

The Journey

One day you finally knew
what you had to do, and began,
though the voices around you
kept shouting
their bad advice--
though the whole house
began to tremble
and you felt the old tug
at your ankles.
"Mend my life!"
each voice cried.
But you didn't stop.
You knew what you had to do,
though the wind pried
with its stiff fingers
at the very foundations,
though their melancholy
was terrible.
It was already late
enough, and a wild night,
and the road full of fallen
branches and stones.
But little by little,
as you left their voices behind,
the stars began to burn
through the sheets of clouds,
and there was a new voice
which you slowly
recognized as your own,
that kept you company
as you strode deeper and deeper
into the world,
determined to do
the only thing you could do--
determined to save
the only life you could save.

—Mary Oliver

I was born in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia when my parents were in the Peace Corps. I grew up on a small subsistence farm in rural central Pennsylvania. I was the oldest of 4 kids. We raised dairy goats, chickens, and rabbits for food. As a young person growing up on a farm, I learned that birth, life, death, and renewal all have a place and a purpose. I spent my childhood reading and playing outside and roaming the forests and fields around our home. I would say it was an idyllic childhood.

Like many teens, I became more curious about human nature when I was in high school and I remember when I asked one of my favorite teachers some probing questions about why people do the things that they do, he recommended that I read “Man’s Search for Meaning” by Victor Frankl. This first hand account from within the horror of the concentration camps during the holocaust is a reflection on the truth of human nature and suffering. Reading it at that impressionable time in my life started me down a path of inquiry that I believe has led me to where I am today. What does it really mean to be human? What is the nature of suffering? Dr. Frankl said, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.” He said, “Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.”

When I finished high school I went on to attend Moravian College. It was the Fall of 1991. For those of you who have never heard of Moravian College, it is a small liberal arts college in the old steel town of Bethlehem, PA. Founded in 1742 by a 16 year old countess named Benigna Von Zinzendorf; the Moravians, who were persecuted and fled Germany in 1732 to settle the new world, believed that all people deserved an education, whether noble or ignoble, rich or poor, and that an education was the path to salvation. Growing up in rural Pennsylvania I experienced poverty and a lack of desire among many to broaden their view beyond their local experiences and the status quo, and while I don’t think I knew whether I needed salvation, I certainly had a sense that getting a college education might be a way for me to get out of the place where I had grown up. So I went to Moravian where I pursued a wide variety of interests, including music, theater, philosophy, religion, and the sciences. One particular course in Eastern Philosophies and Religions would forever change the way that I looked at the world and influence my life in ways that I didn’t know at the time. I read the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Tao de Ching, Vedanta for the Common Man, Siddharta, and other texts and distinctly remember the excitement of knowing that as I learned the history of Eastern philosophy, I was getting closer to answering some of the deepest questions that I had about myself, human nature, and life.

One of my best friends freshman year of college was from India. Her name was Parvathy, but we called her Sangita and she was an artsy intellectual who was quick to laugh. She was a Brahmin, which as she told me, meant that she was part of the highest of four classes in Hindu culture responsible for learning and teaching the Vedas or sacred Hindu texts. One day she offered to show me how to meditate. Parvathy instructed me how to sit with my spine tall and guided me to notice my breath. At first there were many thoughts that seemed to interrupt my focus but as I practiced it became easier to bring my attention to my breath and present moment awareness. At that time, I don’t think I knew what the benefits of meditation were, but I could tell immediately that I was more relaxed, more grounded, I felt better. So, I practiced.

From a Buddhist perspective, in order to understand Healing, we must first understand the nature of suffering. Dukkha is the Sanskrit word that is most often translated as meaning suffering, but it can also be translated as stress. It is the state of mind that occurs as a result of the root delusions, which include attachment, anger, and ignorance. Attachment to the things that make us who we are, the things we call “mine”. Like “this is my body, these are my thoughts, these are my material possessions, my car, my house, my family”. Suffering can also be caused by latching onto emotional states or thoughts, usually thoughts of the past or future. Because each of these things is impermanent and will be lost given enough time or even through our own death, attachment to anything is a source of suffering. So the Buddhist teaching is to let go of

these attachments. The second root delusion is anger. Anger is one particular emotional state that can cause harm to others, so logically it is often the cause of suffering to ourselves. Ponder for a moment how often anger might be the cause of your own suffering. The last root delusion is ignorance. Ignorance, in this context, is not a lack of knowledge per se, but rather the normal state of human knowing, or rather not knowing. We are all ignorant because we are not omniscient, we can not realize all of the consequences of our actions, we do not understand the true nature of other beings, and we do not understand why the world is exactly the way it is. So we often end up in situations where we do not take the best actions, or these actions have unintended consequences. Just reflect for a moment how often we think: "If only I had known this earlier..."

And so from the Buddhist perspective, healing is just a letting go of our attachment to all that is not permanent. It is through the practice of awareness that we can see our anger for what it is. It is through cultivation of wisdom that we can decrease the number of times that we act out of ignorance. What is left when we let go of these things is our true self, our true nature, who we really are, in this present moment. Letting go of attachment, anger, and ignorance is the same as letting go of suffering, and by letting go we are freed from the afflictions of the mind, body, and spirit.

When I was about 12 my mom had a severe episode of anxiety and depression and she was hospitalized for several months. While she was in the hospital, my dad did the best that he could to take care of us while continuing to work, and my brother and I pitched in to help with our younger sisters. We would go to a neighbor's house after school and often didn't eat dinner until late. Our usual bickering and fighting, that was our typical MO, stopped, and in many ways, we became closer as siblings during this time, strengthening our bonds and collective independence, but it was stressful. I worried about my mom, not knowing if she was going to get better. I worried about my dad and my brother and sisters too. My mom eventually recovered and came home, but I now know that those experiences, along with some genetic predisposition, and a propensity for negative thinking, probably contributed to my own experience of depression.

It was the second year of medical school and I was living in Philadelphia, totally out of my country mouse element. It was intense. Some of my class mates dropped out because of the pressures of family or studying and lack of sleep. I managed to do well in school, but without time to nurture my artistic self and little time to meditate, my life soon lost its meaning and I gradually became more and more depressed. If you've ever experienced a depression, or if you've ever been close to someone who has, you know that it can be insidious. It can sneak up on you, like the way a slow rain can gradually soak you to the bone and then suddenly you realize you are freezing. Sometimes, it is only after someone else points out that you are not who you used to be that you know that you are depressed. Thankfully, I had some class mates and friends who had experienced the same thing and so I got help. I took medication for a time, I saw a counselor. Lots of support from family and friends, I made it through my residency training and moved to Colorado, where the sun never stops shining. Hiking in the Colorado sunshine, meeting my wonderful wife, and the birth of my first daughter, and the cloud lifted, I wasn't depressed anymore.

People often ask me why I became a doctor. It's not an easy question for me to answer. Sometimes I think it wasn't up to me to decide. I knew that I loved science, and understanding how life works, from the smallest microorganisms to large multicellular beings. From genetics to physiology, I loved it all. I also loved the arts. Through musical expression, visual arts, and the-

ater, I experienced how human nature can be interpreted and shared. How the arts are truly a medium for us to dialogue and learn about who we are. But it was more than these things that led me to pursue medicine. At some deeper level, I also wanted to help people in need.

When I was a Junior in college, I decided to volunteer at a local hospital. I did all sorts of menial tasks. I stuffed envelopes, I delivered mail, I did whatever was asked. In return, I was offered a chance to follow a doctor on his rounds to see first hand what it was all about. Before we would meet a patient, the doctor would give me an idea of who we were seeing, where they were from, what disease or ailment they were suffering from. I watched as he listened intently to their stories and then offered with compassion and empathy, some type of solution. I saw the patients' relief and gratitude that followed and I realized that the opportunity to share in their suffering and to be a part of the healing process was really a gift. A rare opportunity to be present for a pivotal moment in a person's life. I think it was my desire to understand human suffering and to help people through that suffering that drew me to medicine.

I remember my first save as a doctor. I was a resident in Family Medicine at Marshall University in Huntington, WV. I was the on call doctor in the hospital and it was the middle of the night. Between the interruptions from the nurses and the constant thought of the possibility that something might happen and that I was the one who had the awesome responsibility for taking care of whatever might happen, I never slept very well. In fact, I didn't sleep much for several years during my training. When I did sleep it was usually a very deep stupor and my dreams were vivid. So when I heard the overhead speaker announcing in a woman's unnaturally calm voice, "Code Blue, 324A . . . Code Blue, 324A . . . Code Blue 324A" . . . my immediate thought was that it was another dream, a nightmare. I quickly realized though, when my pager started beeping at me, that I was not asleep, and I immediately felt the adrenaline coursing through my body. It was time for action. I leaped out of bed and ran down the hall to room 324. I was only the second person there. The nurse, who had started CPR, explained that the patient's rhythm strip was showing V tach. Ventricular tachycardia, or "V Tach" is an abnormal heart rhythm that when sustained, is not compatible with life. The patient was unconscious and wasn't breathing. Within a few minutes, people began to arrive from other areas of the hospital, a code is a team event. As the first doctor there, I assumed the leadership role. The first thing I did was instruct the team to move the patient onto the floor. The bed was too soft and I could see that the chest compressions were not effective. Once on the floor, I took over the chest compressions and instructed a respiratory therapist to begin to manage his airway and breathing. By then, a defibrillator had arrived and we were able to get the patient hooked up to the pads and monitor. At this point, the monitor showed asystole, which is a flat line, meaning his heart had stopped beating on its own. This was not good. I instructed the nurse to give epinephrine and continued CPR. A few minutes later and with more drugs, his heart began beating on its own again. More drugs and some electricity and he was back in a normal rhythm. We stopped the chest compressions. I put a breathing tube down his wind pipe and we transported him to the ICU on a respirator. After this was over, I felt a sense of relief and euphoria sweep over me. I had just led a team that had saved a man's life. I celebrated our success. Unfortunately, as is often the case, this patient never really recovered. He died a few days later in the ICU due to complications from the cardiac arrest. Was this a save? Was this heroic? Was this healing? Or did my medical training, which focuses on preserving life above all else, cause suffering rather than alleviate it?

I've been practicing medicine for almost 17 years now, and during that time I have had many more "saves". But I've also had some losses. As a family doctor, I've sat with patients and fam-

illies who were living their last days, their last moments, their last breaths. I've learned that at times of crisis, whether sudden or gradual, there are always opportunities for healing to happen. In these moments, I don't see myself as a doctor, or a healer. I am just a person sitting with another person who is suffering. I am just a person listening to another person's story. Healing is not something that I can perform. It is not something that I can do to another person or for another person. Healing is not a team sport. Healing at its core happens internally and individually. It is a letting go of the attachment to what once was and an acceptance of a new reality. It is a reconciliation between the old way and the new. In order to achieve healing, we must first agree to this new state of being, to undertake whatever experience it brings. We must be fully engaged. We must become whole. As Mary Oliver says, "the only life you could save", is your own.

Frankl says, "Love is the only way to grasp another human being in the innermost core of his personality. No one can become fully aware of the very essence of another human being unless he loves him. By his love he is enabled to see the essential traits and features in the beloved person; and even more, he sees that which is potential in him, which is not yet actualized but yet ought to be actualized. Furthermore, by his love, the loving person enables the beloved person to actualize these potentialities. By making him aware of what he can be and of what he should become, he makes these potentialities come true."

I have learned through my life experience and my work as a physician, that in the end it is only love that matters. And that true love means showing up and being fully present, and being a witness, listening carefully to the stories of suffering that we all share. Knowing that we are all capable of loving one another, no matter who we are, or where we come from. And because we are all capable of listening and loving, we are all capable of supporting the healing process for one another. We are all the healers. That through our hearts, our thoughts, and our actions we can ease each others' suffering and heal each others' wounds, strengthen each others' minds and lift up each others' spirits. Through our continued expression of love for one another, through our powers of acceptance, and reconciliation, and transformation, we can build a stronger community and a stronger world.