

December 2012

Greetings:

I am continuing my practice of writing the non-business part of this letter on Thanksgiving Day. My greatest challenge is how to distill what I've been learning and thinking.

To deepen my practice of functional medicine, I attended two Institute for Functional Medicine conferences and an Integrative Healthcare Symposium this year. IFM combined the symposium with a module (a module is an intensive in depth course on an area of the matrix — i.e., detoxification and biotransformation, etc.). The topic in May was the Year of the Heart. It was outstanding. Because I revisited how the heart/vascular system was intimately entwined with the immune system, I felt inspired to retake the module on Immune Surveillance and Repair. Since medical school, the immune system has been the most difficult for me to master.

For those of you new to my practice, I continue to be a grateful, humble student in the Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM). To me, functional medicine is “better medicine.” I strongly invite you to visit the website for the institute by going to functionalmedicine.org. Explore the site.

My background and personal spiritual bedrock is that transformational healing is real. For many years, I focused on personal growth work and insight as the primary route to freedom and well-being. I rediscovered my passion for using molecules, so to speak, as part of healing when I found the institute. I had fervent certainty that the Mind influenced bodily wellness. I am utterly convinced that if your body is unwell, you will struggle to manifest your authentic self. But how to have the knowledge and tools to utilize both mind and body to heal a unique individual has been my personal quest.

I'd like to focus on what I've seen repeatedly in functional medicine and that true healing is possible and my realization that each of you should “take heart,” so to speak, or in other words, have faith in yourself — your courage, your journey, and your profound capacity to heal.

This May during the awesome conference on the heart, I learned more about vascular biology than I ever dreamed existed! The most important revelation for me was how ignorant I was in my notion that the cells lining the blood vessels (endothelial cells) are inert — just a barrier. Hah! These cells are profoundly active in numerous ways including endocrine and immune. We all have been more aware lately that inflammation is often the origin of diverse disease presentations. I learned that the vascular endothelium can function as one very important mediator of this process.

Mark Houston, MD, spoke carefully and precisely about the mechanisms of action that the surrounding environment exerts on the cells, and in equal depth he explored the myriad effects the noble endothelial cell performs in turn influencing the milieu. He has a wonderful book entitled “What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Heart Disease.”

As in many processes, imbalances begin long before frank disease. One dimension of his presentation was particularly stunning to me — his series of case studies of real people who were very ill. By impeccable understanding of the mechanisms of vascular biology, he was able to reverse plaque, improve cardiac ejection

fraction, fix high blood pressure, etc. Real people, real healing. He doesn't just espouse lifestyle medicine, but he also uses interventions from the allopathic world and the "alternative" world. He derives each intervention logically and precisely based on well documented science and sound knowledge of vascular biology, functional medicine, and anti-aging medicine. I can promise you that if I wanted any question answered about my vascular health, heart health, etc., I'm going to where he practices in Tennessee!

He also discussed cholesterol and lipid balance at length – (two hours, no potty break). I am awed that there is knowledge out there that works, that heals, and is available – if you know where to look for it. I am scared and appalled how few of these interventions are offered in the average physician's office, especially early screening tests of vascular health such as Endo Pat. Even my biological dentist in NYC offers it!

I know that I wrote about Heart Math last year after learning about it in the IFM hormone module. I am struck by such a vivid example of the integration in functional medicine. I learned about heart math during a module on hormones not cardiology. I have enclosed a separate sheet on heart math for those of you new to my practice or those of you who would like a reminder.

My personal intuition has always been that if you can go "upstream" to the origin of imbalance, you can heal. I think this is equally true for biologic processes as for emotional/spiritual ones.

So, "take heart." What do I mean by that? When I was mulling over topics for this letter, the phrase kept welling up in me like a mantra, DON'T GIVE UP. In working with and meeting others, I met a few rare souls who found their path to wellness and never faltered or looked back. For the rest of us, the process of healing is not so unswerving. Unfortunately, there are forces that we can allow to undermine us. Remember, I deliberately use the phrase "can allow" to remind you that even if it feels like it happened to you, how you react is ultimately a choice.

There's perfectionism – all or nothing thinking. Perfectionism can show up in a self-assessment that doesn't acknowledge healthier choices but focuses on a few unhealthy ones. For example, eating wisely. Many of you are working to eat more brightly colored fruits and veggies. Yeah! Yet, if I ask you how you are doing with your self-nurture in the area of healthful eating, you often say "I've been bad." I probe. You mean you made a few unwise choices that you are acutely aware of. In part, aware because you have more knowledge, and you think that eating those Oreo cookies might have been unwise.

You now know about the dangers of processed food with additives, dyes, pesticides, and GMO. You are cognizant of the effects of sugar on Natural Killer cell activity. You are fluent in the post-prandial endotoxemic effects of processed food that lasts up to four hours. Your broader understanding of factors that impact your health is evidence of knowledge and power within you. You don't count that. Worse yet, you tend to discount or dismiss the benefits of the healthier choices you are making such as more veggies, less soda, switching to organic dairy, or whatever.

Another force, so to speak, is the attachment to the "how it is supposed to be." Often this vision manifests in different settings — a desire to fit in to a group at work, to have your biological family be different, to have a better nostalgic image of yourself, to a social or political cause, or to having your mate be what you want. I am NOT saying we shouldn't have a fabulous self-representation of ourselves as healthy, insightful, vibrant, and loving and a reality that includes feeling loved and having meaning and purpose. I am pointing out the pitfalls of trying to make a person or situation be something it cannot or will not. If trying to force external change interferes with your meditating, eating wisely, playing, or feeling joy and passion, then be wary.

Another force is circumstance – whether from outside forces or inside choices. We can choose to respond to stressful circumstances with less healthy defense mechanisms – often from the unholy trinity of fight, flight, or freeze. When we do so, we are much less likely to stay mindful, keep balanced, and make wise

choices.

I bring up this topic of don't give up on your healthy vision (or "take heart") because I see many of you making a real effort. You strive to set boundaries, to make healthier choices, and to have success. Sometimes you may find yourself sliding in mindfulness or habits or even find yourself back where you started from. Yet, you are never back where you started from.

I am very cognizant of the tendency to under estimate ones' own competence. We don't realize the power is in knowing you can count on YOU – to be where you should be when you should, to do something you may not want to do like go to work, clean your bathroom, pay bills, rake leaves, or whatever, but that you CAN do it. Acknowledging your inner strength is critical to maintaining self-esteem. I see many competent people who criticize themselves for not being perfect, consistent, or amazing. They feel what they do and what they are is less than or ordinary. It is not. You are extraordinary.

So I want to leave you with an exercise I learned at a functional medicine module. They offered free yoga for an hour before the day's seminar began. This took place around 6:30 a.m. The instructor told us she had a personal ritual that she practiced every morning and again throughout the day if she needed to.

She stood with good posture, legs shoulder width apart. She then raised her arms to make a half circle at shoulder height, palms facing up and out. She would "set her intent for the day/moment." Her words were "I am open. I am grateful. I surrender." Then she would add whatever she felt she needed for the day. In our case, she set her intent to "lead the yoga class with joy and presence." She intended for us to have the opportunity to be more centered so that we might be better able to learn and grow. Naturally, if you choose to practice this exercise, you will know what statements allow you to come into presence and affirm your truths.

I have been practicing that exercise and it takes literally 30 seconds. I try to do it daily – not perfectly. I open to connect with energy to be more mindful, grateful, and whole.

I am working on a website, slowly I admit. I plan to put on the site the archives of the last few years of newsletters as each has some suggestions for you for improving your well-being. Each of the ideas and practices can be a tool in your toolkit for self-growth. Before the website is done, if you would like any prior newsletters, let me know.

With love and best wishes for your unfolding journey,

Nina Pesante, MD