Introduction to Self-Care and Healing

If you don't trust yourself, I feel that that self-caring, self-love, self-trust is a first step. You ask what's the first step for people to take. And I think a first step is to understand that you are precious, that you are special, that you are unique in this world.

Now there's seven, eight billion people in this world. But each one of us has the opportunity and the obligation to be present with ourselves, to be quiet so that whatever needs to bubble up can bubble up.

I happen to sleep very well and very soundly. But then I get up, I have one cup of coffee, not two, not three, but one for the day. My understanding of the science is that one cup of coffee can help you.

But if you want to or need to have multiple shots of espresso or multiple cups of coffee to keep you going, I suggest rest. Take a nap. Understand that it's okay to renew and rejuvenate yourself through just being present.

Welcome back to the Think Well, Age Well podcast. Today's conversation is an invitation to remember something we often forget. That healing is not something that is done to us, but something that can be awakened within us.

My guest today, Russ Jaffe, began his medical education in the conventional Western world. His path quickly expanded beyond the textbooks and algorithmic protocols.

Through apprenticeships with comprehensive practitioners, healers, and deeply wise teachers, he was introduced to healing modalities that still live mostly outside of academic medicine.

What Rust rediscovered through his journey is both radical and reassuring. It's that each of us has the power to change our lives, our habits, and our future by choosing wisely and comprehensively around what we eat, drink, think, and do.

His work centers on a simple but profound truth. We can choose to thrive, not merely survive. And that healing emerges when we honor our nature, our nurture, and ourselves intentionally and engage the whole of who we are, our chemistry, our relationships, our history, and our spirit.

So this is a conversation about easing suffering, cultivating joy, and reclaiming our innate capacity to heal. I am so glad you, dear listeners, are here for it.

And Russ, I am delighted to welcome you. Thank you so much. You began going down this conventional medical path, yet your journey took you to a much broader sort of perspective.

And I'm curious, what created that hard left turn?

Russ Jaffeu2019s Path Beyond Conventional Medicine

What experience or mentors most profoundly shifted how you understand healing? But what inspired first, like what inspired that shift in your vision for your future?

Well, I did train in internal medicine. Then I was fortunate enough to get a position at the National Institute of Health, NIH, and I am doubly board certified just for background.

But while I was at NIH, I met a Taoist priest named Queen Nuan Wu, who was seminally important in bringing acupuncture back to America. We had a small but interesting group of people, including Patch Adams and others.

that I studied with him for seven years while I was at NIH. And he began to open my eyes. Then I moved on, and to keep it very short, I had 30 years with a Cambodian monk named Banti Dharmawara.

We've done a book about his remarkable life. He lived to 110 and I planned to outlive him if possible. And so yes, I've had an eclectic, unusual, but very rewarding life by following the opportunities presented to me.

And yes, It is beginning to become part of conventional or Western medicine, but slowly. And I would consider myself now a natural physician, M and MD, PhD with a PhD in biochemistry for anyone who cares to know.

And I did some very seminal work on collagen and platelets many years ago, which started me thinking about the fact that we knew very little about the nature of the healing human response.

And I wanted to pursue an understanding for myself and for others of what it meant to heal naturally. what it meant to be effective for yourself and for those around you, for those you care about, for those you live and love.

And I've been fortunate to have all of that. So that's an introduction. Do you think, you know, when you mentioned heal naturally, do you think there's a path to healing unnaturally?

Oh, absolutely. The conventional medical world has become a business. You spend ever more, you get ever less value. I have recently been involved with that conventional medical world and I am now convinced that it has very little to offer people like me and people like you.

And do you think that healing is achieved when you go down that path? Yes, healing is a natural human capacity that is often inhibited by the conventional medical world, a world that relies upon, and I am doubly board certified in lab medicine, but let me say that laboratory results are only one measure of a human being.

And if you are fully awake, if you are fully present, Like Eckhart Tolle, one of my many mentors, you will find opportunities to heal naturally. So break that down for us.

What does that look like? What does that look like for you personally, for the people around you, for patients or your family? What does it mean to heal naturally?

Well, it means using nature, nurture, and wholeness. We have in conventional Western medicine basically excluded nature, nurture, and wholeness. And I find that a major deficit.

So if I try to embody it in a phrase, it would be to use nature, use nurture, use wholeness to find out who you really are. Who are you on the inside and on the outside?

Who are you in regard to, as you said correctly, relationships and a life lived in spirit? I have done my best over the last half century to recover from what I was trained to do, to make it available to those who are interested.

Healing Naturally Through Nature, Nurture, and Wholeness

Can you give us some concrete examples? It's a little philosophical, and I think when someone hears nature, nurture, wholeness, everyone comes up with a different image in their mind.

I'm curious what the image is that you come up with. Is there a particular payment or example? Well, it starts with what you eat, drink, think, and do.

I have chosen in the last half century to eat simply and with whole foods. We happen to have a permaculture biodynamic food forest in our front yard, and so from spring to fall I get to go outside in the evening, pick some herbs or some vegetables that are ripe, and that becomes a major part of our eating, of our dinner.

I think people underestimate how important what you eat is. And let me be specific. I exclude all sweeteners, not just sugar. I exclude all sweeteners because it turns out that they are harmful to your life and to your spirit.

They induce chronic disease. And we can talk at length about chronic disease. I have helped many people with diabetes beat diabetes by understanding in depth what I'm describing for the individual because it is very individual.

And I have meditated for half a century and I am still unlocking the keys to spirit, a life lived whole and in spirit. And I am by nature an inquisitive person.

I want to understand something deeply so that I can share it with others. You've been helping others recover and thrive for decades. When you look back at your career, what has changed most about how you and how you support people in achieving health?

And then I'm also curious, is there anything that hasn't changed enough? Well, sure, there are lots of part of me that have not yet fully emerged, but let me say that I start with deep listening.

I want people to tell me the story of what really has happened to them. And very often this starts in silence. because people have difficulty often understanding that I am really present to listen deeply to them.

But when they get that message, then the story of their life comes out. The story of early childhood traumas. And this goes back to infancy. Very often, and I was part of this Dr.

Spock generation, People are told, let babies cry it out. That raises the cortisol, that raises the understanding that the world is not safe. So very often when I allow people to unpack their life story, what they have to say starts early in childhood and continues throughout their life.

The traumas, the need for self and forgiveness of ourselves and others is profound and helpful. So again, as I've said a couple of times, I try to listen fully to what they have to say.

And often it takes a little bit of time for them to really believe that I am listening and caring and deeply concerned about their nature, their nurture, their wholeness, which we've said before, but I'll say that several times during this conversation, because today the world is distracting.

There are many opportunities to live in technology, to live in distraction. And I want people, as I have done my best to do, to discover quiet, the inner voice, My main mentor was a Cambodian Buddhist monk who lived with me for 30 years between the ages of 80 and 110. And I personally plan to outlive him if the good Lord lets me do that.

And what that means is to be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at 110 or more. How do you do that? What is the path to bright-eyed and bushy-tailed at 110 and beyond?

Well, it's to allow the path to open up for you. It's different for each individual. What I do is encourage people to live their life fully with wide-eyed, double-eyed seeing of the nature of their being.

And very often people go through a phase where they're not really sure that I am listening, then they may actually have tears form in their eyes and their quiet begins to unfold.

I think that meditation is important as a practice. I did not learn meditation in medical school. I did not learn it in my PhD in biochemistry. But I came to learn that my life was not complete.

And therefore, I had to find the way to forgive, forgive myself, forgive my parents, forgive those who had traumatized me. And I learned that they were doing it unintentionally.

It wasn't, I fortunately had a pretty average early life. I was not really physically abused, but my parents had had terrible childhoods. And I only learned that much, much later because they didn't want to talk about the traumas that they had survived and that they visited upon me and my siblings.

But I was very interested in what had happened, what was their story. And fortunately, before they passed, I was able to learn much of their story. And we laughed and cried together as part of that process.

Emotions are just indicators. Emotions should not control your life. Emotions should be used as an indication that something is bubbling up inside you to be understood, to be appreciated, to be resolved.

Listening Deeply, Childhood Trauma, and Forgiveness

Where do you want me to take this? Because I can go in many directions. I'm jotting down notes as you say these things because there's a bunch of themes I feel like we could pull on, these threads we could pull on.

You mentioned this attentive listening. This has been a theme certainly in my clinical practice and in life in general, that attention, true attention with intention and with presence is I think one of the highest forms of love.

And what it brings up for people, right, especially if they haven't experienced much of that, is all of these kind of questions around self-worth, around being loved, being worthy of love, and it can feel unfamiliar for a lot of people.

And it also feels like a bit of a homecoming. And I think that's where some of the emotion, right, the emotion comes from the tears that well up. When someone is really heard, really seen, through presence, through presence and true listening.

And so I guess I feel like you could talk about that for a while and the power, the healing power of that love. I think that's so important. Do you accept yourself as a special child of divine love?

To be willing to accept that you deserve and can be engaged with, self-regard, self-care, and self-love. It took me a long time. I was a multiply accomplished professional before I realized that deeply I didn't feel complete.

I didn't feel loved. And that's where meditation and mindfulness practice, I think, comes in. And yes, it is critically important for the professional to be present, to be evocative of love, and to be loving in a heartfelt way.

I love the work I do. I love the people I work with. They are my intentional family. They're not my biological family. I have two wonderful adult children, but whether you do or don't have children, whether you do or don't have siblings, you can still unlock the keys to self-care, to self-love.

And then you can be more helpful to others. Yeah, I think the power of this, if maybe I can reflect back to you, because I think this is really profound, right, is when you have a provider, a practitioner, whether it's a therapist or a medical doctor or naturopath or a coach or whoever it is, who reflects or who creates that container, maybe more than anything, of love, of presence and attention and love, then it sets that example.

It basically gives you permission to step in. It's an invitation to self-love because it's not about growing dependence on love from others and presence from others, but it's really about that path towards self-acceptance and self-love.

Do I hear that? Absolutely. That is spot on. There's a theme around forgiveness, and I see this. Of course, I work with dementia patients. I work with people who are older, who are typically over 65, many of them over 85. And I hear themes because I ask everyone about stress, about their relationships, about their relationships with people, with money, with their work, their sense of purpose, meaning, with their sense of home.

And one of the things that comes up over and over again is the blame they put on their parents. And you mentioned forgiveness. And this I think is a theme that many people miss, but it unlocks so much healing.

When we can forgive our parents for giving us the gift of life a little earlier in our lives, there is so much peace that can come with that. this assumption of goodwill, that they were doing the best they could with what they had.

The best they could under the circumstances of their life and their life story. It was very helpful when I convinced my parents to tell me their story.

to tell me what had happened to them in early and late childhood. And then that unlocked the capacity in me to forgive them for my misunderstandings or understandings, because too many people are physically and

emotionally traumatized.

I was emotionally bereft because my parents did not have the capacity because of the traumas in their early life to extend love to me. And I think that is common to many, many people.

I am functioning as a 40-year-old, but I am currently 79 and I'm looking forward to my 80th birthday. I'm a New Year's baby. So as a child, I really didn't like birthdays, but now I have come to enjoy my intentional family that gathers with me to celebrate me.

I think it's important to be able to celebrate yourself and your life and your worthiness, as you said, so that you can feel the capacity to help yourself and others in the journey of life.

You know, for me this is very personal, right? I am certainly on this path and I think a lot of this I understand intellectually, right? I can say it out loud and then life gets stressful, I'm lying in bed, I can't fall asleep and I've got all of these ruminating thoughts and I kind of go back into these old patterns.

You mentioned meditation and mindfulness, and I'm kind of wondering if that's where you'll go with this. But the question is, how do we move from intellectually accepting and understanding these concepts to embodying them?

Oh, that's so important. We can study through books or through teachings or through process. and intellectually in our brain, we understand. But emotionally, we don't really understand.

We haven't felt truly accepted for the wonderful being that we are, because each person is very special to me, and I would like it to be for them. So part of my work is to help people appreciate who they are, that they are worthy, that they mean something to themselves and maybe others.

Now I happen to have a very rich personal relationship life, but many older people for various reasons are bereft of relationship. Now it can be with an animal, it can be with a person, it can be with anything that matters to you.

But it is so important to find and keep relationships that mean something in our lives. And I'm so glad that you're willing to say, yes, we understand something at an intellectual level long before We understand it at a intimate, meaningful, wholeness perspective.

For me, it took many years of meditation to discover that I could forgive, not forget, but forgive. forgive my parents, forgive those who had been angry in my presence.

And I had internalized a lot of that.

Self-Love, Presence, and Trust

And fortunately, I think in the last decade, I've been able to cast off those shackles that bind, that bind the mind, that bind the spirit, that bind the mind.

So I'm happy to get into details if you would like of specific examples. I'm happy to take this conversation in any direction that you want. Well, this is so rich.

I do think that if there's one practical, my experience personally and professionally is that everyone is on this path at some level. Some people are just starting.

Some people are just being introduced to these sorts of concepts and other people have been grappling with this for decades. And I'm curious if there was one step someone could take to embody forgiveness, like true forgiveness and self-love.

What would be the step that you would recommend they take? Well, I think one of the first steps is to appreciate. Appreciate that you have a life, a life given by your parents, a life that extends to who and how you live your life.

And I want people to appreciate that they are unique, that they are endowed with the capacity to live and love and be present themselves. So what I try to do is reflect to them that I am here, that I am present, that I am still awakening and eager for them to awaken too.

And I find that very Enriching for me and for them, but challenging because very often people don't trust themselves. They have not found the keys to presence of trust.

And if you don't trust yourself, I feel that that self-caring, self-love, self-trust is a first step. You ask, what's the first step for people to take?

And I think a first step is to understand that you are precious, that you are special, that you are unique in this world. Now there's seven, eight billion people in this world.

But each one of us has the opportunity and the obligation to be present with ourselves, to be quiet so that whatever needs to bubble up can bubble up.

I happen to sleep very well and very soundly. But then I get up, I have one cup of coffee, not two, not three, but one for the day. My understanding of the science, because I am fundamentally a scientist who is also a practitioner, is that one cup of coffee can help you.

But if you want to or need to have multiple shots of espresso or multiple cups of coffee to keep you going, I suggest rest, take a nap, understand that it's okay to renew and rejuvenate yourself through just being present.

Very often when you start a meditative practice and anything is fine, I happen to have found my way through Buddhism, but I am a very traditional Jew.

I'm a very present person who accepts wherever people are and that's the place to begin. So I don't feel the desire to convert people. In fact, I think those who need to convert you to their way of thinking need to step back and preach less and practice more.

So I've had the good fortune to be mentored by remarkable, amazing people. And where did they come from? Just my willingness to show up. One of the first things that I recommend to people and this is a practice that is a bit hard in the beginning, but it opens up many possibilities, is just show up and be receptive to whatever in the day is available to you.

I could go on for a long time, but I would like to hear from you where you would like to take this conversation. But I think that's such a, that is very tangible, right?

Like no matter what happens to you today, how can you be a little more open to the opportunities to people who are present and loving? How can you evoke healing through whatever presents itself?

Yes, I think it's important to surround yourself, at least initially, with people who exemplify, who practice and live into those ways of being. I was very fortunate to have mentors and bosses who encouraged me to be myself, encouraged me to do something that was meaningful to me and might be worthwhile to the world.

And both have happened. We can go into that if you want, but both have happened to me. And I think as you indicated, it starts with being alive. Be a little more alive each day.

Be a little more loving each day. Loving of yourself and of others. Be more present in your daily activities. I am constantly meditating. I'm even meditating as we're talking.

because you can have a meditative part of your being and then a verbal or conceptual or intellectual part of your being. These are all parts of a whole person.

And I didn't start out being a whole person, but I have to the best of my abilities over the last decades, wanted to be

each day a little bit more of myself.

You are a biochemist by training, and you emphasize that chemistry and relationships and personal history are all inseparable. How do emotional patterns and life experiences show up in our biochemistry?

Emotions, Joy, and the Healing Power of Laughter

Well, let me start with the beginning. You can do simple blood tests of your biochemistry. And then you can understand what this indicates about your strengths or your needs.

I don't like to talk about weaknesses. I am very eager to find out what people need and to meet their needs where they are willing to meet me and As a biochemist, I am deeply interested both in the chemistry of a being, the chemistry of a person, as reflected through lab tests and other tests, but I'm also very much interested in the subtler aspects of who people are, of how they feel, because very often, people have been conditioned to deny their feelings.

And I want them to be engaged with their feelings, but not controlled by their feelings. At one time, early in my life, I was ruled by my emotions. And I had rapid advancement in professional qualities of my life but I knew there was something lacking.

I don't know why, but I did know there was something lacking. And that's why I went out to be present, to find mentors, to find people in my world who are able to unlock for me the keys of the kingdom of life.

If you're religious, you will know that the kingdom of heaven is within. That's a simple statement, but for me, it helped me understand who and what I am and can I therefore be more helpful, more living and loving to every person that I meet.

Sometimes I like people, sometimes I don't. I've met a number of our presidents of the United States, some of whom I liked and some of whom I didn't, but I was always loving towards each of them.

And some of them have actually reflected back to me, boy, you're a little different than most of the people I meet, because most of the people who meet people of accomplishment want something from them.

I want to give something to them. I want to help them be more of who they can become. by nature, nurture, and wholeness. You mentioned the importance of emotions and not being controlled by them, but, of course, we're all impacted each day.

You've spoken about joy and laughter as therapeutic tools. Now, this is on that spectrum of emotion. I'm curious what happens in the body, what happens in the nervous system when we laugh and we experience joy, and how can these be used as tools without controlling us?

Well, in specific, if you're willing to laugh for five minutes every day, your cortisol stress hormone goes down, your acetylcholine beneficial neurotransmitter goes up.

Patch Adams, he was famous for the movie Patch, which was a Robin Williams triumph of a movie. But I knew the real Patch Adams because he studied acupuncture when I was interested and interested first in not believing that acupuncture could be real.

Because conventional medicine dismissed, at least at that time, that acupuncture was more than a placebo effect. Now I think the placebo effect is the healing response.

So I don't dismiss the placebo effect. I want to engage it as part of the discovery of who we are, of where we've been, and where we're going. What brings you joy at this stage of life?

Well, I am very fortunate. I enjoy just getting up in the morning. I enjoy getting a shower to wet and rejuvenate me. I

enjoy having breakfast. I enjoy every aspect of my life.

And I am very fortunate in that regard because I have been able to craft a life based on joy, based on doing what I love and loving what I do. Being around the people that I love that are really my extended family.

I think relationship is one of the keys to joy of living. There are many, but what else? What are some of the others? Well, doing something meaningful, meaningful moments.

I've had many meaningful moments and many people have reflected back to me, boy, you're a happy soul. Well, I have a soul, we all do. And yes, my soul rejuvenates with joy, joy of classical music.

My mother was a musician. She had perfect pitch. She was very interested in music, but not so interested in us, her children, because her early childhood had been full of traumas, emotional and physical.

And when I listen to the story that people tell, very often, early in their life, there were emotional and physical traumas from which they still need to recover.

And it's my obligation, my responsibility, my joy, to help them know that at least one person, me, is present for them to unpack those emotional or physical traumas.

I am very disappointed that so many people are physically as well as emotionally traumatized, because that imprints the entire nature of your life. And people tell me that when we're able to transcend, to get over those traumas, to forgive in very deep and profound ways, whatever it is that has traumatized us.

You radiate a deep joy of living and despite, you know, having gone through your traumas, as we all do, What do you think is the most important thing to cultivate?

Is it laughter? Is it meditation? When we get on this healing journey, is there something that stands out for most people that helps them cultivate more joy?

Well, I think it begins with self-acceptance. If we're willing to know that we are worthy of healing, then our healing journey can begin. And I think one of my greatest joys is allowing people to know that they can heal naturally, that they don't need someone outside.

Daily Practices for Thriving and Closing Reflections

Forgive me anyone who is a therapist who wants to heal other people, that's fine. And I've had my share of therapy and it's been helpful. But fundamentally, I feel that recovery really happens inside, not outside.

And yes, I'm glad you appreciate that I am a very joyful, happy, satisfied, contemplative, religious, spiritual person. All of those are different aspects of me.

I think that each person can find their own path. You don't have to follow my path. In fact, I don't want you to follow my path. It might be satisfying for a short time, but your personal path is available only to you.

And when you accept that that is possible, the path opens up in front of you. As I said before, showing up is a very important part of healing. Showing up means being willing to accept whatever is as the moment now.

I'm a confirmed nowist. I'm a confirmed people who has benefited greatly from just showing up. And I feel some of the most important mentors that have influenced and cultivated and helped my life were pleasantly surprised that I showed up.

Because too many people don't appreciate the value of being present and showing up. So I'm so glad that we're having this conversation. I hope that your listeners have been inspired.

that they have been motivated, that they have understood that healing begins within, with what you eat, drink, think, and do. Those are places to begin.

Do you eat in a way that rejuvenates and helps you? Do you allow yourself to eat wholeness? In my world, it's very possible to live on whole foods mostly biodynamic, which is like super organic.

15 years ago, my dear son started a garden that is now mostly self-sustaining. It's a permaculture biodynamic food forest. We're very fortunate to have enough land.

It doesn't take much, but it does turn out that growing anything that you cultivate is very rewarding and satisfying. You can do it with just a little pot and some herbs.

You can do it in small or large ways. It doesn't matter the size. It matters that you have cultivated something in your life that you care about. And it will reciprocate.

It's magical, but it will care about you as well. You remind me that one of my teachers, his definition of grace is trusting that whatever arises is a gift before it feels like it.

And you really exemplify that, right? That these, we have our traumas, we have our struggles, life happens, and turning it into a gift, remembering that it is a gift, is part of how we cultivate joy.

As we close today, Russ, I want to thank you for reminding us of something both simple and profound that's easy to forget. Healing isn't about becoming someone new.

It's remembering and appreciating who we already are. Our chemistry, our relationships, our lived experiences, these are not separate threads. They're actually woven together in this beautiful story of our life and our health.

And when we honor nature, nurture ourselves with intention, and engage with the whole of who we are, healing is not only possible, it's expected. So I hope that for our listeners that this conversation resonated with you and you are considering it an invitation, an invitation to choose daily rituals over potentially routines that haven't always served and curiosity over judgment and thriving over surviving.

There are these small daily choices in what we eat, drink, think, and do, as you've reminded us, that can gently reduce suffering and open the door for a longer, healthier, and more joyful life.

Man, we have been given this amazing gift, right? Every day that we wake up and the sun is shining. Wow, we won the lottery to be here right now. And remembering that, appreciating that each day is, I think, what you have so gracefully reminded us.

Thank you, Russ, for being here. Well, so have you. And thank you for the opportunity to share this with your listeners. I love all of you, indirectly, but genuinely.

and let it be, as you have said, Heather, an opportunity to be more yourself. Thank you so much. Thank you. Until next time, be well. Thank you so much for listening to the Think Well, Age Well podcast.

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