

## What Matters Most?

**That simple question can play a powerful role in healing our lives.**

### **Dean Ornish M.D.**

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Friedrich Nietzsche once wrote: "He who has a why to live can bear almost any how." Rachel Remen, M.D., has spent much of her 40-year medical career helping patients and doctors find their why. A colleague of mine at the University of California, San Francisco, and founder of the Institute for the Study of Health and Illness, she has been a pioneer of integrative medicine, exploring the powerful ways in which our emotional, mental and spiritual states may directly affect our health. Dr. Remen is also the author of the best sellers "Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories That Heal" and "My Grandfather's Blessings: Stories of Strength, Refuge, and Belonging" (both from Riverhead Books). I spoke to her recently about how understanding and pursuing what matters most to us can help to heal both body and soul. **Excerpts:**

**Dean Ornish: There is a lot of suffering in the world right now, and it's experienced on so many different levels—a lot of edginess, anxiety and fear. You often describe how suffering can be a catalyst for transforming our lives. In what ways?**

**Rachel Remen:** Very negative experiences, including anxiety and fear, have the potential to cause us to question the way we've been living. They're a wake-up call. They make people think more deeply about things and ask themselves questions like: What's important? What really matters? How do I want to spend my time, my money, my energy? How do I live more deliberately according to the things that are important to me? Just a very simple two-word question—"What matters?"—can change your life and the lives of people around you.

### **Why?**

Because most of us live by habit. We often spend our time and energy on things that, if we were to ask ourselves, "Is this really important to me?" the answer would be, "Not very." But we don't usually ask ourselves this question. We're not living our lives closest to what has meaning and passion and value for us.

### **Why not?**

We get distracted. There are lots of pressures in life. We're multitasking a lot of the time. Many of us have become disheartened or depressed. We tend to want to numb ourselves out rather than go deep inside and find the well of renewal that is in every person. We spend a lot of time in front of the television set, maybe we tie one on over the weekend. And we're often looking for comfort rather than

renewal, and those are two different things.

### **What's the difference?**

Comfort is a temporary Band-Aid. But whatever you are trying to numb yourself from usually comes back. Renewal is healing. If you go deep within and look to live your life with greater integrity, closer to your genuine and authentic values, according to what is really true for you, then you permanently diminish the pain. You don't just numb it temporarily. Food is one of the ways we numb ourselves. Or we drink too much, or we go from relationship to relationship, constantly seeking something new.

**A patient once told me, "When I get depressed, I eat a lot of fat—it coats my nerves and numbs the pain. It fills the void." Another said, "I've got 20 friends in this package of cigarettes. They're always there for me; nobody else is."**

In the effort to heal our pain, we often numb it so we don't look at our lives. The real healing comes from asking ourselves what really matters and having the courage to let go of what doesn't matter and take hold of what does.

**When people are diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, they often realize this, as well.**

Yes. There is a moment of clarity where you know what's important to you. And it often isn't the way you've been living your life but something different than that. I've worked for years with people who have cancer, listening to their stories—the view from the edge of life is a lot clearer than most of us have.

In all those years, nobody ever said to me, "If I die of this disease, I'm going to miss my Mercedes." What really matters is who you've touched on your way through life, who has touched you and cared deeply, and what you're leaving behind you in the hearts and lives of those around you. We're so busy that we may not be present in our own lives. We don't see. We don't connect. And it's all here in front of us. Many are starving in the midst of plenty.

What matters most is love. And the things that matter are very simple—they're very old—and they're very, very important. These things that can't be measured are the foundation of our lives. There is meaning in everything we do. Most of us live far more meaningful lives than we know.

### **How so?**

Recognizing that we are all connected and, because of that, we have the power to make a real difference in the life of a total stranger without even knowing their name. We often feel powerless in today's society—that you have to be wealthy, or educated or somehow more than you are in order to make any kind of significant difference in the world. And the reality is that we've already made a far greater difference than we know, we have changed the lives of many more people than we realize because there is a web of connection between us.

**You've written that our stories connect us.**

They do more than connect us. They help us find meaning. Stories are about why we're here. They are the container for meaning, and they remind us of the power of being human. Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive.

**You created a course called "The Healer's Art," now available in more than 60 medical schools, that focuses on the human dimensions of practicing medicine. Why?**

Facts are important, but they just give us information. Stories help us retrieve our lives. There are tales that help us to live well—to recognize that nobody is alone, and that we all have far greater power than we recognize. You don't need to be on television in order to change people's lives. The meaning of

medicine is not just science; it's service, to befriend life. One of my students said, "You know, I discovered that I can heal with my presence and listening what I could never cure with my science."

**We have a culture that values celebrity over compassion; that values notoriety over caring. What can we learn from all of this? The entire advertising industry is based on the idea that if only you buy more, get more, do more—then you'll be happy.**

Well, it's never enough because it will never fill the emptiness that only a sense of meaning can satisfy. At the end of life, when people look back to see what mattered for them and brought meaning, it's not about what they bought and what they owned. It's about what they did to help other people to live and how they related to other people and grew in wisdom. It's all about the love they gave and received, not anything else. One heart at a time.

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