

## History of Finding Meaning in Medicine Groups

### In the Beginning

By Rachel Remen, MD

Almost 14 years ago, just after I published a book of little stories drawn from my experience as a physician, I began to hear from doctors around the country about how important stories were to them. Residents and professors and practitioners of every sub-specialty wrote to say that after reading these stories, they felt moved and strengthened and reminded of what mattered in medicine and why they had chosen this work. As these letters and emails poured in, I began to wonder if stories were more than "anecdotal evidence". Perhaps this was the key to enabling us to practice with meaning and satisfaction and passion -- the glue that connected us to a genuine community of service. One of the most common things that people wrote was that they rarely had a chance to tell their stories or to hear the stories of other doctors. And that they wished there was a way to share the things that made their work worth it. After reading hundreds of such letters and emails I began to wonder what might happen if we DID have the chance to tell each other our stories. Would we see each other differently? Would we feel differently about our work and our patients? About each other?

So I invited a few of the doctors I knew from the CME workshops I had been leading, to come to my home and spend an hour together and participate in an experiment. I would bring the tea and cookies. They would bring a story from their experience as doctors. I proposed that we would sit together and tell each other these stories and see what happened. Just to keep things even handed I suggested that the story they bring be a story about courage -- their own or their patients or a colleague's. I was surprised that everyone came. After three hours we were still sharing and talking and a lot less tired than we had been at the beginning. So we began to meet every month and bring stories to share about different topics, and people began to bring their doctor friends, and when the group grew too large for everyone to have a chance to share their story in an evening, someone volunteered their living room and some of the group began to meet on a different night.

Thirteen years later my Finding Meaning in Medicine group still meets once a month in my living room, and the FMM program continues to this day as part of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness. FMM has enabled doctors across the country and around the world to form hundreds of story telling discussion groups at their worksites and in their homes, finding in their own stories the same intention and meaning that has kept physicians alive in this work for generations. As author Barry Lopez writes in his book *Crow and Weasel*, "Sometimes we need a story more than food in order to live. That's why we put stories into each other's memories."

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# The Gathering of Physicians

By Matthew Zwerling, MD

What thoughts come to mind, what feelings arise when you wonder about the mystery of medicine, during those times when you are unable to explain something you have witnessed, or when struck by a seemingly magical insight or response to treatment? Have you ever spent an evening with a group of physician colleagues exploring concepts such as joy, compassion, trust, anger, forgiveness, or dreams? What would it be like to sit together informally, sharing thoughts and stories that connect you with the experience of being a physician, of being human?

A group of local doctors has been meeting once a month for the past few years to explore these and other questions, and to contemplate the meaning of medicine and service through the medium of story. Known as The



*Dr. Zwerling, a Santa Rosa orthopedic surgeon, co-founded the Gathering of Physicians.*

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Gathering of Physicians, the group is modeled after the Finding Meaning in Medicine groups started by Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of the best-selling books *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather's Blessings*.

"There seems to be a deep river of meaning," writes Dr. Remen, "that runs beneath the events of our daily lives ... especially the lives of physicians. Through these groups we have found a very simple way of tapping into this river, and we are witnessing profound results. Most doctors have had rich and unusual experiences, but have never had the opportunity or the encouragement to reflect upon them or discuss them with medical colleagues. There

are certain experiences that only another physician can fully understand. Having the opportunity to share unreservedly with colleagues is a remarkably fulfilling experience and often allows us to heal many of our professional wounds. It certainly has inspired those who have participated and enables many to recover a greater sense of meaning and satisfaction in this work."

Dr. Andrew Wagner and I, having benefited both personally and professionally from regular attendance at Dr. Remen's gatherings, believed a similar model would be valuable in Sonoma County. Once a healthy, vibrant, quality enterprise, our local medical community has undergone a painful fragmentation in recent years. Bitter rivalries have developed among physicians and between physicians and hospitals. There is disturbing competition for services (and survival). New physicians are reluctant to consider practicing here, both for financial reasons and because of the pervasive sense of unhappiness among local

practitioners. Joy and satisfaction are distant memories for many physicians.

Some choose rhetoric and legislative redress to fight the “saber-toothed tiger” of managed care, government regulations, and the like. Some have left our county for the presumed greener pastures of other communities or administrative work. Many hope for change, some just for survival. And some are choosing to reexamine their response to the external stressors and uncertainties physicians face, to search inwardly for ways to reconnect with the meaning of medicine.

*Signs of human community—its meaning and its beauty—can be found all around us, if only we look.*

—Anonymous

The monthly meetings of the Gathering of Physicians are organized as a conversation and discovery process, focusing on a specific topic chosen the previous month. Topics chosen over the past three years include boundaries, stewardship, privacy, ritual, renewal, and fear, as well as joy, compassion, trust, anger, forgiveness, and dreams. Participants are invited to bring a story from their personal or professional life, a piece of writing from world literature, a poem, a work of art, or an exercise, and to share this gift of experience as if sitting in a living room with a group of close friends.

Our conversation on privacy, for example, explored invasions of privacy through the Internet, with telemarketing, and in the hospital setting. One physician spoke of his ongoing discomfort with the lack of privacy when taking a history in a hospital room or in the ER. We explored the challenge of balancing privacy with expediency, and privacy with security. As we looked at the obligation of a parent to honor the privacy of a child, one physician was reminded of a recent experience when his teenager came home drunk one evening. The physician shared the concerns he and his wife had about the “rights” of parents to invade the private space of a child.

*Today, like every other day, we wake up empty and frightened. Don't open the door to the study and begin reading. Take down a musical instrument. Let the beauty we love be what we do. There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground.*

—Rumi

Physicians in the group bring poetry from Rumi, Hafiz, and Dickinson, while others bring music or musical instruments. The group often reads short stories, some written by local physicians, some by well-known writers such as Kahlil Gibran, Jack Kornfield, or Dr. Remen. Our personal, unwritten stories provide another rich source of shared experience. On one occasion, when the topic was trust, a physician spoke of the painful experience of a divorce, and its impact on personal and professional life. The individual had never shared this very personal story with other physicians, and stated that the group's attentive listening felt extremely supportive.

At another gathering, three of us realized that we had each lost our mother within the past six months. We spent the evening sharing reflections on our mothers, our relationship with them, and the experience of the loss—even though neither loss nor death was the specific topic for the evening. Our conversation expanded and segued quite naturally, aided by the collegiality that had developed within the group. What is shared at the meetings is often quite moving, and it touches our hearts deeply.

A few simple rules govern the group's interactions. Participants are asked to respect and maintain the confidentiality of the group if and when they consider sharing the experience with others. The intent of the gatherings is to be respectfully attentive to what others have brought, rather than to fix a problem, offer advice, or jump in to tell our own story. We are there to offer support, to share insights that arise, to reflect on what touched us. There is no requirement to speak, only to share the gift of one's attention, to trust the wisdom that is being shared.

*We are here to do,  
And through doing to learn;  
And through learning to know;  
And through knowing to experience  
wonder;  
And through wonder to attain wisdom;  
And through wisdom to find simplicity;  
And through simplicity to give attention;  
And through attention  
To see what needs to be done.*

—Ben Hei Hei, Jewish sage

Quiet reflection at The Gathering of Physicians allows for a greater awareness of the power and importance of silence, of listening. In his wonderful book *The Healing Companion*, Dr. Jeff Kane writes about the importance of listening: “The Chinese written character for *listen* is compounded of those for *attention, ear, eye, and heart*. You've already ‘listened’ to the illness story with your ears and eyes. To make sense of it, you'll need to listen with your heart—that is, with your insides. ... Listening with your ‘heart,’ then, means staying tuned to precisely what you feel.” Physicians are typically not trained to listen with their heart, to elicit a personal story, to explore the meaning of an illness, or to value silence. Instead, much of our training focuses on the medical history, the scientific, objective data: “Just the facts, ma'am, just the facts!”

At one gathering, a physician shared a short story he wrote about his own internship experience. Visiting a home where an infant had just died, most likely from crib death, the physician realized that he had “never witnessed a death outside the hospital,” nor had he “broken the news of death to a patient's loved ones.” He also realized that he had not received even one lecture on how to deal with the interpersonal relationships surrounding death and dying. He knew immediately that he was in “uncharted waters and must proceed entirely on his own.” This powerful story inspired the group to share their own stories and responses to death and dying experiences.

There is also no place in medical education where physicians are taught

the value and power of sharing their own stories, feelings, or experiences as a way of humanizing the doctor-patient relationship. Many physicians deeply value and respect relationship skills in their personal lives, and some believe that the mutual sharing of stories can be therapeutically healing for both patient and physician. Barry Lopez, in *Crow and Weasel*, writes, "The stories people tell have a way of taking care of them. If stories come to you, care for them. And learn to give them away where they are needed. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food

to stay alive. That is why we put these stories in each other's memory. This is how people care for themselves."

Burnout is defined here as a lack of harmony between our personal and professional values, between what is meaningful in our lives as human beings and as physicians. It is the antithesis of well-being and wholeness. By re-forming the community of medicine, the Gathering of Physicians honors the importance of wholeness and healing, and provides an opportunity for physicians to "care for themselves." We have also created a safe,

supportive space that serves to counter the sense of isolation and burnout felt by many physicians. The Gatherings of Physicians models a way of appreciating what gives meaning to the lives of our patients and, at the same time, reconnects us with the meaning of our work, of service, of healing, of our own wholeness. □

*The Gathering of Physicians is open to all Sonoma County physicians. We meet on the third Thursday of the month, from 7 to 9:30 p.m. Call 525-1311 for further information.*