

# My Girlfriend, the Acupuncturist

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Well, my girlfriend Stella finally did it. In June, after several years of working part-time and going to school full-time (and sometimes vice-versa), she turned in her last paper, passed her final set of exams, and took a giant step forward into the next phase of her life. She's now an official college graduate, with a bachelor's degree in the study of religion (and a minor in anthropology) from UCLA. I'm extremely proud of her, considering everything she's gone through the past couple of years. Congratulations, Stella! You earned it, and you deserve it.

The night Stella graduated, we had a party at a friend's house to celebrate. Naturally, it took about two seconds for her to show up at the party before people starting asking her all of the obvious questions: What do you want to do now? Are you going to work full-time? Are you going to get a master's degree? Are you going to take some time off? and so on, and every time someone new arrived at the party, the same round of questions started up all over again.

I felt bad for her. There she was, still wearing her cap and gown from graduation, without having the chance to sit down and relax for a minute, and people were asking her to plan out the next 40 years of her life. It didn't get any easier for the next couple of days, either, because that's when her friends and relatives from Florida started calling and asking the same questions.

It's been almost three months since that party, and while Stella didn't have an answer for her friends then, she does now. After thinking things over and talking with a lot of people, she decided that she's going to enroll in acupuncture school beginning next January. Her goal is to become a licensed acupuncturist, practice for a few years so that she can pay off her student loans, then go back to school and enroll in a doctoral program. When I asked her if she was doing this because I work on *Acupuncture Today*, she said no. When I asked her why acupuncture, her answer was simple. "I want to help people," she said. That was good enough for me.

Now begins the process of deciding which school to attend. Since we don't plan on moving anywhere anytime soon (unless one of us wins the lottery, in which case we'll be on the next plane to Hawaii), Stella has limited her choices to schools in California. The good thing is, there are a half-dozen or so schools within driving distance of where we live, and another handful up in the northern part of the state.

The next step is to get in touch with the schools and find out about what types of programs they offer. She's done her homework there, too; two schools have already sent her information packets, and she's waiting to hear back from several others. She's also contacted a few schools about visiting their campuses and seeing how they operate first-hand.

Once she's decided on a school, she'll have to apply and, if she's accepted, get financial aid. Going to acupuncture school isn't cheap: the people I've talked to tell me it can run anywhere from \$30,000 to upwards of \$50,000, not including books, supplies, samples of herbs, and insurance. And because of the amount of time Stella will spend studying, chances are she won't work while she's in school. If she does, it'll be a part-time job that just covers the essentials.

She's justifiably nervous about all this, and so am I. She's going to invest a lot of time and money over the next few years embarking on a career that doesn't provide many guarantees, financially or otherwise. And every time she asks me a question about acupuncture, it makes me start asking questions, too. Is going to acupuncture school the best thing for her? What should she look for when she's taking a tour of the campus? Which schools have the best programs? Are there better schools outside of California that she should look at? Are night classes available? How much time does she have to complete the program? How qualified are the instructors? Are the instructors friendly, or do they just read from a book and provide no real guidance? Does the school have a clinic on-site, or will she have to go somewhere else? How much time will she spend actually treating patients in the clinic? What about social activities? What types of pitfalls should she look out for? And what can she expect to get out of all this when she's done? These are all things she's going to have to consider.

There's also the question of the political landscape of the acupuncture profession. Things have changed significantly just in the past five years or so, and not always for the better. What's it going to be like five years from now? Will acupuncturists enjoy the same freedoms they do now, or will legislators start limiting what they can do? The FDA has already put the clamps down on ephedra and pinellia, and they've got bitter orange and other products in their sights. And you can't forget about other health care providers like naturopaths and chiropractors. They want to be able to practice acupuncture, too, and that's a situation that creates more competition for everyone.

To those of you who are still in acupuncture school, or who have just graduated and are about to start practicing, what do you think about Stella's decision? Is acupuncture a good choice for her? If so, why? If not, why not? I'd like to hear from you, and I'm certain she'd like to hear from you, too. So, if you have any advice to offer, send me an e-mail at the address below, or post your thoughts on Marilyn Allen's discussion forum. Thanks in advance for helping her make the right choice.

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