

Preface

WHY WRITE A book about finding meaning and purpose while working in the healthcare industry? The past three or four decades have seen a dramatic shift in the ethos of working in healthcare, especially for physicians and other caregivers. An internist friend of mine recently told me that he had always believed that he was called to be a physician. That calling required him to do everything he could for his patients. But over the last several years, the meaning, purpose, and joy that he found in his calling had diminished greatly. His daily work was less about patient care and more about being a “pieceworker.” He reported that it had been a long time since an executive had asked him about his patients. The most common question he heard from administration was “Did you hit your numbers today?”

What happened to erode the personal meaning, joy, pride, and purpose of being a caregiver? This book attempts to answer that question and provides a toolkit for those working in healthcare to begin to rekindle personal and professional meaning and purpose.

Parts of this book may be hard to read, and even to accept. The data on burnout, preventable deaths, and the roles of corporate medicine, government, and the insurance industry make clear why caregivers are struggling to find meaning in their work. The corporate culture in today’s healthcare industry conspires to deaden the human soul. It is my hope that by sharing data on these factors in this book, I can help healthcare leaders see the importance of creating a culture that instead *feeds* the human soul.

Working in healthcare is hard. And it is getting harder. Dozens of articles have been written about burnout, which the Cleveland Clinic defines as “a state of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion” that may cause caregivers to experience “fatigue, anxiety, and depression.” Just about everyone who works in healthcare today is experiencing more disengagement and feeling more like “economic units” than professional caregivers. Many high-level executives, physicians, nurses, and other healthcare professionals can easily recite the number of years, months, and days until they can retire! The healthcare profession—caring for others at a difficult time in their lives—was once a calling. Now, it seems that working in healthcare is just a job.

The popular antidote to burnout is resilience. Countless books, articles, and seminars are devoted to increasing individual and organizational resilience. However, as the famous management consultant W. Edwards Deming told us, “A bad system will beat a good person every time.” In many ways, the current healthcare system in the United States is a bad system that is beating some very good people!

The story of the boiling frog is a good analogy that illustrates why resilience training is an incomplete solution to the problem of burnout. According to this oft-told tale, if you put a frog into a pot of boiling water, it will immediately jump out. But if you put a frog into a pot of room-temperature water and gradually bring the temperature up to boiling, the frog won’t even realize that it is being boiled alive. Responding to chronic burnout with resilience training is like helping the frog learn to enjoy the hot water. Resilience training does not address the root cause of burnout, which is workers’ loss of meaning and inability to find purpose in the healthcare industry. The essential question is, What personal, interpersonal, structural, or process dynamics are *causing* this loss of meaning and purpose?

The inspiration for this text was Deming’s statement quoted earlier. Too many good people are no longer able to find meaning in their work in healthcare. Increasing regulatory requirements, financial pressures, and constant pressure to improve quality while

reducing costs: The sum of these increasing extraordinary pressures is a disengaged healthcare workforce.

A highly skilled, intelligent, and patient-focused physician whom I have known for more than a decade recently sent a letter to all her patients. The first two paragraphs read as follows:

Dear Patient,

It has been a great pleasure to work with you, and I have enjoyed the privilege of providing healthcare to you over the years. I have learned many things from you as a patient that have only helped me become a better physician and a more empathic person overall, and I thank you for that.

It is with mixed emotions that I regret to inform you that as a result of multiple government regulations, the aspects of running a solo practice, and the financial aspects related to both, I will be closing my office on December 27, 2019.

This letter saddened me and motivated me to write this book. Here, I hope to clarify the root problem, identify the causes of the root problem, and, most important, offer solutions that will help reverse the forces that are robbing healthcare workers of the meaning, pride, joy, and purpose that come from caring for others. This book is a guide for healthcare leaders to navigate today's regulatory and financial pressures and to enable caregivers to rediscover the meaning and purpose that brought them into the healthcare profession in the first place.

Chapter 1 discusses in detail the factors that are diminishing the meaning and purpose of healthcare work and introduces a model of sustainable employee engagement. Chapter 2 articulates the central importance of personal and corporate values. Chapter 3 discusses how meaningful work is a function of vision and why meaning is critical to maximizing human performance. Chapter 4 shows how the alignment of organizational mission with individual motivation creates purpose in work that is the basis for sustainable employee engagement and long-term corporate achievement. Chapter 5 reviews

the research on meaning and work. Chapter 6 begins to put together an employee engagement plan by focusing on creating a strong corporate culture. Chapter 7 explores how leaders set the vision that creates a transcendent purpose for all workers. Chapter 8 outlines several ideas for ongoing organizational and personal growth and development. Chapter 9 discusses what can go wrong when toxic executives behave badly and gives examples of what can happen when executives fail to understand the importance of the human factors necessary for long-term success. Chapter 10 brings together the key points of each chapter and recommends practical next steps.

This book was written while I was in isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, as the healthcare industry was working under unprecedented conditions and facing an unknowable future. The public health crisis has highlighted the many unique and indispensable characteristics of healthcare professionals—not least their ability to risk their own personal safety for the benefit of those who are sick. The pandemic is perhaps the best illustration of the concepts discussed in this book: Meaning and purpose are the most powerful motivators of healthcare providers. Meaning and purpose are at the core of their beings. They are the manifestation of their souls.

—*Tom Atchison*