

## Ripples of Resiliency – Fifty Years Since Operation Understanding

*“What if instead of heroically bursting from the fire, a weakened and traumatized bird rises awkwardly, just barely, careening through a wall of sky on fire, entirely uncertain of what fate awaits when it finally clears the smoke? Why can't this mess be a triumph? Why can't basic survival be a kind of glory? Why do we envision a pristine and painless resurrection - when the world shows us, time and time again, how messy these processes really are?” — Emily Rapp Black*

While the myriad of iterations and perpetual rebirth of many generations of recovery movements has achieved much more than mere survival, the quote above can highlight how it has been a messy process. Anything but pristine and painless. 1976 was an important year in our history. I was a fifth grader. It was also a big year in America as we were celebrating the Bicentennial of our Independence. It was also both the year I initiated drug use and the year a national movement was getting off the ground that would end up saving my life and the lives of millions of other Americans. Help was available to me when I needed it

because of advocates like Marty Mann and Harold Hughes. They toiled against all odds to ensure that help was available for people like us. They were doing so as I blew out the candles on my eleventh birthday cake.



The modern recovery movement got off the ground a few years earlier with the [Hughes Act of 1970](#). This law was the foundation for our entire field from research to treatment and workforce development efforts. There was also nothing easy about passing that legislation. It faced stiff opposition. Addiction recovery was not a politically viable area of focus. It was the enabling legislation that created both our treatment field and federal research efforts. The Bill came as close as legislation can get to dying and still get passed. It was signed into law by President Nixon on the last legislative day on the calendar after which it would have failed and be required to run again in the next two-year session of Congress. We emerged victorious with the narrowest of margins and against all the odds. That phoenix barely emerging through a wall of fire but achieving the sky nevertheless.

What unfolded after that in 1976 started with [Operation Understanding](#). The historic press conference on May 8, at the Shoreham Americana Hotel in Washington, D.C.. It was organized by Marty Mann and the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA). 52 prominent Americans, including celebrities shared their recovery. Nothing like it had occurred before that moment. These were people Americans knew and loved. Astronaut Buzz Aldrin, actor Dick Van Dyke, [Mercedes McCambridge](#), journalist Gary Moore, and Senator Harold Hughes stood up for recovery. It was one of the earliest large-scale efforts to reshape how Americans understood alcoholism. The press conference aimed to change public perception of alcoholism from a moral failing to a treatable health condition. To create a network of informed advocates who would spread that understanding nationwide. It surpassed its aspirations as we celebrate it fifty years later.

The very next month was FreedomFest '76, held on June 26 at Minnesota's Metropolitan Stadium, the current site of the Mall of America. It was a massive gathering, the largest recovery celebration ever held in the United States. The event combined inspirational speeches, personal testimonies, and educational sessions to highlight recovery as a positive, achievable life path. It emphasized community, shared purpose, and the power of peer support in sustaining long-term sobriety. A remarkable [video of the event](#) has been preserved by Hazelden Betty Ford Foundation and the tireless efforts of [Jeremiah Gardner](#).

History can wear rose-colored glasses, spectacles through which we incorrectly view such incredibly successes. We may think they occur because in that long ago era there were adequate resources, unified agendas, robust organizations and broad support, but this was not the case in respect to Operation Understanding. By 1976, the NCA was operating under persistent financial strain, with unstable funding and ambitions that far exceeded its fiscal capacity. It's leader, Marty

Mann was aging. Organizers had difficulty getting celebrities in recovery to stand up and participate in a public facing recovery press conference. Mercedes McCambridge wrote years later that there were a number of well-known Hollywood stars in recovery, but she was the only one willing to participate in Operation Understanding. In her 1981 autobiography she described how standing up for recovery cost her over a million dollars in lost opportunity. Producers did not want to be associated with a recovering alcoholic because people like us were seen as unreliable. The story is even more powerful when cast accurately as a process that succeeded despite the circumstances on the ground and not because of them. This reminds us how determined communities of recovery are and that recovery always finds a way.

### **The 1970's Era of Malaise**

Context is important here in respect to those rose-colored glasses. The view of the 1970s may be that they were happier, simpler times during which change was much easier than it is today. The 1970s were not easy times in America. Perhaps we should consider that inspiration and hope more often rises out of difficult times and not the periods in which life is easy. For those who are too young to recall, people in that era felt like the country had lost its footing, economically, politically, and culturally. Some called it the "Age of Limits." Post WWII expansion has ended. Others termed it the "Era of Malaise" due to the pessimism, disillusionment, and loss of faith in institutions after events like the Watergate scandal and the Vietnam War. We were stuck in stagflation. Costs were rising even as we faced a zero-growth economy. People sat in long lines to get rationed gasoline. There was a sense in America that our nation had lost its place in the world. Doubt was prevalent as to our future. Anthropomorphically we were in a funk.

Despite all of these challenges, fifty years ago visionaries had the courage to stand up for recovery and their efforts rippled out across our country. One of those ripples of inspiration and service fueled recovery efforts in my community. People in recovery [flowed into the fledgling treatment field](#) in both paid and voluntary positions. There was a vitality in the recovery community still present in the mid-1980s because of what happened in the mid-1970s.

As I have written about in [Considering the Facets of Whites Laws of Recovery Dynamics](#), there have been periodic highwater marks in our history. They are often followed by eras in which outside forces or loss of cohesiveness led to a loss of momentum and even regression. In those darker moments, efforts begin to fall into retrograde and processes, yet in these moments efforts of reformation are renewed. This follows the age old maxim that often things need to fall apart in order to come together in a new way. Those moments fifty years ago were a highwater mark, but not the last one we have experienced in the decades that have unfolded since then.

### **The Two Step Forward, One Back Dance of History**

Even a casual read of addiction recovery illuminates that we are not on a linear course. There are distinct periods of expansion and contraction of recovery efforts over the course of time. There are tensions between a number of different facets, including things like community grounded recovery generation and medical model professionalism, a topic that William White focused on in both of these essays, in 2001 [A Lost Vision Addiction Counseling as Community Organization](#) and in 2003 [The road not taken: The lost roots of addiction counseling](#). Our current era rests immediately after a contraction in community grounded recovery support efforts. Operation Understanding and Freedom Fest 76 were the beginning of that high water mark that began to recede with the rise of stimulant use in 1980s. The war on drugs and the over-professionalization of our field that removed people in recovery from the addiction service field unfolded through the 1990's.

What rose up was the New Recovery Advocacy Movement grounded in grassroots community. As William White devoted decades of his life to understanding our history, he clearly saw the risks of privatization, cooptation and over professionalization of our movement, He presciently warned of in his 2013 [State of the New Recovery Advocacy Movement](#) address to the recovery community that we would fail and need to start over if the movement became centered on peer services at the expense of broader goals.

We probably reached our highwater mark in our current iteration of the movement of recovery around 2015 with the [Unite To Face Addiction](#) rally on the National Mall. Since then, we increasingly have found ourselves edged out or mere props in other groups' agendas. We have seen good-faith actors trying to help people within a flawed system eclipsed by recovery capitalists, hustlers and hucksters make money from the suffering of our brothers and sisters with substance use conditions and a new round of over professionalization this time aimed at the peer role. This is a topic I addressed in [Social Movements End – So How Will Ours End?](#) The reason to acknowledge that we have a weakened and debased recovery movement is not to disparage our efforts but rather to shift energy back to a recovery community grounded movement. To not allow us to become a foot note of time limited service structures that are about us, without us.

## The View of 1976 from 2026

We have had ebbs and flow within our recovery movement over the last 50 years. Those pioneers who stood up and openly celebrated recovery set the stage for much of what we have accomplished. Most Americans now know about recovery and that we do recover. We have treatment and recovery support systems structures beyond what they dared to dream of as possible in that long ago era. There are millions more Americans in long term recovery from every walk of life, in every community across our nation. We know that there is a constituency for recovery that has political ramifications for how we are treated and how people in recovery are valued in their communities for their positive contributions.

Our care systems and research efforts still tend to be oriented towards short-term pathological measures. In the majority of communities, when persons with substance use conditions can access any services at all, they get shorter duration, lower intensity care than research shows is effective. We still have an underfunded workforce and minimal recovery representation in our governmental and service system structures. We also still struggle for legitimacy and grapple with deeply rooted societal negative perceptions about who and what we are.

We also have one thing that few who came before us had in their grasp. Thanks to historians like William White, we have a clear-eyed view of the path we have traveled to get to this vista. We can see how we got here with greater clarity than at any point so far over the course of time. We have the capacity to learn what has worked and what we need to change to become more effective. We can view footage of Operation Understanding and be inspired by what they did for us. For what they contributed to those who came beyond the limits of their own lives. We can ask ourselves what seeds we are sowing for future generations. We can stand up for recovery as these pioneers in 1976 did before us.

Fifty years ago, a small group of people stood up in the midst of uncertainty and risk and told the truth about their lives. They did not do so from a position of strength, but from a place of perseverance, uncertain of what would follow, but unwilling to remain silent. The ripples of that courage carried forward into communities like ours, into lives like ours, and into a future they would never fully see. If history teaches us anything, it is that recovery does not advance in a straight line, nor does it require perfect conditions to move forward. It requires people to have the courage of conviction to stand up anyway. The question before us now is the same as it was in 1976: not whether the moment is ideal, but whether we will have what it takes to create the next ripple. To be that Phoenix that even if weakened, still rises to take the sky.

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[Billstauffer@rcn.com](mailto:Billstauffer@rcn.com)