

December 2013

Greetings:

Writing this part of my news letter is daunting! I can select only a few topics from all that I have learned and thought about over the year. Moreover, I am writing to a diverse audience. My plans for last January's break included starting a website and learning more Functional Medicine. (Please visit the Institute for Functional Medicine website – IFM.org for more information.) Unfortunately, much of my time was consumed by the work involved in learning and implementing the new insurance procedure codes/documentation requirements. Part of my summer suffered a similar fate – the prescription monitoring program – PMP. I want to use the PMP to illustrate how I am dealing with the challenge of “to thine own self be true” that we all face.

Unfortunately for all of us, many externally directed changes are not worthy or transparent. We feel demoralized and can respond with ultimately unhealthy defenses to cope with feeling disrespected, unheard, and placed in a double bind. Instinctive responses of feeling threatened, angry, or even inadequate are as natural as breathing. So how do you maintain dignity and human freedom in the face of an external institutional change? Let's work through the example of my ordinary stressor – the compulsory PMP. What is required by the PMP? I must log in to their website, enter your name, gender, birth date, and check on your recent controlled prescription medications. I must record the request number in your chart. I cannot write a prescription without checking and documenting. I can imagine that in some settings this program is important and helpful to identify prescription drug abusers. Since August, I have been using the program to check on your history for each prescription I write. I have about 300 people in my active practice. I have not found one scrap of information using the PMP that has caused me concern about even one of you, nor has it been clinically helpful to us in any way. Yet, I am not allowed to opt out of the process. So an external force deemed what is “good” and important. I didn't agree that this new law was “good” for me or my patients. As I dealt with this new task every day, I noticed I was feeling anxious, guilty, and frustrated. After my initial response, I wanted to come to terms with this mandate, a tough job given that my body felt tense too. I used the 4/7/8 technique (see below) to help me shift my body to a calmer state so I could think more clearly.

After shifting, my challenge was to gain insight. In life you too will experience events that seem upsetting. Hopefully, you will go deeper by inquiring of yourself “is my stress a result of the event itself – the “what” or the “how” it unfolded, or both? So I asked myself that very question. Was the distress I felt from the “what” or the “how?” Was it from both? Digging deeper I noticed I was choosing to experience this task, the PMP, as a waste of time. I felt it was taking away from the sanctity of our session. I could not even maintain eye contact or I might make mistakes on the data entry. I felt I was exchanging the sacred interpersonal connection to procure inhuman and irrelevant legally mandated data. I realized I resented what seemed to me a needless chore, the threat of penalties/punishment if I didn't comply, and the potential loss to our connection. I resented the implementation of the law in which I had no vote. It dawned on me that I could choose to lose my subjective freedom or feel like an object. Instead, I intentionally chose to feel gratitude for my perturbation – to seek answers as to why this particular event might trigger my frustration. I asked myself how I could regain my integrity while performing the task.

I reminded myself to seek and embrace my inner awareness. I am a Spiritual Being traveling through this life in a contingent human body. Once I identified the conflict the event had stirred up, I recalled that no one can hurt the beauty of our working connection. I reaffirmed my vow to maintain mindfulness, yet to keep centered. I needed a phrase or mantra I could think of each time I used the PMP. I worked to find my “touchstone” for that moment.

To do so I reflected on how often each of you share similar life frustrations with me. You tell me that in your role as teachers, state workers, professionals, parents, students, etc., you too are struggling with adapting to changes that often diminish your autonomy and wisdom for the “good.” How do you stay “true” to yourself? The mantra I employ is that each time I do a PMP entry, I remind myself that I am gaining a unique glimpse into your daily lives. I use that insight to grow my compassion and understanding. What I am suggesting is to find a way to keep your inner balance and peace. This doesn't mean being passive, inflicted, and martyred (or in other words, suck it up). I do not believe that change is inherently degrading. With the right stimulus, I think we should challenge ourselves to

“kick it up a notch” and struggle to be better.

So to summarize, start with the stressor if your body feels upset, calm down with 4/7/8 relaxation response, heart math, yoga, etc. From there – self inquiry. Look closely at the situation – are you stirred up by the “what” or the “how” or both? Using your self-knowledge, what meaning are you giving to the situation? Last but not least, how can you find your touchstone or mantra to transform the occasion from objectification to reaffirmation of your deeper truths?

On a different topic, I attended several Functional Medicine conferences. In September, I took the Functional Medicine week-long foundation course again. There have been vital improvements to the matrix since my first class. I have kicked up my studying of Functional Medicine (witness submitting a case study). Studying Functional Medicine is hard on my ego and brings me to my knees on a regular basis. Just a few Sundays ago I attended a conference that showed me I have a lot of work to do to relearn the five cycles of methylation and the important role of genetic individuality on those cycles. I aspire to learn and implement this information because the goal is worthy and transparent. (More fluent knowledge of basic biochemistry and genetics will be important tools I can use to help you heal.) For me the only option is to work harder to learn because avoiding it would feel spiritually, ethically, and morally wrong. Paradigm shifting is not for the faint of heart. How amazingly fortunate I am to have the opportunity to gain knowledge to empower and heal!

In closing, I want to give you something tangible to consider adding to your set of healing tools. I want to share a technique I was taught during my functional medicine class. It is taught at the Mind Body Institute and by the integrative program run by Dr. Andrew Weil. For the sake of simplicity picture a teeter-totter in each of us. On one end is the sympathetic nervous system famous for “fight or flight.” On the other, the parasympathetic nervous system known as “rest and digest.” We often live in stress, which at times is adaptive. Yet a wise and well lived life is about achieving balance — hopefully within or at least by the end of each day. With work, home, families, etc., we often are not taking the time to shift to parasympathetic. This is a technique to try which takes about 80 seconds and is called 4/7/8. I love it. It works. It's simple. No equipment needed. You can start when you are in a very imbalanced state of sympathetic nervous system dominance and restore equilibrium. Free, simple, effective, and best of all – does no harm. I have enclosed a separate sheet with 4/7/8 on it so you can practice if you choose.

The way I was taught was to start by placing the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth just behind your front teeth. Keep your tongue in place throughout the practice. Softly lower your jaw. This technique is performed through an open mouth. Begin by breathing in to the count of four. Hold your breath for seven, then exhale for eight. Repeat the cycle three more times. If you get some relaxation but not sufficient, you can immediately repeat which often makes a big difference.

The beauty of real medicine is it embraces mind, body, spirit, and community. Last year we discussed how the energy you radiate when you are in balance (state of feeling love, beauty, gratitude) affects the people around you. When you choose to enhance your parasympathetic tone, you are availing yourself of the opportunity to take it one step closer to being able to shift and ground yourself in gratitude, love, and joy. This you do for you and it benefits others. How cool is that?

When I began my private practice back in 1993, I started what became a tradition of sending out Christmas cards with a handwritten individualized message. While this is a labor intensive process, I enjoyed thinking about the progress each of you made and sharing my thanks for the privilege of working with you. This year I am sad to say I have made the difficult decision not to send out handwritten cards. Several factors conspired to make sending the cards almost impossible. First, the unexpected complexity of submitting a case study to Functional Medicine. Talk about labor intensive! I was still working on the case during and after the Thanksgiving week. This ate up time I usually devoted to writing this letter which pushed my weekend availability further into December. Also, Thanksgiving seemed later this year. My secretary volunteers to meet with me on sequential Sundays where we spend two or three 8 hour days. She helps by addressing and stamping the cards as I write them. She's away one of the Sundays. Between getting this letter ready and mailed out, the case finished and submitted (BTW the deadline is Dec 16th), and her absence, I didn't have the time to get it all done. I plan to resume the tradition next year. Perhaps this is an opportunity for you to let me know if getting my card is important to you so I can decide going forward

whether or not to resume sending cards.

With Love and Gratitude,

Nina Pesante, MD