

The World of Patch Adams and Gesundheit!

Introduction

Patch Adams is who/what? The subject of a hugely popular film. A film about a caring, doctor who uses humor in his practice. A physician who has piloted and created a model for giving healthcare that is healthful for patients, family, physicians and nurses, and the community. "Got it, been there, feel good" Some might be tempted to say. "So what does Patch Adams have to do with the non-healthcare world of work and me?" If Patch Adams was just the movie character, the answer might be – not much. Patch Adams is not the movie, however – not by a long shot. Adams is someone who through his lifelong focus on "peace, justice and care" and incessant searcher for the why of people and systems has found that the "ills" in the healthcare system were a reflection of the ills of the society.

So who is Patch Adams? What is he about? He is a whole person, bent on healing the whole society – the world - so that one day we would live in a world "where no one alive can remember what the word 'war' means. His nudging, prodding, poking, jabbing, jibing, clowning and challenging on many different fronts, along with building the model hospital is about doing what it takes to assure that "whatever would have to change in the world to make that actually an easy thing and not what would be called an idealistic thing."

His words and journey, energy, analysis, caring methods, and "clown antics" whether applied to making healthcare healthy for physicians and nurses, or delivering a bit of joy and care and sustenance to children in Russian, Cuba, Bosnia, or soon in Afghanistan, can, perhaps, make it easier for each of us to see the "ills" and possible "cures" of our own organizations and lives, as well as the impact we have on the whole society and world. The challenge of his life to us is be aware, not close our eyes and to take action if for no other reason than to avoid extinction of our "kind" within the next fifty years. And, as one of his favorite funny persons, Groucho Marx, might say: Don't forget to laugh and have fun; life is too serious not to have fun with it.

Note: As the time was short for this interview, I've also scanned and will include comments from other interviews and writings of Doctor Adams to give you a better view of his life, work and challenge to each of us.

An Interview with Patch Adams, M.D. about the World of Patch Adams and Gesundheit!

Interviewer: Ned Hamson of the Élan Institute, Cincinnati, Ohio USA ned@elanatwork.zzn.com

This interview appeared originally in the News For A Change newsletter (www.aqp.org) and is reprinted here with permission of the interviewer, Ned Hamson

Ned Hamson: How would you describe what you are about for the person who has not read your book or seen the film?

Patch: If I had to use three words as opposed to a book, I would say "peace, justice and care." A world where no one alive can remember what the word "war" means, and whatever would have to change in the world to make that actually an easy thing and not what would be called an idealistic thing.

Ned Hamson: What is a first step might someone take to making war an unfamiliar word?

Patch: Well one can certainly be peace and justice and care themselves. Which maybe is everyone's first or one step. A lot of people don't actually take that step and they still do great things. But one can be full of peace and justice and care about themselves. I certainly have lived that for almost four decades.

Ned Hamson: What describes who Patch Adams is are and what drives you?

Patch: It's not a philosophical tackling, my life. It's a doing. I'm about doing. I'm a raging doer. I think inherent in the doing is the energy for the doing. At least that's been so far my life.

My life is one of social action. I want to be useful. I thought creating this [healthcare] model was a way that I could sustain myself and it would be thrilling to do. I wanted a lifetime kind of project that was my style. I needed a place to practice where it would be thrilling to be next to human suffering every day, all day long. Because if is not thrilling, it will eat me up. 3.

The most essential question I asked myself in my whole life was, "Can I look at injustice and do nothing, or can I do something?" With that Gesundheit! was born, and whether it's clowning in Russia or Bosnia or Cuba, it comes out of a concern that in the luxury of all of our lives—and in this country even the poor are living luxuriously compared to the rest of the world—we all still have to take the time to do the right thing. 4. For the last sixteen years, the patient that I've been involved with and making a house call on is the community and society.4.

It's the job of the clown and the doctor to walk towards suffering and not be afraid to speak up. That's why I opened with peace and justice and care. None of it's worth anything. That's why twentieth century literature is about loneliness and meaninglessness. Because as soon as you stop being part of peace and justice and care you're going to be lonely and your life isn't going to have meaning.

You're not going to feel like your life has meaning unless you're giving. There you have it. Everyone makes choices. I try to lead by example. To say, look, I'm just doing my version. Everyone has to find their own version of loving. I know if you want meaning and you don't want to be lonely, be loving. Be your style and you might end up in a motorcycle gang, or you might end up in a nunnery, or you might end up in an extended family. Who knows, it doesn't matter. But at least within your tribe that you think peace and justice and care. If you want to prevent extinction then you have to think it for everybody.

I answer all my mail. That's about 600 longhand letters a month. I regularly correspond with about 1600 people. Huge numbers, as the only model in the US you can imagine that I get thousands of letters from doctors and nurses saying such things as: "I saw you speak ten years ago and I've been a free doctor 2 days a week ever since." Imagine the repercussions of that. There are thousands of them.1

"Just recently, an Italian film company raised over \$100,000 so that I could take 22 clowns from all continents to Afghanistan. They originally just said I would get clowns from here, but I said, No let's get them from every continent. Then the question is how many tons of aid can we bring. I told them I can't clown unless we're feeding people if they're hungry.1

Ned Hamson: I would have thought that the film would have made building the hospital easier and that news of your gong to Russia, Bosnia, or Afghanistan would be a part of the news of the

day. Has the media been a help or a hinderance?

Patch: We put up fake, meaningless heroes to completely divert intelligence from our population. So our kind of work if anything is denigrated... After the movie there wasn't a single positive article about me or our work. There were dumb, stupid, meaningless things... made my children cry. They actually thought what they were reading about, they didn't know the person they were reading about

I knew the movie would do this. I would become a funny doctor. Imagine how shallow that is relative to who I am. I am a funny doctor. I just got back from taking 17 clowns to Cuba to where they were hit by the worst hurricane in their history. The month before that 30 clowns from 7 countries ages 16-65 to Russia for the 17th year in a row. I am goofy. During those times I clown 10-16 hours a day uninterruptedly. Blissfully. But it's not the thing to say in an interview. The important thing in an interview is for a physician to say look I studied it this isn't a philosophical inquiry. I'm speaking as a physician saying our species is going to be extinct if we don't convert from a society that puts the emphasis on compassion and generosity that we now put on money and power.

We're active in over forty countries. You just can't imagine what we're doing. The media knows nothing. There's nothing in the media. Read Robert McChesney's "Rich Media, Poor Democracy" and you'll be in the streets as a revolutionary.

I'm on the road 300 days a year. As many as eleven lectures in a day, I'm voracious in trying... universities, medical schools, commencement addresses. I have over 50 presentations. I give sometimes two- or three-hour question and answer periods. When it's in the newspaper it's "Oh, Patch Adams, the real Patch Adams, played by Robin Williams in the movie.Ö"

I keep a list of 50 books in my wallet as my card, so that when someone comes up and asks me for an autograph I say, autograph, and I give them a little lecture on pop culture and how it's dumified our population and its consequences. On sixty percent of school teachers have to have second jobs in order to support their families, where ball bouncers are multi-millionaires. And say that I'm not going to buy into that. So I've never given an autograph. I give them that little lecture and then out of my wallet I take my card which has ten questions to ask yourself, ten ideas to think about, ten things to do to change the world, ten websites to visit, magazines to subscribe to, and ten books to read to introduce yourself as a political activist.

We define success in terms of Michael Jordan and Bill Gates and Cindy Crawford and Julia Roberts. And they're not the success. Success is the school teachers trying to teach math and English in a society that's more interested in spouting clichésÖ 54 million people are watching a fake survivor show without the intelligence their own survival is at stake.

You now know that in talking with me what I am about is ending the love of money and power. I want the number one show in the country if anyone's slow enough to watch TV then. to be "Who wants to be a good friend"

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The Gesundheit! Institute as an organization, community, and activity:

(From the Institute's web site:<http://www.patchadams.org>)

What's the Gesundheit! all about? We want to bring fun, friendship and the joy of service back into healthcare. Please join us. We are working to replace greed and competition with generosity, compassion and interdependence. Because they're healthy and fun, we want to nurture the growth of grassroots, neighborly mutual support and personal activism.

The Hospital is a stimulant to broaden the dialogue on healthcare delivery, we want to build a hospital/healing community where:

- * All the healing arts will be welcome.
- * All patients will be treated as friends.
- * There will be no charge for health services.
- * No third party reimbursement will be accepted.
- * The healthcare experience will be infused with fun.
- * No malpractice insurance will be carried by the Institute.
- * The health of the staff will be valued equally with the health of the patients.

Is It Built Yet? We have established the Gesundheit! Hospital Foundation, and are ready to take the next leap when big money arrives. In the spring of 2000, we have received a \$60,000 challenge grant for architectural work, and a generous \$60,000 grant from a family foundation.

What Can We Do Now? The good news is we don't have to wait for a hospital. This new culture is growing today, in the good works of a worldwide network of people drawing inspiration and support from our common vision. You are probably one of them. You're helping to build Gesundheit!'s foundation with creative personal activism; our most accessible tool for change.

NEW MOVIE! Thanks to the tremendous volunteer efforts of professional videographer, Judith Bourque, there is a new documentary with an inside view of Gesundheit! and Patch's work, titled "The Real Patch Adams." You can get a \$29.95 home video from Bullfrog Films (800) 543-3764 <http://www.orbullfrogfilms.com>

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The road to the "public" Patch Adams (The Gesundheit Institute started in 1971 with a twelve year pilot project using a communal home.)

Patch: "We wanted to build a hospital model addressing the problems of healthcare delivery. We thought we'd get funded because here we were, a bunch of doctors ready to work for free, and we just needed a building, and we could collect huge numbers of people to help. For twelve years we did the experiment and saw fifteen thousand people. We paid for it. We worked outside jobs.... not a single donation. Fourteen hundred foundation rejections. We tried the service route, and everyone thought we were crazy, so we refused publicity up to that time.

I learned, I think, how to do it, and that it was right to be free and intimate, and without malpractice insurance and without third-party reimbursement, and using a mix of all the healing arts. All those things proved to be correct. So, we realized since we got no donation, that we were going to have to go public and play the fame and fortune game, until we bumped into

money... the last fifteen years has been Gesundheit connecting up with the world. So I've spoken at most of the medical schools in this country; many of them, many times. I've spoken at most all of the chiropractic schools, and naturopathic schools, acupuncture schools, osteopathic schools. They know me; we're friends."

Since the film – going global – "People are interested in hearing something about celebration of life, the joy of service. Gesundheit is also connected to environmental groups all over the world, just huge numbers of projects. And volunteers come from all over the world to our place in West Virginia to be in an idealistic setting. In essence, we're a little university of idealism. A lot of people just use us to keep dreaming, because they know we're flaming idealists out here, still trying. And there aren't many forces out there doing that."

"The fact is, I can't believe my life. I get to go as a clown to Bosnia, where it's my job to clown sixteen hours a day, go cheer troubled people up. That's my job! Now, that's not what I set out to do, in 1971. I set out to build a hospital, and that's the most important project. These other things are just peanuts.

Sources:

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4. <http://www.empireone.net/~freeschool/patch.html>
Interviewed by Ellen and Larry Becker

Ned Hamson is an independent writer, consultant and editor. He is the former editor (18 years) of the Journal for Quality and Participation (USA). He is also the lead or co-author of three books. Global Innovation and Managing Quality were both published by Capstone Publishing (UK), a division of John Wiley and Sons in 2002.