

Becoming One of Us

Felice Dunas, PhD

It has never been easy to become an acupuncturist. The rigors and requirements are strenuous and the costs tremendous. The process takes forever and generates lots of stress. Becoming a sacrificial lamb is inherent. Murphy's Law that "everything that can go wrong will go wrong" seems to visit every acupuncture student. I have never met an acupuncturist who didn't feel relief over having left the precariousness of studenthood.

As an apprentice, I recall the difficulties built into the culture of training me. I was the "fall guy" for any problem that happened with any patient. I spent years doing uncomfortable grunt work that appeared to have nothing to do with becoming a healer. It all paid off, ultimately, and it became clear that my discomfort was well-known to my teachers and intrinsic in their teachings. They supplied me with difficulties that had been given to them by their teachers.

While at medical school, I remember thinking how torturous the experience was. Vending machines all over the campus availed students of candy, chips, cookies and caffeine. We put in long hours cramming our brains full of data about the body while entirely losing touch with our own. Inherent in becoming a medical doctor was the dilemma of "living in our heads" and running our lives as if the needs of our physical bodies were non-existent. It was interesting, exhilarating and painful.

When I was young in our profession, I was baffled by this seemingly unnecessary process. Why would my chosen profession, and indeed all callings in the healing arts, be so tough on the soul to acquire and implement? While visiting a friend, I went to her bookcase. It was crammed full from top to bottom. I noticed a non-descript gray book without words on the spine. It was obviously old and worn. I pulled it out to look for the magic. Have you ever done that? Closed your eyes, wondered what wisdom was going to be in a book for you on the page to which you "happened" to turn and with a slightly deeper breath, dramatically opened the book and peered at the words?

This book had lots of magic for me. The pages I read detailed how Hopi medicine people went through their training. I learned that the apprentices had to develop the ability to manifest amulets - magical objects which were created from their own *chi* that they stored in their stomachs - by vomiting at will. Learning to do this would take years and their teachers were unflinching in these requirements. The amulets needed to be available in an instant and had to bring their power to the healer, who would hold them in their mouth or hand while saying prayers or healing commands. To fully manifest these objects, healers in training had to go through extended periods during which they alternated going into sweat lodges and cold exposure in the desert night air. They fasted for days on end, they struggled, they lost consciousness, and they came back and struggled some more.

This reading has stayed with me for more than 30 years. It tied together many loose facts that I had lived in multiple contexts and taught me that no matter the culture, location or methods used, a healer must suffer in the process of becoming. Apparently, being capable of the contribution (*yang*) aspects of healing requires the destruction and transformation of self (*yin*). If one is to go beyond being a technician in one's chosen medical field, one must suffer. The full circle of the *yin*

and *yang* concept must be traversed as a healer is born. The sacrifice can be found in every generation and medical industry. I have no idea how this energetic dynamic began, but as I study the anthropology of healing, I find it throughout history around the globe. Perhaps it's the wisdom required of us - the knowing of the dark side of life. Maybe we need to have been wounded enough to know compassion so as to know the path our patients must walk.

Since the beginning of the year, I have been having discussions with the NCCAOM and the AAAOM on what can be done for students and newer practitioners to make the road into our industry kinder. While no one can take away the sacred personal challenges inherent in the transformation from student to practitioner, it's possible to provide resources in a practical sense. My first thought was to compile the book of stories about which I wrote in my last column. You may recall that I told a story from my practice and asked that you contribute to a book of such stories for students and practitioners around the world so we might all learn from each other and feel a greater sense of community and connection. If you are interested in writing such a story, please contact me at omsupport@gmail.com .

I hope to be involved with our organizations to supply additional aid. How do you envision your most constructive support? What services would you like provided, what questions answered? Do you have a mentor and would you like one? Do you feel the need for marketing support or a lesson in entrepreneurship? Are you part of a community that regenerates you? My goal is to gather information that ultimately will find its way into programs and offerings for students and practitioners. Please contact me with your concerns and desires.

No matter the challenges you face as a practitioner, your daily work expresses great beauty; that of making life more aware of its best self. I honor you and recognize the sacrifices you have made to glorify that which is in alignment with truth and the Tao. Many of us know the quiet moments between patients, the questions, concerns, the pride and the revelries. We have all struggled to get here. You are not alone.

Q&A

Dr. Dunas,

I live in a moderate-sized town with many acupuncturists. I can't charge much for my work because there is so much competition. I need more income and hope you have some suggestions as to how I might expand the size of my practice, or increase the dollar amounts that I can charge.

Thank you,
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DF,

Here are a few suggestions to consider:

1. Become a specialist known for an area of work that is of value to your particular community. Do some research on the most prominent local health care problems and develop specific strategies to address them. Lecture, advertise and contact local newspapers and radio stations for interviews. Discuss how OM can serve patients in reference to those illnesses or injuries. Become a "regular" in local newspapers by writing articles yourself on this subject.
2. Serve a niche market. Is there a baby boom in your town? Take 10 OB-GYN doctors to lunch and teach them how you can help their patients to avoid postpartum problems by becoming one of your patients. Suggest that the MDs refer patients to you while still pregnant so you can discuss measures they can take in advance. Once their babies are born, you already are

in their calendars for regular treatment. Choose any niche of interest to you, such as high-school or college athletes, or geriatric patients.

3. Start a local cable television show. Once people get to know you in their living rooms, coming for treatment will be a natural next step. This is a very low-cost form of marketing. It will encourage you to learn your material well and become a great OM communicator for laypeople.
4. Expose yourself to the community acupuncture model, which is a method of working with many patients simultaneously, at a very low cost. This would allow you to maintain low prices while still generating sufficient income for yourself. Go to www.acupuncturenetwork.org for more information.
5. What typical health problems are encountered by companies close to your office? Can you help business owners lower absenteeism and increase productivity and morale by treating employees? If you offer monthly or bi-weekly anti-stress treatments at the office for a low price to the employer, you can translate that into a marketing opportunity by offering multi-treatment discounts to employees who come to your office.
6. Remember that you have two jobs as a practitioner. The first is to let the world know about your service and the second is to do a good job once they have responded. You run a business that must be marketed and promoted. Being good at what you do is not enough to build and maintain a practice.

I began this column as a Q&A piece. In recent months, I have gotten away from that but hope you will continue to send me your questions as I enjoy addressing them.

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