

Possibilities Never Contemplated: 20 Lessons

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The following is an address given to the Division of Psychiatry, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa as part of their annual Research Day- 9th June 2010. Professor Glencross is a leading academic, and an artist with a number of group and stand alone exhibitions to her credit.

Motivational talks can be difficult. When I was recently invited by the Division of Psychiatry at the University of the Witwatersrand to consider doing such a talk for their Research Day, my immediate and instinctive reaction was to refuse. After all I am a haematologist and my recent research endeavors have been focused around laboratory monitoring HIV/AIDS. As a starting point, I began to consciously reflect back over 25 years of clinical laboratory, teaching and research practice to search for the sources of my inspiration and motivation. Again, as has happened many times in my career, I was confronted with a task that would take me out of my comfort zone but hoped that it would lead me to something new.

I entered medical school in 1980 at the age of 17 with a vague idea of what I ultimately wanted to be. As it turned out, there was no way that I could have contemplated the endless possibilities and permutations of events and choices that brought me to where I am now. Certainly I ended up nowhere near where I suggested I would like to be in the initial interview that led to my being accepted to medical school: a singing paediatrician! My journey may not have taken the obvious route I expected but it has undoubtedly been varied and lively. An outsider looking in at any accomplished career would very likely focus on obvious successes and achievements. What is not evident are the struggles, the mistakes, the failures, the disillusionment, the disappointments, the tiredness, hopelessness and self criticism we all feel and experience at times. I have been, and felt, all of these things. Like most people, I struggle with too many commitments and time management. Mostly, however, I have only strived to get my current task done and to give 100% to all that I do.

In preparing for the talk it was apparent that I had long forgotten that I too was once a young doctor, exhausted and frustrated by workload and processes, not clear on

what direction to take and mostly led by chance and circumstance. 'Life happens' to all of us but one thing that I have fully realised is that getting ahead boils down to choices and attitude. Over time I began to view the stops, detours and distractions as breathing spaces: times for reflection, review and meaningful critical assessment - a chance to get a better perspective on what was happening. I have also paid (over and over) what my printmaking teacher, friend and mentor calls 'serious school fees' by failing successfully. Just getting up and trying again. I have also learned to focus on the issues I considered to be most important and stopped sweating the small stuff. Through 20 years of work, academic and family commitments, and through the process of learning (and making) art, I have finally understood why gurus sit on mountains contemplating both their own existence and that of the universe. In other words, I think I truly understand, whilst not losing sight of the intended outcome or destination, that the journey itself can be more enjoyable. Here then, are at least 20 lessons I think that I have learned along the path to find my own sense of enlightenment.

- 1: ***It only takes '...one...step...at...a...time...'*** ***Baby steps is all it takes.*** Try to finish all the tasks you start (after all we are only human). And even if you don't, do what you can with all of your heart.
- 2: ***Believe in the power of synchronicity*** – so beautifully captured in the writing of WH Murray on his Scottish/ Himalayan Expedition: 'Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, a chance to draw back. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless and splendid plans. That the moment one definitely commits oneself then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issue from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no-one

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could have dreamt would have come their way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now!

- 3: **Believe in the power of serendipity.** There are no mistakes, only happy discoveries by accident. Wits' famous paleontologist, Prof Lee Berger, is a perfect example. The unfortunate death of a new leading laboratory staff member forced him to revisit their Sterkfontein sites and strike upon their latest discoveries.
- 4: **Expect the unexpected.** If things are going too smoothly, be wary. Difficulties lead us to new places. See the gift in every event in your life, even those considered 'bad luck'.
- 5: **Find points for departure.** Picasso is my obvious inspiration and I love the man and his work. It was probably his fascination with African masks that lead him to develop the style of painting for the "Demoiselles D 'Avignon", the very famous painting that changed and led the way for modern art. Be inspired by things that others have done. Build on them – shift the paradigm – take these ideas to a new level but without copying.
- 6: **Be bold.** Half-baked is irritating for others and a waste of your time. Keep reminding yourself: boldness has genius, power and magic in it.
- 7: **Be observant.** Alexander Fleming would not have discovered Penicillin if he had merely discarded his contaminated bacterial cultures and not noticed that the contaminating fungi had actually inhibited the bacterial growth...
- 8: **A house is built brick by brick.** I believe that all work is just layers upon layers; use all that you have done (at some time, each piece will become relevant). No task is wasted. Extend upon the things you have done. Make them more. It all adds up.
- 9: **It's not done until it's done - and everything in good time.** Be patient. Work. Re-work. Think, write, delete, cut, think, change your mind, write again, paste, delete... The relevance of things that are not so obvious at the time will find their place.
- 10: **Examine. Question everything.** Beyond the paradigm. Beyond the dogma. Look for the paradox. Form your own opinions. Although one should not lose sight of the big picture, sometimes the little detail is the thing that is most special and exciting: the path to something new.
- 11: **Establish the truth.** The truth? The truth? Byron Katie says that one should always ask oneself at least three times before forming one's opinion or reacting. Be truthful and ethical in all you do, especially your research and work. Similarly, show respect for your family, friends and colleagues and all that they do. Remember your Hippocratic oath...
- 12: **Simplify. Your work, and your life.** It is not only when one is decorating one's home that less is more.
- 13: **Don't let failure hold you back.** Samuel Beckett believed that we should 'Try again. Fail. Fail better'. I believe that 'bad luck', disappointment, frustration, tedium and poor resources can be good for you;

they take you to the place from where innovation can evolve. Shakespeare said it well... 'Sweet are the uses of adversity'...

- 14: **Broaden your interests.** There is a whole world outside of medicine... embrace everything, accept all challenges. Ever heard the saying 'that all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy...' Read widely, outside of your field e.g. broad-based science journals like Nature and Cell. Find out about developments in Molecular Biology. Go to art exhibitions, music concerts, collaborate with colleagues with different fields of interest. Take up golf or join a yoga class...
- 15: **Find a meditation.** For me, its compulsively drawing or painting and reading about science. Science and art: the endless dichotomy that feeds my soul.
- 16: **Find an inspiration.** Find the things or people that inspire you and surround yourself with them. For me it's Picasso, South Africa's William Kentridge, the way Madonna constantly reinvents herself and... the diversity and biology of life.
- 17: **Take risks.** You don't want to be thinking to yourself on your death bed 'if only...' I have learned this best through my painting and etching where I have created my best work by taking risks with pieces that were probably not bad (but not great either). By not being precious about the piece, by destroying it, resuscitating and bringing it back again creates opportunity for unrealised potential and energy. It never ceases to amaze me these are often the works that people love the most.
- 18: **Follow your intuition.** As Martha Beck writes, follow your 'North Star' and you can't go wrong.
- 19: **Believe you can.** You hold the key You need to remind yourself over and over that you make the choices and have the answers - in hand. After all 'you've got brains in your head and feet in your shoes'. Go and buy yourself a copy of the Dr Seuss children's book "Oh the places you'll go" and read it whenever you stop believing in yourself. (And when you think it can't happen due to so many difficulties, try another of my favourites: 'Did I ever tell you how lucky you are?')
- 20: **Don't take yourself too seriously.** The most successful people I know of play all day. There is a lesson in how much fun Picasso had in his lifetime...

Carpe Diem!

Source material serving as background to content is available upon request from the presenter

Editor's footnote: What has this to with Psychiatry? Everything. Psychiatry is as much about science and scientists as any other medical discipline. It is also about "art", in a way that is hard to quantify. Ultimately, it is about people who practice psychiatry and who will develop the discipline. May their motivation grow.