

## CHAPTER 1

# The Calling Is in Our DNA

I entered healthcare later in life, which is unusual. I was in my early thirties. When I say “the calling,” I mean that people who choose to work in healthcare answered a calling. It happens for some sooner than others; however, there always exists a pull inside each person to be part of something that makes a positive difference.

I ask people, “When did you first start thinking about healthcare?”

When I ask nurses when they first thought about nursing as a career, they usually say it happened very early. People say they were a nurse on Halloween when they were a child. They loved to play hospital. They had one of those medical bags from years ago with all the equipment needed to pretend they were a doctor or a nurse.

When asked the same thing, physicians usually say they had the calling early on and certainly by college. I ask them why they chose to be a doctor. I say, “Did you go to a website and start looking at compensation?” And they laugh and say no, that wasn’t it at all. They just felt a real desire to make a difference. Often they didn’t know exactly what type of doctor they were going to be, but they *did* know they

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wanted to be a doctor. And then in medical school they would do a rotation and something would click. They'd realize "this is what I want to do."

I met the first female urologist in a large, well-known healthcare system and asked her why she chose urology. It seems the field chose her as much as she chose it. She said she wanted to be an internal medicine specialist as it would let her get to know her patients on a longer-term basis. She also really loved surgery. And as she was going through rotations, the urology rotation clicked. She saw that this was the best of both worlds.

It's not only clinicians who have the market cornered on this sense of calling. Everyone in healthcare has this calling. For example, there is a CPA who performed an audit of a healthcare system. He was attracted to how he felt when he was there and ended up working in their finance department.

Think of people who work in information technology, food services, human resources, environmental services, facilities engineering, security, and so forth in a healthcare setting. In many of these roles, a person could work anywhere. They could have better hours and a better balance of life and not deal with the emotions that are part of healthcare. Yet they chose healthcare. These individuals answered the same calling as clinicians. In fact, if you're a clinician, you're probably going to work in healthcare, but if you're not, you certainly made a deliberate choice in choosing this field.

Over the years, I've heard story after story about such individuals making a huge impact on people's lives. For example, I was working with a healthcare organization, and Jeff Atwood was one of the key leaders. We still communicate. Jeff has written some wonderful books on children and leadership. He and his wife knew there were going to be some challenges in their oldest daughter's development due to special needs (which I also call special gifts). They were very nervous. She had been critically ill early in her life, and of course they

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were searching for the best answers possible. They went to a very well-respected medical center with a large children's hospital.

They parked and walked into this large, imposing building. On the way in, they walked past a parking lot attendant. This family was from a smaller community and was accustomed to smaller hospitals. Because of that and the emotional nature of the whole situation, both Jeff and his wife were rather overwhelmed by everything that was going on. They were questioning everything, including whether they were in the right place for their daughter. As Jeff was walking to get the car after the appointment, the parking lot attendant they had encountered earlier stopped him and said, "I just want you to know that while you've been in there, I've been praying for you."

As they got in their car, they took that interaction as a sign they were in the right place. And as you know, reducing anxiety and replacing it with the feeling they're in the right place is huge to a patient and their family.

Just think if that parking lot attendant had worked in a parking garage that wasn't attached to a hospital. If you came out of a mall and the attendant said, "While you've been shopping, I've been praying for you," it may not have quite the same impact as it did at this medical center! But that parking lot attendant who could work anywhere chose to work in a hospital. You will likely agree that they are helpful and useful.

Here is another story that resonates with me. The story happened when I was speaking in Peoria.

Before speaking to groups of employees, I would ask managers to share a note or story about an employee they knew was coming to one of these sessions. I would tell managers, "I can't promise I'll mention all of the stories but will try my best to do so." A manager of a nursing and labor-delivery unit wrote a note about a person in food services. The employee didn't report to her, yet she wanted to make sure I knew

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how valuable this person was. One of the food service worker's jobs was passing out trays. Her note told of a very young mother without any support who had come to the hospital and delivered a stillborn child.

My first grandchild was a stillborn birth, and my son and daughter-in-law were given time to be with their daughter, Ella, to say goodbye. As they do, the hospital gave this mom time to be with her baby to say goodbye, at least physically. The mother was alone and had no support system. Knowing this organization, I guarantee you that doctors, pastoral care, nurses, and social workers all offered to be with this young mother, but she said no. She said she didn't need them to be with her.

Around that time, the trays were starting to be passed out. The lady passing out the trays calmly knocked on the door and walked in and immediately realized what she had come upon. And she said to the young mother, "I'm so sorry. I know you want to be alone." The mother looked at the food service person passing out the trays and said, "No, I don't." So the food service worker sat down on the bed with the young mom. The mother asked her big questions like, "Why did this happen? How can I tell people?" And the tray passer answered all of her questions. You see, she saw a chance to be helpful and useful, and she took it.

You might wonder why the young mom didn't take the offering of help from the other people in the hospital. My guess is she just felt more comfortable with the food service worker. And in the note the nurse manager wrote she said, "When she came to work today, she thought she was going to be passing out trays, which is an important job. But today she did more than that. She passed out love."

Again...somebody in food service could probably work anywhere. I am just in awe of everyone who chooses to work in the healthcare environment. That's the calling. That's what this book is about: how we can continue to ignite our own flame, rekindle our own passion for

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this work, and help others to do the same. As employee motivation and engagement expert Dr. Bob Nelson says, “You get the best effort from others not by lighting a fire beneath them, but by building a fire within.”

Each of us has a fire inside of us. Sometimes our fire almost gets put out. Notice the word “almost.” I believe that fire can be rekindled, and that it will burn for as long as we live. And our fire will help others ignite their internal fire.

Certainly, there are cold winds blowing constantly in healthcare, whether it’s a pandemic, the challenge of different payer mixes, dealing with mergers and consolidations, facing new competition that pops up, or staff shortages. There’s probably never been a time in healthcare where we can say it was just smooth sailing. Now it might seem like that looking in the rearview mirror, but while we were in it, it was always choppy water. And some waves are much choppier than others.

But if we look at stories like these, we can clearly see that the one thing that’s been constant is that each and every day, people keep coming out to do the best they can to make the organization they work with the best it can be. They have to. It’s in their DNA.