

Listening to Echoes of Our Own History – William Stauffer

Authors Note: A version of this is currently in Counselor Magazine. I submitted it for consideration in May 2023 and received notice of it being used last week. My credentials have changed since then and there were substantive changes to the work. The citations here are consistent with what was submitted. I am pleased that Counselor Magazine saw the piece, focused on our history worthy of use. Their published version is here -

<https://counselormagazine.com/article/listening-to-echoes-of-our-own-history/>

“The Washingtonian Movement swept through America Like wildfire for five years in the 1840s, then abruptly vanished. In large part, the demise was due to a loss of focus on reclaiming the individual alcoholic. The Washingtonians became involved in all kinds of politics, exhibitionism about their recovery, competition with other organizations, and fruitless controversy.” - A Biography of Mrs. Marty Mann

History is never linear, although we often perceive it as so. This is true for the history of addiction recovery in America, which has experienced many boom-and-bust cycles. Eras of rapid expansion of services and supports combined with improved public perceptions about addiction and those of us impacted by it. Then, periods of deep contraction. As an example, by the mid-1970s, [Operation Understanding](#) in Washington DC elevated the status of recovery and brought hope to millions. In that same year, in Minnesota, a huge recovery event [FreedomFest 1976: A Celebration of Freedom from Alcohol and Drug Addiction](#) filled a stadium. Dick Van Dyke emceed it. Recovery was in boom times in the USA.



Yet a “get tough on crime” stance emerged. Cities experienced what seemed like intractable crime problems. It was driven by fear, as depicted in the pamphlet handed out to visitors to New York City in the 80s highlights. [Changing drug use patterns](#) were a factor. [Crime fueled political](#) responses to shift the focus to law-and-order strategies. The war on drugs went on steroids. Sentencing [disparities in relation to crack cocaine](#) locked up Black Americans at unprecedented rates. It had a deeply chilling impact on the tender sprouts of the recovery movement, which withered in the intense negative perceptions of the public, fueled by a variety of economic and political interest groups.

By the mid-80s, children were being taught that [users are losers](#). Over the next decade, the value of [substance abuse insurance coverage declined by 75%](#). SUD services were cut deeply as no one was able or willing to advocate for our people. The public SUD care system [oriented itself to the criminal justice system](#) as this was what was funded. There was recognition in the recovery community that what was unfolding was not working. This led to the rise of the [New Recovery Advocacy Movement](#) in America. A new boom time for us!

Right at that moment, the seminal work on our history, William White’s book, [Slaying the Dragon](#), was published. One of the things I learned from doing interviews with a number of key figures involved in efforts to expand recovery in this last boom was that they had all read his book and understood how fragile the thing that they were working on was. While there were a number of critical dynamics that led to their successful efforts to change the way America sees recovery, this fact, that what they were working on was quite fragile led to the other crucial factor in my estimation. They understood they had to put aside their myriad of disagreements in order to focus efforts on matters of common ground.

In [a System That Fails to Retain Its History or Prepare for the Future](#), I noted that we have done a poor job of transferring our own history on any level. We do not transfer knowledge about our progress and challenges in any organized fashion. One of our most significant assets to help us do so is the life work of [Bill White](#). He has left us a huge resource. Even as the recovery boom was starting out, he saw that at some point it would experience a significant contraction. He knew that documenting and teaching our community about our own history could save a lot of future pain and suffering, if those people in the future paid attention.

In our current era, similar to the era reflected in the quote above in regard to the Washingtonians, we seem to be involved in incessant infighting. We are getting pulled into political agendas, possibly [fueled by entities with financial interests](#) in our arena. There are signs that fear of crime and a sense that [what we are doing is not working](#) seems to be fueling a renewed interest in criminal justice oriented solutions, particularly in respect to our community which [remains](#)

[highly stigmatized](#). I suspect we are at a juncture in history where we would be well served to examine our own history and seek common ground in order to avoid stepping backwards.

While I do not pretend to know what the future holds, I do think that right now is a good time to listen to the echoes of our own history. We must take every measure possible to avoid a major downturn. A lot of lives depend on us doing so.

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