



Mastering Recovery

Rooted in the Steps • Growing Through Connection

With Barry Lehman

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More Than Maintenance

● Surprising Recovery

By the time you read this, I'll be midway through my tenth year at Trumpet Camp in Shell Lake, Wisconsin.



*(One of two yearly music retreats I attend. See PS at the bottom.)**

This camp has become one of the touchstones of my musical life.

Ten years ago, it helped launch a renewed journey with the trumpet. Since then, that journey has only deepened.

The structure of the week doesn't change much from year to year.

The faculty teach the same fundamentals.

The goals remain remarkably consistent.

The exercises are familiar.

The expectations are clear.

Yet every year I return.

Not because I've forgotten what I learned last year.

Not because I need someone to remind me how to play a scale.

I come back to discover:

- How am I doing?
- What is working better than it was a year ago?
- What still needs attention?
- What is the next step in my growth as a musician?

Most of the participants are high school and college students.

A few of us are older.

We've heard these ideas before.

Many times.

Yet we keep returning because we've discovered something important:

Growth and maintenance are not the same thing.

Maintaining a skill means keeping it from disappearing.

Practicing a skill means allowing it to deepen.

This week is not really about maintaining my trumpet playing.

It's about continuing to grow into musicianship.

Rigorous.

Demanding.

Exhausting.

Exciting.

Energizing.

Always new.

From Early to Long-Term

And somewhere in the middle of a trumpet camp, I find myself wondering:

Why do we understand this so easily in music, but struggle to see it in recovery?

Many of us think long-term recovery eventually becomes maintenance.

We know the meetings.

We know the Steps.

We know the language.

But what if recovery is more like musicianship?

What if the goal isn't simply to maintain sobriety?

What if the goal is to continue growing into a recovery way of life?

I remember an old expression that occasionally surfaced in meetings. Someone would describe a long-time member who seemed to be saying the same things, attending the same meetings, and doing recovery in exactly the same way they had for years.

The comment was often, "They're so dry they're a fire risk."

Looking back, I think there was both wisdom and misunderstanding in that observation.

The wisdom was the recognition that sobriety alone is not the end of the journey.

The misunderstanding was assuming that maintenance doesn't matter.

It does.

Those men and women helped many of us survive our early years of recovery. Their consistency, stability, and faithfulness to the program became a light in a dark tunnel.

But maintenance and growth are not the same thing.

Maintenance keeps something alive.

Practice helps something grow.

The Heart of the Week:

Every year I return to Shell Lake because I want more than maintenance.

I don't go back because I've forgotten how to play.

I go back because there is always another level of musicianship to discover.

The scales are familiar.

The exercises are familiar.

The fundamentals are familiar.

Yet each year I hear something differently, understand something more deeply, or discover a new way to practice an old skill.

Not all practice is the same.

Sometimes practice is simply maintenance. We go through the motions and keep our skills from slipping.

Sometimes practice stays inside our comfort zone. We play what we already know and enjoy the satisfaction of doing it well.

And sometimes practice becomes deliberate. We become intentionally teachable. We look for weaknesses. We welcome feedback. We seek growth rather than comfort.

Recovery can look similar.

Abstinence is learning not to use.

Sobriety is learning how to live without using.

A recovery lifestyle is learning how to continue growing long after the crisis has passed.

That's why I keep coming back to Shell Lake.

And perhaps that's why many of us keep coming back to recovery.

A recovery lifestyle asks a different question.

Not, "How do I stay sober?"

But, "How do I continue to grow?"



In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few.

— Shunryu Suzuki

Yes, this one takes some thought.

A Closing Thought

The longer I stay sober, the more I believe recovery and musicianship have something important in common.

Neither one is mastered.

Both invite us to keep learning, keep listening, keep practicing, and keep growing.

The meetings may be familiar.

The Steps may be familiar.

The principles may be familiar.

But every year, every season, and every stage of life offers new opportunities to practice them in deeper ways.

Perhaps that is one of the great gifts of long-term recovery.

We never have to start over.

But we are always invited to begin again.

Next week we'll look more closely at what that growth can look like in everyday life. Many of us are already using recovery skills every day without even calling them recovery. The principles we once struggled to learn often become part of who we are—and we may not even notice them until we stop and take a closer look.

*** *PS: About Retreats:***

At last week's *MasterClass* we touched on "retreats" as a great way of digging more deeply into recovery. These are ways of expanding our perspective on recovery like I do with my yearly music retreats. If you have never been on a 12-Step or recovery-based retreat, I would highly recommend it. Some programs, like *The Retreat* in Wayzata, MN, offer regular events. Many religious based centers offer regular retreat opportunities. One of these is the *Redemptorist Retreat Center* in Oconomowoc, WI. Google the idea and you will be amazed.



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Relevant Recovery.

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