From Mindfulness to Medicine

An Interview with Susan B. Lord, M.D.

Russ Mason, M.S.

The path of Susan B. Lord, M.D., is both interesting and unique. As a young woman, she embarked on a wide variety of life-defining experiences and did not enter medical school until her early 40s. By that time, she had immersed herself in various creative and spiritual disciplines that shaped her worldview and that ultimately steered her into the healing arts.

She obtained her M.D. from Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine (Cleveland, Ohio). She currently holds dual appointments as a clinical assistant professor in the department of family medicine and as an adjunct assistant professor in the department of physics and biophysics at the Georgetown University School of Medicine (Washington, D.C.).

She also has a private practice and is on the staff of The Center for Mind–Body Medicine (Washington, D.C.), where she is the director of Food as Medicine, a clinical nutrition training program for health professionals. She is a senior faculty member of the Center's other week-long training programs: the Professional Training Program in Mind–Body Medicine and CancerGuides. She also worked with James S. Gordon, M.D., the founder of the Center, to create the Healing the Wounds of War program, teaching mind–body medicine to health professionals in postwar Kosovo.

In January 2008, Dr. Lord will relocate to western Massachusetts to work with Mark Pettus, M.D., FACP, to establish a medical clinic at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts. She will continue to work with The Center for Mind–Body Medicine.

Russ Mason: How did your journey toward the practice of medicine begin?

Susan B. Lord: It was very roundabout. Basically, I wanted to do something meaningful with my life; more than just making money. I was searching for connection and wondering why I was on the planet and what I should do with my life. It was at Smith College (in Northampton, Massachusetts) that I really began to explore these questions; I majored in religion, and was especially interested in Eastern philosophy.

Also at this time, I developed chronic fatigue syndrome and chronic gastrointestinal symptoms in the context of a very difficult marriage. My interest in meditation and my experimentation with mind–body modalities and nutrition brought me physical and emotional healing. Like many health professionals, my journey began with my own health problems. From there I began my inquiry.

RM: What did you do?

SBL: Right out of college I was intuitively drawn to the expressive arts, perhaps to recover from a rather emotionally restrained upbringing! I took a pottery class and fell in love both with the meditative aspect of throwing pots and with using my hands, allowing my intellect to take a rest. I also started studying ballet and modern dance, as well as returning to my love of music. I began to study voice, play guitar (electric bass), and to write and produce music, just for fun. What is important about this period of my life is not whether I was particularly good at these disciplines, but that I learned about the healing power of self-awareness and self-expression through art. And now, in my medical practice, I encourage patients to use their creativity, and they often find it very helpful.

I also started visiting the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health, where I learned about meditation and yoga. I became more aware of myself, my body, my thoughts, my beliefs, and my feelings. I learned about living a meditative life while being grounded in my body. I had various energy experiences in my yoga practice that took me out of my intellect. I got a sense of what it means to feel healed in spite of illness. This is now what I offer my patients; they are often out of touch with themselves and are not making lifestyle decisions that lead to happy, healthy lives.

RM: How long were you at Kripalu?

SBL: For about 10 years. . . I lived nearby and spent as much time as I could taking classes and doing volunteer work.

RM: At this point in your life were you thinking about becoming a physician?

SBL: Oh no, not at all. I was doing pottery and music. I did start to study Psychosynthesis,* which is a spiritual psychotherapy, so I was beginning to move in a clinical direction.

RM: What is Psychosynthesis?

SBL: It is a spiritually based psychotherapy. It was started by a physician named Roberto Assagioli [M.D., 1888–1974]. He combined Eastern thought and Western psychotherapy in a way that is very interesting. The sessions begin with the client and the therapist meditating together, without a preset agenda. Much of the psychological work is done in a meditative state. The work is deep and the client learns to tap into wisdom and healing from within.

RM: What happened next?

SBL: As I continued with therapy, meditation, yoga, music, and singing, I felt better. And then I discovered gardening. I started growing my own organic food and I got ever better. I was impressed by the difference I could make in my own health by making different lifestyle choices. I became interested in working with other people to help them create healthy lifestyles. I would ask them: "How do you live life in a way that heals you every day?" I decided to get some training to be a health coach. In the mid '80s this was a new idea.

During this time I was also studying *Agni* Yoga, the yoga of fire, which supports spiritual growth via service. It was through my *Agni* Yoga teacher and my meditation that I found my way to medicine.

RM: Did this appeal to you?

SBL: Not up until that point. My father was a doctor and though his patients loved him, he seemed a bit aloof and distant to me. When I was growing up, I just didn't identify with him, so it never occurred to me to consider medicine as my life's work. But when my teacher suggested medicine while I sat in meditation, the hair stood up on the back of my neck and I thought: "*My God, this is what I'm meant to do.*" So I went back to Smith College for a second time at the age of 35 and began premed studies.

RM: After pursuing the arts for such a long time, how did you react to taking hard science courses?

SBL: I did wonder how a right-brain person would cope in the world of science. But I found many connections between the left and the right, the East and the West, between science and spirituality.

During my first chemistry class in premed, when my professor wrote the classic equation $E = mc^2$ on the board, I remember being deeply moved because I saw that he was talking about the relationships among energy, spirit, and the body in a science class. It seemed to me that science is like poetry; science talks in symbols to represent a reality that we usually aren't aware of but that I had

experienced with meditation and yoga. So I ended up really enjoying the science.

RM: What did you do next?

SBL: After premed I had a year off before I started medical school, and I decided to spend the year traveling and doing volunteer work in some kind of medical setting.

RM: Where did you go?

SBL: I ended up spending a good deal of time in India, living in an ashram and working on a hospital bus that traveled throughout the countryside treating people. This intense meditative experience unglued my ego. I began to question everything and I realized that many things had to fall away. This was a wonderful preparation for the world of medicine that I was about to enter. The rest of my year I hiked in Nepal, allowing the mountains to work on me.

RM: Did you go by yourself?

SBL: Yes, I went by myself. I think that was very important. I was coming out of a divorce and needed to assess just about every aspect of my life. The whole year felt like a walking meditation, with nothing to distract me from myself. The beauty of the mountains nourished my spirit with each step.

RM: Were there any experiences at the ashram that contributed to your eventual practice of medicine?

SBL: Yes. Toward the end of my stay at the ashram, the medical staff had a private meeting with Gurumayi, called a "*darshan*." She wanted to impress upon us that we were not the ones doing the healing, that a greater energy was at work and that we should call on that energy. In the middle of the meeting, a young chiropractor collapsed and died as she was speaking about her gratitude and love for Gurumayi. The medical staff couldn't resuscitate her and I must have looked horrified because Gurumayi looked at me and asked: "Why are you upset? This young woman died with the name of God on her lips and in the presence of her Guru." That gave me a lot to think about.

The next day, on my cot, was a gorgeous silk sari. I had been told that Gurumayi liked Western women to wear saris, but I wasn't a disciple and had felt too uncomfortable adopting the dress of another culture. But there was this beautiful canary yellow sari with green brocade trim. I couldn't *not* wear it! I didn't even know how to put it on, so some of the other women dressed me. And, when I put it on, I understood why Gurumayi had wanted me to wear it. It was an extraordinary feeling. I felt like I had put on the feminine aspect of God.

James S. Gordon, M.D., and Susan B. Lord, M.D., The Center for Mind-Body Medicine.

To Contact Dr. Susan B. Lord

Susan B. Lord, M.D.
c/o Kripalu Center for Yoga
and Healing
P.O. Box 309
Stockbridge, MA, 01262
Phone: (413) 448-3400
E-mail: susan@drsusanlord.com

*Psychosynthesis is based on the belief that all humans function within an orderly universe; this can lead to the evolution of consciousness. Moreover, each individual life has meaning and purpose within a broader context, and it is possible for the seeker to discover his or her purpose. A major aspect of psychosynthesis is its affirmation of the spiritual dimension of the person—a source of wisdom, inspiration, and unconditional love that adds meaning to human life. Visit <http://two.not2.org/psychosynthesis/> for more information.

About The Center for Mind–Body Medicine

The Center for Mind–Body Medicine

5225 Connecticut Ave, NW, Suite 414

Washington, DC 20015

Phone: (202) 966-7338

Fax: (202) 966-2589

Website: www.cmbm.org

The Center for Mind–Body Medicine is a not-for-profit 501(c)(3) educational organization working to transform the approach to medical care by instructing practitioners in mindful meditative and healing practices to share with patients. By changing the paradigm of health care, the Center seeks to create a better model of health care and of health education.

Illness is perceived as an opportunity for personal growth and transformation. James S. Gordon, M.D., creator of the Center, states that all persons have an innate and largely untapped capacity to “improve [their] own health and well being through mind–body approaches, nutrition, exercise and group support.”

Combining modern science with world's other healing traditions, the Center seeks to create a more comprehensive model of health care and health education to help health professionals heal themselves, and their patients, clients, and communities.

The Center's educational programs include:

- Self-awareness and self-expression via words, drawings, and movement
- Relaxation
- Meditation
- Yoga
- Exercise
- Diet
- Biofeedback
- Visual imagery
- Self-hypnosis
- Group support.

RM: It must have been quite an abrupt transition for you to go to medical school.

SBL: I loved the science and was fascinated when learning about how the body works, *and* I felt as if I had walked onto an alien planet. Medical education was about disease management, rarely if ever attending to the psychospiritual development of students as healers. Experiencing a medical education turned out to be important because it has led to my commitment to bring mind–body–spirit medicine to medical students.

After my residency, I moved to Washington, D.C., where I was trained in mind–body medicine by Dr. Jim Gordon, the founder and director of The Center for Mind–Body Medicine. I learned more about working with patients from him than I did in all 7 years of my training. After that, I joined the faculty and started a private practice. That was 11 years ago.

RM: Does the Center primarily see patients?

SBL: We do run mind–body skills groups for patients in Washington, D.C., but we are primarily an educational not-for-profit organization. Our mission is to train health professionals in techniques of self-care using mind–body–spirit medicine and nutrition, both for themselves and for their patients.

RM: You are the associate director of medical education and also the director of the nutrition program. What do you do in these positions?

SBL: I work on curriculum development and look for opportunities to bring mind–body medicine and clinical nutrition into medical education and into mainstream medicine. For example, we have trained over 50 faculty members from The Johns Hopkins Medical School (in Baltimore, Maryland) and have worked with them to develop a nutrition curriculum which we hope will be adopted into the school's new curriculum.

RM: Are most of the Center's attendees physicians?

SBL: Approximately 30–40% are physicians and the rest are psychotherapists, social workers, nurses, physician-assistants, patient advocates, and even teachers. Our training is appropriate for professionals who want to use mind–body medicine to help patients deal with stress.

RM: How large is the staff and faculty?

SBL: We have an administrative staff here in Washington, D.C., of about 10 people. We have about 25 faculty members from around the country who teach in our programs. These faculty members have all been trained and certified by the Center.

RM: Does the Center have an overarching philosophy or message?

SBL: Yes, it is that self-care should be the center of all health care—as opposed to drugs and surgery, which should be used only as last resorts. We first teach practitioners how to take care of *themselves*, and then we teach them how to integrate this approach into clinical practice.

We feel that it is essential for practitioners to personally understand the power of mind–body medicine. I would tell them: “When you walk your talk you speak to patients with compassion and an authority that patients notice.”

RM: What is the Professional Training Program in Mind–Body Medicine like?

SBL: This is a 6-day experiential program. Half of the program is didactic, in which we present the science behind mind–body medicine. We discuss both the physiology of stress—psychoneuroimmunoendocrinology, essentially how all the organ systems of the body affect one another—and a variety of mind–body techniques. These include several types of meditation, guided imagery, autogenics, genograms, movement, nutrition, and music. The rest of the time, participants work in small groups with one of our faculty members. Here the participants practice the techniques on themselves. By the end of the training, people understand deeply and personally how these techniques work and experience healing and transformation in their own lives.

RM: Is there a particular kind of meditation you teach at the Center?

SBL: We have a nondenominational approach, drawing from other traditions. People can experiment and choose the kind of meditation that suits them.

RM: Please provide an example of a meditation you teach.

SBL: Our basic meditation is very easy and very effective. It's called "Soft Belly." This is a quiet meditation in which the individual becomes aware of the breath moving in and out of the body, allowing the belly to be soft. This is a great way for a person to check in with the self and see what's going on. It often has a calming effect.

Other kinds of meditations are more active, such as a walking meditation or chaotic breathing (which is very fast breathing in and out through the nose). These are effective meditations for people who are either anxious or depressed, because they get their energy moving.

RM: Please describe what you do for the nutrition programs.

SBL: I was very interested in nutrition when I came to the center. Since our mission is to teach self-care, it seemed a natural fit to include nutrition in the program. Jim and I developed a nutrition elective at Georgetown University Medical School, and when the program was well-received, I expanded it into a 7-day course for professionals, called Food as Medicine. We are in our seventh year and have trained over 800 professionals.

Though this training is appropriate for all health professionals we focus much of our marketing on medical school faculty in order to get this information into medical school curricula. We also reach out to practicing physicians to get trained as well as reaching out to professionals who work with underserved populations. We try to offer scholarships to people who couldn't otherwise attend. To date, we have trained faculty members from over 50 medical schools, and the Jacob and Hilda Blaustein Foundation (in Baltimore, Maryland) has given us a multiyear grant to develop a community nutrition project in Baltimore. We hope this will serve as a model for communities nationally. Our goal is to get science-based clinical nutrition into a variety of settings: medical schools; doctor's offices; clinics; underserved communities; school programs; and hospitals.

RM: Describe the Food as Medicine course.

SBL: This course presents a comprehensive clinical nutrition curriculum that is carefully crafted to prepare participants to start practicing whole-food nutrition counseling when they return to their practices. We discuss the history of the evolution of our diet and how changes have led to the epidemic of obesity and chronic disease. We present the relevant biochemistry and the rationale for a whole-foods diet. Participants are taught how to do a nutritional workup and how to individualize their dietary recommendations for each patient. We discuss the psychological aspects of eating, which can make dietary changes so difficult for people.

The course is also experiential. We serve incredibly delicious food and present demonstrations on rehabilitation of the pantry, cooking, working with children, and pantry remedies. Everybody loves food, so the entire week is a treat for participants. I get many letters from people telling me how the information in this course has improved their own health and has transformed

how they practice medicine. Next year, Food as Medicine will be distilled down to 4 days so more people will be able to take the time to attend.

RM: What prompted your interest in nutrition?

SBL: It began when I lived in the Berkshires, when I learned to grow my own organic food. I simplified my diet, eating only fresh fruit, vegetables, whole grains, and sometimes fish, for nearly 15 years. During that time I ate very few processed foods or sugar, and I felt much better. I came to understand the healing power of feeling a connection with the earth and of eating whole foods. That was the beginning of my experience with a whole-food diet.

RM: Were you vegetarian or vegan?

SBL: I was very close to vegetarian. I did eat fish; but not dairy foods, meat, or eggs. Then I went to medical school, and I got to experiment with a different kind of diet.

RM: What about now?

SBL: The basics are the same, though I can be more flexible since my health is so much better. I enjoy a good dessert once in a while and I probably eat the equivalent of a chicken every couple of months and fish once a week. I still don't eat dairy, rarely eat eggs, and find I feel better limiting the amount of wheat I eat.

RM: When you teach people about nutrition, is this food-based nutrition or do you include dietary supplements?

SBL: Our primary focus is on a whole-foods diet. We do include some information on the nutrients that are most likely to be helpful as adjuncts to a whole-foods diet.

RM: How do you see food as connected to medicine?

SBL: As Hippocrates taught us long ago, food is medicine. For most people, when they choose what to eat, they choose their state of health. The various constituents of foods, vitamins, minerals, and types of oils, as well as toxins, wash over the genes and determine how well the biochemistry of the body will perform. If there is not enough good nutrition and too much bad nutrition, the body breaks down. It's actually quite simple, though we have managed to confuse ourselves for years now. Many people think that packages with labels that list unpronounceable chemicals contain food, and many children don't know where food comes from. This will have to change if we want to regain health and vitality.

RM: You mentioned sugar earlier. That seems to be a hot button among some physicians, and avoidance of sugar is often encouraged.

SBL: A whole cascade of negative reactions occur when people eat sugar regularly. Human physiology was not designed to handle large amounts of sugar coming in all at once. So part of what I do is encourage people to experiment. I tell them to try not eating sugar for a couple of weeks and see what happens. People are often amazed at

"A whole cascade of negative reactions occur when people eat sugar regularly."

the extent to which they are addicted to sugar and very pleased with how well they feel after it's gone. It's interesting to ask patients why and when they reach for sugar. For example, a patient might answer: "I eat when I'm lonely." This provides an opportunity for a patient to explore deeper issues in his or her life. Perhaps the patient is trying to get the sweetness of life through sugar molecules.

RM: I imagine some people drink alcohol for similar reasons.

SBL: Yes. Many of us are addicted to all kinds of things, often to cover up something painful, loneliness, boredom, anger, grief, or anxiety. It is helpful to get to the bottom of it. Dealing with an addiction opens up the possibility of healing.

When it comes to food addictions, I have found that using a combination of mindful eating—eating something with complete awareness of the experience—coupled with short experiments of eliminating the problem food, can be illuminating and helpful. Many people find junk food to be pretty unappealing when they pay attention to its taste.

RM: Does this require patients to adopt a new way of approaching their own health?

SBL: Yes, and I find that using meditative practices like mindful eating is a gentle way to support a natural change toward health. Willpower doesn't seem to work for many people, while awareness encourages people to understand that they are responsible for the decisions that affect their health, and that no one else can really fix them.

RM: Would you say that some practitioners have to make some hard choices also?

SBL: Oh yes. I certainly have. It's difficult to work deeply with patients in a 10- or 20-minute appointment. Practitioners have to decide if that is workable and fulfilling enough. If not, then they have to figure out another way to work. It takes time to help people, but the first place to start is with oneself. I would say to practitioners: "Once you start taking care of yourself, you become able to help others. Eating nutritiously, exercising, identifying and addressing sources of stress, and sharing your life with people you love is a great place to start. What I am really talking about here is living a *mindful* life. When you become mindful about the different aspects of your life, change is inevitable, simply because some things don't *feel* right anymore."

RM: Would you say that The Center offers a variety of options to the practitioner who wants to consider a new way of being in his or her practice?

SBL: We're in the business of reigniting the passion of practitioners who feel discouraged by the way they practice medicine. It's wonderful to see how inspired people become to make the changes necessary to live truly fulfilling lives. □

To order reprints of this article, e-mail Karen Ballen at: Kballen@liebertpub.com or call at (914) 740-2100.