

The Value of Exposing Ideas to the Envelope of Serendipity: How blogging kick-started the Ancestral Health Symposium (AHS)

Brent C. Pottenger, MHA, MD Candidate ('15)
The Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine

When my good friends, Aaron Blaisdell and Chris Owens, and I attended the *New Directions in Physiology Symposium* at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), way back in December of 2009, we never could've imagined that one of Nassim Taleb's positive Black Swans would strike. On that simple winter day, we just wanted to hear some good academic talks about how to apply the insights from our unique heritages as human beings to the modern medicine challenges that we currently face. Standing in the lobby of the conference room that day, spontaneously, we started piecing together the semblance of a speaker lineup and a program structure for our own Symposium, for what is now the Ancestral Health Symposium (AHS): "What if we create an interdisciplinary event that unites healthcare professionals, research scientists, and layperson patients all in one space, on equal footing, to share and collaborate about all things paleo, primal, evolutionary, ancestral, and beyond?" was the question that we asked ourselves on that seemingly-fated day. From there, we decided that I should expose this novel idea to Nassim Taleb's *Envelope of Serendipity* by posting a straightforward essay on my blog, *Healthcare Epistemocrat*. Unexpectedly, after several commenters expressed strong support for the event, one generous donor spoke up and offered to provide the initial gift funding necessary to organize the 1st Annual Ancestral Health Symposium (#AHS11). Out of nowhere, we caught a wave; and, as any good Californians should know how to do, we rode it to shore.

And the presenters soon agreed unanimously. After Aaron, Chris, and I had discussed the Symposium notion with two of our friends, Mark Sisson and Seth Roberts, I e-mailed to our initial group of potential presenters a simple three-page proposal and asked them for their feedback on and interest in participating in an event that was still twenty months away. Luckily, nearly all of these *Ancestral Health movement* thought-leaders reciprocated our tremendous enthusiasm for such a gathering: the momentum started snowballing. Thankfully, from there, presenters chimed in energetically with suggestions for other excellent speakers—ranging from bloggers to physicians to scientists—who would add value to the conference's proceedings. I ran with these suggestions, and the presenter lineup filled up quickly. Once the full schedule took form, Loren Cordain assessed the Symposium fittingly, billing the event as "The Woodstock of Evolutionary Medicine"—a theme with a ring that happened to manifest organically at the real thing. It was genuine, indeed.

With presenters on board, with minimal funding for requisite expenses established, and with a space rented at UCLA, we enlisted hobbyist volunteers to found Ancestry, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charity that organizes the event, and the rest is history in the making.