

William White's Opening Keynote to the Inaugural National Conference on Addiction Recovery Science: Presenting the words of one of our most respected recovery thought leaders at this historic gathering

One morning in mid-February, William White called me. We have had a number of such conversations in recent years. They are always deeply meaningful to me. He noted over the course of the dialogue that he has fully stepped back from public speaking roles. He has at times shared with people who ask that I am one of the torch bearers to consider calling in efforts to carry the new recovery advocacy movement effort forward. We all have some big shoes to fill, both in our words and our deeds. How we carry the message is at least as important to the message itself.



While we have never directly spoken about it, I suspect that one of the reasons he is stepping back from his role as our most deeply respected ambassador of recovery efforts is to end his life's work with grace. To avoid hanging on to the role for personal reasons to affirm purpose in ways that reduce the efficacy of the movement. To provide space for new energy to develop and coalesce in ways that effectively support what comes next. Bill is modeling what he believes is the best way to end a publicly facing and deeply influential role. To navigate the powerfully seductive limelight of public notoriety in ways that affirm the goals of the movement without eroding it. Temptations which all of us are at subject to, far too often with tragic endings when we relent. That is one of the lessons of our own history he is communicating by his actions, to intentionally pass the torch to those who are willing and able to help carry it forward.

A few years ago, Bill and I wrote a piece about the risks of becoming the face of the recovery movement. [We need recovery custodians, not recovery rockstars](#). It cautions us that we live in a media fueled world that promotes rockstar imagery. There is a fine line between using media to communicate our collective needs and becoming the poster child of the cause. Rockstar recovery is erosive of community as gurus are elevated and quite often then fall. We must constantly refocus the energy on our collective purpose and away from the siren song of guru or rockstar status. Failure to do leads to loss of focus on movement objectives and far too, tragic ends to those held under the bright lights of public spectacle.

Bill is modeling what he has learned from studying our history and the risks we face when grappling with the successful end of his life's work. We are all mortal, all of us will have to do the same inevitably. I suspect he wishes to move the message forward and demonstrate his deep commitment to servant leadership values. It is a profoundly meaningful message demonstrated through both his actions and his words. In attempting to communicate this here, I reached over and picked up his book, [Recovery Rising](#) which was close at hand. I thumbed through towards the back of the book as this was a subject he wrote about toward the end. The book fell open to page 458, where he was reflecting on the boundaries between self and our professional roles. It seemed quite fitting. He wrote:

"As I reflected on this boundary between the person and the professional, it became clear to me just how personal our work in the addictions field is – regardless of one's role. The work is personal because the issues of addiction and recovery are so personal. Those issues reflect the darkness and the light in each of us, and as such the person is the medium of the professional work. Credibility in the addictions field, regardless of one's academic and professional pedigrees, always comes down to the nature of our character and our relationships. The medium of our work is the profession AND the person."

He emphasizes here that walking our professional talk and living with integrity are vital and interconnected. On that day in February when Bill called me, he referenced that his mentor, [Ernie Kurtz](#) towards the end of his life would do with Bill what Bill was doing with me. Ernie would share his name as a good person to contact as a voice to consider in efforts to move the message forward. Bill then recounted that at other times Ernie would prepare comments and ask Bill if he would be willing to present Ernie's words at events.

Bill then asked if I would be willing to present his [Keynote comments](#) at the inaugural National Conference on Addiction Recovery Science. I agreed to do so. I felt deeply humbled at the enormity of the request and the trust he had in me to do so. I am still at a loss for words for what this means to me. He then shared [his prepared comments linked here](#).

Over the next few weeks, I read and reread [the seven-page document](#). I believe it to be one of his most significant contributions to our movement. It is a call to action for the next generation to shift how we measure recovery efforts in a way that is authentically representative of the broad array of healing and full inclusion of recovery community in all of its diversity in recovery research. To be quite candid, I have not yet fully processed how deep and honor and responsibility he asked of me. We all face risks in attempting to carry the message forward in ways that are consistent with who we are as people and the darkness and light in each of us. I hope I am worthy of his trust. I reflect on his efforts to model how to navigate ego and desire for notoriety and all the inherent risks that such things present to us all.

Consistency across who we are and what we do in the professional space also reflects on how we support recovery efforts in our professional lives. Bill's keynote is a comprehensive blueprint for supporting a recovery-oriented system of research that improves our understanding of the continuum of healing from a substance use disorder in all of its complex nuances and affirms the value of recovery community in the process. It emphasizes recovery community representation, recovery community coproduction and recovery community coownership of the body of knowledge and how it is used to support wellness at the individual, family, and community levels.

If we ignore his words, we will end up committing harm in the name of help. He is imploring our esteemed research institutions to walk the talk of recovery community values. Bill raises so many important points in his keynote and it deserves a much more significant focus beyond a keynote to applaud and discard. He is asking our research institutions to demonstrate that the medium of their work is consistent with the values and needs of our communities in all of are diversity. It is the only pathway forward that will deliver what we need. I hope that they heed his call to action. A great deal rests on choosing that road forward.

Please follow [the link to his keynote address](#). I would note that in recent weeks, As I considered his words, I reflected on my first weeks in recovery in the mid-1980s. In that era, the emerging science fueled hope in my own life as I became aware that what I had was a condition and not a moral failing. The generation before us stood on the precipice of time and dared to look beyond the pathology to focus on our strengths and our inherent worth to ourselves, our families, and our communities. We stand on a similar precipice today. I hope we choose to build out a body of recovery research on the foundation of his remarks. We have the opportunity to support healing for generations to come. I am grateful to Bill and so many others who built the path we are on today.

The generations who have come before us are counting on us to embrace our best qualities and avoid the siren song of our darker selves that seek money, influence, and notoriety. The pull of those things can far too often result us in being dashed on the rocks. As Bill so eloquently wrote about above, who we are as people and our character is part and parcel to who we are as professionals. We are all human and prone to get ourselves into trouble here. May we work together to support each other in ways that make all of those who came before us proud and provide expanded opportunities to all who come after us.

I see many of us stepping up to serve moving forward. I have no idea if I am worthy of the trust placed in me to help carry the movement forward, but I hope to demonstrate so to the very best of my capabilities. I hope you do the same.

Generations ahead are counting on us.

Sources

Ernest Kurtz. (2015). Ernest Kurtz; Ernest Kurtz. <https://ernestkurtz.wordpress.com/>

Stauffer, W., White W. (2020, May 21). Chestnut Health Systems. <https://www.chestnut.org/Blog/Posts/346/William-White/2020/5/We-Need-More-Recovery-Custodians-and-Fewer-Recovery-Rock-Stars-Bill-Stauffer-and-Bill-White/blog-post/>

White, W. L. (2017). Recovery rising: a retrospective of addiction treatment and recovery advocacy.

White, W. (2024). Frontiers of Recovery Research. Keynote Address, Consortium on Addiction Recovery Science (CoARS), National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), April 24-25, 2024. [https://www.chestnut.org/resources/bebff546-a338-4aac-8720-8cb8639be9f5/2024 Frontiers of Recovery Research.pdf](https://www.chestnut.org/resources/bebff546-a338-4aac-8720-8cb8639be9f5/2024%20Frontiers%20of%20Recovery%20Research.pdf)

Post link - [HERE](#)