**EPISODE 212: Polish Your Own Crystal Ball: 5 Steps to Career Clarity for Physicians at the Crossroads**

**With Dr. Heather Fork**

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Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hey there, and welcome to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host, Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 212. Today, I want to dive into a question I often hear from physicians when they come to me for career advice. They'll say something like, “I know you can't really tell me what to do, but I'm kind of hoping you can.” Many of them want to know whether they should stay in clinical medicine, transition to a nonclinical career, or explore other options. And if so, what path might be the best fit for them?

In these moments, I imagine I'm hoping I have a crystal ball I can look into for an answer. Sometimes I even joke, “Well, my crystal ball is in the shop, or it's a little cracked, but let's put some duct tape on it and see what we can figure out.” The truth is we each have our own crystal ball inside of us. It may be cloudy and dusty at first, requiring some polishing to reveal its clarity, but it's there.

And as I learned in my coaching training, my role isn't to act like a consultant or a psychic and simply hand over answers. Instead, as a coach, I help clients uncover their own answers, a process that is not only empowering, but also deeply transformative. That's not to say I don't provide feedback and guidance and intuition and direction that I share.

For example, in an initial conversation, it may be clear to me that this physician is still deeply connected to clinical practice, doesn't need to leave, and anxiety is getting in the way, or that a particular nonclinical direction could align with a certain physician's skills or interests. But it's important to note that the guidance isn't based on my assumptions or a top-down approach. Instead, it comes from a process of listening, asking questions, and reflecting back what I am seeing and hearing. Through this collaborative process, the crystal ball is polished.

In this episode, I wanted to share five steps that I use in this process that help to polish the crystal ball so you can apply these same principles to your own situation if you like, no matter how cloudy or opaque the ball looks to you right now. Without further ado, let's dive into these five steps to help you polish your own crystal ball and uncover the answers you've been looking for.

The first one is to quantify to clarify. Now this is something I talk a lot about on the podcast. Let me just ask you right now, if you're to look at your own situation on a scale of zero to ten, how satisfied are you? With ten being, “I really love what I do, it's fulfilling, I'm happy.” And zero being, “Cow gone, take me down the river, away from here.”

For example, I was speaking with a physician a bit ago and I said, “What is your career satisfaction?” She is in emergency medicine and she said, one out of ten. I said, “Oh my gosh, you're hemorrhaging happiness at a one out of ten.” And I asked her, “What do you do in the emergency department when someone's hemorrhaging?” She goes, “Oh my gosh, we do everything we can, everything we need to do to stop the bleeding.” And this isn't a situation where you give someone iron and tell them to come back in six months. This number is really helpful.

My cutoff is seven out of a ten. As we start to go below that, there are more negative effects on your mental, emotional, physical, spiritual health to be in that situation for very long. One, two, three, four out of a ten, it's pretty unhealthy. Absolutely not sustainable. You want to do something about that sooner rather than later.

I'm not crazy about five or six even. Seven is good. When you're going to make a big change, we want at least a seven out of ten. So if you're looking at nonclinical options or something entrepreneurial or a different clinical job, we want it to be at least a seven out of a ten. Eight out of ten, nine of a ten, ten of a ten, those are great. But you can use this simple quantified clarified to help you get a quick assessment of where you're at right now and also when you're looking at options.

All right, this brings us to step number two for polishing your own crystal ball. Step number two is to follow your energy. If you think about your current situation, current life, what gives you energy? What drains you energy? If we follow this simple principle, do more of what you love, less of what you don't, it helps get us out of overthinking things sometimes.

For example, when I'm listening to a client and we're on Zoom, I can see them and I'm often paying attention to where are they getting more animated? Where does their voice go up? Where is their energy coming from their body? And what are they talking about? And it could be something in their clinical job. And maybe there's a certain aspect like they might say, “Well, I really love when I'm in the room with a patient and I get to hear their story and I really get to help them and I'm connected with them. It's all the other stuff that drains my energy.”

Or they might be telling me, for example, I have a client who is a physician and she works hard in her job and her job's okay, but it feels like it's a job. And on her free time, she's been investigating having an interior design business and creating all this content. She's already getting good feedback. And I had her find her first client and she got great reviews on that. And her energy, all her energy just perks up when she's talking about interior design. She gets animated and I can feel it. It gives me goosebumps when she talks about it. And I joked and I would say, if I couldn't understand English and I couldn't hear a word you were saying, I would just say, whatever that is you're just talking about, do that.

Because the thing is we can overcomplicate things a lot in our head, overthinking things, trying to say, “Well, what should I do? What's logical? What's reasonable?” And because energy, this energy is a life force. It's connected to our spirit, our soul. It's been given to us as our internal GPS to guide us. And so you want to pay attention to it. Be careful not to discount where your energy wants to flow. Energy is judgment neutral. It is what it is. So pay attention to it. Ask yourself, “Well, why do I feel this way? Why does this light me up? Why does this give me goosebumps?”

Another example is someone else I know. It's a physician and she's spending all this time as a volunteer, helping out friends and family members with medical issues. She was acting in the role of a patient navigator, patient advocate, spending over even a hundred hours with one person. She said, “Well, could I make a business out of this?” I said, absolutely. It's not the easiest thing to monetize being a patient navigator or advocate, but you can do it. And so, her energy was really flowing in this direction. No one was making her. She wasn't being paid. That's a big clue. Look at what you're doing that no one's paying you for and see if this is something you might want to make a business out of.

The last thing I wanted to say for this one about following your energy is simply pay attention to where does your energy contract and what settings does it expand? I noted this towards the end of my years practicing dermatology is my energy initially had been very expansive in dermatology. And then it started contracting where I wanted to see less patients per day. I wanted to work less days per week. I wasn't as motivated to start new programs in my practice. The energy was contracting.

And then when I started getting into coaching, the energy has always been expansive. I always want to do more projects or more things I would like to do. I just don't have enough time. This energy continues to be expansive. That's there. You can apply some physics to your situation to get some guidance for your own situation, where are you contracting and where do you expand and why?

This brings us to step number three, which is to identify your internal driver or drivers. And we look at whether this is coming from a healthy place or tipping into the unhealthy range. A lot of different things can motivate us, but some common ones could be you're motivated to heal and to help and to be of service. You might be motivated to make a certain amount of money and have financial security or to be an expert or to achieve and leave a legacy.

We look at what are our drivers. And typically there's a way that this driver can be very healthy and it can come from a place of trust and abundance. But then there's a part of it that can come more from a scarcity mentality and a fear-based place, which I call more ego-based thinking or the fear-based ego. It's not necessarily at a conscious level, it could be more subconscious.

Let me explain this by using an example. I have a client who is a surgical subspecialist and he said I could share this example. I always ask for permission. And he is a type three on the Enneagram, which is the achiever. And as we're working together it's very clear that even though he's making a good amount of money and he was fairly early in his career and doing well, he was comparing himself to people he went to school with, who are maybe making more money than he was or more successful in his mind.

And so, he was putting himself down like I'm not making enough, I'm not doing the kind of procedures I want to be doing. And he's also raising a family. They felt like he wasn't always showing up the way he wanted to at home. And as we really looked at what was motivating him and what was missing and what was he wanting, he said, “I don't really like admitting this. But the truth is, I chose this direction in medicine because of the prestige and the money.” And he was doing all this comparing, we talk on the podcast about compareitis, and he was always falling short of who he thought he should be and his expectations for himself.

He didn't realize the extent that he was doing this. And when he could step back and be fully honest, sort of looking at crystal ball, the crystal ball became much clearer. It doesn't mean that he was someone who was just motivated by money and prestige. It meant that his ego was telling him that that's what you need to do. And the thing about when we have an ego driver like that, we will never satisfy it. No matter how much money he would have made or how much prestige, he might feel better for a short period of time. But then pretty soon there'd be someone else he would compare himself to and whatever he was making, it would not be enough. That's one strong clue that this internal driver has an unhealthy component to it. And it's more ego based or fear based is that you will never satisfy it, but you can unhook from the unhealthy part. And then you actually get more connected to your healthy drivers.

Now that he is unhooking from this driver, that's been driving him, he said almost his whole life, dictate his career, he can step back and says he's taken this pressure off himself, sort of taken the foot off the gas of where he needs to go. He can step back and enjoy more his patient interactions, enjoy more his family time, because he's not always feeling like he's not measuring up. And then he can really truly assess what is an alignment with his heart, what will really fulfill him, because it's not going to be the prestige, it's not going to be having X amount of dollars. Now he has a sense of really looking in that crystal ball and having a more accurate reflection of what's true for him.

Another example is a client I have who identifies herself as a people pleaser. She's feeling very burnt out at work, it's a very demanding job. And then she has a family, she comes home, and she wants to be a super mom. And she starts with her checklist and her checklist is never ending and she feels exhausted. And she feels like she gets irritable at times and doesn't really like that part about herself. And so, we started looking at what is she doing and why is she doing it.

She talked about how she is a class mom for her daughter. And she said, I don't like to do that. I really just don't want to do that. And I said, “Well, does your daughter think you should be doing it? Would she mind if you didn't do it? - No, she doesn't care. - Why are you doing it? - Well, I feel like the other moms are looking at me and this is, I should do that. I should be involved in this way.” And then she said, “It's a bad old habit that I need to be mindful of. When I am doing this, I'm not honoring what I need or feel.”

And this was another great “aha” moment. This is a transformative moment for this physician because she can unhook from the unhealthy part of this driver. She will be able to come into full alignment of what's best for her. And in this way, also being of service in her job and being of service to her family, but she can stop burning herself out.

Alright, this brings us to step number four for polishing your own crystal ball. Number four is to develop an inner guidance practice. Okay, I'm going to give you some examples of what this could look like, and then explain why it's important. So some examples could be having a meditation practice, practicing mindfulness during the day, doing a daily inspirational reading, journaling. It could even be spending reflective time in nature or having a yoga practice. Now there's so many benefits that can come from any of these practices, in terms of de-stressing, having more peace, being able to be more present.

The one I really want to focus on has to do with that connection with yourself that comes out of being more present. And this, again, is really helpful for polishing that crystal ball, because so often we get caught up in “doing”. We have so much to do, we're so busy, we're trying to get our checklist done and just get everything done in the day before the next day starts. This has often been called being a “human doing” instead of a “human being”. So we're trying to go more into the state of being a “human being” versus a “human doing”. When we're more connected to being, being present in the moment. We're more connected to ourself and obviously the people around us, or whatever is happening in that moment. When we're more in a state of being, we have more access to the truth of who we are, because our mind isn't lost in the future, where we're thinking about what could happen, having worries, having anxieties, trying to prepare for the future, and all the “what if’s”. And we're also not lost in the past, ruminating, “what I should have done, what I should have said, what I should have done instead”. The decisions that I made; the regret. When we can actually be present. We have access to a lot more energy, a lot more possibility and potential, a lot more creative energy, and we have access to ourselves. To the truth of who we are.

So that's a long way of saying these practices can help you hear your inner voice. Hear what you're needing, hear what you're wanting, and help distill out a lot of distracting thoughts to find out what your inner voice is really trying to tell you. So for example, a meditation practice is often something we feel is very difficult to do, but we make it harder than it needs to be.

For example, if you aren't doing one already, or you've struggled with one, I would suggest just starting with one minute. Yep, one minute a day, because that's a powerful rep that you do to say, okay, I can take one minute out of my day. I can be present with myself for one minute. Just breathe during that one minute. Try not to think anything. You're going to have thoughts, but don't worry about that. Just take one minute to breathe and reconnect with yourself. Once you do one minute, go to two minutes, but that's a simple thing you can just start with. Now mindfulness practice is also having that focus on being present in the moment. That is what we're trying to do in meditation. So you can think of mindfulness practice as meditation in motion, or just taking that intention to be present and not get lost in our thoughts into our day.

Maybe mindfulness practice can be implemented anywhere. It could be when you're driving to work or driving your kids, you look and see, “What haven't I noticed on this route that I've gone over 100,000 times? What can I see that I haven't seen before?” Or one thing I like to do is, when I go into a new place, like a restaurant. When I go into the restroom, I'll try to notice, “What is the decor, what's the color on the walls, what's the tiling? What are the fixtures look like?” Because it's just a practice to help me be out of my thinking mind and just thinking thoughts while I'm just sort of mindlessly going into the restroom, it brings you into presence. So anytime you're using your senses, your sight, your hearing, your touch, your feel, smell, you're coming more into presence and being more mindful. A number of physicians do the practice of when they're about to open the door to go into a patient's room, they just take a deep breath. That's a mindful moment.

When you're exercising, instead of maybe listening to a podcast, which you still can do, you can focus on, what does it feel like just to be in your body when you're exercising, feeling the breath coming in and out, enjoying that you're able to move your body. So whatever it is you're doing, you're trying to bring more attention into the present moment and be connected to the body.

There was a recent podcast on mindfulness that was 209. There were a lot of great suggestions about how you can bring mindfulness into your day and the value of it. So I’ll link to 209 in the show notes. Another inner guidance practice is to do a daily inspirational reading. And this could be from a book. Sometimes they're based on your religion. Sometimes they're based on Alcoholics Anonymous (“Al Anon”), or just positive psychology.

I did a podcast, Episode 191, where I mentioned a number of different daily inspirational readers. And these are so helpful. And this is, I think, something I've definitely found incredibly powerful, and I do every day. These inspirational readers are very helpful, because they help us see our challenges and our struggles and the things that we're dealing with from a different perspective. They help us step back and say, “How can I look at this in a different way” So instead of a challenge, it's an opportunity. How do I see this from a possibility-based perspective rather than a problem-based perspective? And for me, it just sets my mind in a better state. When I wake up, instead of waking up and thinking about the things that aren't right in my life in that moment, I kind of have a different perspective that I bring into my day, and I bring in this intention kind of informs how I live my day, how I interact with people. So if you're interested in that podcast, if you haven't heard it already, that's 191 and I will link to that in the show notes.

I also mentioned that journaling and spending reflective time in nature, and yoga, can all be inner guidance practices. And so the most important thing is to just find something that doesn't feel like a big ask for you, that you can incorporate into your day, and just see how it starts helping you reconnect with yourself and be able to hear your inner voice and what it's trying to tell you. And the last thing I'll say about this is just notice that it's not uncommon for resistance to come up to doing any of these. And part of that can be there's a part of us that is afraid to hear what the inner voice has to say. We may be unhappy in our situation. We may know that change needs to happen, but we don't really want to admit it, because then we have to do something about it. So if you notice resistance to any of these practices, even just one minute of meditation, just be gentle with yourself and ask that question of, “Could this be because there's something I really don't want to hear that I need to tell myself; that I need to be honest about?”

All right, we are getting close to wrapping up here. The fifth step for polishing your own crystal ball is to give yourself a permission slip. I say this because so often, we don't allow ourselves to feel what we feel, and we start judging it. For example, it's not unusual for me to hear the story where someone says in medical school, I felt like I'd made a mistake. But people told me, well, it'll get better when we get to the clinical part, or it'll get better when you get to residency, hang on, or it'll get better when you're attending and you're making money. And they say, it never did.

I would give you a permission slip to honor those feelings. And yes, sometimes things do change. And it's good to not make flash decisions about something so important, but honor your own feelings, because other people don't walk in your shoes. They can have advice, and they can have recommendations, but they can't feel what you feel. They don't know what it's like to be you. They don't know what you're experiencing. Their advice is only good up to a point.

You may also find you need a permission slip to say, “Hey, I'm bored.” And it feels very bad to say I'm bored seeing patients, because that sounds like something negative about patients. It's not anything to do with patients. It's not personal. Whatever you may be doing may not be challenging you in a way you want to be challenged. You may need to give yourself a permission slip to say, “Hey, I don't feel appreciated. I feel like a cog in the wheel. No one really values my opinion. And I'm worth more than this. And I don't know how I can find a better setting where I am appreciated, I am valued, I can feel like I'm making an impact, but I'm going to give myself a permission slip to find out how I can do that, where I can do that.”

Maybe you're in a difficult relationship. Maybe you've been married for a while, and things have changed, and you have kids, and you feel like it's a failure to get divorced. But maybe you need to give yourself permission to say, “Hey, this isn't really working. And it's not healthy. And this is not how I want to live the rest of my life.” You may need to give yourself permission to say, “Hey, I have a creative itch I want to scratch. I have this idea. I want to try this thing out. I've actually been researching it. I'm excited about it. And if I tell someone so, they're going to say, well, that's crazy. You've got a good job. Do what you do. Don't bother with that. Or don't think of that as a career. Or just do that as a hobby.”

When we were in elementary school, we had to ask permission to go to the lavatory. And they give you that key sometimes, which is on that big old wooden paddle or something like that. We had to raise our hand and ask permission to go to the bathroom. Well, you don't need to ask permission for anyone to want what you want and feel what you feel and see what you'd see in that crystal ball. Because when you polish it and get that dust off of it and look in it, it's a mirror. And it's looking back at you. It's not looking back at anyone else. It's your reflection. And it's your life. And I want you to honor what you're seeing.

All right, as we're coming to the end here, I want to review the five steps for polishing your crystal ball:

Number one is to quantify, to clarify So on a scale of zero to 10, with 10 being you're really happy with your situation, and zero you are miserable. What is the number representing your current situation? And you can also use the zero to 10 scale when you're looking at different options. And if it's not at least a seven out of a 10, usually it's not worth pursuing.

Number two is to follow your energy. Where is your energy expansive, and where does it contract?

Number three is to identify your internal drivers. Where are they healthy, and where are they taking you out of alignment with yourself?

Number four is to develop an inner guidance practice;

and number five is to give yourself a permission slip.

I'd love to hear how any of these steps are helpful for you and what you're seeing in your crystal ball and how that's going. If you would like some help in polishing your crystal ball, I love doing one-on-one consultations with physicians. And that can be a one-off hour on Zoom, where we really do a deep dive on what's going on, the changes you want to make, and giving you actionable steps for going forward. I also offer a coaching program if you want more ongoing support for working on that crystal ball. And if you’d like more information about these please feel free to reach out to us at team@doctorscrossing.com. I'll have that email in the show notes.

And all the best to you for polishing that crystal ball and seeing your beautiful reflection. Please share this podcast. I'd love it if you could share it with at least one person today. I so appreciate all your efforts in supporting the community, supporting the podcast, helping other physicians find their way out of darkness. And as always, don't forget to Carpe that Diem, and I'll see in the next episode. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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