

Medicine for the People

Joe and Terry Graedon talk about the life experiences that helped shape *The People's Pharmacy*

by Dave Korzon

He's the pharmacist, the mercurial one, an in-your-face, quick-with-an-opinion-or-fact bulldog. She's the medical anthropologist, a deep thinker, careful and precise with her comments.

Together they are Joe and Terry Graedon, a husband and wife team who have made it their life's work to give health advice to health-care consumers. Their syndicated public radio show, *The People's Pharmacy*, is carried weekly by more than five hundred stations across the country, and their nationally syndicated newspaper column, "The People's Pharmacy," offers up health advice for millions of readers. You can add to this the dozen or so books they've written, including their most recent title, *Best Choices From The People's Pharmacy*, which highlights some of their favorite and most fascinating home health remedy finds. (Did you know that placing a bar of soap underneath your bedsheets can cure leg cramps?) And when you mix in the speaking engagements, talk-show appearances, and countless awards and honors they've garnered over the last three decades, you begin to understand the reach and influence of this multimedia cottage industry.

The Graedons, who are admittedly very private people, bring passion, humor, and a practical (and sometimes funky) intelligence to the topic of health care. As a couple, they're as different from each other—and as authentically powerful a team—as Lennon and McCartney. During my first visit with them in their Durham, North Carolina, home, I had to ask what they thought of my Beatles analogy.

"Actually, that's really close," Terry offered. "Joe is the guy who says, 'Oh, this is great, let's do it!' And I'm the one who says, 'Well, let's think about it. Before we jump in, let's make sure we can jump back out.'"

"I bark a lot," Joe interjected. "I flap my wings a lot. There's a lot of drama around me. And Terry is centered."

To more fully understand the dynamics between the two, you can tune into their radio program, where their personalities—and the interaction between them—serve not only to inform, but also to entertain. Since 1980, when *The People's Pharmacy* first went on the air at radio station WUNC in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, the Graedons have been discussing health-related topics ranging from home remedies and miracle cures to the shortcomings of the FDA and drug

company malfeasance. No health topic is off-limits and every call-in question, opinion, and listener's story is given credence. This is a free market of ideas, where the Graedons not only advise, but also learn a great deal from their constituency.

Their newspaper column reaches an estimated six million readers and like the radio show covers an eclectic mix of topics. A recent column addressed questions from readers on flatulence, nosebleed prevention, vitamin D deficiency, and the FDA's opinion of the quality of generic drugs. In print, as on the airwaves, the menu is varied and the dialogue open.

A few personal observations from my time with Joe and Terry Graedon: My initial impression of Joe was that he was an extrovert who could be quick-tempered. This, of course, made Terry the "nice one," always ready to refine Joe's from-the-hip opinions for public consumption. However, after spending more time with them, I found that my first impressions didn't hold up for long. Joe has a vast reservoir of compassion and a genuinely sympathetic nature. And while Terry *is* nice, she also possesses a cutting sense of humor and a penchant for lobbing precision-targeted grenades at the medical establishment. "She can be a flame thrower," Joe related more than once during our conversations.

But the bottom line is this: the Graedons are advocates for all of us, and they have been for a long time. You have to go back over thirty years to when *The People's Pharmacy*, written by Joe Graedon, published by St. Martin's press in 1976, first made its appearance on bookstore shelves. It was this groundbreaking book, providing pharmaceutical and health information for the general public, that started Joe and Terry Graedon on this journey where their passion for people's rights combine with their professional acumen and continue to shake up the medical establishment from time to time. Most important, the Graedons allow health-care consumers to understand that they have someone in their corner. In today's health care climate they are that rare independent voice that tells it like it is.

DAVE KORZON for THE RAMBLER: Joe, when I approached you about this interview, you were less than enthusiastic. Then you surprised me by saying that what would make it worth your while would be for the interview to challenge you, to take you out of your comfort zone. Why this reaction?

JOE GRAEDON: I'm just tired. I mean, we've done so many interviews over the years.

TERRY GRAEDON: Saying the same thing over and over again gets old. And for the readers, reading the same thing over and over again gets old.

JOE: And I'm very guarded.

TERRY: He is shy.

JOE: I protect my privacy and my real feelings very carefully. I have this image of who I think I'm supposed to be and what I think people expect. I'm getting tired of that.

RAMBLER: I'm interested in finding out how you both grew into this job. What you do is certainly unique. You're totally independent health-care advocates.

JOE: Here's an interesting place to begin. I'll tell you what really rocked me: it was an interview I read with Steve Nissen from the Cleveland Clinic, head of cardiovascular medicine.

TERRY: We've had him on the show. He has sort of single-handedly taken it as his mission to make sure the FDA does its job better. That's one of the things we agree with him on, because we do feel we have a mission to make the FDA do its job better.

JOE: So in this profile on him, he's talking about what it was like to be in Ann Arbor in the late sixties and early seventies, because he was a University of Michigan medical student at about the same time that we were there.

TERRY: But we didn't know him.

JOE: In this profile, he talked about being a radical. He talked about what it was like to be in Ann Arbor during the civil rights movement, the anti-Vietnam War movement, and to

be a student radical. He said, "My life, my work, is an extension of what I was like when I was a student." And there it is! He's laying it right out there. I thought, Gosh, I would never say that, but that's who I am too! Of course, in graduate school we weren't very politically—

TERRY: We didn't occupy the administration building at U of M. Someone else did, though. It was occupied by the Black Action Movement, so we wouldn't have been welcome [*laughs*]. We were aware of things that were happening, but we weren't on the front lines.

JOE: But as undergraduates, we were very active, very involved in the peace movement. We did our trips to Washington, D.C. I remember when I was a graduate student at Ann Arbor, Terry went to D.C. to the big rally, and my folks were



Oaxaca, Mexico, 1973. The Graedons around the time Joe was writing *The People's Pharmacy*.

going to be there, so I said, “Look for my parents.”

TERRY: And sure enough, they were there with the Doylestown delegation [*laughs*]. That was when I first met his parents.

JOE: At a peace march. So what I’m saying is where we are today is pretty much an extension of who and what we were thirty-five, forty years go.

RAMBLER: I know that on your program, you always say, “Be your own health advocate.” To me, that kind of thinking, forming that kind of attitude, must predate your time at U of M. That way of thinking is an extension of a whole way of being brought up.

TERRY: Here’s some historical perspective. When I went off to Ann Arbor for my graduate work, I had two hundred dollars in my pocket—this was 1969—and that was what I was given to make my way in the world. Even in 1969, two hundred dollars was not very much to find a job, find a place to live, make it to the first paycheck. But that was the expectation.

JOE: Terry and I share this pretty big common historical marker: our parents were products of the Depression. That left searing scars on both families. Terry’s story in terms of her family was one of just pure grit.

TERRY: Oh, yeah. My grandmother was an amazing woman who was widowed in the middle of the Depression with five kids to raise. The oldest was eleven, the youngest was two. Her husband died of meningitis suddenly. His struggling auto garage went under immediately. So she baked bread, and she sent the kids out door to door to sell bread to survive.

JOE: My folks also struggled throughout the Depression. My mom grew up on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania—no running water, no electricity. Her father was a Bolshevik. He came from Russia: a lefty, a real radical. He located the family on a farm in Pennsylvania. This was a sort of back-to-the-earth movement in the early 1900s. But I grew up with this sense of, you know, any moment now, we won’t have enough money, we won’t have two nickels to rub together. There was also a sense of us being outcasts, being somehow different. And there was always a sense of political activism. Politics was the lifeblood of my family. Not so true for Terry’s family. Religion and politics were off the table.

TERRY: My parents were not politically active, except to vote.

JOE: When I first came in contact with Terry’s folks, I thought, OK, they’re Republicans, and they’re for the Vietnam War. Whew! This is going to be really tricky!

TERRY: And they, equally, my dad in particular, had the same sort of reaction to Joe: “What has she dragged home?” [*Laughs*].

JOE: Because I was pretty in your face. I had long hair and a beard and I was definitely against the war and I’d talk about it whenever the opportunity arose.

TERRY: My dad never called him “Meathead.” But he did call him the “Free Radical” [*laughs*].

JOE: Because of my work in chemistry [*laughs*]. But that’s the one common shared thing for us. For me in particular, an important influence on where I’ve ended up today profes-

sionally is the fact that I had polio when I was two years old. My first memory on this planet was waking up in an isolation ward in Philadelphia Children’s Hospital in full traction, which means you’re completely restrained, and there are ropes and pulleys holding you, stretching you. There are these alien creatures surrounding you in white gowns with masks on; you can just see their eyes. There were a lot of kids all around me who were really sick. Once a week, my parents could come and look at me through a window in the door. There were kids in that ward who were dying.

And I think an incredible amount of fear and distrust developed because I had to go back to the hospital several times later as I was growing up. And in order to get me into the hospital, my mother had to lie to me. The second time or third time after this happened, I told her I wasn’t going to talk to her again; and I didn’t, for quite a long time, because I was so angry. Whenever somebody came to take blood, which they did in those days with long rubber tubes and a little glass thing on the end and they’d poke you and then they’d suck your blood, so you could actually see the blood going up the tube, I’d always ask, “Is this going to hurt?” And they’d always say, “No.” Of course, it always did. Always did. So there was a distrust of the medical profession that started at a very early age. I think that has influenced my attitude toward the medical profession to this day.

So here I am, this kid, an only child, my mother had me when she was forty, and I came down with polio. That was practically a death sentence back when I was born in 1947. The doctors basically said I’d never walk again, and she just said, “Well, we’ll see about that.” Instead of putting me in a brace, the way they wanted me to be, she exercised my legs. But whenever I got hurt as a kid, she was like, “Poor little Joey! Oh my God! You’re dying!” I was overprotected, overmothered, for sure.

RAMBLER: I would have thought the exact opposite. They say that extroverts like to perform because they missed that mothering attention early in their development.

JOE: You made the first mistake by assuming “extrovert.”

RAMBLER: It’s hard not to.

JOE: That’s not who I am.

TERRY: We do have on-air personalities that are pretty darn close to who and what we are really. But it’s also true that Joe sounds more extroverted on the air than he is. He only *sounds* like he’s shooting from the lip.

JOE: In some respects, Terry is more the bomb-thrower than I am.

TERRY: I’ve been told my on-air personality is supposed to be the voice of reason. We figured out a long time ago that when we’re doing the show, people like to hear me reeling Joe in. So I can do that on purpose sometimes. There’s a little bit of a performance going on. Because if it isn’t entertaining, nobody’s going to listen. You can’t get any information out there if people aren’t listening.

JOE: You’ve got to capture their ears before you can capture their brains or their hearts. We try to do both. We try to reach people at a visceral level.

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