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Article: Healing the Profession: Nurturing Ourselves

Article:

"We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give"

~ Norman MacEwan

Who hasn't at rare moments of self-honesty noticed ruefully the gaping space between the advice one is giving one's patients to live in harmony and balance and the levels of imbalance in ones own life?

Some years ago I found myself in one such impasse, as my own lumbar discs decided enough was enough as I struggled one day to wrestle an outboard motor off a rocking boat while standing painfully in the rocky shallows of a Swedish lake. For the following couple of years I often had to resort to standing flamingo like on one leg, as I saw my patients, in order to relieve the ever-present sciatic pain that seared down my right leg. Not a great advert for an osteopath. In the sleepless nights of pain and worry, I had plenty of time to reflect on my life of striving and exhaustion.

My own mid-life come-uppance eventually had a happy ending, but not without much help from many friends and a good deal of reflection and questioning on my part about my deeper role in generating such a state of burnout and collapse.

Osteopathy, as one of the helping/healing professions is not immune from its own forms of self-destructive behaviour. Now at the moment of wished for unity and legitimation we appear to almost be in danger of our own corporate mid-life crisis.

It is often easier to travel hopefully than to arrive. Somehow, with, I am sure, no malevolent intent on anyone's part, we have arrived at the summit of our long decades of struggle, yet moved into the new millennium with a whiff of our old curse, distrust and discord, still floating in the air.

It is sad to reflect that our national newsworthiness of late has, largely been focused on our local difficulties around evaluating and reregistering ourselves, (see for example: The Times, "Bones of contention" 28/11/00). Rebranding operations that go a bit off target always make better copy than those that succeed without a hitch.

Perhaps, now as the new life of 2001 starts to show itself and we look beyond the last two trying years, it is time to reflect on where we have come from, and on what we make of our individual and professional journey so far. To this end this article is designed as a pause for reflection to step back for a moment from the issues of the hour and contemplate our individual and corporate journey to the present moment and consider those who went before who have played a part in helping us reach this far. So for a short time sit back and dream.

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The Hero's Journey

Reflecting on my own struggles and challenges along side the challenges of our own osteopathic journey to national legitimation and acceptance reminded me of the work of a personal hero of my own, Joseph Campbell. Campbell the great mythologist, described the commonalities of our overall life path in terms of the 'Hero's Journey' – the sequence of events that seem to be shared in the epic myths of every culture. Perhaps we can reflect on our own journey into and through the profession in the light of these common patterns that Campbell elicited.

1. We hear the call to our life's purpose or mission. We can choose to either accept or ignore the calling.

How and when did you first realise that you wanted to devote your life to this? Perhaps you never quite did and you remain ambivalent about your choice of profession, or worse, perhaps your motives at that time were less about hearing the call and more about just finding a way of earning a crust. What did you hear, has it changed or can you still hear it, what was that calling for you and how is it evolving?

2. If we do accept the calling this leads us to confront a boundary or threshold in our existing abilities or map of the world.

For many the process of studying osteopathy required increased flexibility in order to expand that map to include subtler models less commonly held; for others it was like coming home.

3. Crossing the threshold propels us into a new life that forces us to grow and evolve, and in turn, requires us to find support and guidance as we make that crossing.

Where did your support and guidance come from as you crossed that threshold, who were your friends as you made that journey and where are they now?

4. Finding a guardian or mentor is something that often comes naturally from having the courage to cross a threshold.

Who were your guardians or mentors as you crossed the threshold into the osteopathic profession, and when and how did you acknowledge and thank them? Did they ever know what an important part they played in your personal journey? More of this later.

5. Finding a challenge (or demon) is also a natural result of crossing a threshold. 'Demons' are not ultimately necessarily evil or bad. They may be more ones own inner shadow or power that one needs to learn to live or contend with, accept and use effectively and safely without abuse or mishap.

Osteopathy like all health professions has, in its nature, plenty of potential traps for the unwary, especially those with great talent. Its power to help people heal themselves can easily go to the heads of the unwary. Equally the skill and desire to master the craft to help and heal can create its own challenges. We develop a lifestyle that gradually increases in its relentless demands on us. First to constantly study and stay in touch with our profession and as we gain seniority and experience to develop and then teach our rapidly evolving field. All too easily this can put us on

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a road to imbalance and self-destruction if we don't take the next step of the hero/heroine's journey.

6. Transforming the 'demon' into a resource or advisor. Typically this is achieved by either:

- a. Developing a special skill
- b. Discovering a special resource or tool.

These skills and resources can be seen as the more obvious specific professional development that most of us are called to do to enrich our work and satisfy our fascination with aspects of osteopathy, but also they include those less tangible skills and resources.

These less acknowledged resources may be ones we have developed in other non-osteopathic contexts such as having and caring for children, or our own illness and other experiences of the slings and arrows of life. They may well be the very things that shape us diamond-like into something those who seek us out find sparkles most and brings hope and healing back to their heart. Do we discount these resources and put ourselves down neglecting to honour these hard won resources in the face of what we might perceive as the 'greater' professional CV's of others?

7. Finding the way to fulfil the calling is ultimately achieved by creating a new map of the world that incorporates the growth and discoveries brought about by the journey. We are changed fundamentally by having taken the journey. We see the world differently as a result of this.

How have you changed those inner maps from when you first started this osteopathic journey? Who and what in your early life was influential in helping you build your original worldview and making it sufficiently flexible that it could grow comfortably to include the specific models that go to form the core of osteopathic philosophy. Campbell observed that this transformation and adaptation of our map of the world characterises the common features of the hero/heroines journey and results in the final step.

8. Returning home as a transformed or evolved person.

Perhaps we look at our profession too rarely in this light. How much do we allow or even guess at the profound role our humdrum professional life plays as a perfect means to transform and evolve as a person? All those daily ethical choices, that ongoing opportunity to interact with others, often disadvantaged by their suffering, in a way congruent with the worst or best of ourselves, the choice is always ours.

Reflections on our journey

Now, having seen our own life in the light of the archetype of the hero's journey our next step is to reflect on both the professional world we daily inhabit treating patients or teaching students, seeing it as if through fresh eyes and as we do this with this new found professional status and potential security remember and honour those who have helped us on this journey.

None of us can function without each other. In this next mind experiment we are going to explore who were the key players who influenced and helped you arrive where you are today?

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Of course what has caused much of the heat of late has been our different understandings of what that route should be and what would be a fitting monument to the efforts of those whose who went before us on whose shoulders we stand.

I invite you to take a moment out of time and treat the following as a mind experiment or guided contemplation on your journey to this present moment in the context of your osteopathic life. It is, therefore, best done when you are not in too much of a hurry and can take a few reflective moments during reading.

Environment and Guides

First, see yourself in your daily working environment. Notice with the eyes of someone new to your practice, what strikes you as you enter this space? Is it warm and inviting or cold and inhospitable, professional or maybe too informal? Remember who guided you into this profession? Who took care of you as you as you started the long road of study?

Behaviour and Coaches

Secondly, looking for a moment, through the eyes of a patient, see how you behave in your practice. What mannerisms do you have? Do you shake their hand, do you avoid eye contact, smile or listen? How could you improve the experience of others by changing anything at a behavioural level?

Who have been your coaches in the profession helping you perform at your peak? Who have helped you and encouraged you explaining details and as you matured in skill, drew you out and gave you specific tips and guidance over specific behaviours to develop you to reach higher than you could have alone?

Capabilities and Teachers

Thirdly, look at what you are capable of now. How has this changed over the years since you first started as a student? What untapped capabilities do you have yet to explore that could increase you ability to be of service and add value to the lives of others? Who were your teachers, who developed you in a cognitive way influencing you to develop as thinker, unravelling and explaining the mysteries the art and science of what you now do? Take a moment to acknowledge them all, for all their idiosyncrasies.

Values, Beliefs and Mentors

Fourthly, if you were your patient what values and beliefs could you infer that underpin this practice? Are you congruent with your own values and beliefs in how you live your practice and interact with your patients, colleagues and the taxman? What changes could you make in your life if you were to adopt more empowering beliefs than those you have been living up to now? Are you living your beliefs or do your unexamined beliefs 'live you'?

Who were/are your mentors? In Greek Mythology, Mentor was the wise and faithful counsellor to the hero Odysseus. The notion of being a "mentor" has come to mean the process of:

a) Advising or counselling and

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b) Serving as a guide or teacher.

We can see how there is a bit of an overlap between teacher and mentor and yet mentoring has distinctive qualities. While a coach provides specific behavioural feedback and a teacher instructs, a mentor guides us to discover our own unconscious competences. Mentors are often those who, seeing something in us we ourselves may not have recognised, release something important in us.

With the use of mentoring in relation to the dreaded PPP we could be in danger of thinking this is always a formal official appointment, quite the reverse. Few who have achieved great things in any field have not, in their journey to that greatness, benefited from the informal mentoring of another further down the path, who has seen their potential and taken the time to encourage, advise and shaped their development.

If at times you feel the need of a mentor and life just does not seem to provide, who, if you could call on anyone from the world of fact or fiction, past or present would you call on as a wise counsellor or mentor in times of difficulty?

Identity and Sponsors

Fifthly, as you picture again your practice life, listen to its tone, feel its texture and taste its flavour. What can you discern is your true identity? Behind the white coat and osteopathic persona who are you truly being day by day? Is it the identity you want or approve of, if not, how specifically will you change it?

Who are our Sponsors? Sponsorship involves creating a context in which others can act, grow and excel. Unlike teachers, coaches and mentors, sponsors are not necessarily role models for individuals or groups being sponsored. Rather sponsorship provides a context, contacts and resources that allow the group or individual being sponsored to focus on, develop and use their own skills. Like so many terms it has been somewhat devalued by the culture of commercial sponsorship with echoes of post-war American media...

“And now, a word from our sponsor!”

So it is with gratitude I notice the words of one of Osteopathy's more influential sponsors hitting the headlines recently with Prince Charles's measured call (The Times 30/12/00) for more medical research money to be devoted to complementary medicine. In 1999 only 0.05% of the total research budget of UK medical charities went in this area and this was an increase on the previous year when it was zero! One does not have to be a royalist to appreciate the profoundly supportive sponsorship that such efforts involve.

It is often the case that members of a profession busy at 'the coal face' are unaware of the acts of true sponsorship that we all benefit from, the full results of which may not be known until decades later. This true sponsorship involves a commitment to the promotion of something that is already within a group or person, but is not being manifest to its fullest capacity. The sponsor is able to influence things to allow this potential to realise itself. Those who benefit may never know of the trouble taken on their behalf. So who have been your/our sponsors, know and unknown, acknowledged and unacknowledged?

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What undreamt of potential lies within the osteopathic profession and ourselves awaiting further sponsorship to realise itself? Have you even had intimations of those barely know about parts of yourself waiting to be made manifest?

Beyond Identity and Awakening

Sixthly, as you see your practice with these other eyes, hear its voice with other ears and feel it with some other senses for a moment, ask yourself does it sing or groan, does it give or take? Does it respect you as well as itself? Is it about scarcity or plenty, love or fear?

Who, for you, includes and transcends all the other levels of coaching, teaching, mentoring and sponsoring to be an awakener. Who by their integrity and congruence “awakens” you, puts you back in touch with your own visions and missions by being in full contact with his or her own vision and mission?

And as you reflect on those who have awakened you, sponsored you, mentored you, taught you, coached you guided and cared for you, perhaps it is fitting to remember those in our profession, now busy on the great plinth of eternity, who have already trod a far harder path before us and on whose shoulders we stand.

It has been said that leaders grow by putting themselves in contexts and situations they can't get out of without growing. What kind of a profession do we wish to be part of in the future? What can our personal gift be to our collective future? Can we fashion a profession as it matures into the twenty-first century that is characterised by generosity, originality, diversity and the wisdom of the heart? Or are we in danger of falling for those familiar qualities of discord, distrust, convention and myopia? The choice for the present lies with us.

Osteopathy is after all, a generative philosophy that leads to an art and a science or perhaps in practice, to a craft. With each new generation it is created anew taking from its tradition and discovering profound, novel and original ways of expressing itself in practical means of reducing suffering.

When one looks back and remembers the determined visionaries, touched by genius, pioneers of this great tradition and the hurdles they had to overcome both from within and from without to be heard at all, we could do worse than renew our own passion with the words of Ella Wheeler Wilcox:

“There is no chance, no destiny, no fate, that can circumvent or hinder or control the firm resolve of a determined soul.”

With thanks to one of my own teachers and awakeners, Robert Dilts, for his ideas, from which I have drawn in this article.

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