



The Gift of Presence in Medical Practice

ON A WARM LATE-SUMMER AFTERNOON more than 600 people came together in Portland, Oregon for one single purpose: to honor Ron Naito, MD '78, whose sudden retirement had just been announced in the wake of his diagnosis of advanced pancreatic cancer.

With only a week's notice to prepare for this event, Dr. Naito's patients arrived in droves, and waited patiently in endlessly coiling lines simply for a chance to spend a few moments with him.

They came to say good-bye. But most of all they came to say 'thank you' to a physician who had modeled throughout his nearly 40 years of medical practice a remarkable capacity to connect with, and be fully present to, his patients.

SOME MONTHS LATER, Dr. Naito brought that same deep presence and quiet humility to a conversation about his many years of practice. Presence was not something he had learned in medical school, and he did not have a book to guide him. It was a skill he honed over many years because he recognized its vital role in the healing relationship.

When you walk into an exam room you have only seconds to establish a relationship with a patient, he explained. "You need to let them know that they are not just a patient: they are *the* patient. For you they are the only patient in the world in this moment."

Many patients are anxious when they see a doctor, he continued. They don't know what you're going to tell them. Being fully present allows all extraneous thoughts to fall away so that it's easier to put yourself in the patient's shoes and understand what they need.

Patients sense this understanding right away. They know how different it is to feel that someone is listening to them and fully present to their needs. "New patients would often tell me that they'd never had a visit like this, that no one had listened to them so intently before. For me that was the only way to be with my patients."



Dr. Ron Naito graduated from the
OHSU School of Medicine in 1978.

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RON NAITO, MD



Treating a simple sinus infection, something he treated hundreds of times, illustrated Dr. Naito's point. "I realized it was becoming routine and rote for me, and I told myself 'this can't go on.' That patient had never experienced a sinus infection before: they needed to know that I was bringing my whole self to helping them."

As he practiced the art of presence with his patients he quickly saw that the benefits were numerous, both for his patients and for himself.

"When you are fully present you bring all of your senses and powers of observation to learning about the patient and their concerns. Patients feel your compassion. They trust you. They sense that you are really listening and available. And they are therefore more likely to tell you what you need to know and be active partners in their treatments. All of this results in better care."

In the fast-paced, time-scarce world of modern medicine, many might argue that doctors do not have the luxury of presence in the midst of a busy day. But for Dr. Naito, presence was the answer to the tyranny of

the clock because it allowed him to forge deeper relationships with his patients — more quickly and with more meaningful communication. In the end it often saved him time.

"Looking at a watch during a patient encounter is an absolute no-no," he emphasized. And the ubiquitous presence of the computer? "That dehumanizes the patient and must be pushed out of the way during key parts of the visit, as though it does not exist. The patient must know that your only focus is on them and what they need."

As he reflected on the profound fulfillment he had gained from his long career in medicine, in marked contrast to the increasing prevalence of burnout in the medical profession, it was clear to Dr. Naito how he himself had also benefited from his practice of presence.

"If you practice being fully present, you find a power you didn't realize you had that energizes you," he explained. "I might be exhausted after a sleepless night on call, but the minute I saw my first patient the fatigue completely disappeared. I was able to treat the oldest, sickest and most complex people with compassion. Treat each as a treasured individual and really listen to their deepest concerns."

"I had to learn how to do this for myself," he said. "But these skills can be taught, and the benefits for both patients and physicians are simply incalculable."

On that warm summer afternoon of remembering and honoring, it was abundantly evident how many of Dr. Ron Naito's patients recognized the gift of deeply compassionate presence he had brought to their care. In the most fitting tribute of all, they brought their presence to him.

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