

White, W. (2010) Pathways to Recovery (Book Review: Martin Nicolaus. Empowering Your Sober Self: The LifeRing Approach to Addiction Recovery.) *Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly*, 29, 95-96.

## **Book Review**

**Martin Nicolaus. Empowering Your Sober Self: The LifeRing Approach to Addiction Recovery. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 251 pages. \$19.95**

There are many pathways and styles of addiction recovery. That proposition is a central finding of modern addiction science and a foundational premise of the new addiction recovery advocacy movement. Yet these pathways and styles have not been fully mapped, nor has their existence and diversity been broadly communicated to service professionals and the American public. The twelve step program of Alcoholics Anonymous (A.A.) is the best known of such recovery frameworks due to its historical longevity, membership size, widespread accessibility, influence on American models of addiction treatment, and its adaptation to address a multitude of other human problems. A.A.'s dominance as a spiritual framework of recovery has been challenged in recent decades by an ever-growing menu of secular and explicitly religious support groups that differ significantly from A.A. in their organizational structures, philosophies, meeting rituals and recovery support tools.

The growing varieties of recovery experience in America underscore the need for people concerned about alcohol and other drug problems to become serious students of these divergent recovery strategies. More specifically, it suggests the need for addiction treatment programs and allied helping institutions to forge formal linkages with these new recovery support groups and for professional helpers to become intimately familiar with the operation of such groups. All recovery support groups have individuals who optimally respond, partially respond, and fail to respond to the group's particular approach to recovery initiation and maintenance. Optimal responses could be increased through better matches between individuals and particular support groups. This would require greater professional and public knowledge of recovery support alternatives and encouragement of a philosophy of choice related to recovery pathways. Acquiring such

knowledge and adopting such a philosophy have been limited in part by the sparseness of professional and lay literature on alternatives to AA. Martin Nicolaus has added to this needed literature with the publication of *Empower Your Sober Self: The LifeRing Approach to Addiction Recovery*

Nicolaus offers us a clear window into the basic approach of LifeRing Secular Recovery, one of the major secular alternatives to AA. LifeRing was founded in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1999 and became a national organization at a founding conference in Florida in 2001. LifeRing hosts face-to-face recovery support meetings, a range of email lists for member-to-member communication, online ([www.unhooked.com](http://www.unhooked.com), [www.lifering.org](http://www.lifering.org)) chat rooms and Internet forum (bulletin board), an online social network ([lifering.ning.com](http://lifering.ning.com)), LifeRing social events, and the annual LifeRing Congress. In *Empower Your Sober Self*, Nicolaus has created an engaging text for individuals seeking recovery and for service professionals wanting a greater understanding of LifeRing's core ideas and recovery support strategies. *Empower Your Sober Self* also includes the voices of many LifeRing members whose personal stories illustrate key points in the book.

The discussions in this book include some of the more controversial issues in the addictions field. Nicolaus outlines positions on these issues clearly and forcefully and in ways that help distinguish LifeRing Secular Recovery from both twelve step programs and from other twelve step alternatives. This book is intended to inform rather than convert. Not everyone will agree with the ideas and approaches set forth here, but for the past decade, individuals and families have used LifeRing Secular Recovery as an effective framework to initiate and maintain long-term recovery from life-impairing addictions. Those recoveries are cause for celebration, and this book details how they did it. Those seeking a solution to alcohol and other drug problems and professionals assisting people with such problems will find great value in *Empower Your Sober Self*.

William L. White

Author, *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*