
ANTHROPOLOGY

The Paradox of Powerlessness

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Feminist critics have largely argued Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) is oppressive, male dominated, and places women in yet another patriarchal institution. However, one third of AA's membership is made up of women. Despite the feminist criticisms, women find healing, recovery, and empowerment within AA. Through in-depth interviews with 10 diverse women, this qualitative study seeks to bring academic discourse around AA into conversation with the voices and experiences of women in AA. The goal of this study is not to refute prior feminist criticisms but to question how women in AA navigate and negotiate the contradictions found within a male-dominated and male-centered program.

KEYWORDS *Alcoholics Anonymous, 12-step recovery, women, empowerment, feminism*

This article examines the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) directive that people in recovery admit powerlessness to heal from alcoholism in light of work by feminist critics troubled that the concept of relinquishing power reinforces the oppression of women in society. Specifically, there appears to be a contradiction between the academic critique and the high proportion of women in AA—if its discourse and practice are oppressive, why is one third of AA membership female? To determine how women in AA experience this

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issue, for this study the first author interviewed 10 women with a minimum of 3 years of sobriety who have gone through all the 12 Steps with a sponsor, regularly attend a women's-only meeting, and attend a home meeting. The women's ages ranged from 26 to 64 with a mean age of 51, and they were of mixed ethnicity and socioeconomic status. By sexual orientation, five self-identified as lesbian or queer, four as straight, and one as bisexual. Here we focus on the interview question, "Does saying you are powerless over alcohol make you feel powerless as a woman? Why or why not?" The conversations generated by this question addressed powerlessness, empowerment, surrender, and spirituality. We discuss these themes by drawing on feminist theorists, particularly those within the field of feminist theology,¹ with the aim not to discredit previous feminist concerns, but to analyze how women in AA navigate a program created by and for men to find healing and recovery.

FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF POWERLESSNESS

The first step of AA states, "We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable" (AA World Services [AA], 2001, p. 59). From the AA perspective, it is only when an alcoholic admits that she is powerless over her *drinking* that can she begin to take action to regain control over her life. The language of Step 1 concerns some feminists, who view it as inhibiting and harmful rather than healing and redemptive. In fact, this critique originated with a former female member of AA.

In 1975, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick founded Women for Sobriety (WFS) and its Thirteen Statements² as an alternative to AA and its 12 Steps. There is a marked difference between AA's step one and WFS's first statement: "I have a drinking problem that once had me. I now take charge of my life and my disease. I accept the responsibility" (Women for Sobriety, 2011b). Two decades later, Kirkpatrick reiterated her position in an interview published by Hafner (1992) in *Nice Girls Don't Drink: Stories of Recovery*:

In A.A. you turn yourself over, and as women have been forced to turn themselves over to their fathers, husbands, to everyone, I think this is just the last straw. I think what our program tries to do is to give women some empowerment. We need to have control of our lives; we need to have control of ourselves. (p. 161)

Other feminists echoed Kirkpatrick's anxieties.

Johnson (1989), in *Wildfire: Igniting the She/volution*, argued that AA, "is simply another male institution . . . dedicated to maintaining men's oppressive and destructive value structure and hierarchy" (p. 131). She claimed that AA reproduced women's lack of agency in U.S. culture through its emphasis on self-abasement and lack of power. Kasl (1990), in *The Twelve-Step Controversy*, equated AA's higher power with an all-powerful male God women

must “surrender” to, and claimed the organization of AA mirrors women’s second-class treatment in society. Kasl also argued that the language of AA is harmful insofar as “many women abuse chemicals . . . because they feel powerless in their lives” (p. 30).

Yet Covington (1994) in *A Women’s Way through the Twelve Steps* recounted that when she admitted her powerlessness over alcohol she found a sense of relief and reassurance. After that she made sense of the difficulties in her life (p. 10). Sanders (2009) in *Women in Alcoholics Anonymous: Recovery and Empowerment* added to this argument by reporting that her research revealed women found collective and individual empowerment through the AA program. However, both scholars acknowledged the validity of previous critiques of AA in that it is a male-dominated program and because women live in an androcentric society it is understandable why the language of powerlessness causes such anxiety.

PARADOX

By doing that, by admitting I was powerless over a substance, somehow, what’s the word, not ironically, but like opposite, by admitting I was powerless, somehow I finally had the ability to stop being victimized by it, stop being at its mercy. So in every way I feel that I am stronger. It’s like I’m more powerful. (Cindy)

As this remark demonstrates, Cindy actually gained strength by giving voice to powerlessness. For many women, lack of power or control causes anxiety and discomfort. Yet is it only recognition that they cannot overpower their addiction, that addiction is beyond their “power to control,” can they exert “power over” their addiction and life (Covington, 1994, pp. 10–11). Rather than view powerlessness as self-abasement, as some feminist critics have argued, these 10 women redefined and reinterpreted it as agency. Their narratives reveal that the directive to admit powerlessness over alcohol is not equivalent to powerlessness in other realms of their lives. We can call this “the paradox of powerlessness,” whereby women in recovery navigate the language of the 12 Steps to accommodate their own healing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* (“Paradox,” n.d.) defines *paradox* as “a statement or proposition that, despite sound reasoning from acceptable premises, leads to a conclusion that seems senseless, logically unacceptable, or self-contradictory.” This precisely describes how the women responded to the language found in Step 1 of AA. This theme ran throughout the interviews, with over one half of the women making reference to a false proposition. Out of this sample, only one woman used the specific term *paradox*, but others used terms or phrases like ironic, opposite, freedom, becoming powerful, or having a sense of control by admitting powerlessness.

Sarah said:

But for me I gain hope that I don't have to worry about it anymore. It actually gives me hope that I'm powerless because before I was fighting it, and like trying to get that power back and trying to have some sort of control, but by saying I'm powerless and giving up full control of that I've been able to get my power back as an individual, if that makes sense.

This sentiment is echoed by Susan, who stated,

It's really paradoxical. I don't exactly know why it makes sense, but it does. I feel very empowered as a human being and a lot freer than I have at other times in my life when I was a slave to the things I really had no control over.

This stance is reiterated in published literature. David Berenson (1991), author of "Powerlessness—Liberating or Enslaving? Responding to the Feminist Critique of the Twelve Steps," discussed this paradoxical gain in power and complexity of transformation through the process of release or letting go:

A phenomenon I have observed clinically is that when people start taking decisive action to change problems to which they have become chronically resigned ... experience[ed] of the acute feeling of powerlessness paradoxically often leads to a longer-term empowerment and effectiveness in actively correcting power imbalances. (p. 79)

In this scenario, letting go of the illusion of control redefines the empowered self. Likewise, Covington (1994) argues that

It may seem contradictory to claim our power when we've just admitted our powerlessness, but actually we are made more powerful by this admission. By admitting our powerlessness over our addiction, we are freeing ourselves to turn our attention to areas where we do have control. (p. 12)

The concept of disempowering the self to empower it is explicit in feminist theology articulation of kenosis, the voluntary act of emptying one's self spiritually to generate healing, of losing one's life in order to save it. Sarah Coakley (2002), in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, noted that self-emptying does not equal negative loss, but rather a loss that results in addition (p. 13). Coakley identified the need to rethink the binary of power and submission, redefining the terms and reconceiving this "lack" in a positive light. Here *emptying* is not asking for submission to the world or other abusive powers, it is a redefining of power and powerlessness. One interviewee, Vanesse, shared, "Saying that I'm powerless over alcohol

does not make me feel like I'm powerless as a woman. Actually being able to give up that power, has empowered me, not just over alcohol, but in other areas of my life." Harriet added:

When I was on alcohol I was powerless because I couldn't do anything but drink. I didn't go out, I didn't have friends, I just drank. So powerlessness means that I have freedom. I can do what I want, I can go where I want. I have friends today, I go out to different places today, I speak at graduations today. Today I am an AOD [Alcohol and Other Drugs] counselor because I am powerless.

By acknowledging her lack of power over alcohol, she gained freedom to achieve goals and create a new life. In sum, though the original feminist critique argued that to admit powerlessness is at the cost of freedom, the women interviewed are saying the exact opposite, aligning with Berenson (1991) and Coakley's (2002) theories of paradoxical power. Let us take another step toward understanding how for these women, powerlessness can become empowerment.

EMPOWERMENT

No, it doesn't make me feel powerless as a woman. Actually, finally understanding that I was powerless over alcohol made me feel more powerful or more grounded. When I stopped struggling against the alcohol, just finally realizing that this was something I could not control, it opened up other areas. Once I got sober and accepted the powerlessness, I found areas where I was effective and valuable because the alcohol was out of the way. I think I got more power. (Pamela)

As Pamela's narrative shows, empowerment results from admitting a lack of control. The self-determination women gained emerged as a key component of empowerment.³ For Sarah, the process didn't end at the first step. "By continuing the steps . . . I can get my power back. It's not like I'm defeated and I'm not going to do anything about it. I can do things now to get my power back." For her, going through all 12 Steps gives her the opportunity to gain self-knowledge and feel empowered. In general, the women agree that to know you are powerless means you have the ability to take back control of your life, make different choices, find an identity, improve relationships, and set boundaries. Cindy asserted, "I feel more powerful somehow . . . somehow I am a choice now in my life where I don't feel like I was a choice before. And I think that's a pretty good definition of power." She feels able to make choices and determine the course of her own life. This sense of "control as power" came up for Vanesse as well, "I have found that once I have fully admitted that I have no control, it brings

me to a sense that I'm taking responsibility where I gain some type of control and that's powerful."

What, then, constitutes power? When men work Step 1 they need only think about alcohol. When women work Step 1, they navigate between lack of power over alcohol and their lack of power within a patriarchal society. Here we note two contrasting definitions from the *Oxford English Dictionary* ("Power," n.d.) (1) "the ability to do something or act in a particular way, especially as a faculty or quality" and (2) "the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events." Borrowing from Berenson (1991), the first definition is "an intrinsic ability or state of being, *power-to*" (p. 72) or *power-with*, and the second "an extrinsic action or state of doing, *power-over*" (p. 72). Cross-cutting this intrinsic/extrinsic dimension is an understanding of power as destructive vs. productive. Michel Foucault (1977) argued that:

We must cease once and for all to describe the effects of power in negative terms: it "excludes," it "represses," it "censors," it "abstracts," it "masks," it "conceals." In fact, power produces; it produces reality; it produces domains of objects and rituals of truth. (p. 194)

Here the negative or destructive is contrasted with the positive or productive, though it must be emphasized that positive is not necessarily "good" in the ethical sense. That is, what is produced by power may as well be a system or technique of oppression as a modality of empowerment or liberation. What is critical is how power is engaged and how relations of power are played out in practice.

In AA the interviewees gained power through an organization that has been critiqued as a source of negative power over women by engaging it as a productive power "with/to" change their lives. As Susan said, "I just feel so much clearer knowing that which I have control over and that which I don't which really brings a lot of freedom." Another respondent, Monica, asserted, "I'm not done discovering who I am and who I can become. That's what powerlessness gives you . . . freedom and choices." For Monica, this "loss" paradoxically gave her ability to find herself, grow, and pursue the things she wants to do with her life. This kind of power can be both outside hierarchy and subversive of hierarchy, redefining the relation between power and knowledge in order to access new ways of de(re)constructing identity, subjectivity, agency, and discourse.⁴ As Linda insisted, knowledge is power: "I consciously know that there is something [alcohol] if I touch it, it will totally destroy me. And so knowing that is powerful. Therefore it gives me more power to not touch it." Linda also experienced agency through her identity as a woman in recovery:

But I don't feel any less powerful knowing that I'm an alcoholic. It empowers me because I have an identity. I know what my faults are

and I consciously know where I stand. Yes, I'm an alcoholic woman and yes, I'm powerless over alcohol, but I know who I am and that is power.

Here we see at work the strategy of reworking and reassembling an identity category to achieve change, resistance and voice, similar to how the once derogatory term *queer* has been reclaimed by some members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) communities and even become the name of the academic enterprise of queer theory. Foucault (1978) defined this as reverse discourse. It reverses the meanings found in Eurocentric history and refixes or reclaims those meanings (p. 101). Foucault (1978) wrote,

The question I would like to pose is not, Why are we repressed? but rather, Why do we say, with so much passion and so much resentment against our most recent past, against our present, and against ourselves, that we are repressed? (p. 8)

This is a clear and ingenious way of exposing the “instability of power.” Once the body was written as homosexual, it was constructed as aberrant through medical discourse. Yet this discourse and vocabulary became a site of a resistance movement toward resignifying homosexuality.

The women I interviewed used this strategy. They redefined and reclaimed the term *powerlessness*. Rather than find repression, they found power in a multitude of ways. Kristin realized empowerment largely in relationships. For so long, her relationships were dysfunctional and based on her fear of being alone. She believed that if someone was interested in her, she had to do everything they said. Since self-acceptance, she knows that she no longer has to live this way. She gained self-worth and the power to set boundaries.

I wasn't afraid to say no anymore. I've drawn the line in the sand at what my boundaries are and I stick to them. This is a personal redemption for me. While the program teaches us that it's not all about us, it also teaches us when it is. And this time, it is all about me. I have to stand up for what I believe in because if I don't, I'm compromising myself and my self-worth, and that's something I could drink over.

Her experience exemplifies Lois McNay's (1992) claim that “Individuals are no longer conceived as docile bodies in the grip of an inexorable disciplinary power, but as self-determining agents who are capable of challenging and resisting the structures of domination in modern society” (p. 4).

This recognition does not eliminate the very real hierarchies of power. Women find control and strength in a paradoxical way in AA, yet this does not negate other forms of oppressive powerlessness.

While the experience of powerlessness may be liberating for some women in some respects, it does nothing to address the very real social, political, and economic power inequalities that exist. Focusing on their private growth may distract many women, and men, from questioning and changing oppressive power arrangements based upon gender. (Berenson, 1991, p. 78)

Powerlessness is often interpreted as negative, and rightly so. Feminist critiques of AA and Step 1 rightfully note that lack of agency and succumbing to the will of another are not feminist characteristics. Lucy asserted, "I come from a woman-centered space and that's what I want to see in the world, but that's not the world we live in." Pamela concurred,

The women whose sobriety I admire have used the steps to unpeel the layers of patriarchy and expectation and institutional anti-feminist things built into society about women and guilt and shame and sex and motherhood. Society places expectations on women and I find that the steps are helping women unpeel their resentment against the institutions and the social contracts that force them into a box so that alcohol was the only way they could deal.

Admitting powerlessness is not trouble-free for women, as feminist critiques have shown, and as we acknowledged earlier AA is a male-dominated and male-centered organization. Yet women intervene and transform an environment not created for them. Sanders (2006) argued that "women in AA actively define the nature of their recovery experience in gender-specific and self-empowering ways. Hence, women's recovery in AA represents not a threat to feminist empowerment, but a particular and particularly powerful contemporary form of women's empowerment" (p. 1). These women describe themselves as active agents, not passive victims of patriarchy. They identify as empowered subjects via paradoxical power gained through a program created by and for men. But can this empowerment stand up under the injunction to surrender oneself to a higher power?

SURRENDER, SPIRITUALITY, AND ONE'S HIGHER POWER

Before I got into recovery I thought surrendering meant I had to give up my will, that I didn't have any choices and I considered surrendering as losing. But through recovery, I have found that surrendering means winning. I'm on the winning side instead of the losing side. (Harriet)

As Harriet's account illustrates, surrendering can be positive, and equated with winning. Although members in AA are counseled to surrender to a power greater than themselves, this was not an expected theme to find

in relation to powerlessness, yet every woman interviewed used this term. AA is a spiritual program where sobriety is contingent upon some type of spiritual awakening; the alcoholic experiences an epiphany of the presence of a god-type figure, or Higher Power that leads to a posture of surrender and dependence upon a force outside the self. Just exactly what that spiritual experience is remains ambiguous, although Appendix II of AA does state, “awareness of a Power greater than ourselves is the essence of spiritual experience” (AA, 2001, p. 562). Sobriety and healing are not a matter of self-will, but recognition that absent some form of Higher Power, the alcoholic cannot find lasting sobriety.

Surrender is defined in the *American Heritage Dictionary* as “relinquish[ing] possession or control to another because of demand or compulsion” (“Surrender,” n.d., Definition 1). *Submission* as a synonym for *surrender* is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “the action or fact of accepting or yielding to a superior force or to the will or authority of another person” (“Submission,” n.d.). The loss of agency in these definitions is precisely the target for feminist critiques of AA that question the program’s language and ideology. An alternative definition in the *American Heritage Dictionary*, “To give up in favor of another” (“Surrender,” n.d., Definition 2), situates the alcoholic in a place of relinquishment but also implies the possibility of a new direction—the realization another path is necessary. In terms of AA that path is a power greater than you.

The second step of AA states, “Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity” (AA, 2001, p. 59). Women in my sample not only admitted but “surrendered” to the fact that they were powerless over alcohol and reinterpreted surrender as a positive response because it gave them greater agency. Paradoxically again, by the self-determined act of surrender to a power greater than themselves, they experienced multiple manifestations of empowerment. As Lucy argued,

By admitting that you’re powerless over alcohol you’re surrendering to the fact that you have to go to something else with power and that something else is a higher power for me. The irony of that is by admitting that I’m powerless it actually gives me power through the higher power.

Vanesse echoed this and said,

I love the word *surrender* and the language of that because I believe that once I surrendered to a power higher than myself I gained the power that I don’t have within myself to stay sober. If I can surrender to a higher power, then I can have a different type of thinking and a different way of living.

In contrast to a stance of surrender to a Higher Power, WFS place emphasis upon the self as instrumental in achieving sobriety through positive

cognitive thinking. Statement 5 of WFS reads, “I am what I think,” mirroring French philosopher René Descartes’ maxim “*Cogito ergo sum*” or “I think, therefore I am.” In both cases, it is the person and not a spiritual relationship that situates subjectivity and agency. WFS believes that surrender is an unnecessary dependence. Dissatisfied with AA, Dr. Jean Kirkpatrick began to study the metaphysical writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson which informed her reliance on positive thinking. She “began to see that by changing her thoughts she could change herself” (Women for Sobriety, 2011a). The emphasis on self-discovery through cognitive strategies of positive thinking work to disable negative thought patterns. Empowerment does not come about through surrender, but instead through changing the way ones thinks.

We create our own world. No one else does. We are responsible for ourselves and our choices. . . . We have the power of changing our way of thinking. We live in the atmosphere created by our mind and our thoughts. (Women for Sobriety, 2011a).

Kirkpatrick’s and other feminist critics of AA are skeptical of a spiritual program they believe reflects androcentric practices of traditional Christian religion. They argue that AA tenets subjugate women through complementarity of gender roles, especially with its emphasis on submission and obedience to men (Kirkpatrick, 1986; Rapping, 1996; Walters, 1995). Walters (1995), in “The Codependent Cinderella Who Loves Too Much . . . Fights Back” contrasted the recovery movement with the women’s movement and argued, “one movement encourages individuals to surrender to a spiritual higher power, while the other encourages people to join together to challenge and restructure power arrangements in the larger society” (p. 55). The critique is that women lose agency through AA’s emphasis on surrender. Yet interviewee Lucy disagreed, “Because of the program, I’ve learned how to be powerful through my higher power. I don’t feel like saying I am powerless over alcohol and surrendering to a higher power extends to being powerless as a women.” Vanesse asserted,

I gain power because I know I have no power over alcohol. So to give up the power, to surrender to a higher power, doesn’t make me less powerful. It makes me more empowered because it brings me to a sense that I’m taking responsibility where I gain some type of control.

These narratives stand in sharp contrast to feminist concerns.

In addition, seven of the 10 women interviewed clearly asserted that their higher power was not a male god. Cindy stated, “Surrender should be a real problem for me but it’s not. I do have a problem surrendering to people’s will, but when it comes to the universe, what I consider my higher power, I’m totally down for it.” In AA, Cindy is able to create her own version

of a higher power. She also dismissed the fear that women in AA submit to male authority. Pamela's viewpoint was similar:

I have a problem with surrendering. The hair on the back of my head goes up. But in a way I do surrender and when I think about that, I think about joining a great life force. I'm not surrendering to a specific being or idea, but what I call the force for good in the universe. If I try to align myself with what is good, then that is a form of surrendering and it seems that all of the little tacky bothersome things in life kinda fall way. It's a Buddhist kind of look at it.

The women ask deep questions and carefully and methodically probe and navigate what their spirituality is and how it relates to their sobriety.

Interestingly, three of the women understood their higher power to be a male God, yet this did not render them powerless as women. It was their choice. Indeed, from these interviews AA appears as a nondogmatic program of spirituality, where each woman decides for herself what her higher power is. It is important to note again that all ten women found power once they surrendered to their version of a higher power, lessening the understandable feminist concern (Bepko, 1991; Kasl, 1990; Walters, 1995) that AA's higher power, and the language of surrender, causes oppression and obedience.

The themes of paradox and empowerment discussed earlier overlap with how the women described surrender. For Coakley (2002), kenosis also entailed a power-in-vulnerability, a paradox where surrender and vulnerability and personal empowerment came together. As she said, "Empowerment occurs most unimpededly in the context of a special form of human vulnerability" (p. 32). Coakley's comparison between empowerment and vulnerability is affirmed by Kurtz and Ketcham (1992), who identify a place where failure and imperfection become the building blocks for a spirituality of powerlessness and surrender—different, yet the same (p. 111). If vulnerability can be envisioned as the glue that binds powerlessness and surrender together, or a fusion and bleeding in of the two, then room is created for a nonconventional spirituality.

This elicits the question: What form should this human vulnerability take? The answers of female interviewees varied. Linda said,

When I say I surrender I'm not giving up, I'm getting rid of a burden. I feel better because it's not all on me. I can give it away. I can give it to God and let God take care of things. It opens me so I don't always have to be the tough one. Things feel better and things get better.

Kristin thought similarly,

By surrendering to a higher power you put your faith and trust in the hands of somebody else and you don't have to think about it. You do the

footwork but surrendering all the other stuff is honestly so empowering. To completely surrender is what gives you the power to be able to get what you need and what you want. You get your peace of mind and that enables you to be a part of society and a part of the fellowship of AA. You get to be a friend, a daughter, a sister, a sponsor, a student, and an employee.

Their personal definitions of *surrender* caused them to gain power and have a better life. There is a difference between the general notion of vulnerability and the one in the kind of kenosis which these women implicitly employ. Understandably, surrender, vulnerability, and dependency are consistently viewed negatively, yet as Coakley (2002) and others argue, there must be freedom to redefine and navigate terms that historically, and currently, render women impotent.

Women in AA gain strength and power from their dependence on a higher power because they have decolonized language by reappropriating traditional, patriarchal concepts and terms. As one respondent, Cindy, demonstrated,

I have a respect or a love of this non-human power. It's the earth revolving, it's the seasons coming around again, it's the seeds sprouting and growing. . . . It's just nature and that's something I love and something I am a part of so not surrendering to it, fighting against it is the core of human insanity.

In this way Cindy utilizes a "special form of vulnerability [that] is not an invitation to be battered; nor is its silence a silencing. If anything, it builds one in the courage to give prophetic voice" (Coakley, 2002, p. 35). In accord with this, Monica's thoughts were,

Surrendering has given me the power of acceptance and to not be so hard on myself. I can look at who I was then and that's not me anymore. Back then I was so insane. I love surrendering to a higher power. It frees me. It really frees me to discover myself.

For Cindy and Monica, surrendering is not a loss or seen as negative. They see it as love, freedom, and personal growth. Not only do these women redefine the term surrender, they redefine dependency as agency.

FLUIDITY OF NAMING GOD

Sanders (2009) conducted a survey around the third step that focused on the issues of surrender and spirituality. The third step in AA reads, "Made

a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him [sic]" (AA, 2001, p. 59). Sanders (2009) found "that women do not easily, simply, and unequivocally give up the use of their will power and turn their lives over to God" (p. 76). The women in her study were not passive actors, blindly surrendering to something that makes decisions for them. The women in this study conveyed the same sentiments as those in Sanders' (2009) survey. Pamela stated:

To me, surrendering is more of an awareness. It's becoming aware that I belong to something greater and if I align myself with that I am much more peaceful and things open up. When surrendering my will and my life over to the care of the God as I understand Him, if I were to rephrase that, it would be that I quiet myself and I join the force for good that is all around the planet. It's like getting reconnected. I call it grace.

The assumed "maleness" of a Higher Power/God was noted by Unterberger (1989) in "Twelve Steps for Women Alcoholics." She claimed, "A.A.'s Twelve Steps insinuate a hierarchal, domination-submission model of the individual's relationship to God. God is always referred to as male, and God's activities are described in stereotypically masculine terms" (p. 1150). Yet Sanders' (2009) survey around Step 3 revealed women in AA:

Have not been told to turn their wills and lives over to a specific God, as defined by a specific religion or . . . a particular religious culture. . . . [T]hey . . . plot the characteristics of their own personal conceptions of God. . . . The belief in God does not have to be absolute, complete, or all-inclusive. (pp. 76–77)

Berenson (1991) agreed on the fluidity of naming God. "AA refers to this presence as a Power greater than ourselves, Higher Power, spirituality, or God. It can equally be called Higher Self, higher consciousness, or the sacred" (p. 77).

Sanders (2009) also argued that,

The experience of many of these women indicates that, even when a woman has begun to believe in power greater than oneself, she does this cautiously, with a clear intent to understand her higher power and to turn her will over in contexts that she believes will help her. (p. 77)

Monica affirmed,

It took me awhile to get to that surrendering thing and it came in teeny bits. The only thing I knew was existing. It's a hard place to be. To not feel. But once I surrendered I had so much freedom and could learn to start living for change.

Sarah insisted:

Surrendering changed my life. I believe in God, so I allow God to dictate how my life is going to be so it takes the selfishness out of it. It makes me a more productive part of society. I can help people now. I can have a family, I can have relationships . . . like those are all things that I couldn't have when I was using but I can now have. So for me I have control of my life again through God.

Vanesse asserted:

I think that it's a good thing that we come as individuals and as women to the program and surrender ourselves, surrender our power, surrender to the fact that we can't control our lives anymore. Out of that so many opportunities are opened up to us. For me, it's an amazing aspect to be able to surrender and admit the powerlessness and allow something higher than myself to be able to move in my life. The doors will open up to greater possibilities. Possibilities you will never imagine.

Feminist researchers such as Rapping (1996) critique the surrender to a higher power because they have not understood the agency attached to surrender, but rather view it as blind submission. Despite the legitimate concerns of some feminist scholars, the experiences of the women in Sanders' survey and in this study highlight the challenges and rewards associated with surrender, spirituality, and one's higher power. They "demonstrate[d] that they defined the direction, pace, and extent of the spiritual or psychological processes connected with the Third Step" (Sanders, 2009, p. 78). "In short . . . the women in this survey have begun to surrender to win" (Sanders, 2009, p. 80). As Linda indicated:

I didn't even have a higher power when I got here. I didn't even know what that meant. Now I have a whole a spiritual system that I work at. I think everybody is unique and different. That's why we have so many different religions because God speaks to people in all different ways and whatever uplifts a person, gives them a soul, a sense of grounding and love and acceptance is important to me. I don't have to be ashamed of anything in front of my God and I think everybody needs to find that for themselves, sober or drunk because without that we turn into monsters. Not directed towards others necessarily, but towards ourselves.

The women whose words we have considered here show their vulnerability and surrender to spirituality are not acts of self-abnegation, where they denounce their own needs in favor of the interests of the others. Instead, it is contemplative self-effacement versus self-destruction and self-repression. This special self-emptying allows the self's transformation and expansion into a productive and life-altering spirituality.

NOTES

1. Feminist theologies offer a variety of theological perspectives developed to focus on the experiences, needs, and concerns of women. According to feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether (1983), in *Sexism and God-Talk*, “The critical principle of feminist theology is the promotion of the full humanity of women. Whatever denies, diminishes, or distorts the full humanity of women is, therefore, appraised as not redemptive. Theologically speaking, whatever diminishes or denies the full humanity of women must be presumed not to reflect the divine or an authentic relation to the divine, or to reflect the authentic nature of things, or to be the message or work of an authentic redeemer or a community of redemption” (pp. 18–19).
2. In *Women For Sobriety*, the program comprises 13 *Statements* and not Steps as in AA.
3. In accord with how these women talked, note that Covington (1994, p. 12) defines *empowerment* as finding and using an inner power, Sanders (2009) uses multiple definitions of *empowerment* including self-development, improved self-esteem, self-respect, confidence, and enriched relationships.
4. This is reminiscent of Sara Coakley’s (2002) question about power: “Must it necessarily involve intentionality, imply resistance, suppress freedom, or assume a ‘hierarchy’? (p. xv).

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