This I Believe – by Pam Adelstein

Good morning. I am happy to be here today for the “This I believe series.” I would like to dedicate this talk to Rabbi Neil Gillman, of blessed memory, who inspired a generation of rabbis through his remarkable ability to listen to their stories.

What I believe is two-fold: first, I believe that everyone has a story. And second, everyone needs someone to hear their story. To listen.

Everyone has a story. This story may be different than yours and it is critical to appreciate that. To not make assumptions. To open one’s heart to overcome stereotypes and put yourselves in others’ shoes.

I am a family doctor and I work in a community health center in Dorchester, a part of Boston. I take care of babies, children, teens, adults, elderly, and pregnant women. Dorchester is a place that is often in the news. For gun violence. For bad things happening there. My patients are poor. They are immigrants. Their skin is often a different color than mine. Most practice a different religion than I do. All have survived incredible struggles and continue to do so. Every day. Some patients do not have friends or family. Many are homeless, or their apartments are infested with rats or roaches. Some have spent time in jail, or their loved ones are in jail. Others work 3 jobs just to pay the bills. Some have been shot, or have had loved ones severely injured or killed by gun violence. Many have been abused as children or adults in horrific ways. Some have been persecuted for their political or religious beliefs. Others do not have money for food, or for the medications that I prescribe. Some children are not allowed to play outside because their neighborhood is unsafe. People who have emigrated here have not seen their families back home in decades – their children, their parents, and other loved ones.
Despite these hardships, my patients are some of the most generous and upbeat people I know. They bring me gifts even though they can’t afford their next meal, or to pay their bills to keep the electricity on. They bring me food and souvenirs from their country. They hug me, they ask after my family, they bestow blessings upon me, they truly care about me. When I pause to acknowledge them and their story, I hope that helps them heal and brings them comfort. What I do know is that hearing their story, being truly present with them, helps me grow, empathize, and become a better person.

Everyone needs someone to listen and hear their story. I used to think my job as a doctor was to prescribe medications, treat illnesses, and advocate to alleviate poverty. But now I understand a bit more – it is just as important for me to listen. To learn how to be a better listener. To let my patients know that they matter. I hear them, I see them, I care about them, I believe in them. I am so grateful to all of my patients who trust me with their stories, as my life is so much richer for it. Hopefully, through the task of listening, I am helping make the world a better place.

I thank you all today for listening to my story, and I hope that I can inspire even just one of you to listen more deeply and openly to the stories others share with you. This opportunity to listen to others is all around us – but it is up to each one of us to seize such moments and run with them. Thank you.