

Where We Are Going – One Vision

by George Peter Kousaleos. LMT © 2004 All rights reserved.

(NOTE: This was a keynote speech delivered at the 2004 AMTA Council of Schools Meeting. In it, George articulates a vision for the future of massage therapy.)

When I was asked to present this closing keynote of the 2004 Council of Schools Leadership Conference and Annual Meeting, I felt honored and only a little anxious. I knew that Bob King was going to open our meeting with a history of where we came from. He would have to stick to the facts, honoring our shared accomplishments and critiquing our missteps. I figured that I could do no wrong, because anything I predicted about “where we’re going” would be seen as possible, and only “one person’s opinion”.

But then I began to worry. First, that I would present the future challenges in a doomsayer manner – creating anxiety and widespread fear that we’re already on a slippery slope rushing to professional annihilation. Then I worried about displaying a manner that was too upbeat about our potential for success, and exude a Pollyannaish euphoria that could never be realized.

And I do think there will be great obstacles to our future accomplishments, but I know that we will find solutions that come from facing the hard realities, combining our resources, and remembering to “think outside the box”. I want to talk about these realities, but please understand that no matter how difficult I imagine our future may become, I am also very excited about our shared expression of will that comes from the empathetic nature of our beings. It is this nature that will sustain us and support our efforts towards integrative advancement and creative cooperation.

Then last week Bob King called me and told me that he was experiencing some of the same concerns about his keynote and was wondering how I was doing with mine. You see, Bob and I have a shared history, including our birth date, that at times reminds me of the interconnectedness of all things. Part of my concern about the future is the thought that great challenges require visionary leaders with enormous energy. I knew that I was blessed to be a part of the proliferation of the past quarter century’s most dramatic advancements our profession had ever been challenged to make.

There was a core group of massage therapists, each who had created schools or clinics where there weren’t any before, and who co-opted an aging association and revitalized

it with an energy that was transformational. People like Margaret Avery-Moon, Grace Chan, Iris Burman, Benny Vaughn, Raymond Moriyasu, Janet Kahn, Dan Ulrich, Patricia Benjamin, Elliot Greene, Ruth Marion, Sallie Nieman, Nancy Dail, Steve Kitts, Jackson Petersburg, Rose Gowdey, Rick Rosen, Ben Benjamin, Steven Schenkman, Debra Curties, Carol Carpenter, Toni Gallagher, and so many others who took their lead from Bob King.

What we had in common was a sense of urgency about creating changes that supported progress for our profession and relying on the belief that our progress would support the common good of our society and of our world. We knew about "win – win" before Covey wrote about the seven habits. One of my questions for the future is, "Who are the future leaders that will cooperate to create new changes that advance our art and science? Who are the future "Bob Kings" who will inspire many to share the responsibilities that await them? "

So my anxiety about what to predict, and how to warn, and whether to chastise began to fade. The future is about our shared abilities to look at challenges, situations, dilemmas, and opportunities with a sense of respectful concern for the integration of our profession, including its advancing clinical scope of practice, the raising of entry and advanced levels of educational curriculums, and stimulating cooperation between schools, colleges, and universities; between associations, foundations, and consortiums; and between allied professions, governments, and the public. It is from this essential integration that our common ground will be broadened and stabilized with bedrock made of focused and honorable intentions.

We have already integrated our scope of practice with wellness and fitness, with rehabilitative and restorative medicine, with esthetics and beauty, and with optimal performance and functional athletic enhancement. The difficulty we face with the incredible variety of this scope of practice is our responsibility as educators to decide how much and at what level the future students of our schools will be mentored in this rich and colorful mix of knowledge, technique, clinical skills, and competencies.

We are also faced with the challenge of pondering new admission standards that recognize the need our profession has to attract individuals who already have displayed personal maturity and have a sense of community responsibility. These must be people who can demonstrate positively an ability to prosper academically, clinically, and socio-culturally. Are these the students your institution seeks? Do you demand that those who enter your doors have already achieved some measure of successful living? Do you push a comprehensive view of our combined disciplines seeking to uncover their common truths? Does the age, experience, and educational background of your students matter?

If it doesn't, how old were you and what experiences did you have when you were aware that you had earned the title of therapist, teacher, or director?

Here then are some of my musings about my hope for the future and the potential I envision for an integrated massage therapy that serves the advancement of medical, cultural, performance, and academic interests.

The scope of practice of the 21st Century massage therapist will continue to evolve as we learn more through research about the actual effects of massage therapy and as biomedical technologies, especially in measuring the human body's many systems, evolves. Massage therapists will still provide relaxation and rejuvenation services through spas, resorts, fitness centers, corporate offices, and private clinics. However, the therapist of the 21st Century may have a small, handheld device that allows them to immediately measure levels of imbalance through neuro-electric impulses, skin temperatures, and brain wave cycles. Advancement in technologies may also create massage-simulation devices that serve the individual more profoundly than any device on today's market. Consider a full-body suit of clothing that can be programmed to manipulate the soft tissues in pre-programmed cycles that respond to lymphatic, cardiac, and neurological measurements. Know that there will be products that will assist the individual to become more attuned to the dynamics of the parasympathetic and sympathetic branches of the autonomic nervous system.

Medical massage therapists will work in an integrated environment and will be utilized in a more pro-active system that works to balance the immune functions before moving forward with more aggressive medical therapies. The medical massage therapist will also be asked to become an expert on balance, longevity, and the aging process. The enormous population of baby-boomers will require a more active system of structural alignment strategies that includes exercise, somatic treatment, and computer-based study systems. Computer programs will assist the therapist in both measuring and tracking the functional abilities of the patient/client while producing educational materials that increases the client's conscious involvement. The current philosophy that created products, therapies, and services that are advertised as "anti-aging" will be changed to include the future emphasis on pro-aging strategies. Massage therapy will be accepted as a primary partner in quality of life endeavors that unite the principles of total health.

With an unrelenting increase in the development and use of medicinal and psychoactive pharmaceuticals, the medical massage therapist will also need to understand the indications and contraindications of adding certain massage disciplines that better harmonize with medical therapies. The pharmaceutical industry has and will inevitably

continue to develop drugs that promise total physical and mental relaxation, while promising the public that side-effects are minimal. Their advancements will probably hasten the weakening of the fundamental balance of the human immune system, leading to systemic damage of intrinsic homeostatic functions. We must publicize with greater coverage and clarity our natural and safe remedies for depression, chronic pain, neurological dysfunction, and acute soft-tissue maladies.

Sports and performance-based therapies will demand a more educated practitioner who understands the physical and psychological dynamics of the client's specialized talent and the inherent demand on their body. The therapist will need to be familiar with a wide assortment of athletic disciplines and divergent dance and music cultures, each which place demands that alter how the performer utilizes body mechanics to compensate from overuse abuse. Performance-based massage and specialized exercise strategies will become as necessary as supportive nutrition, organized practice, and mental preparation.

Future findings in optimal performance increases will recognize that massage therapy is essential to offset sustained training levels that potentially threaten joint, myofascial, and neurological health. Indeed, performance-enhancing massage strategies will be utilized for those select few that embark on multi-year journeys to other planets in our solar system. There will be a massage therapist orbiting in the space station that launches future missions.

Scope of practice should always dictate how curriculum should be organized and expanded. It's what we do that tells us what we need to know. In the case of both medical and performance-based massage systems, how should we expand what is now considered entry-level and advanced curriculums? Can our current entry-level system of 500 to 700 classroom hours deliver the critical knowledge, skill, and integrated competencies, or will we need to find a new standard that incorporates the best global models in extended intensive programs of one to two years?

Our current directions of massage therapy education seem to have taken three separate roads. The final decades of the past century brought us individual massage therapists who created schools that fueled the early explosion of our professional population. Where there is success, competition will follow. Corporate trade and vocational schools that specialized in other career programs couldn't help notice our growth and began adding massage courses to their mix. While they may have found experienced instructors to support their courses, these schools lacked those key decision makers who thought and felt with the mind and heart of a somatic practitioner. Finally, the public school systems, including community colleges and multi-career vocational schools that

support student' tuitions with tax dollars opened programs that threaten the financial status quo of privately owned schools. While I recognize the right for public schools to teach students massage therapy, do I have the right to demand that they employ all their resources to create programs that advance our culture and seek to cooperate with those who have brought us to this point?

What I envision is an educational system that agrees to find common ground – in curriculum development, admission standards, and degree programs. It will soon be time for us to claim that the body of knowledge that has been accumulated is more than enough for a variety of academic and professional degrees. This would make the early 20's the minimum age of any new therapist. While the possibility exists for private-public partnerships in educational endeavors, it is more likely that larger, successful schools will transform themselves into colleges that specialize in bachelors and masters programs. A few schools have already done this and I think more will follow.

The multi-state and multi-country corporate schools will not only exist but will expand their embrace of our educational system. Hopefully they will be allies in helping us raise our standards to new heights so that we can jointly pursue those who are better prepared to learn and benefit from the profession's treasures. Too many of the younger graduates of all schools find themselves overwhelmed by the responsibility of the therapeutic relationship and the difficulties of creating and maintaining a successful practice. We must never be satisfied with watching half of those we teach fail in the development of their career.

The future of our educational system will also demand that we cooperatively work with private and public universities to create bachelors and masters degrees that focus on the educational needs of adult learners. Indeed, I foresee the possibility of twenty or more strong regional schools forming a consortium under an umbrella that will coordinate bachelor degree programs for students who have not yet earned one, and masters programs for those who have. These programs will offer specializations in clinical practice with extensive specialized internships, teacher-training modules, and directed involvement in research, scholarly writing, and cross-cultural analysis.

We will also need to create doctoral programs that prepare research scientists in methodologies that incorporate medical, socio-cultural, and behavioral concerns. These research scientists will have a greater understanding of the clinical nature of our profession and therefore better able to design projects that answer the questions we pose.

We should immediately open a global dialogue on the issues of scope of practice, curriculum development, and advancement in the cooperation of research design and other scholarly pursuits. International exchange programs for massage therapy educators, clinicians, and association leaders needs to be funded so that our best and brightest can both learn from and dialogue with colleagues from around the world. International symposiums, like the upcoming research conference in Montreal, should be coordinated to advance our appreciation of a global movement that is both wider and deeper than we realize. The inspiration factor of events like these is monumental, as well as the opportunity to create bonds that will enhance our appreciation of the shared wealth of knowledge that currently exists.

Metanoia is an ancient Greek word that describes a major epiphany of understanding, indeed, a profound leap of consciousness that answers many questions at once with a truth that is powerful and fully recognized by the recipient. I believe with all my heart that our profession's ability to touch, to assist, to serve, and to balance the lives of those we come in contact with is one of the most powerful tools of personal and social enlightenment. We have been blessed with this gift and we are ultimately responsible for its use.

While walking through the French Quarter this week with my wife, we admired the art and music of this rich, multi-cultural city. We came upon one art studio that had beautiful pieces of Judaic art. On one piece was the 12th Century physician's prayer and oath by Moses Maimonides. I was touched by its insightful beauty and elegance, and by its clear statement of purpose. Let me close with these words so that we can move into the future by teaching our students these principles:

Thou has appointed me to watch over the life and health of all of your creations. May the love of my art motivate me at all times. May neither avarice, or miserliness, nor the thirst for glory or a great reputation engage my mind, for enemies of truth and philanthropy could easily deceive me, and make me forget my lofty aim of doing good for your children.

Endow me with strength of heart and mind to serve the rich and the poor, the good and the wicked, friend and foe, and that I may never see in the patient nothing else but a fellow in pain.

May I be moderate in everything except in knowledge of this science, so far as that is concerned may I be insatiable. Grant me the strength and opportunity to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain, for knowledge is boundless and the spirit of man is infinite.

We share these responsibilities that are both necessary and unrelenting as we pursue continued advancement in the name of knowledge, truth, and ethical discipline. We can never be satisfied with the status quo. We must solidify our shared engagement in all things that announce our identity as professionals in a global community of therapists and educators. We must learn to constantly question the accepted order and search for new answers. We must honor the past, but never allow ourselves to be bound by its comfort and security. The future presents the ultimate opportunity to learn, to create, to magnify, and to shape a truth that embraces the best of humankind.

This is who we are and who we must continue to become.