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## One Thousand Eyes, Hands and Needles

ACUPUNCTURISTS WITHOUT BORDERS' ONGOING EFFORTS IN NEW ORLEANS

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Kwan Yin, the female Buddha of Compassion, often appears with 1,000 arms and hands, and in the palm of each hand, an eye. One thousand eyes scan the universe, ready to respond wherever suffering is found. When I reflect upon the work of Acupuncturists Without Borders (AWB) in New Orleans over the past 12 months, I wonder if maybe she also appears with a needle in each hand, poised to treat a roomful of trauma victims, still struggling to find the ground under their upended lives in the deepening aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.



In the year since AWB quickly assembled its first response team, volunteer acupuncturists from around the United States set aside their families and private practices, paid their own airfare and joyfully entered a disaster zone in order to bring a little light, love and healing to a place of desperation, dust and chaos. Nearly 8,000 individual treatments have been offered, and behind each of these, a story is told, sometimes in words, sometimes transcending words.

Regardless of the language, the circle of healing, once set in motion, only keeps expanding, touching the hearts of everyone involved: volunteers, residents, responders, family members, the larger community and the world. I imagine that the desire to experience unity with the larger whole - the great circle of healing encompassing the planet and beyond - is the underlying motivation of every acupuncturist, and indeed probably is what brought them to the profession in the first place.

AWB, in offering the powerful healing inherent in Chinese medicine to the Gulf Coast recovery effort, has certainly performed a great service to the people of this region. Everyone loves recognition and support, especially infant nongovernmental organizations working diligently to stand and walk on their own two feet, enabling them to fulfill their noble vision long into the future. The ultimate benefit in serving others, though, is the very gift of giving. Everything circles back upon, and in resonance with, the mind of the actor.



AWB offers individuals within the acupuncture profession, an incredible opportunity to participate in relief work, now and in the future; this is both heart-opening and holds vast implications for the future of our planet. Can you imagine living in a world based on compassion and healing, instead of war and strife? That reality is ours, right now for the creating. This precious gift has changed every acupuncturist who has gone to New Orleans. Some have even returned home and radically changed the structure of their practices, switching to a more community acupuncture-friendly model.

The voices of volunteers again and again confirm the richness of the AWB experience.

In July, a volunteer wrote: "Eleven people have come for treatment including some staff members. Many are trying acupuncture for the first time, having heard that it brings immediate relief for symptoms of post-traumatic stress as well as for insomnia, pain, and a wide range of other conditions.

"An hour later, as we pack to leave, a woman walks in and is obviously disappointed when she realizes we're on our way out. She asks us where she can get help. She is visibly shaking with despair. We invite her to sit down. After placing five tiny needles in each ear, she starts to unload:

"My work is my refuge, my routine. By staying busy, I avoid my pain, which I don't know how to deal with alone. My family can't help. They call me and want to talk about their problems. My father is dying. Another family member was recently killed in a car crash. Many of my friends have left. A few weeks ago, I went online and found information about suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. I feel so desperate and depressed."

"Tears begin to stream down her cheeks. I reach out and she squeezes my hand tightly. Another

volunteer puts an arm around her shoulder."

AWB Executive Assistant, Sarah Tewhey wrote: "Last winter the people I was talking with were desperate ... looking for anything that could help them. I'd ask about Internet access and hear about waterlogged computers, ask about transportation and hear about cars turned over on the next block. I'd hear about missing family members and months spent sleeping on uncomfortable couches, lost pets. People were heartbroken, traumatized and angry, but somehow they sounded as though they had the strength to get on with life. It sounded as if they were going to be OK and that all of the material losses were secondary to the fact that they had survived.



"Based on more recent conversations with New Orleans residents, I think we are looking at a very dramatic second wave of trauma moving through the city. The people I've been on the phone with in the last few days are desperate. Many of these women are so busy taking care of their patients that they struggle to hold on to their own mental health. Several have confessed becoming addicted to drugs as a means of coping with the heartache and the enormous loss their entire community has experienced. There is a pervasive feeling of just barely hanging on. It hurts my heart to hear these things."

More recently, another volunteer wrote: "To see acupuncture work in the midst of such suffering was a great reminder of its power to help people heal."

A patient from the Musician's Clinic wrote: "Just knowing there are such beautiful souls who have us on their minds, and care enough to volunteer coming down here to love us, touches our hearts. So many of us feel that we've been forgotten by our countrymen, our government and everyone else. Y'all have been angels coming to spread your physical and emotional healing."



A woman at St. Jude's Community Center, who was homeless, said that she was able to go to a "safe place" inside of herself for the first time, maybe since childhood. The peace that this simple treatment gave her was immeasurable and the sparkle in her eyes at the end, priceless.

On the way to the airport, I asked our taxi driver if he was from here. "Born and raised," he said. "How have you been doing since the storm?" I asked. "Terrible," he replied. "I can't stop thinking about it, and I can't get my spirits up." He went on talking for a bit. By the end I had given him contact information and schedules to our clinics around town. "Thank you," he said. "Everyone has forgotten about us in New Orleans. Thank you for coming down here." He was eager to try acupuncture and said he'd tell the taxi drivers. When I paid my fare, he brought me my bags and gave me a hug. "Hang in there," I said. "Oh I will, baby," he said in his classic New Orleans drawl, "I will!"

AWB has a powerful vision of healing and promoting the acupuncture profession, but it can't happen without a steady influx of new volunteers. AWB offers a strong and active community of like-minded people promoting healing and wholeness, personally and globally, especially in times of disaster. This enables practitioners to feel personal power in times of crisis, as well as gaining confidence in the benefits of acupuncture in trauma relief work and in general. For more information, please visit [www.acuwithoutborders.org](http://www.acuwithoutborders.org), where you can subscribe to our e-mail list and learn more about the many ways, including donating monetarily, that you can participate in this golden opportunity. Please e-mail [info@acuwithoutborders.org](mailto:info@acuwithoutborders.org) for information on how you can participate locally during the month of November by doing a community acupuncture event to support our project to benefit veterans (Veterans Day is Nov. 11).

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