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Obituary

Ernest (Ernie) Kurtz, 1935-2015

Ernest Kurtz, the Harvard-trained scholar best known for his definitive history of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) [1], died at the age of 79 on January 19, 2015. His later studies focused on guilt and shame [2], spirituality and its role in addiction recovery [3], and the growing varieties of A.A. and addiction recovery experience [4-6]. He remained active as a seminal thinker, teacher, and mentor, with his last book [7] completed in 2014 and his last scholarly paper [8] completed only days before his death.

Ernie was born in 1935—the year A.A. was founded—in a German neighborhood of Rochester, New York, the oldest child of Edward and Josephine Kurzejewski. He attended St. Bernard’s Seminary and College in Rochester and was ordained as a Catholic priest. During his parish work, he took psychology courses at the University of Rochester and then entered Harvard University where he completed a PhD in the History of American Civilization in 1978. Having himself been treated for alcoholism in the mid-1970s, the potential for studying A.A. arose when A.A. established an archive containing all of its previously unavailable historical documents. After convincing his Harvard dissertation committee and the A.A. Trustees’ Archives Committee of the need for a scholarly history of A.A., Ernie completed his dissertation and subsequently revised and published it as a book.

Following publication of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1979, Ernie served as Director of Research and Education at Guest House, taught at the University of Georgia and Loyola University of Chicago, and later served as an Adjunct Research Scientist at the University of Michigan’s departments of social work and psychiatry. In the 1980s, he left the priesthood, married Linda Farris, and established himself as one of the premier alcoholism educators at venues such as the Rutgers University Summer School of Alcohol Studies. In the early 1990s, Ernie began exploring how the core spiritual experiences of recovery within A.A. (release, gratitude, humility, tolerance, forgiveness, and being-at-home) might hold meaning for a much broader audience. This led to collaboration with Katherine Ketcham on the book, *The Spirituality of Imperfection*, which has sold more than 250,000 copies, and its recent follow-up, *Experiencing Spirituality*.

Ernie’s most noted work, *Not-God*, marked the beginning of his decades-long research on A.A. and the broader history of alcoholism recovery. Much of this work involved debunking misconceptions about A.A. and elucidating the differences between A.A. and professionally directed addiction treatment [9-10]. Ernie believed recovery mutual aid and professional interventions each had value as an aid to long-term addiction recovery, but that their integrity and value were diminished when their distinguishing characteristics were diluted or lost. Ernie found the growing pathways of long-term addiction recovery cause for celebration, whether it was in his support of atheists and agnostics in A.A. or his support of those establishing recovery support alternatives to A.A., including his early support for the development of Moderation Management. He played a leading role in the development of the *Guide to Mutual Aid*

Resources developed by the U.S.-based recovery advocacy organization, Faces and Voices of Recovery [11].

In his explorations of A.A. and spirituality, Ernie always returned to the transformative power of story reconstruction, storytelling, and story listening. In a recent interview, he noted: “All stories require a context, and for the kind of stories told in A.A.—spiritual stories, however weird that claim may sound to some—there is something about an A.A. story that makes sense, that can be truly heard, only within a community of listeners, of fellow hearers who are making an effort to identify with the story-teller, to absorb her or his story into their own” [12].

Ernie was above all a teacher, mentoring generations of scholars wishing to explore the history of A.A. and the larger history of addiction recovery. It is hard to find a thesis or dissertation on A.A. or recovery mutual aid that does not acknowledge his contributions and guidance. Ernie repeatedly challenged those of us working on advancing the history of addiction treatment and recovery to adhere to his six suggested guidelines: 1) tell the story chronologically, 2) tell the story in context, 3) document the historical evidence—ALL of the evidence, 4) clearly separate fact from conjecture, 5) tell the story from multiple perspectives, and 6) localize and personalize the story [13]. He demanded a rigorous level of scholarship and could be harsh when that standard was not met, but he always raised the quality of work of those he mentored.

Ernie’s intellectual curiosity was wide ranging, but he often returned to the subject of A.A.’s historical significance within the larger history of ideas and what A.A. meant to those suffering from alcoholism. He insisted that “A.A.’s revolutionary contribution was not medical diagnosis of the ‘disease’ of alcoholism but its insistence that the most important reality in the life of the alcoholic, sobriety, could not be attained alone” [14]. As historian, teacher, master storyteller, research colleague, and friend, he gifted us with his intellect, his integrity, and his open offers of assistance.

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