When Raymond Carver met Richard Ford in 1978, Carver had already crossed over into what he spoke of as the second of “two lives.” June 2, 1977 marked Carver’s “line of demarcation,” the day he entered into a new life without alcohol (Gentry and Stull 89). In these days of instability, Ford remembers that Carver “had inched his way out of shadows and into light, and he was as thankful, and as determined to stay in the light—my light, your light, the world’s light—as any convert to a feasible religion” (73). Ford’s memory suggests that Carver was a convert, a changed man on a pilgrimage to recovery. However, while critics may recognize that “something” happened to Raymond Carver’s fiction, few are willing to associate Carver’s literary transformation with a spiritual conversion. This interpretive reluctance causes Carver’s vision of transcendence to be handled with suspicion, as spiritual imagery and confessional language is typically dismissed as an alcoholic’s restored hope in humanity rather than a possible encounter with “the other.” In contrast to the postmodern way of suspicion, Dennis Taylor advocates for an authentic engagement with spirituality in literature. Taylor goes as far as suggesting that some texts in the western canon actually demand a religious interpretation; when this possibility is squelched, “what is left over is a nagging spiritual question” (125). Concurring with Taylor, I suggest that a truly judicious approach to Raymond Carver’s life and work will create the necessary theoretical space for a spiritual reading.

Perhaps the most significant article concerning Carver’s spirituality is William Stull’s, “Beyond Hopelessville: Another Side of Raymond Carver.” In this essay Stull contrasts the darkness of Carver’s earlier work with the optimism illustrated in Cathedral. Stull’s close reading of “The Bath” and “A Small, Good Thing” suggests that the ominous uncertainty of “The Bath” is revised from chaos “into an understated allegory of spiritual rebirth” (12) which culminates as a “symbol of the Resurrection” (13). Although Stull cites deliberate allusions between the Bible and Carver’s story, Carver makes no claims of biblical literacy, making it problematic to suggest he was using Christian imagery as deliberately
as Stull suggests. For this reason, both Randolph Paul Runyon and Mark A. R. Facknitz reject Stull’s interpretation. They, in turn, assert that the ending of “A Small, Good Thing” is not designed to elicit a sense of Christian communion, but is a self generated human communion that is genuine, but also godless (Runyon 149, Facknitz 295–96). Although these observations make a valid rebuttal, their overwhelming rejection of structured Christianity also negates the spiritual awakening that is certainly evident in Carver’s post-recovery work. To dismiss the possibility of a spiritual encounter on the grounds that it does not correlate with Christianity is yet another representative misreading of Carver’s work. In short, Carver’s spirituality is far more ambiguous than critics tend to realize, as Carver simultaneously refuses to be interpreted as a Christian or a secular humanist.

As an alternative approach to this critical tension, Hamilton E. Cochrane contends that Carver’s predilection toward spirituality arises from his association with Alcoholics Anonymous. Cochrane asserts that examining Carver’s redemption “in light of the A.A. experience is illuminating and more accurate than locating his new sensibility in some other, say, Christian perspective” (81). Although Cochrane’s observations are convincing and insightful, it is worth noting that Carver actually denies the influence of Alcoholics Anonymous on more than one occasion; however, this rejection should be interpreted with care. For even if Carver did not reproduce the actual narratives of A.A. meetings in his work, an examination of key stages in the A.A. program suggests that the structural patterns of Alcoholics Anonymous influenced the spiritual dimension in Carver’s later work.

In 1977, Carver was living in San Francisco, where he visited St. James Episcopal Church and went to “at least one and sometimes two [A.A.] meetings a day for the first month” (Gentry and Stull 39). During Carver’s early drying out period, he continued to attend A.A. meetings for what he calls, “the longest while—six or eight months” (Adelman, Carver Country 106). Apart from these brief references to A.A., it is difficult to assess the degree of participation Carver maintained with Alcoholics Anonymous; nevertheless, it is evident that the influence of A.A. remained with Carver his entire life. For example, Tess Gallagher, Carver’s wife, recalls that by 1980 Carver was secure enough in his sobriety to develop a pattern of attending A.A. meetings with friends who were struggling with alcoholism (Soul Barnacles 219). However, in 1988 Carver found himself on the brink of drinking again. In this moment of temptation, Gallagher remembers that he “started out for an AA meeting” but returned home, as he was unable to find the exact location of the