TWELVE STEPPING ON THE MARGINS:
A NEO-PAGAN CASE STUDY IN OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

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By

Charlotte Turvey

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The thesis of Charlotte Turvey is approved:

Christina von Mayrhauser, Ph.D.  Date

Kimberly Kirner, Ph.D.  Date

Sabina Magliocco, Ph.D., Chair  Date
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ABSTRACT

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Charlotte Turvey
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Substance abuse is a pervasive threat to the well-being of individuals, families and the public sector. One of the most well-known and widely available options for substance abuse assistance in the United States are Twelve Step programs like Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and “sister” organization Al-Anon. Twelve Step programs promote themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” However, there is an implied monotheistic Christian connotation in the literature and in group meetings. This aspect can be challenging for Twelve Step seekers who do not share a Christian world-view. As a result, hybrid groups are often created, such as Pagans in Recovery, a group of Neo-Pagans who are in Twelve Step recovery programs. Neo-Pagans are a minority group of nature religions that are demographically, economically and culturally similar to the majority Euro-American population in the US. Conversely, in terms of spiritual belief and practice they differ greatly. This study investigates how Neo-Pagans conceptualize and practice the tools and ideology taught by Twelve Step programs, with a specialized focus on AA and Al-Anon. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews this study is a multidisciplinary undertaking laid within the framework of anthropological knowledge and theory.
INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization has deemed substance abuse a public health threat because it goes beyond affecting the individual user and extends into the lives of family, friends and communities (WHO 2011). It has been suggested that in the US there are 14 million cases of severe alcohol dependence which contributes to more than 100,000 annual deaths (Hanson et al. 2009). Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) assists people who suffer from alcohol and drug disorders, while Al-Anon assists the family and friends of those who are drug and alcohol dependent. These programs promote themselves as “spiritual not but not religious,” but meeting and literature discourse implies teaching a monotheistic Christian worldview. This can be conceptually and ideologically challenging for those who do not subscribe to this worldview but are seeking substance abuse related assistance through these programs. Previous studies have documented interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges experienced by practicing Neo-Pagans in AA (Foltz 2000; Fox 1995). Neo-Paganism is an umbrella term used to describe several traditions of contemporary nature centered religious movements. This study is an investigation of Neo-Pagans who are in Twelve Step programs for substance abuse or for substance abuse family support.

AA and Al-Anon were influenced by and draw from a Christian perspective. In Christian traditions there is an element of faith that corresponds to the idea of belief. Twelve Step programs have based a great deal of their “recovery programs” on the idea of believing in a Higher Power to solve one’s challenge. This notion is presented in a monotheistic male centered paradigm. Neo-Pagans have a very different worldview from the Christian one that influenced the founders of AA and Al-Anon. Neo-Pagans seek to
honor the divine feminine, are polytheistic and view the divine as immanent (Adler 1986:23). Neo-Pagans seek to gain transformation and/or self-empowerment through ritual practices rather than receiving spiritual grace from a deity. Furthermore, it has been suggested that one of the uniting factors within the diverse Neo-Pagan movement, is the principle of practice being more important than belief (Magliocco 2004:69).

Neo-Paganism is one of the fastest growing religious movements in the United States (Magliocco 2004). Academic studies on health needs and perceptions within this population are in the beginning stages. Insights into the Neo-Pagan experience with substance abuse challenges and participation in Twelve Step programs are minimal. Information on Neo-Pagan experiences in Twelve Step programs is of crucial importance to clinicians who are developing substance abuse care plans. This is of paramount importance to clinicians who work in the substance abuse sector. Spiritual approaches are often used as supplements to substance abuse care (Winkelman 2003). AA and Al-Anon are highly recommended by rehabilitation centers and other institutions where substance abuse challenges persist (Wilcox 1998:43). Clinicians who have a better understanding of how Neo-Pagans apply the Twelve Step model to their lives will in all likelihood be more successful in helping patients to utilize these very popular and widely available methods.

Neo-Pagans are involved in ritual practices that induce non-drug altered states of consciousness (ASC). Many studies have discussed the benefits of ritual ASC for emotional healing and for overcoming addiction (Greenwood 2000; Winkelman 2001, 2003). Twelve Step programs heavily promote the use of prayer and meditation. I sought to uncover how ASC was being practiced or incorporated into Neo-Pagan
“recovery.” The intention was to explore more experiential forms of ASC that could be potentially utilized outside of the Neo-Pagan community. With all of these considerations my inquiry revolved around the following questions. How do Neo-Pagans conceive of and practice Twelve Step programs? How do Neo-Pagans resolve ideological incongruences? What ASC practices are Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step programs utilizing? Through an exploration of these issues this study contributes to the limited understanding of the Neo-Pagan experience in Twelve Step programs.

This study is organized by chapters. The first chapter lays the foundations of this research by briefly reviewing the history and practices of Twelve Step programs. Also in this chapter, I have included a discussion of key tenets of Neo-Pagan traditions and an introduction into the Neo-Pagan recovery movement. In chapter two, I review perspectives on substance use and abuse as well as perspectives on Twelve Step programs and other spiritual modes of healing. In chapter three, I discuss the methods I applied and terminology I employed. The heart of this investigation rests in chapter four where I detail the perspectives and practices of twelve Neo-Pagans who gave their time and insights into their experiences with AA and Al-Anon. In closing, I offer a discussion of my study, as well as an overview of the implications of this research.
CHAPTER 1: HISTORY AND CONTEXT

This chapter is intended to introduce the unfamiliar reader with the AA, Al-Anon and Neo-Pagan movements. In the first section, I review a brief history of the formation of AA and Al-Anon as well as address some of the key tenets. Following, I discuss some of the unifying aspects of the diverse religious traditions within the Neo-Pagan movement. Lastly, I provide some of the prominent aspects of Neo-Pagans who are in Twelve Step programs.

Formation of the Twelve Steps

Alcoholics Anonymous is a worldwide organization that focuses on the use of spirituality as means to overcome alcohol dependence. AA was founded in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Dr. Bob Smith. Wilson suffered many years of failed attempts to recover from his drinking malady. He sought help through various inpatient treatment centers only to return to drinking shortly after release. In 1934, Wilson’s last year of drinking, he was visited by an old friend named Ebby Thatcher who, like Wilson, was also a “drunkard.” However, on the day of their visit Thatcher was not drinking. He shared with Wilson that he had found religion and God to be useful in helping him to recover from compulsive alcohol abuse. Wilson saw that Thatcher seemed a changed man and agreed to meet him at an Oxford Group meeting the following day (Minnick 1997).

The Oxford Group was a non-denominational Christian movement that was opposed to hierarchy and authority and focused on salvation through conversion, confession and evangelizing (Pittman 1988). Despite Wilson’s attendance in a drunken stupor, that first meeting made a major impact on his perception of his malady. For several days he drank himself into oblivion while still pondering his friend’s solution.
Wilson knew he needed to “dry out” and he checked himself into Towns Hospital center for “alcoholics.” That was his fourth stay in a hospital that year for alcohol related problems. The regimen at Towns Hospital was a chemical cocktail that included hourly doses of belladonna, herbs and sleeping aids (Pittman 1998).

During Wilson’s hospital stay, he was again visited by Thatcher who again tried to impress upon him the usefulness of the Oxford Group principles. At that time, Wilson had a strong aversion toward religion and God. He suggested to a disheartened and an unconvinced Wilson to consider choosing his own conception of God. Following the visit Wilson was angered and depressed. In a memoir Wilson wrote:

I still gagged badly at the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, “If there is a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!”

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe…All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of presence and I thought to myself, “So this is the God of the preachers!”

(Pittman 1988:153)

Initially, Wilson was frightened by this experience and thought that maybe he was going crazy. But re-assurance from the staff doctor, William Silkworth, helped him to view his experience as important and valid. The next day Thatcher again visited Wilson and brought him the William James book, The Varieties of Religious experience, which further convinced Wilson that he had had a “spiritual experience.” As mentioned earlier, he was detoxing from alcohol as well as being given regular doses of belladonna, both of which can cause hallucinations (Pittman 1988). It is highly possible that Wilson’s vision experience was a result of one or both of these two factors. Nonetheless, Wilson’s
actions following his hospital stay changed the course of his life, and eventually his follower’s lives for generations to come.

The first six months after Wilson’s “spiritual experience,” he became intensely involved in the Oxford Group. There he shared openly about his encounter with God which he believed helped him to acquire abstinence. Sharing experiences was the manner in which all Oxford Group meetings were conducted. There was a good proportion of “alcoholics” who were involved in the group and benefitted from hearing about Wilson’s white light experience. But it was not until he met and helped another member of the Oxford Group named Dr. Bob Smith, that the beginnings of AA were formed. Together the two men spent an entire summer devising a “program of recovery” which largely drew from the Oxford Group principles and to a lesser degree eastern religious philosophy and psychology. The beginnings of AA involved six steps or actions that were evangelized through the Oxford Group meetings (see appendix B for original six steps). Increasing membership of problem drinkers made Wilson decide to break away from the Oxford Group while retaining the format of sharing personal stories (Minnick 1997:18). The following two years, members of the unnamed “alcoholic” group collaborated to devise a strategy that could be flexible enough for all religious faiths. They developed a plan of action that they felt was spiritual rather than religious (Pitman 1997:19). AA is thus the spearhead in promulgating the phrase “spiritual but not religious” (Fuller 2001:112). It was not until the men devised a book which they entitled *Alcoholics Anonymous* that AA became an official group. This large “text,” often called the Big Book by members, contains the detailed accounts of Wilson and Smith, a description of what it means to be an alcoholic, the Twelve Steps of recovery, the Higher
Power concept and personal recovery stories (see appendix C for AA’s Twelve Steps).

The steps are meant to be passed down from a sober member of the group, a mentor so to speak, who members call a “sponsor.” According to AA literature, passing on the steps to others who want help, and doing “service work,” is seen as a selfless act that helps to maintain sobriety. This is partially reflected in their twelfth step, “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” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001: 59). According to the Alcoholics Anonymous book, the steps are a method to ensure continued spiritual growth which is thought to provide immunity from a return to alcohol abuse (AA 2001:85). The steps involve an admission of powerlessness over alcohol, relying on a Higher Power of one’s choice, a written self-evaluative inventory, confession of the written inventory to another person, amends to those harmed, meditation, prayer and continued involvement in service work, especially with other alcoholics. Alcoholics Anonymous sole stated purpose is “to help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.” This is stated in their preamble which is read at the beginning of every meeting:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. The only requirement for membership is a desire to stop drinking. There are no dues or fees for A.A. membership; we are self-supporting through our own contributions. A.A. is not allied with any sect, denomination, politics, organization or institution; does not wish to engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any causes. Our primary purpose is to stay sober and help other alcoholics to achieve sobriety (Pitman 1988:198).

Alcoholics Anonymous has become a world-wide organization. In the fourth edition of the Alcoholics Anonymous book it states that AA has extended to 150 countries, 100,800 groups and has an estimated two million members (AA 2001:xxiii).
Closely marching alongside AA has been Al-Anon family support groups. Al-Anon was the first off shoot of AA and has now become known as AA’s “sister organization.”

Al-Anon’s preamble states, “We believe that alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery” (Al-Anon 2008). Bill Wilson’s wife Lois and her confidant Anne B formalized the Al-Anon program in 1951 (Minnick 1997). Prior to this, family groups were naturally spawning on the sidelines of AA groups across the nation. It has been suggested that eighty seven family groups had already been congregating and distributing literature as early as 1943 (Minnick 1997:36). Some of these early groups were established in support of AA members’ abstinence. While other groups felt that they also needed the personal help of the Twelve Steps. The first published Al-Anon book stated its purpose as to help those who were affected by alcoholism. Yet, it was largely created for, and in response to women’s needs, especially wives of AA members. This fit well with women’s needs in the 1950s because divorce was not a readily available and/or socially acceptable option. Al-Anon’s steps are almost exactly the same as AA’s steps but with two slight changes. Al-Anon’s first step is the admission of powerlessness over other people’s behavior instead of over alcohol. And their twelfth step suggests carrying the message to “others” instead of to alcoholics (see appendix D for Al-Anon steps). The focus of self-discovery and self-empowerment taught by Al-Anon has proven to be successful well beyond housewives in the fifties. Today, the Al-Anon program has expanded its membership base and includes all family members, partners and friends of alcoholics. It is the second largest Twelve Step program next to AA. As sister organizations, Al-Anon and AA often participate together at large social functions such as conventions, retreats and camp outs.
The AA self-help Twelve Step format has been adopted well beyond Al-Anon and has become attractive to an abundance of seekers wishing to face personal challenges. Twelve Step recovery programs have become quite a phenomenon that has erupted into American mainstream culture. It has been suggested that fifty percent of the American population has been directly or indirectly affected by Twelve Step programs (Hawkins 2002:181). While this estimate may seem high, it is entirely possible when considering that the model has branched out to offer assistance in a wide variety of challenges. The Examiner (2010) reports that there are an estimated fifty four different off shoot Twelve Step programs which can be broken down into the eight categories of alcohol, drug addiction, sex, gambling, eating, emotional/psychiatric disorders and miscellaneous. A brief list of examples in addition to AA and Al-Anon includes, Narcotics Anonymous (NA); Crystal Meth Anonymous (CMA); Nicotine Anonymous (NicA); Over Eaters Anonymous (OA); Codependents Anonymous (CoDA); Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLA) and Debtors Anonymous (DA). While the participants in my study considered AA and/or Al-Anon as one of their primary programs, many also participated in one or more additional programs from the list just provided.

**Neo-Paganism**

Neo-Paganism is a canopy term that is used to refer to several branches of earth based or earth centered religions, some of which are Wicca, Druidism, Heathenry and Witchcraft. Neo-Paganism was brought to the US in the 1960s from Europe (Magliocco 2004:56). This grouping of religions is diverse in practice, loosely organized, non-dogmatic and has no authoritative leadership (Adler 1986:21). This aspect makes it difficult to know the exact number of practitioners, however, it has been estimated that there 611,000 to 1.2
million Neo-Pagan practitioners in the US (http://commons.trincoll.edu/aris;
http://religions.pewforum.org/pdf/report-religious-landscape-study-full.pdf). Neo-
Paganism is a revival movement that attempts to reconstruct Western pre-Christian
religions (Adler 1986:xiii, Magliocco 2004:210). Neo-Pagans tend to be polytheistic or
worship many goddesses and gods, often from multiple pantheons of ancient and/or
modern religious traditions. According to Neo-Pagan studies scholar Margot Adler,
polytheism is not just about divinity but it is also “grounded in the view that reality…is
multiple and diverse” (Adler 1986:23). Adler also reports that animism and pantheism
are equally important and unifying concepts in Neo-Paganism. Animism is a view that
vitality is within everything and pantheism is the notion that “deity is immanent in
nature” (Adler 1986:23). Folklorist and Anthropologist Sabina Magliocco states that,
“The concept of the interconnected universe finds its most complete expression in the
practice of ritual” (Magliocco 2004:126). She also states that ritual practice is another
unifying factor amongst the diverse Neo-Pagan traditions.

Traditions vary greatly but typically Neo-Pagans celebrate eight annual holidays
that honor and/or relate to cycles in nature; known as the wheel of the year. While
traditions vary in form, rituals often involve non-drug induced altered states of
consciousness (ASC). Altered states in ritual usually range from a light trance, like that
that comes from a guided meditation, or in the case of Wiccan traditions, ecstatic states
are sought and achieved (Magliocco 2004:166). In regards to ritual “magic,” Starhawk,
one of the most influential authors of the Neo-Pagan movement states, “The work,
training and discipline of magic can lead to a sensual trance similar to that produced by
marijuana, and the goal of ritual is the ecstatic vision and high sense of wonder like that
found on the highest LSD trips” (Starhawk 1999:175). Through ritual this group of religious movements seeks to create community and to gain a deeper connection with the sacred.

**Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step Programs**

The term Pagans in Recovery is often used in reference to Neo-Pagans who are in Twelve Step “recovery” programs. It has been suggested that the term “recovery” gained popularity in the late 1980s as a way to identify members of Twelve Step programs (Minnick 1997:137). Around the same time, a newsletter published by the Pagans in Recovery network became available for purchase by yearly subscription (Fox 1995:7). The newsletter is out of print, yet, the usage of the term Pagans in Recovery (PIR) has become a widely used frame of reference for Neo-Pagans in traditional or modified self-help step programs. The term may have been popularized by Isaac Bonewits when he posted an article online entitled “Pagans in Recovery.” Bonewits was a writer, a Neo-Pagan priest in the Reformed Druids of North America (RDNA), and founder of Ár n Draiocht Féin (ADF), an organized Druid fellowship (Bonewits 1983). The article was posted through ADF’s official website (www.adf.org) and discusses the pros and cons of Twelve Step programs for Neo-Pagans.

Bonewits opens the article with mention of his own struggles with a challenging childhood in a dysfunctional family, as well as his struggles coping with his best friend’s “alcoholism.” He states that the birth of his son prompted him to seek help with determination “to break the cycles of dysfunction” that he learned from his parents. He reports that while he had known of several programs through friends and from meetings at festivals, his own involvement caused him to have a “revelation.” He also
acknowledges the “problems” of the Twelve Step groups, especially as they relate to Neo-Pagans. He states that despite the intention to be “non-denominational,” the overarching discourse in Twelve Step meetings is centered around a monotheistic, omnipotent and male “Higher Power.” According to Bonewits the theology is largely focused on guilt. He states that for all these reasons some Neo-Pagans have avoided receiving help from Twelve Step programs.

Despite these challenges Bonewits speaks highly of the Twelve Step method. In regards to this he states, “They have their weaknesses (mostly poly-theological), but they are nonetheless the most powerful and effective systems I have ever seen for healing the inner child and giving the adult appropriate life skills. I believe that all of us, especially the clergy, could learn a lot from them” (Bonewits 1990). He proposes that eventually Neo-Pagans will form their own version of recovery, but in the meantime it is the best solution to address substance and behavioral challenges. Approximately five years later, Bonewits posted another article on his personal site with repeating information from the ADF article but with additional opinions and many more resources (www.pagan.net). Included is a “Pagan friendly” version of the Twelve Steps that removes the monotheistic male references while keeping them otherwise true to the traditional model. It appears that Bonewits was very outspoken and passionate about bringing awareness of substance abuse issues to the Neo-Pagan community. Sarah Pike (2001) reports that in 1993 Bonewits conducted a workshop during the Winterstar festival called “Pagan Taboos.” There he brought awareness to being silent in regards to substance abuse. He suggested that, the value of individualism in the Neo-Pagan community was preventing people from
speaking up about problematic substance abusers. He encouraged attendees to break the silence (Pike 2001:119).

Selena Fox, psychologist and founder of the Circle Sanctuary Wiccan church and nature preserve, has also been an active spokesperson in the move to bring awareness and treatment options to Neo-Pagans for substance related issues. Circle Sanctuary pioneered the initiative to bring Twelve Step meetings to Neo-Pagan festivals by first introducing them at the annual week long summer solstice Pagan Spirit Gathering festival. In addition, Circle Sanctuary sponsored Fox’s graduate research project which explored Neo-Pagan experiences in AA. Fox began working with Neo-Pagans in recovery in her spiritual counseling practice. It was there that she initially uncovered that some Neo-Pagans experienced interpersonal and intrapersonal challenges in AA. As a result, they struggled or abandoned the program. However, she also encountered others who found AA helpful. Fox undertook graduate research in this area in order to have a better understanding of these experiences.

Starhawk has also been vocal about bringing awareness of substance use and abuse to the Neo-Pagan movement. Starhawk is the author of one of the most influential books in the Neo-Pagan movement entitled *The Spiral Dance* (Magliocco 2004). In the twentieth year edition printing of this book, Starhawk revised the text in several ways in order to draw awareness about substance abuse, not only in the Neo-Pagan movement, but in the United States in general. In the introduction of this edition she discusses healing in the Neo-Pagan movement. She addresses “addictions” by stating that many Neo-Pagans are choosing to confront their addictions to substances and codependency. Starhawk relates that Neo-Pagans have encountered challenges with Twelve Step
language. However, she states that those involved in Twelve Step programs and have
found that “Craft practice” can complement and deepen the recovery process. In accord
with this, she changed the original ritual formats in *The Spiral Dance* that indicate
passing a chalice of wine to passing a chalice of juice. Additionally, where suggested
ritual formats once indicated a time for “Cakes and Wine” the newest edition has been
changed to “Feasting.” She specifies that she made these changes so that the rituals could
be safe for all people. She states, “Those who still choose to may still drink wine, but out
of recognition that to some people in the circle it may be destructive, we no longer pass it
in the ritual chalice” (Starhawk 1999:21). In addition to this she also indicates in several
places throughout the newest edition how she strongly advises against the use of “drugs”
in ritual. She reasons that the wide spread addiction patterns in the US need be resolved
before including ritualized use of “consciousness altering substances” (Starhawk
1999:253). Additionally, she proffers that Westerners do not incur the training and
knowledge to use “mind altering” plant substances in the way that indigenous shamans
do. Therefore, she deems it unwise to imbibe (Starhawk 1999:297)

Psychologist, feminist and former Twelve Step member Charlotte Kasl has been
influential on the Pagan in Recovery movement through her book titled, *Many Roads One
Journey: Moving Beyond the 12 steps.* Using the Twelve Step model as a template, Kasl
(1992) developed a sixteen step program. Many Neo-Pagan adapted versions of the steps
draw from Kasl’s work (see appendix E Kasl’s for steps). Kasl suggests that the
phenomenal attraction that Americans have with Twelve Step programs stems from, “a
need for meaningful ritual in our lives” (Kasl 1992: 306). The premise of Kasl’s book is
aligned with values that are often associated with Neo-Paganism. She emphasizes
recovery through self-empowerment, balance, inclusivity and diversity. This is well illustrated in Kasl’s suggested first and sixteenth steps: “1) We affirm we have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on substances or other people for our self-esteem and security; and 16) We grow in awareness that we are interrelated with all things, and we contribute to restoring peace and balance on the planet” (Kasl 1992:332).

Cynthia Collins (2004) is a Wiccan Priestess, Twelve Stepper and MFT. She authored the book entitled *The Recovery Spiral: A Pagan Path to Healing*. In this book she adapts the original Twelve Step format to a more Neo-Pagan friendly version. This book was intended to be inclusive and flexible enough for those from any Neo-Pagan tradition or Twelve Step based program (see appendix F for Collins’ steps). Collins states that she adjusted the steps to reflect the Wiccan Rede, which seeks to harm none. She maintains the general format and tenets proposed in the traditional Twelve Step model, only slightly modifying language in order to better reflect a more Neo-Pagan world view. The book is composed of discussions on the intention and spiritual meaning of each step. Woven throughout are personal recovery stories of other Neo-Pagans. Included is a tarot manual and Book of Shadows section located in the latter quarter of the book. In the tarot manual she provides examples and templates of how to do tarot readings in relation to each step. The Book of Shadows portion contains several reflection questions per step, which is designed for further self-awareness. In addition, there is a ritual format that can be performed at the completion of each step. There are many other Pagan adapted versions of the Twelve Steps that are available to Neo-Pagans through a few other books and several online sources. There are also exists many
attempts to reform the steps entirely. Nonetheless, all adaptations follow the basic principles of the original Twelve Step model.

In this chapter, I provided a brief overview of the developments of both AA and Al-Anon. From this it can be seen that the historical roots were heavily influenced by Bill Wilson’s exposure to the Oxford Group, a nondenominational Christian religious movement that has since disbanded. The Protestant principles utilized by the Oxford Group account for the Christian orientations still present in AA and Al-Anon. The Twelve Step method and meeting format of these programs has remained virtually unchanged since their development. In discussing some of the key tenets found in the Neo-Pagan movement, it can be seen why Twelve Step participation could prove challenging for some Pagans. Several key spokes persons for the Neo-Pagan movement have openly discussed the benefits of Twelve Step programs while acknowledging some of the incompatibilities as it pertains to Neo-Pagans. Challenges have been met with creative resolve and many Neo-Pagan friendly versions of step programs have been developed. In the next chapter, I take a closer look at the relationship humans have with substances. I detail some pre-historical and historical aspects, anthropological perspectives and multidisciplinary views on the Twelve Step movement.
CHAPTER 2: PERSPECTIVES ON SUBSTANCE USE, ABUSE AND REHABILITATION

A review of pre-historical and historical perspectives demonstrates that humans share an extensive history with the commonly abused substances of today’s world. A pre-historical glimpse reveals that ancient peoples were just as involved in bringing about altered states as modern ones. In a view of modern accounts, it can be seen how anthropologists have contributed a great deal of ethnographic data on the use and abuse of substances. Moving into treatment options, a multidisciplinary review of spiritual modes of recovery, suggests that subcultural variables play roles in the effectiveness of substance abuse treatments.

Pre-historical Glimpse

Historian Yulia Ustinov (2011) states that hunter-gathers of the Paleolithic were in all likelihood familiar with mind altering plants. However, concrete evidence of substance use does not appear until the Neolithic period. During the Neolithic period (10,000 to 5,000 BP), spiral artwork on European tombs suggests entoptic phenomena that occurs with the induction of altered states. In regards to this Ustinov states, “The same pattern consistently appears in the drawings of narcotic-induced visions by modern shamans and is explained by them as designating the doors or passages from one dimension to another” (Ustinov 2011:48). Even more conclusive evidence is the abundance of opium poppy seed capsules in Western European sites. The opium poppy naturally produces a potent narcotic sap from unripe seeds. Ustinov argues that, “…The plants psychedelic properties could hardly remain unknown” (Ustinov 2011:50). The capsules are found in numerous burials amongst many European sites in Spain,
Switzerland, Northern Italy and Germany (Ustinov 2011:50). The opium poppy appears to have been first domesticated in the Western Mediterranean region during the sixth millennium BCE where it diffused in a northward pattern fairly quickly (Ustinov 2011:50). The presence of alcohol in ancient Europe does not present itself until relatively late in comparison to the rest of the world. This may be attributed to a lack of indigenous sugary sources required for alcohol fermentation. However, S.M. Valamoti et al. (2007) have argued that evidence from a Neolithic site in Dikil Tash Greece provides strong evidence to support that grape wine production began as early as 5000 BCE in the Mediterranean. This evidence includes pressed grape residues and fancy ceramic cup ware which is indicative of a “special holding vessel” intended for a distinct use.

The ancient Near East provides a plethora of evidence for beer production through artifacts such as straws, strainers, beer jugs, texts and artistic depictions. A tomb painting from fifth dynasty Egypt contains the most complete portrayal of beer production in the ancient world (Homan 2004:94). The importance of beer is found in all areas of ancient Egyptian life as evidenced in funerary practices, household activities, art work, temple offerings and within sacred narratives. It is probable that beer was an important staple in the ancient Near East because fermentation reduces bacterial contamination and could have been a safe source of water. (Homan 2004:84). On the other hand, there is evidence of alcohol abuse in ancient Egyptian iconography, where it is seen that at banquets people drank until the point of illness or unconsciousness. There are also ancient Egyptian texts that abhor drunkenness and warn against it (Mandelbaum 284:1965).

It has been conjectured that grape wine spread and became commercialized throughout the Mediterranean because of religious ritual. Archaeologist Dan
Stanislawski (1975) examined the complex history of wine commerce in the Mediterranean suggesting a link to a fertility cult of the Great Mother Goddess. He relates the Great Mother cult was the founding religion involved in the emergence of the worship of Dionysus, the male god of wine. He argues that the inclusion of wine in religious ceremony was attractive to the seeker who may have perceived the euphoric effects of alcohol as a sign of closeness to the deity. Stanislawski discusses many benefits of combining wine and religion, such as emotional and physical comforts, as well promoting a marketable product. He argues these aspects combined to provide perfect conditions for commercialization and trade of wine in the Mediterranean.

The oldest known chemically analyzed alcoholic drink comes from pottery residues of a Neolithic village site in China dating at 7000 BCE, the beverage consisted of rice, honey and fruit (McGovern et al 2004). Mu-Chou Poo (1999) details the long history of wine production, consumption and rituals in ancient China by comparing and contrasting the political influences that imposed fluxes in the practices associated with wine. He explores the high value of wine by examining the funerary remains in the archeological record as well as literary works of poets. He notes accounts of the abuse of wine consumption during the Shang dynasty (1750-1100 B.C.E), which led to claims that alcohol abuse was the root cause in the fall of the Shang dynasty. Following that reign various political leaders tried to impose laws to control consumption, from allowing use only in ritual to full banishment. Large quantities of wine vessels in burial sites and wine as religious offerings are suggestive of the importance of wine in daily life. In addition to these factors, the high regard of wine shared in poetry suggests that wine was highly revered and valued amongst all classes in ancient China.
Archaeological evidence demonstrates that the human use of alcohol has a venerable history going back to prehistoric times. It is seen that along with human alcohol consumption came intoxication and the abuse of alcohol. The evidence also suggests that culturally accepted patterns developed, and in some cases cultural ideas of overuse where not favored. It is probable that ancient cultures abhorred substance abuse because it can be deleterious to community well-being.

Theories on Substance Use and Misuse

The dangers of the misuse or overuse of psychoactive substances is prominent in discourse and appears to be part of the shared knowledge in the United States. However, despite the “common knowledge” of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse the prevalence of substance abuse in the US ranks in high numbers and has devastating consequences. Hanson et al. (2009) report that next to tobacco, alcohol related deaths out number that of any other abused substance (Hanson et al. 2009:162). Here I review evolutionary and biological factors associated with alcohol use and abuse. Following, I discuss anthropological perspectives and contributions.

Several studies have sought to determine the biological risk factors that lead to manifestations of alcohol dependence. Investigations have included examinations of human variations in ethanol metabolism, environment, age, sex, ethnic background, body mass, liver volume and genetics. One study performed by V. Ramchandani et al. (2001) reveals that there are some metabolic gene alleles that can be associated with differing degrees in the rates of alcohol elimination. It was also found that specific alleles appear more frequently within some ethnic groups than others. One allele variation has been determined to offer protection against alcoholism in Asian populations. However, the
researchers make it a point to relate that there is also a diverse amount of ethanol metabolic variations within populations as there are between them. Another study suggests that Asian populations are not exclusive to the protective allele and links have been made to European and Jewish populations (Han et al. 2007).

Robert Dudley (2000) put forward an evolutionary hypothesis that “alcoholism” manifested as the result of adaptive mechanisms that led human ancestors to choose ripe fruit. He supports his argument with the suggestion that human ancestors were predominately fruit eaters. Additionally, ethanol has almost twice as many calories as carbohydrates and therefore provided greater nutritional benefit. According to Dudley, in order to fulfill greater caloric intake human ancestors had the innate sense to choose ripe fruit over non-ripe fruit. He states, “This hypothesis thus proposes that natural selection has acted on human ancestors to associate ethanol with nutritional reward, promoting rapid identification and consumption of ethanol-containing fruit sources” (Dudley 2000:75). He provides data that demonstrates that modern nonhuman frugivores display behaviors of ethanol addiction similar to that found in humans. Dudley suggests that alcoholism is a “disease of excess” resultant from high accessibility of ethanol that was not present among human ancestors.

A critique of Dudley’s model has been proposed by Douglas Levey (2004). Levey states that there is only a trivial amount of ethanol in wild fruits. He argues that wild fruit was unlikely to be the source of human’s attraction to alcohol. Levey reviews studies that reveal that vertebrates display strong preferences toward ripe but not rotten fruit which contain the most ethanol compounds. He states that it is more likely that humans discovered alcohol through the trials and errors of fermentation processes.
Levey argues that the attraction to alcohol developed once humans discovered that fermentation was beneficial for food preservation.

Evolutionary and biological factors involved in humans’ attraction to alcohol and other substances are only one consideration when examining this multi-faceted issue. Many factors contribute to the use and abuse of alcohol and other substances. This includes but is not limited to religion, socio-economics, political economy and family relations. Until recently, substance use and abuse have been relatively marginal topics within anthropology. Early considerations on the topic were predominately in relation to alcohol. These early discussions initially took a more functionalist position noting the value of alcohol use for social or psychological purposes. Today, anthropologists seek to approach the subject of drug and alcohol studies from a holistic perspective, noting cultural variations as well as macro structural factors.

Several authors have discussed alcohol as having culturally specific meanings (e.g. Dietler 2006, Heath 1987, Mandelbaum, 1965) carrying with it a wide variety of cultural variations each with their own ascribed meanings and norms. One of the first anthropologists to specifically review cross cultural alcohol use was Mandelbaum (1965). He proposed that alcohol should be considered a “cultural artifact” and in regards to this he states:

Alcohol is a cultural artifact; the form and meanings of drinking alcoholic beverages are culturally defined, as are the uses of any other major artifact. The form is usually quite explicitly stipulated, including the kind of drink that can be used, the amount and rate of intake, the time and place of drinking, the accompanying ritual, the sex and age of the drinker, the roles involved in drinking, and behavior proper to drinking (Mandelbaum 1965:281).
In addition, Mandelbaum discusses that variations of alcohol consumption can range from extreme forms of abstinence, to moderation, to extreme of drunkenness. There is also variation in the culturally ascribed meanings attached to alcohol, ranging from sacred to profane.

Dwight Heath is often revered as the leader in the anthropological study of alcohol (Baer et al. 1997). In the 1960s Heath’s published study of the Camba, highlighted the sociocultural perspective as well as promulgated the development of drinking patterns as a worthy focus of anthropological study (Baer et al. 1997). The study examined how the Camba, a mestizo’s people in Northern Bolivia, participated in patterned and ritualistic drunkenness that could last for several days. According to Heath the Camba drank with the purpose of getting drunk. Heath observed that their drunken behavior was calm and involved spacing out and/or passing out; there was no known unruly activity or aggression. Additionally, the Camba reported that they did not experience hangovers (Heath 2000:162). As a result of this study, Heath became an integral promoter of the sociocultural model and the notion that variations in alcohol consumption are a result of learned behaviors. The sociocultural model focuses on the importance of a culture’s values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors in regards to alcohol. One dimension has been to explore alcohol consumption as culturally meaningful with specific behavior patterns. The sociocultural model treats all drinking behavior as learned behaviors. Within this frame all drinking behavior, including drunkenness, are usually explored in terms of the benefits the drinking pattern offers.

In 1984 Sociologist Robin Room aroused a big stir in the anthropological community when he critiqued anthropologists for largely looking at alcohol use through a
functionalist perspective thereby minimizing the occurrences of negative social consequences that alcohol abuse plays within various cultural settings. His now famous argument where he accused anthropologists of what he called “problem deflation,” suggested that an ethnocentric perspective accounted for many of the ethnographic reports on alcohol use within indigenous populations. He discussed that one of the major problems was that the researchers where blinded by their contextual lens in two ways. First, Room suggested that the researchers studying alcohol patterns in indigenous populations were part of the “wet generation” and were partial to the benefits of alcohol. Secondly, he proposed that the researchers were also blinded by the “disease model of alcoholism” and associated problem drinking within that paradigm. Therefore, they failed to see the social problems that were occurring with alcohol in populations other than their own.

Room based his arguments on personal experiences where he attended conferences in three different countries. Room found that the ethnographers’ perspective and the indigenous perspective on alcohol consumption were in opposition. He uncovered that anthropologists tended to promote functionalist arguments and minimized alcohol related problems. Meanwhile the indigenous people felt there were many social problems in their communities that resulted from alcohol consumption. Room challenged anthropologists to move away from the restrictive functionalist theoretical orientation. Instead he proposed to develop new analytical approaches in order to make accurate contributions to the ethnographic study of alcohol use.

Anthropologist Jeffrey Hunt and Judith Barker (2001) critiqued the discipline for developing what they considered to be a narrow scope. They stated that anthropologists
often failed to take into account that individual substance abusers are part of a larger social complex that includes family, economics, religion and ethnicity. They argue that anthropologists, “…Seem to find it easier to connect the user with the substance than to see him or her as an actor within a social setting, devising, manipulating and giving meaning to rules, strategies and desires” (Hunt & Barker 2001:169). In addition, they argue that following Room’s critique anthropology became “too problem focused” that it could now be considered to be using a “problem inflation” approach. They suggest that anthropologists have lost their critical perspective and largely adopted the perspective of alcohol abuse as a social problem that needs to be fixed. Like Room, they suggest it could be a cultural context issue on part of the researchers mostly coming from American culture and the possible influence of “the war on drugs.” They argue that the sociocultural model is for the most part descriptively beneficial but lacks theoretical back bone. Therefore, they suggest the overall contributions of anthropologists to be “patchy.”

One of the most inclusive perspectives is the biocultural model, which was originally utilized in medical anthropology to examine the worldwide epidemic of AIDS. But it has also offered promise as a beneficial model for the examination of alcohol and drug abuse. In regards to the biocultural model Merrill Singer states that it:

Integrates the political economy of risk behavior, the ethnographic examination of insider understandings, meaning systems and behaviors, and the biological analysis of health-related issues. Methodologically, the assessment combined methods and concepts from all of the major subfields of anthropology (Singer 2001:153).

In addition, the biocultural approach examines structural violence and oppressive social constructions that instigate and perpetuate substance abuse behaviors. This holistic and thorough lens offers promise especially in alcohol and drug related studies because
chemical substances have effects on the biological, social and political worlds of modern day human experiences. In similar spirit, the critical medical anthropology perspective is another multi-level and holistic lens.

Hans Baer et al. (1997) argue that anthropological analysis of substance abuse should incorporate historical, political and economic factors. The authors argue that anthropologists have failed to take into account the macro-level factors that contribute to alcohol abuse. They propose the critical medical anthropology perspective. This analytical model and method examines six macro level factors that contribute to problem drinking. These factors are 1) public health consequences; 2) class stratification; 3) solidarity of class structure; 4) availability; 5) government taxation; and 6) market economy. Their critique draws attention to the fact that alcohol abuse is often defined in American culture as an individual problem, however, the authors argue that macro level factors are sources that contribute and promulgate alcohol abuse. While the authors focus their discussion on alcohol abuse, this perspective is also utilized in the examination of other commonly abuse substances.

Cecil Helman (2000) examines macro forces of drug use in Western industrialized culture and how they weave into social values. She suggests that the use of commonly prescribed drugs such as diazepam (brand name valium) have become “normalized” as a result of expected cultural behavior norms. In regards to this she states, “Psychotropic drug use is embedded in a matrix of social values and expectations…In this setting, the drug can be used to improve social relationships by bringing one’s behavior (and emotions) into conformity with an idealized model of normal behavior” (Helman 2000:141). Helman’s study of fifty long term substance users revealed an overreaching
consensus that the drive to “use” was largely due to maintain “normal” behaviors in relationships such as “self-controlled, good to live with, nurturing, non-complaining, sociable and assertive” (Helman 2000:114). Her participants reported that without the drugs their mood and behavior was opposite to these desired traits and caused relationship problems. Helman suggests that the “normalization” of narcotic pharmaceuticals could relate to doctors and pharmaceutical companies who promulgate and advertise the social values of what was defined above as “normal.” She reports that from the 1960 – 1990 tranquilizers such as diazepam and other relaxants such as sleeping aids were the number one prescribed class of drugs (Helman 2000:140). Once Prozac was introduced in 1987, dissemination of prescription tranquilizers lessened considerably. By 1994 Prozac became the second most commonly prescribed drug in the world (Zantac was number one). This example illustrates how macro and micro contexts play roles in the attitudes and actions of substance use.

Michael Dietler (2006) suggests that all cultures have an attached meaning to alcohol and it is usually one that has charge. He proposes that alcohol should be classified as a type of food and within the category of embodied material culture. However, he suggests that because of the psychoactive qualities there is usually a much stronger emotional affiliation associated with alcohol versus other types of foods. Dietler suggests that drinking alcohol can… “Form a versatile and highly charged symbolic medium and social tool that are operative in the playing out of ritual and politics, and in the construction of social and economic relations, in crucial ways” (Dietler 2006:232). He discusses alcohol studies as seen through the lens of practice theory. Dietler convenes that from the practice perspective drinking alcohol is part of a social practice that helps
facilitate construction of the social world. In practice theory, drinking does not simply function to express identity, but rather in this view identity is created, preformed and evolves. It moves through many boundaries and social categories such as ethnicity, gender and age. In this sense, identity construction through the medium of alcohol use or nonuse, serves as a marker for inclusion and separation in various sociocultural categories.

This overview of substance use highlights that the use and abuse of psychoactive substances is deeply rooted into the human experience. Nevertheless, abusive consumption patterns can lead to dependency. In turn, abuse and dependence can cause serious negative consequences for individuals, families and the public at large. When this happens, those who abuse substances often seek or are forced into treatment through family or law enforcement. Treatment for substance abuse and/or dependency is often referred to in the literature and in popular culture as “recovery.”

**Spiritual Modes of Substance Abuse Treatment**

This section reflects on perspectives of Twelve Step programs and other spiritual/religious options for drug and alcohol rehabilitation. Many social scientists from numerous disciplines have examined the various aspects of why and how AA works, thus, most of the review focuses on AA.Anthropologists have made a smaller dent in Twelve Step studies when compared to other social sciences. Therefore, in this review I have also included perspectives from alcohol studies, communications studies and sociology.

Anthropologist and AA member Danny Wilcox (1998) performed a three year study of AA which included attending over 600 meetings and participating in numerous
social gatherings with AAs outside of meetings. The ethnography that came out of this study examines culture transmission and language in AA. Wilcox has a primary focus upon a concept highly discussed in AA called “alcoholic thinking.” Wilcox argues that alcohol dependent persons prior to treatment were operating under an “epistemological error” which alcohol temporarily relieved. He suggests that the error stems from a misconstrued internalization of the American cultural value of self-sufficiency and “The perception of self as an autonomous, independent source of power” (Wilcox 1998:120). Wilcox states that dependency on anyone or anything is looked at negatively in American culture. He believes that this aspect keeps “alcoholics” lingering longer in denial of their problem because being able to control and manage one’s own affairs is highly valued in the US. Wilcox suggests that the erroneous epistemology, or “alcoholic thinking,” was an unrealistic system of beliefs that formed attitudes and drove behavior. Based on reports from members he suggests that the more alcohol abusers were unable to fulfill or uphold cultural values or expectations, the more isolated and lonely they felt. He states that the maladaptive belief system was referred to as “alcoholic thinking” because it can keep the alcoholic drinking and can prevent long term sobriety. In regards to this Wilcox states, “In short, alcoholic thinking is the way that their interpretation of values and beliefs they acquired as members of the American culture conflicted with and confused the reality of existence” (Wilcox 1998:85). Wilcox states that AA assists in the correction of the epistemological error through the cultural transmission of a new value system that focuses on community interdependence, social service, acceptance and love. The AA meeting serves as the place for cultural transmission of new the value system. It is here that Wilcox discovered that AA members, “…shared a unique worldview that
contrasted to many popular American values, attitudes and beliefs, and that they were engaged in a group psychotherapeutic exercise that used language as the primary tool to foster radical change in the behavior of the alcoholic” (Wilcox 1998:26).

Anthropologist Carole Caine (1991) discusses the importance of storytelling as a method for identity transformation in AA. She relates that the personal narratives shared in AA meetings act as a method for cultural transmission of what it means to be an “AA alcoholic.” She suggests that successful rehabilitation depends on a re-interpretation of one’s problems to match the AA perspective. Caine argues that once a member embraces the “AA story model” and begins to relate their own problems in that paradigm, they start to understand themselves and their lives as an “AA alcoholic” (Caine 1991:215). She relates that the story telling process is the method by which members undergo identity transformation from drinker, to AA member and lastly to sober alcoholic. She relates that members who did not undergo an identity transformation that aligned with the AA model were also unable to stay sober. She suggests that the AA treatment model works best for those who transform their behavior and their identity to AA’s cultural script. She conjectures that medical care alone is not sufficient for recovery from alcohol dependence and that identity transformation plays a major role in successful rehabilitation.

Sociologists David Rudy and Arthur Greil (1988) argue that AA is an identity transformation organization (ITO). ITOs require their members to undergo pervasive worldview and identity shifts. Part of these shifts pertain to members goals aligning with the organization. According to Rudy and Greil, ITOs attempt to “encapsulate” individuals within the organization, creating a “social cocoon.” This method bombards
newer individuals with the “definitions” that help create the desired new identity, as well as assists in the transformation process. They explain that these types of organizations receive membership on a voluntary basis but firm commitment to the group is necessary. One way in which commitment and identity transformation can occur is if the ITO gets its members to align their own goals with that of the group. Rudy and Greil argue that this mechanism of “encapsulation” and aligning one’s goals with the ITO’s goals can lead to feelings of transcendence and institutional awe, and can thus be perceived as a “spiritual experience.”

Rudy and Greil explore how well AA fits within the various academic definitions of religion but state that, “It is hard to answer the question in an unequivocal way, since members are allowed considerable leeway to interpret AA ideology as they see fit” (Rudy and Greil 1988:44). They determine that on the surface there are certain features of AA that are found in many religious organizations such as a perceived super natural power. Also, AA ideology provides a system of meaning for people’s lives, as well as teaches norms and values. On the other hand, AA literature explains that one’s “Higher Power” can be the AA group. This alternative eliminates the need for supernatural forces and thus supplants power to the social group. According to Rudy and Greil, most importantly, AA cannot be called a religion because it denies itself as such and instead proclaims to be spiritual organization. Therefore, they consider the more relevant question to be not, how is AA like a religion? But rather why they deny being a religion? In regards to this they state:

What is interesting about A.A.’s ideology in this regard is the obstinacy with which the organization and its members cling to ambiguity. What needs to be explained is why A.A. has developed an ideology in which the religious and its
denial exist in a state of dynamic tension. A.A. is neither religious or not-religious: it is quasi-religious. It is the "sort of" quality of A.A.'s religious aspect which demands exploration and explanation. (Rudy and Greil 1988:47)

Rudy and Greil suggest that there are many diverse explanations as to the quasi-religious nature of AA. Most overtly is that the founders drew heavily from the Oxford Group model to develop their “program of recovery.” Additionally, making the organization “spiritual but not religious” allows for AA to reach a wider audience. This aspect is more conducive for the therapeutic purposes that AA seeks to address. Rudy and Greil argue that these aspects are not enough to keep the “transcendent” aspect of the organization alive. They ask, why constantly deny its religious resemblance? What benefits can be gained from the constant tension between sacred and secular? Rudy and Greil explain that the tension serves an important function for the organization to fulfill therapeutic value and allows for the opportunity for identity and worldview transformations:

The ideological tension cannot be resolved any more than the organizational tension can be. To be therapeutic, A.A. must be all-encompassing. To be all encompassing, it must institutionalize a feeling of transcendence. But, to take transcendence too literally might result in compromising the therapeutic goal (Rudy and Greil 1998:49).

Therefore, they argue that the quasi-religious nature of AA serves its ability to function as an identity transformation organization.

Communications scholar Francine Marrus explores what she calls “transformational myths” in AA. She suggests that transformational myths promote and create the appearance of wellness that the alcoholic can achieve via AA. She argues that the wellness stories are derived from recurrent mythic notions that function to create and
perpetuate the unity of AA, and thus allow for a transformational experience. Marrus defines myth as a way in which groups can “structure their reality” and “transmit the organizational culture” (Marrus 1999:303). She states that, “AA has a language world of its own” which she suggests, “act to reinforce organizational perceptions of wellness” (Marrus 1999:312). Marrus conducted field work at thirty meetings within eight different communities in California and Texas. In addition she interviewed sixty AA members. Marrus argues that polarity, community, spirituality and responsibility are the four prominent notions that feature within the various wellness myths.

Marrus states that the first transformational myth that the newcomer is exposed to conveys a message of polarity and can be seen as “us versus them,” or alcoholics versus the “normal” person (Marrus 1999:306). She states that the connotation in this case is one that emphasizes the alcoholic in a positive light versus the condemning view that newcomers have of their condition. The myth of community is closely tied to polarity. Once the AA member comes to identify more with AA through the polarized view, the sense of belonging can further nurture the member’s commitment to the AA. According to Marrus:

The myth of community has a number of effects. For instance, members are indoctrinated into a community that stresses fellowship and belonging, where they can separate their acceptance as an individual from the non-acceptance of their disease. It helps strengthen AA in that once the member buys into the community myth, he or she has a stronger stake in maintaining the organization by supporting its values and goals (Marrus 1999:308).

Marrus states that spirituality is a strong myth in AA and is communicated through stories of how a Higher Power (HP) can empower the alcoholic to overcome dependency. Additionally, HP stories include another theme of miracles of transformation. According
to Marrus, the myth of responsibility is closely related to the spirituality myth because it suggests that AA and one’s HP are responsible for their sobriety. In turn, this supports the “myth” of service. She suggests that the myths that relate to community are foundational for the organization because they propagate unity.

Anthropologist Ann Marie Minnick’s argues that the popularity of Twelve Step programs is a response to a cultural crisis affecting the white middle class Protestant population in the US. Her examination of Al-Anon illuminates how the various Twelve Step programs respond to the lack of fulfillment and absence of meaning experienced by many who are part of the dominant US culture. She argues that Twelve Step programs respond well to these crises because ultimately its focus is spiritual in nature. Minnick states, “Although social and psychological dimensions are evident in the crises of identity facing dominant-culture Americans, at heart the crisis is spiritual and moral because it stems from a disorientation in people’s value frameworks, in their ways of viewing, understanding and being in the world” (Minnick 1997:3-4). Her ethnographic case study highlights the experiences of Al-Anon group members.

Minnick explains that the social structure in the US has been undergoing tremendous changes since the World War II era. She notes that the changes are external but also internalized. She states that advances in technologies, economic highs, economic pitfalls, urban sprawl, prevalence of mass media and increases in leisure and commodities are some external contributing factors. On the other hand, Minnick relates that Americans have been undergoing shifts in perceptions of self, “Standards of personal success, behavioral norms and guidelines, clearly delineated social roles, and what it means to be a person of worth and value are no longer readily apparent” (Minnick
1997:3). She states that these shifts are allowing for marginalized groups to come into better positions but it is also “disorienting” for the dominant culture. She relates that organized religious institutions have often acted as a support structure during uneasy times but dissatisfaction with these institutions are making seekers explore new options. Minnick argues that as a result marginalized religions and spiritual organizations have become attractive options. Some includes the examples of charismatic Catholicism, eastern mysticism and Twelve Step programs. Minnick suggests that the Twelve Step programs are successful because they offer a moral code and new framework of meaning which have in the past been addressed by organized religious institutions.

Anthropologist Paul Antze (1987) reviews and analyzes AA literature in order to gain a deeper understanding of the AA worldview. He argues that AA bears similarities to traditional healing cults infused with Protestant symbolism. Antze sees that AA shares significant similarities to Ndembu “cults of affliction” that were studied by Victor Turner. He reports that Ndembu ancestral shades are thought to be responsible for misfortune, such as minor illness or bad luck in hunting. The Ndembu cults perform curative rituals, sufferers are initiated into a community which has overcome the shade affliction. In essence the sufferers become the healers. Bonds between cult members are strong and create long lasting solidarity. Once the shade has been revealed and pacified it can turn into a confidant. He suggests that this process is akin to AA’s program. However, while the process bears resemblance, he notes that AA draws on Protestant symbolism and the theology of sin and salvation.

Antze relates that the disease model of alcoholism was popularized by AA and is used by them as a way to explain the cause of alcohol dependency (Anzte 1989:155). He
discusses that according to AA literature, practicing “alcoholics” have a physical sensitivity and a mental obsession which drives the afflicted to compulsively drink. Abstinence and a Higher Power can alleviate the mental obsession but the physical sensitivity is permanent thereby making abstinence a necessary way of life. In regards to this Anzte states, “While neither is quite accurate in scientific terms, apparently both capture the lived realities of the situation well enough to ring true for a great many compulsive drinkers” (Anzte 1989:157).

Alcohol studies scholar Milton Maxwell (1984) utilized interview and participant observation in his long term case study of AA. Maxwell argues that a major aspect of AA’s success is its function as both a “transitional” and “specialized” society. He states that it is transitional because one of its major goals is to restore “the alcoholic” back to a well-functioning member of society. He explains that it is specialized because, “...it is attuned to the special feelings and outlook of persons who have become alcoholic” (Maxwell 1984:117). However, he makes clear that alcohol dependence comes in many forms and that AA was designed for, and may thus work best for, those who are classified as “gamma alcoholics.” Maxwell defines a gamma alcoholic as one who uses alcohol to deleterious proportions and is 1) unable to control when they will drink and 2) displays the consistent inability to control consumption once drinking has begun (Maxwell 1984:15). Maxwell states it is specifically the second condition that separates the gamma type from other classifications. Maxwell explains that in the process of becoming “alcoholic” the user under-goes radical changes in their perceptions of themselves and of reality. Maxwell conjectures that AA helps to correct one’s way of thinking and being in the world (Maxwell 1984:118). He suggests that a large portion of new members “buy
into” AA because of a sense of identification, acceptance and warm environment. Maxwell provides a plethora of consultant narratives that support his notions.

Religious studies scholar Robert Fuller (2001) suggests that AA is one of the most well-known holistic health therapies in the US. He argues that Twelve Step programs follow suit with a long tradition of “unchurched” spiritual movements in the US. He illuminates that while new spiritual movements may seem exotic, a closer examination reveals five common themes among individual seekers. First, the seekers desire to be able to choose the criteria for which to believe; second, is sensibility over dogma; third, an aversion to institutionalized religion; fourth, the idea that self holds infinite potential; fifth, a deep interest in the metaphysical (Fuller 2001:75-6). Fuller reports that 20% of Americans are unchurched and yet appear deeply religious. This is largely the sector that identify as spiritual but not religious. Fuller states that AA’s success is largely a result of mysticism that stands in contrast to institutionalized religions. Additionally, he suggests that AA’s focus on psychological and spiritual modes of healing over a medicalized one is also attractive to seekers. In regards to AA’s success Fuller states, “…its open-minded and eclectic approach to spiritual regeneration makes it one of the most powerful meditators of wholeness in America today” (Fuller 2001:115).

The overview of the above studies demonstrates how Twelve Step programs, particularly AA, function and succeed. Despite the perceived flexible and inclusive nature that Twelve Step programs promote, scholars have reported that Twelve Step seekers can experience ideological conflicts. From these studies it can be seen that AA is not a one size fits all treatment option. The commonality of alcohol dependence or substance abuse family support is not the only factor under consideration for a treatment
to be viable. Cultural and subcultural worldviews need to align with the treatment modality for it to be a success. As discussed above, AA draws from Christian theology and was developed by middle class white American protestant men. These factors play critical roles in the perspective that AA transmits. The following case studies illuminate some of the challenges that Twelve Step seekers have encountered in their experience with AA.

In his study on Native American drinking challenges, Paul Spicer (2001) relates that anthropologists have predominately focused on the reasons why people drink (e.g. oppression). He argues that shifting research attention to why people stop drinking might offer more promise in developing treatment models versus trying to understand why they started (Spicer 2001:227). He relates that many studies have focused on rehabilitation at the institutional level, or group recovery processes versus looking at individual experiences. Spicer focuses his study on several individuals and relates their narratives of why heavy drinking is no longer desirable. He found that his consultants were resistant to the AA model because they felt it was too “white” and “very Christian.” Spicer learned that they wanted abstinence because of the way heavy drinking was interfering with living up to the “Indian” cultural ideal of provider.

Selena Fox’s (1995) seminal study on Neo-Pagans in AA focused on exploring experiences of participants who had past or active membership in AA. Fox reached a wide audience and attracted fifty two participants by advertising through Neo-Pagan media sources. She utilized a letter questionnaire method that was mailed and returned by participants. Participants came from twenty seven different states and practiced within a variety of Pagan traditions. Fox’s results indicate that there is an eclectic range
of experiences that Pagans have in regards to AA participation. Her data set returned five dominant perspectives: 1) refusal, seeing AA as incompatible with Pagan ideology; 2) initial participation was abandoned after perceived prejudice of being Pagan; 3) people received initial benefits but left after feeling they outgrew the need for it; 4) continued participation with Pagan oriented adaptations; and lastly 5) supplemented or substituted their recovery with a “Pagan-oriented” group. Fox argues that AA can be seen as a “suitable” treatment option for some but not all Pagans. She states that, “…AA is not an automatic fit for Pagans and that Pagans who are working with the AA program have found it necessary to make adaptations” (Fox 1995:37).

Anthropologist Tanice Foltz’s (2000) study with “Sober Witches” suggests that feminine gendered spirituality practices complement, and in some cases can be a substituted, for “recovery” work in former alcohol dependent women. Her study involved the interview of ten women and survey data from fifty two women. She related that of the ten women she conducted interviews with, most were practicing within the tradition of feminist Dianic Witchcraft. Foltz used the term “Goddess spirituality” to refer to women who identify as Wiccan, Pagan or Gaians, who celebrate the Goddess and engage in women-only rituals. Foltz relates that Goddess spirituality offers healing to women through gendered focus practices that encourage female empowerment. She contends that this is opposite to the philosophy found in AA because of its patriarchal slant. Foltz uncovered that there were three healing aspects that Goddess spirituality fulfilled that were absent from their AA involvement: 1) a holistic approach to healing; 2) a healing spiritual community; and 3) a celebration of women (Foltz 2000:127). As a result Foltz argues, “Because AA is missing a key spiritual component for many women
we need to take a closer look at Goddess-oriented recovery groups as therapeutic alternatives to AA” (Foltz: 2000:133). A further look at feminist Witchcraft and ASC for healing substance use helps to illuminate Foltz’s findings.

According to anthropologist Susan Greenwood, feminist Witchcraft places a considerable amount of attention on healing self, others and the environment. Greenwood (2000) argues that feminist Witchcraft offers a space, through ritual, that aims to connect the individual with their true self. “The ultimate aim of feminist Witchcraft spirituality is to connect with the true self, this is seen to liberate the individual’s latent and potential power” (Greenwood 2000:147). She states that the true self is located within the body and is a “stable identity.” Feminist Witchcraft is nature based and draws on shamanistic techniques in sacred rituals and healings. Nondrug induced altered states of consciousness are sought during ritual and are prompted via such methods as drumming and dancing. Greenwood reports that altered states are desired because Witches consider these types of states as “primordial” and can thus link them to the beginning of humanity; before patriarchy and class hierarchy. Ritual space can espouse a new sense of self through a focused intent on connecting with the Goddess within. In Witchcraft “The Goddess is the symbol of a holistic interconnectedness of all creation” fostering this connection is therefore an instrumental part of restoring the “whole self” (Greenwood 2000:143). Rituals help the practitioner to feel empowered through connecting with inner resources.

Michael Winkelman (2001) emphasizes the importance of shamanistic techniques, ritual and ASC work in substance abuse recovery. He suggests that Western culture’s lack of institutionalized means for producing ASC leads to hazardous patterns
of alcohol and drug use. He argues that shamanistic techniques and ASC can act as both a preventative measure and a treatment option for substance abuse. Winkelman explores ethnographic data and discusses the psychobiological aspects of shamanic healing and ritual. He contends that the psychological and biological responses induced by these techniques reflect a primordial and necessary human drive to alter consciousness. Additionally, he reviews neurological processes and discusses how ASC can assist as relapse prevention for substance abusers because the neurological opioid response during ASC is similar to that achieved through commonly abused substances. This aspect induces stress relief; a prime trigger of relapses. Winkelman states, “A view of ASC as a natural human need and a part of evolved disposition suggests that addiction be addressed by providing alternative means of achieving the high addicts seek” (Winkelman 2001:348).

This literature review demonstrates the pervasiveness of psychotropic substances in the experience of being human from pre-history to present. The archaeological record reveals that humans have an extensive history with substances going as far back as the Neolithic. Evidence such as cave paintings with entoptic imagery, poppy seed capsules in burials and fancy cup ware for wine, demonstrate the special status that humans give to mind altering substances. On the other hand, the archaeological record illuminates the possibility that substance abuse, especially with regard to alcohol, is not a modern occurrence. Anthropologists have documented that patterns of substance use are culturally variable and can serve many purposes; however, they can also come with challenges. Most mind altering substances have properties that can lead to dependence in some individuals. In this circumstance, the dependent user not only jeopardizes themself
but also family and community well-being. AA and Al-Anon are the most well known methods for seeking assistance with issues related to substance abuse, alcohol dependence and family support for these issues. Scholars have investigated the mechanisms that make these programs successful for some people. Studies also illuminate that cultural and/or subcultural variances make these popular programs ineffective or challenging for those whose worldviews do not align with a middle class Protestant prospective. It is for these reasons that studies on the marginal voices in Twelve Step programs become vital in the movement to create the most optimal treatment care plans for substance related issues. In the next chapter, I discuss the methodology I employed to give voice to some of those marginal perspectives of members within Twelve Step programs.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Through participant observation and semi-structured interviewing this study sought to give rise to voices of Neo-Pagans who are members of AA and/or Al-Anon. In this chapter I discuss the methodology I employed for this project. I begin with an overview on confidentiality and anonymity so that the reader understands why details of participant descriptions and observation locales are limited or excluded. My methods included five procedures: (1) library and internet research; (2) university and anthropology department proposals; (3) participant observation; (4) recruitment; and (5) interviews. Furthermore, I define classificatory terms that I employ throughout this study and discuss my reasons for making these choices.

Anonymity and Confidentiality

Both AA and Al-Anon operate on the principle of anonymity. The programs’ loosely organized governing system functions in accordance with what they call the Twelve Traditions. Al-Anon literature states that the steps and traditions “are guides for personal growth and group unity” (Al-Anon 2008:399). The Twelve Traditions are nearly identical in the AA and Al-Anon programs. Traditions eleven and twelve focus on anonymity and are designed to keep publicity low and privacy a priority for individual members. Furthermore, the majority of meetings are closed to members only. The organization’s rules surrounding publicity and anonymity make it challenging for researchers to study and assess them. Since “alcoholism” is stigmatized these traditions allow members to keep their private lives in private places without jeopardizing professional, familial and public images.
Neo-Pagan religious misconceptions and prejudice are equally if not more prevalent. Neo-Pagans are often misrepresented in the media and in popular culture as having an association with Satan or other forms of malevolence. Fox’s study uncovered that Neo-Pagans were experiencing prejudice and/or ridicule within the AA organization. Fox suggests that Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step programs have a “dual anonymity concern” (Fox 1995:17). In accordance with this, I have made it an utmost priority to protect participant identities. Thus, descriptive information is limited to a pseudonym, gender, approximate age and length of time as Neo-Pagan and Twelve Step member.

**Methods**

Background research included becoming extensively familiar with studies in alcohol use/abuse, Neo-Paganism, Twelve Step programs and altered states of consciousness. I found minimal academic work on Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step programs. Therefore, I largely relied on the internet for leads to resources, meeting locations and an overall picture of the progression and happenings of Neo-Pagans involved with Twelve Step programs.

Administrative procedures included writing an anthropology department proposal and a university proposal. The university proposal included human research subjects’ protocol. In accordance with university requirements I submitted a packet for approval by the Institutional Review Board. The packet included a proposal, recruitment procedures, project instruments, adult consent form and participant bill of rights.

In order to establish a sense of both Neo-Pagan and Twelve Step culture I participated in several events which included Neo-Pagan rituals, Neo-Pagan adapted Twelve Step meetings, a Neo-Pagan workshop and AA with Al-Anon participation.
conventions. I attended three public Neo-Pagan rituals. Two were for wheel of the year holidays, and one was a full moon ritual. I made a contact at one of these events who cordially invited me to a private ritual which I attended and took part in. I attended two Neo-Pagan adapted Twelve Step meetings. I contacted three different groups that I found through internet advertisements; one of which I heard back from. I let the contact person know that I was a student researcher who wanted to observe and perhaps make contacts for my graduate research project. Following, he gave me written authorization to attend the Neo-Pagan Twelve Step meeting. Upon arrival, I announced my intention to the group leader and was enthusiastically given permission to stay. The meeting drew from a standard Twelve Step model format with some Neo-Pagan touches interspersed. Among them was a circle casting at the beginning of the meeting. At the end a Neo-Pagan version of the Serenity Prayer was recited (see appendix G). At the Neo-Pagan Twelve Step meeting, persons from any and all Twelve Step groups were welcome to attend, as well as other open minded non Twelve Step members. Lastly, I participated in a Neo-Pagan workshop which was conducted by Starhawk and hosted by Reclaiming Los Angeles.

In 2010 I performed a participant observation research study within the Twelve Step movement by attending an AA with Al-Anon participation convention for a festivals and pilgrimage course. Conventions are designated as “open” events by these organizations and anyone who is willing to pay the registration fee may participate in the conventions events. For this current project I took advantage of this opportunity again and visited another convention. These conventions were three day events with around the clock AA and Al-Anon meetings as well as other social activities. My combined visits
afforded me ample opportunity to attend meetings from both programs and to fully observe and absorb AA and Al-Anon culture both within meetings and in the social arenas outside of meetings.

Volunteers for this project were recruited through meetings, Neo-Pagan rites, advisors and committed participant referrals. I met several contacts at both the Neo-Pagan Twelve Step meetings and public Pagan rites. Two participants were referred to me through faculty advisors. This accounted for half of the participants. From that base, I gained referrals through participants who committed to the project. When meeting prospects I was clear about my project and my intentions. I asked for permission to call prospects that expressed interest in participating. Upon calling, I again thoroughly explained my project and answered their questions. Afterward, I asked them to relate what they understood my project to entail. Once I ensured that the project goals and procedures were clear, I set up an appointment for an interview.

Most interviews were set up to meet in public settings with the exception of two which were conducted over the phone. I issued and reviewed the consent form and bill of rights form prior to the interview process. All interviews were tape recorded with signed prior consent as per the adult consent form. I had nine prompts to facilitate the interview which included a brief history into becoming Neo-Pagan, Twelve Step involvement, conceptions and practices of two core steps, conflict resolutions and spiritual experiences or practices that impacted their recovery. I did not use any special equipment and worked solely with my voice recorder, my home computer and Microsoft word. After each interview I transcribed the material into Microsoft word documents and applied pseudonyms where any persons, places or groups were named. After transcriptions of all
interviews were completed I color coded each topic using the highlight application in word. For example, all discussions on step three were highlighted with pink and for step eleven I used blue, etc. After color coding was complete I printed the transcriptions and grouped them by color in order to look for patterns.

Definitions and Designations

For this study I am adopting the World Health Organization’s (WHO) definition of substance abuse, which is “harmful or hazardous use of psychoactive substances” (WHO 2011). I employed this definition in order to acknowledge that substance abuse comes in many forms and often includes abuse of multiple substances. The majority of my consultant’s primary “recovery program” was AA, therefore my literature references are largely based in alcohol abuse studies. Additionally, I use the terms drug and alcohol disorders, substance abuse challenges and alcohol dependence when discussing groups, individuals or family members who are experiencing difficulties in this regard. These terms are relatively neutral and help me to avoid classifying people as “alcoholic” or “drug addicts.” These labels have stigma attached to them and imply chronicity. In addition, many substance abusers are coerced to take, or are assigned to take, these labels by Western medical professionals. Anthropologist Sue Estroff (1993) argues that the label of “alcoholic” assumes chronicity and incurability. Estroff clarifies that there are two linguistic categories in which illnesses are described in Western medical discourse. First, there are illness labels that end in “ic” such as alcoholic; these chronic (ic) conditions are linguistically constructed as “I am” and are related as “I am alcoholic.” Other people also refer to the individual as being the illness and they are designated as, “he is alcoholic.” The second category of illnesses does not have the “ic” suffix and are
discussed as the patient having the illness versus being the illness. Estroff discusses that
the “I am” disorders are often stigmatized, are in relation to cognitive malfunction and
contain an element of mysteriousness. The “I have” category implies that the illness is
temporary, solvable and can be interpreted by the patient as “not me.” According to
Estroff the “I am” category requires the patient to take on the illness as part of their
identity. I feel that I do not have the authority to assign people with labels that carry such
weight. Other aspects of substance abuse challenges, such as the ambiguous nature, and
the relatively little understanding we have of it, were also considered. For all of these
reasons, I have chosen to apply terms such as substance abuse or drug and alcohol
disorders throughout this study. However, there are studies that apply the former terms
and I use them when discussing academic work that uses these designations. In such
cases I indicate it as a researcher’s choice by using quotation marks.

In similar stance I also find the term “recovery” equally problematic as it also
implies chronicity and incurability. From my perspective I feel it describes individuals
and groups in perpetual liminality. I do not feel I have the authority to make judgments
on the curability of illness experiences. To mitigate this I have experimented with using
the phrase Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step programs. One of my consultants identified as a
“Twelve Stepper,” and because of its more factual connotation I have embraced this term
as well. Conversely, “recovery” as a classificatory term is useful, and there are moments,
for lack of a better term, I do use it. Although I do so sparingly, and in such cases I
utilize quotations.

I have also remained careful throughout this study to avoid using the statement
“AA believes.” I recognize that it is useful to do so for the purpose of classifications and
discussions on group dynamics and values. However, it is my utmost intention to consider the heterogeneity and opposing viewpoints of the communities in which my study focuses. I have attempted to identify all occasions when the perspective being related is an individual's or a community's voice. Anthropologist, Paul Antze relates that AAs' use of printed media is crucial to dissemination of information about the organization. According to Antze, materials are chosen and approved via a central governing system, known as the General Service Conference (GSC). He reports that the GSC employs elected officials to represent each membership region. They employ a voting technique called a "group conscience" which allows members to make decisions about literature and other organizational concerns. Antze reports that a major function of the GSC is to ensure that publications remain consistent with the overall "group conscience." Antze states, "It is because of this body's activity – and only because of it – that we may employ such phrases as 'AA says' or 'according to AA' with some reliability."

I firmly oppose this position in favor of recognizing that group elections do not reflect marginal viewpoints or marginalized people. The "group conscience" only needs to be on a basis of two out of three total votes, which seems reasonable when looking at small groups. However, when moving into cases where districts have much larger numbers the discrepancy of this method becomes more apparent. In order to reflect on how this works a quick look using a fictitious example is useful. Let us say, for example, there is a GSC of one hundred people, if fifty one members vote yes on a piece of literature and forty nine vote no, the group conscience favors the fifty one yes votes. Therefore, the forty nine viewpoints who do not favor the piece of literature are not
represented in the group conscience. My sentiments are further supported by Minnick’s ethnographic case study on Al-anon when she reports, “There are, of course many who do not support the Program or who feel they are unable to express their religious preferences in it. These people no doubt leave, or, if they do stay, they do not get their views printed in organization-produced materials” (Minnick 1997:65).

In accordance with my position I have chosen several tactics to distinguish viewpoints. When drawing from literature approved by AA’s group conscience I apply statements such as “AA literature states,” or “according to Al-Anon literature.” In cases where authors choose these generalized population statements I have tried to indicate it by explicitly stating so. For example, “According to Antze AA believes.” This method can be repetitive to the reader but is important for clarity of viewpoints. The next chapter well demonstrates the multiplicity of perspectives that can be found amid individuals who participate within the same subcultural group. Forthcoming, I introduce the participants who volunteered for this project. Here it will be seen how documenting subjective experiences illuminates diversity.
CHAPTER 4: POLYTHEISTIC TWELVE STEPPING

This section is divided into three parts and reflects the three areas that I investigated which were conceptions, conflicts and spiritual experiences. In the first section, I introduce the participants who volunteered for this project. There were twelve participants, with each of whom I conducted live interviews. There were seven females and five males. Participant ages ranged between thirty and sixty five. However, this is an approximation based on my interaction with them, with the exception of a few cases where age was revealed. To protect anonymity and confidentiality I have left out a lot of descriptive information about participants. I have instead chosen to describe participants in accordance with the pieces of their lives that they chose to share with me. To create context I provide some background information on their Twelve Step membership and how they were introduced to Paganism. Participant background information is embedded in their conceptions of the two steps that I inquired on.

In section two I discuss ideological conflicts or discomfort that participants experienced on account of having a religious or spiritual world view that differs from the Christian orientated nature of Twelve Step programs. Lastly, I relate spiritual practices and experiences that some participants related as having profound impacts on their lives. I follow each section of participant descriptions and personal narratives with a discussion on academic work that relates to the content presented.

Conceptualizing the Steps

In attempt to understand the Neo-Pagan Twelve Step perspective I explored how Neo-Pagans were conceptualizing and practicing step three and step eleven. I presumed that exploring these “spiritual” steps would lead to key insights into how Neo-Pagans
apply their ideology to the Twelve Step model. I posed the following two questions as a prompt into this exploration:

1) Describe how you conceptualize and practice the third step which states, “Made a decision to turn our will and lives over to the care of God as we understood Him” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:59).

2) Describe how you conceptualize and practice the eleventh step which states, “Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for the knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out” (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001:59).

The attempt to make these steps “spiritual and not religious” by AA’s early co-founders by including the italicized “as we understood Him” was commendable and progressive for the 1930s in the US. Nevertheless, religious and ethnic diversity among the early AAs was not as prominent as it is today. Contemporary AA and Al-Anon literature have not been updated to reflect religious diversity or gender equality. These steps still resemble the patriarchal monotheistic Christian orientation from which they were derived. This is very different from a Neo-Pagan worldview which is generally polytheistic and largely influenced by the feminist movement (Adler 1986:21). I also specifically inquired on these steps because I thought that there could be conflict for Wiccans who practice magic – a process that requires one to project one’s will out into the universe rather than surrendering it as implied in the third step. Starhawk states that, “Through spells, we can attain the most important power – the power to change ourselves” (Starhawk 1999:138). Step three is the foundation that leads to asking the divine to change oneself. Repeated messages in AA and Al-Anon literature suggests that
one cannot change themselves, “…I lack the power to heal myself. Only my Higher Power can do that” (Al-Anon bib 1992:31).

Two repeating concepts that came up in discussions on these steps were the idea of “self-will” or “my will” and “God’s will.” In AA literature, one’s self-will is seen as part of the problem that is causing suffering. Bill Wilson called it “self will run riot” (AA 2001:62). Several participants related various perceptions and opinions on the concept of will as a Neo-Pagan and as a Twelve Stepper. The Big Book states, “So our troubles, we think, are basically of our own making. They arise out of ourselves, and the alcoholic is an extreme example of self-will run riot, though he usually doesn’t think so” (AA 2001:62). Al-Anon literature states, “Instead of relying upon our ego or self-will to direct our lives and the lives of others, we draw upon the strength, wisdom, and compassion of a Power greater than ourselves” (Al-Anon family Groups 2008:7). Four participants discussed self-will, and most made mention of how “their will” was not working in their lives. Five participants found the statement of seeking God’s will to be inaccurate or irrelevant. Also, closely connected to will and these steps was that I uncovered that most participants perceived that there were two types of deities. I can best describe this as the immanent and the formed. This is consistent with literature that discusses Neo-Pagan’s world view (e.g. Adler 1986; Hardman and Harvey 1996; and Magliocco 2004). Marc described this to me best when he explicitly related that in his belief system he has a “belief deity” and a “practice deity.”

Marc has been sober in AA for eighteen years. He has been a practicing Neo-Pagan for thirteen years. He was introduced to Neo-Paganism through his local Unitarian Universalist church. He explained that he dove into Paganism after his first ritual
experience of which he stated, “It really resonated for me.” The focus of the ritual was connecting with the elements and a guided meditation was conducted in this regard. He said that connecting with the elements brought him back to his childhood and the connection he had with the redwood trees that populated his hometown. As a child he felt like the massive trees were like cathedrals. Marc’s first ritual was Wiccan based and involved raising energy through the spiral dance. He later found the Druid path and is now an ordained Priest. He stated that his first experience made a huge impact on him and he felt that, “The whole experience was really profoundly right.”

When I asked him how he conceptualized and practiced step three he related his notions of spirituality. He said that there are two types of deity in his belief system. The first type of deity he refers to as “belief deity.” His belief deity is an abstract white light that cannot be understood. This is the deity he uses for his step three work. Then he has “practice deities” that he calls upon in ritual. He considered ritual and any other meditative exercise as part of his eleventh step practice. Marc calls upon many gods and goddesses from a variety of pantheons during rituals. He relates that, “Practice is very different from belief.” He feels that this distinction is crucial because in Druidry; “we don’t tell anyone what to believe.” Magliocco observes that this is not only the case in Druidry but rather this is an aspect that is important to the Neo-Pagan movement as a whole: “For it is praxis, rather than belief, that is the central rubric uniting Neo-Pagan religions” (Magliocco 2004:69). Marc also related that he didn’t have to worry about the Neo-Pagan tensions on “will” in the third step because the Druid tradition he is a part of does not practice magic.
Lance has been practicing Neo-Paganism for seventeen years. He related that when he looks back at his childhood he thinks that he was probably Neo-Pagan from a very young age. He is a member of both AA and Al-Anon. He has been in recovery for five years and sober for four. Lance has been involved in a variety of Pagan traditions but he is most at home in the Celtic Wiccan coven where he was initiated. He considers himself a, “Scientific rationalist in that the very nature of the physics of the universe is in all of us, and we are all part of this one whole cosmos, and that is spiritual enough for me.” Lance stated that for him invoking gods in ritual is metaphorical rather than literal.

On his third day sober he went to an AA meeting with an old high school friend. Afterwards, they went to breakfast with another man from the meeting. The man repeatedly asked Lance, “Are you serious about being sober?” Still feeling bewildered by his life circumstance Lance shakily replied “Yes.” Following, the man pointed to the pentacle around Lance’s neck and said “That will work! That will work as your higher Power!” He stated that in the beginning he had a little trouble with the Christian language. But he made a decision to choose tolerance and to quietly make adaptations to the program prayers and language for his personal use. For example, he recites the AA Third Step Prayer every day but instead of petitioning God he petitions Mother Goddess (see appendix H for the third step prayer). He shared that there was a paradox between the Neo-Pagan worldview and AA language. But he stated the same that paradox exists in AA as per the Big Book:

The whole eleventh step ‘sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood him, praying only for the knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out’—so there is a paradox in knowing God’s will for me. The power of the universe is in me – and it’s in the Big Book in the chapter to the agnostics [it says] in the end we found that reality was deep down inside of us—it is only there that he may be found [or]
she may be found, it may be found. It’s inside us – so the paradox for me is that when I am feeling something…I ask myself] is that true? And [if] I still don’t know. I need to continue to practice, and continue to ask for knowledge because sometimes I don’t know whether it’s my own self-centered desires – or if it’s coming from a deeper [place] – the truest place that there is.

The passage that Lance referred to occurs among a discussion on faith in Higher Power being inherent: “Sometimes we had to search fearlessly, but He was there. He was as much a fact as we were. We found the Great Reality deep down within us. In the last analysis it is only there that He may be found. It was so with us” (AA 2001:55).

Tara entered the Al-Anon program as a young adult in order to support her sister who had joined AA for her drug and alcohol disorder. Tara attended meetings for three years, attempted working the steps and tried out eight different sponsors. Ultimately, she did not find the intimate connections or community support she expected or desired. Despite that, Al-Anon helped her in some distinct ways. It was through Al-Anon that she learned about alcoholism and the various manifestations of addiction. She began to see that most of her family fit the description of being “alcoholic.” This insight made Tara decide to be very responsible and mindful of when and how she drinks alcohol. She does not want to end up like her alcohol dependent family members. Unbeknownst to many, she more often drinks nonalcoholic beer than its alcoholic counterpart. She said that this action makes her and her company feel more comfortable because in many social situations drinking is expected. At business functions or when hosting parties she has secretly sought a glass to pour her nonalcoholic beer as a way to remain inconspicuous.

Tara explained that the more spiritual steps in Al-Anon were not challenging for her because she was already strongly rooted in her faith. It was the self-evaluation steps
that were challenging. She felt that the Christian language used in meetings was just one expression of the divine, and she was not affected by its use:

For me I have always been able to look at it – when it comes to religion when people talk about god – in my head I automatically say – Goddess, so for me that was okay. And for me some of the steps I did not feel like I necessarily needed to work – like the idea of turning my life over to, I would say Goddess – the unifying thing is that I understand what my spirituality is to be. I always had a strong sense of that so my will and my life was already committed to that – so looking at that statement then ‘turning my will over’ – well I already have so that was not something that was hard for me to do because I already did it – and I didn’t see the him. For me it was a lower case “g” and a lower case “him” with a “her” next to it. I just assumed that is what they meant. I think they allow that in [saying] as we understand – so for me it wasn’t an issue. And coming into it having a really strong faith base already – it was fine to do that.

Tara shared similar sentiments in regards to step eleven. To this day, she feels that she lives her life with the intention behind steps three and eleven because it was something that came to her naturally. She has continued to foster her spirituality throughout the course of her life.

There were five participants who indicated that they did not feel that god was a director guiding their lives. The meditation part of step eleven worked for them, but the part about seeking God’s will was not relevant to their lives or remained confusing.

Kimber related that she was led to AA through Over-eaters Anonymous. She has been sober for twenty-two years and a practicing Witch for twenty years. As a child she was an atheist but had a book about Greek gods that she adored. She often wished people still worshipped “the old gods.” She had been sober for a few years when she found a book on Neo-Paganism. It took her life in a completely different direction: “The moment I realized there were people who still worshipped the old gods, oh my god that was a big thing for me. You mean I can do this? This is so awesome!” She is an initiated high
priestess but her coven dissipated a while back and she is now a solitary practitioner. She feels that she has a very strong spiritual life and that Paganism complements her AA program very well. In ritual she almost always works with the Greek Pantheon and she feels that Neo-Pagan ritual fulfills a large part of her eleventh step work. However, she does not subscribe to the orientation that any god is directing her life as insinuated by the language of the eleventh step:

There is occasionally some tension over turning your will and your life over to the care of God and praying for his knowledge for his will for you and the power to carry that out. There is tension between that and the notion of Witches and Pagans – we – impose our will on the universe through magic. I see it as almost a false tension in some ways because part of what we do as Pagans and Witches is we do meditate, we do connect with the gods on a very spiritual level – and we try to learn who they are, what they are looking for in the world. We do in fact try to find out what their will is and carry it out to the best of our ability. As a person who has undertaken the training and done invocation work, I have done that kind of meditation – so I don’t necessarily think they are mutually exclusive – but I also do not think that there is a god trying to direct my life. So yes, I know that prayer and meditation is a very good thing and a strong part of my life. But am I looking at this particular god to direct my life? Not quite so much.

Kimber related that in “surrendering her will” for step three, she made up a specific Twelve Step God that she calls Sam. When it comes to step three work, she turns to her AA God because she perceives step three to be only in relation to her alcohol problem. She jokingly related that it would not be a good idea to turn her life over to Dionysus for struggles with drinking. However, she has invoked Dionysus and makes special “accommodations” with gods who generally prefer alcohol as an offering – a creative adaptation that I will detail in the upcoming section.

Tristan has been sober and in AA for thirty two years. He also attends Narcotics Anonymous, Debtors Anonymous and a Pagan-adapted meeting. Many other twelve step programs have also been part of his journey. About twelve years ago he was involved
with a sacred sexuality group that led him to learning about contemporary Paganism. It was around that same time that he started honoring the divine feminine and praying to the Goddess. At the time of our interview he was undergoing training with a Wiccan priestess that he met at his Neo-Pagan Twelve Step meeting. In regards to Neo-Paganism he states “I really do believe in honoring the feminine side of divinity.” He also draws from “the best parts of Christianity” and New Age spiritual practices such as chakra clearing music. He is opposed to the way in which AA and the New Age community discuss “God’s will” as a universal plan that humans are subject to. He believes it can insinuate punishment and guilt. When he contracted a chronic incurable disease, he became intolerant and frustrated with the “God’s will idea.” In the early stages of the illness, he relates he was emotionally uninhibited because the disease attacks the frontal lobe. He didn’t trust himself and he lost his job. Tristan was very upset about contracting the disease as it was negatively impacting all areas of his life. He recalls saying in meetings at that time:

If this is God’s will then he can go fuck himself with a cactus. I was actually saying that in meetings when people would say ‘Oh, it must be God’s will.’ And there is a new age version of that, it goes ‘Oh, figure out what you are supposed to be learning from this.’ That is what I call New Age guilt, if your life sucks it’s because you are not visualizing hard enough, damn it!

Tristan related that he was attracted to the Pagan in Recovery meeting in his area because it was advertised in the local paper as open minded and welcoming to all faiths. He feels that that Neo-Pagan movement is less judgmental and less rigid about spiritual views and “recovery.” Negative experiences in meetings have not deterred him from continuing to cultivate his individual spiritual path. He stated that he often petitions the divine for assistance with his life. Later on in the interview he related:
Because usually there are several crises going on in my life at any given time...there’s a lot of petitioning the divine – [I want] the assurance that everything is alright, [that] my Goddess is not playing practical jokes with my life.

Scott has been in and out of AA for twenty-four years. He related that at one point he had nine years sober. During that stretch of time he was initially very active in AA and with Wicca. He did not have a sponsor and he did not “work the steps,” but he was very involved on a fellowship level. During that time, Scott went to meetings on a regular basis. When he travelled for business he would seek out meetings and attend them. Wicca and the wheel of the year were a dominant part of his spiritual life. Scott related that he was attracted to Wicca because it was nature-centered. He also enjoyed the aesthetics of ritual, the gender equality and egalitarianism. When he reached four years sober, he discontinued AA meeting attendance. He reconvened several years ago after a relapse. Scott has since gone to several treatment centers, all of which encourage AA attendance. At the time of our interview he had one hundred days sober. Scott abandoned group Wiccan rituals after perceiving hypocrisy in the egalitarian tenets. His reverence for nature and the idea of being connected to the cosmos has always remained.

This is a large part of his step three and Higher Power (HP) concept:

I am part of this natural existence, my atoms and molecules were once floating around in the stars and the celestial heavens, and it is kind of ethereal and everything, but it provides me a certain kind of comfort that when I die, I will become part of the natural world again – I’ll go back from whence I came...it’s kind of wondrous and magical in a certain way...So it does give me a certain wonder mystery and awe about it. That’s part of my HP. I don’t believe that there is any sentient or sentimental force behind it. The universe doesn’t have an opinion one way or another about me personally. It’s just pure existence. It just is. No plan. It’s just happening. So it is totally neutral.
Scott struggles greatly with the Christian language in meetings. He feels that the concept of God’s will is erroneous and believes that humans have free will. This, along with his view of a non-sentient universe, has been a source of contention that he has encountered with others in AA. Scott shared that in the past his irreconcilable conceptual differences make him repeatedly leave AA.

Hazel also felt that the idea of God’s will was not compatible with her belief system. She expressed that in her initial membership some AA ideology really troubled her because it was incongruent for her view of the world. After several years, she accepted that that was the dominate perspective and is open in meetings about the parts of the program they do not work for her. Hazel has eight years sober in AA and has also been a member of Al-Anon for five years. She related that she has considered herself Neo-Pagan since she was a child. She was a solitary Witch until several years ago. After a devastating break-up, she followed the advice of a Wiccan friend who told her she needed to find a group of Witches that could help her connect with the healing energy of the Goddess. In regards to rejecting AA ideology, she states:

Step eleven, I kinda ignore the wording of it all together. I conceptualize it as fostering the feeling of interconnectedness that I know underlies the totality of existence. Fostering my spirituality—that’s how I see step eleven….As for the part of the eleventh [step] that states “praying only for knowledge of his will for us and the power to carry that out,” that part doesn’t make sense to me because I don’t think the universe has a will, so to speak. So that part I ignore because it is irrelevant to my life.

She shared that after she started working with a like-minded Wiccan community, many of her qualms with AA ideology dissipated. Hazel explained that she chooses to focus on the spiritual principles of the program, such as honesty, acceptance and introspection rather than the spiritual orientation.
Nicole also did not relate to the idea of God’s will. She shared that she has a pantheist worldview. Nicole has considered herself Pagan since childhood because of her strong connection to and reverence for nature and animals. She has always been a solitary practitioner but her connection and practices have increased as a result of seeking to foster her spirituality as part of her twelve step work. Nicole has been “in and out” of AA for over twenty years. She explained that she had a lot of obstacles with the Christian orientations she heard in AA meetings and in the Big Book. This aspect kept her drinking for a long time. On the day of our interview she stated that she had “nine and three quarter years” sober. Nicole had trouble with the third step for a long time. Eventually, step three meant giving her worries to the universe: “Step three and turning it over means that I shoot my worries up to the universe – I do any footwork but then I let go of the outcome.” In order to help herself with step three, Nicole created a worry box where she inserted questions to the universe. She explained that she would write questions on a Post-it note and then stick it in the box. An example she gave me was that one time she wrote “Will I ever make more than eight dollars an hour?” She stated that eventually this repeated action prompted a permanent change in her conscious mind which allowed her to eliminate the box and more often than not consciously “surrender at will.” Nicole defined the concept of self-will as “acting on impulse and obsession…I want something with no regard for the consequences. I want it and I want it now.” She stated that the wording of the step eleven and the concept of God’s will is confusing for her:

God’s will is confusing because it makes God a thing and like it has a will. I need a concept that is short and simple so I don’t get lost in it…God’s will is all the things I don’t want to do…when you are still…it’s opposite of self-will – you pause and wait until you reach that higher level of consciousness…patience,
tolerance and awareness leads to a feeling – a knowing as to what I should do...[it’s] being still and waiting until I know what I should do...but it’s not coming from the conscious mind which gets me muddled; it comes from within.

Four participants felt that their will wasn’t working for them and that they wanted to connect with or allow a guiding force to help them.

Sophie is an ordained Wiccan priestess. She has been in recovery for seven years. Her primary programs are Al-Anon and CoDA. She dabbled with Wicca as a teenager but it wasn’t until she was in Twelve Step programs that she sought Wicca out as part of the suggestion to foster a spiritual connection. She had profound spiritual experiences at both her first AA meeting and her first Wiccan ritual, both of which prompted her to continue involvement. Both the Twelve Steps and Wicca are an extremely important part of her life. She feels that Wicca and her Twelve Step programs align with each other well. She felt that her will was “questionable.” The one incongruence she found with Pagan and AA ideology was on the concept of self-will and doing spell work:

So there is a certain part in spells, wherein you state this is my bit and this is how I want things to happen. That is not how things work in Twelve Step world. You’re supposed to let go of your will. Self-will is a bad thing. ‘Self will run riot’ ‘my best thinking got me here,’ all that Twelve Step stuff. And I agree with all that...you know for the first twenty-five years of my life, when it was me trying to run the show all by myself, – [it] didn’t really work out too well. You know, I got myself into some pretty deep depressions, bad relationships...until I finally got into program and started giving my will up to the universe and getting the help from other people and my Higher Power – since then things have been improving – so my will is a little questionable.

Sophie feels that the Twelve Steps are her “spiritual foundation.” I will discuss how she adapts spells in accordance with this belief in the next section.

Tyler also felt his will was not working for him. He has been in recovery for four years and has two years sober. His core programs are AA and Crystal Meth Anonymous but he has attended meetings from several other Twelve Step programs. Tyler has a
tumultuous past and has suffered the bleakest consequences of drug and alcohol abuse such as homelessness and physical assaults. He has experienced trouble with the law and he has been admitted into numerous treatment centers. Tyler has been practicing Wicca since he was a teenager; the Goddess and magic are a huge part of his life. Using the Twelve Steps as a guide to direct his new life in recovery has brought him great awareness about himself and the way he used to live. However, the language of the steps and in meetings makes him uncomfortable. As a result he regularly refers to the *Recovery Spiral: A Pagan Path to Healing* over the Big Book. In regards to surrendering his will and step three he stated:

> The third step, making a decision to turn my will… after everything I have been through I was just at a point where I was like, ‘I’m done!’ It was just something that I had to do…because if it was my will I would still be out there doing what I was doing before. I just can’t, [I’m] thirty nine years old; I want something more for my life than…doing drugs and getting arrested and thrown in jail and prosecuted. You know, I used to be a straight ‘A’ student and then all of a sudden it’s like I was sitting in jail. That isn’t me.

Despite being a regular practicing magician, Tyler did not see a conflict in doing spell work and surrendering his will to his Higher Power. For him, these were unrelated practices. He felt that step three was surrendering his “using life” in exchange for a sober life.

Chanel has been in recovery for five years. She attended AA for a couple years and drops in on Al-Anon meetings on as “as needed basis.” She stopped going to AA when she moved from her hometown. While she tried AA in her new location she felt that there was a “negative vibe” and she didn’t have the same support system. She states that AA was the catalyst for her to develop a deeper spiritual life. She draws from Neo-Paganism, Neo-Shamanism and New Age spiritualties. She is very active in spiritual
endeavors and attends public functions and rituals, but she is not a member of any coven or grove. She regularly attends full and new moon rituals, guided trance meditations and public rituals. She recently returned from a ten day pilgrimage to Hawaii in which her sole purpose was to connect with the Goddess of the volcano, Pele. Chanel related that she was suffering from heartbreak over a guy, fear over being unemployed for several months and overall grief about approaching forty and not having the kind of life she desired. She related, “I was having a really tough time directing my life.” Her turmoil made her feel like she needed the healing energy of Mother Earth and the refuge of the Divine Feminine. She felt called by the Goddess Pele to retreat to the main island of Hawaii. She began her journey on the volcano side of the island where the Goddess Pele is known to reside. She drove the entire island full circle. She stopped at bed and breakfasts and did several nature hikes where she received three messages from the Goddess about how she needed to re-direct her life: self-commitment, balance and self-value. At the end of her journey she was back in the town where she began. She did a “releasing ritual” that included meditation, communing with the Goddess and planting written intentions within lava rocks by the ocean’s edge. This spiritual pilgrimage did wonders for her and she returned feeling renewed and restored. She got a full-time job within three days of returning from her journey. I asked how she came upon the idea of doing the pilgrimage. She laughed and said, “Oh, having a complete melt-down that requires talking to Goddesses Pele and then going to Hawaii.” This was a first-time experience for Chanel but nonetheless an extreme example of how Chanel conceptualized turning her will and life over to the care of her Higher Powers.
Violet has been practicing Celtic Witchcraft for twenty years. She joined Al-Anon five years ago as a way to help her cope with her husband’s substance abuse disorder. She has “worked the steps” in their original form but she related that it was a struggle for her to get past the Christian oriented language. She stated, “I had to do a lot of mental gymnastics in order to uncover the intention of the steps.” Despite this, she did not refer to any Pagan adapted books or programs because she felt that the steps are “magical and transformative” and she wanted to get the “full effect.” She now sponsors other women in Al-Anon and she also attends a Pagan adapted meeting. She said that once she understood the intention behind step three, she also understood its benefit:

I had to realize that when I get upset, when things don’t seem to be going my way, then I want to take the reins back. I want to think that my conscious mind can come up with decisions about how I should live my life. Then I try to make plans to follow through on those decisions…that never works out – never works out. I knew I had to reach a new level of surrender to that guiding force, whatever that is. Now I call it Goddess. For me I know that it is a metaphor for something – there’s a mystery, there’s a source energy, there’s a consciousness. We can speak of it as the source that is the foundation of the creation of the universe, the source energy that created the universe is one way to speak of it. I know that that is accessible to me. I know that my life in this body is an expression of that and that it is important to surrender to that and know the difference between that and the babble within my conscious mind. And to know that what I think I want and my conscious desires, my conscious plans, all of that is just noise. That there is something nonverbal to surrender to that is beyond all of that. And when I turn my life over to that – things work out. So to consciously proceed with the process of surrendering my life to that—on a daily basis or even on a as needed basis—more often than daily is what that step is all about to me.

Violet explained that the paradox of will between the way the Twelve Steps are written and her religious orientation was resolved once she uncovered the intention just described.

All participants conveyed that they were part of the cosmos and not separate from it. This is a different view than the language used in the Twelve Steps which imply that
one’s Higher Power is outside of them. Many participants described an intangible Higher Power that they applied to step three. While step eleven was most often discussed as being open to a deity of choice. Conceptual incompatibility came up most often in discussions of step eleven and the idea of seeking God’s will. Many agreed that the idea of “God’s will” didn’t work for them and they disregarded that portion, or they found a conceptual resolve. Nonetheless, all agreed that the prayer and meditation portion of step eleven was not problematic for them, and everyone discussed their personal practices in this regard. Practices varied per person but included such things as solitary meditations, spell work and religious rites. All participants felt that these practices were beneficial to their emotional well-being.

Step three was not as clear-cut to understand because it entailed a concept, prayer practices and a mental action. Many participants used the concept of surrender in relation to step three. Several participants discussed that turning “one’s will over” meant acknowledging or connecting with the quiet within: that part of self that is not the conscious mind, but is rather beyond the conscious mind. Others described surrendering and “turning one’s will over” as giving their Higher Power various unwanted challenges that they felt were problematic. The challenges were described to me differently per individual but included such things as addictions, compulsions, worries, depression and destructive choices or behaviors. The concept of step three could be described as a commitment to let go of the part of one’s life that is not sustainable. Consultants had an array of practices that they associated with step three. Practices varied per individual, and included such things as putting offerings on an altar and putting notes into a worry box. Both the concept of surrender and individual practices were mentioned to me
repeatedly as part of “working” step three. How does this process offer therapeutic relief?

Maxwell (1984) suggests that steps one, two and three work together and can offer a person an opportunity to create shift in perception, conscious mind and personality. He calls it “saying yes to life” (Maxwell 1984:70). Maxwell removes the spiritual aspect of the steps and discusses them from a therapeutic stand point. He suggests that step one, “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol and our lives had become unmanageable,” is the beginning of breaking denial. It is an admission of one’s inability to direct one’s life in a necessary and/or desired manner. Maxwell suggests that the second step, “We came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity,” offers hope to the sufferer that wellness is possible. He states that the third step is the “basic-change process.” Maxwell notes that combined, the steps can appear confusing or paradoxical, especially the third step. In response to this he states:

…concerning step three, let me make the important point at the outset that what we are talking about here is a deep-down, inner shift in trust and control. It is not a shift from one neurotic dependency to another neurotic dependency – nor a shift to eternal control. Rather, it is an inner shift from a hopeless…closed-in orientation to a fresh orientation of being open to life (Maxwell 1984:75).

Psychiatrist Harry Tiebout (1949) more clearly explains how step three and surrender are involved in change processes. Tiebout examined the therapeutic process of “surrender” in AA. He suggests that there are two types of surrender in AA, one is the “act” of surrender and the other is an emotional “state” of surrender. Tiebout proposes that the act of surrender in AA is an occasion when denial or fighting circumstance ceases and the individual becomes perceptive and accepting of reality. It is a letting go of the struggle one is facing. According to Tiebout, it can be accompanied by a sense of
serenity or peace. The state of surrender is when the act of surrender becomes a way of life and the individual persists with a continued ability to face and accept reality.

Maxwell proposes that in "becoming alcoholic" the sufferer undergoes dramatic distortions of reality. He suggests that AA helps to extinguish those distortions. Maxwell documented several informant statements that supported this idea: "Sobriety to me, is the ability to live with a degree of comfort with the conditions as they truly exist – in the world of reality" (Maxwell 1984:123). Wilcox reports that the AA members in his study affirmed that "Only through a fundamental change in the way the individual perceives the world and the way in which one responds to this new perception can the alcoholic truly recover from alcoholism" (Wilcox 1998:75). Wilcox states that a radical difference was made when subjects willingly let go of ideas about themselves and about life that no longer served them. Minnick (1997) discusses how a change in thinking is also taught and internalized by Al-Anon members. She reports that through Al-Anon members learned that, “…they were not responsible for other people’s behaviors, drinking patterns or for the inability to meet people’s expectations” (Minnick 1997:77). Minnick relates that Al-Anon members were taught to stop trying to control external factors and instead surrender their problems and ineffective actions to their Higher Power.

The therapeutic effectiveness of step three can be seen as a process by which the sufferer undergoes a change in the way they perceive and respond to themselves and to life. This has been seen to happen suddenly, but in most cases it is a gradual process that often requires continued practice (Maxwell 1982:120; Wilcox 1998:75). One example from my data is that of Nicole and her worry box. Nicole used a tangible act of writing
her worries on papers and inserting them in a box. Following, she consciously and physically directed her attention to other things. Eventually, she reported that it changed her internal make-up and she was able to “surrender” worries and re-direct her mind without use of the box. Nicole’s “act” of surrendering led to a “state” of surrendering.

Step three and the concept of surrender can be seen as a process by which Twelve Steppers undergo a change in their interpretations and reactions to life. It is possible then, that the therapeutic value of the Twelve Step concept of surrender lies in directed intention to change the parts of self that no longer serve to foster sustainability in mind, body, spirit and social interaction. While some people in this study took comfort in attributing the action of surrendering to a mystical force, others found it just as effective to surrender to the quiet within, the universe, nature, or circumstances. Once the Christian orientation was removed and the intention understood, most participants in this study felt it was an extremely important part of overcoming their challenges.

While surrender is an important concept, it is not the only one utilized. This concept is one of many that appear to be synergistically woven into one therapeutic system (Maxwell 1984:91). Another method and therapeutic process in twelve step programs which is of extreme importance is identity transformation. In Maxwell’s study overviewed earlier, he does not mention that step one and two, in addition to coinciding with surrender, also help facilitate a new identity. In all likelihood embracing the new identity of AA or Al-Anon member precedes and/or is involved in the ability one has to “surrender” to either the program or program teachings. Identity not only plays a great role in Twelve Step programs but it also plays major roles in religion. Recognizing that Neo-Pagan’s religious orientations and identity constructs are different than the Christian
influenced Twelve Step programs I assumed I would uncover some contentions. I sought to uncover these by directly asking consultants to describe any spiritual or ideological conflicts they had. In the next section participant conflicts and resolutions are explored.

Conflicts and Resolutions

The most common theme of discomfort stated by participants was the reciting of the Lord’s Prayer at meetings and/or the use of Christian patriarchal language. Six participants discussed their dislike of this prayer being used in meetings. Three of those six are taking actions or took action to eliminate its use. The same six who did not like the Lord’s Prayer also expressed dislike of the Christian/patriarchal oriented language. An additional three expressed dislike of the patriarchal oriented language, making that a total of nine participants who were uncomfortable with some aspect of the Christian/patriarchal oriented language and/or prayers. Three participants expressed that the language and prayers did not bother them. Two of those three expressed that they had initial discomfort and one expressed never having discomfort.

As discussed earlier, several participants perceived a paradox between the Twelve Step and Neo-Pagan ideology of “will.” Almost all were able to resolve the conceptual challenge, most often through their polytheistic worldview. However, Sophie felt it was necessary for her to change her spell incantations to reflect her commitment to the Twelve Step philosophy. On the other hand, Kimber made “accommodations” to her AA program in order to conform to her Wiccan invocation practices. Sophie and Kimber shared creative adaptations that they found helped them to resolve ideological conflicts.

Sophie explained that the Twelve Step philosophy was her “spiritual foundation” but she also performs a significant amount of magic. She modifies spell incantations in
order to resolve the paradoxical nature of surrendering her will, as per step three, and enforcing her will, as per magical practices. Here she relates her accommodation:

So what I do, when I am doing a ritual or a spell, for example, in a spell there’s a thing you say: ‘And as I will so shall it be by the power of three times three’. There are a lot of variations on this but it’s saying, ‘This is what I want to happen, so shall it be.’ So what I do when that part comes up is I change it to, ‘as the universe wills so shall it be by the power of three times three.’ So it’s not my will, I am just saying ‘Look I am making myself available, whatever the universe wants to have happen, that’s what I want.’ Because the Twelve Steps are my spiritual foundation, and not having my will is a big part of that – aligning myself with my Higher Power’s will instead of trying to force my will. So when I run across anything in a spell or ritual that I think is promoting me trying to enforce my will, I just make it more like I am open to the universe’s will for me [and] that’s what I want.

Sophie gave an example of how she applies this method. She related that when she went through a period of loneliness and wanting a boyfriend she performed a spell for attracting love into her life. Sophie was in “early recovery” at the time and she did not know if she was emotionally ready for a love relationship. In addition to applying the above incantation, she felt that using a generalized attracting love spell versus a spell to attract a boyfriend, allowed her Higher Power to bring her the kind of love she needed.

Kimber has made adaptations to her AA program by allowing ritual consumption of alcohol. In AA literature and in meeting discourse abstinence of all mind altering substances is highly touted and repeatedly expounded (Maxwell 1984:120). Kimber stated that she partakes in ritual consumption of alcohol as an offering to deities under invocations. During invocation, a worshipper gives up their body to the deity being invoked for a short period of time. At such times an offering is made to the deity by consuming a small quantity of wine. In order to protect her sobriety Kimber takes certain precautions. She explained that when she first works with a new deity she writes up a contract establishing the nature of the relationship. Included in the contract is a statement
that specifies if she drinks alcohol as a form of offering that the deity must take the alcohol with them when they depart. Additionally, Kimber has a designated ritual partner who assesses the safety of the situation and gives the final word on whether or not she should consume:

When I undertake invocations I have contracts with deities I work with…there is an understanding as part of the invocation that it may be required that I will take alcohol. That is a decision that is made – and I am willing to do it – but it is also at the discretion of the priest and the hand maiden. There have been occasions where I was willing to establish the relationship but the other person involved said no. And either way I am fine with that because when I am under invocation I am not in control and I cannot say that it would be a safe thing for me to do…Part of the contract is that if I do drink anything while under the invocation the deity will take it with them when they leave.

Kimber related that she had twelve years of sobriety at the time when she started doing invocations. She explained that she had time to work up to the idea of ritual consumption during her training as a Priestess. There was a time in earlier sobriety that she would have not considered it an option. Conversely, her growing interactions as a priestess and the intention for consumption to be an “honorable sacrifice” made ritual consumption something she felt was an important part of her religious practice.

Scott and Tristan were the only participants who spoke to me about active conceptual unrest. Both men found that utilizing the phrase “take what you like and leave the rest,” spoken in meetings was beneficial. Additionally, they chose to focus on differing aspects of the Twelve Step community that they found useful.

Scott explained to me that he struggles to reconcile his personal beliefs with AA ideology. He expressed that around the ninety to one hundred day mark of sobriety, the lack of resolve becomes acutely problematic for him. His pattern has been to refrain from going back to AA until he has to start his sobriety all over again. He stated that he
is trying a different route this time because his last relapse was excruciating. Scott has
found some new comfort in the hope that he can recover and carry his unique perspective
to others who also struggle with the strong Christian orientations he found to dominate
meetings in his current locale. He related that he got the idea from a fellow AA:

I am trying to stay around a little bit longer this time before I leave...somebody said something to me...[after my] share in a meeting. It was all about God. I said, ‘I hope this does not offend anybody but I am going to say it anyways, I have no functional use for god in my recovery.’ The room just went silent and all eyes were on me...Then I said, ‘that doesn’t mean that I cannot practice spiritual principles. I can still be honest, I can still be accepting, I can still be tolerant, I can still be loving. I can do all of those things. I just don’t look to God for meaning or for inspiration to practice them. They are things that I have integrated into my personal life.’ And after the meeting [a guy came up and said], “You didn’t drink the Kool-Aid but you have a good message and you’re gonna help some people in this program who can’t swallow all the things they hear in here.” And I thought, ‘You’re right,’ and I didn’t feel egotistical about it. And I know that there are other people in the rooms that are like me that really struggle with this God issue and hearing it all the time. Those are the people that are going to turn around and walk out if they don’t find somebody else in the rooms that they can relate to. So I am looking ahead into the future to a time when I can be that person – and say, ‘You know what there is a lot of shit in here that you are not going to like – and there are some people in here that you are not going to like – but there’s more than one way to [do it]. You don’t have to accept all of it – you just have to, as it says in the preamble, have a desire to stop drinking.’ I wanna be here to help those people. Whether they’re Pagan or Buddhist etcetera.

Tristan, like Scott, is also very open and vocal about his opinions and divergences
with Twelve Step program philosophies and language. He stated that, “In AA meetings I
would even call myself the resident rebel and heretic. I have so often had something to
say. Not in a judgmental way, but just to show them alternatives.” Tristan has not
resolved all of his conflicts and he knows that some of them are core teachings of the
program. For example, he related that in the Big Book it teaches that you need a Higher
Power. However, he stated that, “People don’t need a Higher Power; they just need to
stop drinking and what it takes to do that is huge.” He has been teased in regards to
calling his Higher Power Goddess, and he objects to a “one size fits all” road to “recovery.” However, despite incompatible appearances Tristan adores Twelve Step Programs for the sense of community and love he has found. Here he relates how after losing his job and home to a debilitating disease, the Twelve Step community in his area supported him immensely:

Thirteen years ago…I lost my job, my residence…the people in [my community] who were very strongly Christian and many of them kind of objected when I spoke of the Goddess or about Pagan holidays—they were still very caring and incredibly supportive—and in so many ways. One guy gave me a free haircut, one guy gave me a free oil change. I am speaking in just material terms but they were also there to talk to me and to be there with me as my mind kept exploding. So it is not that I am opposed to—as I said—the best aspects of Christian faith—I am more opposed to the notion that there is one way to do it and that one book contains it literally. So really it is the community that I like best about Twelve Step programs of all kinds. I think that is the real contribution of the Twelve Step programs and not the notion of spirituality being the focus—I believe that everything is spiritual…a part of everyone and everything. I think that the idea that really made the difference was one alcoholic helping another, one addict, one debtor, one sex and love addict—somebody who has been through that corner of hell—saying ‘I’ve been there and there is a way out.’

The day after our interview Tristan emailed me and thanked me for the opportunity to share his perspective. He said that the experience reminded him that he has been continually supported in Twelve Step communities. It also reaffirmed to him that he need not give up Twelve Step programs for his faith in the Goddess.

Chanel, Hazel, Nicole, Scott, Sophie and Tyler all expressed a dislike for the Lord’s Prayer that can sometimes be recited at the ending of meetings. Wilcox reports that every AA meeting ends with the Lord’s Prayer or the Serenity Prayer (Wilcox 1998:56). He reports that the variation depends upon individual meeting preference, is decided through a group conscience, and varies according to geographic location. The citing of the Lord’s Prayer is one of the many residual practices that was taken from the
Oxford Group and has not been yet relinquished. Chanel, Nicole and Scott all expressed dislike for the Lord’s Prayer but have found some sort of resolve. Scott related that he “gave up” on that particular issue and is more concerned with implementing change in other areas of the program. Chanel related that it bothered her at first but with time it bothered her less and less. Nicole explained prior extreme dislike to both of the prayers she heard in meetings but she had a perception change when she took the following approach. This was a comical conversation and I indicated where she laughed in attempt to convey the light hearted way Nicole handled this once uncomfortable situation:

I say them like…how you sing along to a Christmas song (laughing). Like you think it’s really silly…(she sings) ‘Rudolph the red nose reindeer’ (laughs). [Also] there is a tradition that [says] we can employ special workers – I always imagine like Santa’s dwarves being the special workers (laughing). I just say it like I sing along to Christmas songs. It’s not important to me. It is okay. It doesn’t bother me. It doesn’t mean anything. It doesn’t mean that I am doing anything differently with my life. It’s just like, here is what everyone else is doing in this room…I just join in and do it too. It’s not so important that I have to make sure that everyone else in the room knows that I am different – ‘Look at me I’m not saying it.’ But then I like to look up and see who’s got their head all held back and blissed out – Oh god that really bothers me—like come on, do you have to do that?

Hazel, Sophie and Tyler all stated that the Lord’s Prayer made them “cringe” when they heard it in meetings. Hazel related that she was able to resolve this in her “home group meeting” by calling a group conscience to change the meeting format to end with the Serenity Prayer. The group agreed, and she said that she now feels very comfortable going to that meeting. Sophie related her discomfort at an Al-Anon meeting she had just begun attending that utilizes the Lord’s Prayer. She explained that she really liked the format and the people, and did not want to “throw it out” entirely because of that one aspect. She stated that once she gets more established at the meeting she will
call for a group conscience in attempt to eliminate the Lord’s Prayer in favor of the Serenity Prayer. In the meantime, she said that she whispers the Serenity Prayer to herself while everyone else is saying the Lord’s Prayer. Tyler is also silently stating the Serenity Prayer to himself at meetings where the Lord’s Prayer is standard. He related to me that he is taking actions to reform language and prayers in his region by asking for votes on these issues through group service representatives (GSR). The GSR of a meeting goes to monthly district office meetings as a representative who expresses group concerns and brings back information to the groups. He stated that he intends to continue to be vocal about choosing religious and gender neutral language and prayers in the literature and in meetings.

Twelve Step programs can help people restore well-being in their lives; however, for some it is not without internal or external conflicts. Scott and Tristan were vocal about their discord in meetings and they are active in finding alternative options. A quick search on the internet reveals at least five or more Neo-Pagan adapted “step programs,” and a couple different books. Many Neo-Pagans have responded to their need for a different paradigm than that found in the traditional Twelve Step model while still maintaining the intention of various recovery models. Fox and Foltz have both addressed these issues in their work.

Of the fifty two participants in Fox’s project, there were only two who had chosen to refuse help through AA because they felt that it was “Too rigidly Christian-based and disempowering to be a viable option” (Fox 1995:19). On the other hand, thirty six participants remained active in AA and found ways to adapt the program to fit their own belief systems. In this majority group, Fox reports a wide range of experiences and
solutions to conflicting principles and ideologies. Some felt that there were many areas in which AA and Pagan ideology overlapped, while others struggled to get past the Christian emphasis and wished for Pagan adapted meetings. Both attitudes are reflected in the following participant’s statement, “The program of AA has good stuff for recovering Pagans to use to build their own program—taking what we want, and leaving the rest. We need to create our own program” (Fox:1995:23).

Neo-Pagans from Fox’s study reported a variety of creative and viable solutions to tailor the AA program to suit individual tastes and needs. Many of the adaptation methods were largely in relation to “renaming and reframing” the concepts and language found in literature and meetings to better align with Pagan perspectives. Fox found four major trends applicable to the category of renaming and reframing: 1) renaming God; 2) renaming gendered terms; 3) restructuring concepts; and 4) rewording or remaking the Twelve Steps to align with a more Pagan world view (Fox 2000:29).

One of the most common adaptations Fox found was rewording AA literatures use of the terms God and Higher Power to suit individual needs. Changing male gendered terms to gender neutral terms and/or feminine terms were also common adaptations. Fox notes the variety of ways in which Pagans choose to address the power of their choice. The following list includes the most common adaptations that replaced God and Higher Power, “Goddess, Great Goddess, Great Mother, Goddess and God, Lady and Lord, Divine Mother, Divine Father, Goddesses and Gods and The Gods…Higher Powers, Powers that be, Powers greater than myself, Higher Self, Deeper Self, Spiritual Self and Inner Self” (Fox 1995:29).
Fox additionally uncovered that in interpersonal situations, predominately participation in meetings, Neo-Pagans developed a variety of approaches to maneuver through various concerns. Amongst the resolutions were choosing the “right” meeting; recognizing when to reveal or not to reveal Pagan identity; confronting prejudice of their religious orientation; rewording of meeting prayers and developing relations with like-minded or open minded AA members. Several participants from Fox’s study indicated that the level of open mindedness in meetings was largely a result of geographical location. For example, one member from Fox’s study stated that in San Francisco being open about Neo-Pagan identity was not a problematic because a high percentage of Neo-Pagans attended AA meetings. However, the same participant expressed that in small towns and suburbs, closed mindedness made it more difficult to be open about being Neo-Pagan. I heard the same reports from Kimber, Scott and Tristan who had all been to meetings across the US and in parts of Europe. In relation to this Kimber stated, “AA comes in many flavors.” Other participants in Fox’s study expressed that they only revealed their religious affiliation to a few trusted friends but never on a group level during meetings. Despite the above challenges, those who chose to continue AA involvement felt that their Neo-Pagan practices and AA complemented each other well (Fox 2000:35).

Although my study was on a much smaller scale then Fox’s, both reveal similar trends. First, both studies indicate an eclectic range of perspectives and experiences. Secondly, there were similar trends in adapting the traditional Twelve Step model to suit Pagan orientations. All of my participants discussed re-naming their Higher Power(s) to names that were more suitable to their beliefs and/or practices. In some interviews,
participants mentioned multiple names in how they addressed their Higher Power. For example, in my interview with Sophie she addressed her Higher Power as Goddess, God, Universe and Higher Power. In my study renaming gender terms was not discussed as prominently as re-naming Higher Powers. Re-naming gender terms was primarily mentioned by four participants who repeatedly identified the Goddess as their Higher Power. Three of those four participants were men. Restructuring concepts was discussed most often in my study with regard to step eleven and the notion of seeking God’s will. Five participants disagreed with the idea that God has a will; two of the five seemed conflicted on how to resolve that. While the other three, rather than restructuring the concept, it would be more accurate to say that they disregarded the idea all together. In relation to re-wording the steps, eleven participants in this study re-worded the use of God in the traditional steps to suit their needs, while one referred to the Recovery Spiral for a Pagan friendly version of the steps. For the most part, it can be seen that my study shares similar trends to the ones that Fox uncovered.

Similar findings on Neo-Pagan AA adaptations are echoed in a study on feminist Witches in AA. Foltz (2000a) conducted in depth interviews with ten “sober Witches” and found that the ladies had three major areas of contention with the AA program. First, the predominance of Judeo-Christian/patriarchal language; secondly, the “demand for conformity;” and lastly, emphasis on the necessity of AA meeting attendance. In order to resolve these contentions Foltz’s consultants either made adaptations or eventually outgrew AA.

Patriarchal language was a major concern heard by all the ladies in Foltz’s study. Many of the women worked with the existing dogma and “sexist” language heard
in meetings by either choosing gender neutral terms or by replacing masculine pronouns with feminine pronouns. In several cases this was done in private and simply took the form of changing the pronouns in personal copies of their Big Books. In another case, one participant was more vocal about her feminine preferences in meetings, and expressed that she had been ridiculed by other members for referring to her Higher Power as a she.

In addition to the patriarchal language, all women in Foltz’s study expressed a dislike of reciting the Lord’s Prayer which was common at the meetings they attended. One participant resolved her objection to the closing Lord’s Prayer by silently reciting “We are a circle,” a Wiccan chant which goes, “We are a circle, within a circle, with no beginning and never ending” (Foltz 2000a). In an extreme case, one of the women called public attention to her distaste in reciting the Lord’s Prayer and requested that it be changed. The outcome of this request caused a six month dispute amongst the group with the final result being a collapse of the meeting.

“Meeting dependency” was another concern that the women in Foltz’s study shared. Several women felt that there was too much of an emphasis on needing meetings in order to stay sober. One woman related that she continued to attend meetings for several years out of fear of not being able to stay sober without them. Another aspect of strife was “rigidity and conformity” in many cases this was a driving home of AA slogans that were common responses to questions about AA ideology. In other cases, it was a lack of open mindedness by AAs who rejected them once their Neo-Pagan identities were directly or indirectly revealed.
Despite the conflicts, Foltz states that AA had a very positive and profound effect on the women. In relation to the positive results Foltz states, “This is not to say that AA did not help the women in my study. In fact, all but one woman claimed that the Twelve Steps had saved their lives” (Foltz 2000a). On the other hand, at the time of the study only four of the ten women continued to actively participate in AA meetings. Those who remained in AA felt that it complemented their Goddess spirituality practices. While the majority felt that intensified work within their Goddess community better addressed their specifically female healing needs. For example, some felt that gender oppression and sexual trauma lead them to becoming problem drinkers in the first place. These were some of the concerns that were not appropriate to address within AA or for which AA does not address. Within the safe and ritualized context of all female groups, all of their challenges could be directly addressed instead of focusing purely on substance dependence. Overall, the women felt that their Goddess oriented circles treated the “whole self,” allowed for deep healing, celebrated femininity and sobriety. A closer examination of feminist Witchcraft offers some considerations that could lend to the results of Foltz’s study.

Susan Greenwood (2000) argues that that feminist Witchcraft cannot be separated from feminist political issues because of its historical roots within the women’s liberation movement. She states that while feminist Witchcraft shares characteristics with Wiccan traditions, ultimately the goals are different. Greenwood states that feminist Witches seek to heal the wounds that they believe were caused by patriarchal society. Through ritual the Witch, “…can become unpossessed by the alienations of patriarchal culture. Healing involves coming to understand the way that domination has been internalized”
(Greenwood 2000:145). When considering these aspects of feminist Witchcraft the results of Foltz’s study seem probable because Twelve Step programs reflect the patriarchal structure that strong feminists seek to address and reform. However, there is another aspect of feminist Witchcraft that Greenwood describes which is not addressed in Foltz’s study. Greenwood states, “The feminist Witchcraft ritual utilizes shamanistic techniques such as dancing and drumming to obtain trance states” (Greenwood 2000:145). Winkelman argues that shamanic techniques could prove beneficial for overcoming and abstaining from substance abuse. In the next section I focus on altered states practices and spiritual forms of healing that participants engaged, and how these experiences influenced their lives.

**Altered States and Spiritual Experiences**

I had a strong interest in exploring the benefits of alternate states of consciousness practices like meditation, light trance and ecstatic states. One of my investigative interests in the Neo-Pagan community was to explore the use of altered states of consciousness (ASC) in ritual. I hypothesized that Neo-Pagan ritual activity might be beneficial for those in “recovery.” At the very least, I hoped to yield insights or leads in this avenue. My hypothesis was based on the ethnographic insights of Magliocco, the arguments of Winkelman and neurological studies on the healing benefits of neurotransmitters that are released during ASC. Magliocco (2004) examined Neo-Pagan experiences with ASC and religious ecstasy in ritual. She suggests that this is an instrumental component in the Neo-Pagan movement. Magliocco relates that Neo-Pagan ritual settings are a context in which non-drug induced religious ecstasy or ASC is sought, valued and embraced. In regards to ritualized ASC she states, “For Pagans,
ecstasy is ordinary, in that it is an expected part of religious experience and something which everyone can achieve” (Magliocco 2004:153). Magliocco utilizes ecstasy as a term that describes a range of alternate state experiences such as visions, trance, embodying deity or waking dreams. These states are “alternate” because they are experienced as different from ordinary waking consciousness. Magliocco relates that these states are sought through ritual and are appealing because they silence the thinking mind (Magliocco 2004:150). This suggests that ASC and ritual offer a mental break from waking consciousness and everyday life, and could thus provide stress relief.

Winkelman argues that ASC practices reflect an evolutionary and biological human need for the release of brain chemicals that can induce feel good states. An example of one of these chemicals is dopamine, which has been largely associated with the feeling of well-being. Winkelman argues that if the means to induce ASC are not culturally provided they will be sought elsewhere. “Nearly all societies have institutionalized group rituals procedures for altering consciousness. This near-universal distribution of ASC for healing reflects a biologically based mode of integrative consciousness and indicates that all cultures need to make some adaptation to these needs” (Winkelman 2001:339). He suggests that Western condemnation of ASC practices has led to a lack of “legitimate institutionalized” means to achieve it. As a result, these states are sought in ways that manifest as destructive patterns, such as harmful use of alcohol, drugs, tobacco, and dependence upon these substances (Winkelman 2001:340). In regards to this he states, “The current social crisis of substance abuse is coupled with the lack of institutionalized procedures for addressing innate needs for ASC and the evolutionary factors that produce drug dependence”
(Winkelman 2001:348). He promotes the idea that spiritual practices especially akin to shamanism offer the most promise for rehabilitation and abstinence of substance dependence. In light of Winkelman’s argument that ASC represents a biological need, it is thought-provoking that some of the fastest growing religious movements in the United States are heavily involved in non-drug induced ASC practices, such as Charismatic Christian movements and Neo-Paganism. Is it possible that there is a relationship between ASC and the popularity of these movements?

In the last decade, neurological sciences have been active in studying ASC. There is evidence that suggests that different alternate states have different biological reactions, especially with regard to neurochemicals. Neuroscientists Andrew Newberg and Mark Waldenman (2009) have demonstrated that waking consciousness and ASC center in different parts of the brain and release different neurochemicals. They performed several clinical studies that utilized brain mapping imagery in order to determine brain activity in relation to alternate states. The brain map measures high amounts of neural activity that are represented on a monitor as light. They found that the experiences of glossolalia and spirit possession center in the same part of the brain. On the other hand, lengthy meditations like that of Buddhist practitioners centered in a different part of the brain than possession experiences. They suggest that it is for these reasons that accounts of reported somatic responses vary. In terms of glossolalia they state:

…the practitioner surrenders voluntary control—and thus a significant degree of ordinary consciousness—by deliberately slowing down frontal lobe activity. This in turn allows the limbic areas of the brain to become more active, which neurologically increases the emotional intensity of the experience (Newberg and Walden 2009:49).
They report that the opposite is the case with Buddhist meditators who tests demonstrated that the limbic system settles down immensely and the frontal lobe activity increases, which accounts for the feelings of peacefulness.

All of the above literature influenced my interest in ASC as a field of investigation. I sought to collect data on various types of ASC involvements in order to illuminate the subjective experiences of those who practice them. I presumed that since the Pagan community is involved in ritual ASC practices, that they could offer insights into possible benefits. Additionally, Twelve Step programs heavily promote the use of meditation. These two considerations made me conjecture that this population might have higher than average knowledge of ASC practices and experiences. I wanted to uncover how ASC shaped participants rehabilitation, beliefs and experiences. Above all, I wanted to know if there were any perceived benefits of ASC and healing. All twelve participants in this study discussed various ways in which they included regular meditation practices into their lives. Half of them described daily practices of prayer and meditation. Those that related that they had daily practices also stated that they felt these exercises helped to foster a sense of well-being or helped them to be more serene.

Tara was the most passionate about daily meditation practices. She related that her regular morning meditation practice included silent meditation, gratitude prayers and yoga. She feels that this daily exercise brings her better health and a foundation upon which she is better able to help other people:

Meditation makes me a better person for the rest of the day because you’ve centered yourself spiritually...It’s a wonderful moment that makes things better – so to have those moments, if you can, is wonderful. So that makes me a healthier person, mentally and physically. Having those clear moments and time just to myself that I give so much more to others – physically and emotionally. If you keep yourself strong than you are stronger for others who need you.
Marc related that meditation practices were the focus and purpose of one of his private groves. The type of ritual he leads and partakes in is specifically designed to maintain a continuous light trance. He described this as “the magic of ritual,” and following he detailed fourteen different aspects that are incorporated into the rituals he leads. Marc discussed that the most important part of setting the stage for the light trance is to initiate the separation from the mundane and into the sacred world. This is done through conducting a processional and performing a grounding visualization meditation:

Ritual is just a name for worship service…that Pagans usually adopt because like AA’s they have an aversion to the language circulating churches. Making sure the individual is separated and leaving their worldly cares and worldly clamor behind and forming a sacred gathering…to establish this as something special. What my group is doing now is explicitly about leaving worldly matters and negative matters behind. To leave you in a positive state – rather than the back of the mind worrying about…things. We are very explicit to the appearance of cleansing the space – in consecrating the space – to create sacred space…to set it apart from the mundane world. So we set apart the space – literally a processional in space where you physically move from somewhere and into the special space. Then of course it’s also highly mental. We usually have a song that accompanies. Grounding is done intentionally. In most Pagan gatherings there is a very explicit grounding.

Once that is established the heart of the ritual begins, gods are invoked, offerings are made, blessings received and divination is performed. Marc discussed that it is equally important to close the sacred space with another grounding before the ritual concludes, “In closing…we usually have some sort of grounding for us at the end…you need to close that trance.” Marc explained that people become out of sorts without the concluding grounding and could, for example, find it difficult to fall asleep that night if they did not initiate the closing.

Sophie reported that she had profound “spiritual experiences” at both her first Twelve Step meeting and her first Wiccan ritual. Both experiences inspired her to
continue involvement. She detailed her first Twelve Step meeting which was an AA meeting. She was suffering greatly from a “depression spell” when a friend who had been in AA for a long time asked her if she wanted to go to an AA meeting. She thought it was absurd idea, since not only did she not have a drinking problem, but she had never “had as much as a sip of alcohol” in her life. Her friend persisted and said, “Do you wanna be alone or do you wanna go with me to an AA meeting?” That question prompted her to go. Sophie abandoned the Catholic religion of her childhood long prior to her first Twelve Step meeting:

I never stopped believing in God; I just knew that it wasn’t that confusing version. So for a long time God was just this amorphous blob that I did not have much interaction with. So I went to this AA meeting with my friend in the city. It was a candlelight meeting and this was my first Twelve Step meeting and I didn’t know jack about anything. So during the sharing portion of the meeting they turned out the lights and they didn’t use actual candles – it was something else, but I was just sitting there…kind of still in this depressed fog. The more I heard of the readings, and the more I heard people’s shares – this feeling came over me and I wasn’t sure what it was but it felt very comforting and warm and attractive – I liked it and wanted to be in it. And then the thought popped into my head, “This is what church was supposed to feel like,” that warm fuzzy feeling you’re supposed to get by going to mass that I never really got (laughs). Or when you take a communion or whatever – I was feeling it there and I was like, whoa! There is something going on here. There’s something really good going on here! That is why I went to that meeting pretty much every week for like six months with my friend. Sometimes she wouldn’t even go and I’d go anyway.

Sophie related that she felt so inspired by AA meetings that she knew she had to find a Twelve Step group that was relevant to her life. That is how she found CoDA and shortly after Al-Anon. Sophie had the same feeling come over her at her first Wiccan gathering, which was a full moon ritual. Additionally, she a profound vision experience at a Wiccan ritual where she danced with Quan-Yin, the Buddhist Goddess of compassion. She explained that it was a standard guided meditation that her coven was in the regular
practice of doing. Her experience on this occasion was extraordinary, vivid and like a
dream. She related that she usually has easy time visualizing, “But this was very
different, like I was watching it on a screen, it was very realistic, very clear, focused; you
know I haven’t had too many meditations like that where it has been super clear.” This
aspect made Sophie classify this as a spiritual experience because it was unlike other
experiences she had. Sophie stated that she felt a nurturing motherly love pouring from
Quan-Yin. Since then, Quan-Yin has become one of the main Goddesses she works with,
“I have continued to draw back to her over and over because I just feel a very strong
connection to her.” Visualization meditations, like those Sophie learned through her
coven have become regular and beneficial practices.

Chanel also shared a “vision” experience she had during a meditation. Like
Sophie she explained that it was extremely vivid and like no other experience she had
prior. It was this experience that enticed her into searching out earth based and
shamanistic spiritual forms:

I was with my friend in New York City and we decided to go to this mediation
thing where the guy was using drums to get to get us to some sort of altered
state; and the mission was for us to go find our spirit guides. So we actually did a
few exercises in that way, and it was the drumming which kind of speeds it up –
you get to the meditation state faster. So in the first one we had to go find our
spirit guides. I went down into the earth and through this hole and I had several
different animal guides: the first was a salamander and it turned into a fish, and I was just following all of these critters through a cave, a river, and then
it turned into the ocean. I kept on following these different animals, a
salamander, a frog, a fish and then a larger fish and then a dolphin and then a
whale – it was really beautiful.

Violet did not share a specific personal experience but rather she had a strong
opinion about the healing and feel good states that can occur within communal ritual.
When I asked what practices she found useful in her recovery she passionately responded with the following statement:

I think that the practices that light people up are going to be different for everybody. But I think in general Pagan ritual, or any kind of a ritual or any kind of a gathering where people contain their energy in sacred space and raise energy together in sacred space. There is a consciousness, an alteration of consciousness that happens there that is organic and natural and beneficial – that feels as good as any kind of a high that you can get from any substance. And I think that is really beneficial for people just to do ritual. No matter [if it’s] sabbats and having ritual on the esbats – really just gives life a sweetness and a juice and a joy that would really benefit anybody in recovery. Especially people that need something that is more natural, more accessible from an experiential level and not so much about the words and the head space and especially about the sin and judgment trip and the hierarchal God but just something that gets people in touch with the divinity that live in all of us.

Violet’s sentiments are supported by Winkelman who highly emphasizes the benefits of shamanic ASC in substance abuse treatment. He argues that shamanic practices that induce ASC such as drumming and ritual offer extreme benefits for overcoming the cycles of substance abuse. Winkelman notes that one of the major healing rituals that shamans perform is healing soul loss. Soul loss exhibits similar symptoms to what Western clinical psychology would call depression. The shamanic perspective is that this “illness” is caused by a loss of spirituality, or lack of connectedness to the sacred. Winkelman notes that AA and Transcendental Meditation suggest that addiction stems from the same problem. During a shamanic soul loss ritual, the sufferer is taken on a spiritual journey that is concerned with returning the soul and regaining connectedness. Furthermore, he suggests that these kinds of spiritual journeys can be profound and have the potential to add meaning to the sufferer’s life, an aspect that addicts often report is missing from their reality (Winkelman 2001:347). Other
anthropologists have also discussed the psychological benefits of experiential forms of ASC.

Anthropologist Douglas Holland (2000) draws from psychological theory and proposes that the “constructivist model” assists in conceptualizing the relationship between mind, body and culture. The model is applicable to the examination ASC because it views the mind as having the ability to split and divide, thereby allowing for a way to interpret differing states of consciousness without demeaning them as pathological. While the constructivist model does view extreme variations of mind splitting as indicative of pathology, others are suggested to offer advantages and are seen to enhance adaptation and communication. Holland discusses “spirit possession” and how this mode of consciousness serves social and psychological adaptive purposes, “They open a cultural arena for public discussion of morality and power relationships” (Holland 2000:539). The constructivist perspective views the individual world as constructed through interactions with oneself, and the many interactions of the external environment. The myriad of stimuli that one encounters cannot all be processed at once. Many interactions will become subdued by the conscious mind until a process of symbolic systems, like ritual, allows for them to be conceptualized. On the other hand, in many cases “suppressed” material may not surface again if the “right” symbol or schema does not presents itself and thus allow for processing. Spirit possession is a mechanism which allows subdued material to surface, “The alternative voices that emerge through these acts are meaningful and interpretable, not senseless” (Holland 2000:541).

The constructivist model complements the theory of the “autonomous imagination” proposed by Michele Stephen. Stephen (1995) first proposed the theoretical
perspective of the autonomous imagination to explain some of the different types of supernatural and dream experiences that occurred amongst the Mekeo People of Papua New Guinea. This theory draws upon psychology, in particular studies of hypnosis, and on anthropological ethnographic case studies of altered states of consciousness. Stephen describes the autonomous imagination as a universally specialized type of imagination which is utilized during ASC and within artistic expression. It is a mechanism by which the mind, unconsciously known to the experiencer, draws upon and mixes with memory stores, experiences and cultural environment, ultimately bringing forward into the conscious mind a new and unknown form. Mild examples include dreams and the creation of works of art such as paintings or poetry. More pronounced examples include visions that appear to a ritual specialist when possessed by a spirit, or past life memories shared by someone under hypnosis. According to Stephen, this mode of imagining has a much greater capacity for inventiveness and memory access than normal waking consciousness. She suggests that the images and/or experiences are always culturally specific, drawing upon the experiencer’s external environment as well as the experiencers unconscious mind. Stephen implies that the imagery created by the autonomous imagination can be healing because it has the potential to link the inner and outer worlds.

Both the autonomous imagination and the constructivist model provide frameworks to interpret the intense vision type experience that Chanel and Sophie encountered during mediation. Furthermore, these models draw attention to the potential that ASC experiences may offer in the way of healing. The examination of ASC experiences in this study was exploratory, and reveals that Neo-Pagans in Twelve
programs are a lucrative population in which to conduct studies on the healing components of all types of ASC experiences.

In this chapter I have conveyed participants’ conceptions, challenges and benefits with their involvements in Twelve Step programs. Participant narratives revealed that there were many perceived benefits of being involved in Twelve Step programs, but not without the need for ideological and/or practical adaptations. Furthermore, adaptations were seen to vary per individual, thereby supporting the need to document subjective narratives when examining this group. Nevertheless, there were some patterns in participant views of the likes and dislikes of AA and Al-Anon. The parts of AA and Al-Anon that were disliked were most consistently the male-centered, monotheistic Christian orientations. A shared favored aspect was the therapeutic methods and the community.

In this study, spiritual views and ASC experiences were as varied as the creative adaptations that informants utilized. Based on the information gathered here, a view of ASC reveals that these types of experiences can have a dramatic impact that may offer healing benefits. Further investigative studies on Neo-Pagans and ASC could prove beneficial. In the next chapter I discuss the implications of this study and provide ideas for future research.
CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Discussion

This study sought to explore how Neo-Pagans practiced and participated in Twelve Step programs, and if ASC practices were playing a role. I investigated how Neo-Pagans conceive of steps three and eleven as per the Twelve Step model. This included an exploration into spiritual and ideological challenges that participants incurred. This part of the investigation was intended to better comprehend how Neo-Pagans were using the Christian oriented spirituality of the Twelve Steps in relation to their Neo-Pagan worldview. I hypothesized that not only would Neo-Pagans need to resolve their substance abuse related challenge, but they would also need to find resolve with the dominant Christian spirituality that is prominent in Twelve Step literature and meeting discourse. This was the case for ten out of twelve participants. However, there was wide variation in how this manifested. For example, Lance had initial challenges with the Christian language but he related that he overcame it fairly quickly. Marc, Tara and Lance all seemed firmly grounded in the idea that the programs were open to individual interpretation and the Christian discourse was not problematic for them at the time of interview. For them, the incongruences between Neo-Pagan and Twelve Step ideologies did not cause internal or external strife. Despite this, all three did make adaptations in order to better conform their ideology to the program’s philosophy. Tristan had a different experience. His views on Twelve Step programs changed in various ways over the course of his thirty two years of membership. Tristan was in his early twenties when he joined AA. As he got older, his spiritual worldviews changed and eventually he began to examine the programs more critically. In this study, all participants who felt
uncomfortable with Christian orientations and/or language had found resolutions. This included conceptual adjustments, rejecting aspects of the programs that were not suitable, and choosing to focus on the benefits of community. The results of this portion of the investigation suggest that AA and Al-Anon can be advantageous for some Neo-Pagans. The existence and intensity of ideological conflicts will vary per individual but there can be resolve if other aspects of the program prove beneficial. However, Neo-Pagans will have to make adaptations to the Twelve Step model in order to make it work for them.

The second part of my investigation sought to uncover how ASC practices were playing healing roles in Neo-Pagan Twelve Stepper lives. I had hypothesized that Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step programs might have a higher occurrence of experiences with and/or knowledge of ASC practices. This was largely based on ethnographic accounts of Neo-Pagan practices, and the Twelve Step program encouragement of prayer and meditation. Recent nationwide surveys conducted by Kimberly Kirner support this hypothesis, as well as make some important inferences on well-being and ASC practices in the Neo-Pagan population. These surveys, “Pagan Health Survey I” (PHS I) and “Pagan Health Survey II” (PHS II), collected responses to questions that queried on Neo-Pagan health care perceptions, practices and accessibility (Kirner 2010, 2013). The PHS II had a question that asked respondents (N= 1170) to select from a list of practices that were regularly performed to maintain well-being. The results suggest that meditation, which was chosen by 63% of respondents, and ritual, which chosen by 53.5% of respondents, are highly valued practices for the maintenance of well-being in the Neo-Pagan community. Furthermore, a smaller subset of this group which indicated current or prior substance abuse history (N=137), most frequently selected meditation (74%),
followed by ritual (63.2%) as well-being maintenance practices. In the present study, I was particularly interested in collecting evidence that could illuminate the benefits of more experiential forms of ASC, like those known to accompany group ritual practices. All participants from this project revealed that they were involved in regular prayer and meditation practices as part of their eleventh step work. Eleven participants noted that these practices helped to foster a sense well-being. There were seven participants who were involved in group ritual practices, four of whom mentioned that ritual practice does help instill a sense of well-being. While I did collect some narratives about ASC experiences, I did not collect any significant insights into how these experiences related directly to well-being.

The lack of data on ASC that I was searching for can be attributed to errors in methodological design. I limited my focus to uncovering ASC experiences in ritual or group experiences. Meditation and visualization are performed by Neo-Pagans in both solitary settings as well as group settings. This study may have benefitted from inquiring about participants ASC experiences in solitary situations as well. Furthermore, the prompts I utilized in the inquiry of ASC and spiritual experiences were too few, and not direct enough to produce the data that I was seeking. Inquiry into people’s private spiritual experiences can be vulnerable. As such, I approached the inquiry delicately. However, I feel that I was overly cautious in being sensitive to this aspect and did not prompt in a manner that could lead to more detailed accounts. As a result, I ended up with a wide range of responses. Both of these methodological limitations became clearer to me as my investigation was nearing a close. Despite this, the results of this portion of my investigation do suggest that there is a lot to learn from Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step
programs with regard to ASC, healing and well-being. Future investigations with this population on the effectiveness of ASC for healing and/or well-being could benefit by doing in depth inquiry on ASC practices in both group and solitary settings.

**Implications for Anthropology**

This investigation reveals that Twelve Step members offer a plethora of insights into well-being studies. In essence these programs are designed to help restore “feeling well.” The process of going from suffering adversity to well-being is worthy of study because it can illuminate the processes and methods that aid in emotional health and healing. Anthropologists can contribute greatly to understanding the effectiveness of self-help, private and public assistance programs through investigations of well-being. Several scholars have offered practical methods in this regard.

Neil Thin (2009) argues that anthropologists “must” make a concerted effort to collect case studies that can contribute to theoretical perspectives on well-being. He discusses the interpretative challenges but nonetheless states that there are three assumptions that could offer potential validity on a cross-cultural basis. First, “feeling well” is a desirable universal to all cultural groups. Secondly, most cultures differentiate between “feeling well” and “living a good life.” Lastly, moral codes promote how to live a good life and are designed to lead one to feel well. The degrees, norms, desires, views and variations in which well-being plays out are considerations for investigation. Thin states that well-being is not just the absence of ill-being or suffering, but rather a balance between “undesirable extremes” (2009:33). He states that while well-being may sound positive, it can be neutral and is measured over a long period of time.
Anthropologist Gordon Matthews argues that the Japanese concept of *Ikiga*, meaning “what makes life worth living” might offer a good method of cross cultural investigation. He states “…to compare individuals in different societies in the cultural formulation, social negotiation, and institutional channeling of their senses of what makes life worth living” (Matthews 2009:167). Matthews suggests that pursuing “life significance” is universal; however the methods to obtain it vary per society and among individuals.

Wilcox observed that AA member’s lives prior to recovery were bewildering: “In recovery they began to recognize that they had no clue about how to live life” (Wilcox 1998:38). Based on the narratives of participants from this project, I would suggest that they did not know how to live their lives in a way that was sustainable to their well-being. Participants had various degrees of repercussions from individual or family substance challenges. Some ended up in jail, some in suicidal depressive states and others were merely looking for support or to support others. Substance abuse can destroy individual health, cause family conflict, arouse violence and can lead to serious injuries to self and others (Hanson et al. 2009, Wilcox 1998). It is for these reasons that I suggest that substance abuse can be viewed as a threat to well-being, wreaking havoc and chaos in the lives of individuals, families and society. Using the theoretical lens of sustainability, Thomas Weiser suggests that the opposite of chaos is well-being. He defines well-being as, “Engaged participation in everyday cultural activities that are deemed desirable by a community, and the psychological experiences produced by such engagement” (Weisner 2009:229). He argues that when social chaos is high, sustainability is not possible. Weisner applies this perspective in regards to nuclear family units but it is my conjecture
that this perspective is a useful lens in which to examine recovering persons and recovery programs. I propose that part of Twelve Step programs’ appeal lay in being able to restore sustainability into the lives of substance abusers and friends and families who are negatively affected. There is a high amount of chaos in a substance abuser’s lives; this can be either emotional, physical, spiritual, or a combination of all three (Wilcox 1998:36). It is unlikely that a person would seek help for direct or indirect substance related issues if some aspect of their lives was not being adversely affected. Consequently, it can be presumed that assistance for drug and alcohol disorders, or substance abuse family support, is sought in order to eliminate chaos in one or all aspects of mind, body and spirit. Hunt and Barkers (2001) argue that “the addict” does not live in a bubble but rather is a member of a society that requires social interactions with other beings. Sustainability can apply to all aspects of one’s life including how they interact with the social world. Applying the theoretical lens of sustainability, or lack thereof, offers promise when examining substance related issues and programs.

Anthropologists can contribute significantly to examinations of substance related programs and healing services by applying the lens of sustainability and investigating chaos and well-being. There are several directions that researchers could focus. Avenues include evaluations of the effectiveness of self-help, private and public treatment programs. Additionally, those that have overcome tremendous adversity could potentially share valuable insights in the extremes of both chaos and well-being. In the past anthropology has avoided studies on well-being because of its subjective nature. Several anthropologists have made contributions on how well-being offers exploratory
relevance and plausibility for investigative study. The lens of sustainability offers promise in future explorations of substance abuse related issues.

**Implications for Neo-Pagans in Twelve Step Programs**

My study reveals that Twelve Step programs can help Neo-Pagans restore well-being in their lives. However, for some, it is not without internal or external conflicts. There are good reasons for this. The “spiritual but not religious” aspect touted by Twelve Step programs is not an entirely accurate description. It is more accurate to assess AA and Al-Anon as nondenominational Christian spiritual organizations. I would imagine that the claim of spiritual inclusivity feels immediately erroneous to anyone of non-Christian religious faith once the Lord’s Prayer is recited in a meeting. This was the repeated experience of Scott who participated in this study. In our interview he stated that he felt that those who oppose Christianity are: “the people that are going to walk out the door and drink.” Minnick points out that the lack of spiritual discomfort she found in her study of Al-Anon members may be on account of the dominant population identifying as Christian (Minnick 1997:65). This is a probable conjecture when considering that estimates of Christian affiliation in US are roughly seventy eight percent, with fifty one percent identifying as Protestant (http://religions.pewforum.org/reports).

Twelve Step programs are highly recommended to substance abusers and their families when treatment is sought. Wilcox reports that many substance abusers are referred to AA through rehabilitations centers, psychologist or physicians (Wilcox 1998:67). The close association that AA has with clinicians suggests two things; a) that clinicians need to be more aware of the spiritual orientation of Twelve Step programs;
and b) that clinicians need to be more familiar with the spiritual orientations of their clients.

The PHS I sought to uncover Neo-Pagans’ worldview and care seeking choices on health related issues. The results measured the number of responses to questions on care seeking for health and substance related issues. The greatest number of Pagans selected substance abuse counselor as someone they would go to for substance abuse assistance (39.3%), followed by psychologists and spiritual leader (21.6%), licensed MFT (20.6%) and physician (18%). These research results highly indicate the need for clinicians of all kinds to be informed of Neo-Pagan spiritual orientations before referring them to substance related Twelve Step programs.

Another viable aspect of making this research available to clinicians is to dispel misrepresentation and discrimination. The PHS II revealed alarming results in the area of Neo-Pagans experiencing discrimination when seeking care in clinical settings and in Twelve Step programs. One question explicitly asked about religious discrimination experienced while care seeking for mental distress. Respondents were asked to select from a list that included multiple health practitioners, and a Twelve Step program option. The greatest number of respondents selected Primary Care Physician /MD (40%), followed by Psychiatrist MD (37%) and Psychologist PhD (28.6%) as clinicians with whom discrimination was felt. A high proportion of respondents also indicated experiencing discrimination in Twelve Step programs (20%). In a free response section, one respondent stated, “12 step program refused to accept my spiritual views” (Kirner 2013). These issues overwhelming indicate a need for religious education in clinical settings and in Twelve Step programs.
Addiction counselors largely work in conjunction with inpatient and outpatient drug and alcohol rehabilitation centers. Hanson et al. report that “The addiction counselor often encourages Twelve Step participation” (Hanson et al. 2009:503). This suggests that substance abuse clinicians and rehabilitation centers must be informed about Neo-Pagan spiritual orientations if they are going to create the most beneficial care plan for Neo-Pagan clients. Drug and alcohol counselors would benefit in knowing the results of this study. They could inform Neo-Pagan clients of the pros and cons of AA and/or Al-Anon involvement prior to referral. If the client is interested in trying the Twelve Step approach, the counselor could offer suggestions on how adaptations can be utilized to conform these programs to better align with Neo-Pagan ideology.

**Implications for AA & Al-Anon**

It is unfortunate that the spiritual but not religious intention advertised by AA and Al-Anon is not enforced. These programs are widely available, economical and provide immediate community support. This is one reason that despite discomforts Scott was trying to resolve his conflicts he had with AA. In regards to accessibility he stated, “AA is free and on every street corner.” Societal substance abuse complications remain consistently problematic, and AA/Al-Anon can be valuable resources for those who need help. However, current trends in religious affiliation is the US exhibit a growing number of Americans (20%) who consider themselves to be unaffiliated with any religion (http://www.pewforum.org/Unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx). This presents a strong case for Twelve Step self-help programs to modify the current theology to one that is religiously neutral. Minor adjustments in AA/Al-Anon language and prayer choices
could provide a more inclusive spiritual orientation suitable to most faiths, as well as to the growing segment of the population that is unaffiliated with any religion.

It became apparent to me over the course of this study that AA and Al-Anon serve the dominant culture in the US. They do not, however, attract or attend to minority populations. The group conscience system is one that could begin to work in favor of changing these organizations into a true testament of “spiritual but not religious.” However, reform will require minority voices to become politically active in service board positions that deal with matters of group governing. As another option, members could get active in the meetings they attend by requesting a group conscience that considers changing religious orientated prayers to ones that are more religiously neutral. Three Neo-Pagans in this study recounted taking pro-active and successful measures in changing prayers at meetings in their local areas. Wilcox reports that the concluding prayer is a matter of group choice, a decision which is supported by Tradition four that allows group autonomy. However, upon examination of the Traditions I would argue otherwise. Tradition four as stated in both AA and Al-Anon literature reads, “Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole” (AA 2001:562 and Al-Anon 1992:368-9). I would argue that saying a religious prayer at any meeting is a matter that affects AA and Al-Anon as a whole. These organizations deny any religious affiliation and avidly promote themselves as spiritual but not religious. The continuation of reciting a prayer that is associated with any religion makes all attempts and claims of these organizations to be spiritual but not religious completely erroneous. I would encourage any member to go to service board meetings and directly address these issues for the benefit of all people who seek help from these organizations. In her
feminist critique of AA, Kasl acknowledges that many people have silently altered the language of the steps to be more individually suitable as per gender or religious affiliation. Kasl argues the need to reform the steps on a public level in order to address and amend the patriarchal slant:

While many women and men have reworded the steps privately, it is extremely important that we do it openly. To remain clandestine in this activity further reinforces the cultural norm of pretending to accept a rigid, male model when it is not working for us – whoever we are” (Kasl 1992:307).

I would extend this to include the Christian orientation. My study is one of many who have discussed the Christian “quasi-religious” nature of these organizations. But I think that reform is in order and these programs need to: a) honor what they say and eliminate religious connotations and provide gender neutral terms; or b) they need to embrace the Christian connotations. Either way, if clinicians are going to continue to refer clients in the direction of Twelve Step programs, reform is in order or a different option provided.

Conclusion
This study sought to uncover how Neo-Pagans practiced the Twelve Steps of AA and Al-Anon. What I discovered was that while many Neo-Pagans found the tools and communities to be beneficial, the majority were uncomfortable with the Christian spiritual orientation and prayers. There are several implications for this research, including making Neo-Pagan spiritual orientations and Twelve Step adaptations available to clinicians. This is of heightened importance to those clinicians working in the substance abuse sector because spirituality and Twelve Step programs are often encouraged as part of the care plan in substance treatment. Another implication is geared towards AA and Al-Anon, this study demonstrates that these programs are not as
spiritually inclusive as they promote themselves to be. The results here strongly suggest the need for some kind of reform in these programs. Lastly, the issues and implications of this research demonstrate the need for more anthropological studies in the area of religious and ethnic minorities in Twelve Step programs. Studies of minorities in Twelve Step programs offer a plethora of avenues in which anthropologists can examine issues of conflict resolution, minority involvement in dominant culture organizations and studies of well-being. As a result, explorations in this arena could provide benefits for underserved populations.
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Appendix A

The Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous
(Short Form)

1. Our common welfare should come first; personal recovery depends upon A.A. 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 A.A. membership is a desire to stop drinking.

4. Each group should be autonomous except in matters affecting other groups or A.A. as a whole.

5. Each group has but one primary purpose—to carry its message to the alcoholic who still suffers.

6. An A.A. group ought never endorse, finance, or lend the A.A. name to any related facility or outside enterprise, lest problems of money, property, and prestige divert us from our primary purpose.

7. Every A.A. group ought to be fully self-supporting, declining outside contributions.

8. Alcoholics Anonymous should remain forever nonprofessional, but our service centers may employ special workers.

9. A.A., 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 A.A. 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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Appendix B

Six Steps of Recovery
(1938 AA)

1. We admitted we were licked, that we were powerless over alcohol.

2. We made a moral inventory of our defects or sins.

3. We confessed or shared our shortcomings with another person in confidence.

4. We made restitution to all those we had harmed by our drinking.

5. We tried to help other alcoholics, with no thought of reward or prestige.

6. We prayed to whatever God we thought there was for power to practice these steps.

(Pittman 1998:199)
Appendix C

Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

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.

Alcoholics Anonymous (2001:59)
Appendix D

The Twelve Steps of Al-Anon

“Because of their proven power and worth, A.A.’s Twelve Steps have been adopted almost word for word by Al-Anon. They represent a way of life appealing to all people of goodwill, of any religious faith or of none. Note the power of the very words!”

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 others, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

(Al-Anon 2008:397)
Appendix E

Sixteen Steps of Empowerment

1. We affirm we have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on substances or other people for our self-esteem and security. Alternative: We admit/acknowledge we are out of control with/powerless over ______ yet have the power to take charge of our lives and stop being dependent on substances or other people for our self-esteem and security.

2. We come to believe that God/Goddess/Universe/Great Spirit/Higher Power awakens the healing wisdom within us when we open ourselves to the power.

3. We make a decision to become our authentic selves and trust in the healing power of the truth.

4. We examine our beliefs, addictions and dependent behavior in the context of living in a hierarchical, patriarchal culture.

5. We share with another person and the Universe all those things inside of us for which we feel shame and guilt.

6. We affirm and enjoy our intelligence, strengths and creativity, remembering not to hide these qualities from ourselves and others.

7. We become willing to let go of shame, guilt, and any behavior that keeps us from loving ourselves and others.

8. We make a list of people we have harmed and people who have harmed us, and take steps to clear out negative energy by making amends and sharing our grievances in a respectful way.

9. We express love and gratitude to others and increasingly appreciate the wonder of life and the blessings we do have.

10. We learn to trust our reality and daily affirm that we see what we see, we know what we know and we feel what we feel.

11. We promptly admit to mistakes and make amends when appropriate, but we do not say we are sorry for things we have not done and we do not cover up, analyze, or take responsibility for the shortcomings of others.

12. We seek out situations, jobs, and people who affirm our intelligence, perceptions and self-worth and avoid situations or people who are hurtful, harmful, or demeaning to us.

13. We take steps to heal our physical bodies, organize our lives, reduce stress, and have fun.

14. We seek to find our inward calling, and develop the will and wisdom to follow it.

15. We accept the ups and downs of life as natural events that can be used as lessons for our growth.

16. We grow in awareness that we are sacred beings, interrelated with all living things, and we contribute to restoring peace and balance on the planet.

(Kasl 1992:332)
Recovery Spiral Steps

1. We admitted that we were harming ourselves and others, that our lives had become overwhelming.
2. Came to believe that a Power within ourselves and our world could restore us to balance.
3. Made a decision to move our wills and our lives toward that Divine Presence.
4. Made a searching and fearless ethical inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to ourselves, to the Divine Presence, and to others human the exact nature of our harm.
6. Were entirely ready to have our harmful patterns replaced with ethical coping skills.
7. Asked the divine to transform us giving us rebirth in our lives.
8. Made a list of all beings we had harmed, beginning with ourselves and including our worlds and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to all whenever possible, except when to do so would violate the Rede.
10. Continued to take ethical inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it and corrected it.
11. Sought through action and meditation to improve our conscious knowledge and contact with Divine Presence, seeking only to choose in harmony with the greatest good.
12. Having had spiritual awakenings as the result of these steps, we offered this opportunity to others, and practiced these principles in all our lives.
Appendix G

Serenity Prayers

**Neo-Pagan Serenity Prayer**

God & Goddess grant me:
The Power of Water, to accept with ease and grace what I cannot change.
The Power of Fire, for the energy and courage to change the things I can.
The Power of Air, for the ability to know the difference.
And the Power of Earth, for the strength to continue my path.
So Mote in Be!

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**AA & Al-Anon Serenity Prayer**

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.
Appendix H

Alcoholics Anonymous Third Step Prayer

God, I offer myself to Thee — to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt.

Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will.

Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of


(AA 2001:63)