

Authenticity and Actualization: Stronger Through Our Brokenness, Together - William Stauffer

"Know thyself" (γνώθι σεαυτόν) – Inscribed on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi 4th century B.C.E

For millennia, philosophy has grappled with our capacity to reach our fullest potential, barriers to these ends and the conditions under which we are most likely to actualize. William James (1842-1910), often called the "father of American psychology," well over a hundred years ago recognized that humans have not only a capacity to change, but that being broken is often necessary for conversion processes to reveal the true self. In being broken reside the seeds of our growth. As James noted in a [letter to his wife](#) Alice Howe Gibbens, in 1878 prior to writing his seminal work, the [Principles of Psychology](#), it is in such states when we can find our inner voice, our true selves the "attribute which makes you feel most deeply and vitally alive, along with which comes the inner voice which says, "This is the real me." As he wrote 148 years ago, "when you have found that attitude, follow it."



Some of the very earliest sprouts of a modern world view in psychology grounded not in what was wrong with us, but what was right and true within us emerged from James. This is true within people and also more broadly the capacities of communities to be greenhouses of actualization within which people flourish. Actualization is the realization of our potential, values, and capacities to support positive growth. That connection of striving within community is a foundational concept of Ubuntu Recovery more fully articulated below.

William James provided the conceptual framework from which recovery mutual aid was born out of the twentieth century. William White in his seminal book, [Slaying the dragon: the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America](#) documents how James's views were heavily influential in the formation of Alcoholic Anonymous. In that era, our understanding of addiction was rooted in pathology. It was well understood that addiction was deteriorative, eroding the mind body and spirit. As Dr. William Silkworth, Medical Director at Towns Hospital noted in the 1930s "[Alcoholism was a hopeless disease, without a known cure.](#)" What William White generations articulated as the additive dynamic of recovery, that [recovery was much more than the subtraction of addiction](#) was in the earliest stages of taking root in this bygone era. The knowledge that the process of being broken by addiction could lay the foundation for a more vital and meaningful life. What James asserted a generation early as "the real me." It was a radical and transformative process that was also grounded in mutual support. The very real and then radical notion that we grow together. A community of wounded healers becoming better versions of ourselves by supporting each other's actualization.

Alcoholics Anonymous was perhaps the first large-scale application of a transformative process of the recovery journey within a formal mutual aid structure. While William Shakespeare wrote: "[This above all: to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.](#)" Millions of people around the world carry recovery coins in their pockets with the first part of this quote inscribed on them. We have seen a myriad of iterations within mutual aid and organized treatment efforts that have embraced the community based transformative nature of recovery.

Therapeutic communities and the Dynamics of Helping or Hurting

Therapeutic communities rose up in mid twentieth century America with [core concepts](#) of community as method, and mutual self-help within structures of role modeling and social learning within structures of accountability, responsibility, work, service, and community participation. Therapeutic communities (TCs) aimed to support "right living" and character development, not just abstinence. Recovery as additive not subtractive. It is an evidenced based model found to support recovery, improve legal outcomes as well as employment and psychological functioning.

As these community-based models expanded, they also revealed a recurring vulnerability. As William James asserted, change is experiential. It is not solely based on insight. We can embrace our higher selves or our darker shadows and our

experience informs the direction of our feet. The self becomes real through positive or destruction action in the world and in parallel, social environments shape which selves get expressed or suppressed. In this context recovery is not limited to symptom relief, but fundamentally a re-centering of identity.

TCs, like any service modality, have the capacity to help or hurt. While positive transformation can occur, darker forces are at risk to prevail. [Charles "Chuck" Dederich founded Synanon](#) in 1958 and a lot of people were helped. But it also holds a cautionary tale as Synanon fell into retrograde and took on cult like dynamics. In 1980, Dederich pleaded no contest to charges of conspiracy to commit murder. Such tales are prevalent across our space to even the most casual recovery historian. History abounds with such lessons to heed.

Retrograde to a Pathology Orientation

One hundred and forty years after James asserted his concepts about transformation and the role of being broken in the process of actualization, we still struggle with acute pathology limited orientations in respect to addiction. Viewing “success” by the limited metric of fewer deaths by overdoses is entirely pathology grounded. Death prevented for one day in one way. It fails to account for our internal and external potential, our authenticity of self and in the capacity to build real community. In respect to emerging drugs and drug use trends, we have failed to even examine things beyond immediate first aid, as I recently wrote about in [Will We Ever Move Beyond an Acute Crisis Orientation?](#) We must move beyond systems of care that myopically fail to see our inherent worth and capacity.

In the quest to support attainment of our full individual and community capacities aligned with our better selves, we should consider how both individuals and communities reflect:

- **Congruence:** Our inner experience aligns with our community. We walk the talk of authentic recovery together and strive to live well together.
- **Agency:** We are the authors of our own lives. Policies and processes that are aligned with our agency are reflective of our efforts. They do not fail us by setting low expectations of who we are and what we are capable of individually and within community.
- **Value-guided living:** Our conduct reflects deeply held values at the level of self, family and community.
- **Resistance to imposed identities:** We do not allow ourselves or our communities of recovery to be defined solely by externally assigned labels or pathology. Our allies in government and community honor us by not imposing on us their goals of who and what we are, but by supporting our full capacities in our lives and as vital contributing flora and fauna of a healthy society.
- **Growth orientation:** . Authenticity unfolds over time; systems are designed to encourage striving and flourishing that evolve over the long term. The inherent tendency to underestimate our capacity is overcome.

Ubuntu Recovery and Greenhouses of Mutual Actualization

Ubuntu Recovery draws on the African ethical–philosophical concept of Ubuntu, often summarized as “I am because we are.” Communities of mutuality, including Ubuntu, embrace change beyond the limiting focus on self. [Ubuntu Recovery understands healing](#) as the restoration of personhood through positive regard, reconnection, mutual recognition, and contribution within community. Recovery unfolds through belonging, reciprocal responsibility, and the reclaiming of meaningful social roles, emphasizing that individuals become fully human not in isolation, but through participation in collective life. In this view, recovery is not merely the cessation of harmful behaviors, but the contributive re-entry into shared moral and social worlds where dignity and agency are affirmed.

Community is the greenhouse of actualization in Ubuntu. As “I am because we are.” Actualization within any member of the community strengthens the entire village. Ubuntu recovery is aligned with the growing evidence base on belonging as a vital component of being human and is consistent with recovery-oriented systems of care grounded in community (Johnson-Wade, L. 2025, October 22). There is also a deep connection with history, we are because they were. Those who strive to live well before us are not gone at all, but with us now as their contributions live on in us. Ubuntu Recovery aligns closely with the concept of actualization by shifting the unit of growth from the individual in isolation to the community as a whole. Groups actualize as they develop the capacity to include, support, and be transformed with each other. They build social capital and collective efficacy in the process. This creates the conditions for sustained growth. Within this context recovery is a process of mutual actualization, where individual healing and community development are inseparable, dynamic, reinforcing and connected to all of those who have come before us, just as our actualization influences all who come after us. We are embedded in our own history connected in both directions of time.

William White's Laws of Recovery Dynamics and the Deep Reservoir of Recovery Regeneration

As I wrote last year with Dr David Best in [the Arc of Recovery Movement History Ultimately Bends Towards Expansion](#), While there have been waves of progress to expand recovery transmission in America followed by troughs of reduction, history shows us that we are making progress that simply cannot be denied. White's Laws of Recovery dynamics are cyclical. Community-generated recovery ideas grounded in mutual actualization inevitably drift toward top-down, paternalistic, pathology-oriented systems unless they are intentionally anchored in authentic recovery communities. These dynamics are clear across our history. Recovery is inherently regenerative: despite repeated periods of retrogression, community-driven, grassroots recovery processes consistently re-emerge our history to restore connection, transmission, and meaning.

Retrograde processes occur when community grounded concepts become commodified and coopted into our service structure. They then become overly professionalized with top-down goals. We lose emphasis on community actualization and instead drift towards short term, pathological oriented goal resolution defined by the systems that have monetized the processes. Authenticity is blurred. Personal gain becomes the aim of those who find ways to leverage processes for personal gain. Community grounded actualization becomes muted and retrograde processes erode vitality. Greed, fraud and control over recovery processes fuel the falling apart of the communal. Yet all is not lost. Recovery always finds a way. We see these dynamics unfold generationally throughout the course of our long history.

As reflected in Ubuntu Recovery philosophy, community is the deep reservoir of recovery regeneration. We are indeed the seeds that rise out of the soil fertilized by prior generations efforts. We hold within us all the memory of all who have come before us and the growth of those who come after us. We rise again. As William James wrote long ago, being broken is often necessary for conversion processes to reveal the true self. We hold that knowledge within our collective. As Carl Jung wrote in *Man and His Symbols*, "Every transformation demands as its precondition "the ending of a world" the collapse of an old philosophy of life." We break and then transform into our true selves, within community, together.

As individuals and within community, our suffering is not erased but integrated into our collective growth. Change occurs with each other; it is experiential and relational. I am because we are. We are because they were. We are active participants in the reconstruction of our own villages. What we do lives on beyond the limits of our bodies. Recovery is community centered, future-directed yet informed by the evolution of our efforts across many generations. It is not "what's wrong with us" but collective human resiliency bonded through shared purpose grounded in service, meaning, and connection, transformed through reorientation of our life purposes. Many if not most of the seeds we sow and nurture will not bear fruit in our lifetimes but are vital for those who come after us. As such, together in the fields we till as those who came before us did, and those who come after us shall also. We rise above adversity because we know that being broken makes us stronger as we nurture the soil of our future selves.

Questions worth considering:

- Who determines what our true selves are capable of and when we are capable of it?
- Why do we frame recovery as a "we" process rather than an "I" process?
- Do we have low expectations or high expectations for people in recovery? What influences are expectations? When we have high expectations, how does that influence the outcome and vice versa?
- Do we have systems of care and support that provide scaffolding to reach our potential at the individual and community levels?
- Are we doing enough to ground recovery within authentic, nurturing community?
- Are we in recovery retrograde or reformation or perhaps some facets of both? What are we doing to augment reformation?
- Do we understand our own history to appreciate our interconnectedness with our own roots?
- What are our collective responsibilities to ensure recovery processes are present for the next generation?

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