



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE PICKLE  
CHALLENGE  
FOR A POSITIVE  
WORKPLACE

Emma Friedmann gawked at the bulletin board in mock astonishment. “Who made Rutledge supreme commander?” she asked Don Jefferson. They’d seen the notice on the way to the break room: *Mandatory meeting – Thursday at 3:00 in the classroom.*

The notice was signed by Sarah Rutledge. Marge Payson, the Pediatric Oncology department manager, looked up from where she was sitting at the nurses’ station. “Hey Marge,” Emma asked, “What’s this ‘mandatory meeting’ all about?”

Marge smiled. “I don’t know. But I plan to be there – and since Sarah says it’s mandatory you should probably be there too.” Marge propped her chin on one hand and gazed at Emma expectantly. When Emma finally shrugged and mumbled, “Sure – why not?” Marge went back to the record she’d been reviewing. As the two nurses continued on toward the break room she overheard Emma whisper, “This ‘proceed until apprehended’ business has really gotten out of hand. I guess now anyone can call a ‘mandatory’ staff meeting.”

Sarah was already in the classroom when people started to arrive on Thursday. Marge Payson was there early as well, sitting in the front

row. To the question “What’s this all about?” Sarah simply replied, “You’ll see.” A towel covered an object sitting on the table at the front of the classroom. By a few minutes before the hour, people had settled into their chairs, their expressions an admixture of curiosity and suspicion.

At 3 o’clock Sarah cleared her throat and shoved her hands into the pockets of the lab coat she was wearing. “I want to thank you all for coming today – especially Camille and Jon, who came in on their days off. I know some of you think it’s presumptuous of me – ‘just a nurse’ – to call a mandatory staff meeting, but what I have to say is important and it affects all of us. More important, it affects the kids we are blessed to care for and their families who are our guests while those kids are in our care.”

Sarah looked around the room. So far, so good. She hadn’t lost anyone yet. Yet. She inwardly braced herself, knowing that would come soon enough. “I know many of you saw that article in last month’s nursing journal about bullying, lateral violence, and toxic emotional negativity in nursing. I read that and thought what’s wrong with this picture? Terms like that should have no place in the nursing profession. More important, what can we do to make it right?”

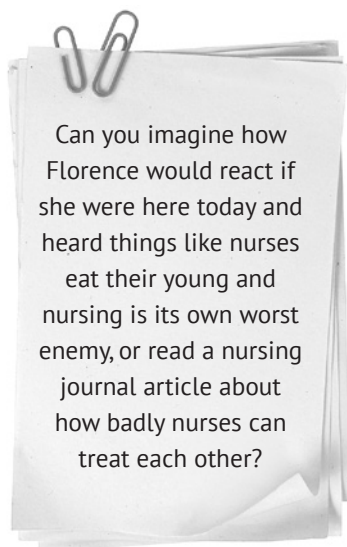
Sarah picked up a book that had been lying on the table and opened it to a dog-eared page. “Every year, Florence Nightingale would write a letter to students at the school of nursing that still has her name over the door. If you want to learn about what patient-centered care is all about, these letters are a pretty good place to start. I’d like to read an excerpt from one of them.” Ignoring Emma Freidmann, who was rolling her eyes in the back of the room, Sarah took a slow breath then read:

**Prying into one another’s concerns, acting behind another’s back, backbiting, misrepresentation, bad temper, bad thoughts, murmuring, complaining. Do we ever think of how we bear the responsibility for all the harm that we cause in this way?**

Closing the book and setting it back on the table Sarah said, “Can you imagine how Florence would react if she were here today and heard things like ‘nurses eat their young’ and ‘nursing is its own worst enemy’ or read a nursing journal article like the one last month about how badly nurses can treat each other?” As she looked around the room, Sarah noticed a few sullen glares amidst the knowing nods of recognition.

“I was in the locker room getting ready to go home a few days ago and happened to look in the mirror. My God, I looked like I’d spent the day sucking on a sour dill pickle – like one of those pickle-suckers Carol Jean Hawtrey talks about. From the look on my face, you’d have thought that article about toxic emotional negativity had been written with me in mind. I tried to make myself laugh and I couldn’t do it – I was too out-of-practice.” She smiled and shrugged, pointing her palms upward. “Who knew?” Everyone laughed because everyone knew. “Pickle-sucker is such a great metaphor! Think about what a pickle is – a fresh vegetable that’s been soaked in vinegar! And that’s what I’d become myself: a cynical, sarcastic, bitter old pickle-sucker.” Sarah puckered her lips and squeezed her eyes tight as though she’d just bitten into the world’s most sour pickle, creating a caricature of the person she’d allowed herself to become over the past several years.

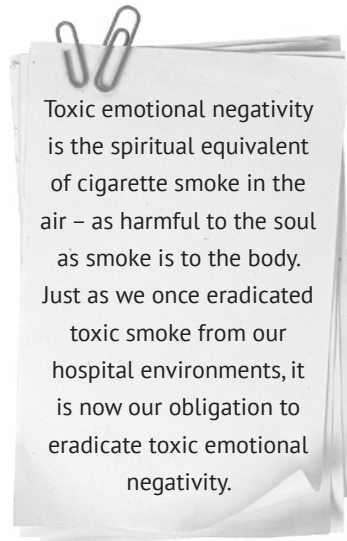
“In my house we use dry erase markers to leave notes on the bathroom mirror. When I got home that evening I wrote myself a note: *Get that pickle out of your mouth!* I don’t know if you’ve noticed – I hope at least some of you have – but for the past few days I have really been working hard trying to do just that. To stop being so negative – to stop complaining and criticizing.” Sarah’s eyes widened. “You *have*



noticed, haven't you?" Almost half the people in the room nodded in agreement while the other half glared impassively. These are the ones, Sarah thought to herself, who are unhappy with me because I've stopped listening to their complaining and gossiping.

"It's been hard work," Sarah continued. "Every morning I stand in front of the mirror and . . ." Here Sarah used her index fingers to push the corners of her mouth into a smile. "And as some of you have noticed, as soon as the gripe session starts, I move away as quickly as I can." Sarah saw several people frown and cross their arms even more tightly. *You know who you are*, she thought to herself, smiling inwardly. *And so does everyone else.*

Sarah glanced up at the clock. She'd figured that she'd have twenty minutes max before she started losing her audience on this Thursday afternoon. "I've been reading about emotional intelligence, and some of what I've learned really concerns me. It turns out that toxic emotional negativity – complaining, gossiping, finger-pointing



and the like – is both malignant and contagious. It's bad for your health, and one caustically negative person can suck the energy out of everyone else in the room the way one person lighting a cigarette will pollute the lungs of everyone else around. Carol Jean Hawtrey – the woman who wrote the Florence Nightingale leadership book – calls toxic emotional negativity the emotional and spiritual equivalent of cigarette smoke. Cigarette smoke for the soul!"

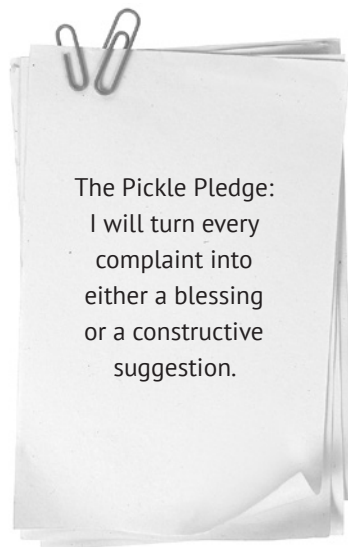
Marge raised her hand, then turned around to face the room. "I'd like to say something here. We say that we want to be treated with, and treat others with, respect, but every time two people talk about a coworker behind his or her back, we've just lowered the bar. We say that we

want to provide compassionate care and honor the dignity of our patients, but every time a patient overhears the sorts of conversations that Sarah's talking about – and believe me they *do* hear, because then I usually hear about it from them – we've just lowered the bar. I think Sarah is challenging us to raise that bar back up again. Our negative attitudes can cause iatrogenic anxiety and depression for our patients – and that's not just unprofessional, it's malpractice.”

Sarah picked up a small pile of papers that had been lying face down on the table and, handing them to Marge, asked her to pass them around. “What I'm passing around is something I call The Pickle Pledge. It's a promise I've been making to myself every morning and then again several times during the day. It simply says that I will turn every complaint into a blessing or a constructive suggestion.

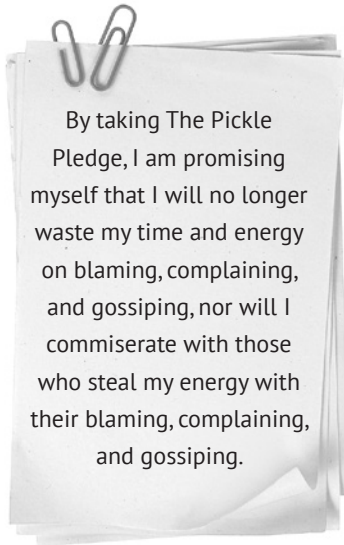
And it's true that there's nothing you can complain about that can't be turned into a blessing or a suggestion if you think about it. When I catch myself complaining about how far I have to walk from the parking lot to the hospital, I can be thankful that I have legs, that I even have a job, and remind myself that if I put in more miles on the treadmill, walking a few blocks wouldn't be such a hardship.”

Sarah waited as The Pickle Pledge was passed around and people had a chance to read it. “You'll notice there's a footnote. It says I won't let anyone else ruin my day with their toxic emotional negativity and that I promise to not do that to any of you. That doesn't mean I won't help you deal with real problems – you all know I will, and I know you will for me. I just won't sit around listening to you whine about things, or make you listen to me whine about things, that we're not going to do anything about other than complain.”



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Out of the sixty people in the room, Sarah guessed that about forty were now tracking with her and the rest either skeptical or wanting to throw her out the window. She reached over to the table and lifted the towel, revealing a large empty pickle jar. “My husband and my three boys thought I’d lost my mind when I told them about the changes I was trying to make, but they’re good sports and agreed to go along with it.” Sarah held up the pickle jar so everyone could see



the home-made label that was pasted on its side: *Deposit Your Pickle Fines Here.*

“Every time one of us catches ourselves, or each other, bitching, moaning, whining, and complaining – you know, the ‘other’ BMW Club” – this drew a chuckle, even from a few people Sarah suspected were dues-paying members – “we’re supposed to put a quarter in the jar. The money’s going to go toward a family trip to Disneyworld, but at the rate we’re filling it up we might be able to take a round-the-world cruise.” A few more chuckles. “Guess what – not only are we

more positive, we’re actually talking about things that really matter instead of just complaining about things that don’t really matter.”

Sarah set the pickle jar back on the table. “I brought this pickle jar in to challenge us here at work to do what my family is doing at home – to take The Pickle Challenge. I can’t make anyone participate, but I can tell you that for me this has already been a life-changing commitment. I feel like I’m blowing a black cloud of toxic emotions out of my life. We could use the money to help pay for a Christmas party. Or we could contribute it to the unit’s scholarship fund – help Timmy go to medical school someday.”

Sarah would later joke that the silence of the next 30 seconds was the longest hour of her life. Finally Angelina Kingman, the unit’s

long-time environmental services aide, stood up and walked to the front of the room. She pulled a crumpled dollar bill from her pocket and dropped it into the jar. “Nobody’s heard it ‘cuz it’s all been in here,” she said, putting an index finger to her temple, “but I been complaining about things all day, my whole life! I should put a hundred dollars in this jar just for this week alone, but on my paycheck this is all I can afford.” She smiled sheepishly and looked at Sarah. “I guess I owe another quarter for that one.”

Sarah laughed. “We’ll let it slide this time.”

From the back of the room Marty O’Connor, who often looked like he’d been born with a pickle in his mouth, shocked everyone by saying “I’m all for it. ‘Bout time we started acting like grown-ups around here.” Over the next fifteen minutes almost everyone weighed in one way or another and eventually a consensus was reached that it was worth a try – and that it could even be fun.

Sarah was about to thank everyone for coming when Paula Janovich, who’d been silent throughout, said “I’ll go along with this, but I don’t know why we should fine ourselves for complaining when complaining seems to be all we ever hear coming out of administration. Wah-wah, we have to do more with less. Wah-wah-wah.” That got the biggest laugh of the day – even Marge joined in. “We should be able to expect the suits to set a good example, shouldn’t we?” There was a general murmur of agreement.

Sarah nodded emphatically. “I agree. And just so you know, I asked Connie in administration to schedule a mandatory management meeting for next Monday. You can imagine the reaction down on the Gold Coast when Sarah ‘just a nurse’ Rutledge calls a mandatory management meeting. I wish I could have been down there to see their faces!” Even the few people who up until now had been obviously disengaged smiled. Sarah could imagine what they were thinking – *at least she hasn’t completely gone over to the dark side – she’s still one of us*. “This weekend,” Sarah continued, “I’m going to Costco

and buying the biggest pickle jar I can find – then I’m going to clean it up and decorate it just for the suits to fill up.”

“Proceed until apprehended, Sarah!” shouted a young woman from the middle of the room. It was Darla Taylor, a new grad who’d already proven herself to be an informal leader.

“Hey,” Sarah replied, “if you proceed fast enough, by the time they figure out what you’re up to it’s too late to try and stop you! Nobody’s apprehended me yet – and if they do I’ll beg for forgiveness.” Sarah looked up at the clock. “I know I’ve gone longer than I said I would, but I’d like to share one more thing before you all leave.” She picked up another pile of papers from the table and handed it to Marge to pass around. “This is a poem by Emily Dickinson. She was a contemporary of Florence Nightingale, though I don’t believe the two of them ever met. It’s called ‘If I Can Stop One Heart from Breaking.’ I’d like to read it for you.” Sarah fumbled for the reading glasses she’d only just conceded to needing, then read aloud:

*If I can stop one heart from breaking,  
I shall not live in vain;  
If I can ease one life the aching,  
Or cool one pain,  
Or help one fainting robin  
Unto his nest again,  
I shall not live in vain.*

“That could be the nurses’ credo, couldn’t it?” Sarah asked as she set aside the poem. “Every time I put a quarter into this jar, I’m going to think of this poem and let it remind me of why I became a nurse – to ease the aching and cool the pain and to help those precious little ones we care for, kids that I really do look upon as my own children, to get back into the nest, and back up on their bikes, again.” Sarah



thanked everyone for coming, then spoke individually with as many people as she could as they were leaving. When she went back up to the front of the room to retrieve her things, she was astonished to see that her pickle jar was already starting to fill up.