

# RECOVERED or RECOVERING

## *Getting Past Semantic Differences*

Thom Rutledge

**Workshop Participant (WP):** *Thom, do you think it is possible to totally recover from an eating disorder or do you think people with eating disorders must always be “in recovery”?*

For all our mutual experience, all our separate conclusions are the same.

– Billy Joel  
Summer, Highland Falls

**Thom Rutledge (TR):** *In the addiction treatment field, we had this debate back in the 80’s – as in last century. Of course there are significant differences between substance addiction and eating disorders, but it turns out the answer to your question is the same. Both “recovered” and “in recovery” are fine. It really is just a matter of semantics. It’s not the words you choose, it is what you mean by the words that matters.*

**WP:** *My therapist told me that thinking in terms of being constantly, perpetually in recovery is a negative way of thinking about my recovery from Ed [personification of eating disorder].*

**TR:** *We’re human beings, we can turn almost anything into something negative. [group laughs] It is only negative if what you mean by it is negative. There is a Buddhist saying: “Be careful not to mistake the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.” Well, we make that mistake all the time. All of us. We become focused on language at the expense of meaning. For instance, if you say that you are “in recovery,” and you mean that you will always be in a constant, never-ending battle with your eating disorder, then that is a negative way to think. Similarly, if you say “I am totally recovered from my eating disorder,” and mean that, even with a history of this illness, you believe, with absolute certainty, that you can guarantee that you will never have to deal with eating disorder thinking or behaviors again, then you are a fool. None of us can predict the future, after all. Besides, confidence is a good thing, but overconfidence is a dangerous thing.*

*Okay, let’s turn it around. If by “in recovery” you mean that you are in constant state of learning and growing, and that you have become symptom free – or plan to become symptom free – but that you are wise enough to hold onto appropriate caution, and even vigilance, like the cancer survivors I work with tend to do, then you are saying something extremely positive. Obviously. If you say that you have “recovered” from an eating disorder, and you mean that you are free and clear of destructive eating disorder behaviors and toxic thinking, then that is also very positive. Make sense?*

**WP:** *The way I have been thinking, it is like recovery will always be a burden I have to carry.*

**TR:** *If the word “recovery” means that to you, then of course, you are going feel that way. Find the words that work for you. I kind of think that we alcoholics have an advantage here, because we don’t tend to think of alcoholism as something we want to get rid of. We just want to make sure it is no longer a defining factor in our lives. For me, to say I am a recovering alcoholic is a positive thing; it’s not like I have to settle for something less than I want, or that I am burdened by my recovery. For me, the word “recovery” is synonymous with “life.” So the bottom line for me, to be “in recovery” is to be “in life.” I don’t think anyone is going to argue that that is a bad thing. Does this make sense?*

**WP:** *Yes, it does. It makes a lot of sense. Thanks. And you are so right about how easy it is to get lost in the semantics.*

**TR:** *Yes. And there is nothing to beat ourselves up about here. We all do this, we all get distracted by the words. We all need to be reminded --- over and over and over again, in fact --- to stop staring at the pointing finger and look at the moon.*

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I am told that there is a controversy in the land of eating disorder treatment. But I don't think it is so much controversy as it is confusion. Apparently people are choosing sides to argue about whether we should speak in terms of being "in recovery" from an eating disorder, or if that is selling ourselves short, and we should, instead, be talking about total recovery, making generous use of the past tense, "recovered."

Because I remember a similar linguistic dance in the world of addiction treatment back in the 80's, I have not really paid that much attention to this one. When I have been asked the recovered-or-recovering question, I have tended to brush it off with answers like...

*It doesn't matter.*  
*I don't care.*  
*Makes no difference.*  
*It really doesn't matter.*  
*Six of one, half dozen of another.*  
*Who wants to know?*  
*I'm sorry, were you talking to me?*  
*Either one is fine.*  
*Whatever you want.*

I am getting this question more and more these days and, at least for the time being, it doesn't seem like it is going away. So I have recently taken to answering the question seriously. Not my favorite thing to do, but sometimes it just needs to be done.

This really is just a matter of semantics. There really is no disagreement. I can demonstrate this by posing three (3) questions to the person facing her eating disorder:

- 1.) Is the ultimate goal of treatment for your eating disorder to be symptom free, both behaviorally and cognitively?
- 2.) Do you believe that achieving the goal of being symptom free is possible?
- 3.) If/when you are symptom free, if any eating disorder symptoms were to recur, would you seek help?

Whether you use the term "recovered" or "in recovery" I expect that your answer to all three of these questions is "yes." This is what anyone seeking eating disorder treatment wants for herself, and this is what we professionals want for her.

Language is symbolic representation of meaning; the words never matter as much as what we mean by them, but we humans do have a unique talent for missing that point. In fact, confusing language for meaning is one of the fatal ---quite literally--- flaws of humanity.

Within this particular pseudo controversy, we need to focus on the answers to our three questions and not worry so much about what we call it.

## **DEFINING RECOVERY**

For some, apparently the term "in recovery" connotes constant struggle. On more than one occasion I have heard, or read, the term "perpetual recovery," and it seems to be offered in the spirit of Sisyphus's exhausting and futile task of rolling a stone up a mountain only to have gravity undo what he had accomplished. If recovery is an eternity --- or even a lifetime --- of that, I certainly want none of it.

To the person who believes that recovery is a constant struggle and a never-ending uphill battle, I would say that he is talking about coping with a disease, not recovering from one, and if he is being told that that is as good as it gets, I might be suggesting that she find a new therapist.

I began the very first book I ever wrote (Simple Truth, 1990) with my brief definition of the word “recovery.”

Throughout this book I use the word “recovery” to refer to a new path taken by those of us who have become dissatisfied enough with our old circular paths to venture out, risking the letting go of old ways and experimenting with new.

The word “recovery” has become a natural part of my vocabulary as a recovering alcoholic and codependent person. But the word has come to mean much more to me than a simple reminder of where I have been (alcoholism, dysfunctional and irresponsible relationships). It speaks to me of where I am bound.

It is not enough for me to hold my focus on these conditions and behaviors I am recovering *from*. The miracle of the new paths I have taken, and continue to take one day at a time, is found in what I am in the process of discovering of myself --- literally, the me that I am *recovering* (meaning regaining).

It is not necessary that you share with me the identification of alcoholism or codependency in order to identify with this general use of the word “recovery.” Herein, “recovery” simply means possessing the courage to let go of old, ineffective patterns of thought and behavior, and a willingness to start fresh.

Consider that definition of recovery: “Possessing the courage to let go of old, ineffective patterns of thought and behavior, and a willingness to start fresh.” That certainly sounds like a commitment to a never-ending, life-long process, but it doesn’t seem like a negative. When they say life is a journey, not a destination, they aren’t kidding. And if you, or anyone else, tells me that you have “arrived,” that you no longer have dysfunctional or less-than effective patterns of thought and behavior to be addressed, then I can say, beyond all doubt, that I don’t think you are paying attention.

## **DEFINING OURSELVES**

My granddad was fond of clichés. One of his favorites was, “Nobody said life is going to be fair.” I tend to juxtapose that one with the famous --- and wonderful --- first sentence from Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled*.

Life is difficult.

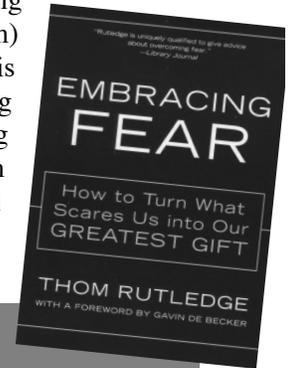
If calling yourself “recovered” or “totally recovered” is, in any way, an attempt to duck out of the challenges of life, of running from the radical imperfections of your humanity, then I think you will be missing out on some amazing opportunities in life. Some of these opportunities will feel wonderful and some of them will hurt like all kinds of hell, and most of them will fall between those extremes. All of them are valuable if we will let them be.

When we are really living life, we are going to take some hits, we are going to get knocked around a bit (or a lot) and as we emerge into however you want to phrase your recovery, we will all carry some scars. The scars don’t have to define us, but they are a part of who we are. My alcoholism presents absolutely no problem for me these days, nor has it for many years now. But it is still a part of who I am. In fact it is a wonderful part of who I am. Among other things, it is a part of who I am that makes it possible for me to help others lost in their addictions. If you ask me if I have recovered from my alcoholism, I would say,

“You can call it that, if you want.” I’m not worried about saying that I have “recovered,” because I am committed to remaining cautious. I am not afraid of my addiction, but I do respect it. I respect its power and its cunning and I know that addiction, by definition, is opportunistic. Eating disorders are no different.

As someone begins recovery from alcoholism, there are no shortages of other alcoholics willing to help. We alcoholics are never hard to find. But people recovering from (or recovered from) eating disorders can be difficult to find for the person beginning recovery. I believe that this is due, in part, to the understandable desire, to be finished, once and for all, with your eating disorder. Ironically, the danger is in losing a valuable part of yourself. If you insist on being defined completely separate from your eating disorder, if you insist on being defined only in terms of your health and your accomplishments, distancing yourself from the radical imperfection and constant vulnerabilities that make us human, then you distance yourself from other human beings who could use your help.

So my request to you, the reader, is this: If you have an eating disorder, if you are in recovery from an eating disorder, or if you are totally recovered from an eating disorder, never forget that it is by virtue of your radical imperfection and acknowledgement of your vulnerabilities that you will be able to reach out to others, who are where you have been, and offer them safe place to begin, and the hope that it is possible to recover.



If you like this article, you are going to love *Embracing Fear*. I have known and worked with Thom a long time, and I just like the way this guy thinks.

—David McMillan, Ph.D.  
Author of *Create Your Own Love Story*

## THE CONTROVERSY THAT ISN'T

Controversy is a good for marketing or political strategy. But its success hinges on getting people to define themselves as different from others, to define themselves *against* others. It is based on exclusion:

We are right and they are wrong.  
We are good and they are bad.  
We are smart and they are not.  
We are more and they are less.

The so-called controversy of recovering-or-recovered question is based on this kind of contrast, this kind of exclusive thinking (aka: fundamentalism). But it is *inclusive* thinking that has the power to save us. If we are looking for a common meeting ground, let's meet in the middle of our imperfections and vulnerabilities, let's meet in these places in which we have so much more in common, that we will ever have differences. There is no need to divide ourselves into camps of those who have overcome and those who are still struggling. We are all in the process of living our lives to the best of our abilities. That's all we have to know...

That, and the answer to our three (3) questions. Short version: 1.) Do you want to be well and happy? 2.) Do you believe well and happy are possible? 3.) Are you willing to do whatever you need to do to get there and stay there?

That's what we're looking for, right? Call it whatever you want. I say tomato, you say tom-ah-to.

*Thom Rutledge is the author of Embracing Fear: How to Turn What Scares Us into Our Greatest Gift.  
He facilitates Beyond Eating Disorders Weekend Retreats several times each year.  
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