



Family Medicine Moments

December 1, 2022

Introduction: I am pleased to again have Dr Bob Singer offer up a reflection. Bob was at the UMass Family Practice Residency Program from 1978 to 1981 at what was then called the Family Health and Social Service Center. (He notes Lucy Candib was his mentor!) He then practiced in Everett for years before moving to Maryland to do geriatric work before retiring. His story reminds me of the advice of Ron Epstein in his book *Attending*. We are so prone to interrupt, thinking it will speed up our encounter when taking a pensive mindful approach actually has better results. Read Bob's piece and then think about trying his advice for just one session.

Listening Days

By Bob Singer

In my work as a family doctor, there was once a morning I began with so little emotional energy that I could not imagine how I was going to make it through the day.

But I had no choice, no option.

I had to walk into the exam room, listen to my patient, and try to help.

That day I made a vow: I would get through the day by saying aloud the fewest words possible while still feeling I had helped, I had made a difference, and I had done what was necessary.

To my great surprise, it was an absolutely marvelous day.

When you do not interrupt, when you don't cut people off, when you do not offer solutions before being asked, then amazing things happen.

Patients talked to me that day, and I listened.

I learned things about them I might never have come to know.

One fellow who I had known from infancy came alone for an adolescent visit.

He rambled a bit as I listened carefully, then finally blurted out, "I'm gay! Do you think I need an HIV test?"

An elderly man admitted he had not, after all, been taking his blood pressure medicine, hoping that his new exercise program would do the trick.

A woman I had known for many years asked me if I was all right.

She said I seemed unusually quiet that day.

I answered that I was fine and thanked her for asking.

I told her I had just decided that today would be a listening day.

She nodded, pleased, and kept talking.

It was a really good day.

And as the day ended, I found I was not tired; I was strangely energized.

By doing less, I had done more.

Now I will admit-- it's not my way to be like this every day.

I like talking with and to patients.

But sometimes, when I am especially weary, I do another listening day.

And it sustains me.

I even taught this to residents in my care, who were often immensely fatigued.

They thought the idea quaint and a bit silly, but each of them eventually had a hard day and gave it a try.

And they always came to me later, and with a thoughtful tone, told me that patiently allowing their patients just a few more words somehow made it clearer what advice needed to be given, and how to say it.

So please, don't be afraid to try this when you are weary.

Listening days.

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