

I Promised To Listen: The Life Of An Osteopath
Sutherland Memorial Lecture
Bonnie Gintis, D.O.
Indianapolis
June 21, 2014

The more I think I know about the living human body, the more I realize how vast the mystery is that holds that knowledge together. The longer I observe and listen to the body, and to the context in which it lives, the more I am in awe of all aspects of life. The great poet Mary Oliver, in her poem “Sometimes” proclaims¹,

Instructions for living a life:
Pay attention.
Be astonished.
Tell about it.

This sounds to me like the charge of being an Osteopath, and over the next hour, I hope I live up to this task. I say, “*being* an Osteopath,” not “practicing Osteopathy”, because I believe it is not simply something we do; it is a way of life, a world view, a calling to a sacred path, a way of existing in relationship to everything, including our own bodies, which is a sorely missed subject in most of our training. Today I hope to offer you a valuable experience, and not just read you a lecture. Over the next hour I will share with you the way I cultivate my own ability to be attentive, and tell you about how that has made a difference in my Osteopathic life. I will tell you some stories, and invite you to ask yourself questions and listen for the answers. The asking and listening may be just as valuable as any of the actual answers you receive. I can’t guarantee *your* astonishment, but I hope to share some of *my* astonishing Osteopathic life with you.

I’d like to begin our time together by inviting you to be intimate with the sensations of your own body. Developing a first-person sensory vocabulary and an ability to sense your own embodiment creates a bridge to translate this ability into perceiving other’s bodies.

Perhaps some of you are thinking, “I sense my patient’s bodies fine without bringing myself into the mix.” This might be true to some extent, but in my experience, and the experience of my teachers, and the countless people I have taught, awareness of others can only spring from the awareness that is within ourselves, and excluding oneself from that awareness muddies the water more than it helps.

Profound clarity arises when we are conscious of the source of what we sense and respond accordingly. We sense things from the outer world, from inside our own bodies, from our mental activity, from our relationship with other people, and from the natural world. (There are other categories of sensing, but these are the ones I will discuss today.)

First let’s distinguish our sense of what comes in from the external world via the commonly known senses: sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. It’s important to know how these senses differ from our own interoceptive sensations – those experiences that arise from inside our bodies (feeling hot, cold, pleasure, itchy, tingly, stiff, sore, tired, hungry, etc.). Once the distinction between what we feel from inside ourselves and outside ourselves is made, then we can discern our sense of things that arise in the form of mental activity: thoughts and emotions, hopes and dreams, opinions, and fears. With all of these different types of sensory perceptions identified and differentiated we are less prone to project them on our patients or other people in our lives. We are in a state of wholeness that Dan Siegel, MD, psychiatrist, neuroscientist, and meditation teacher describes as “integrated”², in a state of having various aspects clearly delineated and simultaneously linked. It sounds to me like what A.T. Still called “connected oneness.”³

There is a seat of awareness within us. Many disciplines refer to this aspect of our consciousness as “The Observer.” And there is a function by which we gather information and deliver it to this observer of our awareness. Dr Sutherland used The Minnow to teach his students about their observer. If you track the Minnow and look at what she sees, you are being aware of your own awareness. Take a moment right now, close your eyes, and check in with yourselves. Are you are aware of being aware?

Cultivating this subtle quality of awareness of *ourselves* is quite challenging, and then, we commit to going one step further removed from our own experience by

learning to perceive the subtle inherent forces moving through *other people's bodies*. This is one of the most complex and challenging tasks I can imagine. And yet here we are, a whole profession based on the assumption that this is what we do. In order for our profession to evolve and deepen, in order to "Dig On"⁴ I invite all of us to renew our devotion to becoming more refined in our abilities to cultivate the awareness necessary to most effectively care for both ourselves and our patients.

Let's begin with being mindful of our own bodies. Each of us has our own portable natural world, a personalized, ever-ready classroom. Mindfulness is the process of paying attention on purpose and perceiving without judgment. This is a skill that is extremely useful in examining our patients, as well as in living our own lives. Mindfulness is not about bliss or quieting the mind, although these conditions have a greater tendency to arise with practice. Mindfulness is not a religion, or about spirituality, or even about meditation. Mindfulness is simply being informed by what's actually happening in the present moment. What could be more valuable in caring for people? Mindfulness allows us to respond to the necessity of the moment. This is how 12-year-old Drew Still began his exploration when he had a headache and felt the need to drape his neck over a clothesline, and how Sutherland began when he donned a home-made helmet made of 2 catcher's mitts strapped together to alter and explore his own cranial mobility and motility. Let's join them in the spirit of awakening our inquiring senses.

Guided Experience #1

*Put down your notebook, pen, coffee cup, or whatever else you might be holding. Close your eyes. Feel the support of your seat. Feel your feet on the floor. Notice that you just shifted the direction of your attention stream from primarily listening to me to feeling yourself. **You can choose the place from which your attention delivers information to your awareness.** You can allow my voice to move to the background of your attention and have the sense of your own body move to the foreground.*

Bring your attention to your breath and allow it to rest there as it is moved by inhalation and exhalation. You don't need to do anything with your breath; just let it be,

and it will travel through your body as it will. Your breath will find you.

Experience your breathing and the other sensations of your body without thinking about them, analyzing, diagnosing, labeling, or judging... And if you do have thoughts, thank your mental commentary for sharing with you, and if you can, let it go, and if you can't, let it be. Being kind to yourself, return to the sensations of your breath, of your body touching the chair, the temperature of the air in the room, the sounds that you hear, the taste in your mouth, the wetness of saliva, the feel of the clothes touching your skin, or of any other sensation you might be feeling.

Place your hands on your thighs and lightly, press down, and feel yourself engage in this gesture. Notice how your body responds to this simple action. Do you feel your back press against the back of the chair? Your arms tighten? Does something in your abdomen engage? Do you feel your feet pressing into the floor? Did your breathing change?

Take a moment and ask yourselves if there is any movement or change of position that would allow you to feel even just a tiny bit more comfortable. Pause and listen... and respond to your desire to care for yourself. Now pause again and feel what is unfolding from how you responded to caring for yourself. Your answers to these questions are just as important as the way you ask them and pause to listen and feel.

Open your eyes and notice how you can choose to shift your listening attention. Become aware of the size and shape of the room. Notice the people in room and the noises they make. Allow the sensations and awareness of your body to move into the background, and bring your attention back to me in the foreground.

Osteopathic Intimacy

My first story is about Osteopathic intimacy. It's a true story, as are all my stories. During the 23 years I was in private practice, I shared intimacy with my patients. They were intimate with me; they told me things they told no one else. Sometimes they

needed to undress for the examination or treatment. Always, I touched them and listened.

There was a definite vector to this intimacy. They only touched me when saying hello or goodbye. I did not necessarily intimately share with them, but many of them didn't realize this. In their state of suffering, vulnerability, and longing to be understood sometimes they mistook my engagement and caring compassion for mutual friendship. I thrived on this meaningful contact with my patients, and gladly took professional responsibility for maintaining the clarity of the boundaries, and I accepted the asymmetry of the relationship, knowing that what I had to offer was of great value, and I was committed to being in service to others.

About 5 years ago I became increasingly aware of imbalances in my life. I felt overworked, role-bound, and weary from not feeling well. I knew something had to change, but I was too fatigued to come up with a creative solution. I yearned for the tide to turn... and then it did. In 2009 I was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer, after years of normal mammograms and impalpable breast masses. **Bone metastases** - a cruel and unusual fate for an Osteopath. How could I have not known? What feeling did I overlook?

I couldn't answer or make peace with these questions, and that allowed me to stop and shift my attention to caring for myself. Without yet knowing exactly what the lesson is, I understand that this is my advanced course and I feel compelled to speak and write about it.

As an Osteopathic writer, my world has turned and the arrangement of intimacy has shifted. I have become the one who speaks candidly, the one who confides intimately. And now, as a writer reading these words to you, you are my Osteopaths. I stand before you with the honor of speaking in the lineage of my teachers: Andrew Taylor Still, William Garner Sutherland, Anne Wales, Mary Elizabeth Hitchcock, Stanley Schiowitz, James Jealous, my beloved husband Steve Paulus, my colleagues, students, patients, friends, and many others outside my Osteopathic world, including Emilie Conrad, the founder of Continuum Movement, who died this past April. I humbly ask you to be my Osteopathic witnesses. Allow *me* to be intimate with *you*. I invite you to listen to what I have to say, and *take in* the stories of my Osteopathic journey through life.

When AT Still met with a new patient he described what he did as *taking in* a history. One of the many things I have learned about the mysterious process of Osteopathy is that ***much of the healing occurs in the alchemical vessel of listening***. Sutherland asked us to listen and allow our perceptual fields to engage far more than mere information, but to “think, see, know, and feel”⁵ and as we cultivate wisdom at the deepest level.

The 50 Sutherland Memorial Lecturers who came before me have surely presented all the most inspiring and obscure quotes from Still and Sutherland, so I won't try to present more of the same. Instead, I'm going to tell you some stories. These may be my stories, but their messages are universal. ***Stories deliver a philosophical pearl through a secret door right into the heart and soul of the listener***. These stories are about sentinel events in my life that taught me principles that I now realize emerged from the natural world and provided a felt-sense to support my understanding of Osteopathy. I invite you to listen, to find your own defining moments in life, in Nature, in Love, in Health, and understand with your felt-senses how they brought you to Osteopathy.

Beginning With The Resonance Of Saline Fluids

I began my Osteopathic education with the Resonance of Saline Fluids. The scene of many of my childhood Sundays was the placid Miami Beach of the early 1960s. Lost in the rhythm of the perpetual motion of the waves and the slow swelling and receding of the tide, I played at the water's edge. As a six-year-old I was fascinated with digging holes and watching them fill from beneath and bubble up, as the rising groundswell permeated the spaces between the sand particles. I imagined a place below where the boundaries between earth and ocean shifted and gradually differentiated, and I was filled with a child's wonder as I created a theater in which to witness this mysterious interface in motion.

One Sunday afternoon, as I enthusiastically thrust and scooped my hand into the damp sand, I unexpectedly encountered a sharp fragment of a shell that gouged a small but deep laceration on the side of my index finger. It wasn't a serious cut, but I was bleeding, and it was stinging enough to set tears in motion. I drew my hand up, the cut

side of my finger facing me, and reached towards my mouth. The tide was coming in, and as I sat there crying, head bowed, and sucking on my bleeding finger, an unexpected wave splashed my face. I felt completely overpowered by things beyond my control. Overwhelmed by my circumstances, I wailed in distress.

Then suddenly I became filled with the awareness of the similarity of the salty taste and fluid texture of the blood, the tears, and the ocean. The sense of awe that filled me and overflowed in that moment remains with me to this day as a vivid, palpable memory, a defining moment of my life. I was enthralled in a child's version of mystical rapture. In this spellbound moment, I merged my consciousness with the salty fluids that surrounded and filled and soaked me. I felt freed and comforted by the sense of connection to the encompassing saline fluid resonance.

Tasting the salty blood, tears, and ocean water created a bridge to a feeling that had no name yet. I was only six-years-old, and I had no words for many of my experiences, yet I knew that this one was important. I was in resonance with these fluids. It was through a resonant field that these fluids "communicated" to me. The fluids carried a message, and I felt I could receive that message if I listened with a sense that had yet to be named. The fluids were permeated with the vitality instilled in them by their movement and interaction with their surroundings, and as they shared this potency with me I knew that I was connected to them.

The salty fluids had a texture that differed from the fresh-water fluids, and yet I felt resonance with both. It would be years before I would understand that fresh water courses through me as cerebrospinal fluid, and that all other body fluids are saline. Both fresh and salt water are parts of my physiology. As I identified with all of these fluids, I felt deeply assured that I was part of some bigger picture. There was a mysterious seamless connection between my life, the Earth, and some living process that was far more encompassing than anything I had previously comprehended - that state A. T. Still referred to as connected oneness.

In that initial moment of conscious reverence at the water's edge, I became aware for the first time in my short life of being a part of something bigger than my little self. This "something" surely must have existed before I became aware of it, and continues, even when my attention is not with it. The forces that allow the wholeness of

life to unfold are moving and expressing themselves regardless of the company and participation of my conscious awareness. What might be different if I intentionally met this resonant field of natural function with awareness and full participation?

Homesick for those rhythms I felt at the ocean's edge, I continued to explore similar rhythms all around me. I began to sense this same feeling around bodies of fresh water: rivers, lakes, and streams. I could even feel it in the rain. As a young teenager, I would wake up at dawn to sense the same feeling in the sunrise, the early morning fog, the clouds, and in the humid wind. I felt it in the trees, in the grass of my sandy front yard, in the nearby swamplands, in the sounds of chorusing frogs and insects, in the still air at night, *and in people*. These textures, tones, and tempos that I felt as a child in nature would someday offer Osteopathy a familiar place to land and unfurl in my consciousness.

Guided Experience #2

*Put down your notebook, pen, coffee cup, or whatever else you might be holding. Close your eyes. Feel the support of your seat. Feel your feet on the floor. Bring your attention to your breath. Don't take a deep breath. Don't work so hard. **Allow your breath to rest on your attention as it moves like the ocean through inhalation and exhalation.***

*Place 1 hand on your chest and the other hand on your abdomen. Notice the sensations that come from your world within: gurgling, fullness, pulsation, congestion, or whatever you might be feeling. Note the difference between what you sense from **inside** yourself from what you sense from **outside** yourself, like the sounds of your gut rumbling, versus the sound of the door opening and closing. Bring your attention back to your breath and feel the change of the shape of the space that your chest and abdomen live in. Feel how your whole body lives and breathes and functions.*

*Dive into feeling your **fluid** body, and if you've never experienced that before, imagine you are a water balloon (because you are) balanced on your two ischial tuberosities or if you are standing, on your feet. Tilt slightly and shift your weight to one*

side and feel, or just imagine your fluid being pour to that side. We are externally exaggerating a movement that is actually happening within us. It's more like we are joining a movement already in progress, in an attempt to highlight our sense of it.

Now tilt the other way and feel your fluid body pour to that side. If you are familiar with the lateral fluctuation we have just encouraged, you may wish to stop here and track the effects of this in your body. If not, spend the next minute in extreme slow-motion swaying from side-to-side, externally exaggerating fluid movements to invoke an experience of the expression of inherent movements within. Appreciate your fluid nature. Pause, suspend voluntary motion, and feel what keeps moving, even after your body has stopped purposely swaying.

We are as Sutherland described like a house under the sea with all the windows and doors open. We are immersed in The Sea Around Us, which continues to move in, through, around, and past us, even as we are physically still.

Open your eyes and notice how you can choose to shift your listening attention, leaving the awareness of your fluid nature in the background, while you bring your attention back to my words in the foreground.

Trusting Flipper

In the fall of 1973 I sailed out into Sarasota Bay on a little boat alone and encountered a sea creature who conveyed to me a new sense of relating to and trusting nature. My day began in the library at New College, one of the small experimental colleges of the 1960s and 70s. It was a magical place on the Gulf of Mexico, full of exotic fruit trees and orchids. The college library was housed in the waterfront Venetian Gothic mansion formerly owned by the Ringling Brothers circus family. I loved to study at desks by the rear windows facing the bay. I'd spend hours alternately slogging through tomes of philosophy and anthropology and resting my eyes by gazing out at the bay.

One day I thought I saw something arc out of the water and make a little splash, but quickly got back to my reading assignment. Later, as I strolled back to my dorm I perused a

bulletin board and noticed that the sailing club offered free Sunfish rentals. A Sunfish is more like a raft with a sail than a boat, about twice my height, but easy to lift, like a heavy surfboard.

I was already an experienced sailor, so I rented one out the next morning and launched myself from the dock behind the library and took off across the bay. I longed for solitude and silence, but realized when I finally reached a place that fit that external description, that the noise that was torturing me was my own internal incessant mental chatter. I knew no escape from myself. I thought being alone in the middle of the bay might provide some relief, but in fact, it got worse!

It was a magnificent day and when I got sufficiently far away that I couldn't hear traffic or other noises of the city, I dropped sail, stopped the boat, slung my legs over the edge, and drifted. I was mesmerized by the wind on the water, by the gentle swells and rocking of the boat on the bay waters. I felt a softening of my hardened grip on life, and an opening of my perceptions of this place. My mind quieted a bit until out of the corner of my eye there was a flutter. Then again. Once more I saw something in a flash, but this time I heard it too. Whatever it was, it was coming closer. My heart pounded as I pulled my dangling legs out of the water and fumbled to raise the sail, catch the wind, and get my boat to whisk me away to safe shores. The faster I darted, the louder the splash that I was now sure was in pursuit of me.

I looked over my right shoulder and there it was, a dolphin, with big eyes and a goofy grin, swimming along side of my boat, about 12 feet away. I gasped when we made eye contact and I dropped the ropes, losing control of the sail, nearly catapulting myself off the pontoon. My boat slowed down and the dolphin kept pace, moving a little bit closer. Relieved that I wasn't about to die in the jaws of a sea monster, I dropped sail and brought my Sunfish to a stop. The dolphin bobbed and peeked out of the water every few seconds, as if he was trying to track me nonchalantly. I say "he" because the dolphin had a scar across its left side, and young males are known to have more scars than females because of fights.

I had seen many dolphins in Miami's Biscayne Bay, where my brother had taught me to sail, and where most of the Flipper TV show had been filmed during the 1960s, so the realization that my pursuer was a goofy-grinned dolphin calmed my fears. It was rumored that retired Flippers were released in Sarasota Bay or that the dolphins studied by the Sarasota Dolphin Research Program were just so used to being around people, that they sought them

out for companionship and play. I was curious and chose to stay, in spite of my fear of the unknown.

He just bobbed and peeked up and out at me for a while. Each time he went under, he surfaced a bit closer, until he was right at the boat's edge. And then he nudged my foot with his nose. I was thrilled, but pushed to the edge of the fine line between excitement and fear. Then he looked right at me, cocked his head sideways, blurted one of those endearing dolphin "squeaky bleeps", and bowed his head. How could I not trust him? He seemed so sweet and gentle and curious. He must have felt me relax, because he immediately came up out of the water, slid his nose onto the edge of my boat, and nudged me with enticement to jump in. I slid off the edge of the boat and reached out to hold onto the side of my boat, but he interjected himself between the boat and me. If I needed to hold on, it had to be to him.

I didn't know where to put my hands. How should I touch and hold on to this magnificently large and slippery creature? Would I hurt him, tickle him, irritate him? He seemed pretty substantial and didn't flinch in any way, so I wrapped myself around him holding on to a fin. He began to move, swimming slowly away from my boat and coming right back to its side, allowing me to rest, calm down, and decide whether or not to continue playing. When I didn't climb back onto my boat, he took off again, swimming a bit faster than before, bobbing up and down on the surface and dipping just slightly below. After one more rest, he took off, with a rising momentum until we arced and dove down under the surface. He brought me up quickly and let me catch my breath. He knew I was preparing for the next dive as I took an even deeper breath and held it, and he launched. He swooped me down, turned me around a big loop, and then curved for the ascent to the surface. He slowed down gradually so that we didn't exit explosively, like they do, when they are performing in marine park shows. I managed to time my exhalation as we swooped around and prevented too much water from rushing up my nose.

We swam for a little while longer, just gently undulating on the surface. I'm sure he felt my pounding heart through his back and knew that I had reached my limit of excitement. He delivered me to the side of my boat, like it was the end of some fantastic date. He clicked and bobbed, and disappeared beneath the surface. A few seconds later, he breached, leaping a few feet into the air, and with a tremendous splash disappeared beneath the surface forever,

leaving me with a trust in Nature that cultivated my curiosity and courage to dive and be led into the unknown depths.

The Accidental Osteopath

I discovered the mutability of mesoderm quite literally by accident during the 1974 summer term at New College. Sarasota, Florida may have seemed charming on the surface, but I had quite a strong sense that many unknown, unseen forces lurked there in some dark realm just beyond the veil of my consciousness. I didn't understand why I thought it was such a magical place when most of what I felt (when I wasn't thinking) was in the domain of discomfort, frustration, sadness, and fear. Sarasota was a beautiful but unusual place that gave me a vague impression of portentous events unfolding all around, leaving me feeling a bit anticipatory and anxious most of the time.

I was somewhat excited about the expansive, intellectual world of college and about being out in the world on my own, but my senses and emotions were dominated by an oppressive feeling of compression, sometimes exaggerated to the point of feeling like I was going to implode. I was coping with a 38° scoliosis that I refused to have treated with the full body brace the orthopedic surgeons had prescribed. My neck and back hurt all the time to some degree. My hands fell asleep intermittently throughout the day and night. I suffered from frequent migraine headaches. Emotional chaos colored every moment of my life. I was confused about my relationship to my body, my family, my education, and the world around me. My own problems would have been enough to handle, but in addition, my father was unemployed, and my mother had been diagnosed with ovarian cancer three weeks after I arrived at college. My plate wasn't just full; it was spilling over. As if life were not challenging enough, during the spring trimester of the school year, I developed a bad case of mononucleosis with a very painfully enlarged spleen and liver, which necessitated my dropping out of school.

After I recovered from the acute illness, I tried to get caught up by taking summer classes. I didn't have a car, so I got around the campus and town primarily by bicycle. Coming home from the store one day, cycling down a street lined with trees that formed a dense canopy, I had an accident that changed my life. With about 35 pounds of groceries in my backpack, I turned my head suddenly as I heard a young man's voice

say, “Excuse me!” The abrupt turn of my head threw me off balance, and I toppled over and skidded onto the side of the road. There I lay, under a tree filled with climbing vines and wild orchids, stunned and unable to move at first. My backpack had burst open and food was scattered all over the roadside, I was moderately scraped and bruised, covered in spilled grapefruit juice, but not seriously injured. I was mostly shocked and stunned by the fall. The young man who called out to me came running over to help, extremely apologetic for creating the unexpected interjection that caused my spill. He gathered my scattered and bashed groceries, picked up my bike, and helped me walk home.

He introduced himself as a previous year’s graduate of my college and said that he was visiting and looking for a friend. When he saw me go by on my bike, he assumed I was a student and thought I might know where to find his friend. Unfortunately, I didn’t. This kind and apologetic man explained that he was an Osteopathic medical student in Kirksville, Missouri, and he was very excited about having just completed his first 40-hour training in Cranial Osteopathy the day before he arrived in Florida. When he offered to give me a “treatment,” I didn’t know what he meant, but I was drawn to trust him and follow through with it to discover what he had to offer.

I lay face-up with my head at the foot of my dormitory bed, and the young man kneeled at the foot of the bed with his hands resting gently on my head. That’s all the detail I can remember to describe what appears to have happened. All he seemed to do was hold my head, but I have a vivid visceral memory of the intricate unfolding of sensations as I felt my head and neck changing shape. I was morphing into something or someone new. I had no idea of the anatomy of the cranial base, but I knew that the configuration from which my neck was suspended had changed. The space between my eyes widened, and later that day I would realize that my visual acuity had shifted. I no longer needed my reading glasses, and I still don’t wear glasses, forty years later!

At the conclusion of the treatment, I had trouble opening my eyes and talking, but in my bewilderment I did manage to mutter, “What was that?” He wrote, “*Osteopathy in the Cranial Field* by Harold Magoun, DO” and “Kirksville College of Osteopathic Medicine” on a piece of scrap paper and left it on my bedside table. I have no idea how

much time passed. I might have fallen asleep or drifted in some altered state of consciousness, and when I opened my eyes he was gone.

For years I wasn't sure exactly what had happened, but I knew my life had changed course. My scoliosis reorganized into a comfortable 8°, my headaches decreased in frequency and severity, my hands stopped falling asleep, and I felt an incredible sense of relief from the compressive implosion that had oppressed me. Most significant of all, I had a sense of being able to change, to heal. Life seemed workable, manageable, amenable to change. I knew that if something seemingly as dense as my twisted body could change that much that fast, there was something about the body that was more mutable and responsive than I had previously imagined.

I could feel the effects of the physical changes seeping into my psyche during the days that followed the treatment. The decompression I experienced both physically and emotionally expanded into the space around me, and I once again experienced that connectedness I felt at the edge of the ocean as a small child. The future called to me from the newly opened space in my body, and I felt this expansiveness extend out beyond the space in the night sky between the stars. I was filled with hope and curiosity about my emerging life. I was given a great gift in the midst of a very confusing and traumatic time.

I was only seventeen, and I had very complicated life circumstances. My mother was dying. I still had health issues that needed attention. Two students at my college were murdered that spring, and there was an upsurge of rapes, beatings, and other violent altercations. I was victim or witness in several of these incidents. Being questioned by the police became routine, but they didn't seem to be interested in doing anything to protect me. I found a way to brace myself to move ahead with my life. I felt terror living there and was in shock upon discovering that the world is not necessarily a safe and welcoming place. My college went bankrupt, was taken over by the state, and all of my favorite faculty left. My father was still unemployed, caring for my dying mother, and they couldn't assist me with college expenses. I had to continue my recovery from trauma and mononucleosis, get a job, find another college, and discover how to navigate my precocious young adult life with more grace and ease.

I was captivated by courage and adventure and eventually moved to New York City. Once I established residency there, a public college education would be affordable and I would explore the many options available in urban living. I would soon find my way to the Osteopathic Clinic and Hospital of New York, also known as LeRoy Hospital as a billing and admissions office clerk. I wasn't yet ready to commit to a career as an Osteopath, but I knew it was there in the waiting. I could feel it in my bones.

Recognizing Unsaid Necessity Disguised In A Pink Dress

I never thought I'd learn anything about communing with the natural world at a Midtown Manhattan penthouse party, but I did when I arrived and a young chimpanzee jumped into my arms. It was a family reunion with over a hundred guests organized by a distant cousin, and the chimp was hired for entertainment. I stepped off the elevator, which opened directly into the living room of the top-floor apartment; I scanned the room for familiar faces, and made immediate, somewhat accidental eye contact with the chimpanzee. She looked like a baby, wearing a pink ruffled dress and a diaper, and was clearly not happy about meeting and doing tricks for my extended family. She jumped from her trainer's arms and ran across the room towards me. She had a vertical leap of nearly 4 and a half feet and trusting that I would catch her, she aimed for my chest. Rather than panic and step away, I reflexly opened my arms and caught her.

I spent the next 3 hours in a room with her gripping me desperately. I'm not sure who was more upset, the chimp, my relatives, her trainer, or me. But it was clear that she didn't want to be there and that she had spotted a sympathetic ally in me. The trainer ushered us into a spare room and after realizing he was helpless and that she was not going to harm me, he left us alone.

I held her, and intuitively discovered that she liked being rocked. I felt her breathing become slow and calm. I desperately tried to feel into what she needed or wanted, but soon realized that my desperate wanting to figure her out got in the way of connecting with her.

Did her trainer abuse her? Was she too young to be performing for such a large crowd of people? Was she ill? How could I touch her and know what she needed without her telling me? Was it okay to make prolonged eye contact? Should I treat her

like a pet or a human baby? At that point in my life, I had hardly had any contact with children. I had never had a pet, or even held a human baby. I wanted to kiss her and snuggle, but I became uncomfortable about having tender feelings for this non-human primate, and then she began to whimper. I took a deep breath, kissed her on the head, and began making cooing sounds, which she seemed to understand. She began to mimic me or sing along with my cooing, and soon she fell asleep.

She slept for an hour or so and awoke ready to play, and have her diaper changed, but I'll spare you that part of the story. She left my cradled embrace and explored the room, climbing and rolling around. She enticed me onto the floor with her and we tickled each other until we made so much noise, her trainer returned. When he entered she seemed genuinely happy to see him and ran into his arms. I was so relieved that their reunion was spontaneous and affectionate. Suddenly, my relationship with her ended. Our time together was over and I felt like I was suspended in a dream state from which I couldn't fully awaken.

I mingled with the remaining few relatives and soon left, wandering through the streets of Midtown Manhattan. Unable to descend into the dark mechanistic world of the subway, I headed south on foot towards home in the West Village. I felt the dissonance of the intimacy of animal nature I had engaged, and the concrete, impersonal, and machine quality of city life and I knew I would someday search for another place to live. I wanted to live and practice in a place where I could become familiar with the presence of nature and learn to respond to its necessity, like I did with the chimpanzee.

The commitment to caring for patients requires an ability to hear what they say, sense their unsaid necessity, and know how and when to respond. Whether we are caring for a wild animal, a domesticated pet, a baby, an adult patient, or ourselves, we need multiple levels of sensing to be able to offer support or intervention that allows the Health to express itself most freely. Sometimes the Osteopath leads and sometimes the Osteopath follows in this complicated dance. Discerning which is called for, and letting go of a role-bound identity opens up unimaginable possibilities.

Listening To The Language Of My Bones

When I took the oath as a physician on graduation day from Osteopathic medical

school in 1986, I promised to listen deeply, to feel the messages conveyed by my patients' bodies, especially their bones, not knowing what that promise would eventually entail. After years of caring for people and devoting my studies and perceptual training to receiving the stories of other people's bones, my own bones call out more loudly than anything I've ever heard. My bones have become passageways for breast cancer to spread its cryptic message. I promised to listen, and now I hear an unexpected language spoken in a strange tempo that sounds like the static blur of a shortwave radio transmitting a distress signal from a faraway place in the night.

I yearn to understand the language of bones, of the dialect spoken by the cancer in my bones. The cancer? My cancer? What is the grammar of cancer? With what does its rhythm and cadence synchronize? A tumor bulges from within my sternum, hovering over my beating heart. Is there communication between my heart and the tumor, or is cancer like a psychopath, wreaking havoc and causing harm without having any empathy for the suffering it causes? The paradox is that this cancer in my bones is essentially made from my own cells. Do I have cancer, or does it have me? Is it mine? Can it be had? Is it an "it," or is it me? Have I been inflicted or gifted by this growing presence within me?

When I can't understand something, I turn towards the sensation of my moving breath, and look for resemblances and resonances with water. I lie in bed late at night when I cannot sleep and I ride the fluid breath inside my bones. When I take this ride, I clearly see why there's a common misconception that our bones are solid; this is an illusion. The average bone is about 20% water, but we fixate on the 80% that is not.

The human body is an incredibly functional container for its predominantly watery contents; its spaces, cells, and tissues form a vessel for its fluid-based form. Some mysterious set of codes and signals organizes our amorphous sac-of-water bodies into a highly functional form, and in my case, these signals have been distorted allowing cancer to overgrow inside my bones.

I oscillate from sensation to science, from memoir to philosophy every time I hit a cancerous bump in the road. I try to breathe and just let it be, but I become distracted by the dissonance between what I think about the body and what mine is actually doing.

Listening to the distress signals emanating from my bones, I am reminded of my

promise. **Bones carry promises from one point in time to another.** The mineral and fluid matrix resonates and receives signals simultaneously from the past and future. Life unfolds from all directions, not necessarily in a linear progression, into all directions through our bones. My bones will bridge the past and future assimilating food and water, the wake of desire and longing, the residues of repetition and impact, and the hardened reactions to shock and trauma. The messages of my bones will persist whether buried or burned.

The call of the shadow arises from deep in the marrow. A light cannot shine in such an enclosed space, but a river can flow in the darkness. A message arises from the darkness and I hear it emerge as a ripple in the stream of my consciousness. As I adapt to the dark, I hear a distant Voice, whispering, calling out an as yet unimagined message about allowing the next moment of my life to flow into the present. Jim Jealous describes it beautifully, “Healing is not a resolution of the past; it is allowing the future to move into the present.”⁶ The response to this call, to such profound loss, is nothing short of radical reimagination. I promised to listen.

When I first heard of the Osteopathic profession I didn’t understand the meaning of its name. It’s perplexing to most people how Osteopathy got its name, when the profession doesn’t necessarily have a primary focus on bone pathology. Many erroneously assume that we are “bone doctors,” but the origin of the name runs deeper. “Osteon” is Greek for bone, and “pathos,” also derived from Greek is usually defined as suffering, or something that evokes deep emotions. But pathos can also connote the experience of “an incoming expression”⁷ implying that we, as Osteopaths can empathically sense someone else’s experience or convey our own via bones.

Andrew Taylor Still asked us to begin with the bones, but he never expected us to end there. He had a deep connection to the study of *all* anatomy. His request was meant to create a structure to approach the study of the living human body, like a scaffold or a skeleton. He described the purpose of adjusting bones as a means to give freedom to the movement of fluids and open the space for the body to function better and heal itself.⁸ Still began his study of anatomy with the bones, and he found that it led him to the rest of the organism by what he called **connected oneness**. He was driven to learn every detail of every attachment, and then to follow all the structures that ran

through and crossed those bones and attachments, until he had explored every inch of all the anatomy of the body and pondered its function. He waxed poetic, acknowledging the connection of the study of anatomy to the deep esoteric mysteries of the universe as he proclaimed, “To know all of a bone in its entirety would close both ends of an eternity.”⁹ Still speaks of “eternity,” but there is nothing eternal about the body. Perhaps he believed there was something other than the physical body that is eternal and he spoke of gaining access to knowing this non-material metaphysical quality through the bones.

My reverence for the relationship between the known and the unknown continues to expand and contract, like my breath. I move from part to whole, from detail to big picture, from bone to membrane, to fluid, to viscera, into the metaphysical, and from movement to transcendent transformative stillness. The territory of exploration is endless, and the horizon unfolds seemingly always one step ahead of where I am, enticing me to pursue more of the endless web of connections just beyond my reach.

Honeymooning With Dr Wales

My husband Steve and I woke up the day after we got married and drove to see Anne Wales. It was a great way to start an Osteopathic honeymoon. On the morning we arrived in North Attleboro it was 103 degrees and the three of us began by drinking iced tea together. We told her about our Osteopathic romance and the wedding, and she told us about hers with Chester. Then, we traded treatments, two-on-one.

Anne impressed upon us that as Osteopaths we are distinctive because we make specific diagnoses. She said, “We may have faith, but we are not faith healers! We are as anatomically precise as we can be.” At some point in the afternoon I was the patient on the table and Steve and Anne were treating me together. Steve perceived a change in me that he couldn’t describe anatomically and he asked Anne if she felt it and knew what it was. She answered, “You don’t have to label everything you see.”

Later in the day I questioned her about the value of making a specific diagnosis as opposed to allowing the intention of the inherent forces within the patient to guide the treatment. She shook her head and said, “That’s too vague to be most effective.”

I have spent my whole Osteopathic career trying to resolve the paradox of these

two viewpoints: When is it helpful to make a precise material diagnosis, look for the cause of a problem, and act on it, and when is it best to hold the space for possibilities to come in with the non-material Tide?

We look for explanations and yearn for meaning, in our patient's bodies and in our own lives. We tell stories about how and why people feel the way they do. Sometimes we cling to models, we tour the map and forget about the actual territory. Sometimes we are right, and sometimes we fabricate explanations where they don't exist. We naively imagine that making a diagnosis gives us a degree of control. Sometimes it does. Sometimes it doesn't. Non-specific metaphysical treatment can be what is most needed by a person, or it can be a place to hide when you don't want to take responsibility. I've worked hard learning about what's known and knowable, and paying homage to the hidden unknown and unknowable that is unfolding in every human life. I trust that when I put my hands on my patients I know which approach is needed. Do you?

The Value Of Our Presence In The Face Of Uncountable Rates

Rollin Becker was my table trainer on the first day of my first SCTF Cranial Course in Colorado Springs in 1983. I had read the "Diagnostic Touch" series of articles, so I knew it was auspicious that I got to spend the day with this very famous, but seemingly grumpy old man. He was a man of few words, so when I asked my first question I was challenged with interpreting his answer. I had my hands in a vault contact on my partner's head and I was attempting to perform the dreadful task of counting rates. I had been studying Cranial Osteopathy at NYCOM for a few months and I had a sense that I knew what I was feeling, but I would waver between feeling what my teachers told me I was supposed to feel and feeling other rates, rhythms, and motions that weren't taught or talked about. I hadn't yet sorted out the varieties of perceptual experiences I was having.

I told Dr Becker that I felt an inhalation phase, but that no exhalation phase had come yet. I was feeling something that wasn't taught in our course. I could not perceive an 8-12 cycle per minute rhythm in my partner. I was not going to perpetuate my ability to force myself to feel anything I was told I should feel. I knew that this was not a skill,

but a dangerous ability that would only get in the way of both caring for patients and living my life. I asked him if I was missing something? Was I feeling a slower rate? He didn't touch my hands or my partner's body, but nodding his head, as though he were saying, "yes, you have discovered an Osteopathic secret, but we won't talk about it here," he put his index finger to his lips, nodded his head up and down emphatically, but just went, "Shh..."

A few years later, I was table training and a student called me over for guidance during a sensing session. He told me that he had sensed the beginning of an inhalation phase, but he was waiting minutes and was under the impression that inhalation was still expanding. He wondered if he was imagining it, or if he had missed the exhalation phase. I didn't presume to enter into the middle of his experience and know what he was feeling. I didn't know what his partner's body was revealing to him, but I asked him to consider the possibility that there are many phenomena creating rates of movements in the body and perhaps some rates are so slow that their exhalation phase might not come for years. He might not live long enough to observe and know the answer.

Some rates are knowable, and occasionally we get a glimpse of a rate that is as yet unknown and so slow in pace that it is unknowable. We must cultivate the ability to hold our experience in the hands of the unknown and unknowable and trust that our presence is of value in the vast and unfolding therapeutic process even when we can't count it.

Listening At The Potent Fulcrum Of Hurricane Donna

In September 1960, on the eve of my fourth birthday, Hurricane Donna ripped through my childhood home and showed me the potency of her stillpoint. After peeling off a corner of my bedroom roof and uprooting twelve trees in my yard, Donna's eye passed through, giving us a half-time rest before the second part of the storm. The eye of a hurricane can't be seen, except on a radar map, but it can be felt. I felt the pressure changing in the air as the stillness approached, and then, as T.S. Eliot might call it, "the stillpoint of the turning world"¹⁰ revealed its fulcrum at the center of the spiral. Silent. So calm.

My mother drew me a picture and showed me where we were inside the path of

the spiraling hurricane. I didn't really understand, but I remember feeling something very different than anything I'd ever felt before. I dashed about the yard held in the tenuous embrace of the center of the spiraling storm. I looked a little ways up and down the street surveying the chaos and destruction. I marveled at uprooted trees, my neighbor's Volkswagen bug turned on its side, and scores of dead fish that had been scooped up by the storm and dropped from the sky far from their homes. Nature had its own agenda. I sat on the front porch, silently listening for the first stirrings of the other side of the turning storm. Nature demanded my respect, and I knew that if I listened, I would know when to go safely inside.

Guided Experience #3

Put down anything you're holding. Close your eyes, allow your attention to find your breath. Just notice your breathing and let it be. There are many different rhythms of ceaselessly alternating inhalation and exhalation moving through you. Take a breath, and pause momentarily at the peak of inhalation. Balance in that buoyancy between the 2 phases of the breath. Feel the fullness of the transition point between the in-breath and the out-breath. Where do you feel that point? Is it in your chest, your belly, your throat, your head? Is it inside of your body or outside of your body? Is the fulcrum in time itself?

And now pause at the end of your next exhalation, and ask, "what else do I feel moving when I suspend at the end of my breath?" Can you sense the potency and potential in the pause-rest at the fulcrum of stillness between the end of one breath, and the beginning of the next?

For the next few breaths, exhale with an audible "Ha." Exhale slowly and listen to your breath as you feel it, hear it, and I continue to speak. Hear the collective breath of this room, synchronized in intention and attention. Extend your attention to all our Osteopathic colleagues around the world who aren't here in Indianapolis. Expand your attention and open your heart to your friends and family, to all the people of the place where you live...of the state, of the whole country... of the world... and beyond...

Offer the sentiment of loving care that you extend to your patients to all the people of the world. Hold the space for the healing potential of all humanity and the earth on which we live. And be sure to offer some of this precious kind and compassionate sentiment to yourself.

Are you aware of your own awareness right now? Can you allow yourself to rest in this awareness - to simply rest at this stillpoint of your turning world? Once again, redirect your attention to me in the foreground, leaving a little stream of your conscious in touch with your body and breath in the background as I begin my final story.

The Indirect Answer That Fueled My Curiosity

In the spring of 1982, during my first year of Osteopathic school, I had the pleasure and great honor of spending several Sunday afternoons with the legendary Osteopathic couple, Howard and Rebecca Lippincott. The Lippincotts were among Sutherland's first students and served on his original faculty in the late 1930s and '40s. Both of them were in their early nineties at the time of our meeting, but had mental clarity that far surpassed mine as a twenty-five-year-old sleep-deprived student.

Aging challenged each of them differently. Howard was nearly deaf, and Rebecca was nearly blind. Together, they functioned as a whole. I helped Rebecca in the kitchen at each visit, as she made soup. I was frightened when I first saw her pick up a chef's knife and begin chopping vegetables. When I asked how she could use such a sharp knife with such compromised vision, she explained, "The knife is an extension of my osteopathic hands. I know exactly what I'm doing."

I would come, sometimes alone and sometimes with some fellow students, with a list of questions. My most urgent question at the time of one particular visit addressed the relationship between Primary Respiration and breathing, the so-called secondary respiration. I asked Howard to address this topic, and in grand style he pondered the question for what seemed like eternity. I wasn't sure if he had fallen asleep in his rocking chair, or if it was I who had fallen asleep in my chair. I felt suspended in time. The air in the room became very heavy and still and then seemed to change density and lighten.

He finally opened his eyes and said, “It all begins with the ocean,” and then slowly his eyes drifted shut again. He spoke with his eyes closed, “The Tide comes in. The Tide goes out. The Earth breathes as we do. Every cell breathes—every drop of water.” He spoke poetically about the oceanic tide, the unseen forces that create the tide, the Tide of the Primary Respiratory Mechanism, the Breath of Life, and the breath of air we breathe. He addressed my question quite indirectly.

I have spent my life searching for the things my teachers *don't* say. I've been exploring the shadow of the light they shined upon me, yearning to understand hidden connections. I have found some answers, but many of my questions remain unrequited. Far more important than the answer to any of these questions is how I show up to ask them. A life lived in the spirit of inquiry asks questions for the purpose of going deeper into the mystery, not necessarily to solve it, but to be in relationship with it. My curiosity propels me to continue the inquiry into the fluid, potent, resonant realm of life. I have grown to value the experience of longing to know, as much as the actual knowing. There's great pleasure in longing. This yearning charges my desire to learn with a momentum within me that fuels my exploration, inviting me to dive deeper into relationship with everything.

This is a journey without a destination, a question without an answer, a lesson in understanding that the subject of the tour is with me wherever I go, and that however I attempt to search for it, it's already here.

Thank you for listening.

"I Promised To Listen: The Life Of An Osteopath" The Osteopathic Cranial Academy's 2014 Sutherland Memorial Lecture, Indianapolis. Bonnie Gintis, DO, copyright 2014.
PLEASE DO NOT COPY OR REPRINT WITHOUT PERMISSION.

References:

¹ Oliver, Mary. "Sometimes" in *Red Bird*. Boston, Beacon Press. 2008.

² Siegel, Daniel. *Mindsight*. Bantam Books, New York, 2011, p. xiii.

³ Still, A.T. *Autobiography of A.T. Still*. Originally published by the author in 1908; reprint, Colorado Springs: American Academy of Osteopathy, 1981), p. 93.

⁴ Extract from a letter by Andrew Taylor Still addressed to the President of the American Osteopathic Association of 1915, Portland Oregon, reprinted in the 1948 American Academy Of Osteopathy Yearbook.

⁵ Sutherland, W.G. *Contributions of Thought, 2nd edition*. Portland, 1998, p.1.

⁶ Jealous, James. Personal communication and unpublished course materials, Phase VIII, Malibu, California, January 2001.

⁷ Tucker, E.E. and Wilson, P.T. *The Theory of Osteopathy*. Kirksville, MO, 1936.

⁸ Still, A.T. *Autobiography of A.T. Still*. Originally published by the author in 1908; reprint, Colorado Springs: American Academy of Osteopathy, 1981), p. 93.

⁹ Still, A.T. *Autobiography of A.T. Still*. Originally published by the author in 1908; reprint, Colorado Springs: American Academy of Osteopathy, 1981), p. 67.

¹⁰ Eliot, T.S, *Four Quartets*. Harcourt Brace and Company, San Diego, 1943.