

The River

Introduction

Going through the chemical addictions recovery process has been one of the best journeys of my life. I say “best,” because after a point my unhealed emotional wounds – often expressed as chemical substance misuse – blocked the self-realization trying to dawn in me. My own path to awakening and self-liberation was blocked by the easy use of opiates and alcohol before I went through recovery. Chemical substance abuse was a habit that obscured my abidance in *what-is* – the clarity and presence at the basis of Reality. Now, as a recovered person, I am gratefully free of the need to resort to alcohol and other drugs as mind changers. I have been clean and sober for over 20 years and my intention in surrender is to remain that way.

The River is a story of how I see the role of recovery, and what could come after recovery. It helped me understand that the way to happiness or inner-freedom for myself is by honoring and integrating my limitations, not necessarily by overcoming them. It is a story that expresses my gratitude and respect for the 12 Step process, which I utilized in my own way. It is also a story that hints at the deeper social causes for the addictions epidemic, which we seem to ignore as the scientific disease model dominates. These social causes are simply the unwell and crazy-making pattern of modern life. Our scientific, technological and progress-driven way of life, coupled with materialism, consumerism, and the oppressive economic system, results in a high addiction rate through *the addictive stress response*. It is a way of life, or Worldview, that has lost its sense of harmony, balance and real purpose. It has lost its core spirituality, which can and must be expressed in many diverse forms. It is an anti-contemplative way of life ripe for addiction.

I am grateful to all of us who have taken an intentional recovery journey and are now clean and sober. We are a community of brothers and sisters who have a lot to offer society in this new era of legalized drug use. We offer a body of experience and knowledge that could be of use to the wider society in its deepening confusion. When an individual has achieved some good, stable recovery (perhaps five years or more) it may be time to cross The River and explore lands on the other side.

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The River

Richard Simonelli

A river runs through the landscape of the Addictions recovery journey dividing it in two. Some may choose to cross over, while others may not. The crossing is optional—it's a free choice. Crossing that river may not be easy, but some of us are drawn beyond recovery to what lies on the other side. Whether we make the crossing or not, the healing journey is still a moment-to-moment excursion beginning with the first step.

Imagine a wild, beautiful landscape consisting of trees, hills, mountains, lakes, meadows, prairie, desert, and yes, badlands, too. Far to the west lie the badlands of dysfunctional behavior, unhappiness and chemical addictions. So many of us know that terrain. We spent time in the badlands, maybe even a long, long time. But with the help of a higher power that goes by so many different names, one day we look to the East and wonder about taking a journey. One day we climb one of the awesome rock piles in the badlands of unwellness and gaze out to the east. Perhaps someone told us that better land lies in that direction. Or maybe we are just tired of being sick and tired. We begin to take a journey.

The country we cross in the first part of the journey could be called **Abstinence and Sobriety**. Whether it's substance abuse, spousal abuse, self-harming conduct or any of the other "abuses" that mark our behavior in the badlands, we have to stop. We have to *cease and desist from the act thereof* before we can really take a look at the path we want to walk. True, there might be a few false starts because whatever ails us is often a relapsing condition. But even the false starts are in the right direction—the beginnings of a journey to the east. A journey to the sunrise. A journey to the awakening sun that shines deep in our very own hearts.

THE LAND OF RECOVERY

As we travel the many roads of abstinence and sobriety, the country slowly begins to change. The burning sun and punishing hail storms of the badlands are giving way to a much finer climate of grasslands, open prairie, lakes and stands of shade trees. The healing journey is opening up into the landscape of **Recovery**. In recovery, we begin to recuperate from many years of unhappy, unwell behavior. We are in convalescence from addictive behaviors. We are on the mend. Recovery is a time of great revival, renewal and revitalization. We are coming back to life. The landscape becomes fairer day-by-day, week-by-week, month-by-month and year-by-year. Now there are green hills all around and snowcapped mountains in the distance. There is dew on the grass at dawn and small, beautiful ponds in which colorful fishes swim. Recovery is a good time. We are finally getting our bearings after too many difficult years.

Continuing our trek to the east, we begin to find ourselves in country having small peaceful villages with well-kept houses and good people in the market places and on the streets. Climbing a small hill and gazing eastward we see a great river sparkling in the morning sunshine. There are small boats on the river ferrying people to the other shore. Peaceful settlements dot the near side of the great stream.

"What's the name of that great river?" I ask a fellow traveler along the way. She is a pleasant looking lass with laughing eyes. She regards me carefully before responding.

"Beyond," she says mysteriously. "The river Beyond." How interesting.

"And what about the country we are now in?" I continue.

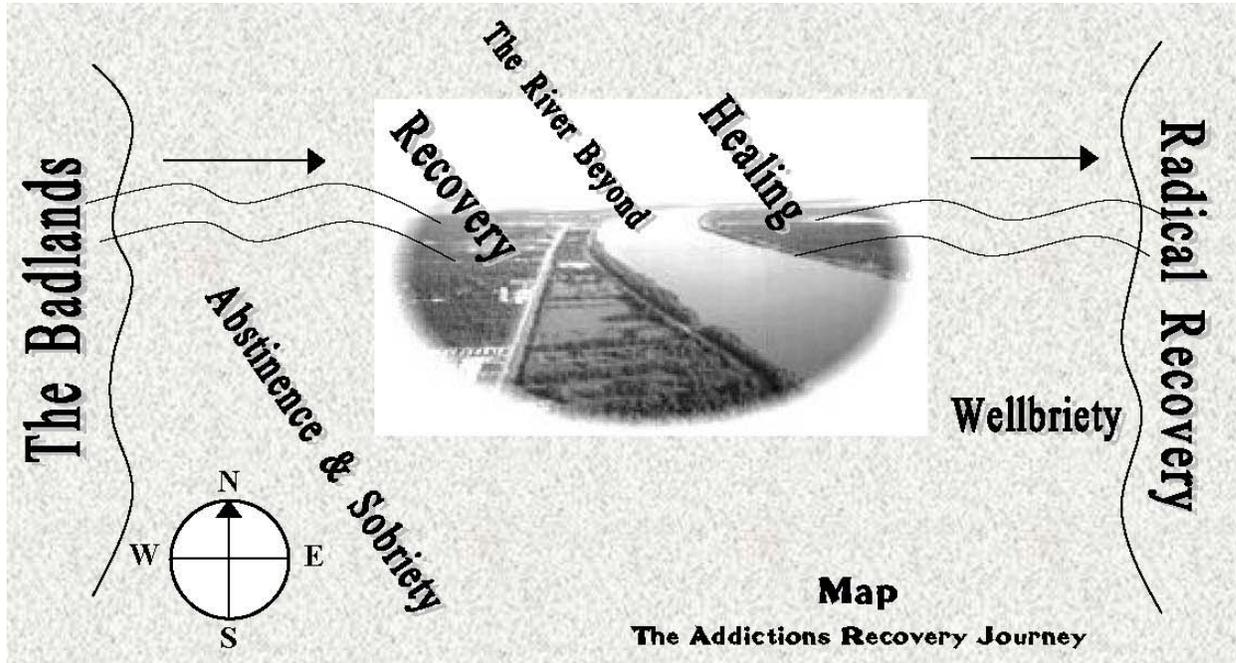
"Recovery," comes the reply. How puzzling.

“And the country on the far side of the river?” I wonder.

“**Healing**,” she says, a small smile lighting up her face.

know what is on the other side of the river?” she asked.

I surprised myself by not hesitating. “Yes,” I replied.



THE ELDERS' VISIT

I camped that night in a peaceful place on the banks of the river Beyond. Sitting at the campfire, I could see small boats ferrying people across the river. Their lights were like fireflies in the quiet night. What is this land called “Healing?” I wondered. Should I cross the river? Or should I settle in this fair country of Recovery?

It wasn't long before footsteps sounded on the path leading to the camp. Three figures came into the circle of firelight. The first was the young woman from earlier in the day—the lass who gave the river a name. My other visitors proved to be elders—one male and one female. Before long, all four of us were seated around the fire enjoying mugs of steaming tea. The young woman introduced the elders as people who had just ferried back across the river Beyond from the other side. They were making a short visit, she said. She paused once again, just as she had done with me earlier in the day, looking directly into my eyes. “Do you want to

The elders seem pleased at my quick response and unfurled a map. “When you cross the river,” said the elder woman, “the first country you'll reach is called ‘Healing.’ As a journeyer walks the path of healing, the roots of so many of the behaviors that you experienced in the badlands of addiction start to be purified and you begin to become well. Before that you must cross through abstinence, sobriety and recovery, just as you have done. In Healing you will learn the difference between healing and cure. Many of us can be healed from previous conditions but never completely cured. Part of the experience in the land of healing is to accept this distinction.”

“You can't really enter the country of Healing until you cross the river from this land of Recovery,” the older man chimed in. “Healing comes after Recovery,” he said, pointing to the map. I studied the map. The road led to the river of Beyond from the badlands to the west. I could see that the road through the country of Healing across the river continued on to the east.

“What comes after Healing?” I asked my new friends.

“Some call it **Wellbriety**,”¹ she said with a twinkle in her eye.

“Wellbriety?” I asked. “What an unusual word.”

“It means to be both sober and well,” she offered. “It means that you have recovered from the effects of all the self-harm and unself love you experienced in the badlands, and that you have fully entered the healing journey,” she said significantly, and paused, looking out on the river. “It means that you have found the heart and the strength to cross this river of Beyond—to go beyond the land of Recovery. You are *recovered*...no longer in recovery,” she concluded. “In the land of Wellbriety, the issues of healing, hope, unity and forgiveness are alive in each individual and in the community as a whole,” she went on. “So you can see that each land on this journey overlaps with the previous.”

I felt strangely quiet and excited at the same time. I knew that I had a choice to make. The land of Recovery was fair and comfortable. The people I met on this western shore were fine people and their villages were excellent. But something inside me still felt incomplete even though I had recovered from past harmful behaviors. I knew I was facing a choice, but it was not an ego choice. In fact, it felt *choiceless*. Both elders watched me closely. I could see love in their eyes. “And the land beyond Wellbriety?” I asked suddenly, not even knowing where my question came from.

“Beyond Wellbriety lies what we call **Radical Recovery**”² the elder woman said. “In radical or deep recovery, all identity or personal reference to the terrible times in the badlands has vanished, although it is not forgotten. In the country of Radical, deep Recovery we also meet people who have made the spiritual journey from other directions from time immemorial. We meet people who have taken a journey of self-discovery and self-realization, which goes by so many different names. We meet people who may not have lived in the

badlands as we did. Radical, deep recovery is a place of tremendous interfaith, intercultural, and multi Way interaction. It is a place that is radical because of its inclusion. We include ways and orientations we never could before. In the land of Radical Recovery, the changed self is naturally dedicated to helping others make the healing journey in ways through which one can be effective and for which one has capacity.” The grandmother was silent for a bit and then continued. “In radical, deep recovery, one may experience an unusual appreciation for the very chemical addiction that was finally a factor in his or her own awakening, as if from a deep sleep. Some of us couldn’t wake up in any other way. “Still, we must avoid the tendency to grandiosity, which many of us carry,” she said. “Many of us are driven to heroic measures because of the gratitude we feel. We want to help. But our deep helpfulness is only as good as our own healing. Radical recovery is a timeless place in which wholeness is found,” she went on. “Wholeness is not particularly heroic. My husband and I live in that land of wholeness which lies across this river, far away,” the elder woman said shyly. “But it’s also right here, too, she said mysteriously.” She paused and looked at me. “We invite you to consider crossing the river and making the journey.”

I looked closely at the map. “Is there still another land beyond Radical Recovery?” I asked quietly.

“No,” she said. “That is completion. But I want to emphasize that we bring the learning of each part of the journey to all those parts that come later. First we abstain and become sober. Then, in recovery, we continue with abstinence and sobriety. In healing, we bring along abstinence, sobriety and recovery. In wellbriety, our abstinence, sobriety, recovery and healing are very much alive in us. And in radical recovery, we are invigorated by all of the previous: abstinence, sobriety, recovery, healing and wellbriety. Ours is an inclusive journey but we don’t stop in any land. Radical recovery is a kind of play ground where we continue to deepen, but the quest of the previous journey is complete.”

As though signaled by a hidden call, my three visitors got up in unison to leave. I watched as they left the circle of firelight and disappeared down the path. I looked out onto the river and saw the twinkle of ferryboats in deep waters. I looked back at the lighted houses in the village on my side of the river—in Recovery. I was tired. The journey to the river Beyond had been difficult but good. How would I make the decision? Would I receive help in this choiceless choice? Would the higher power guide me beyond the ego mind? Tonight I was too tired to consider the matter any further. I doused the fire and looked up into the twinkling vault of the heavens. The old, rugged stars seemed to put my question into deeper perspective. Then I made my way into the little tent and crawled into the sleeping bag, feeling warm and good. It wasn't long before I fell fast asleep. Not long at all until I began to dream of the road that would take me east.

THE DREAM

I slept soundly for what must have been a long time, emerging into a lighter sleep of complete awareness. I realized that I was dreaming. I saw a country of rivers, high peaks and cloud-studded skies. Into that pleasant terrain, a light formed and took shape. When the light resolved itself, I realized that the elder man from the fire circle was seated before me. He smiled and opened a thermos of tea.

“Care for a cup?” he asked.

I felt surprise. How could I drink a cup of tea? I was fast asleep. But it was a time for surprises when I heard myself say, “Yes, thank you.” We sipped our tea and paid attention to the country in which we had met. Beneath us was a large, fine hand-woven carpet placed upon a meadow of green grass. We each sat on comfortable folding chairs with small ornate side tables. A decorated sunshade extended the length and breadth of our carpet-floor. I could hear the song of meadowlarks and crows. A kingfisher's call punctuated the soundscape from over by a small stream. I understood in some wordless way that I was still asleep.

“We realize you have a choice to make when you wake,” my friend said suddenly. “I wanted to visit with you one last time before my wife and I return to the land of deep recovery. If you choose to cross the river Beyond,” he said, “You may experience some resistance from the people in this land of Recovery where you now camp. Some who live here have chosen not to continue to the east, which is of course, quite all right. But a few will try to block your own intention to cross the river,” he said. “We wanted you to be aware of that possibility. If you encounter obstruction, it will be subtle and will play on your own interior doubt,” he continued. “So that is one reason I have chosen to come to you in a dream.”

“Why would they do that?” I asked.

“For some, the journey from the badlands to where you now stand has been their entire dream. Many have come from another time when no one crossed the river. But the world now finds itself in a very unique, special time in its own cycle of becoming. It is only in the past few years that those of us who have made the journey out of the badlands of chemical addictions have the option to cross the river. When this special time comes to completion, all transportation across the river will once again cease. Of course,” he said, “a person can swim, as a few have always done from the beginning of time.”

“Why is this time so unusual?” I asked?

“It is a time when the great momentum of human life on earth finds itself at a crossroads. The dominating way of life has crossed over into the territory of *hubris* (excessive pride and arrogance), which is the source of the great epidemic of chemical addictions and other increasing health afflictions that abound. These addictions and chronic health situations are a message given by the great impenetrable mystery that human life is leaving the path of survivability. That's the purpose of the addictions epidemic,” he said, “to give us a visible sign or warning of that. But the people of this dominating societal path are not systems thinkers. They are unable to see the larger picture and to realize that everything carries a deep message. It's not enough to simply solve the

problem of chemical addictions with drug wars and medically modeled disease theories.” He paused and then continued.

“Addictions are not an individual disease in the way some of the dominating society now thinks. The idea of a physical disease helped us all stop thinking of chemically addicted people as depraved or as morally inferior people, which we are not. But the disease model diverts attention from a society’s excessive materialistic stance to life as a source of addictions when the numbers rise to what we have today. There has never been scientific evidence pointing factually to this “disease.” Mass addictions are a natural human response to the spiritual stress of a society caught in a progress trap. Most of us don’t think of it in this way because we share the mindset of the society that has created a lifeway leading to addictive stress response. Objective research is difficult for this reason, although not impossible, and some are now beginning to see it in this way. The war model is equally unproductive because the mindset of war and aggression is yet another cause of large-scale addiction in the world in the first place. You can’t fight fire with fire and hope to heal addictions because the aggression of war creates the seeds for the next individual or social problem. Freeing ourselves from drugs and alcohol is a sacred individual and community struggle, not a war. War never heals. *Re-languaging* our outlook on addictions will help us cross the river and grow as human beings.”

“Well, what *does* cause so many people to drink and drug?” I asked. “Surely not everyone is addicted,” I said, irritated.

“Mainstream society oppresses people into addiction with its mass consciousness, just as it did its own indigenous people,” he said. But it does not see that its own self-oppression is the source of the addictions pandemic we all face today. There are different sensitivity factors among people. Some respond to impossible stress with chemical addictions, some do not. When our greatest healing advocates finally begin to speak more honestly about self-oppression in a manner that can be heard by those who hold the power, as well as those in

recovery, then many more will begin to cross the river. Those who cross the river will step out of the small thinking that has led to the addictions epidemic and enter the road of possibility for the human being. Sometimes that road is called *hope*. It is hope not as wishful thinking, but as clarity and non-denial of the contemporary way of life as a cause that has led to the rise of such great human habitation in the badlands in the first place,” he said. “For some of us, hope is our higher power,” he went on. “Authentic hope is modest, not grandiose. But hope as a kind of blind faith can be very hurtful,” he said thoughtfully. The old man paused as though waiting for me to speak.

DON’T GET CAUGHT IN RECOVERY

I realized I was absorbing all he said effortlessly while still asleep. But I had a question, which I thought rather than voiced. “What does this have to do with my decision to cross the river Beyond, or not,” I wondered. He understood me.

“Those who leave the badlands of this hubristic way of life we all find ourselves in will help put an end to this unhappy time in human history,” he said. But if there aren’t enough crossing the river beyond Recovery, the improvement will not last. A certain proportion of all journeyers must journey to Healing, Wellbriety and on into Radical, deep recovery or the mindset that creates such human habitation in the badlands will simply return. The addictions recovery models of past years are not enough to take human society, as a whole, away from the danger of disintegration. The experience of individual self-awakening, brought by crossing the river and continuing on the journey, benefits the whole of humanity—even those who do not make the crossing. We think you have the heart to cross the river and to make the journey,” he stated so simply.

A pause appeared in our wordless conversation. When I next heard my friend’s communication it took place in a more common or ordinary voice than he’d been using up ‘till then.

“Son he said. “I come from the same place you do. I spent a lot of time in the badlands. Those meetings we both went to really helped me get my bearings and to get on the road,” he confided. “I speak the same kind of rough and tumble language that all of us from those times do. So let me say something really direct to you—as one who has also suffered. There are other lands across the river. If you can help it son, move on. Don’t get caught in recovery.” He then added an afterthought. “Part of our commitment is to help others in any way we can. But we also have to be careful not to get caught in their recovery. Use your addictions background as a teacher but put it behind you, even as you work for the people and care for yourself. One of the most important things you can do is to acknowledge the dominant way of life as a perpetrator of the addictions epidemic. That’s the tiny key that can open up the lock of our sustainable future together.

“Son,” he concluded, “As you go along in your own wellness journey, begin thinking in terms of the addictive stress response as a source of mass addictions rather than the disease idea, for which no measurable disease has yet been found. This promises to be a fruitful direction of inquiry to heal our addictions problems together.”

I experienced a great whooshing sound and perceived a beautiful clear light. Bird song from the dream vanished. The old man and the entire scene were gone. I heard ordinary bird song and woke up. I noticed a parchment scroll at the foot of my bedroll and began to look it over.

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1– A term created by Don L. Coyhis and adopted by the Wellbriety Movement among Native Americans. The interpretation of “Wellbriety” in this paper is my own. (Author).

2–First encountered in **Recovery Rising: Radical Recovery in America, William L. White, 2004**
The interpretation of “Radical Recovery” in this paper is my own. (Author).

Step Thirteen and the Thirteenth Tradition

Step 13

Recovered. Recovery is a process through which many meaningful events take place. One of the most meaningful events is the sudden realization that we have recovered from our own pattern of chemical substance misuse. A recovered person is at the very beginning of a journey to wholeness through self-development, surrender, and giving back.

Tradition 13

The journey to becoming a whole person begins with Step 13. The 12 Steps are completely alive within oneself in Step 13. A recovered person has internalized the 12 Steps and lives through them as part of his or her day-to-day life. You might even say they work him or her rather than he or she works them. A recovered person welcomes other Traditions. He learns from them in order to develop as a human being. He or she does not get caught in fear, dogmatism, and rigidity. She does not get caught in recovery. He gives back to others who still suffer, in ways for which he has capacity. His own journey to becoming a whole person is intimately tied to his own giving back. In Step 13, we give back to others in a commitment to be open to our brothers and sisters of any persuasion. *Some give back simply by remaining in alignment with the higher power.* But first and foremost, we cannot be of real service to those who still suffer unless we give back to ourselves through self-knowledge, moment-to-moment surrender to the higher power *however we understand*, and non-narcissistic self-love (caring for oneself). In Step 13 we understand that chemical addictions are often a relapsing condition. We go forward as recovered people knowing full well that we will always possess a vulnerability or sensitivity to addictions. We make our choices wisely in life. The journey to becoming a sobriety or wellness elder begins with this rendering of Step 13.

AFTERWORD — 2014

Well, he did cross the river.

We left our protagonist camped by the river *Beyond* deciding whether to cross from the country of Recovery, over into what lies beyond recovery – ultimately into radical recovery and the rest of his life. That was almost ten years ago. But even though the story ends before he crosses the river, he *did* cross the river and is now living the rest of his life with a new appreciation for his own addictions recovery. Recovery helped him discover his own contemplative life, which might not have been possible without it. But he also feels sorrow that the recovery movement seems to lack a broader vision and a deeper understanding of what recovery could mean for individuals, as well as for all of us together. He is sorry that it is understood as a monumental and effective problem-solving epic without seeing its more holistic or existential meaning for humankind as a whole. He is sorry that the movement can't take that step.

Somewhere across the river *Beyond* he was fortunate to ally himself with the indigenous people of North America – Native Americans – as a helper in Native addictions recovery. He discovered that in one sense chemical addictions are just chemical addictions. Individuals in each culture group have to do the hard work to recover in more or less the same ways. But that's only partially true. He also discovered that the Native community took an in-depth look at the historical Native Boarding School Era. They concluded that what happened from 1879 to about 1960 in North America is one cause of the high rates of addiction in their communities. From that knowledge, programs for healing intergenerational trauma were put into place. Native addictions recovery is receiving great benefit by addressing a perceived cause – the intergenerational trauma of the boarding school era. In a spirit of deeper inquiry, he wondered why mainstream recovery could not, and would not look at deeper causes of addictions on the social and

societal level in search of systemic causative factors. He is sorry that the movement can't take that step.

From his vantage point on the other side of the river, our protagonist began to understand that his own recovery process gifted him with a kind of enhanced knowledge through intense self-inquiry and self-awareness. That's what it took for him to get clean and sober; but his recovery was not just a problem solving process to get over addictions and return back to "normal." His own hard recovery work helped him into *leaving normal*. In some sense, "normal" helped create his addiction. He realized that the Worldview orientation of his own society is one cause of the addictions epidemic in the first place. He wondered why the mainstream recovery movement could not, and would not inquire into possibilities like that. He is sorry that the movement can't take that step. He invites you to consider these thoughts and begin to embrace a new way of seeing beyond recovery without diminishing the hard work and focus of the addictions healing process. Opening our thinking in this way will reveal many personal and societal pathways after recovery, contributing to the solution of today's intractable problems in some surprising ways.

Thinking about, and writing *The River* is almost ten years old in 2014. I believe that more than ever some of its notions, concepts and ideas have something to offer addictions recovery in North America. Our recovery is not only a powerful problem-solving tool to get over our addictions. It is a way of coming closer to the heart of what it means to be a human being. My take is that this not being discussed in the recovery movement. It's being dismissed as speculation or "philosophy" not relevant to our addictions problems. *Au Contraire!* I believe that it is time for some of mainstream recovery to at least consider taking that step, embracing a wider vision, and moving from its childhood into its own human maturity.

– Richard Simonelli
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