DISCUSSION GUIDE

HIGHER AND FRIENDLY POWERS: Tranforming Addition and Suffering

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1) Anything Larger Will Do to Take the Next Step

A. What is your habitual center of personal energy? How has it changed over time? Can you identify some points in your life when you made an intentional decision to change? Are there other changes that happened gradually without your noticing them?

B. How do you define spirituality? Do spiritual impulses burn brightly at your center or do they seem unfamiliar or remote?

C. What is a higher power? What does it enable you to do?

D. How have your own over-beliefs influenced you? Have you ever made an inventory of your important beliefs, and can you ever imagine changing them?

2) Generations of Suffering

A. How might the traumatic experiences of Henry James Sr have affected his parenting? Does it seem as if he had distinct set of expectations for William and Harry but a very different set for his other children? Do you think that contributed to the suffering of his children?

B. William James's suffering as a young man was acute. Do you think his own suffering made him more empathetic to the suffering of others, especially to the suffering of Bob his alcoholic brother?

C. How does alcoholism or other forms of addiction set the tone and dynamics of families? Do the decisions of Mary, Bob's wife, make sense to you?

D. William and Alice James were the closest family members of Bob. How much can people help others who are suffering with addiction and other kinds of suffering? How can the suffering of others become our suffering?

3) The Healthy-Minded

A. What is the distinction James draws between the material, social, and spiritual dimensions of a self? Is this plausible and how does it make you think about your own self?

B. Do you agree there are two basic types of people—the healthy-minded and the sick souls—and most of us fall into one category or the other? Is it true that the mixture of the two in each of us can change over time? Can you intentionally make that change?

C. Why is fear an accelerant to becoming less optimistic or even morbid-minded? Does the concept of fear-thought resonate with you?

D. Why might the recommendation of mind cure writers to relax, let go, and believe everything is or will be okay be embraced by the healthy-minded while heartily rejected by the less optimistic? How do you meet this recommendation?

4) The Sick Souls

A. What are the stages of world sickness that a divided or sick soul may experience? Are these all the stages or do you think there are others? If so, what are they? Are these stages useful in describing and understanding other types of suffering in addition to addiction?

B. How well do the young Oxford graduate, S.H. Hadley, and Henry Alline demonstrate the stages of world sickness?

C. How compelling is the comparison of world sickness to the Substance Use Disorder diagnosis? Does each capture some dimensions of suffering that the other misses?

D. Is James's concept of misery threshold useful in making sense of when, where, and how a person might say "I can't take anymore?" How is it different from rock bottom? Do you have some sense of where your misery threshold is or do you hope never to find out?

About the Author

Peg O'Connor is a Professor of Philosophy at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, MN, recovering alcoholic of 35 years, and author of Higher and Friendly Powers: Transforming Addiction and Suffering (Wildhouse Publications, 2022) and Life on the Rocks: Finding Meaning in Addiction and Recovery (Central Recovery Press, 2016). She writes the column "Philosophy Stirred, Not Shaken" for psychologytoday.com.

In her free time, Peg is an avid tennis player and a black belt in taekwondo. She has worked in dog rescue for about 10 years and finds that her faith in humanity can be simultaneously shattered by meeting mistreated animals and restored by colleagues who are fiercely loving and caring advocates. Her own dog, Clooney, is a rescue and they spend their days together in the great Minneapolis area.

5) Conversions and the Hot Spot of Consciousness

A. Of the two sorts of conversion—sudden and gradual—which one seems more likely to happen with you? Do you agree that a conversion can happen without a God and that you can author it for yourself?

B. When and how have you captured a glimpse of what's going on in your subconscious or transmarginal region? Was that glimpse enough to make you pay attention and perhaps change something about yourself?

C. Why is it important for a person on the verge of having a conversion to have both a sense of the wrongness or incompleteness of the present and a positive ideal or vision for the future? What gets in the way of that positive vision and how might you come to have one?

D. What does it mean to be reborn, rejuvenated, or regenerated? How do changes to a person's habitual center of personal energy make a person a new person? Have you experienced such deep changes in your material, social, and spiritual selves?

6) Willingness to Live on a Maybe

A. What's the difference between surrender and renunciation? Why does renunciation look not just to the past but to the future? Are there behaviors or ways of being in the world that you have renounced?

B. Why does hedging your bets when trying to make a change such as not drinking or using drugs keep a person from succeeding in making those changes? Have you experienced the gap between wishing for something to be different and willing for that something to be different?

C. Does James's claim that faith is a willingness to act when the results are not guaranteed in advance seem a robust definition of faith for you? Do you agree that faith can help to bring about fact, and that fact then shores up faith?

D. Is a willingness to live on a maybe enough to prompt people to take a next step in changing their addictive behaviors or other behaviors that trouble a person? Do some maybes and possibilities seem far too remote to be up to the task for you?

"Each person's higher power, sense of the divine, or something More is unique to her. There are as many higher powers as there are individuals in the world."

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7) Fruits of the Spiritual Tree

A. Why are people who undergo a conversion able to perceive new truths about themselves and the world? Why might that be frightening to some people and liberating to others? What would it be for you?

B. How do people who have been converted feel a new expansiveness or openness to the world? James says people can reach outward to a higher and friendly power or inward to that power. How would that sort of connection or continuity change you?

C. How do the material, social, and spiritual selves change when a person becomes more unified through a conversion? Does a conversion mean all parts of our selves will unified and consistent or will there still be pieces of ourselves at odds with each other? What might that look like for you?

D. Why does a converted or transformed person come to have a firmcharacter, stability, and equilibrium in life? What other characteristics would you include?

8) Living with the Acute Fever

A. Why might the characteristic or dynamic of craving change over the course of a person's recovery? How can you strike a balance between an awareness of different types of craving and not lapsing into fear-thought about cravings?

B. Why is it so easy for a person to assume she knows herself better than anyone else ever possibly could? How is it that we can get so much wrong about ourselves and how can other people help to challenge our views of ourselves?

C. Why is it so hard for many of us to forgive ourselves? Is there something you would argue can never be forgiven? How about when a person we have harmed forgives us? How about when a person we have harmed doesn't forgive us but we forgive ourselves?

D. James claims that our selves are always changing, which means that what we need in recovery will change over time. What are some of the ways we can stay flexible in relation to our recovery and our life in general?

"Expansiveness involves a person extending outward to something More or greater than her previously embattled self. A person may also reach inward to a better self. This expansiveness enables a person to begin to say yes to life."

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Appendix I) William James's own Over-beliefs

A. How much attention do you pay to your own over-beliefs? They're so familiar we are often unable to see them. What are some instances where you did notice them? Did you change them or recommit to them?

B. Do you believe you have a wider or more expansive self that is continuous with something More however you define that for yourself?

C. Why does James claim that God's existence or attributes cannot be proven? Though there may be no evidence or proof of God's existence, James maintains we have a right to believe. Does this seem plausible to you?

D. Are you content with James's belief that we humans are in the universe much like cats and dogs are in our homes? We're tangents to all that goes on around us. We are not the measure of all things. Does this feel liberating or frightening?

Appendix II: William James and Alcoholics Anonymous

A. How much different is James's conception of higher power from what finds in Alcoholics Anonymous? Is/are there some characteristics or descriptions of higher power that work well for you?

B. Why was James worried about the spiritual experiences of one individual becoming the basis for a religion or program? Is it fair to say that Bill Wilson's experience of a sudden conversion became the basis of the program of Alcoholics Anonymous?

C. Why might a more expansive understanding of higher power make Alcoholics Anonymous a viable option for people who want to change their relationships to alcohol and other drugs or to address other forms of suffering?

D. How similar are what James calls "the fruits of the spiritual tree" and the Ninth Step promises of Alcoholics Anonymous? What else would you add to these fruits or promises?

"Optimism isn't just a feeling or an outlook on life; it is a living attitude."

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