



Selected Papers of William L. White

www.williamwhitepapers.com

Collected papers, interviews, video presentations, photos, and archival documents on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in America.

Citation: White, W. (2015). A personal tribute: Ernie Kurtz, 1935-2015. Posted at www.williamwhitepapers.com

A Personal Tribute to Ernie Kurtz, 1935-2015

William L. White

Emeritus Senior Research Consultant
Chestnut Health Systems
bwhite@chestnut.org

Ernest Kurtz, who made landmark contributions to the study of addiction recovery, died January 19, 2015 of pancreatic cancer. Following publication of *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous* in 1979, Kurtz focused his studies on the growing varieties of recovery experience, the healing of shame and guilt, and the role of spirituality in addiction recovery.

Ernest Kurtz was born in Rochester, New York, September 9, 1935--only two months after the meeting of two desperate alcoholics in Akron, Ohio marked the birth of Alcoholics Anonymous. Kurtz attended St. Bernard's Seminary and College and was then ordained as a Catholic Priest in 1961. Following five years of parish work, he began his graduate studies at Harvard University where he completed an M.A. in philosophy and a Ph.D. in the history of American civilization. His Ph.D. dissertation on the history of A.A. marked a turning point in the scholarly study of A.A. and the larger arenas of addiction recovery and recovery mutual aid

societies, both legitimizing such studies and setting a benchmark by which future studies would be evaluated.

Kurtz subsequently taught at the university level (University of Georgia, Loyola University of Chicago), served as Director of Research at Guest House—an addiction treatment program for Catholic clergy, and served as a research associate at the University of Michigan Center for Self-help Research. He trained generations of modern addiction professionals through his perpetual presence at Rutgers Summer School of Alcohol and Drug Studies and other prominent training venues. He leaves a series of seminal publications and books that followed on the heels of *Not-God*, including *The Spirituality of Imperfection* (with Katherine Ketcham), *Shame and Guilt*, *The Collected Ernie Kurtz*, and the recently released *Experiencing Spirituality* (with Katherine Ketcham).

In the early 1990s, I contacted Ernie, as did legions of people before and after me, requesting help with a project. I

was writing a book on the history of addiction treatment and recovery in the United States and sought Ernie's review and comment on the chapters on A.A. I was quite intimidated by approaching him and did not know at that time that Ernie loved up-and-coming historians of both academic and amateur standing. He welcomed me as he did so many others. I had no inkling at the time that this initial consultation would morph into a sustained mentorship and friendship that would endure for more than twenty-five years and produce the most significant collaborations of my professional career.

Before critiquing my A.A. chapters, Ernie insisted that I had to master the basics of researching and writing history. He created a stack of "must read" history books, including the works of Barbara Tuchman, who he suggested I emulate. As that initial consultation expanded into a broader mentorship of all my historical research and writings, I began to make note of the guidelines within Ernie's repeated admonitions. He challenged me to:

- 1) Tell the story chronologically (do not confuse your reader but give them hints on what is coming),
- 2) Tell the story in context (let your reader know what else is going on around the event you are profiling),
- 3) Present and document the historical evidence—ALL of the evidence,
- 4) Separate statements of fact from conjecture and opinion,
- 5) Tell the story from multiple perspectives,
- 6) Localize and personalize the story, and
- 7) Stay connected to my readers—

keep them wanting to turn the page to find out what happens next.

Ernie also talked a good deal about the ethics of historical research and disclosed his own past dilemmas as a teaching tool, e.g., his response to a request by an A.A. General Service Board trustee not to include the account of Bill Wilson's LSD use in *Not-God*.

I recently published an in-depth profile of Ernie's life and work in [Alcoholism Treatment Quarterly](#), which I would commend to the readers. What I would offer here for readers is a personal glimpse into Ernie's mentorship and why so many aspiring and accomplished historians have held him in such high regard and why so many now mourn his passing.

In his mentorship of others, Ernie, like A.A. itself, expressed far more interest in alcoholics than the disorder of alcoholism. He found within the recovery experience of the alcoholic something of great universal value—the acceptance of human limitation—one's not-Godness, what he often characterized as the spirituality of imperfection. He felt such acceptance was a powerful and essential antidote to many of the ills plaguing individuals, families, communities, and countries. Causes and consequences of alcoholism captured far less of his attention than the paradoxes that existed within the experience of alcoholism recovery. He found something relevant to all that hidden gifts could be found within the curse of illness, that strength could rise from the acknowledgement of weakness, that wholeness could rise from brokenness, that authentic connection

and community could rise from the most severe forms of estrangement and isolation, that envy and resentment could give way to forgiveness and gratitude, that grandiosity and self-hatred could both give way to self-acceptance and humility, and that injury to others could give way to service to others. These poignant lessons he found within his observations of men and women recovering from alcoholism. In his mentorship of others, Ernie was far more interested in calling our attention to the possibilities that could flow from recovery from alcoholism—and what those possibilities revealed about the human condition and human potential--than in the pathologies that alcoholism continued to wreak in the absence of recovery.

Ernie knew stuff, and he knew people. What he did for me and so many others, including legions of M.A. and Ph.D. students, was connect us to information and sources that escaped the usual search methods. He was a walking encyclopedia of the subjects he held most dear and freely shared those resources. So many people's research had crossed Ernie's path that he served as a crossroads continually connecting people with shared interests. Ernie loved connecting people and he played a key role in forging a community of A.A. historians in collaborations with Brown University, A.A. Archivists, A.A. History Lovers, and other such groups. Many of the stories I was able to share through my writings were made possible by Ernie opening doors to people whose names would never have been revealed in a search of the published literature.

Mentoring under Ernie's guidance was not for the faint of heart. I ended

many a session with a piece of work bruised or battered, but always believing I could and would do better. Faint praise was not Ernie's style. Those seeking a warm and fuzzy father figure and blind adoration of their capabilities were quickly dismissed of any such expectations. He had very high expectations, and he didn't brook fools. His feedback was extremely pointed, lacking any attempt at sugar coating, but, when he saw potential, his challenges to elevate the quality of one's research, thinking, and writing were quite inspiring.

My mentorship by Ernie evolved into later collaborations on numerous formal studies, monographs, and articles. That experience also taught me a style of collaboration that I found effective and professionally fulfilling. When Ernie and I found a topic we wanted to mutually explore, we would divide and share the research; brainstorm the central ideas and our potential approach; determine which of us would take the lead writing responsibility; create, discuss, and repeatedly revise a detailed outline; prepare a first draft; and repeatedly revise it—sometimes with input from external reviewers before taking it through a formal peer review process. When working on papers using this process, I often learned as much from what we did not include in the papers as from what was included. The frontier issues, often lacking sufficient evidence to then include, were left on the editing floor to be later gathered for further investigation and discussion.

Ernie was a lover of stories and had a profound belief in the healing power of personal story reconstruction and storytelling. With so much to explore

within the history of A.A., he repeatedly came back to the personal narratives forged in A.A. and what happened when these stories were exchanged among A.A. members. In that same vein, he believed that history was a form of collective storytelling and that wisdom and healing could flow from this form of sensemaking. He believed that the study of history could make a difference in present and future decision-making. And Ernie loved the ideas that flowed from his study of history. Few things energized him more over the years I knew him than his intellectual exchanges with the likes of Robin Room, Ron Roizen, Bill Miller, Alan Marlatt, and innumerable others.

Ernie often said that if he were to do another book on A.A., it would be titled *Varieties of A.A. Experience*. He was particularly interested in the growth of secular spirituality within A.A., as represented by such groups as Atheists and Agnostics in A.A. (Quad A) and A.A. Agnostica, and he had a deep interest in the growth of secular and religious alternatives to A.A. He led the effort by Faces and Voices of Recovery to create a [Guide to Recovery Mutual Aid Resources](#) that catalogued secular, spiritual, and religious mutual aid groups in the United States. Ernie was one of the few people who commanded wide relationships and respect across these boundaries. When Ernie reflected on these diverse pathways of recovery, he saw more similarities than differences. He saw recovery across these pathways as an escape from self-entrapment—an achievement of *beyond* and *between* (connection with resources and relationships beyond the self)--manifested in six core experiences: release, gratitude, humility, tolerance,

forgiveness, and being-at-home (Kurtz and White, in press, *Religions*).

These past months, Ernie and I were acutely aware his days were limited. Two things struck me about our final months of working together. First, he was primarily concerned with the burdens his illness and death would impose on his wife (Ernie had left the priesthood and later married Linda Farris); he spoke rarely of any other concern about the process of dying. Second, he was concerned that the final fruits of his work be completed, not as a tribute to himself, but as a resource for future historians he hoped would carry his work forward. Toward that end, we spent the closing weeks of his life creating a [Kurtz section](#) of my website that contains his collected papers, interviews, and links to his books, and we completed the final revisions of our last co-authored paper four days before his death—a paper he thought of as a final testimony of his work and thought.

The fact that people representing diverse and sometimes warring constituencies today mourn the passing of Ernie Kurtz is itself a remarkable tribute to the man and his contributions. My heart weighs heavy in the face of Ernie's absence, but I draw great comfort from the memories of our work together and the many gifts he left us all.