

# The World, Alchemy and the Mysterious Feminine

PART ONE OF A TWO-PART INTERVIEW WITH LORIE EVE DECHAR, MAC

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As soon as I got to read and review Lorie Eve Dechar's book, *Five Spirits*, I knew I wanted to interview her for this column. In addition to acupuncture and TCM, Lorie is trained in Jungian archetypal psychology and is a serious practitioner of Zen. She maintains a practice in New York and Maine, is a faculty member of the Tri-State College of Acupuncture, and leads workshops and trainings nationwide.

Though her book is geared toward psychological and spiritual healing, she describes her unique approach to the practice of TCM as emerging from her commitment to discovering a healthier and more integrated way for her and other human beings to live on this planet. Indeed, our planet is in the process of a vast healing journey, and as I said before, we should be leading the way as healers.

Q: In your book, *Five Spirits*, you say that acupuncture leads to a new consciousness. What is this consciousness, and specifically, how do you see acupuncture leading us there?

A: When the acupuncture needle slips into the point and activates the movement of *qi*, both patient and practitioner know that something has happened. The practitioner knows by the "tugging" of the *qi* on the needle, an easing of the patient's breathing, color changes in the face, a brightening of the eyes and, at times, a shift in the atmosphere of the treatment room. The patient knows by a change in mood, relaxing muscles, the alleviation of pain, the falling away of nagging concerns and a new insight that arises during semi-sleep, following the insertion of the needles. But this "qualitative felt-sense knowing" of patient and practitioner does not necessarily translate into the repeatable, quantitative knowing of modern Western science.

Acupuncture emerges from an ancient worldview, a more embodied, pattern-forming, non-dualistic, qualitative dream-like state of consciousness than the predominantly mental, linear, dualistic, quantitative, waking consciousness of modern culture. Contemporary research relies on methods derived from our present consciousness structure. When we use these methods to try to investigate a system that arises from a non-linear, non-dualistic worldview, we find ourselves at an impasse, bogged down in subject-object, material-immaterial, body-mind, qualitative-quantitative splits. We cannot rely solely on our current, mental consciousness or research methods derived from it to support our understanding of acupuncture, our skill as practitioners or the work of healing the complex symptoms of our bodies, minds and souls.

For both patient and practitioner, acupuncture presents us with a kind of Zen *koan* that can blow open our minds and reorganize our way of looking at the world. The experience of acupuncture negates the tendency to regard our bodies and the world we live in as a mass of quantifiable, purely physical matter. Rather, it invites us to recognize our bodies as organs of awareness and repositories of healing wisdom, appreciate the non-measurable qualitative aspects of our experience, grapple with the soul-level implications of the healing relationship, and consider the possibility of a transpersonal field as an immanent presence in the treatment room.

If we are willing to move beyond the limits of our current way of looking at the world, yet resist the temptation to regress to overly simplistic, magical explanations, the experience of acupuncture can support the emergence of what philosopher Jean Gebser named "integral consciousness" - a consciousness which brings the diffuse, qualitative, receptive, embodied awareness of the past into relationship with the precise, quantitative, critical, mental awareness of the present. The result is a new, more efficient way of organizing reality that opens us to the nonphysical, as well as physical, aspects of being, to dimensions far more extensive and complex than those of the three-dimensional world currently accepted as "real."

As we move into integral awareness, we become like those master practitioners of old whose gaze penetrated into the invisible spaces between the surfaces of things and saw the world through the eyes of an "open and attentive heart." When we recognize that the material world is illuminated and animated by the immaterial, time and space are holographic, rather than linear phenomena, and our own flesh is inspired with a heavenly breath - then in the words of the *Neijing Suwen*, the spirit, *shen*, becomes clear to us "as though the wind has blown away the clouds."

Q: You also say that personal transformation and planetary transformation are intertwined. I was happy to see you write this, because that is not only what I believe, but also the entire point of my column. Can you expand on what that means for you?

A: I grew up in a small town about an hour outside of New York City. As a child, I spent hours in the woods behind our house, watching for pheasant in the underbrush, discovering carved flint arrowheads in the leaves, picking wild blueberries and reading books perched high up in the branches of an old apple tree in our backyard. I know this sounds kind of romantic and idealized, but it really is how it was for me. I was passionate about the trees, woods, ponds and fields. They felt as much a part of me as my arms and legs. They were the world of my soul, the matrix of impressions and energies that nourished and formed my sense of self.

As the suburbs expanded during the late '50s and '60s, the natural environment I had grown up in disappeared beneath a layer of highways, strip malls and housing developments. I felt the loss in my body. It was as if someone I loved had gotten sick and died and no one had been able to help. Later, this loss led me to dedicate my life between the ages of 20 and 30, to environmental activism, gardening, feminist spirituality, political writing and yoga. I lived through those years with grief, rage, despair and a profound resentment toward the insensitivity of human beings to the natural world.

Then, a breakthrough came for me during a workshop with teacher, activist and ecopsychologist Joanna Macy. Macy's message was that a crucial key to turning around humanity's destructive impact on the environment lies not in outer-directed political action, although this is an indispensable part of the process, but in healing the human soul and transforming human consciousness. When our consciousness changes, our behavior changes, and the imprint that our actions leave on the world around us changes as well. When we stop regarding our bodies and the natural world as inert matter that can be exploited, shaped and controlled according to the needs and desires of the individual human ego; we can come back into relationship with the physical world as a living organic being. Soon, we begin to recognize, as did the ancient Chinese, that our bodies, souls and spirits are made up of the same elements as the world around us. We and the planet are one; our illnesses and our healing are intertwined. For example, the water shortage we are currently facing on the planet mirrors the epidemic kidney-*yin* deficiency modern acupuncture practitioners see each day in the treatment room. We will not be able to resolve the problem of water shortages or the overheating of our planet unless we also change the cultural conditions that create and nurture adrenal-pumped, kidney *yin*-exhausted, overheated executives and soul-deadened consumers who grasp endlessly for the unsustainable control and consumption of natural

resources.

When I discovered Five Element Acupuncture and the work of Dr. J.R. Worsley, I realized that traditional acupuncture could be a way for me to bring together my various commitments. Dr. Worsley's approach, in particular his deep reverence for nature and his insistence on following the laws of nature in the treatment room, was in alignment with my own belief that personal and environmental healing cannot be separated. I soon recognized that traditional Chinese medicine and modern ecopsychology share core principles and values. In particular, the idea that nature is the doorway through which the mystery of the divine - the Tao - enters our lives and that beyond the boundaries of the individual self, at the deepest heart of our being, we exist in a primary state of union with the cosmos. Although it is unlikely that human beings or the natural world will ever return to the pristine state of unbroken unity with Tao referred to in the first chapter of the *Neijing Suwen*, transformation on the personal level may help bring human beings to a new balance and wholeness and restore the possibility for ongoing life, creativity and abundance on the planet.

Q: Spiritual development often begins with a shock because it takes us out of our complacency. Do you think our profession will need a shock to help it grow?

A: In *Five Spirits*, I say that "the shock of the needle dissolves rigid holding patterns ... a shock to the system that is the first stage of transformation ... like lightning the needle initiates a process of change that includes both a shattering and reorganization." This idea of a *yang* influence penetrating a *yin* system in order to initiate the creation of a new wholeness is part of an ancient alchemical formula for transformation. Like all alchemical formulas, it describes a real, observable physical phenomenon - such as the fertilization of the egg by the sperm at conception and the formation of the embryo in the uterus of the body. When leavened with imagination and vision, this phenomenon becomes a description of something invisible to the physical senses, yet knowable on the level of expanded sight; in this case, the fertilization of a spiritual embryo in the human soul.

I have found both in my personal, inner work and in work with my patients that some kind of shock is necessary in order to potentiate a process of transformation. The shock can come from inside or outside. It can come in the form of a divorce, job loss, illness, death, falling in love, birth, recovered memory or transcendent experience, but without some kind of animating, initiating shock, real growth does not happen. Without some reorganizing shock, the inertia will hold an existing system in place until the effects of entropy and gravity take over and the system enters a cycle of declining vitality, decay and eventual dissolution. This is a natural law that we can easily observe in the world around us but is often harder to see in our own lives.

When acupuncture made its first big entry into Western culture in the early 1970s, it created a kind of shock. There was a lot of resistance, a lot of idealism, passionate dialogue, and morphing of theories and treatment strategies between East and West. There was chaos and excitement as laws changed, schools opened, books were written and individuals vied for positions of power; a lot of energy was activated.

Now, however, things have settled down. Commissions have been put in place. Licensing and accrediting agencies are in full swing. We all pay dues and keep our diplomas in frames on the walls of our offices. I have to say that one of my concerns with the current direction of our profession is that it is moving too far in the direction of hyper-order, fixed structures and complacency. My fear is that through all this fixed organizing in the outer realm, we will lose our connection to the living vibrant source of our tradition - which, at least for me, is the spontaneously arising Tao, the way of the wild shamans and healers of *ling shan*, the inner-soul mountain.

The question for me is what kind of shock could allow us to maintain the necessary ethics,

boundaries and codes to function responsibly as medical professionals in modern culture, and yet also to make space for the uncertainty and risk of continued evolution and growth? What kind of shock could allow us to integrate the Confucian, Buddhist and Taoist principles and values of our tradition with the consciousness of modern Western culture in order to support the emergence of a truly new and transformational healing system on the planet? Unless we are willing to address these issues both within our own lives and within our profession, we will find ourselves in much the same position as our comrades in hospitals, clinics and managed care facilities - stuck in an outmoded and inefficient mental structure of consciousness, slaves to paperwork, delayed reimbursement and time-management problems. This is not the future I imagined for myself when I became an acupuncturist, and I am fully committed to a different possibility.

Q: One of the keys you claim is the "Mysterious Feminine." Can you describe what this is and how it will help manifest these ideals on Earth?

A: The "Mysterious Feminine" is the world around us. She is the ocean, the earth, our bodies, our instincts and the web of relationships that maintains the integrity of the universe. She is the living flesh of being, the mother of all things. Unlike the Tao, which can never be spoken or known, the Mysterious Feminine shows her face to us each hour of the day, each season of the year. She is the visible mirror of the invisible realms, the embodied or *yin* aspect of the divine. In the words of the *Tao Teh Ching*, "she is the very face of the Absolute."

The Taoist Goddess Xi Wang Mu, the Queen Mother of the West, deity of birth, death and resurrection, is one of the representatives of the Mysterious Feminine. Xi Wang Mu is said to reign from a palace deep in the underworld. She sits on a jade throne above the sulfur springs that rise up from the fiery core of the planet. The phoenix is her consort, the symbol of her ever-renewable life/death potency and an important clue to the secret of her power.

For me, the Taoist reverence of Xi Wang Mu and the "Mysterious Feminine" is what most distinguishes this tradition from later Confucian and Buddhist traditions, as well as from Western Judeo-Christian ideologies. The Taoists' focus on this *yin* mystery and their willingness to trust in the irrational wisdom of the embodied aspect of the divine reveals Taoism's pre-patriarchal, Earth-centered, shamanic roots and is a crucial key to the understanding of Chinese medicine and acupuncture theory. From this perspective, the divine is not *logos*, split off from our daily life, high up and far away in some abstract, celestial realm. Rather, it is *soma*, spirit incarnate. Here and now, our bodies and the myriad organic forms of the world around us are sacred. Form, and in particular the human body, is a vessel in which spiritual transformation takes place.

Although in most texts, we read that the *yang* spirit "comes down" to Earth from heaven to initiate transformation in *yin* matter, the "mystery" of the "Mysterious Feminine" involves the initiatory potency that is already actualized in matter. The mystery is represented by the speck of *yang* at the center of the *yin* in the *taiji* symbol. It is what psychologist C.G. Jung referred to as the *enatrodromia* - the turning point. It is present when a minute iota of inert carbon buried in the ground at the extremity of *yin* darkness, stillness and compression spontaneously ignites and sets off a fiery volcanic eruption that rocks the planet. The green vegetation that grows in the rich soil of the mountain after the destructive fire, the healing that follows illness, these are the gifts of the goddess; the red feathers that drift down from the sky as the phoenix rises up into the clouds.

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*Editor's Note:* As of press time, part two of Gregg St. Clair's interview with Lorie Eve Dechar is scheduled to appear in the September issue of *Acupuncture Today*.

