

Chapter 1

My Healing Journey

We love because it's the only true adventure.

Niki Giovanni

Friday evening. *Rob introduces himself to the group by telling the story of how he was inspired to become an oncologist, and to run cancer support groups.*

When I was a medical student, I didn't know what type of doctor I wanted to be. While psychiatry and working with people with addictions were interesting, what I really wanted to understand was how people cope with the stresses we all face. Medical school catered to my inclination to look at the world as a scientist but I felt there was more to life – something was beginning to awaken in me.

One day as I was browsing in the library, a book seemed to fall off the shelf into my hands. As I stood there, looking at this book, an inner electrical charge surged through me telling me to pay close attention. The book was called “Love, Medicine and Miracles” written by Dr. Bernie Siegel, a cancer surgeon from a prestigious medical school. Bernie was the type of physician who wanted to understand the human side of the cancer experience and was a pioneer in cancer support groups. He felt called to share the wisdom he had gained from his ‘exceptional’ patients, the ones who seemed to recover quickly from their treatments, whose tumours shrunk faster than expected, who lived longer than all expectations or who even defied the odds of being cured.

Bernie emphasized that his exceptional patients found meaning in their cancer experience and ways to express their love for the people in their lives and for life itself. The stories of ordinary people, showing great courage and strength in their cancer journey, touched me deeply. I remember crying as I read on the subway. From that point on I knew, more than anything, I wanted to be a cancer doctor and to run support groups for those dealing with the disease.

A Weekend with Bernie

At the end of medical school I learned Dr. Siegel was offering a cancer weekend program for people affected by cancer, followed by a two-day seminar for professionals who wanted to learn more about support groups. We were instructed to read several books including “I Ching”, a classic Chinese spiritual text, and a

book edited by Ram Dass called “How Can I Help?” It was as if I had been travelling through the desert for years and suddenly discovered water. I couldn’t wait to go.

At the weekend program, about 180 people affected by cancer gathered into what looked like a high-school auditorium. I sat in the front row like a keen medical student, wondering what great words of wisdom Bernie would offer this group. How would he inspire us? What lessons would he teach us?

Bernie appeared plainly dressed and, as he leaned into the microphone on Friday evening, his first words were “Hi, I’m Bernie Siegel. I’d like to start out with each of you telling a little bit of your story.” With that, he gestured to a man sitting in the back of the room “You sir, can you start us off?” To my amazement, each person stood up in turn and told a little bit of their story.

I remember a young man there with his mother who had ovarian cancer. He sobbed openly, worrying he would lose her. Most everyone was wiping tears from their eyes. Another woman had brought a dead chicken to the seminar and waved it at the group exclaiming that a sense of humour was critical to recovery – we all laughed along.

Story after story, each person shared from their heart and everyone listened intently. The energy in the room was both peaceful and vibrant, and I felt surrounded by compassion and caring. This was my first experience of the magic of a support group. By the time it was my turn, I told the group I had learned more about the human side of cancer in two short hours than I had in all of medical school.

Learning from my Patients

I returned to Ottawa to start my specialist training in Radiation Oncology with that same attitude of trying to learn from the people I was serving every day. More than just providing the best physical care and treating the whole person, I wanted to know how cancer was affecting their lives and what it really meant to them. I learned that listening to a person’s story can be therapeutic and that being able to provide a space where people can share their scariest thoughts and darkest feelings provides a level of healing in and of itself.

Early on in my career, I attended a spirituality and health conference and, for the second time in my life, I felt like I was coming home. I committed myself to ask my patients about their spirituality in a respectful and non-judgmental way during the initial consultation.

The first patient I saw, on the Monday morning after the conference, was an elderly woman with a highly curable breast cancer. Slumped over in her chair, she seemed shaky and nervous. Being jet-lagged and a bit irritable, I just wanted to get to the end of the consultation so I could reassure her that the treatment would be easy and her chance of cure was high. But I forced myself to ask the question “Are you comfortable talking about your spirituality or religion?”

It was as if an inner light had been turned on in her. She sat up straighter in the chair and leaned forward; her face began to shine. “Oh yes, Doctor!” and she went on to recount how she was looking forward to seeing her deceased husband in Heaven. She told me of waking up on the day of her breast cancer surgery with the feeling that the spirit of her husband was lying in the bed beside her. She had felt a great sense of peace and no longer worried about the surgery that day. The presence began to leave and gave her a reassuring pat on the shoulder in the same way her husband had done in their life together. I was touched by her story, and felt I understood her so much better just by asking a simple question.

Many of my other patients shared their spiritual perspectives with me. Another woman, with an early breast cancer, seemed very relaxed during the initial consultation. She explained she wasn't worried about dying but wanted to survive for her young son. She went on to say she didn't pray to be cured of her cancer. Instead she prayed to God to be given the strength to face whatever arises. I was silenced by the power of this insight and kept thinking about her for days afterwards. Like this wise young woman, so many of my other patients have shared of themselves over the years and I am truly grateful for the opportunity to learn and grow from their wisdom.

The Science of the Body-Mind-Spirit Connection

While I was learning from my patients, I was also reviewing the scientific literature to understand what people needed to do to heal from their cancer. Over fifteen years ago, when I first began this investigation, the mainstream scientific community didn't seem interested in health promotion. But in the last few years, science has been showing that simple effective health habits like exercise, a

healthy diet, sleep, and relaxation techniques can make a tremendous difference in a person's health, and even in the chance of recovery from cancer.

Science has also been proving the connection between body, mind and spirit. It was fascinating to read about the hundreds of published case reports of people who have undergone spontaneous remission from their cancer. In support of what Bernie Siegel wrote about in "Love, Medicine and Miracles", these remarkable survivors possess certain attitudes and characteristics.

I learned they tap into their innate healing potential by living an authentic, autonomous, and peaceful life filled with purpose and love. They have a deep belief in their body's ability to heal and yet don't worry about future outcomes. They no longer view recurrence of their cancer or even death as a failure and instead put their energy into the things they can control. They listen to their own intuition and the feedback of their body in creating and following a recovery program. They release any sense of guilt about fully loving and supporting themselves. And they also reconnect with their sense of community and reclaim the joy that comes from being of service to others. In healing themselves, they facilitate healing in their loved ones.

I began to share these teachings at public talks and organized a weekly support group for people affected by a cancer diagnosis. (The full story of meeting Dr. Timothy Walker and how we created the 'Skills for Healing Weekend Retreats' is captured in the introductory chapter of this book.)

My Passion to Share

As I stand up in front of a group at the start of every retreat, I feel so grateful to each and every one of the participants for being there, and sharing their stories with me. I know I'm living the dream of a young medical student from twenty years ago. I love this work and feel that I have been buoyed along on my own spiritual journey by these ordinary yet remarkable people.

In the weeks and months preceding each retreat, I set the intention to be a compassionate and wise facilitator, and to be a clear conduit to the profound insights and perspectives I've learned from my patients and participants over the years. I also pray for each and every one of the attendees. I pray that they may gain knowledge and insight, that they may find strength and happiness, and that they may find healing in a way that is just right for them whether it be in body, mind or spirit.

May this also be so for you.
