

# Wresting With Our Higher Power

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

## **Meditation**                      words by Susan L. Suchocki

Day by day, month by month, year by year we are confronted with all that we do not know, that we do not understand, that we do not grasp. Sometimes we are humbled by this knowledge and say: God, it is too wonderful for me to comprehend but I know this universe is more grand and more beautiful than I ever could have imagined and I give thanks for the blessing of being here and seeing, hearing, experiencing, and sensing all that is so wonderful around and in me.

Sometimes we are saddened by this knowledge and say: O merciful spirit, we need to have the burden of hurt and suffering removed from us. Grant us the courage, the wisdom and fortitude to bear the pain of living. Send us those who will carry our burdens for a short while and send us those who will comfort us with their healing words and thoughts.

Always let me continue to search for the unknown in myself and others.

## **Reflection: “I’m Larry...I’m an alcoholic,” Larry Knight**

My name is Larry... I’m an alcoholic. I am a life long Unitarian Universalist and I am a member of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Members of AA do not break their anonymity at the level of press radio or films, so I will be a little cryptic with you and I apologize for that in advance.

My purpose here today is to share my experience, strength and hope with you, about my struggles and achievements with my addiction. I am here to let you know that Unitarian Universalists, like everyone, have elephants in the living room regarding our addictions and mental health issues yet neither are we “alone” with it... and this has been true since our earliest days.

I have been an active UU my whole life. I served on the board in Waterloo as a young teenager as an LRY representative That's Liberal Religious Youth for those that aren't familiar with the acronym...I held that same position here at first as an Adult advisor. I have always floated in the background around here, there and everywhere...and for some that know me, they would tell you I am a non liturgical Evangelical UU.

I come by it honestly. My family has been Unitarian for more than two centuries. Both my father's family and my mother's family were not just acquainted with but were friends of the great Unitarian minister Rev. Joseph Priestley during the late 1700's. Perhaps it was over a mug of grog at one of the many Johnson Dinners that both John Adams and Richard Knight, at different times, discovered their personal spiritual liberation. John went on to become president of the United States and was perhaps the most notable founding father. The other, while caring for Priestley's personal library, devised a method to make platinum malleable; a small breakthrough for scientific apparatus at the dawn of the chemical age. Both men were liberated by Unitarianism and the idea of Free Thinking. Regardless of their accomplishments, both families held secrets. Both families had generation after generation of problem drinkers. It seems dipsomania gripped at least one member of the family in each of the following generations. Where it didn't, I am pretty sure the tea-totaling was a protection from personal alcohol abuse.

I come by it honestly. My first drink precedes my memories. I remember draining beer bottles in the morning after church parties in our home. I was probably less than 4 when I began. My first "drunk" was at a UU wedding at age 12 or so. The participants will remain nameless as some of them are probably here today.

My drinking problem with alcohol developed quickly. By the time I was in college I knew that stopping was difficult. I was a daily drinker and I could only put the brakes on it for a short period of time. If I had a single drink at the end of a work day...I could never guarantee where that might possibly lead. Fortunately, I have never killed or injured anyone I have never been arrested or hospitalized. My hostages were my family, my friends and the community at large. My greatest victim was myself. Alcohol caused me a great deal of self harm and depression. I was very alone in my sickness.

In 1935 two men, Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith, met in Akron Ohio. They spent the day together discussing their individual and unique problems with

their drinking. These two men shared their experience and fears and frustrations with each other and became each others support on a journey of sobriety. From that day forward...AA has existed. The next 4 years attracted 100 members into AA's ranks and then something amazing happened.....a Unitarian minister, Rev. Dilworth Lupton was approached about this miraculous new approach to alcoholism treatment. At first he refused to be involved because of their affiliation with the Oxford Group, But after their 3 groups left that protestant organization...Rev. Lupton preached a sermon at the first Unitarian Church in Cleveland. It was November 26 1939, and was titled Mr X and Alcoholics Anonymous.

In short, the sermon became the first pamphlet distributed in AA. It spoke about:

1. *The principle of spiritual dependence*
2. *The principle of universality*
3. *The principle of mutual aid*
4. *The principle of transformation*

AA grew to 500 members the following year. Alcoholics of any religion could now attend.

Well, this is supposed to be true. It is, however, up to the individual to decide what they do or do not do and it can be very tough being a UU and listen to some of the rhetoric at an AA meeting. In fact, 50% of us, according to a UUA study, will not attend AA because the language seems too religious sounding.

When I first showed up at AA I was 35 years of age, I had just become a father for the third time. My mother was dying, my grandmothers were dying, my Grandfather was being put into a retirement home with Alzheimer's. My father, newly retired, was coping with life from the bottom of a liquor bottle. My father in-law was waiting for a double lung transplant. I was living a crowded lonely isolated existence in Huntsville Ontario. My marriage was in trouble and I was regularly un-employable. These were tough long dark days. I went to AA meetings. Day by day...week after week...I started to get better. I stood up. I began to take some responsibility for myself. I gently cared for myself...for the first time in my life. My focus was on "not" drinking, just for today, and to just "do the next best thing". I had a lot of distractions from

my obsession just by caring for the family. It was a burden that I can barely describe even now.

The message that I carry today and the message that I so earnestly learned back then was that I am no longer alone. I belong. I belong here...simply because I am here. I am connected to humanity again.

A little over two years ago a young friend of mine spoke at an AA meeting about his struggles with his addiction and his atheism and that even he was staying clean and sober. He told me that he was approached after the meeting and informed that his message had just sent the newcomers out to die. I was mortified. I knew that the AA rhetoric was getting more difficult in some groups, so a few friends in the program and I decided to start an agnostic meeting so that those of us without traditional concepts of a higher power or a "power greater than themselves" could also get sober in the rooms of AA. AA without the brimstone. Last week marked the second anniversary of "Beyond Belief". Last September a fellow member of this congregation and I started "We Agnostics" which meets here Tuesday nights at 8pm (This is the gratuitous plug portion of my talk).

As it turns out, and I have only recently learned that the very first agnostic and atheist AA meetings were started by Don W a member of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Unitarian Church of Chicago. From the encouragement about his Sermon "An Agnostic in AA: How it works for me." On January 7<sup>th</sup> 1975 he launched the first AA meeting for non believers.

I can assure you that there are many alcoholics in Toronto who are so grateful that this congregation has allowed us your precious space and time so that we could serve our community. In fact...It has inspired a couple of us to go a step further. Wearing our UU hats we are not only prepared, but eager to join the ranks of the UU addictions ministry and to form a team of first responders and setup a support network specifically for our UU community. We are currently looking for people who want help. We are looking for friends who have a professional background or can be supportive and help us get organized to help others to transform their own lives.

My father, after 4 years, finally asked me how I managed to stay sober...He followed me into AA and lived out the rest of his life as a sober and as an amazing contributor to his community. On his 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary in AA he asked me to present him with his special medallion in front of his group's meeting. This symbolism of a healed relationship between father and son will not ever escape me. In our talks together, He and I shared the notion

between us that AA is a fellowship of Recovery and Unitarian Universalism is a home for Discovery...and there is no difference between the two other than the directions that we choose to seek for ourselves each day.

I have witnessed the truly downtrodden, the desperate, the hopeless and the angry...I have watched as they find their light, find a glimmer of meaning for themselves. I have seen friends struggle back from beneath the crushing weight of utter despair. Fractured friends, men and women, regain their lives by nurturing lost dignity and reviving a sense of their own self worthiness. It is something to behold. It is powerful food for the soul. Sadly, most addicts die or become institutionalized.

I believe that our early UU founders were recovering from strict Religionism and learned the power of personal discovery. They achieved greatness in their radical contributions. We have the power to recover from our addictions and distractions to discover the wonderful and amazing world that is before us. We just have to want to.

I'd like to thank this community for embracing the concept of Universalism. Rev Lupton sure knew that it is the key to our connections with one another. Our world is filled with suffering. We can reach out for help when we need to and be ready to help others which helps ourselves. Recovery and Discovery....**we just have to want to.**

### **Reflection: "Wrestling With Our Higher Power," Shawn Newton**

Some two decades ago, not long after waking up with the worst hangover of my life, I found myself sitting in the office of the woman who was my spiritual director for a few years, a Catholic nun named Sister Judy.

She wasn't your average nun.  
She had long ago given up wearing the habit.  
She was riotously funny and immanently wise.  
She didn't mind that I wasn't Catholic  
and simply honoured me for who I was by listening.  
Most of our relationship involved taking long walks or gathering vegetables from the convent's garden, all while talking about matters of the heart.

As I sat in her presence, that morning, though,  
I wondered aloud whether I was an alcoholic.

I knew I could share this with her, not only because she was a great listener, but ultimately because of her car.

Before I met Sister Judy, I didn't even know nuns could have cars. But Judy did. And on the back of her car, every bit of the bumper was covered with the well-known slogans of Alcoholics Anonymous:

One Step At a Time  
East Does It  
Let Go and Let God  
We Are Only as Sick as Our Secrets

But, my favourite was the one that read: "Honk, if you're an alcoholic!"

Like I said, she wasn't your average nun.

As I sat there in her office, she asked me a few questions.

After a few minutes, she said, "Shawn, you're not an alcoholic, but you are abusing alcohol and you need to stop."

And, so I did.

With the distance of years, I know she was right. While I enjoy an occasional pint of beer or glass of wine, I'm not an alcoholic. But like that other common refrain heard in AA, "There but for the grace of God." I know it could be otherwise.

The vast majority of us likely feel that same way—and are fortunate to do so.

I won't ask any of you here to honk if you're an alcoholic. But, I would invite each of you to raise your hands if alcoholism or addiction of some other sort has touched your life—through your personal struggles, or those of family and friends and colleagues.

While roughly 10 to 20% of us personally

contend with substance abuse in some way, the truth is that all of us belong to a community living at various points on the road to recovery.

As Larry so beautifully explained a few minutes ago, the Twelve Step movement has played a powerful role in his life and the lives of millions as they have found their way to health and to wholeness.

And, as Larry also pointed out, Unitarians have played a key part at various points in the seventy-five years of Alcoholics Anonymous.

It would seem that we are at another such point.

Across North America, many people seeking to be in recovery are finding it difficult to work through the traditional language of AA's twelve steps.

The stumbling block is God.

While almost from the very beginning people in AA have been free to interpret this as the God of their own understanding, in practice, it seems, the Higher Power of the majority of twelve-steppers looks and sounds remarkably like the God of Judaism and Christianity.

While that is wonderful for the majority, though, it simply doesn't work for an increasing minority who recognise themselves to be Humanists, atheists, or agnostics.

This is why half of Unitarian Universalists have said they wouldn't turn to AA if they were in trouble.

In recent years, alternative AA groups have emerged, though there are sometimes sharp divides in the Twelve-Step Community as to whether these new groups can consider themselves part of AA.

Earlier this summer, the Toronto regional Intergroup of AA voted to delist the two groups Larry mentioned earlier, including the We Agnostics group that meets here on Tuesday evenings.

While there seems to be some rebuilding of those bridges, these theological divides within the larger AA community are real.

There are some who argue that the time has come for a reform movement akin to Vatican II in order to keep AA relevant and inclusive.

That's why I am glad and grateful that we are able to open our doors to this group, so that those struggling with addiction issues need not also wrestle with theological issues at the same time.

And, that's why I hope we will take seriously the opportunity to create an ongoing full-scale Addiction Ministry here at First Unitarian.

Beyond welcoming agnostics and atheists in recovery, we are forming a first-response team to be of help when people in our congregation find themselves struggling with issues around addiction, be it within themselves or with someone that they love.

It can be an especially powerful thing in a congregation, when a response team is in place to help folks when they find their lives spinning out of control.

It's a beautiful thing—indeed a religious experience—to see the people who have walked the road to recovery before, step up and step in to support others and help them to pick up the pieces of their lives.

That is what we do in religious community, when we are at our best. And, as is so often the case, it is the one of the ways that the recovery community has given back by reminding us all, through their example, of some key spiritual teachings.

Have you ever actually read the Twelve Steps? They are as solid a guide to authentic religious living as anything found in the scriptures of the world's great religions.

(The copy of a non-theistic version found in your orders of service is for you to keep or to pass on to someone who might need it.)

Though they point specifically to a path for recovering from alcoholism, they also reveal an intensely spiritual way of moving through the world with integrity that has something to say to us all.

They call for honestly recognizing when life has become unmanageable.

When we need help beyond our own strength.  
When we even sometimes need to surrender ourselves  
to the help and wisdom of others.

They call for making “a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves”  
and admitting to another person  
the exact nature of whatever we may have done wrong.

They call for making amends wherever possible,  
except when we would cause more harm.

And, they call for mindful, intentional practices  
that raise spiritual awareness and point to one’s rightful path in life.

Fortunately, these steps are there for those who find themselves in desperate  
need of a way out of addiction.

And, blessedly, one need not necessarily be an alcoholic to practise them.

As so many have made clear by their recovery,  
spiritual transformation is possible  
whenever any of us confront our demons, work to clean up our messes,  
and commit ourselves to walking an intentional path through this life.

That transformation may lead, though,  
to destinations very different from our initial hopes and expectations.

As many of you may recall, one of my favourite writers  
is the poet and undertaker Thomas Lynch.

What you may not know is that Lynch is a recovering alcoholic,  
that his father was an alcoholic all his life,  
and that his son, now in his twenties, is struggling with addiction, too.

In the stunning way Lynch is so often able to do,  
he speaks of one of the key lessons he has taken from a life in recovery.

What I’ve learned from my sobriety, [he says,]  
from the men and women who keep me sober, is how to pray.

Blind drunks who get sober get a kind of blind faith—

not so much a vision of who God is,  
but of who God isn't, namely [themselves].

When I was a child, all of my prayers sounded like,  
"Gimme, gimme."  
I wanted a Jerry Mahoney puppet, to fly like Superman,  
and for my brothers and sisters to be adopted  
by other kindly parents and leave me and my mother and father alone.  
I got none of these things.  
Those prayers were never answered.

When I was my son's age, I'd always begin with,  
"Show me, Lord."  
I wanted God to prove Himself or Herself or Itself.  
In this I was...full of outrage and arrogance and bravado.  
Nothing ever happened.  
None of these prayers was ever answered.

For years as a new husband, new parent and a social drinker,  
I'd pray, albeit infrequently, "Why me, God?"  
The more I drank, the more I prayed it.  
I was carping daily, a victim of my all too often self-inflicted wounds.  
Why wasn't God listening? The silence out of heaven was real.

[And then,] someone told me that I should just say "thanks,"  
and that all my prayers should begin that way  
and never stray far from the notion  
that life was a gift to be grateful for.

I [soon] began by giving thanks for my family,  
for the blessings to my household, the gifts of my children.  
Then the daylight and the nightfall and the weather.  
Then the kindness you could see in humankind,  
their foibles and their tender mercies.

I could be thankful even for this awful illness, baffling and  
powerful, that has taught me to weep and to laugh out loud  
and better and for real.

Every time I say it, [every time I say thanks,] the prayer gets answered.  
Someone, out of the blue, every day,

someone gives out with a sign or wonder in the voice of God,  
in some other voice than mine, to answer my prayer.  
“You’re welcome,” it says.

“You’re welcome.”

Those words can come to us—to any one of us—in myriad ways—  
through the kindness of a stranger on the streetcar,  
or from the people sitting in a circle of chairs  
downstairs in Shaw Hall every Tuesday night.

Whether we regard the voice as divine or not,  
let us open our ears to hear those life-giving words.

Whether we live with addiction or not,  
let us open our hearts to that life-saving prayer of gratitude for each day.

That we, as individuals and as a congregation,  
may live in such a powerful way  
that people will trust that they can honk in our direction  
if and when they need a hand, or a lifeline.

So may it be. Amen.