Three Stories of Healing + Transformation
by ServiceSpace Volunteers

In April of 2017, volunteers from ServiceSpace convened a special circle on Healing + Transformation in Berkeley. Below are three stories that were shared in the circle.

A Lesson in Service from an Art Store

What inspired me to become a physician was watching my twin cousins suffer through Duchenne’s muscular dystrophy, which is a very severe, debilitating and mostly seen in boys. They grew up with that. As a child, I just saw how their mother would care for her two children, and it really propelled me to go out and really help people who needed it.

In my third year of med school, my uncle contracted glioblastoma, very severe brain tumor. As I entered my clinical years, I was very enthusiastic that I would be able to cure his condition. But unfortunately, it was a very aggressive tumor and before I knew what was happening, I lost him.

Post med school, my journey brought me to the United States. I struggled to get into residency for some time, and then had to put it all on pause. I went through a very terrible divorce, and became a single mom.

During those trying times, I took up a job at Michael’s Arts and Craft store. Nobody even knew that I had this medical background. But one thing I learned was about connecting to people. That was my first formal job, and the way people connected there and the way they listened to each other, it really did feel like family.

What I learned was your title wasn’t all that important. It didn’t matter that I was a doctor. What mattered was that I could connect, that I could relate to that essence of being human and being related to each other’s happiness.

My journey continued on -- I got some scholarships, got certified as a medical assistant and started working in many clinics. Today, I am being trained as a Physician’s Assistant, currently working with a geriatric doctor. Yet, I still carry my experience at Michael’s store. People skills, art of listening, I continued to savor all those lessons, and didn’t get lost in the world in rat race.

I now notice the subtle things. Recently, I was with a 98 year old patient, who just lost her eyes. Because of cataracts, she lost her vision. But as soon as I entered her room, the smile I saw on her face was incredible -- I can even put it into words. Her resilience and joy just shifted something deep within me, reminding me that we are much more than our body, mind, vision and our senses. There was something else that was shining through her.
You know, it’s easy to skip over these nuances of the doctor-patient relationship. The doctor I’m working with is trying to make both ends meet, and I often see the stress she has to endure -- to make the finances and what not. That really compromises her capacity to connect, one patient, one moment at a time. I keep reminding myself of the lessons I learned at Michael’s -- to not get caught up in the finances, and lose the essence of what means to serve patients.

Thank you so much. I’m so very grateful to share this deeply sacred space with all of you.

-- Padmaja Murtinty

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A Pediatrician’s Search for Meaning

I work as a pediatric doctor in a large HMO and I’ve been working there for over 10 years now. I’m sure some of you will probably identify with this. When you come out of medical school and then residency, you have this vision of saving people. You’re intubating patients and you’re giving lifesaving medications and you’re doing tracheotomies and whatnot -- to actually save people’s lives.

After I did my pediatric residency, I wanted to do a fellowship but I was so burned out by my residency that I decided to take a year off. Then somehow I landed this job and started working as a community pediatric doctor. About two years into my practice I had this great sense of unease, dis-ease, and not able to identify with what I’m doing. I wanted to save lives. And I was not saving lives.

I thought of myself as a PR doctor, public relations position. I was just giving advice. The maximum I was doing was treating ear infections and if I was lucky a pneumonia. So I had this great dis-ease within myself. "I’m not doing what I should do." "This is not the potential for a doctor." So I started applying for fellowships and got into an infectious disease fellowship, at a children’s hospital.

Then, I found out I was pregnant. I had been trying to have a baby for quite a few years. It was not, how should I put it ... it was very precious. This pregnancy didn’t come easily to me. I had to re-evaluate everything. Should I have my baby in the middle of my fellowship? How would I deal with that?

In the end, I decided to drop the fellowship and I had my baby. I don’t know if it was the right decision to make but I was happy with it.

As a result, I’ve stayed with my practice and I no longer consider myself as a PR doctor. I think I have a very valuable role to play and I’m very, very grateful for the role that my patients allow me to play in their lives. I don’t know how much value I provide for them, but I do know how much meaning they have given to my life. No matter how I feel when I walk into my clinic, I always walk out feeling great.

This has been an invaluable shift.

I was reading the recent DailyGood article about Viktor Frankl on how giving meaning to
your life is perhaps the most important thing. And yes, being a doctor gives meaning to my life. This PR job that I do treating ear infections and pneumonias and being a part of the kids’ lives from the time they are born to the time they graduate and go to college, is now very, very meaningful to me.

- Shalini Sahai

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Jojo’s Journey of Healing

My journey started a while ago, about 10 years ago, as a new nurse. A really naïve and new nurse who really didn’t know much about what healing meant. I thought healing meant that we’re going to fix everybody, but I arrived at a very stark realization that healing means so many different things to so many people, and there’s so many journeys that one can take to get there. Healing happens differently for everybody.

It was a patient of mine that really taught me that lesson. For privacy’s sake I’m going to call her Jojo.

Jojo, when I first met her, was a 17 year old female. She was initially diagnosed with HIV, which later on progressed to AIDS, and was a young female that didn’t really understand her diagnosis or her imbalance, her disease. Her parents kept that from her, so she didn’t know her whole life. She only came to know her diagnosis when I met her, and it was, as you can imagine, the most horrific news to receive.

Jojo was known to most of the nurses as someone who is extremely angry and mean towards nurses. She was always on the bell right before those medications were due. It was a concern for the nurses. When I walked in that room, I remember the intensity of the energy within that room. It was bitter, angry. She was in the middle of an argument with her mother, and her mom stormed out, and she was left crying and just cursing at her mom while she left. I had just met her, and I was like, "I'm going to give you your pain medicine now."

I was just trying to do my job in an action oriented manner, but as I was leaving, I asked her if there was anything else she needed, if there was anything else I could do for her.

As I was leaving, she said, "Don’t leave me. I don’t want to be alone."

It caught me off guard. I replied, "Your mom must be coming back shorty. Can I grab her?" She was like, "No. But I don’t want to die alone. I don’t want to be in the room alone, and I don’t want to die alone."

That really caught me off guard, and I paused and felt like there’s something that I needed to offer her beyond the pain medicine that I had just given her. There was something else that I needed to offer her in that moment.

So I sat with her and I said, "Jojo, you will never be alone. You have us, and you can have anybody in this room, whenever you want it." I sat, and I started creating a sort of imaginary space for her, a place where she can bring in anybody she needed. I ask her to create it in her mind, "This is your safe space, so if you need to bring in your dog, and your friends, you can bring them in. You can have anybody here." She kind of agreed, and
pretty soon she was like, "Okay, and can I bring in so-and-so?" I was like, "Yes, any time. Any time."

Through the weeks that I was caring for her, I realized she wasn't as much on the bell for the pain medicine. She kind of had a sense of peace within her. She was able to create a sense of healing for herself.

Not long after that, couple months later, she was very ill at the end of her life, and I remember visiting her, now in more of an intense care setting, and I went to her and I was like, "Jojo, who did you bring in today? Who's in your safe space?"

She said, "I brought in my mom, and I brought in my dad."

For me that was a moment where I realized that, yes, she was going to pass any day, but there was a sense of healing, a sense of peace, of respect, of compassion, and understanding of what her life was about.

That was the moment that really hit me, that I can never forget. She really helped me understand what the journey of healing could look like, even if we didn't "fix" her.

-- Anne-Marie Pandya