

Meet the Real Patch Adams M.D.

An interview with Robert Holden

Patch Adams M.D. is America's most unusual doctor. He is a physician, clown, activist and revolutionary who challenges the orthodox medical establishment to "practise healing as a loving human interchange, not a business transaction". Earlier this year, Universal Pictures launched the hit movie "Patch Adams", starring Robin Williams as Patch. The film received two Golden Globe Nominations and was a huge box office success. Here, in this exclusive interview, Patch Adams talks to his friend and colleague, Robert Holden, founder of The Happiness Project.

R.H.: Patch, you are the only person I know who didn't have to die to get a film of your life made! Congratulations.

Patch: It's a gas. I remember you rang me the day after I was told Robin Williams was to play me. I couldn't believe it then, and I'm still not sure I believe it now.

R.H.: The film has inspired millions. What's it done for you?

Patch: It represents opportunity, a ticket, a special pass, to take my work with The Gesundheit Institute further and further to new countries and new people. I'm still doing what I have always done, but now more people get to hear about it.

R.H.: Let's start at the beginning, Patch. What was the first significant turning point of your life?

Patch: I had my mid-life crisis early, when I was 16. My dad died. We barely new each other. When I was young, he was away a lot. He was aloof, wounded and he drank. Then, at 16, we spent a whole week together, and he told me how World War II and the Korean War had destroyed his spirit. He was confused, angry and his best friend had buried a live grenade in his own stomach to save him. He had survivor's guilt. We cried a lot together. And, then, at the end of that week, just as I finally became friends with my dad, he died. A big heart attack. He died alone. I felt cheated, angry. Over the next three years I became a rebel without cause. Twice in high school, I was hospitalized for ulcers. Next up, my uncle who I made surrogate father committed suicide. Other things happened, and so I started trying to find ways to kill myself. I ended up in a mental hospital. It was here I finally became a student of life. I read the works of Nikos Kazantzakis, author of *Zorba the Greek*, and Plato, Neitzche, Walt Whitman, Mary Oliver, Dostoyevsky, everyone. I was hungry for a greater truth.

R.H.: You then went from mental patient to doctor. Tell us about your early experience at the Medical College of Virginia?

Patch: Let me tell you what was missing. There was no love, no intimacy, no passion, no joy, no laughter, nothing that distinguishes humans from hamsters. My professors taught biochemistry and politics. The stench of joylessness stained the hospital wards and the classrooms. There was no vision for being well. We simply got told “health is the absence of disease”. It was a joke – a sick joke. Illness was god. People got buried under piles of diagnoses and labels. My medical training was military, and any heart and soul was ripped from the troops. I rebelled. Albert Schweitzer was my north star. His inspiration plugged the gaps. The Gesundheit Institute is in many ways the antithesis of what I learned in medical school.

R.H.: What is The Gesundheit Institute?

Patch: The Gesundheit institute is an experiment. We treat people, not illnesses. We celebrate life all the way up to death, and after. For the first twelve years, Gesundheit consisted of 20 adult healthcare visionaries who used a large home as a community, retreat, oasis and make-shift hospital. We were open 24 hours a day, seven days a week. We welcomed over 15,000 people into our “home” and offered them friendship, service and healing.

In the last ten years we have, with the help of millions of volunteers worldwide, began work on the new-look Gesundheit which is a 40 bed rural community hospital in West Virginia, offering surgery, pediatrics, family practice, ophthalmology, psychiatry, counselling, healing, body work, acupuncture, homeopathy, naturopathy and an outpatient clinic. My role is networker, broadcaster, fund-raiser for the world’s first “happy hospital”.

R. H.: What would you say is the real purpose of Gesundheit

Patch: Gesundheit is both a stimulant and an irritant. It stimulates you to live, laugh, love. It stimulates you to be passionate about truth, beauty and service. It stimulates you to rise to the highest in you. The Gesundheit Institute is also a pie in the face of greed. We take America’s most expensive commodity – health care – and give it away for free. We want to irritate people who do not practice medicine with heart so that they will think again.

R.H.: What is Patch Adams’ #1 key to healing?

Patch: Health is centred on happiness – hugging people, connecting, loving your family, clowning and celebrating, loving your work, and connecting ecstatically to nature and the arts. Happiness cannot happen without intimacy. Intimacy is the key to happiness and healing. Without intimacy, there is no joy, no love, no healing, no medicine, no recovery, no remission, nothing. This is why we must treat people, not illnesses. When I treat you, I want there to be no distance between you and me. I want us to be as one.

R..H. My old counselling professors would tell you this “excessive intimacy” is unprofessional and very dangerous.

Patch: Friendship is my God. It was friendship that saved me when I was ill. Friendship, joining, belonging, being together took me away from the hell of

isolation, meaninglessness and pain. I want there to be no distinction between “friend” and “patient”. The love I feel for my colleagues, my patients, my sons, my lover, is the same love! Friendship is our most magnificent creation. It is a genetic and spiritual imperative that we huddle together, and be as one. All illness happens when we fracture and split from others.

R.H.: The great paradox of clowning is that a “mask” allows two people to get close. Your clowning must facilitate intimacy.

Patch: We have taken our “In Your Face” Clown Tours all over the world. We have gone to Russia, Europe, Cuba, everywhere. Laughter is the universal medicine. People crave laughter as if it were an essential amino acid. Someone once told me M.D. stands for “mirth defect”. Laughter creates healing contexts for people who want out of pain. Laughter and intimacy are twins. With laughter there is no hierarchy, no distance, no fear between patient and physician.

R.H.: I know you have strong views on finance in medicine, and in particular the relationship between malpractice insurance and intimacy.

Patch: The essential goal of Gesundheit is to support friendship and build community. Malpractice insurance mocks these goals. Fear of being sued for malpractice is one of the greatest tragedies of modern medicine. It is the thief of joy, trust and intimacy in the healing relationship.

R.H.: But what about accountability and responsibility?

Patch: The doctor is not god. We will make mistakes. The current malpractice law is a gun pointed at a surgeon’s fingers and at a psychiatrist’s heart. Malpractice law is not heart-centred. It is greed. It is a cancer. It wants to make “victims” and “enemies” and there can be no healing in our community while there are “victims” and “enemies”. And, anyway, when a doctor practices with love in his heart, he becomes completely accountable and responsible.

R.H. The Gesundheit Institute does not make a charge for its services.

Patch: No. Everyone is entitled to health, in the same way everyone is entitled to life. You should not go in to medicine to get rich. Medicine is about love.

R.H.: Recently I addressed a thousand medical students at a conference. I asked them why they wanted to be doctors. The majority said “prestige”.

Patch: Money and malpractice insurance make medicine an industry, not an art. It creates adversarial relationships. It means we practice with fear, caution, always covering ourselves. Healthcare, like life, should be free. We should not have to pay for our life, and we should not have to pay for our health.

R.H.: But, Patch, many people would say that the N.H.S. is on its knees because for a whole generation people lost sight of the value of health precisely because they did not have to pay.

Patch: Gesundheit is not “the” way, it is a way. We believe it is possible to teach people the value of health and life without having to make people lose their life savings for it. When you teach someone to value themselves they will value their health naturally.

R.H.: You describe modern medicine as “a health care system in pain”, crying out for hope. You particularly focus on the issue of “burnout”.

Patch: Burnout is the number one symptom of a modern health care system that has allowed greed, malpractice insurance, drugs and money to eclipse the joy of healing. Technology is a friend, not master. Drugs are an aid, not a god. And money and prestige must not be the purpose of healing. Burnout is what happens when the soul of medicine is swallowed up by a system of what you call, Robert, “politics and paperclips”. It’s because of politics and paperclips that we no longer have house-calls in America.

R.H.: “House Calls” is the name of your latest book. In it you cry out “bring back house calls”.

Patch: The loss of the house call in America is our greatest tragedy in medicine. Intimacy is lost. There is no bed-side manner. There is no doctor in the community. There is no medicine in the home. Now we have to visit factories where we get processed, diagnosed, prescribed and pushed out as fast as possible.

R.H. In your endorsement for my book “Happiness NOW” you said “the most revolutionary act you can commit in our society today is to be happy”. What do you mean?

Patch: One way to change the world is to give up your addiction to suffering. We eat, walk and talk suffering. The world is full of suffering stories. Honour your suffering, yes. My suffering was my fast train to joy. But let your suffering go also. Let it go. Make time to talk about the miracles of life. Be a “celebrant”. Celebrate your health, your life, your family, your friends. Celebrate and affirm joy. Decide to have fun. Decide it! Fun is a vote for life, in spite of everything.

And the greatest fun of all is service. Albert Schweitzer said no man can be happy and not service. Service is the key to wealth. It is the greatest wealth. When you serve you give yourself. And when you give yourself the separation and the pain is over. Where there was fear, there is now imagination.

Patch Adams and Robert Holden will be giving a series of one day “Living with Joy” workshops in London, Dublin and Edinburgh in February 2000. For information and credit card bookings, contact The Happiness Project at Elms Court, Chapel Way, Oxford OX2 9LP Tel: 01865 244414 Web-site: www.happiness.co.uk