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Interview with Georgianna Donadio

Georgianna Donadio is the energetic whirlwind behind the National Institute of Whole Health (NIWH) & New England School of Whole Health Education (NESWHE) in Boston. Her extensive education and training includes clinical nutrition, practical nursing, pastoral counseling, health education, and chiropractic health care. For the past two years Georgianna has been doing original research on Florence Nightingale's writings and works for her dissertation, and is currently a Nightingale Scholar candidate. She has been working in health care since the mid 1960's.

MH: It's very clear from reading material on the internet that you really have conviction for the body/mind connection and getting the word out. What was it particularly that headed you in the direction of holistic health?

GD: It was an accident. I was very young, involved in a major car accident and had a severe back problem. I basically lived on Percodan for a year. I was 23

years-old and going to college and I couldn't walk because of a serious back injury. I was studying dance and theater and working in health care to put myself through college. I basically had to put my studies on hold because of the problem. My gynecologist sent me to a chiropractor and that's what put me in this direction.

MH: Were you helped immediately by a chiropractor?

GD: Absolutely! Many people go into health care because of some traumatic thing, I was one of them, and also because my grandfather, my most beloved grandparent, died very young of leukemia and I watched him suffer terribly and had a great passion to want to know what killed him. When I was 14, I volunteered as a hospital candy striper and at 16, became a nurse's aid and when I was 17, a practical nurse. I believe most things we do come from our passions. I've always worked with one foot in medicine and one foot in alternative medicine. When I was in chiropractic school in New York City, I worked as the weekend medical records supervisor at St. Vincent's Hospital in the Bowery.

MH: I noticed you said the school was established in 1977.

GD: We've been around now for almost thirty years, so I can share with you that back "in the day", before the 1993 Eisenberg study changed the climate of health care, people like myself were called the "Q" word – we were referred to as "quacks". Holistic nutritionist, chiropractors, acupuncturist, energy healers – it was all viewed as absolute quackery by mainstream medicine. Now that there is a huge market in "integrative medicine", we see a different prevailing attitude.

MH: It's hard to believe but to some people it still is.

GD: Back in 1983 I had scathing exposés written about me in Boston Magazine. The writer said how dare I state, during a class I was teaching at a leading Boston educational institution, that there was a correlation between behavior, lifestyle, environment, nutrition and a person's health. I don't think that article would be written today, although some people, especially old timers in medicine, may still think integrative or whole person health care is the "Q" word!

MH: It's amazing isn't it? It's a little frightening that there's still people out there with those beliefs.

GD: The difference is that today these subjects and practices are being taught at Harvard Medical School. I would like to put in a plug here for the chiropractors, who have single-handedly transformed the health care industry. When Eisenberg's study was published back in 1993, what do you think the overwhelmingly most utilized modality was that patients were using?

Chiropractic health care !

MH: Who are the people coming to your school?

GD: People who are looking to bring greater purpose and integrity to their work. People with vision.

MH: Are they already practitioners of some form of alternative health care?

GD: They're either educated, trained, or licensed in a healing art. The majority of our students are nurses, social workers, nutrition professionals and integrative health practitioners. They could be reiki practitioners, family medical doctors, acupuncturists, nurses, radiology techs, yoga teachers, midwives—you name it.

MH: Do you get any M.D.s?

GD: Absolutely. We've had naturopaths, chiropractors, dentists and believe it or not, veterinarians. A very well-known physician, who co-founded Choices Wellness Center, is a graduate of our program.

MH: I see that you have a program for holistic health counselors. What would that person be trained to do and what would they be hired for after they graduate?

GD: We have 8 different programs. Our Track A program is a certification in Whole Health Counseling. This program is very different from the many other "holistic certifications" that are out there. We are licensed by the Department of Education, and therefore our certification actually means something across the country. We attract people with credible training who want to add whole person care, education and information to what they're doing. There are several integrative practices, such as body workers, that do not have longevity. A typical body worker after seven years can start to have physical problems with their wrists, hands, back, etc and we see a lot of people who are burning out from doing this kind of healing work.

MH: What do you do about that—what do you recommend to them?

GD: Well, to a great extent, some of this is an occupational hazard. For example, one of the things about massage therapy is, I think only fifty percent of people who graduate from massage therapy school ever practice! Practicing health care is a very complicated business, learning how to make a living doing it is another issue as you well know, and if you are putting your hands on people it gets even more complicated.

MH: When you say only fifty percent actually practice, do you think that's

because only fifty percent actually know how to run their business or is it a combination of that and burn out, or what?

GD: Well, all of the above. This is why your writing about how to be successful doing this work is so important. The fact that the insurance companies are not covering much of it is a big factor as well.

MH: I notice in the classes you have listed, you talk about Maslow's hierarchy and the square of common good.

GD: What we've developed evolved out of Maslow, Newton, Einstein, psychology, many ancient spiritual principals, human imperatives, and physics -- we put it all together and created a model we can all use to relate to one in a productive and healthy manner.

MH: Tell me how you started this school?

GD: A patient of mine, said, "Georgianna, I want to know what you know." Having just come up to Boston and being busy with building a practice I said, not too graciously, "David, get lost." The last thing I wanted to do was start some sort of program. However, the universe had other plans and this man bugged me and bugged me... and bugged me about it !

MH: Was he a minister or a spiritualist?

GD: He was an ordained reverend and he was sincere. I said, "David, you come back here with ten students who are willing to take my course, and I'll do it. Thinking I finally deflected him, don't you know he comes back six weeks later waving checks under my nose. So we started with ten people. We had a therapist, a social worker, a nurse, a reverend, a massage therapist, a very varied group. The following year 37 people signed up. We hired three more teachers.

MH: How did you handle the ten people? Did you do all the teaching?

GD: Yes, I did.

MH: How many courses did you give to those ten people initially?

GD: I broke it down into ten sections. There was philosophy, anatomy, physiology, nutrition, psychology, spirituality relationships and so forth.

MH: How many students do you have now?

GD: We're averaging between 40 and 50 a year, which is less than we did 5 years ago, but we have spent the last 5 years developing our distance learning

videotaped curriculum and were not offering in-person classes during that time.

MH: Through the internet?

GD: People find us through the internet, but our program is offered on videotape along with a comprehensive curriculum, that is endorsed by many national medical & holistic organizations. We also offer in-person classes, conducted at the Newton Wellesley Hospital.

MH: I noticed on the internet that you offer individual videos, but they're \$150 apiece?

GD: Yes. These videos come with CEU hours for medical professionals and are very comprehensive. We also have a fabulous low cost offering for people not in practice. It's a 10-video program that costs \$750 thru our alliances. It's called *To Be a Human Being*, and presents all the mind body systems and how they work together. We talk about the physical, emotional, nutritional, environmental and spiritual components of the entire human body and mind. It's evidence-based, relationship centered, whole person focused.

MH: I see that you're teaching the philosophy course. I'm curious because you talk about Einstein, Bhudda, Maslow. I'm wondering how you organize the course. Do you focus on the commonalities between them?

GD: Always. I've also been doing a cable TV program for the past 18 years, which explores the spiritual lives of women. We have women of all persuasions on the program and here, again, we're looking for that "common ground" consensus.

MH: I noticed there was a reference to 'right thinking' and 'deep listening.' What do you consider right thinking?

GD: Right thinking, right living, right being is something that meets others in an equity-based way. Honoring their value, their worth, their individuality, their beliefs and their choice. And that's hard to do. You asked me "Who takes these courses?" and I said to you "People with vision, people who are seeking the truth. People with passion for right living." As a result, we are not a trendy program. So we are not a school that panders to what's currently popular. We are wanting to attract a few good minds, a few good souls. We are looking for people whose passion is still burning for truth, justice and right living. We are teaching people to balance ego, not to feed ego. We are teaching people to respect one another, to meet each other mindfully, to bring integrity to their interactions, to treat each other with all of the qualities we want to be treated with.

MH: So, you're not just doing techniques?

GD: Not at all ! We are inviting nurses, doctors, and health care providers to say, “I am not the healer, I am not the doer. I am a facilitator through which I will serve this person so they may heal themselves and be in touch with their own divine creation.”

MH: Do you think the reason that a lot of bodyworkers fail in their business is because they don't have this particular vision for what they are doing?

GD: I promise you, the words you just said are absolutely the truth. What we are seeing today is a corruption of what integrated, natural health care is supposed to be. NIWH sees itself as holding out against the system of selling health care training that appeals to the ego of the practitioner. Choosing to become a health care practitioner is a vocation, not a career. Everybody should make a living and experience financial rewards for their work. But this is a vocation. Florence Nightingale had the right idea. She knew this was a vocation. She knew that it is ill advised to work in health care unless you realize this is also a spiritual pursuit.

MH: Does your coursework include instruction for practitioners on to how to take care of themselves?

GD: Absolutely. We have a program that invites people to be in relationship with themselves, with their patients, and the world around them. How do you *be* in relationship? By having a checklist of things to do? Or do you *be* by getting up every day and looking in the mirror and asking yourself “What are my values, what will my legacy be?” Where is my integrity?

MH: What makes you an integrative health care expert?

GD: As an integrative health educator, and someone who has over 40 years of experience, training, and education in both the medical field and conducting an integrative health practice, I can walk around the entire circle of what comprises various health care trainings and practices, and communicate with doctors, nurses or shamens and respect and understand their perspective while potentially offering them a new way to look at the same condition so they may have new tools and information with which to facilitate the clients or patients who come to them for care and guidance. It's very exciting and rewarding work, and I am deeply grateful and privileged to be doing it.