

Story-Telling...Finding Meaning in Work

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*"Life is never made unbearable by circumstances,
but only by lack of meaning and purpose."*

— Viktor E. Frankl

In 2010 the Gallup organization published the results of an extensive study on what people believe contributes to their wellbeing. The study identified five "essential elements of wellbeing" that included Career Well Being, Social Well Being, Financial Well Being, Physical Well Being, and Community Well Being (Rath & Harter, 2010). A closer look at the dimensions of Career Well Being makes clear that the word "career" is very broadly defined. The career category focuses on the question "**How do you occupy your time everyday and do you like what you do?**" In other words, does a person find meaning...purpose...joy...satisfaction in what she/he does with their life each day? The Career element was found to be the most important element of wellbeing, even more important than Financial.

With that in mind I would like to describe a workplace story-telling group designed to remind participants of the essential value and meaning of the work they do every day. For the past 8+ years I have served as a consulting psychotherapist to The Center for Physician Wellbeing at Florida Hospital in Orlando. The purpose of this unique program is to provide services in the form of consultation, education, collegial engagement, and counseling that serves to support and/or restore the wellbeing of the 2,500 physicians on staff at nine affiliated hospitals.

This program was established 13+ years ago in response to a growing awareness and concern that physicians were experiencing significant stress as a result of changes in the healthcare system, stress that can result in burnout. Burnout is defined as "...an erosion in values, dignity, spirit and will – and erosion of the human soul" (Maslach & Leiter, 1997). Three well-documented symptoms—**physical and emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced sense of accomplishment**—are the hallmark symptoms of burnout (Maslach & Jackson 1981). Burnout can occur to people in any occupation but those in the helping professions including medicine, counseling, psychology, social work, education, among others, seem to be particularly at risk. Once thought to be a function of individual susceptibility—a flaw in the character, commitment, or behavior of the individual—researchers are coming to understand that the social environment plays a significant role in creating conditions that invite burnout. When the human side of work is ignored, or worse, when work is stripped of the opportunity to connect with others and be supported by others...people burnout (Maslach & Leiter, 1997).

How Can Sharing Stories About Work Help Prevent Burnout?

In the late 1990s, Rachel Naomi Remen, MD from the San Francisco Bay area was asking that very question. She was concerned about the wellbeing of medical students and medical residents and was looking for ways to help replenish the altruism and enthusiasm that had once propelled her students to pursue

***Finding Meaning in Medicine** is a conversation that invites physicians to speak from-the-heart physician-to-physician about personal experiences in their everyday life that have provided access to the deeper meaning of the practice of medicine. Each meeting is organized around an announced topic or theme.*

medicine. In her search for answers she established what has come to be called **Finding Meaning in Medicine** groups (Remen 2012). These story-telling experiences are now widely utilized by practicing physicians,

residents, fellows, and medical students as well as other health caregivers (nurses, techs, social workers, etc.). The format is deceptively simple: a facilitated group experience in which participants are invited to tell a story about their work with a patient, patient family, or other medical caregiver that captures a pre-identified topic or theme. What makes this group activity so powerful is that the concept of "meaning"...*meaning in the practice of medicine*...is so

seldom spoken of during medical school and residency training, and is almost never mentioned once a physician becomes immersed in the unrelenting demands and stresses of the everyday practice of medicine.

For the past 8 years we have been establishing and facilitating *Finding Meaning in Medicine* groups in our hospitals. The format described below reflects the evolution of the program but should not be seen as the only way to conduct this group. Along the way we have experimented with inviting the spouse/significant other of the physician to attend, we have included hospital administrators, and we have on occasion included other hospital-based caregivers.

Format of the Group

Finding Meaning in Medicine is co-facilitated by a physician leader and a mental health professional. The physician leader extends the invitation to her/his colleagues and is the host and convener of the event. *Finding Meaning in Medicine* groups are typically held in the home of the physician leader but other locations can also be utilized.

The group is based on an “open group” format; attendance is open to all who are invited. Typically the physician leader extends an invitation to 20-30 physicians with the belief that 10-16 doctors will actually attend. The group normally convenes immediately after work.

As people gather and begin to mentally shift from the hectic pace of the practice of medicine... they are invited to socialize. A light dinner is provided.

At the appointed time, the physician leader welcomes the participants and introduces the topic for the evening. The topic or theme is either chosen by the participants who were in attendance at the previous group or by the leaders. The topic is usually one word, examples we have used include: *Gratitude, Empathy, Prayer, Spirit/Spirituality, Listening, Suffering, Dignity, Fear, Humility, Forgiveness, Compassion, Mistakes, Collaboration, Surrender, Awe, Integrity, Mystery* or the topic could be a short phrase: *My most memorable patient, The moment I knew I wanted to be a doctor, or The time my patient healed me.*

The mental health professional co-facilitator reviews the ground rules and explains his or her role. It is important to begin each gathering by reminding participants of the ground rules. This ritual ensures that

AGENDA

6:00 pm: Social & Dinner

6:45 pm: Welcome (Physician Leader)

- Silence: Invite people to take a minute of silence to transition from where we have been to being fully present in this room and in the group.
- Introductions: Determine if there are people in attendance who have not met – if so, allow everyone to introduce themselves

6:50 pm: Overview (Physician Leader)

- Purpose of Finding Meaning in Medicine - FMM is an opportunity to speak from our hearts about how we find meaning in the work we do as physicians.
- Tonight's Topic: Tonight we have chosen the topic of _____.
- We ask you to reflect on how _____ contributes to making your work meaningful.

6:55 pm: Ground Rules (Facilitator: MH Professional)

- Speak...when/if you are moved to do so
- Be...as fully present as possible (step out if you need to make or take a call)
- Listen...deeply, attentively, and without judgment.
- Resist...any urge to problem solve, give advice, or fix anything or anyone
- Respect...confidentiality of what is said

Explain Facilitator Role

“I’m here to help guide the process of our discussion – to prevent us from drifting into topics that take us away from “finding meaning in medicine.” With your permission I will intervene if/when I notice that the discussion may be drifting away from the announced topic. May I have your permission to intervene?”

7:00 pm: Begin Conversation (Physician Leader)

- How has _____ contributed to making your work meaningful?

8:20 pm: Wrap-Up Reflections (Physician Leader and (Facilitator)

- Choose a topic for next meeting. (If appropriate)

everyone, veterans of the group as well as first-timers, understand the expectations of the group experience (See Ground Rules in box above). Once the topic is introduced it is important to provide a few moments of silent reflection while the topic marinates. Allow silence to do its work...someone will speak. However, the physician leader should be prepared to share his/her story in the event that no one is ready to speak. Participation in terms of sharing a story is completely optional. Time should be given so that everyone has an opportunity to speak however there may be times when a member chooses to remain silent.

The Experience within the Group

One of the beautiful things about a *Finding Meaning in Medicine* group is that doctors can tell their story to other doctors who “get it”—who understand the medical implications involved with the patient or the situation being described. As a result, the doctor does not need to interrupt the human side of their story by explaining or translating medical terms or patient conditions. One-by-one doctors tell their stories...there are nods of understanding, sprinkles of laughter and sometimes tears...and always knowing looks exchanged between participants. Acceptance and colleague support are palpable in the room; it’s a safe place to be heard, known, and understood.

Along the way, during the *Finding Meaning in Medicine* experience, there may be times when the mental health professional makes some brief redirecting intervention. Typically these interventions occur when the discussion gets “too medical” or when “advice-giving” begins to creep into the discussion that can follow from a story, or if the discussion in any way becomes “political” (hospital or healthcare politics). These group norm-redirecting interventions are generally gentle and in the vast majority of cases the group redirects itself.

As the evening winds down, the facilitators observe that the time for closure is drawing near; silent members are invited to speak if they so choose. Sometimes during the story telling a topic surfaces that might be a good topic for the next gathering. The facilitator might ask if the group wants to identify that topic for the next gathering. The group closes by expressing appreciation to the host for the evening. Typically, there are 10-15 minutes of post group social activity as people wind down the discussion and, perhaps, privately express support or acknowledgement to a storyteller.

Reported Benefits

Participants in this program have consistently reported enhanced wellbeing in the form or improved collegial relationships, increased ease of professional collaboration, and a renewed appreciation for the emotional rewards inherent in the practice of medicine. A few years ago we invited 50 physician participants from one of our hospitals to respond to an anonymous survey designed to identify the benefits to them of participating in the *Finding Meaning in Medicine* experience. We received 18 responses to the survey. One of our survey questions asked “*how have the “Finding Meaning in Medicine discussions influenced me and/or my practice of medicine?”*” The top five responses were:

These gatherings...

- helped me establish new collaborative relationships with physician colleagues
- helped me be more mindful in the relationships with my patients
- positively impacted my working relationships with my physician colleagues
- helped me to remember my power to make a difference
- expanded my understanding of my physician colleagues as people

In a video project we did about *Finding Meaning in Medicine* groups we interviewed seven physicians who have attended at least five times and asked them to tell us why this experience has been of value. The comment that seemed to say the most was simple, yet so very powerful.

“I don’t come here looking for anything in particular, but the reason I come back is because I often leave with something I didn’t know I needed.”

What About *Finding Meaning in Counseling, or Teaching, or...*

Physicians aren't the only caregivers who are vulnerable to loss of professional vigor and burnout. This approach is a timeless group story-telling activity that can have wide application to any homogenous group of people who are connected and share a common understanding of some important aspect of their life's work.

Professional counselors, psychologists, teachers, social workers, child care workers, clergy, and even counselor educators are also challenged by the work they do to maintain their professional vitality and personal aliveness in the face of a myriad of client, institutional and societal stressors/ depressors that can drain their compassion and enthusiasm. I have conducted this program three times for different counselor groups (ASGW National Conference, local Mental Health Counselors Association, and local Marriage and Family Therapists Association). Every time the response was enthusiastic and the feedback parallels what the physicians have expressed in reaction to their participation.

Speaking personally...my "**career well being**" has been made more meaningful as a result of helping to remind others that there is meaning in what they do.

References

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