts aren't just egocentric selfish liars prone to fooling themselves who need to be broken down in the eyes of the AA fellowship—they are that to everyone because AA has informed us of how we think about problematic drinking. One of my closest people who told me I was deluding myself if I didn't work the program had never set foot in a meeting and knew nothing about addiction or recovery—she just knew what I was because I had a problem with alcohol, and knew I couldn't be trusted until I submitted to the program. We don't need to have first-person experience with AA to wield it as an axe above someone's head; it's just there.

When I read *At the Root of This Longing,* it was like finally that hand wasn't holding my head under water anymore because finally I had words: What healed me wasn't obliterating my sense of self, silencing myself, or denying my desires or body, or closing myself off more from the world—it was the opposite that saved me.

When I think of what the disaster of recovery for women really is, it's that most of us come into it without the things it's beating us to deny. Women aren't sick from an overdeveloped sense of ego or a pathological lack of humility because all we've ever done is chase our desires; we are sick because we *don't* have these things, haven't done these things. We drink not because we have too much power but because we have so little. And when we are told our problem can be solved by getting rid of and denying even more of ourselves, we are not given a way out, we are given the same death sentence of subordination.