

Ernest Kurtz: The Historian as Storyteller and Healer

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History and imperfection are my specialties—not necessarily in that order. --Ernest Kurtz, 1996

The lives of Fr. Edward Dowling, Sr. Mary Ignatia Gavin, Fr. John C. Ford, Fr. Ralph Pfau, Dr. Austin Ripley, Fr. Joseph Martin, Sr. Therese Golden, and the history of Guest House constitute critical chapters in the larger story of the rise of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the role of spirituality in long-term recovery from alcoholism. It is thus quite fitting that *Recovery Through Catholic Eyes* is dedicated to Ernest Kurtz, the person most singularly responsible for uncovering and telling this larger story.

Ernest Kurtz published his seminal work, *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, in 1979 and has continued his writing and teaching on the topics of AA, spirituality, shame, and storytelling. This final chapter of *Recovery Through Catholic Eyes* explores and honors his ideas, activities, and sustained influence. The chapter contains four sections: 1) a brief biography, 2) a sampling of the topical themes that permeate Kurtz's work, 3) a profile of Kurtz the man, and 4) an appendix containing a chronology of the Kurtz publications. The chapter is designed to let Kurtz, and those profoundly influenced by him, speak directly to the reader in their own words.

When I began writing a book in the early 1990s on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America, several people directed me to Ernie Kurtz as the authoritative source. I had no way of knowing that what I expected to be a brief consultation on the history of AA would evolve into a prolonged mentorship, multiple professional collaborations, and an enduring friendship. Through these years, Ernie Kurtz taught a number of crucial lessons to me about researching and writing history. He repeatedly challenged:

- 1) Tell the story chronologically (do not confuse your reader).
- 2) Tell the story in context (let your reader know what else is going on around the event you are profiling).
- 3) Present the historical evidence (sources)—all the evidence.

- 4) Separate statements of fact from conjecture and opinion.
- 5) Tell the story from multiple perspectives.
- 6) Localize and personalize the story.
- 7) Stay connected to your readers— keep them wanting to turn the page to find out what happens next (for an elaboration of these, see White, 2004).

I will try to be faithful to these guidelines in telling Ernie's own story.

Three sources form the foundation of this chapter: the complete publications of Ernie Kurtz (See appendix), taped and transcribed interviews conducted with Ernie Kurtz in 2008 and 2009, and comments solicited from those who have worked professionally with Ernie Kurtz over the past three decades.

A Prepared Life

Ernest Kurtz was born September 9, 1935 —the same year AA was founded—in Rochester, New York—a city whose financial and cultural history was dominated by the Eastman Kodak Company and later, also by the Xerox Corporation. Also like AA, Kurtz was born in the heart of the Great Depression—a time when America and many alcoholics were economically and spiritually hitting bottom. He was the oldest of two children born to Edward and Josephine Kurzejewski [Koozhay-yev'-ski]. Ernie relates:

Eight years of grammar school in a German parish shortened that name for practical use, and when I began graduate school bringing transcripts in two names, I was advised to choose one. Tired of too-lengthy phone interactions, I opted for the one that was easier to spell. But I do remain proud of my Polish heritage and advertise it whenever appropriate. (Kurtz, Personal Communication, August 2009)

Josephine worked as a homemaker, and Edward, like most men in the depression era, worked in whatever job he could find to support his family. The Kurzejewski family lived in St. Boniface Parish—a close-knit German neighborhood where Ernie attended Catholic grammar school. One of his earliest childhood recollections reveals his love of learning and teaching and the extent of his young and still developing ego.

The first or second month after beginning first grade (“I remember, it still was hot”), I gathered the neighborhood kids in front of the porch of the house in which

I lived and gave a lecture on something I had just discovered. To know something was to want to teach it to others, to make it understandable. (Kurtz, 2009 Interview)

Following grammar school, Kurtz entered St. Bernard's Seminary and College in Rochester. Minor seminary—four years of high school (1949-1953) and two years of college (1953-1955)—was followed by major seminary and college graduation from St. Bernard's in 1957 with a Bachelor of Arts in philosophy. Ordained to the priesthood in 1961, he was assigned as a parish priest to Our Lady of Good Counsel in Rochester's soon-to-be racially mixed 19th ward.

Kurtz found parish life “rewarding and fulfilling” and reveled in the varied activities, whether preparing a sermon, performing liturgy, or working with the youth club. While visiting sick parishioners, Kurtz befriended several Jewish Rabbis who were also visiting the sick. It was especially from two of them, in the lunchroom of the Strong Memorial Hospital, that Ernie really absorbed the power of story as a teaching device.

To be more effective as a pastoral counselor, Kurtz enrolled in psychology classes at the University of Rochester. There, he fell under the influence of Professor Marvin Becker and became enthralled with the history of ideas. As this interest increased, he was encouraged by his Bishop to pursue further education. After considering several schools, Kurtz entered Harvard University in the fall of 1966. He “ploughed a very wide and wandering path” in his 12 years at Harvard, completing an MA in history in 1968 and a PhD in the History of American Civilization in 1978. Kurtz was involved in many activities during his school years, including serving as a teaching fellow at the Harvard Divinity School, returning to serve as a parish priest in Rochester (1972-1973), doing “Sunday work” for a number of parishes in the Boston area, and for a time providing pastoral coverage at a rehabilitation hospital in exchange for room and board.

Several factors influenced Kurtz's choice of the history of Alcoholics Anonymous as a dissertation topic. First, slipping into his own alcoholism, he was admitted to Guest House's three-month treatment program for priests in 1975 after continuing to drink following detoxification at the Harvard Infirmary. Second, Kurtz found himself drawn to questions about the history of AA while researching his original dissertation topic on the history of the city of Cleveland, Ohio.

I was going to these AA meetings and was hearing things about the history of AA that I knew couldn't be true: "Oxford Movement" and all that. I also became very interested in the source of the ideas upon which AA was founded. I began to investigate AA history and the further I got into it, the more fascinated I became. I was spending more time on AA history than doing my doctoral research on Cleveland. On one of my visits back to Guest House, my former counselor suggested that I should discuss my interest in AA history with Dan Anderson at Hazelden. When I met with Dan, he expressed enthusiasm and informed me that AA was about to establish an archive that would include all of Bill Wilson's correspondence. Now that's a graduate student's dream—getting access to previously unviewed correspondence of some historically significant person. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

Getting approval to conduct a scholarly history on Alcoholics Anonymous required more than getting such a proposal by Kurtz's Harvard dissertation committee; it required obtaining approval for unprecedented access to AA's historical documents.

Dan Anderson put me in touch with Dr. Milton Maxwell, who was one of the AA Trustees at the time. Maxwell shared Dan's interest in my potential work on the history of AA. All this led me to request a switch in my dissertation topic. My Harvard mentors approved, as did the AA Trustee's Archives Committee (Milton Maxwell, Joe Jackson, and George Gordon). The approval from the Archives Committee was much tougher than my committee at Harvard. My work with these treasured documents was later supplemented by a review of taped interviews with AA oldtimers that were on these old reel-to-reel tapes. I had unlimited access to AA's primary documents in a way that had never existed before or since. It was a truly unique opportunity, to participate in the beginning of an archive. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

Kurtz's dissertation on AA was completed and approved in 1978. At the suggestion of his Harvard mentors and Dan Anderson, he spent the year following completion of his doctoral work transforming his dissertation into a book. As the book neared completion, a troubling issue was raised by AA's trustees.

Milton Maxwell, who by that time, was the head of the trustees, called me, and said, "Ernie, you mention in the book Bill's experimentation with LSD." He went on: "The other trustees have asked me if you would cut that from the book." He

added, “We had the agreement that with your dissertation there could be no censorship, but this is not the dissertation. You’re going to publish a book.”

Ouch! After a sleepless night I went to my academic mentors, Oscar Handlin and Bill Hutchinson, telling them, “This is what I’ve been asked. Out of respect for AA, I do not want to do something that would be injurious to AA, though I doubt that anything I might do will injure AA. But that does seem to me to be an important part of this story.” Oscar and Bill agreed, saying, “This is part of AA’s story as you tell how Wilson’s thirst for alcohol became a thirst for helping alcoholics. This thirst took many varied expressions. That’s an essential part of your story.” So I gritted my teeth and prayed over it and decided to leave it in the book. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

Kurtz’s *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* was published in 1979 by Hazelden Publishing.

When the book was published, AA Trustees were holding their breath, concerned about possible backlash for having given me such access to the archives. The first 300 calls they received were people saying how wonderful the book was and that it revealed Bill’s humanity rather than presenting him as a tin god. When the membership responded that way, the Trustees were happy and then respected my decision. The book also added to AA’s legitimacy since it was based on a dissertation approved at Harvard University by one of the leading historians of our time, Oscar Handlin. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

Not-God as a scholarly document consists of two parts: 1) the history of Alcoholics Anonymous and 2) an interpretation of the historical significance of AA in the larger context of American history and the history of religious ideas. The book meticulously details AA’s birth and evolution from 1935 into the 1970’s at a level not previously nor subsequently matched, and it delves deeply into the inner workings of AA’s program of alcoholism recovery. It is remarkable, in light of AA’s growth to a membership of more than 2,000,000 members in 150 countries, that *Not-God* remains the definitive history of Alcoholics Anonymous 30 years after its initial publication. As partial testimony to its influence, the book has remained in print for three decades through three editions and has sold more than 50,000 copies.

On the Heels of *Not-God*

In the years following its publication, the popularity of *Not-God* created new opportunities for Kurtz. Requests came to lecture at colleges and universities, alcoholism treatment programs, and professional alcoholism conferences. As a result of *Not-God* and Kurtz's popularity as a lecturer at summer schools on alcohol studies across the country, he became widely known in the alcoholism field and began offering additional presentations on such topics as shame as an obstacle to alcoholism recovery, the role of spirituality in alcoholism recovery, and the redemptive power of storytelling.

There were important turning points in the life of Ernie Kurtz during the early 1980's. Most significantly, he left the priesthood, accepted a teaching appointment at the University of Georgia, and met and married social worker Linda Farris, who was completing her Doctor of Public Administration Degree at the university. Their shared interests in self-help movements provided numerous later opportunities for professional collaboration. In 1982, Ernie published his second book, *Shame and Guilt: Characteristics of the Dependency Cycle*. This work presented one of the earliest published treatises on the distinction between shame and guilt, the roles these experiences played in the development and progression of alcoholism, and their role in the alcoholism recovery process. It is important to note that the Kurtz treatise on shame and guilt predated the profit-motivated exploitation of these topics within pop psychology and pop therapy circles, a commodification that sorely twisted his ideas.

Following Kurtz's relocation to Chicago in 1984, he began teaching a history of religion class at Loyola University of Chicago. While there, he sought out various theologians to explore his growing interest in the spiritual dimensions of AA. In 1986, Kurtz accepted an offer to relocate and serve as the Director of Research and Education at Guest House in Lake Orion, Michigan. One of his primary responsibilities there was developing a training program for priests who had graduated from Guest House and who were requesting guidance on facilitating so called "12-step retreats" in their home communities. It was in developing this training that he first developed the key ideas and outlines that would later evolve into the book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*. The Guest House work ended when a new administrator wanted Kurtz to serve in a marketing role, to which he replied with his usual candor, "I'm horrible at such things: you can't be a big enough fool to ask me to do that."

Ernie left his Guest House position in 1990 and relocated to Ann Arbor, Michigan with his wife, Linda, who had accepted a position in the Department of Social Work at Eastern Michigan University.

The Guest House years brought Ernie considerable national visibility. He was invited to serve on the editorial boards of *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly* and *Dionysus* and deepened his involvement in teaching at Rutgers University's Summer School of Alcohol Studies. The late 1980's were also a productive writing and speaking period. Between 1986 and 1990, Kurtz authored and co-authored articles on AA, published additional work on shame, published a book on AA history for the lay public (*AA: The Story*), and made presentations related to the history of AA at international conferences in Canada, England, Norway, Poland, and Russia. He was also invited in 1988 to provide "An Historical Perspective on Jews in AA Recovery" at the Third Annual JACS/Enoch V. Deutsch Memorial Lecture in New York City, which led to his journeying to Israel with a J.A.C.S. group and lecturing on Alcoholics Anonymous to an audience of academics and government personnel at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Each of these experiences further whetted Kurtz's interest in the varieties of spiritual experience within AA. [J.A.C.S.: Jewish Alcoholics, Chemically Dependent Persons, and Significant Others: a group formed by Jewish alcoholics to help other Jews understand that AA is not "a Christian program."]

The Spirituality of Imperfection

During much of the 1990's, Ernie Kurtz worked as an Adjunct Research Scientist at the Center for Self-Help Research within the School of Social Work at the University of Michigan. He continued to lecture in venues of great prestige but spent most of his time presenting at small seminars, colleges and universities, community 5 skill hospitals, and local alcoholism treatment programs. He also continued his reading and research on AA and spirituality.

Significant cultural contexts set the stage for Ernie Kurtz's contributions during the 1990's. The 1980's birthed an American culture marked by rampant materialism, perhaps best personified in Gordon Gekko's "Greed is good" speech in the 1987 movie *Wall Street*. Even alcoholism treatment and recovery were commodified and aggressively marketed. Local alcoholism treatment programs initially conceived as service entities increasingly defined themselves as businesses guided by the mantra, "margin before mission." In time, some both within and outside its fellowship expressed concern about the "corruption" of Alcoholics

Anonymous due to the growing encroachment of addiction treatment vocabulary into AA meetings. Even some AA members began to lament the loss of “real AA.” By the early 1990’s, the country, alcoholism treatment programs, and AA were trying to re-center themselves.

It was within this context that Kurtz produced some of his most influential work. The first of these contributions was a book drawing on a larger and longer spiritual wisdom. Kurtz describes how that project developed:

Kathy Ketcham had been Jim Milam’s co-author of the book, Under the Influence, but she felt that book lacked an understanding of the role of spirituality in recovery. She approached Father James Royce, a Jesuit priest and one of the real pioneers of the alcoholism field and invited him to do a book with her on that subject. He declined but recommended that she should talk with me. Kathy called and raised the possibility of collaboration with me serving as content expert and her serving as professional writer. I was taken with her skill and obvious enthusiasm for the project, so I arranged to present on this subject at the VA hospital in Walla Walla, Washington, close to where Kathy lived. Kathy sat in the back scribbling furiously all during the workshop, and then we spent three days after that hammering out an outline for this book. We sent drafts back and forth (these were the days before email) until we had the essence of what became The Spirituality of Imperfection. I can be difficult to work with and a few times decided that I had to send Kathy flowers as amends for my lapses from proper politeness. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

After an initial exploration of spirituality’s assumptions, the book delineated six dimensions of AA spirituality (release, gratitude, humility, tolerance, forgiveness, and being-at-home) using the medium of just 100 stories. It was Kurtz’s first attempt to interpret AA spirituality to a broader public audience. When asked to explain the phenomenal cultural response to the book, Kurtz replied:

Alcoholism is not contagious, but recovery is. Recovery of our humanity is what we’re talking about here, not recovery from a particular disorder or disease. And this recovery comes about in touching bottom, that hole in the middle of oneself—recognizing oneself as finite, as limited, as one who makes mistakes and does things that are bad. And yet realizing that’s not all of me. Being in touch with that hole at the core of our being while embracing also that our being is larger than that hole— that’s what Sister Ignatia had. That’s why biographies of such people are so important. They illumine these things, especially in the lives of non-

alcoholics I love Ernest Becker's concise image and description of this: "Man is a god who shits." We have this capacity for altruism, healing, profound spirituality, and yet even in those moments, we are periodically reminded of our ties to the earth, of the reality that despite all our grand accomplishments, we too shall decay. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

Since its initial publication in 1994, *The Spirituality of Imperfection* has sold more than 200,000 copies.

Ernie Kurtz continued to participate in various research forums on AA and to publish scholarly pieces throughout the 1990's. Three are particularly noteworthy. In 1994, Ernie co-authored an article with William Miller in the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* titled "*Models of Alcoholism Used in Treatment: Contrasting AA With Other Perspectives With Which It Is Often Confused.*" Many in the alcoholism field were shocked to see the authors' names appearing together. William Miller explains:

When Ernie and I first published together, we both had the experience of our colleagues asking us, "What in the world are you doing working with HIM?" That was in the heat of a "behavior therapy versus disease model" polarization in the field, which to some extent was a reincarnation of the older "craft versus science" tension that still rears its head in the addiction field around flash-phrases like "evidence-based treatment" and "harm reduction." (William Miller, Personal communication, June 2009)

Many readers were also surprised by the article's clear, unequivocal, and well documented demonstration that:

AA writings do not assert that: (1) there is only one form of alcoholism or alcohol problem; (2) moderate drinking is impossible for everyone with alcohol problems; (3) alcoholics should be labeled, confronted aggressively or coerced into treatment; (4) alcoholics are riddled with denial and other defense mechanisms; (5) alcoholism is a purely physical disorder; (6) alcoholism is hereditary; (7) there is only one way to recover; or (8) alcoholics are not responsible for their condition or actions. (Miller & Kurtz, 1994, p. 165)

The 1994 Miller-Kurtz article stands historically as the first crack in the ideological walls that dominated the polarized thinking about alcohol policy and alcoholism treatment in the second half of the twentieth century. The article was also the first to effectively confront the sweeping generalizations about Alcoholics

Anonymous that had begun to appear in professional publications and presentations as well as the popular press. These misconceptions came, in this author's view, primarily from alcoholism treatment programs that had wrapped themselves in the AA mantle.

A second Kurtz article, "*Spirituality and Recovery: The Historical Journey*" was based on a 1996 presentation at the National Clergy Council on Alcoholism. That presentation touched on many recurrent themes in Ernie's work. After reviewing the early history of AA and the distinction between AA and professional alcoholism treatment, Kurtz made note of the crucial contributions non-alcoholics (Sister Ignatia, Father Dowling, Willard Richardson, Frank Amos, Dr. Silkworth, and others) had made within the history of AA.

They were not alcoholic, but they did all have something in common: each in his or her own way, had experienced tragedy in their lives. They all had known kenosis; they had stared into the abyss. They had lived through a dark night of the soul....you do not have to be an alcoholic to understand one. But it seems that you have to have had this confrontation with tragedy in your own life...You have to have known utter hopelessness or utter helplessness. You have to have screamed the first prayer, "God: help me." (Kurtz, 1996; reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p. 120)

Kurtz then addressed the corruption of Alcoholics Anonymous that could occur when the distinction was lost between an AA meeting and a group therapy session. He argued not for the superiority of one over the other, but pointed out how each was injured when it lost its identity and drifted toward the other. Noting also the development of groups that called themselves "Twelve-Step" but lacked essential AA ingredients, Ernie (with some trepidation) attempted to define the "real AA" of history, suggesting characteristics of "real AA": 1) The use of a language of spirituality that speaks of powerlessness, a Higher Power, character defects, inventory, amends, and service, rather than of the vocabulary of therapy with its references to co-dependency, inner children, and the use of diagnostic and clinical terms 2) Humor, with its appreciation of paradox and irony 3) A distinct story-style that shares "experience, strength, and hope" via stories that "describe in a general way what we used to be like, what happened, and what we are like now" rather than telling "what happened to me" and "how I feel about that" 4) Respect for the Twelve Traditions 5) The realization that one is present and participating not because one "wanted to" but because one had to, and the

concomitant sense of identification and fitting in, of belonging in this setting and place, being at home in this community of recovery for the same reason.

In a third seminal article, Kurtz opened with the provocative question, “Whatever Happened to Twelve Step Programs?” The article described the history of the development of AA’s Twelve Steps, and then raised concerns about the “commodification of the Twelve Steps.” This discussion explored the professionalization and commercialization of alcoholism treatment and the presence of people and institutions who sought to economically exploit the larger recovery movement that had become something of a cultural phenomenon during the mid- to late-1980s. Kurtz particularly loathed the aggressive marketing of all manner of recovery paraphernalia—items he collectively castigated as “recovery porn.” He expressed concern that the term “Twelve-Step” had become increasingly “laden with connotations of self-pity, narcissism, and greed” (Reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p. 162). Kurtz’s proposed antidote to such corruption was a re-emphasis on the genuine spirituality found within the authentic Twelve Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous and guarded by that fellowship’s Twelve Traditions. He promised enthusiastic support of any business or other enterprise that implemented those same Twelve Traditions in its own practice.

Increased interest in Ernie’s published articles led, through the encouragement of Charlie Bishop, Jr., to the publication of *The Collected Ernie Kurtz* in 1999. This book contains many Kurtz articles published in scholarly journals that had become difficult to obtain as well as some unpublished pieces (e.g., “Bill W. Takes LSD”).

The Varieties of AA and Recovery Experience

Since 1998, Ernest Kurtz has served as an Adjunct Assistant Research Scientist within the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical School, where he provides consultation on research studies on topics ranging from alcoholism to life transitions. He also serves as a consultant to the Great Lakes Addiction Technology Transfer Center of the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, where he helps develop articles, monographs, and audiovisual products for addiction professionals and recovery support specialists. Collectively, these products use the latest scientific studies to chart diverse pathways and styles of long-term addiction recovery and provide guidance on how to link clients in addiction treatment to communities of recovery in the United States. This latter interest led to Kurtz serving as a consultant to *Faces and Voices of Recovery* between 2001-2007. In this role, he led the effort to create and

regularly update a guide to the broad spectrum of spiritual, secular, and explicitly religious recovery mutual aid groups in the United States. (See https://www.facesandvoicesofrecovery.org/resources/support_home.php)

Although health problems have restricted his travel and presentations in recent years, Ernie Kurtz continues to write (with a new book on spirituality currently in the works) and to serve in his favorite role as “armchair consultant” to many projects. He continues to inspire and support people interested in the history of AA and the role of spirituality in addiction recovery.

Permeating Themes

Numerous themes permeate the professional contributions of Ernie Kurtz. Some of the more prominent of these are highlighted and illustrated below with excerpts from Kurtz’s writings and presentations.

The Role of Respect in Recovery Research: Ernie has been a key figure in conferences for researchers interested in conducting studies of AA. He welcomes such studies, but challenges researchers to set aside their pre-existing ideas about Alcoholics Anonymous. He consistently reminds research scientists interested in this area that respect for AA members and AA as an institution is an essential ingredient in the conduct of good science and ethical research practice.

Why is it that some who choose to research Alcoholics Anonymous seem to bring to that task attitudes toward ‘the spiritual’ that if held toward homosexuality would be termed homophobic? Why, to be more concrete, are pejorative terms such as religiosity and authoritarianism preferred to the as-descriptive-words spirituality and commitment? (Kurtz, 1992; reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p. 8)

Immersion in the literature on AA indeed suggests that, as with the classic Rorschach inkblots, those who tell about AA may reveal more about themselves than about the fellowship and its program. This caveat of course applies also to us. We have sought to respond to its warning by staying as close as possible to AA’s own literature. (Miller & Kurtz, 1994, p. 165)

Importance of Cultural Context: “You have to understand what was going on at that time” is a frequent admonition as Kurtz mentors those of us interested in the birth and evolution of Alcoholics Anonymous.

Alcoholics Anonymous came into being during the cultural trauma of the Great Depression, and A.A. could not have come out of any era other than the American 1930's.....Alcoholics Anonymous recaptured in very American terms the ancient tradition that recognized and accepted limitation. (Kurtz, 1996; reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p.127)

History is in the Details: One of Kurtz's favorite historians is Barbara Tuchman, whom he often quotes and encourages his mentees to read. Like Tuchman, Kurtz prefers historical evidence over sweeping and usually ill-founded generalizations. He is a stickler about the sources of data upon which any historical conclusions are based. The proffered theories of many students are consistently met with the question, "And what is your evidence for that?"

"I would speculate and then Ernie would caution me not to let mere conjectures get too far away from what was actually available in the documentary record."
(Ron Roizen, Personal Communication, July 2009)

The science of history is, at its best, about data and judging the quality of data upon which one's conclusions are based. When his mentees present interview data that conflicts with evidence from archival documents, Ernie initiates a discussion of memory as both a storage area and a construction, or reconstruction, site. He emphasizes the importance of reconciling conflicting accounts and listening for how memory could be distorted for ideological gain or personal prestige. In short, Ernie spends a good deal of his life teaching people how to, in his favorite phrase, "do history."

How AA Works: Ernie has sustained his fascination with the details of AA history, but he also returns repeatedly to the questions of how AA works as an organization and how it works in the lives of its members. It is in these latter explorations that we get the continual thread reflected in the titles of Ernie's most renowned books.

Sitting in that side parlor of the Seiberling gatehouse on the evening of 12 May 1935, Bill presented Dr. Bob four aspects of one core idea. Utterly hopeless, totally deflated, requiring conversion and needing others, the drinking alcoholic was quite obviously not perfect, not absolute, not God." (Kurtz, 1979, p. 55)

"Don't take the first drink" reminds that the alcoholic is not God. It signals the importance of accepting limitation. "Keep coming to meetings" speaks to the

alcoholic as not-God. It alerts to the wholeness to be found in limitation. Since to be human is to be limited, wholeness as human is always unfinished process rather than an achieved condition. (Kurtz, 1979, p. 212)c

Bill [Wilson] never lost what recent self-styled spiritual mentors apparently never gain: the sense of humor that warned him that he could be wrong. Bill Wilson never forgot that if he, as an alcoholic in recovery, had any spirituality, it was a spirituality of imperfection. (Kurtz, 1999, p. 49)

The “secret” of Alcoholics Anonymous, the thing that makes A.A. work, is identification. As Marty Mann is reputed to have said to her fellow sanitarium inmate on returning to Blythwood from her visit to the Wilson home in Brooklyn Heights for her first A.A. meeting: “Grennie, we aren’t alone any more.” (Kurtz, 2002)

Importance of AA Traditions: The endless opportunities for Kurtz to talk about the meaning of AA’s Twelve Steps (perhaps most eloquently summarized in his essay “Whatever Happened to Twelve Step Programs?”), never fail to also elicit comment on the less acknowledged role of the Twelve Traditions of Alcoholics Anonymous.

The Traditions are to the fellowship of AA what the Steps are to the spirituality of the individual AA member. The spirituality of the fellowship is fostered and safeguarded by the Twelve Traditions. The traditions are why AA survived and thrived when so many of its predecessors did not. The “secret” of AA’s success lies in the protective shield of its Traditions. (Kurtz Interview 2008)

....AA built upon it’s concept of “alcoholic”—its insight into essential limitation—an effective modality of healing for the malaise of its age, shame.... A.A.’s intellectual significance, then, is itself appropriately limited. A.A. suggests, for those afflicted with existential shame over their failure to be perfect, both a philosophy and a therapy that enable that shame’s transcendence...Perhaps in this lies its greatest significance, both intellectually and socially, for us all. (Kurtz, 1999, 218219)

Power of Story: Kurtz views the acts of story reconstruction, storytelling, and story listening as among the most important dimensions of recovery from alcoholism within the fellowship of AA. He returns to this subject again and again in his writings and presentations.

...from its beginnings and still today, the philosophy and spirituality—the healing—of Alcoholics Anonymous is transmitted primarily by the practice of storytelling, of telling a particular kind of story the very format of which inculcates a way of thinking that shapes a particular way of life. (Kurtz, 1986, reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p. 26)

In this mutuality between telling and listening, between speaking and hearing, lies the deepest spiritual significance of mutual-aid groups....Those wrestling with spiritual dilemmas do not need answers but presence—permission to confront the dilemma and struggle with it aloud, in the presence of others who in some way “understand,” in the sense that they awarely stand under the same dilemma. (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 95, edited)

For in the settings of A.A. storytelling and story listening, two paradoxical things happen. First, participants discover their shared story; and second, they come to realize that each of their stories is unique. transformed. You don't reform the (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 204)

Guilt, his Shame, and Alcoholism Recovery: Kurtz's views on guilt and shame in writings, presentations and interviews begin with their nexus to addiction.

Addiction has a lot to do with guilt and shame, those oh-so-negative realities. Some old-timers suggest that we are made with a God-shaped hole in the middle of our being, and we are not at rest until somehow that hole is filled. So we try to fill it with booze. We try to fill it with pot and other drugs. We try to fill it with sex. We try to fill it with gambling. We try to fill it with big cars and investment portfolios. We try to fill it with honors and publicity. But the hole remains. The need is not to have this hole filled with pat answers, but to experience connection with others who recognize and participate in these same efforts to find some kind of fulfillment. (Kurtz 2008 Interview)

Having established guilt/shame/addiction connection, he then presents a quite nuanced distinction between shame and guilt and the processes through which each are addressed in the recovery process.

Guilt results from a fault of doing, whereas shame results from a fault of being. There are two ways in which human beings feel bad: feeling bad for what we do (guilt) or feeling bad for what we are (shame). I see the inventory and amends

steps (Steps 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10) in Alcoholics Anonymous as an effective remedy for guilt, but shame is qualitatively different than guilt, and it is most effectively touched by Steps 6 and 7. Shame requires a new way of seeing— insight that changes one’s very being through a kind of conversion. In guilt, we can be reformed; in shame, we must be transformed. You don’t reform the alcoholic. Reformation does not work. The alcoholic needs to be transformed. Surmounting guilt can lead to feelings of righteousness, whereas transcending shame opens us to a new identity and a humanness free of self-righteousness. (Kurtz 2008 Interview)

Respect for Multiple Pathways and Styles of Long-Term Recovery: Respect for the varieties of recovery experience within and outside Alcoholics Anonymous permeates Kurtz’s intellectual contributions.

If I were to write another book on A.A., its title would be Varieties of the Alcoholics Anonymous Experience. (Kurtz, 1996; reprinted in Kurtz, 1999, p. 116)

His fascination with and respect for other, non-AA, varieties of the recovery experience seem to have begun with Kurtz’s interest in the “varieties of AA experience,” observed first in the the development of specialized meetings and Eleventh Step groups (e.g., Calix Society, J.A.C.S.). That study soon broadened to include secular and religious recovery support groups that rose as alternatives to AA. In this regard, Kurtz shares the view of AA co-founder Bill Wilson that “the roads to recovery are many” and that all are cause for celebration (Wilson, 1944).

Kurtz, the Man

In closing this chapter, we will try to move beyond Ernie Kurtz as an iconic scholar and describe something of the man. This effort is challenged by the many roles he has played and the many facets of his character.

Man Behind the Scholar: Kurtz has received high praise from the most esteemed intellects within the addictions field.

Dr. William R. Miller is an Emeritus Distinguished Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry at the University of New Mexico and one of the most internationally respected scientists in the field of addictions research.

I have learned much from Ernie about the 12-Step program and fellowship, first from his lucid writings and then from the man himself. A solid historian who is also a consummate storyteller is a real find, and being a lover of good stories, I was drawn to Ernie from the moment we met. We also share a broader interest in the interface of spirituality and health, looking through the varied lenses of skeptic and believer, scholar and healer, story-teller and storylistener. His Spirituality of Imperfection is, to me, a masterwork. The word that comes to mind when I think of Ernie is mensch. I feel both an awed respect for his intellect and personal affection for the man. He is someone who does not speak often, and ponders before he does so. Thus, when Ernie Kurtz has something to say, I want to hear it. I treasure him as a colleague, a friend, and a rare gift. (William Miller, Personal Communication, July 2009)

Dr. Ron Roizen, a leading alcoholism sociologist, adds:

The world of alcohol history I have worked in would be greatly diminished without Ernie's example and his collegial friendship. The lasting influence Ernie has had on me may simply be his serious mind, serious work, and serious communication. My work in alcohol studies, humble as it is, would be sorely diminished without Ernie as a sounding board, a patient correspondent, a critic, a congratulator, a reader, a model, and a discriminating scholar. (Ron Roizen, Communication, July 2009)

One of the things Kurtz has long done is contribute to the development of repositories of historical documents for use by present and future scholars. Dr. David Lewis describes Kurtz's influence on the founding and activities of the Chester B. Kirk Collection.

The origin of Brown University's collections of historical materials about the founding and activities of Alcoholics Anonymous began when Ernie Kurtz called me fifteen years ago with information that book dealer Charles Bishop was looking to sell the substantial portion of his collection (15,000 items!). With the generous support of Chester H. Kirk, Brown acquired this collection. Ernie Kurtz then helped establish the anonymity policy for use of that collection and assisted in the planning for two meetings of AA historians and authors, which took place subsequently at Brown. Over time, the archive at Brown has grown to include the collections of Dr. Bob, Clarence Snyder, Marty Mann, The Rutgers Anti Saloon League collection, and others. I've had the help of numerous individuals in locating donors of materials and money and giving me advice about how I should proceed,

but Ernie was a prime player and the one who got the collections started. He played other roles as well. I saw Ernie the scholar in action sitting at my dining table in Providence with historian Bill White meticulously sorting through and cataloging Dan Anderson's archives before they went to Brown's John Hay Library. It was a pleasure to see Ernie's academic side and vast fund of knowledge and meticulous attention to detail with each of the letters and reports in that material. It is a pleasure to have worked with Ernie Kurtz for many years. It is my privilege to count him as a friend. (Lewis 2009, Personal Communication).

The Author: Most people know Ernie Kurtz through his written word. His popularity as an author has many sources. First, he is above all a storyteller and a quite good one. Second, he possesses two quite admirable additional traits in a writer: he can “turn a phrase” and “tell it like it is.”

For the last decade, the surest way to make a buck has been to convince people of their shame and then to find a way of blaming someone for it. (Kurtz, 1987, reprinted in Kurtz 1999, p. 77)

Spirituality has to do with the reality of the here and now, with living humanly as one is, with the very real, very agonizing, ‘passions of the soul.’ Spirituality involves learning how to live with imperfection. (Kurtz and Ketcham, 1992, p. 18)

The admission of limitation, and, specifically, of insufficiency of self-control— this is the beginning of Twelve-Step spirituality. (Kurtz, 1996, Reprinted Kurtz, 1999, p. 147)

Addiction has been described as the belief that whenever there is ‘something wrong with me,’ it can be ‘fixed’ by something outside of me...It is no wonder, then, that ‘locating divinity in drugs’ becomes a kind of spiritual death. (Kurtz & Ketcham, 1992, p. 120)

The Collaborator: Ernie has been quite open to collaborative work over the course of his career, but as Ernie suggested earlier, some of these collaborations have had their rough moments, as Kathy Ketcham describes.

*My correspondence with Ernie over the twenty years of our partnership fills many files, including ones labeled “acrimonious letters” and “loving exchanges.” On July 12, 1989, months into our work on what would become *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, I asked Ernie in a letter to explain a story I had read, the deeper*

meaning of which had escaped me. Ernie responded with a three-page letter that began, "Please don't do things like that to me! Our initial joy at finding each other in order to work together seemed to spring in part from a sense that we were intuitively attuned. Now you threaten to go linear on me!" "It is not that I 'resist' explaining stories," Ernie continued in a gentler tone. "Stories cannot be explained. Story is art-form. As with any other art-form, the only possible answer to 'what does it mean?' is 'If I could have put it into words, I would not have had to paint the painting, sculpt the statue, write the sonata, or tell the story.' Note the underlining and bold type. Ernie knew in those years he was dealing with a thickheaded neophyte, and he eschewed subtlety. The letter went on (and on), and I wondered if we would ever be able to breach the schism between us. But in the last paragraph, Ernie extended a hand. "This letter has been a far too lengthy, pompous, discursive, preachy 'explanation.' On the precise topic that you query: We are 'the story!' I doubt that I want to let that hang out in our book, but it may help us survive producing that book." We survived the book, of course, and twenty years later, we are now working (and playing) on a book about sin, shame, and spirituality. The message of our collaboration and our written work is the same: In all our imperfection, indeed precisely because of our limitations and shortcomings, we need each other, then, now, always. (Ketcham, 2009, personal communication)

The Teacher: Gail Milgram, Professor Emerita and long-time Director of the Rutgers School of Alcohol and Drug Studies, had the opportunity to work with Ernie Kurtz for almost 20 years.

Ernest Kurtz served on the faculty of the Rutgers School of Alcohol Studies from 1978 to 1997. His animated and exciting style and wonderful content made his lectures come alive; he told stories, instilling meaning and understanding. All the School's participants attended Ernie's lectures; his wisdom, experience, and renown filled every seat in the lecture hall. After Ernie was finished, he would always receive a standing ovation. His writings continue to exert a great influence on the School. He helps us understand the importance of fellowship, traditions, and spirituality and how they relate to recovery. Ernie Kurtz shaped the field as we know it today, and for that, we owe him our sincere gratitude and heartfelt thanks. (Milgram 2009, Personal Communication)

Kurtz has given considerable thought to the crafts of teaching and coaching and how he can best help those he mentors to also become good teachers. When recently asked the essence of great teachers, he reflected:

There has to be a fundamental honesty. The first honesty for any teacher, of course, is "I don't know." That is so difficult for some people, and people who cannot say those words should never go into teaching. Some people, including myself, go into teaching in the hopes that someday you will know everything. Someplace along the line, you have to embrace what you know and don't know. Teaching requires that basic honesty. (Kurtz, 2008 interview)

When his professional peers were asked to comment on Kurtz's contributions to their own work, people frequently comment on his generosity as a teacher.

When I ask for help regarding one or another historical question, he's as likely as not to send me considerably more than I asked for. I once emailed back to him in this regard, "I asked for a peanut, and you sent me Georgia." (Ron Roizen, Personal Communication, July 2009)

The Mentor: In mentoring, as in teaching, Ernie gives considerable thought to the process involved.

Discussions of mentoring often focus on what the mentor gives and the mentee receives, but these relationships have to be two-way. This is the nature of mentoring. It's impossible to teach effectively without learning. There are some people who don't know this who have a lot to teach but can't connect with their students because they have stopped learning through the teaching process. Another pitfall is possessing one's students and sheltering them from opposing ideas. Those who come to learn from us are a precious gift. We have to realize this and pass that gift on to others. I think an important mentorship role is this linking one's students to other people. I've also learned that nothing is more important in mentoring others than genuine enthusiasm. You cannot teach something you don't love. (Kurtz, 2008 Interview)

People regularly run ideas by Ernie and receive encouragement to pursue their sense of calling. In a casual conversation, Tom Garrett, who worked with Ernie at Guest House, described his interest in doing something to aid alcoholic priests serving in India. Ernie suggested an outreach program from Guest House and encouraged Tom to lead the effort, which he did over the coming years. Tom recently reflected, "Without Ernie's suggesting the program in the first place and supporting the program with the director and the board of directors, it wouldn't have happened" (Tom Garrett Interview, June 30, 2009).

It is difficult to find an AA-related book written in the past 25 years that does not include a thank-you for assistance and support to Ernie Kurtz. The number of books, dissertations, theses, and sundry professional presentations Ernie has been consulted on is incalculable. Glenn Chestnut describes Ernie's permeating influence on AA scholarship.

Ernie's influence on AA history writing has been profound, and often carried out quietly in the background, in ways of which the general public was never fully aware. One of his special concerns over the years has been to locate and nurture other researchers who were just starting out, to make sure that a tradition of good AA history writing would continue into the next generation. The reason we have a number of our best published studies of AA is because Ernie encouraged these authors and helped them and guided them at crucial points during their own researches, and often worked to find publishers for their books. Likewise, when Nancy Olson started the AAHistoryLovers website (which soon became the principal international forum for the discussion of AA historical research), she turned to Ernie at least two or three times a week to give her guidance and support. Ernie has always been there for all of us. He has been one of the major supporting pillars for the overall enterprise of AA historical writing during the Twelve Step generation. movement's second (Glenn Chestnut, 2009, personal communication)

Reverend Sally Brown describes the mentoring she and her husband experienced from Kurtz.

Twenty years after first reading Not-God, my husband, David R. Brown, and I embarked on our own historical project, A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann. One of our earliest contacts was Ernie, who strongly encouraged us to do a carefully documented account of Marty's life rather than a dramatic, quick, and easy "AA story." Ernie's clinching argument was that this was the first biography of a pivotal person in the alcoholism movement and that we should lay a reliable base for future researchers to follow. During our cross-country research, Dave and I visited and interviewed Ernie at his home in Ann Arbor. He was generous and gracious with his time and information then, and later via telephone. His steady support and encouragement and helpful links to others were invaluable. We know we are only two among legions Ernie has blessed with his knowledge, his teaching, and his writing. (Sally Brown, July 2009, Personal Communication)

Dr. John Crowley, Professor Emeritus at Syracuse University and Professor of English at the University of Alabama, describes a similar experience.

When I was writing my book on Bill W. and A.A., I imagined Ernie Kurtz, with whom I had never communicated, as my ideal reader. If I could halfway please him, I thought, I'd know the book wasn't half bad. So I sent it to him, and he had only encouraging things to say. I finally met Ernie at the Brown University alcoholism and addiction confab in 2002. I can't think of anyone now whose opinion in the field I value more. (John Crowley 2009, Personal Communication)

In my own extended mentorship with Ernie Kurtz, I have found the best of what one could want from a mentor: encyclopedic knowledge, high expectations, piercing questions, straightforward encouragement, unfiltered honesty, a sense of humor, connections to a network of other gifted and generous people, and patience with the pace of one's development. I vividly recall a book chapter I sent to Ernie for review in the early 1990's. His response was to suggest that if my work on this chapter was a prize fight, I would be lying bloodied and battered on the canvas. What then followed was a detailed litany of the flaws of the chapter, with a closing admonition that I needed to get up off the canvas—that I could still win the fight because I was better than my opponent. Ernie was right on both counts: the chapter did initially beat me, and I did get up and eventually win the fight—but not without Ernie's guidance and encouragement. To continue the fight analogy, he is a good man to have in your corner.

The Bridgebuilder: Kurtz has spent a lifetime connecting ideas, people, and institutions. That process began early in his career.

It struck me early on that non-recovering professionals, especially academics, and AA members did not trust each other and often did not like each other very much. This bothered me because I knew good people and had friends in both camps. So I have tried throughout my own professional career to build bridges between these two groups. I have tried to connect these people, to forge links of understanding between the proven conclusions of science and the differently demonstrated experiences of spirituality. My goal when I walk into a room obviously split into recovery and professional camps is to have them talking with each other before I leave. I feel very strongly that these two caring communities need to discover their common ground and respect each other, learn from each other. (Kurtz 2008 Interview)

Because Kurtz's name is so associated with the history of AA, few understand his personal connection to numerous other recovery mutual aid societies. He played an important role in the early development of Moderation Management, has maintained connections with leaders of numerous secular and religious recovery support fellowships, and encouraged and brought attention to groups ranging from Methadone Anonymous to Moms on Meth to Millati Islami (A Muslim 12-step fellowship). In the last decade, Ernie Kurtz has had direct connections with more recovery mutual aid groups than any other person. He is quite literally a walking encyclopedia of addiction recovery in America. And importantly, he facilitates relationships between members of these groups. He has been a force to move American recovery mutual aid societies from a position of competition and conflict to a position of mutual respect and collaboration that has contributed to the embrace of a larger identity: "people in recovery." Pat Taylor, Director of Faces and Voices of Recovery, describes Kurtz's approach to creating the Guide to Recovery Support.

His willingness to share his knowledge, experiences, and understanding were boundless, and I feel extremely fortunate to have been exposed to his questioning and curious mind and wonderful spirit as he marshaled the resources of the internet and his vast web of colleagues to expand opportunities for individuals and professionals to find support to sustain recovery from addiction. (Taylor, 2009, Personal Communication)

Kurtz's role of bridge builder extends to his mentoring activities. He has long served as a central node of communication for people interested in recovery mutual aid and the role of spirituality in recovery. In that avocation, he spends much of his time connecting people with one another. What that bridge-building did for this author was move me from a local platform—in how I saw myself and how I was seen by others—to a national and international platform. Much of what I have been able to achieve and contribute came from Ernie first expanding my professional development and then connecting me to key people and venues of influence.

The Statesperson and Activist: Ernie Kurtz earned a statesman status in the addictions and recovery arenas through sheer endurance, the quality of his writings and presentations, and his character. He would not define himself as a statesman or activist, but there are numerous examples that support those titles. Those roles are evident through his local involvements such as serving on the boards of the Washtenaw County Council on Alcoholism and Dawn Farm—a

local addiction treatment facility in Ann Arbor. Jim Balmer, the Director of Dawn Farm, describes Ernie's contributions.

Ernie's tenure as a Trustee for the Dawn Farm Community of Programs helped steer this organization toward a greater commitment to our roots in the recovery movement. His understanding of the principles of Alcoholics Anonymous helped other Trustees see the importance of maintaining our respect and deference to community-based and non-professional recovery workers. The lessons we learned about the primacy of the recovery community stay with us to this day. (Balmer, 2009, personal communication)

Kurtz's activism is also evident at a national level. Here's one example. On January 20, 2000, Audrey Kishline, the founder of Moderation Management, announced that she would be attending AA, Women for Sobriety, and SMART Recovery meetings to achieve a newly set goal of abstinence. On March 25, 2000, Kishline, while legally intoxicated, was involved in a head-on crash that killed a father and his 12-year-old daughter. The event ignited a media frenzy and renewed an acrimonious, polarized debate about "controlled drinking." Published editorials and internet posts variably blamed MM or AA for the deaths that had resulted from Kishline's intoxication. At the height of this frenzied debate, Ernie Kurtz mobilized 34 prominent individuals from all spectrums of the addiction/recovery fields to formulate and publish a statement on this incident and the professional and public responses to it. The statement read in part:

That Ms. Kishline was intoxicated at the time of the crash has been claimed to indicate the failure of the approach of one or another of the mutual-aid groups Ms. Kishline attended. Such claims are not in accord with everyday experience in the field, in which relapse is common, whichever approach the drinker adopts. Recovery from serious alcohol problems is a difficult goal, and there are different paths to it. We believe that the approach represented by Alcoholics Anonymous and that represented by Management are both needed. Moderation
(Downloaded on August 5, 2009 from
<http://listserv.kent.edu/cgi-bin/wa.exe?A2=ind0007b&L=addictl&F=P&P=24932>)

This straightforward statement, signed by people no one would expect to appear together, quieted the frenzy and stands today as a historically important footnote in the American debate about moderation versus abstinence in the resolution of alcohol problems. Ernie Kurtz was the common relational link to those 34 people. It is doubtful that any other person could have brought those individuals together

and mobilized them for a common cause. That such activism was selective made Ernie's voice and the voices of those he called upon to stand with him all the more powerful.

A Closing Reflection

Ernie Kurtz continues to challenge others to pursue work that will build on his own. In recent years, he has been particularly adamant on the need for new studies on the history of AA.

Something's wrong when a single history of Alcoholics Anonymous—Not-God—has remained authoritative for 30 years. Part of it is that no one before or since had access to the AA Archives the way I did. But we need new historical studies of AA. So much new information has been discovered, particularly through the AA History Lover's listserv and through AA members who have delved into various questions related to the history of AA. Not God is a history of ideas. We do not know a lot about the economics of early Alcoholics Anonymous. We do not know much about the interpersonal actions or relationships among people in the fellowship's early days. It really is time for AA's story to be told from new and different perspectives. (Kurtz 2008 Interview)

Historian Barbara Tuchman (1981) once observed that the key to writing good history is a love of your subject. Ernie found such a love early in his life and has continued to spread that contagious passion to generations of individuals who share his interests in the history of AA, spirituality, and the power of storytelling. He continues today to pursue that love through his research and writing. When this book comes out, he will likely be sitting in his study in Ann Arbor pursuing that love, and he will, as the intensely private person that he is, be embarrassed by this fuss we have made over him.

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Appendix

Chronology of Ernest Kurtz Publications

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