Increasingly, Americans are withdrawing into private worlds no larger than family and job. Interest in political participation, and even in voting, is less than in other democracies. No matter how ineffective, unfair and corrupt our federal, states, and local governments seem to be, they appear to be acceptable to the majority of Americans. Even the use of billions of dollars of taxpayer funds to pay for the Savings and Loan "bailout" has apparently become acceptable to most Americans. Meanwhile, environmental quality deteriorates, disparity in income increases, and the number of homeless Americans grows. Yet no effective action is demanded or undertaken.

Why are Americans so apathetic? Many reasons are given — among them the insulating effect of television and the alienation caused by disillusionment with the vested interest controlled political process. One factor which has undoubtedly contributed to increasing acceptance of the status quo, incumbents, and social injustice is the aggressive promulgation, during the past 20 years, of religions and spiritualities which say "the only thing you can change is yourself. Several of these privatizing, solipsistic spiritualities and therapies have colonized the addiction treatment field and their hegemony reigns unchallenged.

Most drug/alcohol treatment programs — inpatient, outpatient, public, and private — have as a core requirement that participants attend 12 Step meetings such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Chemically Dependent Anonymous (CDA).

On its face, AA appears to be a program which develops feelings of community and mutual concern for other humans. It is relatively free of requirements of doctrinal conformity, it permits greater freedom of choice regarding the nature of one's "higher power" than is found in many mainstream Western religions, and it is non-hierarchical in organization. One might think that these factors would conduce to developing people who were independent and felt a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. But the sense of community extends no further than the group and the overall effect is to privatize and depoliticize living problems associated with drug and alcohol abuse. Alcohol and drug abuse are not seen as a collective phenomenon requiring, at least in part, a collective solution. Instead, AA views alcoholism as a disease 1 whose course is unaffected by social or political conditions. AA sees one universal solution: to change personal attitudes, rather than attempt to change social or political structures. Attempts to engage in political analysis and assign political or socioeconomic causes to drug or alcohol abuse problems are often viewed as a form of denial.2

There are many reasons why the 12 Steps programs counsel privatizing personal problems and
accepting the status quo: 1.) AA’s 10th Tradition states that “No AA group or member should ever, in such a way as to implicate AA, express any opinion on outside controversial issues — particularly those of politics, alcohol reform, or sectarian religion. The Alcoholics Anonymous groups oppose no one. Concerning such matters they can express no views whatsoever”. Despite the fact that this rule seeks only to keep the group, and not individuals acting as individuals, out of politics, it is commonly misinterpreted to mean that AA members should avoid politics and controversy. 2.) People who are attempting to follow the AA maxims of "Keep It Simple", "Let Go and Let God", "I'm Powerless", "One Day at A Time", "Acceptance", and "Turn It Over" are not likely to want to get involved in political action which often requires grappling with complex ethical and philosophical problems, and running the risk of becoming angry, frustrated, and upset as well as overtly attempting to change what may appear to others to be the unchangeable. 3.) AA was founded by two white, middle aged, middle class male professionals, one a stockbroker and one a medical doctor. The official literature, the "Big Book" and "Twelve and Twelve" describe as an ideal, a Ronald Reaganesque world, where households are composed of heterosexual couples with the male the breadwinner and the focus of activity is on working, providing for the family, consuming appropriate products and associating with appropriate people for one's station in life, and working within 12 Step programs. 4.) The official literature of the companion group, AlAnon, promotes an overtly stoic philosophy (often quoting Marcus Aurelius) where helping alcoholics and other people with problems is perceived to be "enabling" and "codependent". It counsels "benevolent detachment" as the most constructive way to relate with people who appear "needy".5 Many 12 Step participants attend multiple programs and adopt the philosophy of AlAnon and the codependency movement.6, 5) Since AA depends mostly on courts and employers for referrals, to continue to be attractive to these groups, AA must assure that it is perceived as non-threatening to the established order. 6.) From a group dynamic point of view, it makes sense to channel all altruistic energies into helping to build the group and helping other group members. The groups are free and depend on a constant supply of volunteer energy. Encouraging outside activity might seem to drain off energy needed for the group's continuation.

Those seeking to alter existing power relationships, whether they be feminists, civil rights advocates, environmentalists, or whatever, should be concerned with the political effect of sending ever larger numbers of people to spiritual treatment programs which discourage attempts to change anything but oneself. Twelve Step programs promote the idea that the participant is "powerless over people, places, and things" and the programs discourage members from efforts, especially impassioned efforts, to alter the work place, the environment, or the political system. It is highly questionable whether this approach is appropriate for women and blacks and other members of groups which have traditionally been powerless in relation to dominant groups. Many women are attempting to develop "empowerment" and will not benefit from having their energies channelled into efforts to "turn their will and life over to the care of God", especially a God who is commonly seen as a father figure who demands complete submission and surrender to "His" will.
Twelve Step participants are also encouraged to adopt a philosophy which encourages them to become satisfied workers with no ambitions to "change the system," confining their efforts to changing themselves and achieving contentment in their families and jobs. The Big Book of AA is very clear that anger is never justified. Even the possible ending of the world by "blazing destruction" is to be accepted without fear as members are urged to "deeply fear that "Thy will, not ours, be done"

Various alternative self help programs are gaining some acceptance and are also receiving referrals from the courts and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPs). But the major alternatives, Secular Organizations for Sobriety (SOS), Rational Recovery (RR), and Women for Sobriety (WFS) all share, with AA, the view that the etiology of alcoholism is in the individual. All avoid discussing social context (except in a general fatalistic way); and all ignore social action (other than within recovery groups or the family) as a component of recovery. This is probably because they all must channel members' energies into helping perpetuate the group and must appear non threatening to referral sources.

SOS actually places more emphasis on the disease concept than AA. Its program, as revealed in its official literature seems to rely on reiterations that alcoholism is a physical disease of genetic origin whose course is unaffected by character traits or philosophical or cultural attitudes. While SOS does not rely on a Higher Power, it does seem to rely psychologically on an almost mystical belief in the (unproven) proposition that alcoholism can be scientifically and objectively proven to be caused by a disease agent. Sobriety is achieved by daily reminders, which continue throughout the members life, that the member has a disease.

RR adopts the Albert Ellis rational emotive therapy approach. It describes itself as "the thinking man's solution to the drinking man's problem", and has an even greater reliance and faith in the power of unaided rationality to conquer all problems than SOS. While it does not emphasize the disease concept, it sees genetics as a cause of alcoholic thinking which can be cured if a member will "literally, think himself sober". A member is urged to "concentrate his energy on long-range hedonism, or pleasure fulfillment". Political participation is recognized but only if it is "political intrigue" which can be considered a "personal pleasure" along with "intellectual adventure, social frolicking, sexual strivings, and cultural and artistic indulgences". Spirituality and altruism are disapproved as "irrational as only "enlightened self interest" is considered rational.

WFS, which has 13 Steps for recovery, was started by a woman who found help in her own recovery by following the mind cure methods of the Unity Church. The WFS program avoids discussing the disease concept of alcoholism, and relies primarily on the use of affirmations and
other techniques to develop a positive attitude and self confidence. Espousing the cultivation of emotional and spiritual growth as the primary goal in life, the official literature ignores any larger social context. The program urges women to help other women who need help with drinking problems, but does not promote the idea that community or political participation could be a way of avoiding the alienation that many people feel is the main cause of addiction.11

From a Jungian point of view, all the alternatives strengthen an imperial ego which conquers and subjects the unconscious without attempting to listen to its viewpoint. The unconscious is tamed and shaped to serve "useful" purposes — "useful being defined in the context of a consumerist, materialistic, patriarchal society. This heroic ego approach to personality "control, "development", or "growth" is seen by many feminists and environmentalists as the root of Western civilization's problem.12

Not all therapies or religions discourage anger and encourage people to deal with personal problems as private and unrelated to the structure of the work place, community, and society. Aristotle says to obtain happiness and moderation (i.e. sobriety), people must do more than simply practice virtue in their households and professions — individuals can not be considered to be truly ethical beings unless they engage in citizens' activities and concern themselves actively with the polis.13 Many modern philosophers and psychologists say that there can be no healing of psychological or spiritual problems unless one confronts oppressive power structures and works on healing the community and society at the same time as healing oneself.14

In choosing to deal with drug and alcohol offenders by sending them to a spiritual program which counsels the acceptance of the status quo in all area of one's life, the courts and Employee Assistance Programs (EAPS) are promoting political apathy and non-participation and increasing the likelihood that present power relationships between men and women and the rich and poor will be continued. Policy makers and political activists should look at the effect of the drug treatment industry on the body politic and demand and develop non-privatizing alternatives.15

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Footnotes
1 For criticisms of the disease concept of alcoholism and drug addiction see: Peele The Diseasing of America - Addiction Treatment Out of Control (Lexington Books 1989); Schaler "Don't Be Fooled by the Marketing Myth of Addictive Disease", The Montgomery Journal, August 4, 1989. See also Hall, The True Story of a Drunken Mother, iv-viii (South End 1990).


3 Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, 192 (AA World Services 1987).

4 Alcoholics Anonymous (AA World Services 1976) is known as "The Big Book." "Twelve and Twelve" refers to Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, ibid.

5 One Day At a Time (Alanon World Services).


7 Came to Believe, 116 (AA World Services 1987).


9 As Bill Sees It, page 166 (AA World Services 1987).

10 Christopher, How to Stay Sober (Prometheus 1988).


14 See Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation (Orbis 1973); and Welch, Communities of Solidarity and Resistance: A Feminist Perspective (Orbis 1986); Daly, supra, note 13; James Hillman, Oedipus Revisited (lecture tape available through the Jung Society of New York).

15 Courts have said that AA is a religion for First Amendment purposes. See Grandberg v. Ashland County 590 F. Supp 1005 (W.D. Wisc 1984 and November 19, 1984 Pretrial Conference Order 84-C-71-S of District Court John Shabaz. Other courts have ruled that compulsory AA attendance is unconstitutional, Norfolk v. State, Queen Anne's County (Md.) Criminal Case No. 3588, decided March 16, 1989. See also Luff, The First Amendment and Drug Alcohol Treatment Programs, A Reformer's Catalog (Drug Policy Foundation 1989). EEOC guidelines prohibit forcing covered employees to attend programs which offend the employee's spiritual (or anti-spiritual) beliefs. EEOC Policy Guidelines N-915.022 dated September 2, 1988, EEOC Compliance Manual, Vol II, Religious Accommodation, Sec. 628. These precedents can be used to challenge the monopoly of the 12 Step programs. Unfortunately, non-privatizing alternative drug/ alcohol cessation support services rarely exist.