

What is Recovery?

An expanded understanding from my own experience

by Richard Simonelli

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Introduction

For some of us, addictions recovery has been much more than an urgent life saving necessity in our lives, without denying that it has also been a life saving necessity. Recovering from chemical substance abuse can be an unforeseen gateway into an inner journey of self-knowledge, self-inquiry, and wakefulness that may have been an unlikely scenario for us before our own chemical addictions. In this sense, one's own apparent liability as an addict or an alcoholic became an opportunity to grow, develop and deepen as a human being when we did the hard work of addictions recovery wholeheartedly. It may be a blessing in disguise. If enough people take the recovery journey in this way, a community or nation might find itself with a sufficient sub-culture to band together with others seeking to elevate the national consciousness towards the peace and energy we all say we desire. When the recovery process is understood as a powerful tool for individual and community healing and growth, then addictions might be seen as a positive gift of nature after all. The addictions epidemic may be a phenomenon that is forcing us to wake up as a people. If we don't awaken as a people, we will die as a nation. This is the real strength, hope and expanded definition of recovery.

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What is recovery? In one sense, recovery is the tip of an iceberg. It's the *tip* of an iceberg because what's below can take us beyond a literal, fact and science-based understanding of recovering from addictions, to a full four-directions recovery journey—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. If the recovery journey is undertaken fully, it can become the gateway to wellness and then on towards the realization of our full potential as human beings.

The term “recovery” has come to mean addictions recovery. In fact, it could mean recovery from cancer, recovery from an automobile accident, or recovery from the flu. For some reason, the adjectives “addictions” or “drug and alcohol” are usually left off this term. Nowadays “recovery” means getting over the effects of individual chemical substance misuse. But the deeper implication of addictions recovery for whole societies is usually ignored. The relationship between an unwell society and the addicts it produces is likewise ignored.

Recovery means that an individual has misused one or more chemical substances to such degree that he or she is physically or psychologically addicted to it. It means that the misuse or addiction has progressed to where it takes a profound life change for the individual to become free of the grip that such a psycho-emotional-spiritual-physical pattern has on the addicted person. This means that the individual is trapped in the pattern and cannot simply say “no” and walk away from the addiction without taking a recovery journey. In my opinion, if it is relatively easy for the individual to stay clear of the addictive pattern then there really is no recovery journey undertaken. That person has not gone through recovery because a process of fierce self-confrontation probably never took place.

I make these distinctions because when an individual undertakes a recovery journey from his or her own addiction to a chemical substance, it could, and perhaps should be understood as far more than simple abstention from an addictive pattern. A good recovery journey is a life-changing undertaking in a person's life. A good recovery journey takes a person from a

condition of coarse existential ignorance—physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually— to one of sensitivity and self-awareness as a human being. A good recovery journey is an initiation into the real mystery of human life. When an addicted person makes the recovery journey, he or she goes from a state of spiritual, emotional, mental and physical superficiality and immaturity, to one in which the real meaning and purpose of our human birth begins to become a constant companion. Somewhere along the recovery journey three questions begin to dawn. They are, Who Am I? Why am I Here? and Where am I Going?

The Perennial Questions, Who Am I? Why am I Here? and Where am I Going? have occurred to human beings from time immemorial, either in this form or in the myriad other ways these questions can be asked. It doesn't necessarily take recovery from substance misuse to enter this pathway. A certain proportion of all humans throughout time have chosen to engage these questions intentionally under one name or another. Addressing the three Perennial Questions in some form or another is the real meaning and purpose of addictions recovery. It is a gift from our own very intractable and nasty chemical addictions. Speaking for myself, I don't think I could have undertaken an aware, awakened life journey without having been forced into self-examination by my own stubborn substance abuse.

In order to entertain the questions, Who Am I? Why am I Here? and Where am I Going? there is a certain quality of heart-mind that we must cultivate as part of the recovery journey. "Heart-mind" means anything that transpires in our thinking, feeling, imagining and intuiting gifts as human beings. Being forced to explore the heart-mind by one's own desire to recover from the pain and horror of chemical substance abuse is, to me, a central meaning of recovery.

What are the qualities of heart-mind we must cultivate? They go by different names in different systems, but here are a few: self-confrontation, self-knowledge, self-inquiry, self-awareness, self-discovery, love, awakening, compassion, and so much more. In more down to earth terms, this new skill that we must cultivate as part of an authentic addictions recovery journey could be called *the ability to take a look at yourself*. We certainly couldn't do any of this when we were addicted. For the vast majority, a chemical substance addiction blocks the functioning of the inner contemplative process.

Once one begins to travel an authentic addictions recovery journey centered on self-confrontation, self-knowledge, self-awareness and self-discovery, what then is the relationship between the recovery journey and one's entire life journey? Does the recovery journey go on for an entire life? Is the recovery journey also the life journey? There are different ways these questions can be answered, but for me the recovery journey is most emphatically not the entire life journey. For me, after a point the recovery journey ended. It ended when I felt myself to be recovered from my previous chemical substance addictions. For myself, the recovery journey is really only about one-half the life journey. So what comes after recovery?

It is important to say that we're not doing rocket science here. Some of what has been said falls into the category of symbols, metaphors and philosophical thought. This is not rocket science (as that joke goes) nor is it even Western science. In fact, for myself the narrow thinking of Western science is an impediment to both the recovery journey and to the life journey because it is not a holistic or four directions process. I discovered this blockage for myself below the tip of the recovery iceberg. However, I am quick to say that a more capable scientific system, which I call *indigenous science*, *holistic science* or *four-directions science* can certainly assist a real recovery journey. This issue of the inadequacy of our Western science as a knowledge system for the life journey is really a topic for another time.

So what comes after recovery?

I am indebted to Don Coyhis*, Mohican Nation, for his passionate work on Native American sobriety, recovery, healing and wellness since at least 1988. Don Coyhis, in conjunction with a Passamaquoddy Elder, coined the term *Wellbriety* to suggest what might come after addictions recovery. Wellbriety means to be both sober and well. It means that in order to be healed from the ravishes of substance misuse, we must also undertake a wellness journey. Recovery is not enough. Using the reference point of substance abuse addictions, Don Coyhis summarizes what might be called a four directions life journey. This is a journey around a Medicine Wheel circle in the following way:

The Discovery Life Journey

In the Eastern part of the Circle is **Treatment**.

In the Southern part of the Circle is **Recovery**.

In the Western part of the Circle is **Wellness**.

In the Northern part of the Circle is **Discovery**.

Treatment in the East means that someone suffering from drug and alcohol addictions must undergo some kind of in-depth therapy as an entry point into both the recovery journey and his or her own life journey. Sometimes this means participation in 30, 60 or 90, day treatment programs. Other times it might mean attendance at frequent and regular recovery meetings. The notion of treatment can mean different things to different people. It is the first step a person takes to begin recovery from his or her own chemical substance addictions.

Recovery in the South means everything we have been talking about in this discussion. Recovery, in its best sense, is a journey of self-knowledge, self-awareness, compassion to oneself and others, and the innate, natural ability to be in self-scrutiny constantly.

Wellness in the West means that the scars of one's chemical addictions are finally healing and there is a natural balance, relaxation and joy beginning to dawn in life. The question, *what does it mean to be well, what is the wellness journey?* is something all of us might want to ask ourselves in a society that has very little sense of wellness.

Discovery in the North means that there is indeed something to be discovered about the mystery of our human life. There are many life discoveries we can make once we are more or less well. But for myself, at least, there is one mysterious discovery that I could not even dream of until I was a recovered and more or less well human being. In my own terms, that is the discovery of my own *real nature* or true Self as a human being. It is enlightenment. This discovery goes by many different names in the different spiritual systems. Placing Discovery in the north (the direction of Wisdom in the Medicine Wheel) suggests what is to come after a person has completed the treatment, recovery and wellness journeys: maturing into a loving, compassionate and wise human being.

This discussion points to the fact that for those of us who came through an addictions background, recovery is really only about one-half of a comprehensive life journey. It is a way of placing the very important and necessary recovery journey into a wider context. The discussion is a way of understanding or “defining” what recovery might mean in a greater sense than is usually understood in the ordinary (mainstream) addictions recovery process. This is why I say recovery is only the tip of an iceberg. There is still a bit more to this discussion if we are to further understand the iceberg.

Today we don't just have a lot of people suffering from drug and alcohol addictions. We have a full-blown addictions epidemic with worldwide impact. Beneath the tip of the recovery iceberg is the need for an individual to undertake the full journey of self-knowledge and self-discovery in a manner that makes personal sense to that individual. But what about the community or the society that produced the individual in the first place? Is it an accident that a member of a community became addicted? Does an addict have a disease? Or is it because the roots of addictive behavior are carried by the community or society itself? In a seminal book called When Society Becomes an Addict, Anne Wilson Schaef described how a group of people may be addicted to processes as well as to chemical substances at the level of the group. This behavior is then passed on to other individuals in the group, community or society.

I doubt very much whether addictions are a medical model type of disease as emphasized today. A physical predisposition may play a role for an individual; but the prevalence of chemical substance misuse at this time is certainly a response to stress in ways far more than physical causes and more than what the term “disease” signifies. In years to come, the disease notion of addiction will surely be revealed as only a working hypothesis that needed to be clarified or discarded as a more holistic or four directions understanding proved to be more encompassing. I enjoy a quotation attributed to the American writer Mark Twain. It goes something like this: *When the only tool you have is a hammer, every problem you encounter looks like a nail.*

To further define what recovery is we have to look into the group, community or society that is creating an addictions epidemic. Some of the root causes for addiction at a societal level in fact produce the individual addict or alcoholic. We are not captains of our ship or masters of our fate

as much as we like to think, *unless and until the four-directions discovery life journey described above becomes much more prevalent in a community.* Undertaking the individual discovery life journey may be the ultimate prevention strategy for chemical addictions in the community.

Don Coyhis and the Wellbriety Movement teach about the *Healing Forest Model* for full community and societal healing. The notion of a “Healing Forest” means that if a sick tree is removed from a sick forest and enters treatment, becoming well, when it returns to the sick forest it will in all likelihood become sick once again.

The Healing Forest Model suggests that the wider community, which produced an addict or alcoholic, must itself go into healing at the level of the community in order to stop the ongoing creation and production of addicts. This is especially true when the addictive phenomenon is taking place in epidemic proportions as it is now. It means that the community or society itself must go into recovery. Since I am an American, it means that America is in great need of a healing journey and would benefit from recovery *at the level of the whole* if we are to break this epidemic. I want my country to heal.

Recovery offers an opportunity to become familiar with the human inner journey and a contemplative life. Knowing oneself in this way is rare in an increasingly superficial and externalized society. We hold too much power through science and technology to be ignorant of the heart-mind that holds it. I think it is possible for smaller intentional communities and societies within a larger American society to undertake the Discovery Life Journey and to achieve a degree of sanity and healing if they are sharply aware of the need to create wellness within a sick society. But I think it unlikely that the larger American Nation will heal in this way until, and unless its worldview, key institutions and entire way of life undergo fundamental change.

So, What is Recovery in the deeper sense below the tip of the iceberg? Here is a summary of this discussion.

The Deeper Meaning, Purpose and Definition of Recovery

Recovery is:

1. Self-confrontation
2. Self knowledge
3. Self-discovery
4. Self-awareness
5. Self-inquiry
6. Self-acceptance
7. Self-love (not narcissism)
8. Ability to look at yourself
9. The questions: Who Am I, Why am I here, Where Am I going?
10. Birth of compassion
11. Birth of love
12. Four directions understanding: Physical, Emotional, Mental, Spiritual
13. Knowing that recovery is not enough
14. Going beyond Western scientific thought patterns
15. Undertaking the Wellbriety journey, as community
16. Undertaking the Discovery Life Journey (Treatment, Recovery, Wellness, Discovery), as community
17. Understanding society has become an addict
18. Knowing that a sick society creates individual addicts
19. Embracing the Healing Forest Model, as community
20. Embracing whole societies in healing, as community

The recovery journey below the tip of the iceberg can lead the way to discovery of our full human potential. This certainly includes one's relationship with the Higher Power, Great Spirit, Creator, God as you understand, discovery of your true Self, and so many other names pointing to the land beyond Wellness—to the land of Discovery, a land open to me and to you.

*I wish to thank Don Coyhis, Founder and President of White Bison, Inc. (www.whitebison.org), for his tireless teachings and work on sobriety, recovery, healing and wellness in the Native American community. I have benefited greatly from these, as well as his friendship, over the years.