



# Selected Papers of William L. White

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

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## Recovery Journalism: An interview with William White

### William L. White

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**Mark Sanders:** Bill, thank you for agreeing to this interview. Some of the students I teach in the Addiction Studies Program at Governor's State University are quite interested in writing as a professional development activity and have found the papers on your web site quite interesting. I have shared with them some of my own writing experiences but I thought interviewing you might provide additional guidance for them and for others interested in writing within the addictions field.

**Bill White:** I'm delighted to do it.

**Mark Sanders:** You have been extremely prolific over the past 25 years having authored more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles. What secrets could you offer aspiring writers in the field?

**Bill White:** Perhaps the first secret is simply giving free reign to your curiosity. The best writing is as much about answering questions for ourselves as it is conveying information to others. The demands for daily action are so great in our field that few of us have the luxury to regularly reflect on the big and little questions that surround this work.

The writer seeks answers to these questions and probes emerging issues. I have always had an insatiable curiosity about addiction and addiction recovery. What I don't know continues to be the source of most of my writing pursuits. Writing is a way to synthesize answers for myself and to offer potential answers for others to consider.

**Mark Sanders:** What kind of discipline is required to generate the level of writing productivity you have achieved?

**Bill White:** I write almost every day and recommend that to others, but let me broaden the definition of writing. Aspiring writers can get frozen as they stare at a blank computer screen. That moment is not when writing begins. We are writing when we observe and listen to the field. We are writing when we listen to our own hearts to identify those subjects that seem to be personally calling us. We are writing when we are conducting literature searches on a topic and when we are reading. We are writing when we are posing questions to ourselves and others? We are writing when we are sketching out random thoughts and ideas, outlining and envisioning central themes we

want to convey in a piece of writing. By the time we get to the computer screen to compose, a great deal of writing has already occurred. These earlier steps are an essential incubation or gestation period. Only when such steps are completed will the words flow with any depth to them.

The other key for me is simultaneously sustaining multiple writing projects at all stages of development. It is not unusual for me to have 15-20 projects going at one time, some in the stages of final editing and others nothing but a title on a file folder. I keep a chart of all these projects and “work the chart” by deciding each day which can capture my enthusiasm or which must be taken on now because of this or that submission deadline. Others looking at this chart might well think this is ADHD gone wild and recommend medication, but that system has worked very well for me over several decades of writing.

Another discipline required is the ability to break large projects into their component parts. Organizing and outlining are so critical to good writing and efficient writing. Without them, I would get overwhelmed and paralyzed by the sheer enormity of what I am attempting to do. I focus on the whole when I am conceptualizing and outlining a piece of writing and then I try to not think about the whole again until I have completed all the parts, each of which I think of as a piece unto itself with its own beginning, middle and end.

Finally, good writers build a body of completed work that creates its own momentum for further writing. The first ones are always the hardest—perhaps because we are so self-conscious about the process of writing. You have to write your way through that stage and leave it behind you.

**Mark Sanders:** I have many students who feel that they have something that they can convey in writing that can impact the addictions field but lack confidence in their ability to write and lack an awareness of how to improve as writers. What recommendations do you have for them?

**Bill White:** I think the first task of the writer is to live—to build a foundation of experience

that can be drawn on to create writing of depth. While that body of experience is building, we can work on the craft of writing. I would recommend that your students seek as broad an experience base as possible and that they develop two simple writing habits—jotting random notes on ideas and experiences that can be filed for future use and regular journaling. I recently incorporated some observations in a paper from a journal I kept while working at a psychiatric facility in 1967. There is a freshness and clarity to such immediate observations that is hard to recapture through the vehicle of memory.

**Mark Sanders:** The founder of Facebook was only in his early twenties when he founded the company. Do you think the tech savvy of the young generation will be an asset in increasing readership of addictions and recovery writings?

**Bill White:** I do. I often reflect on how the quality and volume of my work would have both been enhanced if I had the mastery of technology that many twenty-somethings take for granted. Technology is going to transform the process of writing, the forms of such writing and broaden the range of dissemination channels that will be available in the future. I envy your students those possibilities. My understanding of it all is pretty primitive and I often feel I need to hire a 12 year old to help me navigate my way through what your students do so fluidly.

**Mark Sanders:** In your work as a trainer, you have spoken a great deal about the importance of mentorship. Do you believe that mentorship is also important in recovery journalism, and if so, what advice do you have for students who would like to pursue writing as a career path?

**Bill White:** I do think mentoring is important to good writing, and I think there are three different aspects to it. First, you must develop content expertise (you have to have something of importance to say). Second, you have to master the writing craft (you have to know how to communicate). And third, you have to learn the dissemination

process (you have to know how to get your writing to the world). I would recommend that your students find people and resources that can enhance their skills in these three areas.

To achieve the first of these goals requires extensive reading, listening, observing and reflecting. All are precursors to writing of great depth and importance. It's important to find people who have such depth of knowledge and learn from them without losing yourself—without becoming an uncritical disciple.

I think the most important aspect of learning to write is reading—finding, collecting and studying the best writers. There are also books on writing and writing workshops that can help with this, but in the end nothing takes the place of writing itself. If you want to be a writer, you must write and write and write—and edit and edit and edit. The latter is what improves the quality of writing over time. The book *The Call to Write*, which is available for free download on my website, offers additional suggestions.

There are also aids to getting published that will be of help to some of your students. For those interested in scholarly writing, the book *Publishing Addiction Science* is an invaluable resource. It is also available free online.

**Mark Sanders:** Much has been written about the ink of the scholar. Did you believe that you would have an impact on the nature of addiction treatment and recovery when you first started writing on this subject? What, if anything, has surprised you about this?

**Bill White:** It's very hard to tell whether your writing is really making a difference or not. Even when it is having such an influence, it is often a long time before you will know it. Few of us have the experience of a piece of writing that quickly changes the world. I'll give you an example. Mike Boyle and I began writing about recovery management in the late 1990s—advocating a fundamental redesign of addiction treatment that would move beyond brief, self-contained episodes of care toward a framework of long-term recovery support comparable to the best approaches to the management of chronic

disease. We wrote and wrote, and it felt for the longest time that we were writing for only our own benefit. It was like yelling in an empty room and hearing nothing but our own echoes. But in a few years, everyone seemed to be talking about recovery management and recovery-oriented systems of care. It was then that we encountered people who told us how they completely changed their treatment programs after reading our early papers. We had no idea that was going on until much later.

So the question for your students is, "How do you sustain the research and writing when it appears that no one is noticing your work?" Writing is such a solitary activity that sustaining it requires sources of energy that come from inside and that also come from having a small network of support. We need people in our lives who regularly ask us the question, "How's the writing coming?" And we need reviewers who affirm the importance of what we are writing. Most writers need a writing circle of support to keep them going. I have an inner circle of such support to whom I owe more gratitude than I can express.

**Mark Sanders:** What writers have influenced you the most in your writing?

**Bill White:** For the type of translational writing I do—exploring implications of science to clinical practice—people like Bill Miller and Keith Humphreys have been quite influential. They are among the smartest people I know and yet their writing is striking for its lack of pretentiousness or self-consciousness. They both write very clearly and as a reader you feel that they really wanted to connect and communicate with you and not just impress you with how smart they are. Keith's book, *Circles of Recovery*, and the book Bill did with Janet C'deBaca on *Quantum Change*, are examples of such connection and clarity of communication.

I also admire writers whose ideas are so fresh and crisp that they remain with you forever. Dr. Thomasina Borkman's article on experiential knowledge and Aurora Levins Morales article on the historian as curandero (healer), both of which are posted on my web

site, are pieces of writing that exerted a profound influence on my work.

I also admire and emulate writers who exert influence by the tenacity of their writing. People like Jay Lewis, Michael Q. Ford, and David Powell each found ways to use regular columns to create a body of influential writing. That inspired much of my recovery advocacy writing. I have learned through this work that influence can come from a body of cumulative work as well as from a single well-timed piece of writing.

Dr. Ernie Kurtz, one of the most important professional mentors in my life, has also influenced me through his own writing and by coaching me on the art of storytelling and by teaching me how to write good history.

**Mark Sanders:** How important is diversity in writing as it pertains to addictions treatment and recovery?

**Bill White:** It is important to me to remain very cognizant of the diversity of my readers. I've designed my writing desk to remind me of these diverse audiences. I'm surrounded with artifacts from diverse cultures and countries and objects that remind me I have readers who will filter my words through the lens of gender, age, sexual orientation, and numerous other defining characteristics. After I create a first draft, I try to read it through the experience of each of my constituents, who I personify, e.g., "What would Mark Sanders think of this piece?" and, "How would Mark Sanders have written this piece differently?" My answers to those kinds of questions let me look at every piece of writing from multiple perspectives and add nuances and layers that would not otherwise be there.

**Mark Sanders:** Many students say to me that they would like to be speakers. Others say they would like to be writers. What is the relationship between these two career paths? Which do you think reaches the most people?

**Bill White:** They are often interconnected. There are writers who become trainers—I'm thinking of our mutual friend Pam Woll as

such an example. Such persons often choose training as a way to market the ideas in their writing. I'm probably the opposite—a speaker who morphed into a writer. The culture of the addictions field is a distinctly oral culture. Our history, traditions, etiquette, core ideas and practices were, until quite recently, conveyed by oral tradition through a master-apprentice system of preparation. The problem with relying solely on this oral tradition is the instability of the field. If I could speak directly to every organization and every person working in the field today, within a few short years any potential influence would have dissipated due to the high turnover of organizations and of the addiction treatment workforce. It was when I kept seeing new faces every time I returned to speak in a state that I sought a form of more lasting influence. That was when I seriously committed myself to writing. My goal was to create written works and a platform for achieving them that would extend my reach geographically and temporally—beyond the United States and beyond my own lifetime. Historically, the written word always outlasts the spoken word, but who knows, with all of our new technologies even that is changing.

**Mark Sanders:** Your writing over the past decade has increasingly focused on recovery and the audiences have broadened. How would you characterize this stage of your writing career?

**Bill White:** I spent much of the early stages of my writing career producing books, research reports and articles published in the field's scientific journals, but I began a series of articles for *Counselor* in the 1990s that changed that focus. That regular column, which has continued through all of these years, gave me the opportunity to translate scientific and historical research for frontline addiction professionals. The appreciative response to that series also inspired me to branch out and begin writing for various recovery advocacy newsletters and web sites. Over the past decade, my writing has evolved toward an almost exclusive focus on recovery. In fact, I have come to think of this

focus and style of writing as recovery journalism.

**Mark Sanders:** Could you define what you mean by recovery journalism?

**Bill White:** Recovery journalism is using writing as a tool to reach our most important constituents: people seeking or in recovery, their family members and allies, and the people on the frontlines of helping them. It is a way of conveying experience, strength and hope to all of these constituents. It is also a way to carry a message of hope and the reality of long-term addiction recovery to the larger culture. The focus of this writing is not on the problem or methods of personal or cultural intervention but on the solutions that recovery offers individuals, families and communities.

It is natural in one's early career in the addiction field to get captivated by the diverse menu of psychoactive drugs and their psychopharmacology and to get enamored with learning about all manner of clinical pathologies. But the ultimate question in terms of our contribution lies in what we know about the solutions to the problem of addiction. I hope your students will get solution-focused far earlier in their careers than I did. That is all I am interested in at this stage of my life, and it is reflected in this style of recovery journalism I am pursuing.

This style of this writing also emphasizes conveying the best experiential, scientific and clinical knowledge in clear, jargon-free language. I think of the whole process as a way of liberating useable knowledge about addiction and recovery.

**Mark Sanders:** Liberating knowledge?

**Bill White:** As the addictions field became professionalized, our core knowledge became wrapped in language that became less and less accessible to the public and, more specifically, less accessible to people in need of recovery. The best addiction and recovery science is locked up in books you won't find in corner bookstores and in journals that real people can't access, afford or understand. All professions protect their

vested interests through the control information. I see part of my role as liberating this knowledge through translational writing and getting this writing into accessible venues. This month, I will have articles published in peer reviewed scientific journals that will be distributed to several hundred subscribers. Also this month I will have articles published in trade journals that will reach tens of thousands and will also post articles that have the potential of reaching millions of readers. While I have been pushing a recovery research agenda within the scientific community, my recovery journalism is more reflected in the latter types of publication venues.

**Mark Sanders:** Was what you are describing part of the motivation for creating a web site for your collected papers?

**Bill White:** Yes, that was the major motivation. And this was not just to make my own papers available but to create a repository where other key papers could be archived on the Internet. I have also used the vehicle of published interviews as a way to transmit knowledge from people in recovery, addiction scientists, addiction treatment leaders and recovery advocates to frontline service providers and to the public at large. The Internet is a magnificent instrument for this liberation of knowledge.

In my early writing career, all my energy was focused on getting published in what I judged to be the best scientific journals in the addictions field. I have less and less interest in that today, and am more interested in my writing reaching people who live outside the doors of this closed club. My peer-reviewed journal writing generates deliverables within government contracts and adds more bricks to the foundation of my professional credibility, but rarely if ever does it change the world in any measurable way. In contrast, I do think my recovery journalism, particularly the translational monographs and articles and recovery advocacy writings, have had some influence on the worlds of addiction treatment and recovery. The website I created was an attempt to extend and sustain influence.

**Mark Sanders:** What is the biggest surprise you have had since launching your web site?

**Bill White:** I think the biggest surprise is what the Internet does in terms of extending the sphere of your possible influence. I get a daily report via Google Analytics on how many people visit my web site, which papers they are viewing and downloading, and the frequency of visits from particular countries and cities. It is quite amazing actually. I hoped that many people in the United States would access my papers, but I was totally unprepared for number of visitors from so many other countries. The Internet has a way of making us all neighbors and allowing conversations that would have been unthinkable only a few years ago. For example, I am currently working with Mr. Hossein Dezhakam, leader of a recovery community (Congress60) in Iran, on several projects, and several of my papers have been translated into Farsi. This week I have corresponded with people from a dozen countries. Internet communication is transcending professional, political, religious and cultural barriers in ways we are only just beginning to fathom. To see each day which of my writings is being viewed and downloaded from what countries is an experience I never anticipated.

**Mark Sanders:** Are we witnessing the beginning globalization of addiction treatment and recovery?

**Bill White:** That may very well be the case. I have written extensively about the new recovery advocacy movement in the United States, but that movement is rapidly becoming a movement of worldwide dimensions. The Internet is creating the connecting tissue between recovery advocates all over the world and allowing a synergy of ideas and approaches that will accelerate each of the respective national movements.

**Mark Sanders:** What future plans do you have for your web site?

**Bill White:** This will be the year that I add video to my site and a photo gallery. Much

of my advocacy work has been through the vehicle of words so my site is filled primarily with documents. I will be exploring ways to convey these same ideas and stories visually. At the moment, the site is dense; the visual images should lighten the site and make it a friendlier place for visual learners to visit.

I have also been working on a professional memoir of sorts that is less about me and more about using personal vignettes from the past four decades as a stimulus for self-reflection on the part of the reader. I hope to make progress on editing that in the next two years. We are a field lacking professional memoirs. I hope your students will consider journaling and blogging as worthwhile activities that could evolve into writing professional memoirs in the years to come.

**Mark Sanders:** What contributions to the field do you still want to make as a writer?

**Bill White:** I would like to get more of the history of modern addiction treatment and recovery captured in writing and in photographic images before my writing career comes to an end. And I want to get that history deposited on my website so that it is accessible to all. I have tried to contribute to the field in many ways, but I think in the end my ultimate gift to the field will be its own history. I think it is important for your students to each think about the legacy they would like to leave. Legacy thinking affirms that one can make history in small and big ways rather than just existing within it.

**Mark Sanders:** Thanks Bill. I think my students will find this interview very helpful in thinking about their own future contributions to the field.

**About the Authors:** Mark Sanders is a member of the faculty of the Addictions Studies Program at Governors State University. William White is a Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems.