

Expanding the Culture of Recovery – William Stauffer

I was first introduced to addiction and recovery being framed as cultures by the William White book [Pathways: from the culture of addiction to the culture of recovery: a travel guide for addiction professions](#) (1996). It put words to things I had difficulty articulating prior to reading it. Nothing I have read or been exposed to prior to that or since then illuminates the transformative journey of recovery in the way he did by describing it in the context of culture. It can be difficult to see a thing that you are within in such a way. Cultures, particularly our own can be challenging to articulate because we are in essence swimming within them. As an aside, it is part of why the defining of recovery is so vexing. It is so many things. It is a clinical term, a process, an identity and a culture. In respect to the cultural elements, defining it into objective terms would be as challenging as attempting to do so with defining nationalism in measurable ways.



For those of us who have taken this journey, the process is often life altering. We are not the same as we were before, we have become better versions of ourselves, often in ways that were entirely invisible to us in the before times. I have heard people call the assertion of this experience, the “better than well” concept as elitist or even stigmatizing of persons who embrace the culture of addiction. Far be it from the case, it is in fact a celebration of a new life. From a personal perspective, in my addiction I was on the trajectory of a short painful existence that failed to utilize my own capacities and not generative to my community in ways that provided me a sense of meaning and mattering. I do not wish that on anyone, nor look down on those who live as I once did. I want them to experience their full capacities too. That is what another associated recovery concept is of “meet people where they are at but do not leave them there.”

The truth be told I celebrated addiction while in its grips. Better living through chemistry, taking what I could get and not thinking about anything beyond the moment I was in or considering the costs to myself and my community beyond that instant. The hedonistic culture of “if it feels good, do it.” I embraced the whole thing. My sense of belonging and identity was oriented towards using drugs and the shared values, rituals and relationships that reinforced it. It nearly killed me and removed much of what I loved about my life in the process. The short and simple cartoon [Nuggets](#) that has been viewed over 31 million times depicts what happened to me and what happens to millions of others for whom use shifts from non-problematic into the world of pain that is addiction. All this to say that I understand the push back against recovery as culture by those who embrace drug culture, because I once did the same thing.

There is deep irony that for me, and perhaps for many of us I found my true identity and began to learn my capacities as a human on the path of recovery, a road I had avoided and rejected in my prior state. As White noted in his book, this is the culture of recovery. It includes belonging and purpose through mutual support, service and connection grounded in pro-recovery behaviors, relationships, and shared values.

It is also true that there are subcultures of recovery. There is no two identical pathways to recovery, so while there are shared experiences, there are also facets that are unique to each person or to recovery tribes, those who follow the same form of mutual aid, medication supported route or faith-based experiences among many others. Yet despite the variation as we would see in any culture, there are common facets. They include:

- **Recovery Values:** Shared beliefs in things like integrity, transparency and service to others.
- **Recovery Carriers:** Individuals who embody the culture of recovery and attract others to it, not defined by status or credentials but by their ability to inspire and connect with others.
- **Recovery Spaces:** Places that people can go to spend time with others who live in the culture of recovery to share with each other and support the transmission of recovery with each other or initiates.
- **Recovery Concepts:** A foundation of shared values, beliefs, and practices that aim to support individuals in achieving and maintaining long-term sobriety.
- **Recovery Arts:** All mediums of creative expression that validate the culture of recovery.

We know from an examination of our history that people typically recover in the context of community. It flourishes in environments where individuals feel a sense of belonging and purpose. In spaces of mattering. Places where people can share their gifts of recovery, what they have learned through transformation and earned wisdom about life, relationships, and personal growth, which can be shared with the wider community. The modeling of "shedding skins" to shed old patterns and embrace new ways of being.

Our primary method of supporting recovery over the last 55 years has been a service orientation. Fees provided to identified experts to support the resolution of addiction and to introduce people to the concepts, spaces and community members on similar journeys but stopping short of strengthening that vital web of recovery community. It is a critical but incomplete interventional strategy. While we have seen some recognition that expanding cultures of recovery benefits broader society in intrinsic ways, we have done far too little to consider these processes and how to support them more effectively and methodically.

Broadly focused, strengthening culture should include:

- **Cultural planning:** Governments engage with recovery community to plan, identify and magnify a community's cultural resources, integrating them into broader planning and decision-making processes. This supports environments where culture can flourish and contributes to a sense of place, quality of life, and prosperity.
- **Arts and cultural education:** Expanding access to arts that engage and validate the recovery community.
- **Supporting culturally specific organizations:** Prioritizing funding and support for organizations led by and staffed with members of the recovery community, ensuring that efforts enhance their voices and traditions.
- **Cultural infrastructure:** Investment in recovery cultural infrastructure, such as the collection of accessible history, centers of expression, and community centers, is essential for communities to flourish.
- **Creative placemaking initiatives:** Projects that engage recovering, artists, and designers to support local efforts to use the arts and cultural projects as catalysts for social cohesion, livability, and community / economic development.
- **Cultural exchange programs:** Governments and organizations fund recovery programs that facilitate the exchange of artists, scholars, and community members regionally to foster understanding and collaboration between regions.
- **Partnerships and collaborations:** Collaboration among recovery institutions, businesses, and government agencies to leverage resources and expertise, enabling a broader reach and greater impact of cultural initiatives.

One of the challenges we face is recovery and recovery community being commodified in ways that does not augment the needs of the community but reduces us to a stereotype or agenda to meet the interests of other groups. I spoke about this last year in my piece, [Authentic Vs. Astroturfed Recovery Events & Recovery Marketing](#). I noted that "increasingly we must acknowledge and recognize that in the midst of authentic community-oriented recovery celebrations there are also inauthentic processes that use recovery as a prop to promote a myriad of other agendas. Processes that are not authentic and rising from community organically, but what looks more like astroturfing. Events that are top down, with predetermined agendas to promote a product or particular institutional messages not built upon the foundation of authentic community needs or goals." It robs community of its own vitality.

Community Role

We need collaborative government, yet beyond that, we need to also be [Building a Recovery Community of Barn Raisers](#). Every farmer needs a barn but not every one of them has the resources to finance all elements to bring the structure together. This is why, in earlier, more agrarian [times, barn raising](#) was a community event. Communities came together to support individual members. Every member of the community could depend on every other member to help them as they could count on their neighbors to assist them in times of need. These communities had a wealth of barn building capacity. Complex and expensive structures were built at lower costs and also strengthened the fabric of the community through shared purpose, mentoring and connections between people. This resulted in significant internal resources within the community. What is now called [social capital](#) it is also steeped in our shared values.

What our system does well in to develop small teams of technical experts who can build a great barn, but their efforts do not always result in the strengthening of the community. When a group of specialists build a barn, you end up with one barn, and no broader community building! When a community builds a barn together, it strengthens community resilience. It results in a legion of barn builders that cost less and provide additional benefits to everyone. This is a much less expensive process with broader yield. Marginalized communities without access to a lot of resources in particular

can benefit from these community building strategies as they are ill equipped to sustain a cadre of artisans at the standby to build a barn each time one is needed.

What do we want for our future?

As a society, we know better than this. If we value something we actually invest in it, with our time and resources. We do not turn it into a prop for political gain or a commodity to generate revenue from. Yet, we have invested next to nothing in the strengthening of recovery culture in all of our communities. The end result is that we as a society fail to benefit from the worth we have to our communities.

Using us as a prop or a group to generate revenue from is actually more closely associated with the culture of addiction. Propping us up for motives beyond our own inherent worth. This is also not new. Any casual read of our history is replete with hustlers and hucksters who see us a means to an end rather than a community to be nurtured. Yet, every generation makes progress in elevating the value of recovery within our communities.

So what are we investing our time, our energy and our resources into? The culture of addiction or the culture of recovery? A limited gain service structure or a culture that revitalizes and builds upon our inherent strengths or capacities.

The question for readers now and moving forward is how we want to be considered. Are we going to be part of the solution or part of the problem?

History will reveal our choices too.

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