

Revisiting William White: We Need More Recovery Custodians and Fewer Recovery Rock Stars (2020)

Bill and I wrote this in 2020, it is verbatim below. Recently I have been reflecting on the risks of the limelight and the quest for notoriety that can befall us. Consequences experienced systemically when we fail to create an ethos grounded in custodial leadership. What occurs when our focus is on not on taking care of what is good and right and leaving it better than we have found, but rather on other kinds of gains.

Can we see the consequences unfold in every corner of our space? We have experienced so very many losses and setbacks in recent years. People in recovery who resume use and experience tragic consequences. Vocal “recovery champions” who end up being [Hustlers Hawking Drugs](#), [Hucksters Selling Recovery](#) in disguise for their own gain before the schemes implode in public scandal. Leaders who espouse recovery values in public but take advantage of people in every way, physically, sexually, psychologically and emotionally leaving a wake of devastation until exposed in the light for what they have done in the dark.

All things that history clearly tells us to anticipate when our efforts are not grounded in strong ethics, deep humility, an ethos of servant leadership and centering rituals which support our wellbeing. We need to remain ever vigilant in this area for our mutual efforts to bear fruit. History is instructive here. When these kinds of scandals become the fodder of prevalent media, that amplifies and reinforces all the strong and wrong negative perceptions about who and what we are and set back our collective efforts significantly.

Let’s foster and ethos of recovery custodianship for the benefit of future generations, they are depending on us!

Original We Need More Recovery Custodians and Fewer Recovery Rock Stars

(Bill Stauffer and Bill White) May 21, 2020

Definition of Custodian – a person who has responsibility for or looks after something.

We are in a critical stage of the recovery movement in America, and we need to think carefully on what direction we go as a community and what we do to ensure that we expand recovery opportunities for the next generation. We have a stewardship responsibility to build upon the efforts of those pioneers that came before us to ensure that effective and accessible recovery support is available to the next generation.

One risk to that future is the rise of recovery celebrities within recovery mutual aid organizations, other recovery community organizations, and within the larger recovery advocacy movement who seek to use their recovery notoriety as a platform for their own agenda and not as a means to further our common cause.

From nineteenth century temperance missionaries to this morning’s headlines, our history is littered with well-intentioned people in recovery who flew too high into the heat and light of public attention only to crash and burn. Resuming drug and alcohol addiction, getting arrested or simply becoming the antithesis of a good model of recovery confirms the worst biases people have about us. This often ends up causing devastating harm to our collective efforts to show that we do achieve long-term recovery, and we are good citizens.

We want to show the world that recovery is the probable outcome for those of us who are able to access proper care and support. However, asserting a public face and voice of recovery presents very real risks if we promote ourselves more than the goals of the recovery advocacy movement. Good recovery is grounded in humility, open-mindedness, and inclusion. Great harm comes to us when we abandon those central tenants of recovery. It can be easy for any among us to fall into this trap in the rarified air of public attention. This is why we should strive to be custodians of recovery and not rock stars.

If we are entirely honest, many of these inherent risks come from within ourselves. All humans face risks when seeking notoriety, but it can have additional consequences for those of us in recovery. The old timers in recovery knew that this was true when they adopted values to protect the collective from the risks of those who fall into the pitfall of ego, ambition and the drive for notoriety at the expense of the greater community of recovery. Personal anonymity at the



level of press, radio, TV, films, and other media technologies such as the Internet is one of the concepts that has served to protect many recovery communities from these difficult dynamics.

Social media abounds with soap opera like examples of what we do not want the outward-facing view of the recovery community to be. We can ill afford to show this ugly face of infighting and egos run amok. We need to watch out for “recovery leaders” who seek out the intoxicating limelight of the media, including social media, for its own ends rather than a means towards an end. We can and must do better.

Eve Tushnet recently suggested in an essay entitled [What 12-Step Programs Can Teach Us about the True Meaning of Work](#), “in the recovery world, the normative worker—the person whose job best expresses the inherent nature of work, its purpose and even its beauty—is the janitor.” The very idea of janitor or custodian conveys the values of humility, simplicity, and dedicated service as expressions of responsibility to a larger organization, community, or cause. The custodian role is not about joy of self-expression, but joy found in the work itself and in the higher purpose it serves. It demands moving beyond self-performance or expressions of personal rebellion to obedience to a cause beyond service to self. In contrast, the celebrity role is an imprisonment of self—an I-focused abyss that feeds ambition, competition, envy, resentment, and anger rather than collaboration.

The custodian role properly places the focus on what is being maintained and off the person or persons doing the maintaining. This is a healthier place for us to be in rather than in the role of celebrity or rock star. What does it mean to be a custodian of recovery? It is servant leadership. In servant leadership, the “leader” exists to serve the cause and not the other way around:

- Sharing power, putting the community first and helping others to grow and thrive.
- Consensus building around things that support recovery for everyone at the expense of no other group (do no harm)
- Modeling the aspirational values of the recovery movement (walk the talk)
- Focusing on the movement and not the the advocate
- Taking the time to understand as deeply as possible the potential consequences of what is being advocated for before we act to avoid such unintended consequences (Advocacy without understanding the potential benefits and the potential harms is simply fire-starting.)
- Serving with humility and integrity
- Honoring all pathways of recovery
- Modeling inclusion, compassion, resiliency, and hope
- “Pulling each other up” in constructive ways so we all do a better job and not get ourselves into trouble or putting others down so we look better.
- Not shaming, belittling, or bullying people or working behind their back to get our own agendas passed
- Creating and sharing platforms where other people in recovery can represent the recovery experience and the needs of people seeking and in recovery.

Four daily rituals can help keep us centered on the larger meaning of our advocacy work as well as help sustain our personal health and perspective. Centering rituals, whether in the form of prayer, formal meditation, or just quiet reflection, help us “keep our eyes on the prize” and allow us to remain grounded. They help us narrow the gap between aspirational recovery values (humility, honesty, integrity, tolerance, gratitude, forgiveness, etc.) and our daily actions.

Mirroring rituals allow us to commune with kindred spirits for mutual support, for feedback on the quality of our advocacy work, and to rekindle our passion for recovery advocacy. Acts of self-care and personal responsibility allow time for self-repair and caring for the needs of our families and others of importance in our lives. Unpaid and unacknowledged acts of service help keep our egos in check and allow us to remain focused on the value of service to others and to our own recovery.

William Shakespeare once said that past is prologue. What has come before sets our stage, but does not define our future. We decide what happens next in this play. We control what happens in the next act and ultimately how our story collectively unfolds. This is the truth of recovery, we can and do change the past by redefining our future. We do this through careful reflection and painfully gained knowledge of our own hubris and shortfalls and the humility of understanding that we are not immune to repeating our own mistakes.

We know that fame and notoriety can be intoxicating. This is a particular risk for people in recovery. Those of us operating in the public space to advocate for others are at greater risk for harm because the work can be

intoxicating. History is replete with examples of public figures in recovery using drugs and alcohol after proclaiming themselves in recovery or some other bad thing like stealing money or getting arrested. This harms all of us. We must tend to dual risks: 1) assuring that our authentic voice is not hijacked by our own ego, and 2) avoiding seduction by puppet masters who want to control our message to serve their ideological or financial interests. Custodians remain faithful to their mission. They respect with deep humility the purpose of what they do, taking the work seriously without preoccupation with self.

Let's be custodians of recovery and leave being rock stars to rock stars.

Sources

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