

Sarah Bamford Seidelmann **Video Transcript**

Intro by Marsha Hystead:

So, I have the honor of introducing a friend of mine, Sarah Bamford Seidelmann. I got to know Sarah—we were on a medical board together at the Miller-Dwan Foundation, locally. Sarah's a pathologist representing the physicians on the board. And I just fell in love with her from the first time I sat next to her at a board meeting.

And one day Sarah came and she said I'm going to resign from the board because I'm going to leave the profession of being a doctor. I'm like, oh my gosh! I could not believe that. And now I've watched her journey and she's going to tell us about it.

She's the author of *Swimming with Elephants*. And I'm telling you if you haven't read it, it changed my life. I was a skeptic on page one and a convert at the end of the book. It's a beautifully written story. Her new book is *The Book of Beasties: Your A-to-Z Guide to the Illuminating Wisdom of Spirit Animals*.

Give a warm welcome to Sarah Bamford Seidelmann.

Sarah Bamford Seidelmann:

Thank you so much. Well, I'm so honored to be here, thank you. I'm just so excited about this, just a place to dream which really thrills me.

So what I believe is that each one of us in this room holds one of the keys to resolving our health care crisis. And I believe that it's by saying yes to a question—the question is this—there's a question that Zimbabwe educator Tererai Trent likes to ask and the question is this—what breaks your heart?

I believe that if each one of us can just decide to go after repairing that thing that breaks your heart, we can repair the system and I am going to just give you today, the short CliffsNotes version of my journey, and I hope that you'll see that by saying yes to what breaks your heart, you will certainly go on a wild ride that will be unpredictable. But, it

will also be extremely blessed. And as Joseph Campbell likes to say, doors will open where doors did not exist for anybody else but you.

So, I entered medical school just as my father did and my grandfather and my great grandfather. And it wasn't until third year of medical school, when we began to take care of patients directly, that I encountered any challenges. And the first patient, as you can see I've represented here, I was on the ward and encountered this patient who was in her early thirties, recently divorced, three young children and she was there for a bone marrow transplant.

It was a research protocol to treat her for metastatic breast cancer and it was our job, every day, to go and see her. My supervising resident and I would go and round on her and explain to her that her platelets, the part of our blood that clots and keeps us from bleeding to death on a daily basis, hers were not recovering as we hoped that they would. And so, we would go up to her bedside and, I remember just every day, just letting her know that her platelets were dangerously low. And though we'd given her platelets the day before they were not improving. And I remember thinking, we are missing something huge here. There's just some terrible thing we're not doing and we're supposed to be doing this thing. I don't know what it is and it really just haunted me on my drives home from work.

And a few days later, my resident and I were racing up the stairs to go see a new patient consult and his pager went off. It was the ward calling us to tell us that this patient of ours had bled to death that morning. And I remember we sat down on the stairwell—and for a moment we just both just cried. And it was just kind of a, I look back, I can realize that it was a wonderful moment because there were so many times in the future, in all my other rotations at other hospitals and clinics where we would never stop for anything and we never talked about the sad things, the traumatic things, the difficult things that we witnessed.

And so a few months later I found myself on yet another new rotation and this time it was in the department of pathology in a large busy city hospital. And there, I encountered a bunch of doctors who were much like pirates. They were very salty, they were very brilliant, they were very funny and I thought to myself, okay, this is a place maybe I could work here. And really pathologists, for those of you who don't know, pathologists' sort of job, is basically to hunt for disease. So that would be my future job if

I said yes, to be a disease hunter. And I thought, well this is something really tangible that I can get my arms around so I'm going to choose this. And so that's what I went into, pathology.

And for 20 years I absolutely loved it and delighted in it. It was fascinating and amazing and yes, I did swear quite a bit when I needed to. And during this time my husband and I—he's also a physician—grew our family. And it wasn't until about the fourth kid arriving that things really started unraveling for me at work. And it was partly due to the fact that we had four kids and that we are both working like crazy, but I'm sure working parents can relate. But what sort of happened to me is I became somehow, unbeknownst to me—not something that I wanted to happen—but I became less fascinated with hunting for disease and I started being more fascinated with what makes people well. What creates health?

And this would reach a fever pitch every week when I would be in a breast cancer conference. We would present all the newly diagnosed cases of breast cancer each week. And as we would go through the patients often a social worker, a nurse, would raise their hand and say, you know, this patient has an extremely abusive spouse and is unwilling to consider having any kind of intervention but she's living basically in fear for her life every day.

Or, another week would go by and a social worker would raise her hand and say this patient is living in total isolation. She has lost her partner, she lives in a rural place where she has no transportation and nobody to take her to chemotherapy.

And then I remember, one week after one of these kinds of comments had bubbled up, a doctor raised her hand and said—you know, these things are really important but we don't have time to cover them in this conference because we have 14 patients to get through to make their care plans. And I was like, of course, you know, and that was true.

But I couldn't help but wondering, what if we had circled the wagons of love and compassion around these women 15, 20 years ago and made sure that they had loving community, and made sure that they knew what a supportive partnership looked like. And you know, I just couldn't help wonder. I knew that was a question that I couldn't answer.

And so work got progressively more and more difficult for me. I felt very disengaged. And I realized one of my jobs, for example, was to stare at a slide with a hundred thousand cells and look for four to five atypical or malignant cells. And I realized that I could not afford, it might be dangerous, for me and for other people if I was not engaged in this work.

So, being a Norwegian from northern Minnesota I did the next best thing I could think of, I hired a life coach. And I'm just kidding. If you live in northern Minnesota you would never hire a life coach probably. You would now though because I'm living here.

So this coach Michelle was absolutely amazing. She listened to me pour my heart out, which I had a lot to pour out by that point. And then she gave me an assignment. She said, Sarah, what you need to do, I'm going to invite you to do, is to begin doing more things and activities and spend time with people that make you feel good. And minimize the activities and things with people who don't make you feel good. And I said, my God, this is very contrarian advice. Like who is this woman? And like, is that true?

Because for probably 30 years I've been doing everything that did not feel good all in order to someday reach some summit or apex where I did feel good again. So I was very suspicious of this but I was like, can you think of anything that sounds like it would feel good to you? And I was like, well, one thing. What's that? Decoupage.

Now how many in the audience know something about decoupage? Okay, so maybe you've gotten some glue and done some of this. So it's this old-timey kind of vintage crafty thing where you glue images onto like wooden objects, or behind glass is even more exciting, cause it looks really cool. And for some reason I set up a laboratory in my basement, as you can see behind me here, and I began to glue images on the glass. And the weird thing was, anything really, anything I can get my hands on. And the weird thing was the only thing I really was interested in gluing were animals. Images of animals.

First, it started out domesticated things like chickens and horses but quickly I grew tired of that. And then it was like wild animals. It was all like leopards and walruses and whales. And as you can see one of my little trays up there, you know, giraffes and elephants too.

And this was all very exciting and very fun but I was like, how the heck is it going to help me with my problem at work—where I don't want to be there.

And so I kept thinking what else would feel good? And I thought well, like any red-blooded American we all know that having a fabulous gourmet kitchen will also make you feel really good. Am I right?

So to the tune of north of \$300,000—after \$300,000 I stopped really looking at the contractor's bills because I didn't want to know. But as you can see we made this amazing incredible kitchen with the assistance of many people. Unfortunately, when the kitchen was complete I was like, wow, this is a darn awesome kitchen but it doesn't make me feel any different. And I realized that there was still something missing. And so with the support of my loving partner we decided, several months later, after finishing the kitchen, to put our house on the market.

We eventually decamped to a much smaller house in a neighborhood that was much less expensive. And that enabled me to take a little sabbatical which turned out to be pretty radical. So we moved to this house that turned out to be right next to the wilderness.

So I just started to happen to start taking walks outside. And it started making me feel really good. I mean really good! I was like wow! I haven't felt this good in a long time. I didn't realize how much living in the fluorescent lights and never seeing the sun, what it had done to me.

And at the same time there was this huge part of me, another part of me, that was getting terrified because I realized once I got out that door I do not want to go back to that hospital and do that work. I couldn't admit it to myself barely and I certainly wasn't going to tell my husband because we had these four kids and the plan was to put them through college and do all these things. So I was desperate for somebody to tell me what to do, how to solve this problem.

And at the time, that summer, I stumbled into this old ancient idea that the wild animals that cross our paths may have messages for us. And I was like, well that sounds crazy. Nobody's told me that before. If that's true, why not?

But again, I was really lost and desperate and I was just going to give it a try because the decoupage did feel good and moving felt good and maybe this.

So I just started paying attention to see what the next beastie would catch my attention. And the first major creature to really captivate my attention was a walrus. And this walrus that I ran into was a taxidermied walrus that was hanging on a wall in a shop in our downtown.

And this thing was just spectacular. This walrus was so spectacular it had these four foot long tusks that were like down to the ground. Just amazing. When I was in the store I was like okay, you can give me your message, I'm ready for it. Just kind of milling around beneath it thinking, I'm ready for the epiphany. And you know, he wasn't saying anything so I went back to visit him a couple times and nothing was happening.

So then I started watching this video and I thought I'm going to learn about walruses. And what I learned, as you can see, they're pretty darn relaxed. They're pretty much like ahhhh. They're pretty relaxed and they're really not caught up in their head worried about, oh my gosh, I had too many glasses of Chardonnay and shouldn't have mentioned that thing to the neighbor last night or worried about the future like the clams might run out! What's going to happen?

And so I put that together with the other thing that I learned about walruses is that they're apex predators. Meaning, essentially they have no challenges in the natural world besides, occasionally, a polar bear will tangle with them. But usually it doesn't end well so they try to avoid that.

So I put these two messages together and I thought well maybe if I could somehow manage to be Sarah completely relaxed and be myself, maybe I too would have no competition should I choose to choose a different vocation—another way to help people. Maybe through writing, maybe through life coaching. So that was the walrus. And that made me feel pretty good and pretty hopeful at a time when I was very confused.

So I decided to keep noticing beasties. As I like to call them. The next thing I learned is that people often have a unique lifetime relationship with one particular wild animal spirit. And if you can figure out who yours is or you know who yours is that they're there to guide you and empower, protect you; I was like, I could use some of that right now.

So I became curious and I ended up going on a meditation with a drum to access this world where these animal spirits live. And by gum, I encountered this mother bear.

She sat me down and she rubbed my back and she pointed off in the distance and she was like, Sarah, where you're going it's not that far off and all you need to do is enjoy the journey. Which kind of sounds like a lot of platitudes but what I can tell you is that I felt so much love and compassion from this mother bear like it was like nothing else I'd ever encountered. And so I thought to myself, well maybe this is crazy what I'm doing. Is this real? I don't even know but again it felt so good I thought I don't have any better ideas—I'm going to keep going.

So, I kept visiting my mother bear. And the next thing that happened was that I quickly got a phone call from a friend and she said hey I'm going to go and negotiate a bride price for my cousin in South Africa, would you like to come with me? And I was like yes, I would like to come with you. And these are like the kind of strange and magical things that will happen to you if you say yes to what breaks your heart.

So the next thing I know we're in South Africa and I actually get to meet with these two amazing women who are Sangomas or what we might call a shaman. Well-versed in these old ways that I'd been encountering. And a shaman is essentially someone who alters the consciousness—often using drum and sometimes other methods to access these worlds of love and compassion so that they can help an individual or help their community with that wisdom from that place.

And so we went and we had a healing ceremony from them and I share a little bit of the video here. They threw bones for us in this beautiful hut and then we exited the hut and walked out in this beautiful courtyard where people were drumming. And they began dancing and singing. And it was so powerful. And I remember tears were just streaming down my face as I had this experience. And I remember thinking I don't know what's exactly going on here, this is very mysterious, but something really important is happening here. And I want to know more.

And so toward the end of my visit to South Africa my next beastly encounter was not so welcome this time. This time a black mamba appeared. And these are the most poisonous vipers on the planet and very much feared in South Africa. And anywhere else they live. Thankfully this did not show up in reality but showed up in my dreams.

And it was very scary but eventually I did endeavor to get the message from her. And her message was very stern in that it was time for me to get up and dance and start to make myself vulnerable. Take some chances, put myself out there. If I wanted to find out my new vocation and how I was meant to be helping people now, it wasn't going to happen without my action. And I knew this rang very true although it was really not as pleasant as the messages I got from the bear and the walrus.

Next I began to seek out teachers who could share with me and teach me some of these old techniques. And so that I eventually called the guys at work and I said hey guys, do you mind if I extend the sabbatical to six months? and they said, no problem, and eventually I said, do you mind if I just go casual so that if it gets busy you can call me back to work? They're like, no problem. There were no barriers, it was amazing.

Until that next year I worked about 5 days. But I was working very hard in these other new things that I was learning and as I had gone to maybe two or three workshops at this point and learned quite a bit.

I came home one day and my little seven-year-old daughter came up and she said, Mom, I have a tummy ache. And I was like, oh well I've been learning these healing techniques, would you like a little healing from me and she said yeah, sure.

And so we went and I gave her a little tray with some natural materials—some grasses some berries, some twigs and things like that—and asked her to make a collage of what her stomach ache felt like. And she made a collage and it was sort of this big tangled mass of stuff and I was like, okay.

And then I began to call upon my mother bear and black mamba and a few other spirits that I had started to get to know and began to do the healing work. And when it was done, I just said well, sweetie, if you'd like you can go change the collage if your stomach feels different or you can just leave it be. And she said my stomach ache is gone and yeah I want to change it so I was like, OK. I handed her the tray and she sat there working on it for a while, rearranging and rearranging. And I could tell it was getting more symmetric and she shared it with me, and she said Mama, don't you see it? And I was like, No sweetie. What is it? And she said, it's an angel.

And in that moment I thought I don't really care if I ever figure out what the heck it is I'm supposed to be doing with all these things I'm learning that don't totally always make full

sense to me, but this medicine has given me a way to connect with my own daughter and to relieve her suffering and that was so powerful.

So I continued on for the next three years. I just continued to practice these ways and learn more and more. And as I've learned more and more I began to realize that these old techniques, these ancient techniques, really had a power to create health in others. And sometimes the results were very subtle, sometimes they were miraculous and there were a small handful of people that it really didn't seem to have any effect on at all. And I decided that I wanted to really commit my life to this work.

I let my medical license go, I let my hospital privileges go, I stepped away from my job. I went to India just around that point because it was really kind of scary to make this commitment and I went to go and pray to ask for help that I could do this in a good way.

And when I came back the phone rang and this man Cleo called me and he said my wife is in the hospice house and she is really requesting somebody to help her and to give her healing in these old traditional ways. Her mom was Anishinaabe Ojibwe, so a Native American person, and she really honors these ways. Could you come?

And so I came the next day and I met Molly and I explained to her how we're going to do the work and what we were going to be doing. And then I went to the nurse's station just to let them know that we were going to need some privacy and Cleo followed me out to the nurse's station and he grabbed my arm and he said, "I can't believe it" and I said "what is it?" He said she has been like so out of it for weeks we haven't been able to talk to her and now she's talking to you like nothing's the matter.

And we returned back into the room and I lit my candle and I started rattling and calling all these loving and compassionate spirits which had now grown into quite a crew. Black mamba, bears and elephants and many others. I just felt the room fill with so much love and compassion and the spirits told me what Molly needed. There were two of her soul parts that had gone missing in her life that she had lost due to trauma and other bad experiences. So with the spirits help I returned these two soul parts. And as I blew them back into her chest, in that moment, I could just feel that I was finally doing that thing that so many years ago I had longed to know how to do.

So I hope that you can see by my story that by saying yes to what breaks your heart you will be guaranteed to go on a kind of a crazy experience but it will also be again extremely blessed.

And so I hope that each one of you finds the courage to say yes to repairing that thing, and I know that many of you are already on that journey, and so I hope you find the courage to continue on because it's not easy sometimes. And I want to invite you each to just create a vision for what you dream of for health care. And I'm going to share with you mine and I hope that you'll later share yours with me. But I dream that in the not too distant future that these giant clinics and hospitals that seem to get bigger and bigger will all be reimaged into incredible beautiful spaces where we can do all the things that make us well. There will be dancing and singing and telling stories and fires and there will be cooking good food and there will still be places for people who are ill and people who are dying and we will be treating those people with the utmost love and compassion.

So, thank you.