

“Reading Between the Lines” from *Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal* by Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D., pp. 26-28

Sara is a woman who, like myself, has had Crohn’s disease for many years. In thirty years of illness she has had more than fourteen abdominal and joint surgeries. As a result of these experiences she saw herself as a victim. When she first came to my office, she was chronically depressed and incapacitated by self-pity. But over time that changed. Now she works three days a week and participates in the busy life of her family. When she completed her counseling sessions, her husband commented on the changes she had made and said it was like being married to another woman.

A year after I had last seen her she developed pain in her jaw and went to see her dentist. He diagnosed a small abscess in the bone and told her that she would need root canal surgery to correct it. As he began to describe the procedure, she abruptly stood and left his office. A few hours later I received an alarmed phone call from her husband, who had come home from work to find her sitting in her bathrobe in the living room, deeply depressed. He had no idea why, as she was unwilling to talk to him about it. “Come over,” I said.

I was horrified by the change in Sara; she looked much as she had when we first met three years ago. Her eyes were lifeless, her hair uncombed. Her mismatched clothes seemed to be the first that had come to hand when she went to her closet. She sat slumped in the chair opposite me. In a flat voice, she told me what had happened in the dentist’s office that afternoon. “It’s just too much, I can’t do it,” she said. “This straw breaks the camel’s back.”

“What is going on, Sara?” I asked. She began to cry. “I don’t know,” she said. “I feel the same way I did when I first came here, sort of overwhelmed, beaten down.” I suggested we try some of the imagery that had been so helpful to her before. Perhaps it would help her uncover the reason for her distress. In tears, she agreed.

I encouraged her to sit back in her chair and relax. Slowly she was able to follow the familiar pattern. When her breathing slowed and became a bit deeper I suggested that she imagine herself standing before a closed door. “When you feel ready, reach forward and open the door,” I said. “On the other side you will find something that will help you with your feelings.”

Opening this imaginary door, she was surprised to find herself in a hospital room. The patient in the bed was herself, in a coma, at the onset of her disease some thirty years ago.

Over the next fifteen minutes or so, she visited hospital room after hospital room in her imagination. Slowly the events of her long illness began to unfold, year by year, operation by operation, setback after setback, recovery by recovery. As I went along with her, my logical mind began to object. Privately I wondered how any of this could possibly be of help to her now. Wouldn’t revisiting all this pain cause her to feel even more victimized and helpless? Yet as she went on and on, her voice got stronger and she began to straighten up in her chair. She had just come to the year 1988 and she was standing in an operating room watching what must have been her twelfth surgery, in which her right hip was completely replaced, when suddenly she opened her eyes and burst out laughing. “Root canal, schmoot canal,” she howled, tears of laughter rolling down her face. “I can do this itty-bitty surgery with one hand tied behind my back.”

By reviewing the story of her disease, Sara was able to experience the story behind the story, the personal meaning in the familiar facts and events. Looking deeply and honestly at her woundedness, she had found her power; experienced her own indomitable will to live, her courage, and her ability to heal herself over and over again. Perhaps every “victim” is really a survivor who does not know it yet.