



I Hate You

by Bernie Siegel, MD

Many years ago I was asked to see a young woman because everyone thought she had appendicitis. I didn't agree, and after observing her it was apparent her problem was a ruptured ovarian cyst, which did not require surgery.

A few years later, her younger sister, a talented musician, tripped at home and fell into the fireplace, seriously burning her hands, arms, upper torso and neck. When she was sent to the Yale New Haven Hospital emergency room the family asked them to call me to care for her.

Her hands were disfigured and she was very depressed knowing this end her musical career. I admitted her to the hospital and each morning would remove the dead skin from her burns. This was a very painful procedure, and she she screamed and screamed at me, "I hate you."

She really made me think about why I had become a doctor and did I want to continue if this was the reaction patients had to me. Her mother told me years later that one morning I said to her, "Madeline, maybe someday you'll love me." I do not recall that moment.

I wish medical schools helped us to analyze our healthy and unhealthy reasons for becoming doctors. I liked people and wanted to fix their problems. In practicing medicine, I came to learn you can't fix everything, and I really began to wonder why our Creator made a world filled with problems and diseases which couldn't be cured. I really feel if [discussions about] these things were part of the medical school curriculum and graduate training we would all be better doctors and Jack Kevorkian, a very vocal activist for physician-assisted suicide for terminal patients, wouldn't have ended up in jail because of his issues with death, and I wouldn't have wanted to quit surgery and become a veterinarian.

I still recall a child, whose facial nerve I injured while removing a facial tumor, smiling her crooked smile during my post-operative visit. I apologized and announced to her and her mother, "I quit. I can't take this anymore." They both told me I was not going to quit and gave me therapy.

There were other cases too where my errors in judgment led to more pain and suffering for my patients, and I still think of them. Yes, I apologized and didn't make excuses and they forgave me as I learned from my mistakes. I truly feel the best doctors are ones who are criticized by nurses, patients and family. They do not make excuses and learn from their mistakes.

I can recall walking into one patient's room and she said, "What's wrong?"

“Why are you asking?”

“You’re face and forehead are all wrinkled.”

“Yes, I am thinking about how to help you.”

“Think in the hallway and smile when you come in here.”

On another occasion, a patient I was about to discharge said to me, “I am giving everyone who cared for me a bottle of liquor but not you.”

“I do not miss the liquor but why are you not giving me a bottle?”

“Because you are always angry.”

“That’s because I didn’t like what happened to you and I didn’t like what I had to do to you.”

“Yeah, but you took it out on me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Okay you can have a bottle of liquor.”

As I walked away from his room I thought that he could have been discharged and have nothing more to do with me but he took the time to talk to me because he knew I was hurting and needed help. He became my teacher.

I learned to let my patients and others who were experiencing illness teach me, the tourist, what the natives knew. For example, I thought I had prepared one of our children for surgery, which I performed because I was the pediatric surgeon in town. I showed him the hospital and introduced him to the people he would meet when he awoke after surgery. When he woke after surgery, he said, “You didn’t tell me it was going to hurt!”

And when he had a bone tumor, at age seven, I thought it was a sarcoma and was totally depressed. He said to me, “Dad, you’re handling this poorly.” He taught me how to enjoy the day and not live in fear of the future. His tumor turned out to be rare and benign and I learned a great deal from the surgery and from his responses to it and to me.

I have learned so much from the children I’ve treated. When one teenager dying of cystic fibrosis asked me, “Why am I different?”

I answered, “Tony, because it makes you beautiful.”

He loved my answer because he knew full well how much he had done for the world and that he would be immortal through his love and the fund raising of those who knew him and were hoping to find a cure for cystic fibrosis.

We all need to understand that loss is inevitable and learn to use it as a beginning, just as a graduation is called a commencement. Death is not a failure and I am not a veterinarian because when I approached one of my patients, who was a vet, and asked him to help me make the change he responded, “Don’t do that! Remember that it’s people who bring the pets in.”

Now, back to Madeline and how wounds can heal. One summer day, when the temperature was well over ninety degrees, into my office walked Madeline for her routine visit. She was wearing long sleeves and a turtle neck sweater so I asked her, "Why are you dressed that way on such a hot day?" She said, "Because I am ugly."

She also told me she was looking for a summer job, and I said, "Oh, I know a nursing home which needs some aides. If I can get you a job there are you interested?" She said yes, and I worked it out and called her back a few days later to give her the information. What I knew was that she would have to wear a uniform which would reveal all her scars to the people she cared for.

At the end of the summer, in walks Madeline for her office visit and I asked her, "How did the job go?".

Her response was, "No one noticed my scars."

"Madeline, when you are giving love you are beautiful."

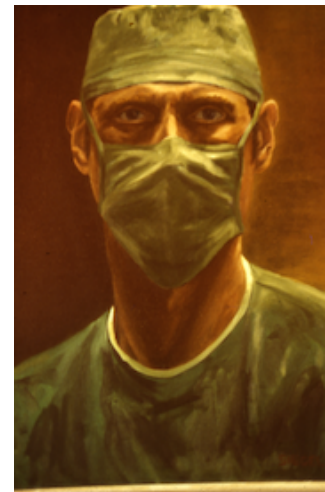
Madeline became a nurse, and years later I received a phone call from her. "Doctor Siegel, I am getting married. My father died a few years ago. Would you be my father at the wedding?"

I can still feel the tears I shed when she said that to me. Of course I said yes. And the greatest gift to me was when we danced after the wedding to Kenny Rogers' singing, "Through the years you never let me down, you turned my life around" That song helped me to heal a lifetime of my own wounds – from the pain of being a doctor and all the feelings buried inside me related to the people I couldn't cure, complications of surgery, and the like. And I do not forget them. As Thornton Wilder wrote, when an angel refuses to heal a doctor and the doctor can't understand why he shouldn't be healed, too, "Without your wound where would your power be? It is your melancholy that makes your low voice tremble into the hearts of men. The very angels themselves cannot persuade the wretched and blundering children on earth as can one human being broken on the wheels of living. In loves service only the wounded soldier can serve. Draw back."

My self portrait – created before I learned to uncover what was within me and how our body stores the pain we experience and also the joys – illustrates my occupational pains. And I found ways to help my patients feel better, beyond my surgical ministrations to bring healing to their bodies. For instance, I shaved my head due to an incredible need to do so which I am sure helped the women in our support group to feel less uncomfortable with their hair loss after chemotherapy. I learned later in my life from studies of Carl Jung that this was more symbolic – like monks, of the need for uncovering spirituality and connecting with my inner child. My birth and life are more like a novel, sharing all the things that happened to me.

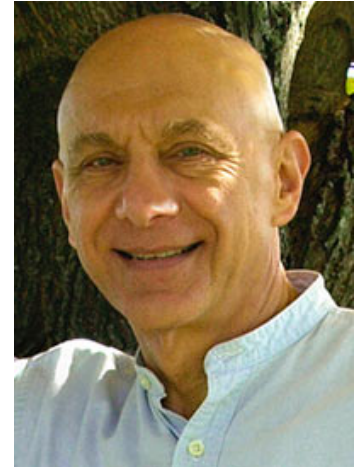
On the way home, the doctor realizes the truth of the angels' words – as people ask him to stop and talk to their family members because he is the only one they will talk to.

So I have learned to become not an MD but a CD for the wounded people I meet. Yes, a Chosen Dad, who may not like their behavior but loves and re-parents them and helps them to heal their lives and find self worth and self esteem and save their lives. For almost every unloved child becomes self-destructive and diseased by mid-life, but not so those who felt loved by their parents. So I learned to always hug my patients and give them return appointments, no matter whether they filled my prescription or not, so they would know I cared.



And if you're one of those skeptics who needs scientific proof to accept clinical and human observations like these that I'm sharing, then I can reassure you that research shows there are great benefits from compassion for both doctors and their patients.

Dr. Siegel, who prefers to be called Bernie, originated Exceptional Cancer Patients (ECAP), a form of individual and group therapy utilizing patients' drawings, dreams, images and feelings. ECaP is based on "carefrontation," a safe, loving therapeutic confrontation, facilitating personal lifestyle changes, personal empowerment and healing. The physical, spiritual and psychological benefits which followed led to his desire to make everyone aware of his or her healing potential. He realized exceptional behavior is what we are all capable of.



Bernie has authored a series of books with the goal of humanizing medical education and medical care, as well as, empowering patients and teaching survival behavior to enhance immune system competency. These include Love, Medicine & Miracles, Peace, Love & Healing, How To Live Between Office Visits, Prescriptions for Living and has published many more books. His most recent is The Art of Healing. He wants to help people fix their lives before they are broken, and thus not have to become strong at the broken places.

Bernie has been named one of the top 20 Spiritually Influential Living People on the Planet by the Watkins Review in London, England.

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