



## An Interview with Jeremy R. Geffen, MD, FACP Multidimensional Beings

Author of *The Journey Through Cancer:  
Healing and Transforming the Whole Person*

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*To realize one's nature perfectly—  
that is what each of us is here for.*  
OSCAR WILDE

“I see humans as multidimensional beings. We each have a physical body, a mind, a heart, and a spiritual dimension. We are all also deeply interconnected to each other, to nature, and to the entire cosmos in ways that transcend our usual experience of feeling separate and that defy conventional understanding. If medicine and healing are to be as complete as possible, we must honor and care for all these dimensions and all these interconnections, with equal skill and integrity, including the parts that are hidden and buried deep within.”

I didn't hear this from a monk, although Jeremy Geffen, when he was living in an ashram as a young man, seriously contemplated becoming one. Instead, he became a highly trained, board certified, medical oncologist. A *summa cum laude* graduate of Columbia University, he received his MD with honors from New York University School of Medicine, and he is also a fellow of the American College of Physicians.

So how did Dr. Geffen go from studying great spiritual and healing traditions and practicing yoga and meditation for hours every day to the scientific and technological field of modern oncology with all its bells and whistles?

“I was chosen for this path. There's no doubt about it,” he told me from his office in Boulder, Colorado. “After I'd spent four years at the ashram, a voice in my heart called me to become a physician. It wouldn't leave me alone. So after a tender farewell, I left to pursue a career in medicine.”

Geffen chose oncology within his first week at medical school. During a series of lectures about various specialties, he “lit up inside” when the oncologist came to the podium and spoke about caring for people with cancer.

“I realized that people with cancer are living on the edge of two worlds. They are often dealing with complex medical issues, and they need the best that modern science and technology have to offer. But they are also quite often staring into the abyss of the unknown, grappling with some of life's greatest challenges and uncertainties. So they need love, wisdom, and compassionate guidance as well.

“Cancer often challenges the mind, heart, and spirit as deeply as—if not more deeply than—the physical body. The question then is, what is the most conscious, empowered, enlightened, and effective way to respond?” That question fueled him through four years of medical school, a three-year residency in internal medicine at the University of California at San Diego, and three more years of fellowship training in hematology and oncology at the University of California at San Francisco. What ensued was that Dr. Geffen became a pioneer in the emerging fields of integrative medicine and oncology.

While his scientific mind was fully engaged, his spiritual heart continued to grow. He learned everything he could from various teachers in India, Nepal, China, and Tibet, and on a Native American reservation. Ultimately, what shaped his life and practice was a deep desire to know how to “honor and care for every single dimension of human beings, and not just treat the body as though it were simply a machine.” It seems few MDs maintain such high expectations of themselves and their patients. But Dr. Geffen isn't your typical oncologist. In our conversation, he expressed deep empathy for his patients and families because of his own life experience. In 1985, while he was a senior in medical school, his father died of stomach

cancer. This made him painfully aware of the limitations of both allopathic and alternative medicine, the lack of emotional and spiritual support available to patients, and the humiliating and disempowering feelings that so many cancer patients experience. Ultimately, it propelled him to create something better, and it shaped how he both lives and works.

“My father died less than four months after his diagnosis. Being in that crucible with him was devastating. My mind and heart were blown open when I directly experienced what people often go through in facing the challenges of cancer and death.

“During my father’s illness, we were surrounded by brilliant oncologists who understood the biology and genetics of cancer and who had access to all the latest technologies of modern medicine. But by and large, they were uninformed about any potential benefits of complementary or alternative therapies, or the power and gifts of many of the world’s other healing traditions. They were also unable to deal with the overwhelming impact of cancer on my father’s mind, heart, and spirit, and on our family.

“On my father’s journey through cancer, we also met with many wonderful complementary and alternative practitioners. They were good and caring people, but with all due respect, most knew very little about the biology and genetics of cancer, let alone the ins and outs of modern, conventional cancer treatments. Nor were they equipped to adequately care for people who were as sick as my father.”

Dr. Geffen’s frustration mounted. He knew from his travels and years in the ashram that there were many things that could help, but no one was offering or even considering them. “I couldn’t stop asking myself: *How can all of the great healing modalities of the world be woven together into a tapestry that skillfully and effectively addresses the needs and concerns of the whole person?*

“After my father died, I decided to become the kind of oncologist that I wished had been there for my dad, someone who could blend the world’s many healing traditions together with conventional Western medicine in a safe and meaningful way. I wanted to be a doctor who could peer as deeply into a patient’s heart and soul as I could into their CT scans, blood-test results, or pathology reports.

“I became possessed by a singular question: *What does it take for a human being to heal and transform at the deepest levels of the body, mind, heart, and spirit in the face of cancer?*

“I was intensely motivated to find answers. I vowed to build a cancer center and create a model of care that would integrate the best of the world’s healing traditions and show how to honor and care for every dimension of human beings within the context of modern medicine. I realized that this is

what I was born to do.”

And so, in 1994, he founded the Geffen Cancer Center and Research Institute in Vero Beach, Florida, which he directed until 2003. It was among the first cancer centers in the United States explicitly designed to be a working model for treating the whole person, multidimensionally, with integrative cancer care.

Soon after opening the center, he recognized that all the needs, questions, and concerns of patients and their loved ones fell elegantly into seven fundamental domains of inquiry and exploration. It wasn’t long before he organized what he calls *The Seven Levels of Healing* into a formal program, which, along with state-of-the-art conventional treatments and a wide array of complementary and mind-body therapies, became the basis of the care he and his staff provided to thousands of patients and loved ones over the next ten years.

Dr. Geffen explained, “Understanding these levels helps people navigate all dimensions of the cancer journey with skill, awareness, and depth, and transforms the experience at every step along the way. These levels are universal and apply to any healing journey, whether related to cancer, other illness, or life itself.”

In 2000, he published the first edition of his book *The Journey Through Cancer: Healing and Transforming the Whole Person*, which describes *The Seven Levels of Healing* and his revolutionary approach to whole person care. Briefly, the Seven Levels are as follows:

**Level 1** – Education and Information: provides basic knowledge and information about modern cancer diagnosis and treatment.

**Level 2** – Connection with Others: focuses on the need for and benefits of a strong support network on the journey through cancer.

**Level 3** – The Body as Garden: explores the safe and effective use of complementary therapies, and invites patients and family members to regard the body as a sacred and wondrously complex garden rather than just a machine.

**Level 4** – Emotional Healing: helps patients and families deal effectively with the emotional issues and challenges often encountered when dealing with cancer.

**Level 5** – The Nature of Mind: explores how our thoughts and beliefs—and the meanings we give to events—influence every aspect of our experience on the journey through cancer, and, indeed, life itself.

**Level 6 – Life Assessment:** helps patients and family members to discover the deepest meaning and purpose of their lives and their most important goals.

**Level 7 – The Nature of Spirit:** connects patients and loved ones to the profoundly healing spiritual dimension of life that we all share.

In 2003, Dr. Geffen closed the Geffen Cancer Center and relocated to Boulder to work full time to bring *The Seven Levels of Healing* to a wider audience and to advance an integrative, multidimensional, wholeperson approach to cancer care. His company, Geffen Visions International, is dedicated to this mission. The program is now being offered to patients, loved ones, and health professionals at a growing number of cancer centers throughout the United States. In 2006, he published a fully updated second edition of *The Journey Through Cancer*.

Given his holistic approach, I figured Dr. Geffen would appreciate and even advocate alternative therapies. Generally speaking, however, he doesn't. He makes a distinction between alternative and complementary therapies, defining alternative therapies as those that are scientifically unproven, have unknown or potentially adverse interactions with conventional treatments, and are sometimes used instead of conventional treatment.

Complementary therapies refer to a wide array of modalities: diet and nutritional support, yoga, massage, acupuncture, mind-body interventions, and energy therapies. These may or may not be scientifically proven, but are increasingly found to be safe and helpful when used in conjunction with conventional care.

Although Dr. Geffen acknowledges that some alternative therapies may anecdotally appear to be effective, he says that based on his understanding of medicine and oncology, and his personal experience with cancer patients, he believes that they are unreliable and largely ineffective. He also believes they rarely address the deeper dimensions of what people with cancer are encountering in their minds, hearts, and spirits, as well as their physical bodies.

At the same time, as loyal as Geffen is to his profession, he also concedes that surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation are not the holy grail either. "To be honest, mainstream cancer therapies cannot usually cure cancer once it has metastasized. At the same time, we now have many powerful diagnostic tools, drugs, surgical techniques, and radiation technologies that can be very helpful and extend survival for many patients. But these technologies and the benefits they bring often come at a huge cost—physically, financially, and psycho-spiritually."

With such a diverse background, Dr. Geffen is well versed in the strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to

cancer. Among the first oncologists to blend Eastern and Western healing modalities, he has recently expanded his focus to include indigenous healing wisdom from the Northern and Southern Hemispheres, which he learned through his travels and explorations of ancient healing traditions of North and South America.

"There's a much deeper mystery involved in cancer than conventional Western medicine acknowledges. Science continues to pursue the reductionist dream that we can manipulate molecules and genes and find magic bullets for this disease. Although we've certainly made important progress, anyone working actively in this field recognizes what a huge mountain this is to climb. Cancer is very complex; it's multidimensional in nature. There are hundreds of different types with widely differing molecular and genetic profiles, and they arise in people of every imaginable size, shape, color, and background. Science will undoubtedly continue to make meaningful advances, but I'm doubtful that we'll find a single, magic bullet 'cure' for cancer.

"Then you look at Eastern traditions. I spent more than twenty years immersed in Eastern healing and spiritual paths. They certainly have much to offer, on many levels. But I also saw what I regard as the shadow of the Eastern traditions, especially the spiritual ones, which mirror the shadow of the Western traditions. The Eastern spiritual traditions tend to be more focused on consciousness and the mind than on emotions and feelings. They tend to be hierarchical, to honor the masculine more than the feminine, and they generally strive for the light rather than embrace the darker aspects of existence.

"Although Eastern traditions have certainly mastered a huge array of profound and important meditation and other yogic practices, they often regard emotions as a distraction from the 'true path'—or even as 'afflictions' to be overcome—rather than as a portal to deep wisdom, self-understanding, and potential healing and transformation. And they rarely acknowledge the profound impact of the unconscious on the human experience.

"I've seen over and over again how people can spend thirty years eating well, exercising, practicing yoga and meditation, thinking positively, and cleansing and detoxifying the body, and still get sick, including getting very aggressive and advanced cancers. When you look below the surface, it quickly becomes clear that—despite what appears to be a 'healthy' or 'successful' lifestyle—they nonetheless have many unhealed, unconscious, wounded parts of themselves that are adversely impacting their health and well-being."

It sounded as though he was saying that, by themselves, neither Eastern nor Western practices hold the key for healing and wholeness. I asked him what does, and he replied, "First, I believe that everyone should adopt as healthy a lifestyle as

possible. This includes, of course, eating a healthy, nutritious diet, exercising regularly, drink plenty of water, getting adequate amounts of rest, and spending time in nature. When cancer is involved, I believe that patients are usually best served by receiving the best available conventional medicine, integrated with safe and effective complementary therapies and the wisdom of the Eastern traditions. If any alternative therapies are eventually proven to be safe, effective, and reliable, they should be included as well.

“I think we should also more fully explore the ancient wisdom of the North and South American traditions, which are still largely unknown in our culture. I’ve been privileged to experience many traditional Native American ceremonies and to travel to South America and explore a variety of sacred plant medicines and other shamanic healing practices. I’ve been astonished by their strength, beauty, and power. I believe they hold immense promise for medicine in the postmodern world.

“Next, deep healing requires a psycho-spiritual perspective that embraces the mental, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of life, including the unconscious shadow and the wounded parts of the self that live in everyone. What’s hard about this—for individuals and for our culture—is that it requires us to look inside and face the fragmented, disowned, and hurting parts of ourselves. This is rarely easy or comfortable. There are many potent ways to do this inner work that can make an enormous difference for people, including transpersonal and Jungian psychology and other powerful modalities, such as Holotropic Breathwork. I’ve been privileged to study and directly experience many of these, and I actually became certified as a Holotropic Breathwork practitioner.”

Other techniques that can accomplish similar types of psycho-spiritual healing include Voice Dialogue, Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT), Emotional Self-Management (ESM), Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), PSYCH-K, and more.

“We also need to acknowledge death as an intrinsic part of life. Open discussion about death is still a big taboo in our culture, particularly in the Western medical model, which tries to postpone death at all costs. But for genuine whole-person healing, it is imperative that we learn to navigate this part of the human journey with consciousness, grace, equanimity, and love.

“Finally, we need to understand cancer—and human beings—in a *multidimensional* way and coherently address the needs of body, mind, heart, *and* spirit. On the physical level, cancer is literally a part of us, our own cells run amok, mediated by genetic mutations and affected by diet, lifestyle, and environmental pollution. On a more subtle level, it involves blockages of energy or life force called chi in the traditional Chinese medicine system, or *prana* in the Ayurvedic system.

“On the mental level, cancer brings up all kinds of thoughts and beliefs about health, illness, conventional versus nonconventional treatment options, doctors, healing, and life itself. These associations affect every decision people make about their care and can be deeply consequential. Some thoughts, beliefs, and decisions may be accurate and helpful, but others may be inaccurate, dysfunctional, or disempowering. And this can cause problems.

“Similarly, the mind assigns *meanings* to every event in our lives—including life with cancer—and these, too, can be either empowering or destructive. This is important to understand because the meanings that we consciously or unconsciously give to events impact not only our *experience* of life, but our *physiology* as well. This is occurring in every moment and at a profound level.

“On the emotional level, I believe that cancer may often reflect a physical manifestation of years of emotional pain, loneliness, or interpersonal dysfunction that so many people experience. At the least, it can point to wounded, hurting, repressed, or rejected parts of the self that are crying out for love and acceptance—many of which may be unconscious. If we don’t welcome these parts into a conscious dialogue, and aren’t willing to face and feel the pain, sorrow, shame, or even rage that they may hold, we miss an important opportunity to discover deeply hidden parts of ourselves and reclaim our wholeness as human beings. As life experience abundantly shows, if painful emotions are not expressed by the voice, sooner or later they will be expressed in the body. This is increasingly being understood scientifically, particularly by the fields of psychoneuroimmunology and psychosocial genomics.”

As Dr. Geffen referenced these fragmented and abandoned parts of ourselves, Raven (my abandoned creative self described in chapter 1) came to mind. I feel fortunate that she showed herself so vividly and spoke so articulately about how she felt I had left her behind. Looked at objectively, however, it wasn’t a sudden and unexpected visit. Indeed, I was on my third cancer diagnosis and had already spent a solid year looking deeply at myself in search of what was within me that had become the cancer. The fact that Raven appeared to me was certainly an act of grace, but it occurred also because I had been asking for the knowledge for years.

Dr. Geffen then quoted the thirteenth-century mystic poet, Rumi, who said, “That which haunts us will always find a way out. The wound will not heal until given witness. And the shadow that follows us is the way in.”

He added, “This is one of my favorite quotes, because it so clearly expresses the fundamental truth that healing at the deepest levels begins with awareness. Becoming conscious of and giving witness to our emotional pain is a powerful doorway to healing and becoming more whole.

“On an even deeper spiritual level, for many people, cancer may be a physical manifestation of the profound sense of separation that is endemic to our culture and that, over time, takes a great toll on the body, mind, heart, and soul. This separation includes our estrangement from nature and other species; from our neighbors, families, and fellow humans on planet earth; and from the cosmos itself. It also includes separation from God, spirit, or whatever you call the mysterious, transcendent dimension of human existence that fundamentally underlies and interconnects all life.

“Honoring all these dimensions asks that we love and accept ourselves more fully than ever before and in a more intentional and authentic way. An essential component is to reflect this in our thinking and language; for example, we can move away from seeing cancer as a ‘battle’ to be won and move to seeing it as a healing journey to be fully lived.”

I flashed on our cultural paradigm of declaring war on whatever threatens us. We have a war on terrorism, on drugs, on teenage pregnancy, and on cancer. The standard shock-and-awe approach clearly isn’t winning any of our wars.

When I asked how he thinks these wounded parts come to be and to impact our health, he brought to light not only our physical, biological, social, and mental selves, but our emotional and spiritual selves as well—and the process of embodiment itself. “Coming into human form and being born is an extremely intricate and complex process. It involves not only the merging of a sperm and egg, but also an integration of consciousness, awareness, and spirit—a dimension of existence described by mystics and sages for millennia—into a wondrous, newly differentiating human form. However, we then spend nine months growing and developing in a womb that is often not a Garden of Eden. That’s because many of our parents, despite their best intentions, were neurotic, frightened, or had various kinds of dysfunctions. Most of our mothers were also living in a world of stress, processed foods, and environmental toxins, not to mention their own inner emotional pain and limitations. The impact of all this affects the growing fetus at a primordial, precognitive level. Modern research is also increasingly demonstrating its impact at the genetic and physiologic levels.

“Then we go through the trauma of birth itself. Even when the birth is successful, it’s an intense experience that can have enduring effects on one’s psychology, personality, and perhaps even one’s health.”

According to Dr. Geffen, making it out of the womb is just the beginning. “Even if our parents were fundamentally kind, loving, and well adjusted, they were human, after all, and their capacity to give love unconditionally was limited. In every child’s life, there comes a time when he or she gets criticized, shamed, or even abused—physically, sexually, or emotionally—or the child may suffer the trauma of abandonment, neglect, or loss.

“In any event, the child believes that what occurred is her fault and begins to believe that there is something wrong with herself. As a result, a process of fragmentation begins. In an effort to survive, we create a false self, a mask, an identity or persona that many of us wear all our lives, believing it to be who we really are. The tragedy, of course, is that this false self often becomes a prison, cutting us off from our true selves, our life force, and, in many cases, the life path that would actually bring us the greatest joy and fulfillment. It is absurd to think that this doesn’t adversely affect one’s health over time.

“This personal fragmentation is often further amplified by transgenerational issues inherited through family history, culture, and genetics. Many people carry and are affected by secrets, shame, dysfunction, and other wounds that did not originate with them.

“The impact of living with all these wounds and deeply buried splits often eventually leads to a crisis of some kind, including physical, mental, or emotional health challenges. We know, in fact, from highly credible studies that adverse childhood experiences—and the wounding and inner splits they cause—are directly correlated with a variety of significant health problems in adulthood.

“I’m not saying that these deeper issues are the primary, root cause of all cancers. However, in all my years as an oncologist, working with thousands of patients and loved ones, I have never encountered a situation where they were not clearly present. In any case, these issues are most always a rich, fertile source of potential healing and discovery for patients who have the courage and will to explore them.

“Of course, the genetic, dietary, lifestyle, and environmental components of cancer causation clearly play critical roles. After all, a fundamental dimension of our being is the physical one. But this is just one dimension of who we are, and to ignore the other dimensions is, I believe, shortsighted.”

This made total sense to me and mirrored my own convictions about my own cancer. His suggestion about how to heal at the deepest levels also validated what I have come to know as true and what’s worked for me. He concluded by reiterating the need for committing to a life lived out of love and trust: “In the midst of intense, focused action, we can also respond with compassion, insight, humility, and love. This is important because the reflexive response to ‘go to war’ against cancer puts us in a warlike state inside, and it is difficult—if not impossible—to heal at the deepest levels with aggressive, war-like energy pervading our reality.

“So for example, along with using chemotherapy, radiation, surgery, diet and nutrition, exercise, massage, acupuncture, and a host of other powerful healing modalities, you can also engage in an inner exploration of parts of the self that—consciously or unconsciously—are hurting and in pain. This

cannot happen with the rational mind alone; it requires accessing and touching raw emotions, feelings, and the unconscious, and making room for and embracing them in our awareness so they can be truly healed. *What messages are these cells trying to bring to consciousness? What wounds are longing for attention and healing?*

“It’s also incredibly valuable to reflect upon and clarify what is really most important to you: *Do you really want to live or not, and why? What is the meaning and purpose of your life? What are your most important goals?* Clarifying these questions can liberate enormous amounts of energy, so you can focus on what really matters most and heal at a deeper level.

“Finally, don’t miss the opportunity to connect with and experience your spiritual self, that part of everyone that is untouched by the turbulent waves of existence.”

Knowing who we really are, discovering that we are *not* separate from spirit or each other, and realizing that at the deepest level we already are and always have been free are

among the many ideas echoed throughout Dr. Geffen’s book. “Cancer, and why we get it, ultimately touches the mystery of the soul. Although we may hold a particular plan for our lives, or even our health, our souls may have a different, or even bigger, agenda. For many people, the ordeal of cancer is the very thing, perhaps the only thing, that cracks open the armor of their ‘false self’ and opens a portal to an entirely new, more powerful, authentic, and expanded experience of life itself.

“I think the evolutionary imperative is to embrace it all. To evolve, we need to understand that life fundamentally includes many opposites and paradoxes: lightness and darkness, masculine and feminine, mind and emotions, body and spirit, joy and sorrow, health and illness, life and death. To grow and heal, we must learn to embrace them all within ourselves. To the degree that we do this, we become more conscious and can more fully heal ourselves. And in doing so, we help heal each other and the world.”

*Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart.  
Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.*

CARL JUNG



Jeremy R. Geffen, MD, FACP is a board-certified medical oncologist, a pioneer in the field of integrative medicine and oncology, and founder of Geffen Visions International, Inc. He is the author of the highly acclaimed book *The Journey Through Cancer: Healing and Transforming the Whole Person* and creator of the leading-edge integrative medicine and oncology education and support program, *The Seven Levels of Healing*<sup>®</sup>, which is now being offered in multiple cancer centers in the United States. In addition to his extensive medical education and training, Dr. Geffen has spent more than 30 years traveling widely and exploring the great healing and spiritual traditions of the world. Dr. Geffen lectures widely and offers seminars and retreats on the multidimensional aspects of medicine, wellness, and life. He also consults with individuals and organizations on integrative programs for medicine and healing, and can be reached at: [www.geffenvisions.com](http://www.geffenvisions.com).

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