

Ashleigh Weaver  
CD702: Working with People  
Dr. Sanders, Prof. Park  
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LE5 - Open AA Meeting Paper

Today I was able to attend an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting in downtown Johnstown Pennsylvania at a United Methodist Church. This was my first ever AA meeting. I would like to give a little history about my experience with alcohol prior to writing the rest of this paper because I believe it will help the reader better understand what shaped my report on the experience I had today.

I grew up in a single-parent home with my Mom. Until I was about 17 years old my Mom was a recreational drug and alcohol user (she would try to hide it but I always knew). She had a best friend/boyfriend for most of my childhood years who I adored, his name was Dave. Dave was very good to us but he regularly used cocaine, meth, alcohol, and/or other narcotics (again, my Mom tried to shelter me from this but I was always aware). Dave and my Mom eventually ended their romantic relationship but they remained good friends.

My Mom then started dating a guy named Dan she worked with. Dan was handsome and charming but he was an alcoholic, I rarely saw Dan sober. I was in 3rd grade when my Mom and I moved in with Dan. Dan was never physically abusive to me (or to my Mom in front of me) but he would go into drunk rages and destroy things, threaten, intimidate, yell, etc... I vividly remember one night my Mom telling me to lock my door and stay in my bedroom. Dan was on his way home drunk and she was scared. She locked all of the exterior doors to the house and called the police. That night Dan broke out all of the windows on the main floor of the house before the police arrived. Shortly after that night their relationship ended and we moved in with my Grandparents. Dan is still an alcoholic, Dave eventually lost his life to addiction.

My Biological Father and Step Mom were always around but I only spent time with them on holidays or special events (never overnight). There was never a time I remember being with my Biological Dad/Step Mom alcohol wasn't involved, this is still true today and by definition, they may be considered functional alcoholics. I have multiple other family members who also abuse alcohol. By the time I was in 8th grade, I had begun smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol regularly. From 8th grade to 11th grade drinking/smoking was the norm for me. The summer between 10th and 11th

grade my friends and I made a pact to get drunk or high every day of the summer for a “no sober day summer”. We did it. The following summer, right before I began my senior year in high school God completely redeemed both my life and my Mom's life! There isn't time for me to write about that in this paper and I know this paper isn't about “me” but today was extremely humbling and without the reader having some prior knowledge of my experiences with drugs/alcohol it would be hard to communicate why today was so impactful.

When I arrived at the meeting I was extremely nervous and intimidated. I quietly walked in hoping no one would notice me with my head down avoiding eye contact. I sat down and from across the room I hear “I'm Anita, what's your name?”, I didn't even need to look up to know she was talking to me. I quietly responded with my name. One by one everyone in the room said “Hi Ashleigh, I'm \_\_\_\_ (fill in the blank)” introducing themselves from their seats, but no one approached me. It was almost like an unspoken rule to not approach a new person, I wonder if that is an AA meeting rule. It was actually nice, I felt greeted and welcomed without having to feel like I had to have moments of awkward small talk with strangers or explain why I was there. In the church we greet people by approaching them, shaking hands, forcing small talk, asking what brought them to church today, etc... Often it ends up being awkward and we never really know what to say. This had me thinking about ways we greet new people within the church.

Right before the meeting started a man named Mike walked into the room. Mike lit up the room when he entered, you could tell everyone knew and respected Mike, and they seemed excited to see him. I noticed Mike greeted people by name and carried in supplies so my assumption was Mike was some sort of meeting leader. Mike not only greeted everyone in the room by name and asked them how they were doing, he also praised them in unique ways “look at you getting your life together”, and joked with them “you're still trying my brother”, as he walked the room he gathered some to sit closer to him. You could tell Mike had a good rapport with the people in the room. Mike came towards me and said “welcome” with a smile, I stood up and said “Hi, I'm Ashleigh”. I felt like I should stand up for Mike because multiple people had approached him with hugs, high fives, etc... I put my hand out to shake his hand but Mike smiled and pulled me in for a side hug and said “I'm glad you're here Ashleigh”. It felt genuine, he didn't ask my story, he didn't ask what brought me, he didn't ask where I was from, he didn't ask why I came, he simply said “I'm glad you're here Ashleigh” and I believe him, he was glad I was there. At that moment I thought “I'm glad

I'm here too". This was another reflecting moment for me on how the church welcomes people. Mike simply letting me know he was glad I was there and not asking me where I was from, why I was there, etc... was kind of nice!

I sat a couple of chairs down from a man who I noticed looked down in demeanor. His clothes appeared to be dirty, his coat was worn, and he had a duffel bag which made me wonder if he was homeless (later in the meeting he shared he was homeless and currently working on booking a stay in a motel). We will call him "Mark". Mark was honest, he was broken and he knew he was broken. Mark was from Philadelphia (which is about 4 hours away) and took a train to Johnstown to get away from "family" and those who enable his addiction. Mark has been through inpatient treatment and went through the 12-step program so he was familiar with meetings. I could tell by the way he was talking he had some sort of faith, Mark said his current focus was on accepting the things he can not control and taking control of the things he could. Wow, I was blown away by Mark. Mark could have asked for something from the people in the room, he could have asked for advice, he could have asked for money, he could have asked for food, he could have asked for anything but he didn't. Everyone in the room listened to Mark, no one offered advice, no one told Mark what to do, and no one tried to "save" Mark. Everyone listened to Mark, allowed Mark to process through the steps, allowed Mark to verbalize his options without interrupting, and when Mark got to the point where he shared he had been sober for 3 months. Everyone cheered, I mean literally we (yes, I cheered too) all cheered. This was my favorite part of the meeting! I felt tears swelling up in my eyes as we cheered for Mark celebrating his 3 months of sobriety and taking control of the things he can control. What if we normalized celebrations like this within the church? What if we just start celebrating all the small victories? You see, Mark was homeless, he was broken, yet he still had something to celebrate.

Speaking of celebration, AA celebrates victories so well! Towards the beginning of the meeting, after they had set the meeting norms they started by taking time to recognize those in the room who hit sobriety milestones. I loved the order they went in. They started with bigger years, then went to months, then days, then Mike (the leader) said "and the most important, who is celebrating twenty-four hours?". Twenty-four hours was the most important celebration they wanted to make today. There wasn't anyone in the room who celebrated 24 hours but we did celebrate months and years of sobriety. During all of the celebration moments, my eyes swelled up with tears! I loved celebrating the victories in these people's lives today.

The meeting left intentional space for people to share and people to listen. People in the room did an exceptional job of listening. There were no interruptions, no advice given, no judgment, no complaining, no gossiping, nothing. Everyone who wanted to share had an opportunity, they began by introducing themselves as an alcoholic or a recovering alcoholic. I'm not sure how they differentiate between who is defined as an alcoholic and recovering. The people who shared had the topic of acceptance (which was the topic chosen by the group at the beginning of the meeting) and I was very impressed at how well everyone did by staying on the acceptance topic. The way they took time to just let people talk and did not respond with any sort of advice, story, suggestion, etc... was a big takeaway for me when it comes to the church. It seems as though in the church we often feel we have to have an answer, response, advice, or comfort for someone yet that isn't what these people needed or came for. They knew they weren't getting any answers, advice, etc... they just needed someone to listen.

One of the girls who shared spoke about the power of the AA community. She shared how she really wanted to quit going to AA meetings, she had been sober for a little over a year and just wanted to be done but she now has accepted (the topic was acceptance) if she wants to stay sober for the rest of her life then for the rest of her life she will need a sober community including a sponsor. She shared how she continues to get things out of every meeting she attends and how "no meeting is a bad meeting". My mind went straight to discipleship. There is power in the community and strength gained through discipleship is irreplaceable. Discipleship is a lifelong need.

When I left I got in my car and literally wept, I mean tears flowing down my face uncontrollably. Not because I felt bad for the people in the meeting or for their personal struggles with addiction (and not because there was a parking ticket on my car that I got during the meeting - lol) but because I felt like I fit in there! I didn't "look" like the people in that meeting, I didn't struggle with the same addiction, and I didn't need the meeting to maintain my sobriety but as they shared so transparently, honestly, and raw I realized I have a lot more in common with them than I may have initially thought. If it wasn't for the grace of God in my life, the opportunity I had to hear the Gospel at 17, and the discipleship I've had over the last 20 years I could easily see myself needing to attend that meeting not as a seminary student, but as an addict.

As tears continued to stream down my face I began to pray and ask God to continue to reveal why I felt so strongly like I fit in there, I felt like I wanted to go back the next day! God began to move in my heart in such a

clear way providing me with clarity. I've been employed in full-time ministry for the last 2.5 years, before I accepted this call to full-time ministry I worked professionally as a High School Counselor in a large, diverse school district. I used to be constantly surrounded by the type of people I sat with today. Daily I would interact with those people who had very little to no faith and those struggling with a variety of issues but now that I am in full-time ministry I'm constantly surrounded by Christians. I've moved across the country and my circle is very small and consists of almost no non-believers. God used today to remind me although my full-time position leading corporate worship is where he's using me within the church that doesn't mean I should put the desire/gifting he's given me to relate, love, engage with, and serve the lost second. I will continue to pray and intentionally build relational bridges with those who may be seeking deeper meaning in life who either haven't put their faith in Jesus or are stagnant in their faith. I have a testimony of escaping a life of wandering and addiction for a reason.