

# *What We Weren't Taught in School*

## **Reflections of a Health Professional By Charles Garfield, PhD**

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*When my nephew Teddy was nine years old, he asked me one day, "What kind of work do you do?" I told him I work at a medical school and my job was to teach doctors and nurses how to care.*

*Teddy stared at me, incredulous, and said, "You mean they forgot?"*

Thirty-five years ago, a generation of young adults, perplexed by the fog of the Vietnam War, tried not to forget how to care. Today, the best minds and hearts of a new generation face a similar challenge. Some of these men and women, health professionals committed deeply to protecting life, asked me recently, "What can we learn from war and its deadly consequences?"

I began my answer with a question: "Can physicians and all health professionals learn to view our caring work, in the words of William James—arguably America's greatest psychologist—as a moral equivalent of war?" That is, as something heroic that "will be as compatible with our spiritual selves as war has proved itself to be incompatible"?

What follows is the rest of my response: As a young man, I got up every day with a message: "The world can be a tough place, and winners are better off than losers. So work hard, do everything you can to excel, to stand out, and good things will come your way." I certainly didn't understand the relentless drives that spurred me to excel, or whether they served a purpose higher than personal advancement. I did feel pressured to excel because I was convinced that bad things happen to those who failed to do so.

Excelling constantly only got harder as time went on. In graduate school, one of my mathematics professors told me that all the great discoveries in the field were made by a half-dozen geniuses. I wondered how in the world I could ever rise to such a level. Years later, I heard my medical students and colleagues voice similar worries about where they ranked in their own pantheon of health care high achievers, as if they were competing in a battle zone with fellow students or coworkers.

If these reflections resonate with your experience, if you're laboring under an intense pressure to succeed in the eyes of the world—and in your own eyes—then I invite you to slow down, consult your heart, and consider the following reflections.

## ***Five Lessons for Health Professionals***

### **1. Nothing meaningful, important, or deeply satisfying ever came from composing a life by the numbers.**

Trying to succeed by sticking to a straight and narrow career path may be predictable for some ambitious people who seek stature and reward. But the well-paved road is always someone else's road leading to someone else's life. Avoid walking in lockstep mimicry of anyone else's version of what your career is supposed to be.

Don't let anyone else, no matter how well intentioned, sell you a version of the good life or the good career that isn't your own.

Someone else's good life or career will not be as good for you as advertised.

What can be difficult but soulsatisfying is to let go of the blind desire to excel and instead embrace the lifelong work of knowing yourself. What values most move you? What offers you enduring happiness in your work? What does the world most need from you? Who is your heart calling you to be?

### **2. Life's two most important questions are: What is the good person? What is the good society?**

Humanity is facing unbearable pressure— war, terrorism, environmental degradation. At this crucial time, we must choose either to continue warring with “enemies” at home and around the world or to learn to cooperate and live justly. No man or woman is an island, on the job or elsewhere. We're all in this life together. If my end of the boat sinks, so does yours. Don't let anyone convince you that “looking out only for number one” is a way to live. We are all cocreating our shared world, and each of us is responsible for doing our best to serve both ourselves and others.

I care more about your values than your diplomas or your investment portfolio. I care about your willingness to be tough on problems yet tender on people more than your success in the rat race. As Lily Tomlin said, “The problem with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat.”

### **3. Pay close attention to the choices you make every day.**

Don't just drift through life or leap impulsively at each hot new advancement opportunity. When I left a promising career in space science, after the Apollo Eleven moon landing, to study psychology at U.C. Berkeley, colleagues and friends told me I was making a serious mistake. It didn't matter to them that I had discovered my life's calling and that it focused on helping people rather than solving equations. My experience on the first lunar landing team taught me that Sir George Pickering, the renowned clinical researcher and Professor of Medicine at Oxford University, was correct when he said, “Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts.”

Later, when I turned down tempting academic appointments in psychology to found a volunteer organization named Shanti, which cared for seriously ill people and their loved ones, a new set of authorities told me I was crazy. Somehow I trusted my inner sense that I was making the growth choice, not the fear choice, and that this caring work was constitutionally right for me. I had learned from my patients that *the need to care for others is as deep as the need to care for ourselves*. Founding and leading Shanti, which became the first community-based AIDS service organization in the U.S., taught me that my career choices might matter profoundly to both myself and others.

I began to understand the forces that induce so many of us to remain bystanders in our time of promise and peril. What will it take, I wondered, to awaken the conscience of bystanders in the face of the environmental, political, and social dilemmas that confront us? What are the psychological and physiological effects on the bystander of witnessing but failing to respond to the suffering that surrounds us?

**4. If you want to be happy on the job, in school, and in your personal life, remember that “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.”**

Thinking well is necessary, but insufficient, for a life well lived. Our capacities for empathy and compassion for those in need are every bit as vital as critical thinking. Kindness is never optional, or somehow less important than the so-called “hard realities” measured in scientific calculations and presented in evidence-based research reports.

The need *to* care is as basic as the need *for* care. Compassion means “to suffer with.” It’s an imaginative entrance into the world of another person’s pain. Through compassion, we close the distance between one person’s experience and another’s, and we start to bridge the divisions between us.

Our society needs caring communities of compassionate and skilled souls far more than it needs a slew of striving, upwardly mobile high achievers whose focus is on themselves and their own desires.

After nearly thirty-five years of serving men and women who have been left out of our nation’s safety net—the poor, hungry, homeless, and infirm; the social casualties whose presence we’ve convinced ourselves is normal since “they’ve always been with us”—I’ve learned that these neighbors of ours are far more like us than they are different.

Today, stress overload, harmful budget cuts, staff shortages, and increasingly bureaucratic models of organization have, sadly, become the norm in health care. Organizations suffering from chronic stress disorder, operating with a siege mentality, create the conditions for burnout and compassion fatigue that will erode your spirit and exhaust your soul. All too often, our organizations lose track of their caregiving missions and focus their time and energies not on superior service delivery but on money and staying alive—as organizations—while slipping more and more into hierarchical rigidity and poorly executed downsizings that end up crushing the survivors. The problem, of

course, is that we then have to serve our patients with overburdened, crushed people whose energies are focused on surviving the day.

Such empathy-eroding circumstances will eventually find many of us far from our original calling of giving care. Eventually we may discover, in the words of Hermann Hesse, that “we kill at every step, not only in wars....We kill when we close our eyes to poverty and suffering.... All hardheartedness, all indifference ... is nothing else than killing.”

The quality of service we offer our patients will be no better than the quality of service we offer one another. Our organizations would work far better if they were structured as chains of service rather than chains of command. We need to get our houses in order internally, to create caring organizations in which to do our caring work. Simply put, the old command and control, boss-subordinate paradigm is dead.

It's an old story that we need to replace with a team-based partnership story in which a chain of service exists from the boardroom to the patient; a story of compassionate service delivery that will gratify us far more than chasing the phantoms of power and prestige.

### **5. Never forget that you are a miracle, an expression of the miraculous never before seen on Earth.**

Now there's something to put on your resume! I remember an old poster from the 1970s. At the top was a photo of babies in a maternity ward—beautiful, wide-eyed miracles, overflowing with life and fidgeting with promise and potential. Directly underneath was a second photo of passengers on a New York subway staring morosely in a hypnotic trance, waiting for their ride, their day, and—unconsciously—their lives to be over.

At the bottom of the poster were the words, “What happened?” Each of us was once a maternity-ward miracle, and each of us can avoid the fate of those who go through life hypnotized by someone else's dream.

I can assure you that one day when your heart is broken or when you're grieving the loss of a loved one or when you want to succeed badly at something but fail instead, it'll be a boost beyond measure to remember how much of a miracle you are.

And, as you attend to your patients each day, remember that they, too, are expressions of the miraculous—and they need and deserve the wisest and most caring guidance you can offer them.

One day you may find yourself speaking to a young man or woman wrestling with a tension of opposites that lives within each of us; someone struggling to reconcile the hostility of aggression and the kindness of compassionate care. Look him, or her, in the eye, smile, and tell that young person you have the utmost faith in his capacity to further health care's sacred mission, our moral equivalent of war. And how fulfilling his life will be when he aligns his own dream with that caring mission and makes his unique contribution to the greater good that sustains us all.

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