

Telling Our Stories

Dr. Remen In Kitchen Table Wisdom reminds us of the passing on of stories. The wisdom of our life is in our story. She recalls a time when families use to sit around the kitchen table and tell stories. Now we sit around a TV set and listen to professional actors tell stories. These stories have beginnings and ends. Real stories don't have beginnings and endings -- they go on through real experience. In our fast paced world we have little time to tell our stories or to listen to others' stories. We miss the wisdom of the kitchen table stories that taught us how to live. Now we seek out the experts and read self help books. So we become watchers or solitary readers rather than participants who share life as a community. "All real stories are true ... and everybody is a story"

The following are excerpts from *Kitchen Table Wisdom* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D

Just Listen

"I suspect that the most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. And especially if it's given from the heart. When people are talking, there's no need to do anything but receive them. Just take them in. Listen to what they're saying. Care about it. Most times caring about it is even more important than understanding it. Most of us don't value ourselves or our love enough to know this. It has taken me a long time to believe in the power of simply saying, "I'm so sorry," when someone is in pain. And meaning it.

"One of my patients told me that when she tried to tell her story people often interrupted to tell her that they once had something just like that happen to them. Subtly her pain became a story about themselves. Eventually she stopped talking to most people. It was just too lonely. We connect through listening. When we interrupt what someone is saying to let them know that we understand, we move the focus of attention to ourselves. When we listen, they know we care. Many people with cancer talk about the relief of having someone just listen.

"I have even learned to respond to someone crying by just listening. In the old days I used to reach for the tissues, until I realized that passing a person a tissue may be just another way to shut them down, to take them out of their experience of sadness and grief. Now I just listen. When they have cried all they need to cry, they find me there with them.

"This simplest thing has not been that easy to learn. It certainly went against everything I had been taught since I was very young. I thought people listened only because they were too timid to speak or did not know the answer. A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well intentioned words.

Have you noticed when you go to a nursing home how much people love to tell their stories?

Shobi was very impressed once with the mother of a friend - actually it was Wavy Gravy's mother-in-law. I had met her at his 60th birthday party. I was there as a clown (cause that's what I do). There was a woman all bundled up and in a wheel chair with an attendant. Of course I went right over to her (cause that's what Shobi does). When I went to Camp Winarainbow Adult Camp, she was there and asked to see me. I gave her a copy of my news letter and she gave me a copy of her book of stories. Her family had typed it up with her photo on the front. What a great thing to do! I don't know why nursing homes don't put out books of stories. It was a little like looking at pictures of someone's vacation. Yet, I like looking at pictures of peoples lives. Just every day pictures and everyday stories and so much of life's wisdom.
-Shobi Dobi

The Holy Shadow

There is a Sufi story about a man who is so good that the angels asked God to give him the gift of miracles. God wisely tells them to ask him if that is what he would wish.

So the angels visit this good man and offer him first the gift of healing by hands, then the gift of conversion of souls, and lastly the gift of virtue. He refuses them all. They insist that he choose a gift or they will choose one for him. "Very well," he replies. "I ask that I may do a great deal of good without ever knowing it." The story ends this way:

The angels were perplexed. They took counsel and resolved upon the following plan: Every time the saint's shadow fell behind him it would have the power to cure disease, soothe pain, and comfort sorrow. As he walked, behind him his shadow made arid paths green, caused withered plants to bloom, gave clear water to dried-up brooks, fresh color to pale children, and joy to unhappy men and women. The saint simply went about his daily life diffusing virtue as the stars diffuse light and the flowers scent, without ever being aware of it. The people respecting his humility followed him silently, never speaking to him about these miracles. Soon they even forgot his name and called him "The Holy Shadow."

"Perhaps the world is one big healing community and we are all healers of each other. Perhaps we are all angels, and we do not know it."
-- Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

"You know you can get a lot of good done in this world if you don't care who gets the credit."

-- Anonymous Bumper Sticker