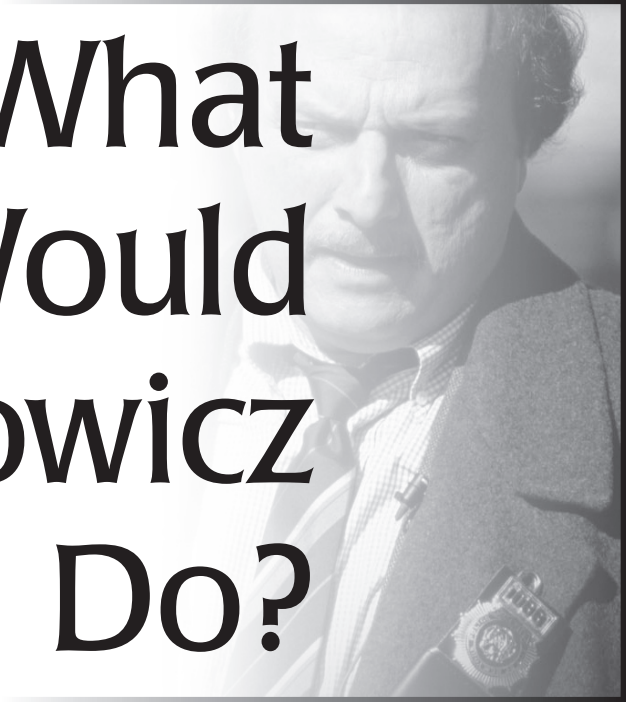


EDITED BY GLENN YEFFETH

What Would Sipowicz Do?



Race, Rights and Redemption in
NYPD Blue



BENBELLA BOOKS
Dallas, Texas

JEFFREY SCHALER

Just One Sip for Sipowicz to Slip



Like the New York background, Sipowicz's alcoholism is a central, if not explicitly mentioned, aspect of NYPD Blue. Sipowicz is an alcoholic, and we all know what that means. Or do we?

"Yee doe here but sippe of this cuppe, but then ye shall drinke up the dreggs of it for ever."

—JOHN PRESTON (Breastplate of Faith and Love)

ANDY SIPOWICZ, our lion-hearted, lily-livered, existential hero, is an "alcoholic." Sipowicz is drunk in the very first episode of the series and wrestles with his alcoholism throughout the entire run of the show. Sipowicz's alcoholism has wrecked his marriage, destroyed most of his relationships and by the end of the first episode is on the verge of ruining his career.

Many people struggle with alcohol problems; these problems manifest themselves in many ways and are solved—or not—in an equally wide variety of ways. As an expert in the field of addiction and drug policy, I've studied the various techniques problem drinkers use to address their drinking—and the effectiveness of these techniques. I'll get to this later, but first I want to discuss the most widely known approach to addressing alcohol problems: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA).

AA has been so successful in popularizing its approach to heavy drinking that many people don't even realize that its approach is only one of many. AA has a very specific set of beliefs regarding what alcoholism is and how to solve it, and these beliefs are fully adopted by Sipowicz (as well as the *NYPD Blue* writers).

To understand Sipowicz one must understand his beliefs about alcoholism, which means understanding AA, and AA's views on alcohol and alcoholism.

There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip

According to AA, some people are marked with a genetic predisposition to drink. Most people can moderate or control their drinking, but people marked with this genetic predisposition process alcohol differently. AA proponents speculate that about ten percent of drinkers have this genetic predisposition toward alcoholism. AA considers this predisposition a disease, a physical disease that is also symptomatic of a spiritual problem. Whether you view it as a literal or metaphorical disease doesn't really matter as far as AA is concerned. It is, essentially, a spiritual disease that lies dormant, only to emerge when alcohol is introduced into the alcoholic's body.

This is why many researchers devote considerable time and money searching for the ever-elusive "alcoholic gene." They believe that if they can identify this gene, then parents with this gene can counsel their children not to drink, as they would then be at great risk for becoming alcoholics.

If you were a fly on the wall at Sipowicz's AA meetings, you'd likely hear this story being told. Sipowicz is taught to believe that he was born with a disease that stayed dormant in his body until he began to drink alcohol. When Sipowicz started to drink it probably caused few problems, but as his drinking became increasingly regular it began to snowball into a central activity in his life. Perhaps friends asked him if he had a problem. He said he didn't have a problem, that he could control his drinking.

According to AA beliefs, this conviction that he could control his drinking marked the beginning of believing he was "God." AA doctrine says this because from its point of view, no amount of willpower can be mobilized on Sipowicz's part to control his drinking in the face of his disease. Alcoholism means "loss of control." It means that he cannot, despite any intention or sincere attempt to the contrary, control his

drinking. He cannot have just one or two drinks. One drink equals one drunk.

The belief that he can control his drinking is part of what some psychoanalysts refer to as “ego inflation.” That’s the psychoanalytic version of the AA belief that Sipowicz thinks he’s God. This facilitates Sipowicz’s attempt after attempt to control his drinking. The more he tries to control his drinking, the more out of control he becomes. This becomes a terrible descent into drunkenness. Physical illness may emerge as a result of drinking—like cirrhosis of the liver or heart disease—as well as marital problems, problems at work, problems with the law, etc. As Sipowicz spiraled downward, he reached a point called “hitting bottom,” a nadir of misery. At this point a religious conversion experience is most likely to occur. If it doesn’t, he hasn’t hit rock bottom yet. Hitting bottom is what psychoanalysts refer to as “ego deflation.” (Sessions, 1957; Stewart, 1954; Greil & Rudy, 1983).

The religious conversion experience Sipowicz went through in order to come to AA involved several realizations. He said something like the following to himself and others: “I have to quit playing God. I admit I am powerless over alcohol—my life has become unmanageable. I’ve come to believe that a Power greater than myself can restore me to sanity. I made a decision to turn my will and my life over to the care of God *as I understand Him*.” The terms “God” and “Higher Power” are interchangeable. This process is what we don’t see in *NYPD Blue*; it is what happens backstage for Sipowicz. It is the only way he could be as involved with AA as he was.

Sipowicz’s joining AA was a conversion experience, of sorts. It marked a total change in identity for him. He no longer thought of himself as capable of controlling his drinking. He “admitted” that he was powerless to his disease. He admitted that he had turned his life over to God or a “Higher Power.” His identity was now that of an “alcoholic.” And he admitted that he must never drink again.

When the series opened, it was clear that Sipowicz had been drinking for quite some time, and he wasn’t exactly a pleasant drunk. His drinking was almost certainly responsible for destroying his first marriage and clearly created a string of burnt bridges throughout the police department. Sober, Sipowicz was not indifferent to the damage he’d done. He bore an enormous amount of guilt, not only for his actions but also for the continual series of tragedies that confronted him. He was forced to face the death of his son, his wife and two partners. Sipowicz believed in a punitive God, and at some level believed these tragedies were pun-

ishment for his crimes. So when AA told him that he had a spiritual problem, he had no trouble believing it.

What also happened for him though was a special bonding with other alcoholics who had come to similar realizations. He entered into the community of AA. An integral part of membership in this community is acknowledging “the wound”—it is the wound and its acknowledgment that holds the community together. One aspect of this new sense of community and simultaneous change in identity is the formation of a relationship with a “sponsor.” Another is the gradual eschewing of relationships with people who are not wounded. A third and most important task becomes one of overcoming the “pride problem.”

The “onstage” Sipowicz, what we see in the show, is a man struggling to overcome his pride problem. This is the true nature of his climb to heaven, according to AA philosophy. Yes, Sipowicz must abstain from alcohol. However, that is not enough. It is not enough for him to simply abstain from alcohol (“white knuckling” it)—Sipowicz has to work to become “sober.” Sobriety, in this sense, means that he has worked—or climbed—the “Twelve Steps” of AA and is living in the “Twelve Traditions,” all of which constitute a deep involvement with social ritual and tenets to guide one’s daily life. AA occupies a place in his life similar to the place major religions occupy in their adherents’ lives. His sponsor helps him do this. His AA sponsor keeps him on the wagon. Whenever Sipowicz feels tempted by the devil—alcohol—he must get hold of his sponsor. Whenever he feels inclined to grab a drink, he must grab an alcoholic. His sponsor, at least in theory, is an “old timer,” someone who has been in AA for a long time and someone who has overcome the pride problem.

In some ways, what works in AA is the sense of community, affiliation, intimacy and acceptance its members find and provide. The spiritual characteristics Sipowicz found comfort in through AA were a release from his guilt, humility toward others, gratitude for love and acceptance and a begrudging tolerance toward those he simply could not stand. These four characteristics of spirituality in AA run through Sipowicz’s character.

The “backstage” Sipowicz is immersed in AA, or so we are led to believe. AA is a free, self-help spiritual fellowship of self-proclaimed drunks who gather together voluntarily to ask their Lord’s blessing and to help one another stop drinking. We see two indications in the series that Sipowicz is an alcoholic in the AA sense of the word. One, he placed a high value on abstaining from alcohol in its entirety. One sip

of alcohol when he met Sylvia's family was the catalyst for a devastating bender ("One drink, one drunk."). Two, he was willing, as a man who inherently resisted and resented all authority, to place himself under the authority of an AA sponsor. His AA sponsor hounded Sipowicz to make sure he didn't slip again.

"Who bent over their shoulders, to sip, before the wine had all run out."

—CHARLES DICKENS (*A Tale of Two Cities*)

In an episode entitled "Trials and Tribulations" we saw the strange side of Sipowicz's relationship with his sponsor. Dan had eighteen years of sobriety under his belt, which qualified him as an "old timer." "Who's the boss?" Dan asked. The question is multifaceted. What he meant was that the Higher Power is the boss, and Sipowicz must remember not to trust himself; he must trust the Higher Power and the Higher Power's intermediary, which—surprise, surprise—turns out to be Dan himself. Get a "GRIP," Dan said. GRIP stands for "growth," "resolution," "intention" and "purpose." These witty sayings are prevalent throughout AA and in many ways are quite useful to the alcoholic trying to stay abstinent if not sober.

But what began to leak out was a sense of Dan's own obsessions with power and control. This is a common problem among AA sponsors: they slip back into thinking they're God in relation to the person they sponsor; they become obsessed with control. Sipowicz began to sense this, and Dan's problems began to undermine Sipowicz's faith and confidence in the program.

Dan became too controlling; he hounded Sipowicz. Dan evaluated his every move. We saw it clearly when he tried to make the decision for Sipowicz about whether Sipowicz should become romantically involved with Sylvia. Dan was unwittingly trying to teach Sipowicz a lesson in psychoanalysis: delay in gratification. He tried to teach Sipowicz to control his "Id." "Wait, don't let yourself get too involved in a love relationship right now," he seemed to be telling Sipowicz. "If you let yourself cave in to your desires for love and sex, you'll soon be seduced back into your desire to drink."

A further example was the "contract" Sipowicz allegedly formed with Dan, a contract regarding control. Apparently Sipowicz had agreed to do what Dan told him to do. It's interesting that Dan was a former cop; now he had become a bit of a spiritual cop. In the episode entitled "For

Whom the Skel Rolls,” we saw sponsor Dan once again in the role of dictator. “Nothing is more important than your sobriety,” he reminded Sipowicz. That is a potent command: that means your integrity, your job, your family, your love, your health, etc., are less important than your sobriety. In other words, Dan, as sponsor, had assumed the role of the Higher Power. Sipowicz had made a contract with God “as he understood Him.” I don’t think he bargained for this, and Sipowicz’s doubt began to show. He began to suspect that Dan was projecting his own insecurities onto him. In psychoanalysis this is known as “transference.”

Sipowicz showed symptoms of skepticism early in the season. He knew he shouldn’t drink, and likely bought into a good portion of the “disease model.” However, he also knew there was something wrong with Dan’s sponsorship. And Sipowicz never really impresses us as a particularly religious person, even when he is forced to deal with terrible misfortune. The fact of the matter is, Sipowicz was controlling his drinking. He seemed to recognize that resisting temptation was within his power. This would be a good indication that he was well on the road to recovery. But AA sees any sense of self-empowerment as “stinkin’ thinkin’”—doubting the dogma is dangerous. It will lead inevitably to a fall.

A Totemic Religion

As anthropologist Paul Antze explains it, AA is a totemic religion. A totem “is an animal, plant or natural object serving among certain primitive peoples as the emblem of a clan or family by virtue of an asserted ancestral relationship” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 1969). Alcohol is a venerated symbol in AA.

Our view of alcohol has changed over time. During Colonial days in America, alcohol was called the “good creature of God.” Its use was encouraged by physicians and ministers alike. Trouble that arose from drunkenness then came to be blamed on the tavern one frequented and on the company one kept. But during the alcohol temperance era, alcohol was known as “that engine of the devil.” Trouble that arose from drunkenness was then blamed on the substance itself. Alcohol was viewed as a universally addicting substance (Levine, 1978).

In AA thinking, alcohol has a Janus nature. Alcohol is seen as both God and the Devil. It is the Devil in that ingesting the beverage is believed to release a spiritual disease that causes a fall from grace, a descent into hell. But once the religious conversion takes place, once the

person abdicates his life to belief in a Higher Power, we see that alcohol in fact is a vehicle to know God. Alcohol thus inspires and inspires the alcoholic. It helps him to move from “not-God” to God. The alcoholic is inspired to climb a symbolic Jacob’s Ladder—the Twelve Steps—and overcome the “pride problem.” The pride problem is the true spiritual disease. It just manifests itself through drunkenness.

What we also see here is that alcoholics are “marked”—they are a chosen people according to their ideology—and it is their affliction or wound that not only binds them together, it delivers them to God. The dual symbolic nature of alcohol-as-totem both binds alcoholics together and delivers them to heaven.

A Sisyphean Journey

But AA’s views on destructive drinking are not shared by everyone, particularly those in academia who study and write about drinking behavior. Academics debate whether addiction is a choice or a disease. Despite the dominance of the AA position (and its adoption by the *NYPD Blue* writers), there are sharp differences of opinion among experts and laypersons alike as to why people drink—and don’t drink—the way they do.

AA has helped many people, and its approach is certainly valid for its adherents. But there are contradictions in its belief structure, as Sipowicz begins to note.

Why, for example, if the pride problem was the true reason why people like Sipowicz drink, shouldn’t Sipowicz be able to drink responsibly if he overcame the pride problem? When I have asked old timers this question they always say “no,” the alcoholic can never drink again. “But you say they can overcome the pride problem, by working the steps. If the pride problem is the real reason they drink, if thinking that they’re God is the real reason they drink, and knowing that they are not God is the real cure, then why can’t they drink again?” I keep asking. “Because they are sick,” is always the answer.

This is what I think Sipowicz sensed, the circular logic of AA. I don’t know what the scriptwriters will do with Sipowicz, but if this were real life, I would predict that a person like Sipowicz would probably evolve to the point where he could take a drink occasionally without losing control.

Certainly the science bears this out. Considerable research exists that indicates that heavy drinking is better explained by mindset, values and

interaction with one's environment, rather than genetics, biology and the chemical properties of the drug. In fact, one criticism of AA is that leading people to believe they are predestined to become alcoholics creates a self-fulfilling prophecy.

As noted, there is strong disagreement in the addiction field today—which includes views about alcoholism—as to whether addiction is a disease or a behavior. For many years, conventional wisdom held that alcoholism is a genetic disease characterized by “loss of control.” This meant that some people are born to drink alcoholically and thus must abstain from alcohol in its entirety. The idea that an alcoholic could control his or her drinking, that is, learn to drink in moderation, was and continues to be considered anathema by many in treatment and self-help fields.

But since at least the 1960s, scientific research on alcoholism and other addictions has shifted this view. Many alcoholics do learn to drink in moderation—and they do this on their own or with the help of others. In the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, for example, “controlled-drinking” programs are implemented by treatment providers along with abstinence-oriented ones. In the United States, we're still a bit behind the times. In my book, *Addiction Is a Choice* (Open Court Publishing, 2000), I document the extensive studies showing that alcoholics can control their drinking, when it is important enough to them to do so.

AA has long held that alcoholism is a disease, and AA has long been considered the most effective way of helping people we label as alcoholic. However, scientific research shows that AA is no more effective than other forms of treatment that eschew “the disease model,” such as cognitive behavioral therapy and motivational enhancement therapy. Interestingly, studies seem to indicate alcoholics who attempt to quit on their own do as well as those entering structured programs of any kind.

This is important information because many people who need help with alcohol do not like the religious nature of AA, or they are looking for a way to moderate but not abstain from drinking. Alcoholics constitute a heterogeneous population. Everyone drinks in different ways, for different reasons and with different results. Treatment approaches should be similarly diverse. No one shoe fits all.

So will we soon see Sipowicz happily and safely taking a few drinks with his fellow cops? I seriously doubt it . . . *NYPD Blue* seems too heavily invested in the AA model of alcoholism. But many real-life Sipowiczs

have managed to control their drinking, and who knows, maybe by the series finale Sipowicz will as well.

References

- Antze, P. (1987). Symbolic action in Alcoholics Anonymous. In M. Douglas (Ed.) *Constructive Drinking: Perspectives on Drink from Anthropology* (New York: Cambridge University Press) 149–181.
- Greil, A.L. and Rudy, D.R. (1983). Conversion to the world view of Alcoholics Anonymous: A refinement of conversion theory. *Qualitative Sociology* 6: 5–28.
- Kurtz, E. (1988). *A.A.: The Story* (A revised edition of *Not God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*). (New York: Harper & Row).
- Levine, H.G. (1978). The discovery of addiction. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 39: 143–174.
- Morris, W. (Ed.) (1969). *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. (Boston: American Heritage Publishing Co., Inc. and Houghton Mifflin Company).
- Sessions, P. M. (1957). Ego religion and superego religion in alcoholics. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 18: 121–125.
- Stewart, D.A. (1954). The dynamics of fellowship as illustrated in Alcoholics Anonymous. *Quarterly Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 16: 251–262.

*Jeffrey Schaler, Ph.D., a psychologist, is assistant professor of justice, law and society at American University's School of Public Affairs in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *Addiction Is a Choice* (2000) and editor of *Szasz Under Fire: The Psychiatric Abolitionist Faces His Critics* (2004), both published by Open Court Publishing Company, Chicago.*