

Hollywood: God Is Nigh

There are 2,000 AA meetings a week in Los Angeles;
will religion make a movie comeback?

By Benjamin J. Stein

A specter is haunting Hollywood. The specter is God, borne down Sunset Boulevard on the wings of Alcoholics Anonymous. It would be hard right now to imagine a more atheistic community than the people who make prime-time-TV and feature movies. The result is that it's almost impossible to find a Hollywood product with real human characters who make a decision based upon religion. Television viewers once saw a sincere Archie Bunker down on his knees and praying to God, but more recently, studio and network executives wince when they are presented with a pitch about a character who talks about God unless he is an Elmer Gantry-type hypocrite.

I suspect that this is about to change. An entire generation that came of age in the '60s and '70s, that thought that cocaine, alcohol and pills were the inevitable accompaniment of work in "the biz" are now recoiling from the disorder that drugs have wrought in their lives. They are retreating to A.A. And therein lies a tale of how A.A. and Hollywood work.

I would never have known about this were it not for a few things that happened to me in late 1987 when I became a father for the first time at the age of 42, lost more than I could afford to in the stock market crash and learned that a loved one was a drug addict. Like any good American, I asked my doctor for the means to cut the anxiety, allow me to work and let my eyes close in sleep at the end

of the day. Soon, I had my cupboard filled with sleeping pills and tranquilizers; with chloral hydrate and meprobamate, Xanax and Halcion to take the edge off reality. Within months I was walking around in a sort of prescribed fog. I felt far better, but I still had a real problems - the pills were doing nothing about them. I told a friend that I wanted to see what my life would be like without medication that dulled the sharp edges. He suggested that I go to A.A. I told him that I almost never drank, but he just smiled. "try it," he said, "You'll like it."

And indeed I did. From the first meeting I went to in Beverly Hills almost eight months ago until now, I have been moved by the way that A.A. cleans up messy, wrecked lives. At every meeting their is a similar format. After prayers and brief readings from "Alcoholics Anonymous," the basic text, one or more persons stands up and talks about what it was like before A.A.; how he or she happened to come to the program and how he or she lives without drugs and alcohol. Some of these talks are astoundingly graphic.

At one of the first meetings I went to, a young man told about how, when strung out on intravenous cocaine, he would hold his arm over a fish tank, cut into his veins with a razor and watch the blood flow into the tank and turn the water pink." Another man recounted how he could almost simultaneously shoot cocaine into each of his arms while he also smoked freebase.

Others, by the score, told of getting drunk and crashing into telephone poles - then sailing through windshields. They talked about drunk tanks and jails.

Personally, I appreciated the more analytical approach. One man, who spoke for almost every addict I have ever known, said that he had been a "heartbroken child." He had carried that heartbreak around with him all of his life until he met alcohol and drugs and then found that they organized his life. They took away the pain and allowed him to succeed at his work - until they so disorganized his life that he literally fell apart. A.A., its tenets, its group willpower, its spiritualism, he said, had helped him put his life back together.

I found this form of public confession deeply affecting. But more than this, this quintessentially Protestant, holy roller sort of ritual (albeit delivered with startling restraint considering the subject matter) struck me as key to how and why A.A. works. In fact, an A.A. meeting is not unlike a revival meeting. The excitement and attention that were conferred by drugs and alcohol are now provided by bearing witness. And Roman Catholics, Jews and highend Protestants averse to smiting their breasts in public are being "saved" - even applauded. They are being given the kind of reinforcement that substitutes nicely for drugs and alcohol.

Public confession: There is an even more basic borrowing from religion in A.A. or in Narcotics Anonymous or Cocaine Anonymous: all of these 12-step programs devote a lot of time and attention to

praising God for lifting the curse of their addiction, one day at a time. Fully six of the famous 12 steps of A.A. talk about relying on God or on following a "Higher Power."

A.A. in short, is a lot like religion. And at the present moment, this religion is sweeping Hollywood. There are more than 2,000 A.A. meetings per week in Los Angeles, many of them jammed with people in the entertainment business. As the Hollywood movers and shakers leave the land of mirrors and lines and tinkling glasses, they enter the world of public confession and prayer.

These are the very same people who write the scripts, direct the movies, star in them and produce them. And 12 years of working here have taught me that what the "creative talent" have on their minds is what they put into their work. If A.A. has put God on their minds, then it's fairly clear that God will soon appear on big and little screens - his presence also acknowledged by rock musicians since A.A. is particularly popular among performers and their produces.

Talk about high concept in Hollywood. The wheel is coming full circle. As the habits of the '60s make life unworkable, A.A. offers a way out. Religion, laughed out of town in the '60s and '70s, is making a comeback via the inevitable fight from the same forces that drove it out in the first place. This is going to shape mass culture, I suspect, in a big way. Stranger things have happened.

As for me, I take it one day at a time.