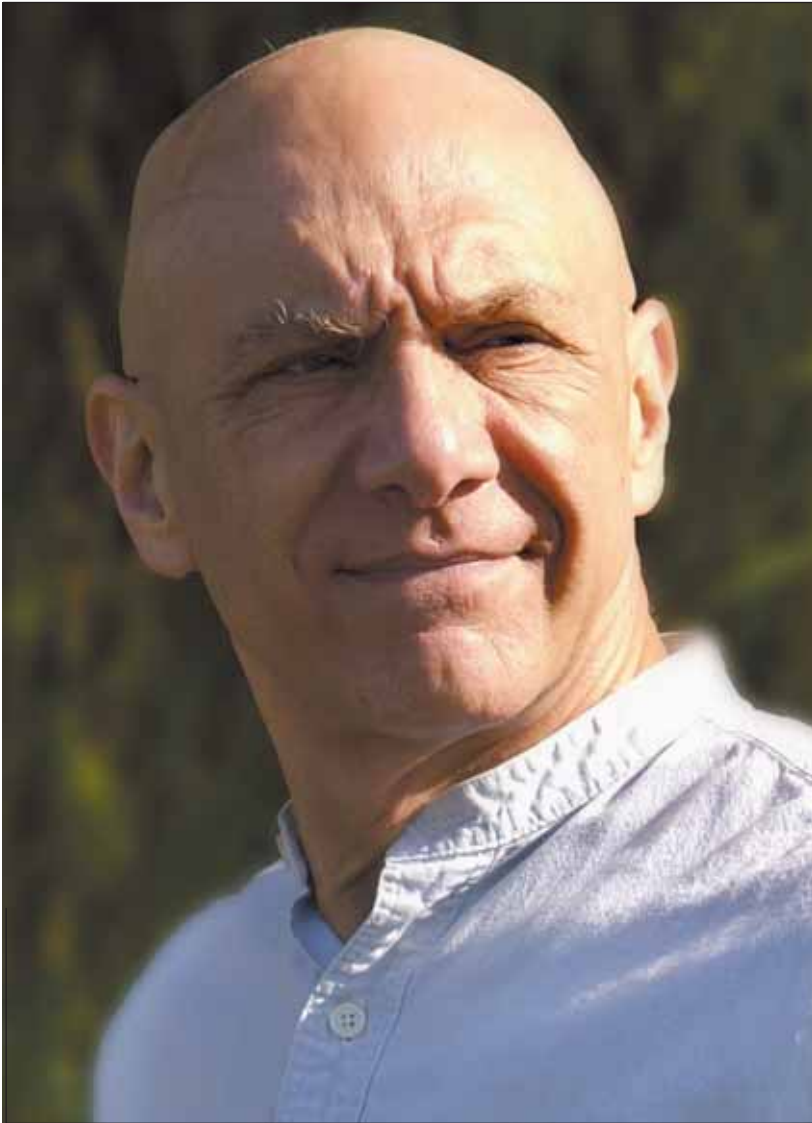


Bernie Siegel, MD



LOVE THE LIFE YOU LIVE AND
LIVE THE LIFE YOU LOVE

By S J Strock

A few short weeks ago, Liz Sterling, the Southeast Feature Editor for *Balance Magazine* and co-host of Be(e) You Radio on South Florida's #1 Radio Station, 101.5 LiteFM, had the good fortune to interview Dr. Bernie Siegel for the radio show. In her infinite kindness, Liz facilitated a follow up interview for me. Dr. Siegel, better known simply as "Bernie" to most, was more than thrilled to chat further about his innovative philosophy and advice, which have led many physicians and other healthcare professionals to help patients participate in and influence their own recovery.

Trained as a pediatric surgeon, Dr. Siegel founded the Exceptional Cancer Patients Program, a form of individual and group therapy utilizing patients' drawings, dreams and images. His first book, *Love, Medicine and Miracles* redirected his life and those of millions of readers. His other books, *Peace, Love and Healing* as well as *How to Live Between Office Visits* were met with huge accolades. Once again, Bernie is inspiring through the written word, with the release of *Faith, Hope and Healing: Inspiring Lessons Learned from People Living with Cancer*. Many have wondered, what happened to the patients who followed his advice over the last three decades? Now the wondering is over as Bernie shares the inspiring and real-life stories of people who have experienced cancer and found deeper faith, hope, joy and healing through the process. Along with these stories are Bernie's insightful commentaries, which are meant to encourage and help readers to develop an attitude and personality that survivors share, while also offering myriad way to cope with and conquer difficult times and discovering gifts illness can bring into a person's life...yes, "gifts!" Riddled throughout the book, and most certainly during our conversation, Bernie reveals what these individuals' experiences tell us all about our common strengths and humanity and most importantly, how to live an authentic, fulfilling life.

For many, Bernie needs no introduction. He has

touched innumerable lives all over the world and continues to break new ground in the field of healing. In 1978 he began talking about patient empowerment and the choice to live fully and die in peace. As a physician, he had cared for and counseled those whose mortality had been threatened by an illness. Dr. Siegel embraces a core philosophy of living and dying that more than thirty years later still stands at the forefront of the medical ethics and spiritual issues our society struggles with today.

I chatted with Bernie from his home in Connecticut and couldn't help but revel in those lush tree-lined streets and how the canopy of leaves shading the avenue was a far cry from Brooklyn, New York, where Bernie comes from. So, too, is his methodology for treating his patients, a far stretch from his background, education and training in the sciences of medicine. And so, I had to ask about his outspoken message exemplifying the connection of spirituality and self-love to the healing process.

SPIRITUAL MEDICINE

"The word healing is very different than the word cure," Bernie begins. "It's about a wholeness, not identifying with their body parts but instead with their innate capacity to live fully. And also to die fully too." He further explains that looking at the full spectrum of life, he's witnessed many people who start actually living *after* they receive a diagnosis of their impending mortality. "If hunger leads me to find food, then mortality will lead me to find life," Bernie quotes and then pauses for affect. I am enthralled by his message and agree with so much of its simplicity. We become what society may have imposed on us. Then, a life-threatening illness, like cancer, empowers us to take control and live the life we want. It's not often complicated, it can be the simple freedom of taking off the suit and tie. This seems to be a recurring theme, so much so that Bernie jokes, tongue in cheek, of a letter received from one patient who writes, "I didn't die, and now I'm so busy living, I'm killing myself!" This woman is doing everything she ever wanted to do – in essence she is finally living.

SELF-LOVE

As a medical doctor trained in the sciences, I knew Dr. Siegel's philosophies were a stretch from the treatments his associates were offering and indeed they are. His "ah-ha moment" was when one of his cancer

patients came for an office visit and she candidly shared that she felt loved and hopeful when she was being seen and cared for by him, but she needed to know how to carry that message with her between office visits. Bernie realized that the proper visualizations needed to be a part of her healing and treatment process. If the idea of chemotherapy "killing" the cancer cells is offensive to the patient, then a more loving approach to ridding oneself of cancer needed to be used. For instance, one patient, chooses to see her tumor as a block of ice that is melted away by the loving light of God. And another, who wouldn't wage war on any living thing, including cancer, envisioned his cancer cells being carried out of his body.

"These are some of the wonderful tools self-love can promote in the healing process." He continues, "Encouraging each patient to embrace the perfection of who they are and to give love to themselves, so that their bodies will feel loved and will want to repair and heal themselves is a hugely important part of the whole process."

Dr. Siegel further advises against the mindset of "fighting the disease." Bernie recounts a story about Mother Teresa refusing to come to an "anti-war rally." She responded by saying, "If you ever have a peace rally, please invite me." I nodded my head in full understanding as he went on, "If you empower a fight, a war, a battle with cancer, you are giving energy to what is negative."

POTENTIAL FOR HEALING

Dr. Bernie Siegel implores not only his patients but each and every one of us, "Be a responsible participant in your own life. There is no shame, no blame - simply live your best life." When asked, "How do I heal my life?" he answers, "Take an opportunity to liberate yourself." In his newest book, *Faith, Hope, And Healing: Inspiring Lessons Learned from People Living with Cancer*, after each person's story, Bernie reflects on the lessons in his own commentary. When I prodded further about the potential for healing, he encourages us to seek from within, he tells me the age-old stories of The Ugly Duckling and The Tiger [who didn't know he was a tiger because he was brought up by goats eating grass]. "Like both the duckling and the tiger who found their true selves in the reflection of a still pond - still your mind, look into the quietness, get to know yourself and then live in that vain. Love yourself and learn who you are, you will see that you are


a swan, that you are a tiger. You can recondition yourself to who you were meant to be, not who society, parents, religious teachings, and so on may have pushed you to be." What I heard in his message was "Recognize the fact that you are indeed living, and live your life fully."

POWER OF INTENTION

When living fully, and living the life you love, Bernie explains some harsh statistics. "More illness like colds and flu as well as heart attacks and strokes occur on Monday morning. It's your body shutting down in the most finite of ways to protect you from what you despise." He cautions, "So instead of allowing for the breakdown, be intent to seek the life you will look forward to waking up to each and every day, then love your life."

Not only will being true to yourself and living a life of satisfaction help to keep you in a state of good health, Bernie also encourages the use of your mind, and intention, one to adhere to self-induced healing. Not a miracle, not a spontaneous remission, but as a healing image described in the book *Cancer Ward*, "a rainbow colored butterfly." Bernie's excitement resonates, "This vision surely speaks volumes; the rainbow being color of order and the butterfly representing a metamorphosis of change." So the formula he encourages is to get your life in order – the colors of the rainbow, then transform – the butterfly, based on the changes that occur in your body when you are mindful to do so.

We are all mortal, we are all going to die, but how about living now?

In the 1930's, Elida Evans, a Jungian therapist described cancer as a "growth gone wrong." Often times, cancer and other harsh disease may be a product of happenstance of a life not well lived. Loss of a loved one; moving to a different state; drastic life changes; a vulnerability at a time in your life – all of these may leave one open to disease. Although Dr. Siegel's message seems to primarily speak to patients with terminal diagnosis, he believes the power of healing may well relate to everyone. He chides, "Hemingway says, 'The world breaks everyone.' So why wait for the curse, learn how to live now!" 

SARAH "SJ" STROCK IS THE ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER AND PMS EDITOR FOR BALANCE MAGAZINE AND GRANTS MANAGER FOR THE WORK-LIFE BALANCE INSTITUTE FOR WOMEN. SHE WRITES WEB COPY, NEWSLETTERS AND MARKETING MATERIALS FOR HER CORPORATE CLIENTELE AND IS A REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR TO LIFESTYLE PUBLICATIONS. SHE CAN BE REACHED AT SARAH@BALANCEMAGAZINE.COM.