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Talk Shop

Without a higher power to define it, LifeRing offers secular recovery for skeptics and self-starters

By P. Joseph Potocki

Daniel's addiction kicked in with his first chug of beer.

He was a skinny high school freshman, splitting a six-pack with two buddies out in a field near his Southern California home. It hardly mattered that those two cans of Budweiser cost him his first steady girlfriend. Hell, he'd discovered nirvana. In fact, Daniel's stated "number one goal in life"—to get loaded and remain loaded—began with that very first drink. Boozin', smoking weed, dropping this, snorting that and slamming drugs his parents had never even heard of all provided Daniel with an unrelenting sense of pleasure and adventure.

Though continuing his daily indulgences, Daniel did manage to squeak through college, making his way into the professional workaday world. He enthusiastically poured his salary into wild-eyed, teeth-grashing nights either hyperawake on meth, nodding off on some opiate, cued up on coke, too smoked-down-mellow to move a single digit or simply passed-out drunk. Still, through much of his professional career, Daniel somehow maintained a semblance of normalcy typical of the "functional" addict/alcoholic.

Unlike many who settle down with a single drug of choice, Daniel was an indiscriminate Odysseus, setting sail on whatever mind-altering substance came his way. His daily choice of intoxicants didn't really matter, just as long as they got him good and high. But no matter what he ingested, it seemed Daniel's insights invariably raced to the stars and dissolved like cotton candy—fleeting, then gone forever.

Daniel loved the confidence a few shots or some brewskis gave him. His self-loathing shyness melted away, alcohol transforming him into the strutting cock-rooster. And listening to music—man, nothing beat a few tokes and a good set of headphones. Being loaded meant he could talk up the tender gender. It didn't matter that women fled from him in knowing terror, because Daniel knew that when he was on, he was really *on*.



Cogito Ergo Sum: Unlike AA, LifeRing doesn't push the idea of a higher power.

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But somewhere in Daniel's mid-twenties, hearty partying began to take its toll. By the time he reached 30, Daniel had a brace of DUIs, high blood pressure, an ugly divorce and a whole lot of ex-friends and family members who pointedly avoided him. He was out of work, clinically depressed and wracked by physical pain. Not surprisingly, Daniel figured it was time he change course.

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse statistics, 23.6 million people needed treatment for alcohol and drug abuse in 2006 alone. Most did not receive it. In fact, for that single year, drugs and alcohol, when tallied together with tobacco use, cost our nation more than half a trillion dollars.

Daniel completed a 30-day in-house stint at a substance-treatment facility, determined to follow the guidance he'd received as he made his way back into the world at large. He attended Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) meetings, sometimes hitting two, three or even four meetings in a single day. He made new friends, got a "sponsor," and worked the 12 Steps as best he could, picking up chips for 30 days of continuous sobriety, then chips for 60 and for 90 days.

Daniel celebrated his first 12 Step "birthday," 365 consecutive days clean and sober, to the hoots, hollers and loud clapping from his appreciative home group. The meeting concluded with the fellowship joining hands to recite the Lord's Prayer. Then came the benediction: "Keep coming back," they exhorted, finishing with a rousing, "It works!"

Daniel says he wore a "doofus smile" after the meeting, as congratulators hugged and laid 12 Step slogans on him. Then he ambled purposefully outside, hopped in his car and bee-lined to an old haunt—where he got shit-faced on tequila.

The Alternative

Twelve Step programs are to the long-term recovery industry what Xerox once was to copiers. That's to say that AA isn't simply a name brand, but is identified as the industry itself. In fact, 12 Step programs like AA are so pervasive that many people don't even know other long-term programs even exist.

But there are options. One such abstinence-only drug and alcohol program flourishes right here in the Bay Area. Known as LifeRing Secular Recovery, it has spread across the country and into Canada and overseas as well.

Just like AA, LifeRing is a free-of-charge, voluntary, peer-run and anonymous fellowship. But where the very first of AA's 12 Steps implores alcoholics to admit they are powerless and that their lives are unmanageable, LifeRing believes that by empowering addicts and alcoholics, they tap into their inherent abilities to manage their own affairs, no higher power necessary. Furthermore, LifeRing maintains that by providing a contextual network of peer-support meetings, program literature and online options, members who are so inclined will conceive, construct and walk their very own customized alcohol- and drug-free paths, no corny slogans necessary. To reflect that, LifeRing's philosophy is embedded within its three S's: Sobriety, Secularity and Self-help.

East Bay attorney Marty Nicolaus is a cofounder and CEO of LifeRing Secular Recovery. Nicolaus been clean and sober for the past 16 years. He estimates that he's attended "well over a thousand" substance-recovery meetings. He says, "I've never attended a meeting of AA or NA," quickly adding, "I've been attending LifeRing meetings since before there was LifeRing."

That's because, prior to LifeRing, there was SOS, or Secular Organizations for Sobriety. Founded 1985 by James Christopher in North Hollywood, the SOS program remains strong, particularly in Southern California, and resembles LifeRing in many ways. Like AA, which emerged from a conservative Christian fellowship called the Oxford Group during the Great Depression, LifeRing Secular Recovery split from its SOS parent in 1997, before incorporating itself as an independent nonprofit two years later.

Secular approaches to drug and alcohol recovery go back at least to 1840, to the beginning of the Washingtonian Revival. Instead of preachers inveighing against inebriates from the pulpit or physicians pronouncing the abject hopelessness of the addictive situation, the Washingtonians embraced orators who had themselves once suffered from addiction. Their meetings were afire with fervent personal testimonies of lives lost to demon rum.

There was a strong social element to the movement as well, designed to supplant the camaraderie of the saloon. But the Washingtonian movement lacked organizational moxie, and petered out in relatively short order. Nevertheless, it set into motion the secular model adopted by LifeRing, as well as the peer-group fellowship model embraced by 12 Step programs and LifeRing alike.

While LifeRing and AA share a commonality regarding fellowship, the two groups feel very different from one another. Alcoholics Anonymous' speak-then-sit-and-listen meeting structure is in diametric opposition to LifeRing's informal group-circle dialogue format.

Alcoholics Anonymous' custom of giving ceremonial import to the length of a member's sobriety places 12 Step "old-timers" up on a pedestal. LifeRing dispenses with celebratory "birthdays" and the like. Another distinction between the two is the concept of sponsorship. While providing helpful guidance, critics argue that 12 Step sponsorship creates a parent-child dynamic fraught with potential abuses. No such roles play out in LifeRing. Additionally, AA's *Big Book* and *12 X 12* manual read and are treated very much like the dictum and dogma other spiritually-based institutions accrue over time.

But the elephant in the recovery program closet has got to be God. To succeed in AA, one must accept its generic stand-in for God, known in 12 Step vernacular as HP, aka one's higher power. In LifeRing, participants can hold to personal beliefs yet dispense with the powerlessness and the God stuff, helping self and fellow addicts by lending an ear and a voice.

Despite AA's name-brand recognition, George Vaillant, Harvard addiction specialist and AA trustee, points out in the May 2001 issue of the AA magazine *Grapevine*, that Alcoholics Anonymous works for less than four out of 10 persons who actually manage to

remain sober. Ever-growing legions of addicts remain underserved, seeking something else to relieve their addictive pain and suffering.

Stan K., from Joliet, Ill., is one of those people. "I don't like being told what to do," Stan explains. "LifeRing met me on my terms and helped me stay focused. It was a good fit."

That's partly because LifeRing, being fairly new, is geared to a newer world. While face-to-face meetings are the traditional modus of group recovery, LifeRing offers online meetings, chat rooms and various special-interest group forums. According to the group's own survey, some 34 percent of the membership first discovered LifeRing on the web. And while many say they attend a LifeRing meeting each week, an equal number claim to spend that weekly hour engaged in online LifeRing activities.

Face to Face

Daniel had his problems with 12 Step programs almost from the start, but for years figured he just wasn't "turning it over" enough. The "God-thing was tough," he admits, "but all that other stuff, like the trite slogans and giving your entire life over to the program. I just could never entirely do it."

With his tequila-fueled slip, Daniel immediately reverted to scrounging for drugs, winding up in another recovery facility less than seven months later. Over the next 15 years, Daniel was in and out of five such facilities, each time returning to AA for a spell. He remembers "trudging along, really wanting to make the program work," while feeling progressively and overwhelmingly alienated from it.

"I felt like I was being condescended to, that I didn't have a mind of my own," he says. "It was like, you know, that old sit-down-and-shut-up attitude you sometimes hear in AA."

I was both a newcomer and a retread."

Daniel entered his last treatment facility four years ago. His examining physician ran some tests prior to admittance. A few days later, the doc gave him the unabridged bad news. Daniel's liver was nearly shot, his drinking had him on a fast track to diabetes and he had developed emphysema from smoking more than a pack of cigarettes a day. The high blood pressure was now a critical issue. But this time, upon discharge from the treatment center, Daniel didn't beeline for AA or NA. Instead, he opted for a LifeRing meeting.

Chairs form a circle. At some venues, participants sit around a table. But table or no, LifeRing participants always face one another—hence the "life ring" moniker. A peer convener gently leads the proceedings. Groups range from a handful to as many as 20 or 30, and sometimes more, though about six people to a dozen seems optimal. A short introductory statement is read. Each participant gets a few minutes to "check-in," and let the group know how the week's been going, with a particular emphasis on personal substance-abuse issues. By keeping everything in the now—and, unlike AA, by allowing and even encouraging crosstalk—those polished-with-time and much-repeated addiction "war

stories" oft heard in AA rarely chew up any clock at a LifeRing confab.

Once attendees have checked in, the meeting opens up to general discussion or to a group conversation centering on a chosen recovery-related topic. While normal courtesies extend to each person engaged, these discussions both welcome and encourage response, feedback and inquiry. They're geared to air out and explore issues; to analyze, process and hopefully illuminate concerns, problems and situations pertinent to the lives of those gathered.

"I really carried a lot of emotional baggage with me here," says Claire M., a LifeRing member from Colorado. "At LifeRing, I feel I can talk about problems that maybe aren't directly related to addiction, but yet if I don't talk about them I risk using again."

Rugged Recovery

LifeRing seems birthed from the prototypic world of the rugged Western individualist. Religion isn't really the issue. In fact, a significant number of its members are regular churchgoers. As one LifeRing member from Marin County put it, "I do belong to a church here, but one reason I continue to come to LifeRing is that I believe it's up to me to stay sober, not up to God."

Likewise, 12 Step programs aren't at issue. Some ardent LifeRingers also regularly attend 12 Step meetings. Rather, it's LifeRing's emphasis on envisioning, building and traveling down one's very own life path which sets it apart. This seems in harmony with that old-fashioned American notion of DIY adventurism and mythic questing. But instead of Lewis and Clark conquering a vast Western wilderness, or some modern-day Horatio Alger striving to build financial empires, LifeRing embraces broken-down folks who are questing to conquer their addictions.

By means of conversational discourse, these dialogue-based gatherings encourage participants to think, help and to do for themselves. Each successful LifeRing member analyzes his or her own set of life particulars, establishes new goals and habits, eventually developing a personal and adjustable paradigm by which to prosper within society at large.

It's been four years since Daniel's last treatment-center stint. Four years, and he's still attending LifeRing meetings. He's remained clean and sober, and says he's never felt better about life and about himself. "My blood pressure's down, I no longer show signs of diabetes, and even my liver is doing a little better," he says. "Hell, I've got a great job and I don't even smoke anymore. For the first time, I feel my life belongs to me, and I'm engaging the world in my own way.

"Life grows and changes," he smiles, "and now, so do I."

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