

# Finding Meaning in Medicine: Reclaiming the Soul of Practice

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A small gray rock, once a part of the Temple of Aesculapius, sits on the desk in the office, a reminder of the sacred nature of our profession. The physicians who trod on this stone would have been in awe of our technology and therapeutic reach, but they would have understood our values perfectly. This shared lineage has come down to us in the prayer of Maimonides and the Oath of Hippocrates; compassion, harmlessness, service, covenant and reverence for life are still the values that shape the meaning of our work. This deep river of meaning can provide us with the strength, wisdom and guidance we need to meet the challenges of practice today.

These are difficult times. Medicine is in an unprecedented crisis of spiritual as well as economic dimensions. The pressures of the marketplace often violate the fundamental values that are the foundation of our profession. Abiding principles as basic as the belief that every human life matters and everyone is worthy of our best care run counter to the economic priorities of our daily practice. Consequently, many physicians now suffer from compassion fatigue, a syndrome of

physical, emotional and spiritual exhaustion resulting, in part, from the widening divergence between professional and organizational values.

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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 students have learned what they have come to do, but may have forgotten why they have come.

Meaning is the antecedent of commitment and is often a doorway to spiritual experience. Maintaining a lifelong commitment to the practice of medicine requires us to conserve and strengthen this dimension of our work, to cultivate the meaning of our work as deliberately and as skillfully as we have pursued our medical expertise. As physicians we have been taught to believe that our strength lies in our scientific knowledge and to identify with our expertise and competence. Sustaining ourselves may now require that we identify with our shared purpose as well as our individual specialty.

Meaning strengthens us, not by changing our lives, but by transforming our experience of our lives. A Sufi parable

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about three stonemasons building a cathedral in the Middle Ages clarifies the power of meaning to transform the experience of our work. Each of these men is cutting rocks into precisely measured blocks. Approaching the first man, you ask what he's doing. Angrily he says, "Idiot! Use your eyes! They bring me a rock, I cut it into a block, they take it away, they bring me another rock, I cut it into a block, they take it away. I've been doing this since I was old enough to work and I'll be doing it until the day that I die." But the second man answers this question quite differently. He smiles and says, "I'm earning a living for my beloved family. I have built a home, there is food on our table and the children are growing strong." When you ask the third man the same question, he responds with 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 routine task. Finding a personal meaning in one's work imbues even the most routine of tasks with satisfaction and even joy. Meaning enables us to recognize the authentic value of our work and of our lives. And in times of crisis meaning heals us, not by numbing our pain or distracting us from our problems or comforting us, but by reminding us of who we are and what we stand for. Shared meaning reminds us that we do not stand alone.

As physicians, most of us lead far more meaningful lives than we realize. Because we are distracted by time pressure and the countless details of practice, it is possible for us to do profoundly meaningful work without ever experiencing a sense of meaning. The meaning of the work is there, nonetheless. Many of today's medical care organizations offer little support for incorporating the traditional values of our

profession into the daily care of patients. However, we cannot wait for others to recognize our needs and devise programs that will help us reclaim the soul of our work. Doctoring has never been more difficult and so it may be part of our responsibility as professionals to fight for our sense of meaning against fatigue and numbness, overwork and unreasonable expectations—to find ways to strengthen it in ourselves and in each other.

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a community of shared values and commitment can create a powerful support environment for personal, spiritual and moral inquiry. In community, physicians of widely differing expertise may help one another reclaim a deeper sense of professional satisfaction in simple and low cost ways. One such strategy is *Finding Meaning in Medicine (FMM)*, a program developed by the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness at Commonweal. This story telling and discussion group process has enabled physicians nationwide to rediscover and strengthen their sense of calling and to find new inspiration in their work. After implementing a highly successful two-year pilot program in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Institute now supports almost 200 doctors around the country as they start FMM groups in their medical communities.

Meeting together in FMM groups once a month for two or three hours to discuss one of the fundamental

experiences of a physician's work has a surprisingly powerful effect on physicians. Sharing personal and professional stories on such topics as healing, compassion, harmlessness, failure, loss, grace, listening, integrity, awe and mystery, draws upon the universal experiences that we have as physicians and reminds us of our collective purpose and calling. The opportunity to discuss the meaning of our work with colleagues is a rare experience and doctors report that the deep level of support, understanding and insight found in such an exchange is deeply validating. Many comment on the power of a safe, non-judgmental and non-competitive relationship among physicians to strengthen in them the very qualities they are seeking to restore to their professional lives and to medicine as a whole. Tapping into the hidden meaning of our work through story telling recalls us to the spiritual integrity of our profession and enables us to

form an ongoing community of shared values. Many of those who participate in *Finding Meaning in Medicine* groups are surprised to find that they can live closer to their values and recover a greater joy and inspiration in the day-to-day practice of medicine.

It is the deeper meaning of our work, our shared purpose and not our science, that will sustain us. Our shared purpose may indeed sustain the culture as well. The cultural role of those committed to compassion has been beautifully remembered in a 14th century story from the Kabbalah, the teachings of Jewish mystical tradition. The legend of the L'Omed Vov suggests that the continuation of the world depends on the existence of a minimum of 36 people of compassion who are capable of responding to the suffering that is an innate part of the human condition. If at any time there are fewer than 36 such people alive, the world as we know it will come to an end.

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The L'Omed Vov respond to suffering, not in order to save the world but simply because the suffering of others touches them and matters to them. Their capacity to respond to the suffering around them, to all suffering, with compassion blesses and sustains the world.

Perhaps our struggle to preserve the innate values of our profession goes far deeper than the sustainability of medicine and ultimately influences the sustainability of the culture. Recent events have demonstrated that our culture's predilection for knowledge and expertise may not restore and heal the world. Embracing the values of compassion, harmlessness, service and reverence for life may be more important today than in any time in recent memory.

To learn more about **Finding Meaning in Medicine or the other programs of the Institute**, please visit us at: [www.meaninginmedicine.org](http://www.meaninginmedicine.org), or email [ishi@igc.org](mailto:ishi@igc.org), or call 415/868-2642.



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