

**JEREMY GEFFEN, MD:
ADVANCING THE CONCEPT OF
MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MEDICINE**

Interview by Karolyn A. Gazella



JEREMY GEFFEN, MD: ADVANCING THE CONCEPT OF MULTI-DIMENSIONAL MEDICINE

Interview by Karolyn A. Gazella • Photography by Andrew Young

Jeremy R. Geffen, MD, FACP, is a board-certified medical oncologist and the founder of Geffen Visions International, Inc. Dr. Geffen is a summa cum laude graduate of Columbia University, and received his doctorate with honors from New York University School of Medicine. He completed residency training in Internal Medicine at the University of California at San Diego Medical Center, and fellowship training in Hematology and Oncology at University of California at San Francisco Medical Center. He is the recipient of research grants from the National Cancer Institute and the Research Coordinating Committee of the University of California, and has testified before the United States Congress as an expert witness in integrative oncology. Dr. Geffen has also spent more than 25 years traveling and exploring the spiritual and healing traditions of the world, including Ayurveda, Tibetan Medicine, yoga, meditation, and other approaches to health and self-awareness.

Dr. Geffen founded the Geffen Cancer Center and Research Institute in Vero Beach, Florida, in 1994, which he directed until 2003. It was one of the first cancer centers in the United States explicitly designed to provide a working model of truly holistic, comprehensive cancer care for the 21st century. He is the author of The Journey Through Cancer (Crown, 2000) and audiotope program The Seven Levels of Healing (Nightingale-Conant, 2001). His work is now focused on writing, speaking, consulting, and research.

Recently, Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine interviewed Geffen at his home in Boulder, Colorado.

Alternative Therapies (AT): What inspired you to become a doctor?

Jeremy Geffen, MD: That's a challenging question. The answer is multifaceted. One of the most important lessons I've learned on my journey so far is that we have many parts and aspects of ourselves. So when you ask what inspired me to become a doc-

tor, I would have to share with you what I have learned about the different parts of myself. Each part had a slightly different motivation to become a physician. In fact, each of us is not just an isolated entity, with a single desire or intent for our lives. We are multi-dimensional beings with complex psyches, which are often not fully or consciously recognized, let alone integrated. Simultaneously, we are also intimately connected to and influenced by others. Throughout my life I have had the desire to understand these mysteries and paradoxes, and to dive deeply inside of myself to find out who I really am as opposed to the person I may think I am or should be.

A constellation of experiences that arose from many different, multidimensional arenas of life inspired me to become a doctor. It was a natural direction for me to move in. When I was a kid, doctors, in general, were admired and looked up to. I have an uncle who is a physician and he had a respected position in the family. So the imprint that being a physician was a good thing was formed at an early age.

But much more importantly, from my earliest years onward, my life has been influenced by a personal spiritual quest, and this, too, impacted my choice. As a young man, I began searching. At age 19, I dropped out of college, became a yogi, and lived for four years in an ashram (spiritual community). It was only after this experience that I made the decision to complete college, go to medical school, and pursue a life in medicine.

AT: It's interesting that the spiritual came first for you. We often hear of people who have a desire for medical knowledge and later have a spiritual awakening. Yet, your experience was the opposite.

Dr. Geffen: That's true. In some ways, my story actually began as a young boy with my grandfather, who I regard as my first spiritual teacher. Often, on Friday night, we would walk to tem-

Jeremy Geffen, MD, at his home in Boulder, Colorado.

Reprint requests: InnoVision Communications, 169 Saxony Rd, Suite 103, Encinitas, CA 92024; phone, (760) 633-3910 or (866) 828-2962; fax, (760) 633-3918; e-mail, alternative.therapies@innerdoorway.com.

ple, and he insisted that we walk in silence. As a little kid I wanted to hop, skip, and chatter. But my grandfather said, "We are going to be in the presence of God. Prepare yourself by being quiet and going inside." It was during those silent walks that I first noticed what I call the whispers of one's soul. In temple itself, I had very deep experiences of reverence and love.

When I was about 10 years old, I went to Catholic Church with a friend. As a Jewish kid in upstate New York this was not normal. I remember walking into church for the first time and seeing Christ on the cross. I had head-to-toe goose bumps and no explanation for it. As I sat quietly in church I was amazed to recognize that I was having the same experience I had in temple.

When I was 16, I went to Israel and spent time in a Chasidic Jewish community. One day the Rebbe (Head Rabbi) called me in to his office. He said, "I've been watching you. You were guided to be here and your destiny is to be a Rabbi. I would like you to go home, arrange your affairs, and return to begin your training. Give me your answer in the morning." I felt honored, challenged, and inspired by his words, and a part of me wanted to surrender to this calling. Yet another part of me was being called, equally strongly, in a different direction, even though I wasn't sure where it would lead. After an agonizing, sleepless night, I met with the Rebbe. I was filled with sadness and trepidation. I somehow managed to tell him that I couldn't accept his proposal and would not be returning.

AT: Was that a major turning point for you?

Dr. Geffen: Yes, a big turning point. I returned to America and graduated from high school a year later, in 1973. I then spent a year at Hampshire College, an avant-garde school in Amherst, Massachusetts. I was 17 and my life began to open up in exciting, new directions. To begin, I had a dynamic physics professor who taught quantum mechanics to freshman. It was an incredible course. I spent several months writing a paper on the Einstein, Podolsky, and Rosen (EPR) Paradox and it blew

open my mind. I also studied human biology and fell in love with science and the natural world.

During this year I was also exposed to yoga and meditation and had some very powerful spiritual experiences. By the end of the year, my spiritual quest was calling even more forcefully than my interest in science. I left Hampshire College and spent the next year and a half traveling throughout the United States and Europe, visiting a variety of different spiritual communities.

In 1976, another major turning point occurred. I met Ram Dass at a lecture in Boston and had a profound heart-opening experience in which I deeply felt the presence of his guru, Neem Karoli Baba. At the time, I had just recently transferred to Brown University to resume my education. After my experience with Ram Dass, however, I felt I could not find answers to my questions in a university. I also began to feel an intense longing for a formal, spiritual teacher. After finishing that semester, I quit school again and resolved to go on the spiritual path once and for all.

I bought a used Toyota station wagon, packed up my belongings, and set out for California to pursue my quest. That day, while driving on the Connecticut turnpike, my car hit the guardrail, flipped in the air, and landed on its roof. The car was completely demolished by the impact. The last thing I remember was being upside down in the car, watching and hearing glass shattering all around me, and having a clear awareness that I was going to die. I had an intense feeling of loss and regret, and heard a voice in my heart that said, "Oh no, I didn't get to finish my work." The next thing I knew, I found myself sitting on the highway. By some indescribable miracle, I was completely unharmed. Traffic was stopped on both sides of the median strip because of scattered debris. An ambulance arrived, and I was taken to a hospital, where I was examined and released.

The next day I went to my mother's apartment in Manhattan. Two days later, a series of remarkably synchronistic events led me to a class taught by Ma Jaya Bhagavati, a woman spiritual teacher with whom Ram Dass had studied. I felt I had found my teacher and immediately joined her ashram. I was introduced to many of the great teachings and

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scriptures of Hinduism, which I deeply loved. For the next four years, I swam in the waters of yoga, meditation, and devotion. I grew immeasurably.

Toward the end of that time, however, I started hearing an inner voice calling me to leave the ashram and go to medical school. I agonized over this for months, feeling torn between my love of living in a spiritual community and a growing sense that my path was to live and serve in the medical world.

As much as I loved exploring spiritual realms and teachings, another part of me wanted to understand science, medicine, and technology, and to know who I was physically. I wanted to know how the human body works. I wanted to know what it felt like to do surgery and deliver babies. And I wanted to experience myself as a man living and working and contributing in the world.

All of these various inner voices and parts of myself were seeking expression, and medicine emerged simply and clearly as the obvious path for me to pursue. In 1980, at age 23, I left the ashram and enrolled at Columbia University as a pre-med student. Two years later, I started medical school at New York University, and never looked back.

However, in the ensuing years, throughout my medical education and beyond, I continued my spiritual quest. I eventually made seven trips to India, where I met the Dalai Lama and H.W.L. Poonja, also known as Papaji, who became my teacher and great inspiration. I went to Nepal and Tibet as well. These trips and experiences were a great blessing and a phenomenal spiritual education. They all profoundly influenced my thinking and practice as a doctor.

AT: Why did you choose oncology?

Dr. Geffen: For me, oncology, more than any other field of medicine, bridges two vast and compelling worlds: the world

of medical science and technology, and the world of spirituality, which includes the deepest questions of life and death. I was very lucky to recognize this in my first week of medical school and knew right away that I would go in this direction. Cancer is an incredibly mysterious phenomenon in which a person's own cells somehow transform and can devour the person from within if not attended to skillfully. And even then there are no guarantees. People with cancer are quite often staring into the abyss of the unknown. Because of this, they need the very best

that science and medicine can offer—but they also need kindness, compassion, wisdom, and unconditional love. I instinctively understood that oncology is where I would be able to call upon and express many parts of myself at the deepest levels—physically, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually.

AT: It seems as though becoming a holistic, integrative oncologist was a natural progression for you.

Dr. Geffen: Yes. During my years in the ashram, I had directly experienced the power of a variety of complementary and alternative healing modalities. Also, in the summer of 1984, during medical school, I went on a medical expedition to Nepal. Our group set up a free clinic in a small vil-

lage on the border of Tibet. Each participant had a research requirement, and I chose to study the indigenous forms of Himalayan medicine. Here I was, directly exposed to the immense worlds of Ayurveda and Tibetan Medicine, which revolutionized my understanding of healing. It was quite natural that I would seek to find ways of integrating all these different healing modalities with the conventional ones I was learning in medical school.

Another very significant turning point in my life occurred when I returned from that trip. I rekindled my relationship with my father. He had left our family when I was 12 and when we reconnected many old wounds began to heal. A year later, in 1985, when I was a senior in medical school, he was diagnosed

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with advanced, high-grade gastric cancer. He died four months later. Watching him die was devastating. I felt utterly helpless to save his life even though I was knowledgeable about cancer and we had access to the top cancer doctors and centers in the country. I was appalled and heartbroken at how he was treated. I saw how the healthcare system objectifies people, how my father was instantaneously transformed from a human being with cancer to a cancer patient. I saw how limited so many conventional physicians were in their thinking. Nutrition was not even mentioned; let alone the impact of one's thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Anti-anxiety medicines and painkillers were offered, but with no meaningful psycho-social support for my father or our family. Chemotherapy was also offered, but with little hope of benefit. All unconventional therapies were dismissed out of hand as a complete waste of time. My dad was only 61 years old when he died. The crucible of that agonizing fire is where the vision for my career crystallized.

The horrific experience that my father and family endured during his illness also caused me to wonder, "If we went through this while having every available resource, what must others go through who don't have these resources?" This disturbed me deeply and I felt I had to do something about it.

AT: Is that when the vision of developing the cancer center really came to light?

Dr. Geffen: Yes. Shortly after my father died, I was meditating one morning and in a classic moment of inspiration, like Saul on the road to Damascus, I was struck with a vision that filled my heart and mind with the light of a million suns. I saw, in vivid color and detail, exactly what an integrative cancer center would look like, how it would feel, and how it would be organized and run. I felt I had received a profound inspiration for what I was to do with my life with explicit directions about my next steps.

First, of course, I had to complete residency and fellowship training and become a board certified medical oncologist, which took six years. I then spent two years in conventional private practice. In 1994, eight years after my father's death, the Cancer Center finally opened and began to grow and expand. Only then did I realize what I had gotten myself into.

AT: You were really breaking new ground with this integrative oncology clinic.

Dr. Geffen: Yes, definitely. Back then, even if you were practicing meticulous, university-quality, conventional cancer care, which is what we were doing, offering yoga, meditation classes, acupuncture, and nutritional support was considered quite radical. Even more, if you talked openly about love, spirit, or consciousness, or their roles in cancer care, you were laughed out the door. Most radical of all, in 1994 I began offering our "Seven Levels of Healing" program to patients and their loved ones, addressing their multi-dimensional needs and concerns in a coherent and comprehensive way.

AT: Where did the Seven Levels of Healing come from?

Dr. Geffen: After my father's death, I became obsessed with a burning question: "What does it take for a human being to heal and transform at the deepest levels of their body, mind, heart, and spirit, in the face of cancer or other illnesses?" I really wanted to know—not only to ease the pain of what I had gone through with my dad, but also for the many patients I knew I would see as an oncologist. Throughout my residency and fellowship years I spent as much time as I could with cancer patients asking them, "What matters most to you? What issues and concerns have most troubled you? And, what has made the biggest difference for you on your healing journey?" This process continued after I went into private practice and was spending all of my days and many nights with patients and their families.

After doing this with hundreds of people, one night, in another moment of deep inspiration, I recognized an extraordinary pattern. I saw that every single issue, concern, challenge, need, or desire that all people encounter on their journey through cancer fall instantly and elegantly into one of seven distinct but interrelated domains, or levels, of inquiry and exploration.

So, at 3:00 AM, I wrote down the seven levels, which are: Education and Information; Connection with Others; The



Body as Garden; Emotional Healing; The Nature of Mind; Life Assessment; and The Nature of Spirit. While contemplating these levels, I realized how practical and universal they are not just to cancer. I couldn't go back to sleep. The next day I began sharing them with my patients. The feedback was uniformly affirming—the levels described and mirrored their own experience. It was as if they had been dropped into a jungle by their cancer diagnosis, and felt lost, terrified, confused, or even overwhelmed with information, advice, options, and decisions. Presenting them with the seven levels was like handing them a crystal clear map of the whole terrain. It showed them, with great precision, where to put their focus and attention in order to navigate through the jungle as skillfully and effectively as possible, with certainty that every part and dimension of their being would be honored and cared for in the process.

As I worked through the seven levels with hundreds of patients, I realized my burning question had been answered. The program actually guided the design and organizational structure of the Geffen Cancer Center. It became the foundation of the comprehensive care we offered to thousands of patients and family members.

AT: You also had an interesting biotechnology component of your work. Can you describe that and explain why it's important?

Dr. Geffen: Yes. Early in my career, I became interested in protein biomarkers for cancer, often called tumor markers. I saw the critical role they could play in the care of patients. Unfortunately, there were, and still are, only a limited number of tumor markers approved for clinical use by the FDA, and they all have serious limitations.

Soon after the Cancer Center opened, I realized I had an opportunity to contribute to biomarker research in a potentially meaningful way. We were seeing lots of patients and routinely drawing blood as a standard part of their care. I decided to start a serum bank to collect serial samples of serum along with clinical data. My goal was to look for new and more powerful biomarkers that could aid in the diagnosis and treatment of cancer. I created a protocol and informed consent, obtained Institutional Review Board approval, and began enrolling patients on a volunteer basis. Over the next eight years we collected more than 48,000 serum samples from 1,437 patients with a variety of cancers and hematologic disorders. I also developed a software program to manage the samples and data. It was a huge amount of work, but very fulfilling.

Beyond looking for novel protein markers for cancer and other illnesses, one of my dreams is to research, on the molecular level, the biology of positive, uplifting emotional and spiritual states. This could help shift our scientific focus from the



biology of disease to the biology of joy, love, hope, and inspiration. It could make a huge difference in how we think about—and ultimately practice—medicine.

Significant advancements in science, technology, and bioinformatics over the last few years now allows us to study proteins in the blood, along with their patterns of expression, in a deeper and more penetrating way than ever before. It's similar to going from looking at the night sky through our naked eyes, then through a handheld telescope, and then from the National Astronomy Observatory. Today, our ability to peer into the human proteome—the repository of protein information in the human body—is accelerating in a way that could be compared to leaping from an observatory on the ground to the Hubble telescope in space. Just as genome research has given us an enormous body of genetically-based information, research on the proteome is opening up whole new worlds of discovery.

AT: Do you really feel we will be able to see the effects of joy and inspiration in a person's blood?

Dr. Geffen: Yes. People were once skeptical that we'd be able to detect the effects of thoughts or emotions on blood flow in the brain, but we now can. We're now beginning to explore molecular profiles—patterns of expressions of proteins—that occur in different individuals. Nobody really knows, yet, how quickly these proteins are expressed in the body, how their patterns emerge, or how they can change in real time. As we speak, great efforts are underway to detect, measure, and identify the myriad proteins in the blood, and understand how they work together.

In the future, I believe we'll be able to track patterns of protein expression in response to deeply held thoughts, emotions, and beliefs and will begin to understand their impact on the body at a molecular level. In a sense, we're approaching the gap between thought and matter. It's really thrilling.

I see this research unfolding in three potential stages. Presently, the focus is similar to that of genomics research: let's find proteins that could be disease markers so we can tinker

with them and treat or cure diseases. This is certainly meaningful and will help in the way antibiotics, chemotherapy, and other drugs and technologies have.

The second stage, which I'm hoping to midwife in some way, would be to use these technologies to help us expand from focusing on the biology of disease to the biology of wellness and joy. Imagine what we might learn by studying the molecular protein profiles of people who are radiant and joyful. Let's not just compare the protein profiles of people with cancer to those without it. Let's discover the profiles of people who are genuinely peaceful, kind, generous, or even enlightened.

The third stage is a more radical possibility. One of the key observations from proteomic research to date is that, over-

all, the relationships among the genes and proteins in the body will likely prove to be more important in influencing health or disease than the effect of any single gene or protein. This is a huge paradigm shift. It counters centuries of reductionist thinking in biology and medicine and moves our understanding of health and disease from the limitations of a left-brained, masculine, linear model to include a more right-brained, feminine, and relational approach. Ironically, this high-tech pursuit may ultimately prove to be an important doorway through which the perspectives and qualities of

what spiritual traditions identify as the divine, sacred, feminine will re-enter medicine.

AT: In late 2003, after a decade, you closed the Cancer Center. How difficult was that decision?

Dr. Geffen: It was very difficult. I came to it slowly over several years. I wanted to find other physicians to take over the Center, but for a number of reasons that proved quite challenging. In retrospect, I see the grace and the wisdom of that not happening.

Closing the Center freed me up to move in new directions.

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It was very painful, however, to intentionally dismantle the organization that I had lovingly birthed, nurtured, and supported for so many years—not to mention saying goodbye to my wonderful, devoted staff and to so many patients, family members, colleagues, and friends. Closing the Center was in many ways a dying process. I loved the Center with all my heart. It wasn't easy to let go. But in order to move forward and be able to contribute in new and expanded ways, I had to 'burn down the mission,' and leap into the unknown. To use Jungian language, it was an agonizing descent into the underworld. But this descent ultimately led me to deeper parts of myself and turned out to be a gift.

AT: What advice do you have in helping an individual navigate through a painful crossroad or challenging life event?

Dr. Geffen: If it involves a serious health challenge, my first advice is to get yourself into the best possible medical hands that you can find. Beyond this, my advice is always the same: make sure that you take time to honor and care for your mind, heart, and spirit, as well as your body. Explore and bring tenderness and compassion to the most frightened, painful, and hidden parts of yourself, especially those that have been neglected or rejected. Resolve to use the crisis as an opportunity to discover who you really are, and what is most important in your life, rather than seeing it simply as an obstacle to be overcome. This advice applies whether I am coaching individuals, working with groups of patients or doctors, or consulting with entire organizations. I feel it is essential that we begin to consciously take off the masks of our roles and identities in the world and discover our deeper, innermost essence. We are programmed to think we have to do something or be something to be happy and worthy of love. This is a big lie. And it is one of the major causes of suffering in our bodies and in the world.

AT: What is your vision of healthcare?

Dr. Geffen: My fervent hope is that healthcare in the future will value love and kindness as much as it values technology and efficiency. Without this fundamental shift, we won't get what we want from the healthcare system when it's our turn—or a family member's turn—to be sick, or frightened, and in need of help.

Medicine is evolving as human consciousness evolves. Over the past decade, we have broadened our thinking from a rigid allopathic model to include concepts such as alternative medicine, complementary medicine, and most recently, integrative medicine. Integrative medicine is certainly not the last stop. The next evolutionary step is what I call multi-dimensional medicine, which unabashedly embraces our multi-dimensional nature—physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual. My vision of healthcare is that it will honor and care for all these dimensions with equal skill and integrity.

In every waking moment, we live and breathe and function as if we are fundamentally physical beings who are separate from each other. In the realm of medicine and healthcare, our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are marginalized or completely ignored. Our current healthcare system discounts their impact on our physiology and health. It doesn't even consider the role of consciousness or our interconnectedness with each other, let alone our deepest, non-dual spiritual core. Yet these are all parts of our multidimensional nature.

Quantum mechanics has shown us that subatomic particles have both a particle and wave nature. I believe this is as true for humans as it is for photons or electrons. We are simultaneously separate and inseparably interconnected. Looking deeper into the mystery of life shows us that we all embody many other apparent dualities as well: masculine and feminine, thinking and feeling, shadow and light, conscious and unconscious, matter and spirit, human and divine. My vision of multi-dimensional medicine is that it will consciously embrace the entire spectrum of who we all truly are while providing practical and meaningful care that addresses all the levels of our being.

I'm not suggesting, for even a millisecond, that we should turn our attention away from science, or abandon any meaningful tools to care for the body, whether they are labeled conventional, complementary, or otherwise. I've dedicated my medical career to bringing every resource I could muster to help my patient's bodies heal, as well as care for their minds, hearts, and spirits. I am also not suggesting that we try to meditate our tumors away. On the contrary, my vision for multidimensional medicine is that we expand our focus from the physical realm to wholeheartedly include and embrace the mental and emotional dimensions of our being, and beyond that, our ultimate spiritual essence and nature.

The great challenge, of course, is how to accomplish this in the context of modern life, with all its problems and complexities. To be most effective, we must do this with an attitude that respects not only rigorous, peer-reviewed medical knowledge but also intuitive and empirical ways of knowing and being. Here we can derive profound lessons from the great spiritual and healing traditions of the world.

As I stand on the threshold of my own new endeavors, I feel deep gratitude for the teachers and guides I've been blessed with—in the medical and spiritual worlds, as well as in many other realms. I am also grateful for the many patients and family members who have deeply touched and enriched my life. We are indeed living in extraordinary times, filled with great promise and peril. The potential for unprecedented breakthroughs in science, medicine, and consciousness—arising in the midst of great global dangers—is yet another intriguing paradox of our lives. This paradox, like many others, offers us an opportunity to understand and embrace our multidimensional nature in new and creative ways, as we seek skillful, elegant, and wise solutions to the challenges we face.

Geffen Visions International, Inc.

4450 Arapahoe Avenue, Suite 100

Boulder, CO 80303

Tel: 303-444-6814

Fax: 303-444-6815

www.geffenvisions.com