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Addiction in the African American Community: The Recovery Legacies of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X

William L. White. Mark Sanders and Tanya Sanders

Abstinence-based cultural and religious revitalization movements constitute vibrant responses to the rise of alcohol and other drug problems in communities of color. Such movements often inspire culturally nuanced approaches to addiction treatment and provide culturally legitimate pathways of long-term recovery. The spark that ignites such movements is often a charismatic, recovering individual who uses his or her own personal transformation as a springboard for broad social change. This article explores what the lives of two remarkable human beings—Frederick Douglass and El Hajj Malik el Shabazz (Malcolm X)—can teach us about addiction recovery within African American communities.

A Tale of Two Men

Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) escaped slavery to become an internationally recognized orator, author (*Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*), newspaper editor, and skilled social reformer and statesman. He was the dominant force in the political drive to emancipate American slaves and was also a prominent advocate within the temperance and women's rights

movements. The character of the man is illustrated in his response to a group of armed men who entered his newspaper office and threatened to destroy his presses. Douglass told his would-be attackers that they could assault him but that other voices would take his place. He boldly offered to help the men and struck one of his own printing presses saying, "You can smash machines, but you can't smash ideas." Stunned by his actions and words, the men left. Frederick Douglass' life offers vivid testimony of how a single individual's unwavering commitment and personal charisma can transform the world.

The life of Malcolm Little (1925 -1965) could be told in serial identities: 1) one of eleven poor children raised on dandelion greens and cornmeal mush; 2) the young boy castigated as "Milky" and "Snowflake" for his light skin; 3) a child bereaved by his father's death and his mother's institutionalization for mental illness; 4) a young man's transition from shining shoes to the street hustling, dope dealing "Detroit Red"; 5) the prisoner known as "Satan" for his animosity toward religion; 6) the minister Malcolm X whose fiery words challenged both blacks and whites; and 7) El Hajj Malik el Shabazz, assassinated in 1965 following

his break with the Nation of Islam and his founding of the Organization of Afro-American Unity. Ossie Davis conveyed something of what Malcolm X meant to the African American community when he eulogized him: “Malcolm was our manhood, our living, black manhood....Our own black shining prince!”

Addiction and Recovery Histories

Most readers of *Counselor* know something of the lives of these two men but may be unaware of the addiction and recovery stories that are part of the larger lives of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X. Both men were discrete about their addiction histories and the means of their recoveries, but this part of their lives is revealed in their autobiographies, published speeches and archived correspondence.

Douglass spoke most candidly about his early drinking excesses in speeches he gave in Scotland in 1846.

I used to love drink—That’s a fact. I found in me all those characteristics leading to drunkenness. (February 18, 1846 Speech in Glasgow, Scotland)

I have had some experience with intemperance... I knew once what it was like to drink with all the ardour of an old soaker [drunkard].... Some of the slaves were not able to drink their share [portions of alcohol provided by the slave master], but I was able to drink my own and theirs too. I took it because it made me feel I was a great man. (March 40, 1846 Speech in Paisley, Scotland)

Douglass told his Glasgow audience “...it would be an interesting experience if I should tell you how I was cured of intemperance, but I will not go into that matter now.” He never revealed those details in his writings or speeches. We do know that he signed a temperance pledge in 1845 in the presence of Father Theobald Mathew (leader of the Irish temperance movement),

kept that pledge of sobriety for the remainder of his life, and went on to play a significant role in the “colored temperance movement” (Cheagle, 1969).

A century later, the man who would later be known as Malcolm X supported his drug habit as a drug dealer, pimp and burglar, describing himself as “always high” on marijuana, cocaine, opium and amphetamines (Malcolm X, 1964, pp. 129, 131). In 1946, Malcolm Little, A.K.A. “Detroit Red,” was indistinguishable from other Black addicted men entering prison for drug-related crimes. Through his religious conversion in prison, he found a pathway to recovery and a new identity (Malcolm X). That new identity propelled him onto the world stage where his eloquence served as a voice for the voiceless. His defiant recovery from addiction and his unheralded outreach efforts (what he called “fishing for the dead”) brought many addicted African Americans their sobriety and dignity. Those achievements were obscured in the larger controversies that surrounded his life.

Addiction and Recovery through an Africentric Lens

Slave Masters carefully controlled the slaves’ access to alcohol. Slaves were prohibited from drinking under normal circumstances but encouraged to drink heavily on Saturday nights and holidays. Douglass viewed such controlled promotion of drunkenness (via such rituals as drinking contests) as a way to keep the slave in “a state of perpetual stupidity” and “disgust the slave with his freedom” (February 18, 1846 Glasgow Speech).

These holidays serve as conductors, or safety valves, to carry off the rebellious spirit of enslaved humanity . . . this mode of treatment [promoting episodic drunkenness] is a part of the whole system of fraud and inhumanity of slavery. (Douglass, 1855, p. 256)

Douglass further noted how the slave master’s promotion of drunkenness reduced the risk of slave rebellions.

When a slave was drunk, the slave holder had no fear that he would plan an insurrection; no fear that he would escape to the north. It was the sober, thinking slave who was dangerous, and needed the vigilance of his master to keep him a slave (Douglass, 1855, p. 256).

Douglass challenged African Americans (slave and free) to abstain from drinking as an act of personal emancipation and as a preparatory step for full citizenship. Through his encouragement and example, nineteenth century African Americans generated their own temperance and mutual aid societies that framed a commitment to sobriety as a stairway to freedom. The pledge recommended in the Temperance Tract for Freedman read:

Being mercifully redeemed from human slavery, we do pledge ourselves never to be brought into slavery of the bottle, therefore we will not drink the drunkard's drink: whiskey, gin, beer, nor rum, nor anything that makes drunk come (Cheagle, 1969, p. 29).

A century later, Malcolm X portrayed alcoholism and addiction as part of the continued machinery of African American oppression. He noted how intoxication had become part of the very fabric of Harlem and other Black communities.

...almost everyone in Harlem needed some kind of hustle to survive, and needed to stay high in some way to forget what they had to do to survive (Autobiography, p. 91).

Like Douglass before him, Malcolm X understood that white institutional interests were well served by addiction in the Black community:

...black junkies are trying to narcotize themselves against being a black man in the white man's America,

but...the black man taking dope is only helping the white man to "prove" that the black man is nothing (Autobiography, p. 260).

The white man wants black men to stay immoral, unclean, and ignorant. As long as we stay in these conditions we will keep on begging him and he will control us (Autobiography, p. 221).

While Malcolm X viewed addiction as an outgrowth of historical oppression, he angrily denounced African Americans who embraced their victimhood as an excuse for continued self-destruction. For him, the source of African American salvation could be found only in resources inside their own souls and inside their own community.

The social philosophy of black nationalism only means that we have to get together and remove...alcoholism, drug addiction, and other evils that are destroying the moral fiber of our community. (From 'The Ballot or the Bullet' speech, April 4, 1964, Cleveland, Ohio; Malcolm X, 1965))

Malcolm X thought the worst crime America had committed was teaching African Americans to hate themselves, and he saw alcoholism and drug addiction as a direct manifestation of that self-hatred (Goldman, 1994, p. 120). He saw recovery as a side effect of the spiritual transformation and the psychological, economic and political liberation of Black people. He practiced and challenged others to live a clean life—no alcohol, drugs, tobacco, gambling, or extra-marital sex—as a daily act of respect for self, family and community. Like Douglass, Malcolm X saw booze and dope as anesthetics that numbed the pain of cultural oppression and dissipated the potential for political protest and economic self-determination. For him, sobriety was more than an act of personal reformation; it was a political act of resistance—a refusal to embrace racial suicide, an act of

personal/cultural survival and healing. Like recovery leaders before and after, Malcolm X challenged those who had been saved from addiction to return to the “junkie jungle” to salvage those who were still suffering (Autobiography, pp. 261-262).

Legacies: “Cultural Pathways to Recovery”

So what lessons can addiction professionals draw from the lives of these two history-shaping figures? The authors have explored this question with audiences across America and would offer the following reflections.

Historical Trauma, Liberation, and Cultural Healing: Addiction within communities of color is best viewed within the larger historical context of slavery and oppression. Such historical traumas destroy personal identity and hope, erode cultural sources of resilience, and fuel the appetite for anesthesia. Conversely, recovery is best framed within the larger framework of liberation and personal/cultural survival. To be personally and culturally meaningful, the recovery stories of African Americans may have to be nested within their larger history and contemporary experience as a people.

Catalytic Metaphors: To achieve recovery, each addicted individual must find sense-making, life-transforming ideas that abort the rituals of drug use. Such metaphors spark profound breakthroughs in perception of self and the world that in turn lead to dramatic reconstructions of personal identity and interpersonal relationships. Linking AOD use to historical oppression, portraying alcohol and other drugs as weapons of continued oppression, and portraying sobriety as an act of resistance and liberation can serve such a transformative function for some African American clients.

Strength, Meaning and Purpose: African Americans in recovery can draw strength, meaning, and purpose from their individual and collective survival. Questions such as the following can help elicit that experience of meaning and purpose:

- 1) How were you able to survive to reach this day when so many did not?
- 2) What is the purpose for which you were spared?
- 3) What has your life course prepared you to do?
- 4) What personal/cultural debts need repayment?
- 5) What special lessons and gifts would you like to share with others?
- 6) What does your family and community need from you right now?

Strengths-based approaches are well suited for African American clients, particularly when they focus beyond the individual to tap sources of resilience within the family and kinship network, the community and the larger culture. The recoveries of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X were rooted in commitments that transcended their own self-redemptions. Challenging the notion that “you can only get sober for yourself,” their allegiance to a higher calling—liberating African Americans as a people—guided their recovery and sustained them in the face of temptations, challenges to their characters, and death threats.

Recovery Heroes: There is a critical need in communities of color for culturally viable models of addiction recovery. Recovery can be incited by the identification and inspiration that flows from exposure to charismatic recovering figures. The African American community has been denied such role models by media machinery that vividly portrays the stories of African American addiction while withholding the stories of African American recovery. African American celebrities have also failed to face additional stigma that would accompany acknowledgment of their recovery from addiction—a failure that has helped obscure the universal humanity of the recovery experience. However, visible recovery stories are emerging across ethnic cultures. As addiction professionals, we need to be able to place in the hands of each client stories of recovering people with whom he or she can identify.

Recovery and History: Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X made significant historical contributions, not in spite of their addiction and recovery experiences, but because of the depth of meaning and purpose they discovered within their recovery processes. The field needs a definitive history of recovery among African Americans. Such a history will require considerable research as these stories, particularly of those who have faced the greatest stigma (e.g., women; lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people), exist only as fading whispers within the oral histories of African American communities.

A Living History: Recovery and community service in the lives of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X are not simply interesting historical artifacts. Recovery is an enduring but hidden reality within African American communities—an experience too often closeted in shame and secrecy. African American men and women in recovery live quiet lives of sobriety and productivity in communities across America. It is time we asked a vanguard of such individuals to step forward as living proof of the liberating, transforming power of recovery in the African American community. It is time we celebrated the historical faces and voices of recovery and the contemporary diversity of recovery pathways within African American communities.

Connection to Community: A common thread within the recovery stories of Malcolm X and Frederick Douglass is the reciprocal relationship each experienced with their larger community. Their recoveries drew succor from African American communities just as their recoveries served those communities. The African proverb “I am because we are and we are because I am” suggests asking each client to explore the relationship between recovery and community.

The Power of Service: Both of the men profiled in this article subsumed their personal recovery within a larger call to service. Recovering people constitute a healing force within African American communities that has yet to be fully

mobilized. Perhaps it is time that collective call to service was issued.

The Healing Power of Faith: Both Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X drew strength from religious institutions within their communities and framed sobriety within a larger Africentric moral code. Such resources continue to exist today in the form of vibrant, faith-based recovery ministries. Such resources should be viewed as essential partners in our clinical and recovery support work with African American clients.

Cultural Prescriptions

This review suggests ten prescriptions for addiction professionals and recovery support specialists:

- Carry a message of hope (via assertive outreach programs) to those who have yet to witness the transformative power of recovery.
- Align yourself with the survival capacities and strengths of individuals, families, and cultural communities.
- Collaborate with folk healers and local organizations in the design and delivery of culturally nuanced approaches to recovery initiation and maintenance.
- Expose clients to the histories of recovery and contemporary recovery movements within the larger communities with which they identify (via culturally relevant and recovery-focused speakers, books, pamphlets, movies, and art).
- Affirm the legitimacy of nontraditional pathways of recovery (e.g., frameworks such as the Nation of Islam, Free-n-one, One Church One Addict, Celebrate Recovery, Ladies Victorious, African American Survivors Organization)(See Sanders, 2002).
- Recognize that individuals may initiate recovery within one framework (e.g., A.A., N.A.) but then transition to

another framework (the church) to sustain that recovery.

- Portray recovery as a vehicle for liberation, visibility/voice (personhood), and service.
- Invite clients to explore the larger meaning and purpose within their survival and recovery experiences.
- Reach beyond the individual client to enhance recovery for families, neighborhoods, and communities.
- Challenge your clients to embrace sobriety as a contribution to their families, neighborhoods and communities and as their personal contribution to the history of African Americans.

The lives of Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X contain profound lessons about recovery, community, and history. We believe those lessons are applicable to clients of all colors and cultures.

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About the Authors: William L. White, MA (bwhite@chestnut.org) is a Senior Research Consultant at Chestnut Health Systems and author of *Slaying the Dragon: The History of Addiction Treatment and Recovery in America*. Mark Sanders, LCSW, CADC is a well-known trainer and author of *Treating the African American Male Substance Abuser and Counseling Chemically Dependent*

African American Women. Tanya Sanders, MSW, is a Research and Strategic Planning Specialist for On the Mark Consulting.

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