



Thursday Memo – December 10, 2015

The Universe is Made of Stories – by Hugh Silk

I feel guilty. I am too blessed to have too many stories to tell about clinical successes and teaching triumphs. As I reflect on my good fortune a couple of ideas bubble up.

A coach of mine once said – make your own luck. I have always been steadfast to gravitate towards that which I think will be innovative, practical, meaningful and fulfilling. I only applied to 2 colleges and 1 medical school. I knew where I wanted to be. I made some luck and I got some luck.

I now find myself gravitating towards the practical and meaningful within the realms of clinical practice and teaching. Making luck by choosing carefully; getting luck by being surrounded by thoughtful colleagues.

In my office I work with a team. I provide primary care to people with significant mental health issues in an outpatient setting where people have been getting mental health services for years. They feel safe there. My practice is the reverse of what Sandy Blount set up at UMass. I *receive* the warm hand offs rather than make them. We routinely talk about our patients as a team in the hallway, at planned meetings, by email - thereby offering people comprehensive, planned, coordinated care.

But wait – it gets better. I have a health coach, a nurse and a medical assistant. We do the now routine team huddles, team meetings, pre-planning for visits, etc. But I can't say enough about a health coach. Iora health has been doing this for years and proving that 1 doc to 2-3 health coaches improves patient wellness. We are now proving it for mental health patients. But I am not interested in numbers improving (as much as I know that this does improve health to some

degree); I am a humanist – I am interested in stories. Muriel Rukeyser wrote in a poem: “The Universe is made of stories, not atoms.”

A 400+ pound patient sits across from me. She is aglow.

I’m doing it. I had lost weight before but it leveled off. I am moving the scale again.

And she is – down 10 more pounds. Why?

Because you all listen and treat me like a person.

Her last doctor had said she was too large to go to physical therapy. She felt too embarrassed to go to the gym. She can feel our enthusiasm; and I can feel hers. She bought a swim suit on-line that would fit. She is going to water aerobics 3 times a week. She is meeting with PT. Her energy is returning and she is determined to no longer need pain meds.

Our health coach meets with her and others individually and in groups. She teaches patients who have never cooked before how to make simple meals, healthy smoothies, and with the help of props how to read labels. She meets folks in the park for stretching, on a hiking trail for a walk, and at the Y to learn how to exercise in a productive manner. I think to myself – I know that scribes can improve medicine and make my life easier – but I’ll take a health coach any day to motivate patients.

Another patient tells me that she is so pleased to have quit smoking and be losing weight.

Last time I quit, I gained weight – she tells me. I love you guys.

And she means it.

Each team member shows her respect. Her goals are simple. Her life is simple. Her accomplishments to date are very small in the grand scale of things. I give her one of the baskets that Judy Savageau helped organize as a reward for her hard work. She hugs me and cries.

Later, the woman who has now dropped below 400 lbs returns for another visit and shows me a photo of her “former self”. She is beautiful. In her own way – then and now. She truly is aglow. Her smile is contagious. Her story inspires us all in our office and we are giddy as we share it with one another. We vow to tell a positive story at the end of each team meeting (something we borrowed from Erik Garcia and his crew in Worcester). Our own Story Corps meets the The Moth.

I then realize – the universe truly is made of stories and only that will save us.