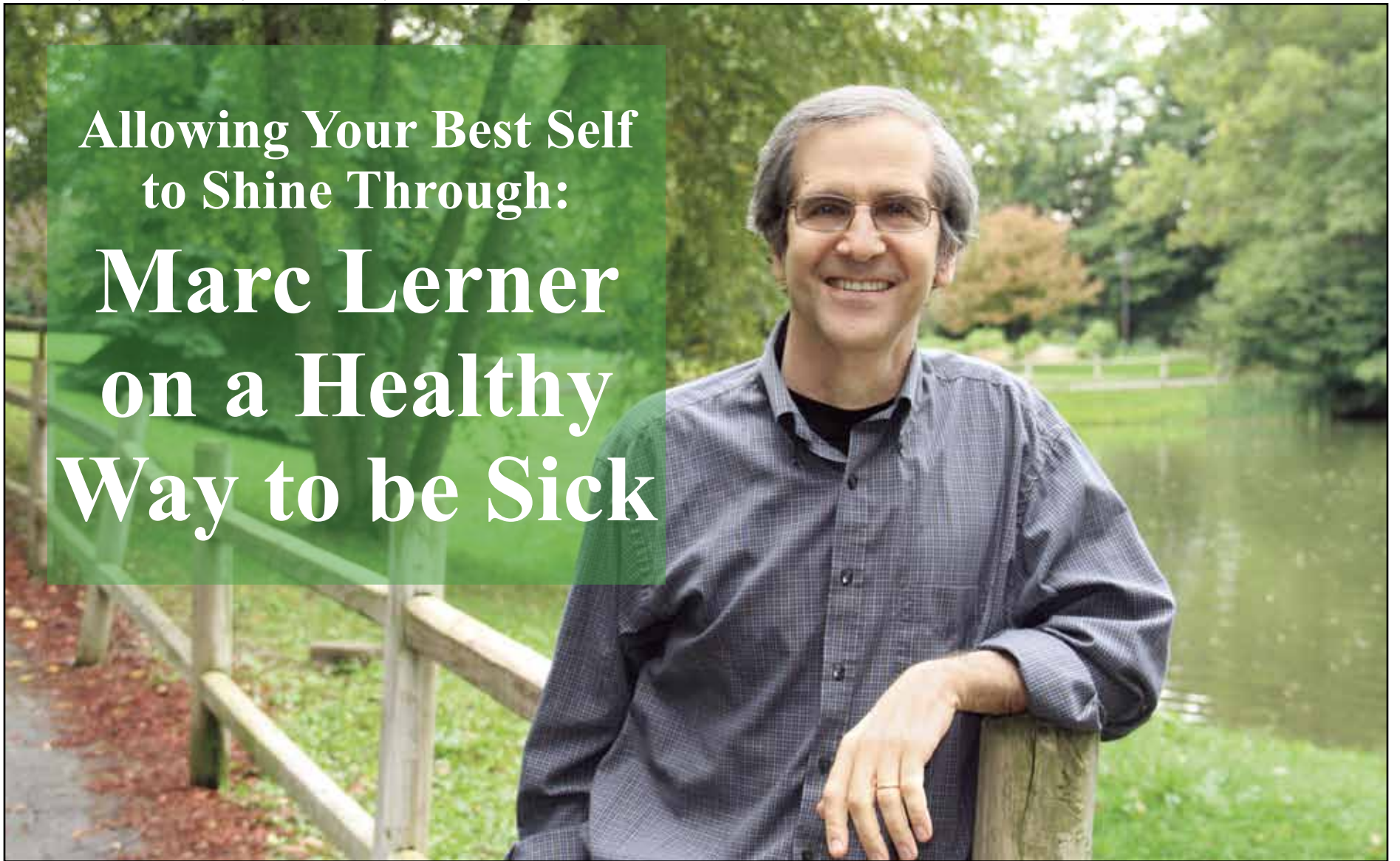


Allowing Your Best Self to Shine Through: Marc Lerner on a Healthy Way to be Sick



Marc Lerner has been living with Multiple Sclerosis for 30 years. Now a resident of Ann Arbor, he runs the non-profit Life Skills Institute.

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By Mary Runser
Photo by Joni Strickfaden

I was given the opportunity to interview Marc Lerner about the radio talk show he hosted called "A Healthy Way to be Sick." It ended up being less an interview and more a conversation between two new friends. At 60 years of age, Marc has been living with Multiple Sclerosis for 30 years. Now a resident of Ann Arbor, he runs the non-profit Life Skills Institute, which he founded in 1982, and teaches people experiencing health crises how to live happier and healthier lives. Our conversation flowed easily and smoothly as Marc expounded on his belief in the healing and transformative power of self-trust, a positive self-image, and self-love, even when our life experiences have been less than positive.

Having had several not so positive and even traumatic experiences of my own, I was fascinated by the ease with which Marc seemed to positively accept himself and his experiences. The differences his beliefs have made to him were apparent; he delights in his life. While our conversation focused on a healthier way of being sick for people dealing with chronic health issues, I realized that I could use this same approach, these very same ideas, and create a healthier way of living my own life. I'd heard everything he'd said somewhere before, but for some reason his words and his gentle nature reached into my heart, seizing on the truth that lay within. We both hope that as you read, you, too, will experience and take hold of the positive energy and acceptance that has the power to transform your thoughts and allow you to re-imagine and rebuild your life.

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Detroit native Marc Lerner is back in his home state of Michigan after decades away. "I was born in Detroit, raised in Midland and managed to escape when I was about 20 years old. I lived in California mostly (and in some other parts of the country) for 35+ years, but came back here to the Ann Arbor area to be with my mother. Her time is short and I couldn't imagine anything more important than being with her, so I moved back here three years ago."

Marc was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis in March of 1981. "I totally freaked out because of my sudden loss of vision and inability to walk. Loss of vision was my first symptom, and amazingly, it was worse at that time than it is now. I'm legally blind,

so I don't see things like most people do. I can see, but only very blurry images." MS forced him to look at the beauty of life through his spiritual eyes until his mental image of himself and his difficulties wholly meshed with what he saw on a spiritual level.

As a young man Marc began to seriously search, as many of us do, for that connection to his deeper spiritual part. "Through all of my searching and meditation — and I did it from my heart — nothing took me there or taught me how to access that part of myself or allowed me to really 'be in the moment' like MS has." According to Marc, MS has forced him to go inside himself to find the reservoir of strength and spirituality that not only gets him through the daily coping with a chronic illness, but also allows him to thrive and enjoy a full life.

For the last 28 years Marc has been working with veterans, AIDS patients, and those with physical disabilities and chronic diseases, teaching them how to use the lessons he's learned to find that spiritual connection and to live life in a way that is full and complete, without being completely dependent upon outside sources. He teaches that the strength and the answers we need are within each of us. Everybody has them; it's really a matter of some being able to access them more readily than others. "Really, it's very simple," Marc said. "The key is to breathe into silence rather than into your thoughts. We think that wisdom is in our thoughts, but really wisdom is more of a heart thing. The wisdom of the body resides in the silence beyond your thoughts." Breath as your focus was a concept Marc learned while taking Karate classes as a child. When you quiet the chatter within, move beyond your thoughts, and breathe into that silence, you can access the wisdom stored within your body.

Marc believes that the body is a tremendous reservoir of strength, spirituality, and wisdom, and within that reservoir are the answers to everything we need physically, spiritually, and emotionally. All we have to do is learn to follow the path to that wisdom. Sounds easy, doesn't it? "It's as easy as breathing," Marc said. "The reality is that this wisdom that can help people deal daily with chronic illness is the same wisdom that's needed to be in love, to work, and to manifest the lives we desire to live. We all have those answers right here inside us, we just need to learn how to access them."

"At this point in my life, I would rather deal with a chronic illness than not experience the quality of life I've experienced through having MS."

Marc's first step was determining that he was not going to live his life with a victim mentality or look outwardly for help. That decision forced him to look inside and

change his inner environment, to clear the way through all the thoughts and clutter that fills the mind. "You know, right now 'the zone' is a concept popularized through sports, but there is a zone of healing, a zone of love, a zone of everything. Being in 'the zone' allows us to tap the inner resources we need to make change. We all have them; we just don't always use them."

The second key is learning to move beyond our thoughts and negative self-images. We've all learned to think negative self-thoughts and carry around negative self-images. Often these thoughts and images are imposed upon us by parents, teachers, ministers/religious leaders and other authority figures, until one day we simply begin to believe them, adopt them as our own, and they become so deeply ingrained within that we begin to live out those negative images in our everyday lives.

On the other side, there are also positive experiences and thoughts, things that make us feel as though we can do anything, things that make us feel very good and positive about ourselves. "We all have these, too. For some reason, though, as humans we tend to cling to the more negative things even though they're extremely self-defeating. When I'm working with individuals, I teach them to look at both of these experiences, recall how each one made them feel, and then give that feeling a name. Later, when they realize they're acting or reacting out of their negative character, they can stop and begin to consciously act out of their positive character. Just taking that moment to realize that we're acting out of a negative self-image and deciding instead to act from our positive self-image gets us immediately in 'the zone,' that space of silence beyond our thoughts. Once we are there, we can access our more positive nature, which allows us to truly be in the moment in our lives and in a particular situation where our very best self can begin to shine through and interact with the world around us in a positive and healthy way."

The proposition is that the unconscious mind is being consciously reprogrammed to support the healing process. "Most people try to attain wellness when they're sick through the thinking mind," Marc said. "The subconscious mind has a direct influence on the healing process, where the intellect symbolically relates to that process. Life skills such as our self-image, self-trust, and the way we relate to negative thinking are significantly influenced subconsciously. These skills can enhance or limit healing based on how they are conditioned. Normally they're conditioned through our past experiences, but they can be consciously re-conditioned if we follow an experiential path and turn them into habits. We walk through life focused on thinking and because of this we ignore the wisdom of the body...In a health crisis, it is important to take control of the subconscious because it affects the healing process so significantly. The focus of my work is to consciously condition the subconscious mind on the level of life skills we learned as we grew up."

Marc explained that it's difficult for handicapped people to date because the handicap is almost always a glaring issue, but he and Amy have never had that issue. He didn't feel bad about his handicap and she wasn't put off by it. "When we're together, neither of us is handicapped and it's the most amazing thing."

We're creatures of habit, and creating a habit of stopping to reflect on how we're reacting or how we should react cultivates trust in ourselves, especially when the outcomes are positive. This isn't a one-stop shop technique to health and happiness, but over the course of time, through repeated practice and repeated success, we begin to trust ourselves on a deeper level. "When we begin trusting ourselves and our positive nature that completely, it becomes so easy to move past all our thoughts into that space of silence beyond, where we can hear that voice of wisdom and knowledge in our bodies and begin to live healthier, happier lives, even when coping with chronic pain or illness. Creating this habit of self-trust helps us to become better partners with our physicians in an environment which allows us to speak openly and freely about the things we're experiencing, and then to decide together on a better or more appropriate health management path."

Turning patients into partners with their doctors is Marc's ultimate goal for the people with whom he works. Partnering with your doctor is about openly sharing your health issues, concerns, and desires for living your life as fully, completely, and happily as possible. These are the techniques that Marc has taught on his talk radio show "A Healthy Way to be Sick" featured on World Talk Radio. The show is not currently being broadcast, but all the segments are available on his website at www.lifeskillsinc.com, along with numerous articles he's written on a variety of health topics and links to other health-related resources.

While Marc primarily works with those who cope with chronic and often debilitating health issues, he's not solely focused on people with health crises. "What I teach these individuals can work for anyone," he said, "although sometimes it may be easier for those of us who are coping with serious health issues because we're already desperate to find something that works to help us feel less pain and help us to feel better. Desperateness can be a valuable thing. When we really want something, we have to be willing to let go of things that aren't serving us well and open up to something different. That's the point where we begin to access the wisdom of our bodies. That's where we find the purest form of love and the best of our creative abilities; that's where the quality of life comes from. One of my favorite

quotes states that 'the quality of life does not depend on the health of your body, it depends on your focus,' and that is so true."

After having practiced this technique for 30 years, Marc is able to move into 'the moment' or 'the zone' frequently and with ease. "In a way, it's like being in a very narrow corridor which is the path that leads me beyond my thoughts into that space where the silence exists and my body's wisdom can speak what it needs."

Marc doesn't offer this approach as a miraculous cure for the physical conditions of the body. "Obviously, I still have MS and I have physical limitations. MS attacks and damages the nervous system, so any area of the body that has nerves, which is pretty much everything, can be affected and compromised. As I said earlier, I'm legally blind, so I can't see like other people do, but I can see. I can't walk like everyone else, but I can walk and exercise."

Today, Marc is in a wheelchair unless he is exercising by walking up twelve flights of stairs while holding on to the rail. He cannot read or make out faces, and he admits to experiencing more pain since having brain surgery last year. "The last year has definitely been more difficult," Marc said. "It's been the first year that I've experienced pain with MS. There is a benefit to that — you have to go deeper to even cope with the pain, so when you find that depth, the pain seems to be a little bit distant. It can still hurt, but it's tolerable...Sometimes I'm still trapped by my thoughts, but if I can keep my focus on something attractive or pleasing to me, that helps distract me from thoughts about what parts of my body don't work very well and helps me with the pain in a more positive way. At this point in my life, I would rather deal with a chronic illness than not experience the quality of life I've experienced through having MS. My physical vision is bad, but it gives me an advantage in being able to practice inner reflection that many healthy individuals have difficulty with."

Recently, Marc joined with Amy Rosenberg in a commitment ceremony. Amy was raised in Great Neck, New York, and has lived in southeastern Michigan for decades. They met at a Passover dinner. Marc saw her walking with a cane and, since he uses a wheelchair, decided they could become good friends. "Over 20 years ago, when she was still quite young, she had a stroke which left her with some physical difficulties." Marc explained that it's difficult for handicapped people to date because the handicap is almost always a glaring issue, but he and Amy have never had that issue. He didn't feel bad about his handicap and she wasn't put off by it. "When we're together, neither of us is handicapped and it's the most amazing thing. It's the most comfortable and loving connection I've ever experienced and she's the most wonderful woman I've ever known."

"I'll say it again. This is something anyone can do. It's simply a matter of letting go of the negative thoughts and images that don't serve you well, breathing into the silence that exists beyond your thoughts, and then listening to the wisdom of your body. It takes practice to create the habit of looking to your positive thoughts and images, but once that habit is established, it becomes easier and easier to slip into 'the moment' and hear the wisdom that's being spoken. That moment opens us up to the deeper wisdom within, allowing us to live creatively, to love purely, and allows our hearts to manifest. It's a truly beautiful gift."

Marc Lerner is the president of the non-profit Life Skills Institute. To view his work, listen to archived radio shows, and discover the silence beyond thinking, visit www.lifeskillsinc.com. On **Wednesday, January 18, 2012, at X:XX x.m.**, he will conduct a free tele-seminar that leads participants through his key techniques for learning to change your inner reality and interpret your reality differently. To hear this tele-seminar, call (218) 862-7200, then key in the Bridge Line, 736052.




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