

Invited Commencement Address June 2004

Capital Systems Family Practice Residency Program

**On Gifts, Peace of Mind and Seven Laws of Ecology**

I feel incredibly honored to have been asked to give your commencement address. This is a different format for me. Many of you know me as the woman who tries to warp time—coming up with a 15 Minute Hour. And here I am having been given 20 minutes to try to say something significant as part of launching a very special group of family practice residents into the next phase of their careers.

I've only given two commencement addresses previously. When I graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> grade of what was then grammar school, I was the valedictorian. Until 3 weeks ago, I had a distinct memory of speaking about a book that my stepfather had just completed reading at the time. It was "Peace of Mind" by Joshua Loth Liebman. Three weeks ago I went to my local county library, looked at the library holdings in the computer, and could hardly believe it. The book was on the shelf.

It is a lovely book. But hardly fare for a 14-year-old. And I couldn't have spoken about it at my grammar school graduation, because it wasn't published until 2 years later. I guess, I used the text when I spoke at my high school graduation as the salutatorian. It again confirmed for me the fact that memories get edited after the fact. I guess that might be one of the significant pearls that I hope you will remember.

So what would I like to talk about today? Three things I think. First, there are some very meaningful thoughts in Dr. Liebman's book that also relate to my current

work on gifts and entitlements, my second focus. And finally, because of my concern for the national psyche as well as that of individuals, I want to share seven laws of ecology and try to relate them to health.

It was fun to read “Peace of Mind” after all these years. It was published in 1946. I graduated from high school in January 1948. For one thing, it reminded me of my stepfather. He was a very intelligent, well-read man, who had very little formal education but whom I adored, except at that time in my life, when I was busy being a teen-ager and he set some very strict limits, and I was always in trouble. But that’s another story. Maybe it’s why I distorted the memory.

Back to the book. It is actually a treatise that tries to bridge the gap between religion and psychology. Dr. Liebman starts out by listing the “goods in life” that could be universally agreed to. They are health, love, beauty, talent, power, riches & fame. Most important of all, however, he cites peace of mind, an inner equilibrium, a spiritual stability that protects us from confusion and disaster. Psychology teaches us that inner health can only be achieved when we forgive ourselves as well as others for our limitations. Self-understanding, respect and trust, rather than beating up on ourselves is the way to inner peace. Our interdependence with others is the most encompassing fact of human existence. We display true love for others only when we cease to demand or expect that they become modified versions of ourselves. The current relevance of the book is evident when he prescribes a positive and cordial effort to understand another’s beliefs, practices and habits without sharing or necessarily accepting them. If that doesn’t signify diversity training, I don’t know what does.

As physicians you well know that no one can go through life without experiencing profound sorrows. As clinicians we experience our own sorrows as well as bearing witness to and participating in the sorrows of others. Liebman suggests that when we face our grief, we can transcend it. He also suggests that in order to have true inner peace we must have an ideal to strive for—a hero to follow—something to aim for and the faith that we can achieve happiness and inner peace.

When we talk about achieving happiness, that brings me to my second area of focus. When Liebman lists the “goods” in life as health, love, beauty, talent, power, riches, and fame—I might wish to edit those, and add intelligence, positive energy, community, and challenging work. But regardless of the definition, I would submit that each is a gift. If we are fortunate enough to be the recipient of any of the above, it is not because we have earned them, but because they have been given to us as a gift. In fact, I have been fascinated by the notion that everything that we humans have—the resources of the planet we inhabit has been given to us as a gift. From earliest times people have been running around the earth, saying, “I got here first, so it is mine”—and then charging other people fees – but that may be just a cultural convention. Food does grow on trees. Raw materials are there for the taking. Also, the talents each of us has been given, are certainly gifts, one can even substitute the word. The love and care we receive from others are gifts, as is the time and attention that we devote to the people we care for and about. Unfortunately, my view is not the dominant one. I think that most people feel entitled to have whatever they think anyone else has. And in relationships, when I feel entitled, anytime that I do not get exactly what I expect or feel I deserve, I am wounded. I feel rejected, unloved, devalued etc. Please do not misunderstand me. I am not

promoting ill treatment here, what I am saying is that anytime I feel entitled to anything, when I get it, that does not make me particularly happy, it is just O.K. because that's how it's supposed to be. But when I do not get it, I become unhappy and resentful. In relationships, especially between generations this creates all kinds of misunderstandings. Suppose you call your elderly mother every night—you think of this as a gift. She in turn feels that this is the least she is entitled to, and you should be coming over much more often—better yet, you should be taking care of her. Anytime my former husband did something especially nice and looked for some appreciation, my mother-in-law used to remind him that she “carried him for nine months.”

The trouble with feeling entitled is that it is like an addiction, when we get our fix, we don't hurt for the moment, we might even get a brief high, but there is no lasting happiness, certainly no peace of mind. I think that most of the worlds' troubles have to do with entitlements. This is true whether we are talking war—the Israelis and Palestinians feeling entitled to the same territory; road rage where people feel entitled to drive the speed limit regardless of the amount of traffic; environmental degradation since we feel entitled to use and throw away everything; and even daily hassles, since we think we are entitled to have everything go smoothly. If we can shift our consciousness and recognize that everything, even the bad stuff, is a gift that allows us to learn and grow, we will spend much more time being happy. Difficult people in our lives, to include difficult patients who feel entitled, can be seen as gifts that give us the opportunity to develop patience, kindness and empathy. And the ultimate gift is forgiveness, both of others and of ourselves, since by definition to need forgiveness implies that we have done harm. Forgiveness is a gift as is love.

The third area I want to address has to do with the laws of ecology. In 1974, Bertram Murray, a Rutgers Professor, wrote an article in the NY Times entitled “What the Ecologist Can Teach the Economists.” I think it has increasing relevance in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and not just for economists. See what you think.

There are seven laws. 1. **Everything is connected to everything else.** Scientifically with the advent of systems theory and chaos theory, we certainly know this is true. The decisions that we make individually and collectively have wide impact on ourselves and on others. Physical health is dependent on mental, social and spiritual factors. Drugs have side effects.

2. **There is no such thing as a free lunch.** When the drug companies buy, they expect you to listen to their spiel. Prescribe too many antibiotics, resistant organisms will develop. As we use up resources of the planet, and pollution grows, lunch gets more expensive. Our climate will change, not quite as rapidly in the movie, “The day after tomorrow”, but it is already changing.
3. **Nature knows best.** Human beings do not really know all that needs to be known to manage an ecosystem. Doctors do not always know why one person responds to treatment and another does not. Evidence based medicine deals with statistical probabilities—numbers needed to treat tell us how many people will be exposed to medication to achieve a benefit for a smaller number. I have some problems with that. At least we should talk about it, and be a bit humbler. They say that every ten years half of what was taught in medical school changes—only we don’t know which half.

- 4. Everything must go somewhere.** The waste absorbing capacity of the natural environment is already taxed. We must learn to recycle and reuse. We cannot throw away forever. In health, when we block feelings, keeping them out of our awareness, not just failing to express them, the physical effect can be devastating. Any blockage--of energy, feelings, blood flow or even elimination—think of kidneys shutting down-- can be drastic over time.
- 5. Continuous growth leads to disasters.** This is my favorite. More and more money and bigger and bigger practices are not necessarily good. I read about executive compensation and it really boggles my mind. Can you tell me what difference an income of say 560 million dollars and one of 1 billion dollars would make in life style. Money can become an addiction like everything else. Cancer cells, those that grow without limits, ultimately kill the organism. Too much of anything—food is a good example, does not lead to happiness, just obesity.
- 6. Competing species can not coexist indefinitely.** While economists feel that competition is beneficial, maintaining diversity and allowing for choice, in nature, one of the competing species will be ultimately be eliminated from the ecosystem. We are seeing this now in the consolidation of the media—and had best consider whether consolidating the primary care specialties might not be a better solution than having them all eliminated.
- 7. The law of the retarding lead.** Dr. Al Tallia had to explain this one to me. What it means is that adaptive changes, creative solutions do not come from species that are dominant in their niche, but from species and individuals that

are forced to be more resourceful because they exist on the fringe. So we can expect progress coming not from white males, but from women and minorities and small wonderful residency programs like yours.

So in summary, as we celebrate the transition of the graduates from formal learners to continuous learners I hope we will remember that peace of mind comes with acceptance of ourselves and others, “as is” with no option for a refund. That the opportunity to serve others and practice our profession is a gift as is all of life. Finally, we must also remember that we are part of nature and there are unintended consequences to many of our decisions and actions. I always like to quote the sociologist Angeles Arrien who says that to succeed all we need to do is Show Up, Pay Attention, Tell the Truth, and let go of attachment to the result. Joshua Loth Liebman puts it in the form of a commandment: “Thou shalt eternally respect truth and tell it with kindness and also with firmness, to thy associates, (to thy patients), and to those who follow in your footsteps.”