

Article 14 (Anonymity)

by AUTHOR

Being open about my recovery is a double-edged sword. While I'm comfortable putting uncomfortable truths about my past out there, plenty of people would rather I just keep those truths to myself. Alcoholics Anonymous helps keep me sober, sure, but I'm not respecting the program by talking about it. At least, that's what I'm told. A lot. I've been pulled aside after a couple of meetings and received some Facebook messages telling me: *Stop talking about the rooms outside of the rooms. This is larger than you and your recovery. AA has existed long before you came in and said anything about it.* I often hear that I'm still so young in my sobriety that I don't know any better, like I'm taking AA out for a joyride and doing donuts with it in a parking lot.

Look, I totally get it. One of the AA traditions is that "privacy is the spiritual foundation" of the program, not to mention the one that says to not talk about it in "press, radio and films." Who am I to break my anonymity, two years in? It's not like I think I'm above the rules or that I'm unique. No, that's the sort of alcoholic thinking that got me into AA in the first place. I respect and value everyone else's anonymity. It's that I simply don't care about mine.

Still, for many, talking about AA outside AA is revealing way too much, as if I'm betraying something fundamental about recovery through AA. I think a lot of people look at AA as an ocean pipeline miles beneath the surface and, by revealing your identity, you crack that pipeline and spill sacred oil out into the sea.

I understand the inherent reason AA thrives on the second part of its name. By saying I'm in the rooms, if I ever find myself drinking lighter-fluid vodka alone again and posting bizarre Facebook messages at 4:13 am, countless fingers would point back at the program as having failed me. People could immediately accuse AA of not working: *I mean, look at what happened to Paul. He used to be so sober. Like, super-sober.* That's really narrow thinking, though. It wouldn't be an indictment of AA so much as my own fallibility, my own powerlessness over alcohol. As sponsor says, there's some part of my brain that's constantly trying to kill me. The problem is me and will always be with me. But that's not how others would see it.

There's a big difference between not being ashamed and being shameless in sobriety. I'm not open for any reason that serves me. While being open about my alcoholism is liberating, it's also hugely problematic. I'm not proud of sharing stories like the time I woke up to a half-dozen missed calls from my wife and son's elementary school because I passed out and didn't pick him up. I get no electric jolt, no adrenaline rush from putting that out there. Also, no one close to me wants to hear how wonderful my sobriety is. I'm about fifteen years too late in realizing I should've curbed my drinking, so sharing my progress doesn't get a lot of high-fives with family and dear friends. I get a lot of head nods when I say I'm "working steps" and "in the program," but mostly sad glances and furrowed brows. It's as if I'm loudly announcing that I'm super-late to a party I wasn't ever invited to.

Comment [LH1]: This is a little unclear to me. Talking about it to whom? In what contexts? You mean like writing about it hear? Don't they do outreach to alcoholics? Wouldn't they want them to hear about the program?

Comment [LH2]: The tone here sounds a bit off and I'm still not sure if you are only referring to writing these articles or to other things.

Comment [LH3]: Nice

Comment [LH4]: my?

When I first started attending AA meetings, whenever I'd hear someone use their last name, I used to raise my eyebrows in shock. *Wow*, I'd think, admiringly. *That woman's got some balls*. The shock's worn off. It's brave in its own right, I suppose, but it's sort of like showing your *Star Trek* Fan Club card in a room full of Starfleet uniforms and foam Vulcan ears. It's bold, but the stakes are pretty low. In my mind, putting yourself out there as an alcoholic in the real world is as powerful as it is inevitable. Anonymity is something of a pleasant fiction in most of the meetings I attend and, given Facebook posts and Twitter tags and the general vulnerability of being online, it's increasingly impossible. You'd have to work harder at being anonymous in 2016 than you would at your actual sobriety. There are enough bread crumbs to figure out if you're in AA or not. Since half of my identity is on Facebook, I'm tagged in enough messages and photos and inspirational quotes on a daily basis that anyone could piece together what I'm up to without me saying so.

Comment [LH5]: This is a good, concrete story that puts us right there in a meeting. You might start with this.

I don't challenge anonymity in AA so much as opt out of it. I don't care that the world knows I'm an alcoholic. I want that knowledge to help others find the courage to take their first steps into a room—if it can. My recovery is also a constellation of things: listening to podcasts, meeting with my sponsor, regularly visiting recovery websites, reading memoirs. One of them just happens to be AA. The program isn't my sole bedrock—it simply provides me a guideline for sober living. I can't fathom not openly acknowledging something that's had such a huge impact on my life. My mother used to call that "lying by omission." As an alcoholic, I know lying better than most. If it feels like I'm lying, I'm probably lying. By redacting AA from what people see of my life, that's like living a second life. Another family in another ZIP code sort of thing.

Comment [LH6]: Maybe change tense here—"I'm not challenging anonymity in AA so much as opting out of it."

Breaking my anonymity doesn't diminish my experience in the Fellowship. I don't feel duplicitous drawing from it and commenting on it at the same time. After all, I don't speak for the AA nor my fellows in it. I just feel that anonymity is something of a melting glacier. I'm proud of anyone who maintains their anonymity in the same way I'm impressed by people who can buy a huge gift for someone and not immediately give it to them. I've embraced a lack of anonymity as a natural part of my sobriety. In fact, I've leaned into it—I just have to assume it's the case. Countless people disagree, but I refuse to tiptoe from meeting room to meeting room like I'm darting around in the dark. That's the sort of behavior that feeds the stigma of being an alcoholic. Hell, it makes me *feel* like an active alcoholic. For me, being anonymous is tantamount to being ashamed—and the minute I feel ashamed of walking into church basements is the minute I've lost the identity I've discovered in those very rooms.

Comment [LH7]: wow. I love how you are kind of pointing out the hypocrisy of the organization—they want people to stop lying but are asking them to lie by omission in some respects. Great point

Comment [LH8]: Really fantastic points! I think the beginning of the article is a little lighter on those compelling, concrete images that you do so well. I would restructure so that you start with one of those more concrete images.