

Venture to Find The Reachable, Teachable Moments



I have realized that I may be in the process of writing another book. Often this is how it happens, I just start writing. The book would demonstrate to people unfamiliar with alternative and holistic medicine (*we call it traditional health care because it is the original medicine for all humankind*), how we practice and serve. It would also be a good addition to our training programs at the Blue Heron Academy of Healing Arts and Sciences for our students. Here is the next installment, Beer and Sausage. These brief articles are very much like the lectures that I give at the Academy.

Beer and Sausage

“She was in her mid-fifties, of strong German descent, and a cosmetologist. She presented at my office with a complaint of severe pain in her right thumb joint (*saddle joint*). She had seen a rheumatologist and the diagnosis was osteoarthritis, throughout her body, but it was her thumb that was giving her fits.

I examined her and determined that she had advanced arthritis in her knees, hips, spine, and in both hands and wrists. She discounted the disease in these other joints as, “simply getting older” because that is what her rheumatologist had told her. The pain in her right hand and thumb joint was due to the additional wear and tear resulting from her work with scissors as a hair stylist.

She explained to me that she preferred to work with scissors and razors rather than electric clippers, and that lately she had had to resort to using the clippers more because of pain, weakness, and limited range of motion in her right thumb and hand. Her fear was that she would have to take an early retirement and neither she nor her husband were financially prepared for that.

During the first two decades or so of my career medical physicians were telling their patients that there was no known cause for arthritis other than getting older. I was trained differently, and I was taught to look at diet and lifestyle factors as the cause.

I began treating her twice a week with manual therapy and therapeutic modalities for the pain and inflammation in her hands (*both hands were arthritic*). After each manual treatment I would apply red oil and massage it into her hands, wrists and forearms.

Red oil is an oil-based infusion of safflower oil and powdered cayenne pepper that is mixed together and allowed to sit in a cool dark place for a week and then strained through cheese cloth and used as a medicated oil. Red oil, used topically, increases local blood circulation and relieves pain. The old doctors that I trained with in Chicago taught me this and years later you could buy cayenne pepper products in pharmacies. I still prefer to make my own.

I would mention that in my herbal and manual therapy training I was taught to use medicated (herbal) topical preparations and to rub them into affected areas, such as arthritic joints. This was at a time when the medical profession was “debunking” this practice and these products as a health fraud because as they stated, “The skin is a barrier and these products cannot get through it.” Jump ahead a few decades and you have medical physicians using hormone and other drug patches....

I continued to treat her with limited success. Each treatment gave her a few days of relief, but we were not getting to the cause which I had identified as inflammation resulting from her diet (*and worsened by her occupation*). She had shared with me that she was a wonderful German cook and the meals that she prepared of roasts and rumps, and potatoes and noodles, were also heavily combined with sauces and gravies.

That diet alone, loaded with meat, fat, and sugar would have been enough to fuel inflammation, but then she told that every evening after dinner she and her husband would retire to their family room to watch television and to eat sausage and to drink a few beers. This had been their practice throughout 30 years of marriage.

I have never been one of those doctors that loads patients up with supplements and a long list of changes that must be made immediately. I believe that it is the slow and gradual changes that will stick. I suggested to her that she and her husband consider making some healthy vegetable substitutions to their evening meal and late-night snack. Here is her exact response to me, “Life would not be worth living without beer and sausage.” I have never forgotten her words.

This is maybe where I first realized that food is an addiction like any other addiction and that to be effective in treating diet related diseases I needed to understand addiction and to use addiction treatment strategies with patients, no different than treating alcohol or drug addiction.

Two weeks after our “beer and sausage” conversation she arrived for her appointment at my office. She was not herself and she was obviously very depressed and sad. I asked her what was wrong, and she shared with me that her husband had suddenly died from a heart attack.

He had gone to his cardiologist for a heart checkup and stress test. He was told after the exam that his heart was healthy and that there were no concerns. On his way home, he lived two blocks from the hospital and had walked, he fell dead in the hospital parking lot. A sudden death from cardiac arrest.

For those of you that have followed these posts, and who think that my statements on diet and alcohol, especially alcohol, may be “extreme”, I assure that from my perspective in treating thousands of patients over several decades, in pain and suffering from bad diets and alcohol, I am not extreme.

What is extreme, is the processed food, alcohol and tobacco industries that hide the facts from people to profit from the sale of their products which contribute to pain, disease and death.

Life is indeed worth living without beer and sausage.”

Written by,
Dr. Gregory Lawton.

Part II

“It doesn't do much good to throw a bunch of facts at people. If you have not reached their hearts your efforts to help will not be effective. If you skip ahead on this story, read the last four paragraphs.

The Reachable, Teachable Moment

Above is describe a sad case where I was not able to convince my patient of the need to make certain dietary changes to the family diet plan and soon after my conversation with her, her husband died of a sudden heart attack. By no means would this be the last time that I would fail in my efforts to convince a patient to make critical lifestyle changes.

This is a problem in all of health care, patients who will not accept the truth and who are unwilling to make needed changes, even for their own benefit and the benefit of those that they love. In defense of my brothers and sisters in the medical profession the system is flooded with patients who will not change their dietary habits. Often spouses, or significant others, in the patient's life will not help the patient, even to save their life. So, the question is, “How can we assist people in understanding the relation of diet and lifestyle to disease? Let's discuss the reachable, teachable moment.

Early in my health care education and training I was blessed by the convergence of several critical factors comprised of knowledge and values that are rarely seen in doctors and medicine today. The first of these factors was my awareness of the inherent spiritual nature of people and

the importance of spirituality in health and healing. This truth is at the root of holistic health care which is based upon treating the entire person, mind, body, and spirit.

The second factor was that I was blessed early in my career with being able to train under highly competent and selfless natural physicians, a few of whom as I have mentioned, either went to school or practiced in the late 1800's and early 1900's.

The next factor in my development was a meeting with Baha'i Hand of the Cause of God, Zikrullah Khadem. I met with Mr. Khadem at a time when I was questioning the path that I had chosen, and I was considering dropping out of my doctoral program. Mr. Khadem not only set me straight, he set me on a path I have never deviated from.

The final factor was the appearance, one after the other, of a series of mentors, each a master of their own disciplines, each with a profound knowledge to share with me.

I am blessed because I have met few other people who have been gifted with so many remarkable men and women in their lives. I will share the wisdom of one of these women with you.

Several years ago, I was traveling to a meeting at a hospital with Joan Laird. Joan was a physical education instructor at a community college and one of the foremost yoga instructors in Michigan. On the way to my presentation before the hospital board of directors and head of the cardiology department I expressed to Joan a sense of inadequacy and doubt regarding my ability to speak before this group. These are the words that Joan said to me, "Greg, you teach what you are. You cannot give a gift that you do not possess."

I would say that from that evening on I began to teach and practice from what I knew from my life and my heart to be true. Joan's words changed how I taught classes to my students and the deeply personal, often painful, conversations that I had with my patients about their health, losses, dying, and death.

Most of us have learned that you cannot change people's opinions, especially strongly held opinions on topics like religion and politics. But, if you listen to people, you may be able to gently change how they look at things. All great teachers have taught this way, not through argument but through examples, symbols and metaphors.

I have learned through conversations with patients, many of them in crisis, that facts and statistics don't change people, heartfelt conversations at the reachable, teachable moment changes people. When I am with a patient I am hoping that the reachable, teachable moment will appear. I attempt to guide the conversation in that direction by talking with my patients like

I would have a conversation with a close friend. Often this works, sometimes it doesn't.

Sometimes the conversation is about the changes that a patient needs to make to regain their health, and sometimes it is about accepting losses, or preparing to say goodbye to those they love. Along this healing path, I have learned that once somethings are broken, they cannot be fixed.

Once we have harmed or hurt ourselves through certain lifestyle behaviors recovery is not a right or a guarantee. That is why when I am working with a patient I hope that I have reached them in time and that they are receptive to the teachable moment.

I am reminded of a conversation with a young mother who had recently lost her infant daughter. She came to see me for a minor issue but during our conversation she began to talk about her grief at having lost her child. During our conversation, and beyond the pain of this loss, it became evident that her true pain was her anger with God and her loss of faith. After listening to her grief and anger to the point of tears and silence, I said to her, “Your daughter is still with you, and she is watching you and learning from you. What is it that you want to teach her about life and love?”

This was the reachable, teachable moment.



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