

Letter to My Younger Colleagues

On tides, tennis and determination

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If you are reading this column as a young person, you are already smarter than I was at your age. When invited to write this letter, I recalled that taking advice as a younger man was distinctly unappealing. What perspective do I now wish to share with my younger self? One difference is that I have slowly acquired a better understanding of life's rhythms. Both in one's personal and professional life, it is often best to let things happen rather than having to make them happen. You may argue that passivity is the last recourse of the aged. I recall with chagrin that my father beat me at tennis well into his 70s by moving less, not more. This doesn't imply passivity. Having spent many hours watching my son try to master surfing, I noted that experienced surfers let many waves pass by. Wait for a wave with sufficient power to bring you all the way in and paddle like a demon to catch it. In "The Gambler," Kenny Rogers sang: "You have to know when to hold them, know when to fold 'em, know when to walk away, know when to run." However, it's an excellent idea to prepare to catch the wave by selecting a goal, establishing your relationships, and assembling the needed resources.

Increasingly I find myself mentoring on the subject of focus. Rarely taking this advice myself, I encourage my junior colleagues to find an area in their professional life which is fascinating enough that they will be happy to immerse themselves in it for years. You may not be the person who finds the ultimate answer, but the answer will yield to your effort by working with others. Recognize and celebrate the small victories, both your own but mostly of others.

Focus has both an internal and external element. Internally, focus allows you to bring to bear all of your abilities. Externally, we become known for knowledge in one or two areas. To others with equally fleeting attention spans, you are remembered for being the expert on one topic, rather than a smart person with many aptitudes.

Challenge yourself both socially and professionally. Starting out, I admit to being attracted to people who seemed pleasant but non-threatening. In building a medical office with partners, I was surprised observing the power that a weaker individual exerted over the group. In times of crisis, the strong will bend to accommodate. The weaker individual covers inadequacy by being elusive or rigid. Of the many valuable lessons I have absorbed from my wife Lori, one is to surround myself with people who, while kind, are both strong and confident. Though more challenging, these folks force us to dig deeper and work harder with far better results.



Dr Bob Issenman

While starting in private consulting practice, my career eventually led me back to work in a large university department. I observed that the best teaching hospitals are living systems equally dedicated to self-preservation and their mission. Just as mass declares its presence by pushing back (Newton), the institution instinctively resists initiative. It seemed that the more I pushed for change, the more resistance I created. However, over time, working with others with a shared vision, we succeeded in building McMaster Children's Hospital in Hamilton as a hospital within a hospital. Most of the progress happened as a result of a largely invisible but steady pressure, which drew its force from the powerful vision shared by some very wise (and patient) colleagues. As in surfing, look for the wave and use its momentum to propel your vision.

Over the years, I have slowly learned the importance of holding an image of the idealized service or institution. In strategic planning this is termed "the vision". Robert Persig's book on "Zen

and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance", read in my 20s, borrowed the Platonic principle that even inert objects have their perfect form. Often this perfect form represents a balance of opposing forces. Discover its essence by looking or listening for that form. The translation in ordinary life is that it's important to try and release that form from its amorphous self (Michelangelo). This is most often done by stripping away unnecessary complexity (now embodied in Lean methodology). In doing this, it is important to ask the next most obvious question, but resist the temptation to immediately do the next most obvious thing. This insight seems to me to be the difference between knowledge and wisdom.

The same philosophy can be applied to patient care. It is enormously stimulating to emphasize what we can learn from our patients, not only about occupations, and how things are done, but who people are and what makes them tick. Perhaps out of fear of being judgmental, millennials seem uncomfortable asking personal questions and making simple observations. In doing this, we risk missing the factor that often holds the key to solving the problem. Part of the medical apprenticeship is reclaiming one's senses from the tyranny of medical training—the sense of smell, the sense of touch and the feeling in your gut which is the composite of a million years of human existence that can detect health and illness, anxiety and despair.

Rather than denying its existence, being in touch with your intuition is how one learns to become aware of your own prejudices. The evidence suggests that most of us make judgements in milliseconds (Gladwell). Learning to listen “through your pores” is useful both as a clinician and an administrator. By this we mean to listen with your illogical right brain which is largely sensory and thinks in patterns.

In a dialogue with students, I express this concept saying that “in going to medical school, physicians leave the human race”. Much of medical education centres on learning to evaluate and apply evidence to a clinical problem. Much of human activity under stressful circumstances is motivated by emotion. My contribution to a family conference with younger colleagues is to reassure a parent before, during and after they have been subjected to a tortured explanation of the current evidence on their child’s treatment. I am convinced that when in unfamiliar territory, even the most highly educated parent listens to complex technical explanations as a verification of the physician’s expertise, rather than fully comprehending the details being conveyed. Explore the family’s worst fears. Decisions under these circumstances are largely an emotional rather than a rational judgement. The reassurance that “Everything will be all right” doesn’t mean that every disease will be cured, rather that the child and family will find within themselves the strength and resilience to deal with whatever hand fate deals them. More than anything, it is a commitment to support them through the challenge.

At my college reunion, I was impressed with my good fortune in being a paediatrician compared to my classmates who pursued different careers. The lawyers were fleeing their profession to try and find meaning in baking bread or social enterprise. Those in business were trying to “self-actualize” by participation in altruistic ventures. Many of those in adult medicine were burnt out and cynical. Those who went into paediatrics seemed more content and appreciably younger in their appearance and outlook. I attributed this to their being involved with beings at the earlier, most optimistic stage of the life cycle. The resilience of youth is truly inspiring.

Our careers are enormously gratifying. Paediatricians are given the privilege of working with families whose commitment and nurturing of their children usually represents the best of human values. This is one of the reasons I so

much enjoyed working with the Canadian Paediatric Society. Most of my colleagues seem to share the satisfaction of knowing that our work is important, our contribution is valued and we get to work with children and adolescents. In dealing with sick and undergrown children, I have gradually come to appreciate that one of the qualities that makes children so delightful is that every being, regardless of stature, has the same sized soul. In some children, their personality is so outsized that their body can barely contain them. Their resilience and optimism, like the flu, is highly infectious. If you learn to be an optimist from them, at worst you will be right at least half of the time.

BOB ISSENMAN—BIOGRAPHY

Bob grew up in Montreal during “Quebec’s Quiet Revolution” sparking life-long interest in politics. He studied Government at Harvard College, graduating with a *Magna cum laude*. To improve his French proficiency, he spent a year at the Université de Montreal Law School.

Bob graduated from McMaster Medical School. The severely malnourished Inuit infants he treated as a resident at the Montreal Children’s prompted him to pursue a fellowship in Pediatric Gastroenterology at Harvard. He returned to consulting paediatric practice in Burlington Ontario, soon joining the faculty of Pediatrics as Director of Ambulatory Clinics and initiating the Pediatric Gastroenterology service at McMaster. He served as its Chief for the next 35 years and is currently Director of the Centre for Kids Digestive Health. Bob enjoyed helping build McMaster into one of Ontario’s busiest children’s hospitals. For the past 5 years, he has also served as Associate Director of McMaster’s Emergency Department. Positions on the Nutrition and Public Education Committees of the Canadian Paediatric Society culminated in his election as CPS President and subsequently, a role as President of the Healthy Generation Foundation.

Bob is married to Lori Isсенman, who is the Director of the Children’s Mental Health Program at McMaster Children’s Hospital. Three children, their partners, grandchildren and dogs live close by.