

FINDING MEANING IN MEDICINE

February 1, 2012

The topic of Finding Meaning in Medicine seemed to me in the past an unnecessary, frivolous topic to discuss as most of us know why we went into medicine in the first place and becoming a physician has personal meaning to each of us. However, with the info I am going to share with you, it is clear that we should discuss this as a preventive measure to incoming physicians. At this time we need to actively dig within ourselves to establish this meaning so we may return to it frequently to hopefully continue our career as satisfied, whole and content individuals. I think this Art of Doctoring course is truly a preventive step to immunizing you against the challenges that you may face with practicing medicine in our current and ever-changing environment.

I will be quoting and using as a basis for our discussion, articles written mainly by Dr. Rachel Remen, a physician who was trained as a pediatrician but spent the majority of her career counseling terminally ill patients. She is also a 57 year Crohn's disease patient, a best selling author and the creator of Finding Meaning in Medicine Groups throughout the country.

I am hoping through this session we can discuss the dilemmas of finding meaning in medicine and the realities of practicing medicine in our current structure and system.

Finding Meaning in Medicine: Reclaiming the Soul of practice

These are difficult times. Medicine is in an unprecedented crisis of spiritual as well as economic dimensions. The impact of this crisis continues to grow. Many physicians, unable to find the satisfaction they had anticipated when they entered the medical profession are dropping out of clinical practice or seeking early retirement. Many others discourage their children from going into medicine. In studies nationwide, physicians report depression and loss of meaning in their work.

The erosion of meaning is insidious and can begin early in professional life. Year after year, students enter medical schools across the country inspired to become doctors. They are filled with a sense of excitement and dedication to service. Numerous studies have revealed that four years later this excitement has often given way to cynicism, numbness and depression. By graduation, many have learned what they have come to do, but may have forgotten why they have come.

1) Board exercise: List of Frustrations in Medicine/List of Good Stuff (group participation, we list)

What erodes our joy?

High expectations of patients and the access patients have with computer allow them to feel that they are experts.

Volume of patients

Economic pressures to discharge patients quickly from hospital

Malpractice concerns

Era of rushing/quick answers

Era of rudeness and lack of respect for physicians

Complaints filed after you have tried hard for demanding patients.

Incidents with nurses and staff

Low reimbursement- real or perceived

Health Care System

Image of docs changed as compared to image of a nurse or social worker

Then give examples of good stuff.

Parable story- Stone-cutter story (earn money to support my family; take pride in my work; doing something for the glory of God)

In times of difficulty, meaning strengthens us not by changing our lives but by transforming our experience of our lives, The Italian psychiatrist Roberto Assagioli tells a parable about 3 stone cutters building a cathedral in the Middle Ages. You approach the first man and ask him what he's doing. Angrily he turns to you and says, "Idiot! Use your eyes! They bring me a rock, I cut it into a brick, they take it away, and they bring me another rock. I've been doing this since I was old enough to work, and I'm going to be doing it until the day that I die." Quickly you withdraw, go to the next man, and ask him the same question. He smiles at you warmly and tells you, "I'm earning a living for my beloved family. With my wages I have built a home, there is food on our table, the children are growing strong." Moving on, you approach the third man with this same question. Pausing, he gives you a look of deep fulfillment and tells you, "I am building a great cathedral, a holy lighthouse where people lost in the dark can find their strength and remember their way. And it will stand for a thousand years!" Each of these men is doing the identical task. Finding a personal meaning in your work opens even the most routine of tasks to the dimension of satisfaction and even joy. We may need to recognize meaning for the resource it is and find ways to pursue it and preserve it.

We are trained to perfection as a goal but often it is the wisdom gained from our own experiences of woundedness, vulnerability and healing that can empower us to help others.

- 1) Do Object exercise – bring in a meaningful object (poem, saying, quote from religious text, picture, object, photo, painting, short piece of music, sculpture, jewelry, symbol) that helps you press on when you look at it during difficulties encountered in medicine**

Meaning is the antecedent of commitment and the original meaning of our work is service. Service is not a relationship between an expert and a problem; it is a human relationship, a work of the heart and the soul. Restoring a sense of service to the practice of medicine will lead us to re-examine the process by which we became physicians. Our current training furthers are expertise but not our wholeness

Restoring a sense of service- how is it different than helping or fixing.
Rachel Remen's background is as a counselor to terminally ill patients but many of our patients are not in this situation.

Rachel Remen talks a lot about our ability to heal.

Discuss the article In the Service of Life

Our power to heal is far less limited than our power to cure. Healing is not a relationship between an expert and a problem... it is a relationship between human beings. Our training may have caused us to focus so narrowly on our professional skills as what we offer, that we have sold both ourselves and our patients short. Perhaps our power to make a difference in the lives of others is far greater than the sum of our techniques and expertise. Perhaps we can tend the will to live in others with just our bare hands.

Finding Meaning in Medicine Groups

In a group setting of community, physicians of different specialties may help each other reclaim a deeper sense of professional contentment in simple and low cost ways. One such strategy is FMM, a program developed by the Institute of the Study of Health And Illness at Commonweal. This story telling and discussion group process has enabled physicians nationwide to rediscover and strengthen their commitment to medicine and find new inspiration. Currently the institute supports almost 200 doctors around the country as they start FMM groups in their own medical communities. They meet once a month for 2 to 3 hours. Many feel the power of a safe non-judgmental and non-competitive relationship among physicians to be very strengthening.

Small group discussion of how our specialty choice maximizes meaning for each individual.?

FINDING MEANING IN MEDICINE

- 1) Stone-cutter story (earn money to support my family; take pride in my work; doing something for the glory of God)**
- 2) Board exercise: List of Frustrations in Medicine/List of Good Stuff (group participation, we list)**
- 3) Object exercise – bring in a meaningful object (poem, saying, quote from religious text, picture, object, photo, painting, short piece of music, sculpture, jewelry, symbol) that helps you press on when you look at it during difficulties encountered in medicine**
- 4) The Service of Life – Remen article; distinction between service vs. helping; mention FMM groups**
- 5) Small group exercise: how does your specialty choice bring added meaning to your practice of medicine? How does your particular specialty enhance the meaning of your practice?**