Never, Ever, Ever Give Up: Reclaiming My Health and Continuing My Life’s Work at 74 Transcript

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Opening Story and Podcast Introduction

It was telling me every single day of my life, and no, I wasn't listening nearly as much as I should have been. I was practicing emergency stuff on myself.

I'd say, oh boy, my Afib's back. I'll take some herbs. I have gout. My gout's up. I'm going to alter my diet and take some herbs. And then, you know, so I was chasing symptoms, which, you know, that's so embarrassing, because that's really the problem with the Western medical system, right, is chasing symptoms.

But that's what I was doing. I wasn't really getting to the core. Welcome back to the Think Well, Age Well podcast. I am your host, Dr. Heather Sandison, and I'm delighted to welcome John Needers today.

He's a clinician, teacher, and lifelong student of the body's inherent wisdom. Dr. John Needers has spent several decades practicing and teaching the integration of functional medicine and traditional Chinese medicine.

while personally cultivating Tai Chi, Qigong, and meditation practices for over 50 years. He's hosted more than 500 call-in radio shows on The Balancing Point, where he's earned a reputation as a master educator and a master storyteller.

Dr. John is the author of The Sweet Spot, a practical guide to understanding what your labs are really telling you, and he has two additional books coming out this year.

Congratulations. And today he joins us from Alameda, California, where he lives with his wife Jenny, an acupuncturist for the San Francisco 49ers, and St.

Mary's rugby and their son Johnny.

Functional Medicine Meets Traditional Chinese Medicine

This conversation is about balance, pattern recognition, and how ancient wisdom and modern medicine can work together to support lifelong brain and body health for yourself personally, and for others.

John, welcome. Thank you. I am really excited to be on here. We went through your pages and looked at your bio, and I love the stuff that you're doing.

It's just wonderful. Thank you. Thank you. Yeah, and I think I have told you my general rule is that I don't want to interview anyone under 70. We make exceptions.

We make exceptions. But really, this show is about personal experience aging well. And so I'm just really delighted. We haven't had a deep dive into traditional Chinese medicine.

It's certainly personally something that I use to support my own health. And you have spent decades bridging this functional medicine, traditional Chinese medicine, these worlds And I'm wondering, you know, if you compare and contrast the systems of medicine, what do you feel each system sees clearly and then what are the gaps that like the other one fills in?

Well, do we have two or three hours? So I first got exposed to functional medicine in 1999. I did a workshop on leaky gut, which at that time, if I said to a patient, you have leaky gut, they'd come back from their doctor who said I was an absolute lunatic and giving them probiotics, it's like, my God, he's going to kill you.

I mean, so that, you know, that was the climate then. So I did this, I was actually dragged kind of kicking and screaming to this weekend workshop because I You know, I didn't know what was valuable about it.

And this wonderful teacher, a guy named Jake Fratkin, who's been doing this much longer than I have. And he's written several excellent books on Chinese medical herbology and was voted the Acupuncturist of the Year at least once.

So he's a really bright guy. And by the end of the weekend, I was totally, totally blown away. I was speechless. when I saw how beautifully these two systems, traditional Chinese medicine and functional medicine, could pair with each other.

You've got this 2000 years of wisdom of, you know, people standing on the shoulders of greats and really, really doing the scientific method. They didn't have that name for it, but they were great observers.

And they came up with some just brilliant concepts and great herbal formulas. There are about 10,000 herbal formulas. And that's if you don't start mixing and matchings.

They came up with a lot. But then when I saw that we could do these really amazing tests to really pin things down even more closely. And Jake did a great job of taking us through that, looking, well, at that time, there were not a lot of labs.

Of course, we now have a new lab opening pretty much every week, but there was one lab that I would do for gut testing. They didn't even, weren't even really doing microbiome testing at that point.

It was mostly just looking for ova, parasites, immune factors, et cetera. and then just seeing what was available from that and then seeing more, I'm going to say, I'm going to call them more advanced, but it's really the tests aren't more advanced, but it's an advanced way of looking at labs, looking at what will actually keep people healthy, kind of what you're directed at, right?

And so our book, Our books, actually another one's coming out next week. We actually put in the actual curves. You know, I read thousands of studies. Catherine did most of the hard work, the boilerplate, but I in there looked at the studies and indicated why they're significant and important.

And when you're looking at. And so it's called the sweet spot. And as you know, most labs have a U-shaped curve. And if you're right at the bottom of the mortality curve, then you have the greatest statistical likelihood of living longer.

And as you go up from there or down from there, then mortality risk increases. And just common things like, say, hemoglobin A1c, the long-term measure of blood sugar, three to four month indication, Well, if you hit 5.7, they consider you pre-diabetic.

If you hit 6.5, they consider you diabetic. And then they have all these ranges. But doctors rarely look if it's low. So, for example, the sweet spot for hemoglobin A1C is 5.0. 5.2 to 3 ish.

And as you start going up, even if you're not pre-diabetic, your risk of dying goes up. On the other hand, if it's low, your risk of dying goes up. And so we see that for this for every single lab that we run.

And if someone comes in and they're sick and they need care, I obviously want to give that to them. But my real goal is to keep them from needing to see me, right?

To kind of guide them back into that sweet spot. As you know, once people start on that slippery slope, it can be hard to bring them back to health. So we don't want them to start on that slippery slope.

And so just seeing that possibility in this weekend, I mean, my brain was just churning with all the possibilities. He also introduced me to more supplements.

I was more of an herbalist. I didn't really use a lot of supplements, but You know, from his training, it was like, oh yeah, that could, that would be a lot faster, right?

Sometimes the herbs are faster. Sometimes the supplements are faster. And sometimes one is a safer long-term or the other one's safer long-term. So that was what really kind of turned me around.

And in my practice. is wonderful having both of those options. I'll order labs, and often different labs than their medical doctor will order. I'm looking at a lot different levels of inflammation, for example, than they are frequently.

If they come up and everything's perfect, but they feel bad, well, I can fall back on traditional Chinese medicine.

Finding the Sweet Spot in Lab Values

I mean, one of the things, one of my loves is cardiovascular care and what the Chinese call blood stasis, which is now starting to be called sticky blood in the West.

And it's the proximate cause of most death, probably if you really break it down. With Chinese medicine, because we're doing pulse diagnosis, we can feel things in the pulses that don't necessarily show up clearly on the lab tests.

And then we look at their tongue. And if you look at the veins underneath the tongue. you can see obvious signs of blood stasis in many people because they look like big purple earthworms underneath their tongue.

Well, that doesn't necessarily show up on common blood tests, right? So that's nice to have it. A hypo, I'm going to call it hypovolemic, doctors would yell at me because when they talk about hypovolemic, they mean you're going to die.

But I'm talking about minor hypovolemia caused either by adrenal dysfunction or and or low sodium, it's not holding enough blood in the bloodstream. Well, that's a 30-second test for us.

But you can't really test that well in Western medicine because you'd have to take all their blood out and measure it. But if it's not filling the arteries, if I'm not getting a pulse, we know that something's wrong.

And often, as a test, we'll give them a teaspoon of salt. And an hour later, their pulse is up. So it's nice having both of those worlds coming together.

And I get teased some by, I've been a teacher for many years, I was a president of an acupuncture college, and I get teased for not being a purist, right?

Because I do Western things. And I say, you know, these great physicians, Sunsamo and Sundered A. D., who is treating thyroid disorders better than most doctors are now, I bet if he had these tests available to him, he would have run them, right?

If he had a CAT scan, my God, it's cheating, right? You're looking inside. So to me, it is actually the best of both worlds. What is missing for me, and not necessarily for functional medicine and traditional Chinese medicine in general, is that I cannot prescribe drugs even if I think they need them.

So then I'm gonna have to refer them out to a medical doctor And sometimes that's very difficult. In my own health journey, I found a couple of $12 a month medications, one in particular, that allowed me to save about $300 in herbs and supplements and is incredibly safe.

But if I sent my patients and said, hey, talk to them about this, about low dose colchicine, they'd go, oh my God, that's ridiculous. But in England, doctors over there, the cardiologists are saying you should never give anyone that has any type of heart problem, any non-steroidal anti-inflammatory other than low dose colchicine.

But it hasn't caught on here yet. So after much cajoling and, you know, papering him to death, my doc finally

agreed to give me low dose colchicine. And my arthritic pain went to, from being in a walker two years ago to none, none.

And now I made other changes too, but it was really the low dose colchicine that got me over the, over the edge. Anyway, that's, that's kind of what can be missing.

You've said never, ever, ever give up. Why do you think our healthcare system has set such a low bar for what it means to be healthy, especially as we age?

And how did you decide not to accept that narrative? It sounds like this story of papering and harassing your doctor to get this, this culture scene is part of that, but kind of like zooming out.

How did we get here? I think it starts the first day of medical school. Now, it's just conjecture, right? But by the first day of medical school, every person in the school has had discussions with pharmaceutical companies.

They've gotten gifts from pharmaceutical companies. They get lots of good takeaways from them. And so there's that bias toward really viewing that as medicine.

And as you and I know, That's really heroic action. You know, I'm not saying people don't need them sometimes, but really there are so many steps before that.

But the medical care system, as you know, is not set up as a health care system. It's set up as a sickness system. You know, if I go into, I'm old enough to get Great Medicare coverage now.

And if I go in once a year for my Medicare appointment, my labs come back, he goes, oh, you're fine. And that's it, right? I have a podcast coming out in a couple of weeks on bedside diagnosis.

And we look at 10 different signs on the hands and the ears as indicators of cardiovascular disease. I have never had a doctor. and I'm 74, I've never had a doctor look at my hands.

I've never had them look underneath my tongue. I've never had them look busy, you know, kind of check out my ears. They don't even check my glands anymore or my lymph nodes.

Blood Stasis, Pulse Diagnosis, and Hidden Clues

They just don't touch me, right? And so I think we've moved so far away from healthcare to sickness care. that I think that's it. And you want to pass the blame around to everybody a little bit, right?

So you've got the pharmaceutical companies that have something to sell, but then you've got the insurance companies who are really running medicine. We don't take insurance, and people say, oh, you don't want to do the paperwork.

That's accurate, but that's not the reason. I don't want insurance companies tell me what I can or cannot treat. And so someone comes in with a certain problem their insurance doesn't cover, they're going to be upset.

And so the insurance, you know, and you've had this experience probably, and certainly your patients have, where there are certain tests that you think they should have.

But the doctor and a big HMO won't do it because it's not the next item on their list to do. Right. And they won't stray from that because they actually get in trouble.

So, right. And so that's where people like you feel such an important niche and the functional medical doctors, et cetera, that they will go a little bit outside of that standard Western medical box.

And again, we need all of it. Part of the book I'm writing. right now, never, ever, ever give up is about that. It's about

using the parts of each system that work and that are supportive.

And, you know, and that Western medicine saved my life in December of 2020, I don't know, 23, right? But they almost killed me first and they almost killed me afterwards.

So in a few months before that, I had been shopping at Trader Joe's and fortunately my associate Catherine was with me. We were on our way home and I passed out in Trader Joe's.

And fortunately I had, you know, 40 years of martial arts training is the only thing I can think of that saved me. She said, it looks so weird. I was totally unconscious, but I still rode the cart down and didn't hurt myself.

But I knew as soon as I woke up, you know, I'm a child of the fifties. And if you're playing sports, you jump up and I'm fine. Right. So you've dealt with enough concussions.

Right. And so I'm, I'm laying there and I'm looking at a jar or a container of hummus. And I knew that wasn't right. So, they made me stay there. The EMTs came, took me to the emergency room.

It was a very hectic night in a very small emergency room. The poor doctor looked like a deer in the headlights. Thank God he had this older nurse who would literally, literally take him by the arm and walk him to a room and say, this is probably a stroke.

And she would give him a certain amount of time, go grab him and bring him to somewhere else. There was one doctor and 11 rooms being occupied. I was sitting in the hallway because I wasn't high priority.

So they did a scan of my brains. I didn't have any bleeds. They did an EKG and I'm sitting there in the hallway right across from the doctor. And this young PA comes up, and she hands the EKG strip to the doctor.

And they looked at each other for a minute, and then they both looked at me. And he looked at her and shook his head no. And I thought, OK, I guess I'm great to go.

So I leave. A couple days later, I get my records and I'm going through and my EKG showed that I was in atrial flutter with my atria were beating at 288 beats a minute and my ventricles at 72. Now I understand they were busy, but someone could have said, sir, we're going to discharge you.

Everything looks fine. However, there was an anomaly on your EKG and we suggest you make a cardiology appointment. They didn't do that. So easily that could have killed me.

It's probably what caused me to pass out in Trader Joe's. So fast forward, I found a great doc. It's always fascinating to me how medical specialties get smaller and smaller, right?

You have one doctor that works on the plumbing in your heart, basically, and one that works on the electrical system. And so this was the electrical electrician.

And he said, I think you need a catheter ablation. And for your audience, that's where they put a wire up through the groin, up into the heart. And with atrial flutter, cells in the heart start sending out inappropriate messages.

It's like there are too many voices telling your heart to do different things. And so what they do is they go up and it's astonishing, astonishing. There was a TV kind of thing that was about as size as what you'd find on a Star Trek episode with more fancy things than you could believe.

Healthcare System Limits and the Need for Integration

They put so many electrodes on me, front, back, feet, head, everywhere. And then they put me under and the doc went through for hours testing, killing cells, retesting, killing cells, just amazing, amazing patients.

I felt great when I came out. The flutter was gone. Now I had treated my own aphrib for about 40 years, very successfully. And then it went to a flutter, which is a different event.

And so I went home, my son was home for the holidays, and we were watching a really bad movie. And he was loving it, and I couldn't stand it. But anyway, as I was sitting there, it got harder and harder and harder to breathe.

And I didn't want to go back to the ER, right? That's the last thing I wanted to do. But finally, it got to the point where I just couldn't breathe. And I said, honey, we need to go.

And we went to Summit, which has a very good cardiology unit. So we drove up there. They admitted me immediately. But I have to tell you Heather, the funniest thing, one of my favorite musicians was a fella named Warren Zevon, and he wrote a lot of music for popular people in the 70s and 80s.

He was actually David Letterman's favorite musician. Well, Warren got a diagnosis of lung cancer, fought it for quite a while, and finally his doctor said, hey, you're not gonna make it.

So he got all of his buddies together, Bruce Springsteen, all these famous musicians, and they cut his last album. And Dave Letterman did an entire show with Warren Sieben on there playing his music.

But he did one song that I could not get out of my head all the way to the hospital. It's a, the shadows are falling and I'm running out of breath. Keep me in your heart for a while.

And I'm, I'm trying not to sing it out loud so it doesn't scare the heck out of my wife, but it's like, oh yeah, the shadows are falling. I'm running out of breath.

Keep me in your heart for a while. Right? So we get to the hospital. Again, heroic medical care. You know, they got me in, scanned me quickly, put, I was diagnosed with congestive heart failure and pneumonia.

I was 72 at the time. That's not a good diagnosis for a 72 year old, but I got phenomenal care. Just loving, kind nurses had some great conversations.

A doctor that was attentive, you know, but the nurses really, you know, did the care. And I was there for four days and they said, okay, we're discharging you.

And I said, okay, should I get some labs done or anything? And they said, no, it's fine. You don't need to. So of course I ran the labs and I had three things that were, well, one that was horrifically high levels, that was a cardiac CRP, C-reactive protein, which was as high as I've ever seen, but then a couple of other things.

So then I did the Chinese herbs and supplements that I knew to use to get all those back in shape. And it worked. So they almost killed me. They saved me.

They almost killed me and they saved me. Right. So it's that. And if I hadn't known, you know, what to do, I would have been in real trouble. Or if I hadn't known somebody that could help me through that.

And so that's why I think it's so critical. Yes. You need catastrophic medical care. You need to have a medical doctor and have someone else, a naturopath.

an acupuncturist who's also trained in functional medicine. So you can bring all those worlds together. And to me, that's real medicine. So that was a very long answer to a very short question.

I think you bring up so many great points and there's so many directions we could go, but what came up for me was just how infuriating it is that there is so much money goes into the healthcare system, but the insurance and pharmaceutical and managed care organizations, really they are who's making the money.

It's not your doctor, right? Your doctor shows up, that guy with the deer in the headlights look that. He went to

medical school because he wants to help.

Yeah, he wants to make money, but he's going to delay that with eight years of training, 12 years of training. And it really gets doing it because he wants to help.

He wants to be the hero and not because he wants to be controlled by the pharmaceutical industry and the insurance industry. It's just, again, it's infuriating.

It's so frustrating. And then, you know, for people to get good care, they have to have enough disposable income that they can spend it outside of that industry with on naturopaths and acupuncturists and people who aren't covered by insurance because not going to play the insurance game.

It doesn't work. And I think that hopefully, you know, this podcast, My Book, Your Books, these things can all give people the agency, some education, it certainly takes effort, but to do some of this at low cost, if not free.

And so a lot of it, I think, is foundational, right? The diet, the exercise, the stress management, the sleep, I'm curious when you decided to reclaim your health going through this health crisis, what were the first concrete steps you took?

You mentioned getting labs, but I'm wondering if when you look back, what mattered most or more than you may be expected? Well, I think for me, and I think this is probably true for most people, it was rediscovering what I'm going to call my why.

Like, what am I doing on this planet? It's like Mark Twain said, the two best days, most important days of your life are the day you're born and the day you realize why, right?

And so it was re-realizing my purpose.

Personal Health Crisis and Hospital Lessons

And it was very clear as I'm laying there with these tubes running through me and the clanging of the hospital and the, et cetera, the bells. Uh, it's like, wait a minute, I'm not done.

I mean, I'm not afraid to die, but I have work to do. I have a purpose and I have a vision and I have completely moved away from that. And my purpose is to help as many people as possible actually to end suffering, but I've been not very successful at that overall, but I'm, you know, doing what I can.

And it's like, yeah, I'm not ready to die. And I have really taken a divergent path from my own health journey. And like many practitioners, I'm not trying to use that as an excuse, we, you know, we'll take care of everybody else.

It's like the moms I see who will do anything for their kids, but they don't have time to take care of themselves. And that's where I'd gotten. I had a very busy practice.

I had been a president of an acupuncture school, which is one of the worst jobs in the world, right? Just so many things to deal with. But I had, my diet was still fairly good, but I had gotten away from.

my foundational exercise programs. I really stopped doing Tai Chi and Qi Gong when I stopped teaching those arts. And I hadn't had time to get to the gym regularly.

I wasn't doing my own herbs that I knew that I needed for my condition. And so as I'm laying there in bed, it's like, okay, you're going to turn it around.

And I gave myself 120 days, four months. And one of the things I'm very, very poor at is asking people for help. In fact, that's the latest chapter on my book.

I made this huge discovery about why I don't ask people to help me. It goes all the way back to when I was three or four years old, right? And I made the decision that nobody is there for me in that way.

You know, I knew I was loved, but I couldn't count on people. And so it was a big step forward for me, like, okay. So my wife, you know, is wonderful, wonderful human being and very loving and very busy.

So this was right in the middle of football season with the 49ers. So I would see her in passing a couple of times a week, basically. So I asked Catherine, who is an associate that I'm working on the book, to form a cohort so we'd go to the gym.

So we tried a couple different schedules and afternoons never worked ever, ever. So she comes over at five 30, brings her dog over to hang out with our dogs.

We go to the gym, leave about five 45, go work out and then come to the office. And we started doing that five days a week. I started doing my herbs and the way I made sure I did it, because at home I forget.

So I have a, I do mostly tinctures now for Chinese herbs. As we get older, the, you know, I just can't stand taking so many capsules and pills. And so I found the magic V8 pomegranate and blueberry juice.

And I put that in a cup and I just pour my tinctures in there and I sip it all through the day. And some of those herbs are hideous. Some of the, like the shagas mushrooms just, oh my God, but it hides it.

You know, it's creating, since I was a, as early as I can remember, I always resented the word discipline. All right. We need some discipline. It's like, I'm out of here.

Right. But. The word ritual, I love. And so I realized I needed to create ritual. So my life now is less stressful than it's ever been because I have a ritual for it.

I get up at a certain time. I do my, what I'm going to do to get ready. I make a couple soups every week. I bring those in. So I'm getting my protein.

And I'm getting my fiber and I, you know, will take, I have short breaks between patients occasionally. I'll just drink that then I will add some additional protein.

So I was getting that baseline established and that was the key, the baseline. And then anything I do above that, that's awesome. And, you know, I find for me, it's great to start with simple steps.

And so I would layer these things in, wanted to have, when I was younger, I wanted to do everything now. And now I just, okay, okay, we'll add the exercise next week.

I just bought a, bought a really good bread making sourdough bread book, right? And so that'll get layered in sometime over the next few weeks. And so on Sunday mornings, I do all my prep for the week.

I'll make a chili usually, and I'll make a. ham and pea soup or something like that. I'll put them in the freezer and then I'll pull them out and heat them up before work.

So it's, my work during the week is minimal. I do it all on Sunday morning. I may hard boil some eggs, just prepare everything. And so creating that ritual was amazing.

And then getting to the gym, my God, what a struggle, right? I can't believe I committed to this, but Catherine's very dedicated and I wasn't, you know, the old cohort thing.

I wasn't going to let her down. And so. I started working out, I made very few gains at the beginning. It was just getting there, going through, almost going through the motions.

And then I started taking a deeper dive again into proper workout techniques. workout rituals, I'm going to call them. What am I going to do to actually maximize strength in this particular case?

Because I'd gotten very weak. My quads had gotten really weak. And they used to be very strong. So I was having trouble getting out of a chair. It was that week.

And then taking another deep dive into supplements. And I must have found a hundred positive articles on creatine, right? And I'd always been, oh, that's weightlifter stuff.

And I must have found a hundred articles. And it's like, no, this is good for almost everything. So I added the creatine and a couple of other things.

I tested my testosterone. It was very low and my free testosterone was very low. So I then had to do a dive into how to get my sex hormone binding globulin down.

So I'd create more free testosterone and I found some herbs that really worked. I doubled my testosterone in about two months, very safely got my sex hormone binding globulin down.

So I had more free testosterone and I don't actually have herbs. I know she legit can help with that. Did you have?

Reclaiming Health Through Ritual and Baselines

And, you know, they've used Tongkat Ali as an aphrodisiac in Southeast Asia for years, and they assumed it raised testosterone. What it actually does is it lowers sex hormone binding globulin.

And so then there are ants called Changbai mountain ants, and traditionally they could only be eaten by the emperor and the people in his court because they were so valuable.

That also, so there's actually a supplement from a company and it's called Tomcat. And I just love, it's just hilarious. My patient love it. And it's one of my favorite supplements or this favorite supplements of my patients, male or female.

Cause again, once you start, I used to do a lot of fertility. work and you know by the time women get to me they're you know they they're diagnosed with unexplained infertility well 90 percent of the time it was stress right and so they were getting high reverse t3 levels so they weren't utilizing their t3 their their hormones they weren't they might have perfect estrogen progesterone levels but they were so stressed that their sex hormone binding globulin was up they weren't using the hormones and so once we could get them to chill out which was easy, right?

They were all driven, you know, but once, you know, wanting a baby will get women to do a lot of different things that they wouldn't otherwise, and so we'd have these little negotiations, right?

Okay, this week I want you to start this herbal supplement, and the next week it's like, okay, now I want to start this one, and you know, our conception rate was phenomenal.

I don't do a lot of fertility anymore because somehow I got older and it's really a young person's game to me. You know, if you're an MD as a reproductive specialist, you don't have that much contact, right?

You do the labs, you order tests, you set up some schedule for IVF or IUI. But then you're not riding the roller coaster with them. As an acupuncturist, we need to see them a lot to make the change.

And a phenomenal result is that 20% of those women get pregnant in a month, but the other 80% are going to be crying. And I just lost my ability to deal with the emotional roller coasters, right?

It's hard. And so I still do fertility, but we don't put it out there. You know, I'm not looking for it at this point. So, yeah. And so anyway, but my biggest barometer now for how my testosterone levels are is Catherine brings her dog

over, his name's Opie.

And when I got my testosterone levels up, all he wanted to do was sit on my lap. He was, I was the alpha. And when my testosterone levels started to drop, he didn't care about me anymore.

So I use him as my test. Aha. We need to get those back up again. It's a, it's amazing, you know, how sensitive they are. So looking back on your personal journey, were there signs, like physical, emotional, energetic, that your body was asking for attention before you were on that trip to the ER?

Well, there are two things. Yes, it was telling me every single day of my life and no, I wasn't listening nearly as much as I should have been. I was practicing emergency stuff on myself.

I'd say, oh boy, my Afib's back. I'll take some herbs, get rid of the Afib. Oh, you know, so I have gout. Oh, my gout's up. I'm going to alter my diet and take some herbs.

And then, you know, I, so I was chasing symptoms, which, you know, that's so embarrassing because that's really the problem with the Western medical system, right?

Is chasing symptoms, but that's what I was doing. I wasn't really getting to the core where I'd been teaching and doing Qigong and Tai Chi and eating really well and, you know, doing all these practices.

And I had veered off course. And so now it was getting back and Heather, I have to tell you, it was kind of blew me away. And so. I'd work out occasionally over the years, you know, for a week or two at a time.

And so I had kind of a baseline of what my strength was. And as weak as I was, it hadn't gone down a lot. But after I added the supplements and made it a ritual, I doubled my strength in every exercise but one.

And I was doing usually six to eight for my lower body, six to eight for my upper body. I doubled my strength in four months. Now, if one of my patients had done that, boy, I would have been over the moon, but it was stunning.

And that's kind of. What's inspired me now to move forward with writing the book about my journey is this could be your journey. If I can do it as lazy and off track as I was at that time, you can get on track too.

And you know how these are people you should probably talk to, you know, get a good trainer, find a good, I'm going to say alternative medical provider and get to work.

Yeah, even a health coach. A health coach, yeah. Yeah. I feel like health coaching is the biggest bang for your buck, man, because really, ultimately, what you're talking about is getting to the gym, eating well, managing your stressors.

It's the foundational stuff that requires implementation day to day. The labs are really helpful, but they're not as helpful as someone showing up and dragging you to the gym.

Well, we all know the benefit of having someone hold you accountable. You know, I work to hold myself accountable, but it's not as effective as when I'm holding someone else accountable, right?

Right? And so to get that feedback, you know, I was a member of the American Diabetes Association. My doctorate is in gynecological endocrinology, but I do a lot of endocrinology, so a lot of diabetes.

You know, so I get the journals and 90% of the time, the articles, let me rephrase that. 10% of the time, the articles will use the word cure. 90% of the time it's control.

In China, when I studied in China and their diabetes program, it is cure. You're a property of the state. You will no longer have diabetes. And the programs they set up are so much ahead of what we do here.

And it's really like the health coaching. And so the hospitals, the major hospitals in China will have diabetes day. And on diabetes day, all the diabetes patients will come in like on a Friday morning.

As soon as they come in, they get a blood draw, then they'll sit and there'll be an exercise physiologist of some kind who will get up and show them a new exercise.

Like the day I was there, they were teaching them line dancing. And right. And so these people form a cohort. It's like, Hey, let's go line dancing out in the park on Saturday morning.

And so they all get involved. So they're all supporting each other. And then they had someone on seasonal eating and what to buy, and people are making agreements to go to the store together.

And then they had someone talking about diabetes. But then they go over, their blood tests are already done, and they go down the row. So they'll see a GP.

They'll get an eye exam. The women will get a gynecological history done, an update. The men will see an andrologist.

Hormones, Supplements, and Strength Recovery

They'll see an herbalist. They'll go right down the line. And the expectation is that they will cure their diabetes. And so that they're getting not as much coaching as you might get, say with you, or you're probably doing much more frequently, but at least once a month, they are reminded, plus they have a cohort, right?

And it's astonishing the results they got or get. You're known as the storyteller. I'm curious, how did reframing your health journey as a story versus a diagnosis of AFib, a diagnosis of congestive heart failure, change your mindset and your outcomes?

Well, one of the things that it had me do, and so a lot of my life, my main teacher in martial arts, who was the world martial arts champion in 1978, way before, you know, they now have a martial arts championship every weekend, but then it was like once a year.

And so he went to China, won the World Martial Arts Championship, but he said the power of his martial arts came specifically from his contemplation. Now he did lots of martial arts work too, but he was the most pristine teacher of contemplation I've ever encountered and I've tried a lot of people.

And he was the purity of his contemplation. And so I spent 12 years with him contemplating. You know, day long, four long, 13 day long sessions, really working on contemplation.

And contemplation, I think of thinking, right? And that can mean so many things. Does that mean, like, just break that down for us? Because I think almost in my mind, contemplation has almost a negative connotation in some ways.

Like you can overthink, you can overanalyze. Yes. So tell me… This was designed to be a non… thinking in that way. So you're probably familiar with Zen Coens, right?

You know, what's the sound of one hand clapping? You actually, if you think that, you can't. Nobody can think the sound of one hand clapping. The idea is to have a breakthrough in consciousness where that doesn't make sense anymore, and then something becomes clear.

And so in the Zen world, they have these Coens where they nonsensical questions, essentially. Well, with Peter, his were sensible questions, but aimed very differently.

And so he had worked with a fellow named Charles Berner, who developed the Dyad School of Enlightenment, he called it, and he took And he didn't invent it, actually.

It seems to have been invented or created by a Zen master. Actually, my teacher and I disagree on this one a little bit. I think it was a guy named Huang Po.

He thinks it was Huang Po's student, a guy named Rinzai. Now, Rinzai is pretty famous in Zen circles. Huang Po, not so much. But maybe because Wong Po speaks to me more clearly, I think he found it.

And what he did is they said, look, these people are sitting here staring at the wall, supposedly holding a question, right? And so contemplation and the way we do it is holding a question.

And I'll explain more about that in a minute. And he said, these people, you know, they're not doing anything. They could sit here for 20 years. So we turned them to face each other.

One person is a listening partner and one person is a communicating partner. So if I'm the listening partner, I say, Experience what you are and communicate that to me.

And then you, and then I don't say a word. The listening partner is so critical because it's like, if you go to a four day intensive, the first day, who cares?

By the last day, everybody's searching out the best listening partners. Cause it, it just draws your experience. It gives this open space for your experience to fill.

And so you're the communicating partner and it's like, what am I? I'm a banana. I'm a Democrat. Nah, I'm independent. And you come up with all these identifications, and then it gets deeper and deeper and deeper into truly what is the essence of you, whatever comes up for you.

And you communicate that. And when you do get to that point, it is truly life-changing. And so there are a series of questions that Berner created. First one is, who are you?

Then what are you? Then what is another? Then what is no distance? Actually, there's another one in between. Awakening, I'll call it, came from, from sitting with the question, what is no distance?

What a stupid question. I mean, it's ridiculous. Everybody knows there's distance. I mean, I, you know, this is flat screen, but it looks 3D and there's distance.

But I had an incredible partner, incredible partner. She was much more committed to the truth even than I was, and I was very committed. And so we're doing a workshop and we had a break and we went out and sat in the back of my van and continued to work.

And suddenly no distance. could not have been more clear. It was just the truth. And of course, with no distance, what you can't think, there was no time.

And so I was completely free of time and distance. There's a saying, it's like, saints dive into the lake and stay there. People like me dive in and then get back out, right?

And so I got a taste of this incredible sense of freedom. And so when I'm lying in my hospital bed, it's like, I'm asking like, what is this? Like actually, what is this experience?

What is my purpose? Right? And so asking these questions rather than coming up with a game plan right away. It's like, if I don't care about dying, I might, you know, if I'm not, don't have a purpose, who cares?

Right? If I don't care about really serving people, Who cares? And so as I laid there, getting deeper and deeper into my contemplation, everything started to become clear.

Okay, what's my vision?

Signs the Body Was Asking for Attention

Then I started to create a plan. And so by the time I got out of the hospital, I was ready to roll. I mean, I was rolling slowly, but I was ready to roll.

Yeah, do you think that there's one question, I think you mentioned for you personally, what is distance was the most profound question? Is there one that comes up for other people as commonly as the most profound question?

Or is there a way, I think what I'm thinking is, what can I do this afternoon? Is there a question I can contemplate that will help bring me closer to the truth?

you're pretty, you're advanced. And so I don't know exactly what question for you, but for most people, the non-enlightenment question that starts it all out is, who am I?

And so people will come up with, I'm a mother, I'm a father, I'm a Democrat, you know, whatever. And none of that is who we are. Those are identifications, right?

And they become very solid. People will die for those. But I wasn't born with those, right? I didn't have those in utero. I didn't know what a Republican or Democrat was.

And when I was a kid, I had no concept. Unfortunately, kids now have way too much concept of these things. But, you know, I was really slowly the concrete kind of built around my personality and my ego.

And I started to believe that I was this. And so it's really asking, who am I can be a process of deconstruction. an acupuncturist. Well, no, what I do is acupuncture, right?

That's what I choose to do in the world. Okay, I am 74. So, okay. And so you start breaking this stuff down and that gives you the opportunity to let go of the places we're stuck, right?

Where they've gotten so, like the phrase, that I have used, usually before, just before some breakthrough. And it just, it's hard for me when people say it.

It's like, I'm just like that. That's just the way I am. Cause every single breakthrough I've had was preceded by a, damn it, this is just the way I am.

And then I go, oh, wait a minute. No, I can remember when I created that. I can remember the day that my first wife and I decided to get divorced and I created this new persona so that I wouldn't get hurt anymore and then acted out of that.

But from then on, I never thought about it again. That decision. Right. And until one day I was like, okay, I'm not leaving my house. Right. I just, I'm not leaving my house until I get to the bottom of this.

And sometimes it's that desperation, you know, like it's just, yeah, I can never be free until I find out what I'm stuck on or stuck with, or, you know, and so I usually would start people with who am I?

Now, people that are already pretty well de-identified from that. What am I? It's very powerful, right? It's like. Am I my brain? Am I my mind? No, I'm certainly, there's more or less, whatever.

And just kind of breaking that down, getting to the essence, I call it. Is it pure attention? Is it, you know, what is it? And so I would never give people answers to any of those questions because it could be different for everybody.

But those are the questions I would start with. You know, what is no distance was a very advanced question. And in my huge arrogance at the time, I thought I would take it on not knowing that that's a very advanced question actually.

So yeah. How beautiful, what a neat path. It sounds like it takes courage, real courage. Oh my God. When I have people that come in and sit in front of me telling me that they're doing, you know, not exactly what I was doing, but you know, that introspective, really working to change their lives in a meaningful way, to really get to the source.

Contemplation, Identity, and Purpose

I'll say to them every time, this is the most courageous thing anybody can do. I mean, firemen have courage running in, to a burning building, but that's their identification, right?

To break the identification, to let it go is much more courageous and much more difficult. And I love firemen. Wow. It's such a rich conversation. In your experience, the brain and the body's capacity to heal later in life, especially, you've mentioned, and the conversation has gone in this direction, that it's less about the physical manifestation of our brain and body and more about purpose, about meaning, about deep inquiry.

And I'm curious, is there anyone listening who might start to think like it's too late for them to start that process? Like what would you say to them?

You know, now I have some background, right? So I didn't start absolutely cold, but I got off my likely deathbed. You know, again, 72 with congestive heart failure and pneumonia is not a great place to be.

And I turned it around completely. Now, again, I had background, but they're so easy to find people now. When I was studying, I'd have to go many states away to find someone that I felt, you know, I was compelled, that I wanted to study with.

But now it's just, it's so easy to find, call you, get some health coaching, right? And that's going to do more. I mean, it took me years and years. So in my early 20s, I was a professional poker player and someone asked me, you know, if I could go back now and be a professional poker player at a high level.

And I said, no. I said, well, why not? And I said, well, as you get older, it's a little, you don't process quite as quickly. But the big thing is when I learned to play poker, I played thousands of hands of poker, right?

To learn, you know, how to play. Today, those people that are going to be professional are playing thousands of hands a day online every day. Go to the gym and work out.

They eat right. You know, it's not like the days of the cigar smoking, you know, hamburger eating guys, fat guys sitting at the table. These guys are Uber athletes.

Now you look, I'm sitting at a poker table. They're pumped. I mean, you got biceps that are huge. Uh, they're all drinking really healthy stuff and they are practicing hours and hours a day.

And I said, you know, I. I don't have thousands of hands that, you know, I don't have the time to do that anymore. And so they have passed me. You know, when I was doing it, you know, nobody had those options.

You know, you went out and played poker. Right. So, and it's, yeah. So now there are so many options, again, with people like you doing health coaching and so many.

Now you know how it is. You have to separate the wheat from the chaff. You know, the internet is wonderful and frightening all at once. And so, you know, knowing how to really find the real people, but then you've got podcasts and you can tell who's genuine and who isn't.

And, you know, now anybody can turn their life around. Well, the great Persian physician Avicenna was talking about black cumin seed oil. And that was his favorite.

He said, the only herb I will never be without is black seed oil. And he said, the only thing black seed doesn't cure is death. He said, if the patient's already dead, I can't help them.

Otherwise I give them black seed oil, they get well. And it's kind of like that. As long as you're not dead, right? Turn it around. And I know, I see the work that you do is so amazing.

You know, I tap a little bit into those worlds of neurology, dementia, et cetera, and dementia prevention, but you really go for it. Yeah, we are. One of the questions I ask everyone is what brings you joy at this stage of life and is it different from what brought you joy earlier in life?

I don't, I'm not sure because I now have a tremendous almost 24-7 sense of contentment, right? And, and joy, but it's contentment. I was lying, you know, I was, I usually get up between four and 4.30 and this morning it was like 3.30 and I'm laying there going, oh God, I just love lying here in bed.

Now, when I was 20, that was not a thought, right? And so now it's like, I just love my bed. I love my hot tub. You know, I'm going to get home after work.

I'm going to wash off all of these problems of the day by getting in my hot tub. And so, and working out and seeing my patients, I love my patients. I mean, I'm not.

I'm an acquired taste. I have a lot of fun with my patients. I tell them stories. I get stories out of them. And so it's a little different. And I just have the most wonderful patients.

I sit here, I have a scribe while I'm talking to them, the patients. And after the patient leaves, they go, oh my God, what a wonderful human being. I said, yeah.

Yeah. So all of them bring me joy. So when I was young, it was more about excitement and more about, you know, I played a lot of sports. I did a lot of martial arts.

I dated way too much, right? Stuff like that. And so there was that sense of ego kind of conquest, maybe a little bit in some of those things. And self-satisfaction, but I don't think I had a lot of joy.

And now I think my life is filled with joy. My son graduated from college last year and he's still hanging at the house and he's working for us five days a week here.

Joy, Contentment, and Aging with Intention

And I just love it. Just be able to have that, you know, that privilege of spending time with this wonderful human being who now knows more than I do, right?

So it's great. And then my wife, who is so advanced in her area. And one of the things that's really interesting is Katherine, my co-author, is a total geek.

She comes in with new stuff every day. I'm a total geek. Four to five in the morning, I'm reading research every day, new stuff. My wife is a total geek in the sports and orthopedics realm.

And the stuff that flies back and forth between us is just so fun. Just constantly learning. And I used to do orthopedics. I was board certified in orthopedics in 98. She's 20 times better than I ever was because she's had these.

great teachers and she just studies so hard. And so to listen to her and to listen to her as she talking, talking to people say after a class that she teaches, it's like, wow, that is so cool.

And all those little things now just bring me tremendous joy. And also we had two older dogs, we still have them, but we got a call from the woman that we got those dogs from saying, Hey, I'm moving to Southern California.

If you want another dog, you should come get one now because I'm, I'm, I'm leaving the business. And our older dogs are, you know, they're old, they're, they don't have a lot of life left.

And so we got this little dog named Sasha and the two older dogs love my wife. Oh my God, they're just Gaga. and a little Sasha won't get more than a foot away from me at any time.

That brings me a lot of joy. I wake up in the morning and kind of reach down and there she is, right? There's no pleasures. Yeah, exactly. It's the simple things to just be alive and experience rather than having to go for the big bang.

You know, I've given up the idea of climbing Everest, but a good day, I get in a good walk. As we wrap up today, I want to pause on something that you've shared, Dr.

John. I think it's easy to forget in our culture that quietly or loudly tells us to expect less as we age, that decline is inevitable. And your story reminds us that you have a choice, that our bodies are not done with us just because we've crossed a certain birthday, right?

We're over 70 or over 72 or over 80. And healing doesn't always look dramatic, right? You started slowly, but sometimes it looks like just starting to pay attention again to those simple pleasures.

And sometimes it looks like choosing curiosity over resignation or judgment. And it's like this simple but radical decision, I'm not giving up, I'm not done.

And your journey is this powerful reminder that wisdom isn't something that we just accumulate with time, but it's something that we can use to reclaim our health, our energy, and our sense of possibility at any age, but it requires intention.

Yes, absolute. Intention is the number one word that we used in my teachings with Peter and my studies with Peter. It's creating the intention, right?

I hope for all of our listeners wondering today if it's too late for you. I want this episode to be your answer that it isn't, that the next chapter is still there to be written.

And as you've heard from Dr. John today, the most important turning point comes exactly when you think you've already passed it, right? There's such a choice there.

And so Dr. John, I just want to thank you deeply for your stories and your honesty, your vulnerability sharing your own story and for reminding us what's possible when we refuse to accept that good enough is not, that is not the final word, that there is so much more to life to be lived.

When you said that, it reminded me that if you're asking the question, is it too late? Then it's not. Right. That's your answer. Yeah. Well, take this one with you.

Never, ever, ever give up. Right? Dr. John, it's such a privilege to have you here. Thank you again for joining us today. Heather, I can't thank you enough for having me on.

You're such a great, great interviewer. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It's been a privilege. Thank you so much for listening to the Think Well, Age Well podcast.

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