

As Time Goes By

Felice Dunas, PhD

I celebrated my 40-year anniversary in the field this summer. It was astounding to contemplate how my entire life has been built around learning, practicing, promoting, fighting for, and teaching this medicine all over the world. I have reminisced about the decades of struggle, passion, commitment and reward.

When I began learning about acupuncture from the Japanese priest who was my first teacher, there was nothing professional to strive for. There was no demand in English-speaking America for acupuncture. There were no colleagues, books, schools, licenses or blogs. And it might have stayed that way. The life of this medicine could have gone in any direction in the final decades of the 20th century. I didn't involve myself because it was going to become popular and I would make a decent living. There was no way to have known that.

I loved this work and saw it as the bridge between my stepfather's work as a founding physician for the Kaiser Permanente hospitals and the thousands of patients that he and I knew his profession couldn't help. If he did his medicine and I did mine, everybody would get better. That was how my teenage brain assessed the situation. I stuck with it because it was my destiny, not because there was professional potential. I didn't even know other people doing it, besides older, non-English-speaking Japanese men. It was ludicrous, really.

I recall sitting down with my high school counselor and discussing my professional future. "I want to be an acupuncturist," I told him. "There aren't any schools for that. There is no professional demand for it. Are you sure that is what you want to do? Maybe you should major in the Chinese language. That is probably the closest major I can find you. Have you considered this seriously? There is no need and no future for acupuncture." How beautifully blind is youth? I simply didn't listen to him or to my college counselors or nursing and medical school counselors who all said the same thing. My insisting on becoming an acupuncturist was attributed to the stupidity and the blind nature of youth. I knew better than the grown-ups. But occasionally the genius of adolescence actually has genius in it.

One of the most challenging aspects of those early years was that there were no peers to talk to. Acupuncture was a solitary pursuit for a Caucasian female in the early 1970s. My *AT* column, spanning several years now, has been built on my desire to give you what I didn't have back then; someone to hear you and give a provocative opinion, an unusual suggestion, a good idea or an opposing view to stimulate your creativity. That is also why I have tried to respond to all the e-mails you send me.

Since this is my column, my anniversary and my party, I thought I would use the poignant nature of this moment to share support from several who have been in this field for a very long time. Respect for the wisdom of elders has always been important in the transfer of this medicine from one generation to the next. If these bits of advice may not be what you need, pass them on. You never know who may blossom by hearing them.

Larry Fugimoto, who retired at the age of 68, had business experience before beginning his practice. That was deeply helpful to him. When I asked him what he wanted to pass on to you, he suggested that practitioners build their own clinics and be the principal owners of them. This means you must develop two sets of skills; business and medical. They are entirely different. "By having your own place, you can have people work for you. When you take vacations, your practice can be temporarily covered by colleagues. Eventually, you can work as little or as much as you like when you retire. You may never want to quit entirely. Our profession is such that you hate to waste all the knowledge you have as you get older and you may want to support others as long as you can."

Steven Benedict, an early graduate of the first acupuncture college in the U.S., has been practicing more than 30 years. Still in the clinic full time, his commitment to the details of patient care is beautiful to observe. His results are astounding and his demeanor remains dedicated and humble. "Tell your readers that in the age of electronic marketing, they should never underestimate the power of word of mouth. Share with your patients, even your new patients, that you love what you do, that you would like to be busier and ask them to refer anyone to you who might benefit from what you do. Explain your full range of services and help your patients understand the wide range of disorders you can support. A pain patient may not understand how infertility or diabetic patients would benefit by seeing you." Steven was recently concerned about the size of his practice due to the bad economic times the country is going through. While investigating electronic marketing options, he remembered the importance of speaking honestly with his patients. When he did so, nine out of 10 people had thought about referring people but hadn't for various reasons. Within a month, his practice substantially increased in size.

Honora Wolfe, Blue Poppy Press owner, suggested that we heed the advice of Cheng Da-an, one of the early architects of the barefoot doctors concept and training in China. He helped acupuncture come into the 20th century. "He believed that the most compassionate and powerful treatment you can give a patient is to be absolutely 'with them' when you are with them. Be completely present. Think of nothing else. Just for a few minutes. It's more important to be present than to get the point right. It's the most important thing you can do, clinically. Some patients get that kind of attention nowhere else in life. If you are looking into their eyes, that is all you are doing. If you are putting in a needle, that is all you are doing."

From the marketing perspective, Wolfe stressed that not only is this important for patient healing, it is a brilliant marketing tool. Patients want their friends and family members to be fully seen and heard because of the fulfillment that it brings. Being known and accepted is the essential hunger that we all have. If you can share the gift of that with a loved one, wouldn't you be inspired to refer?

One sobering thought: as noted in "Death of a Salesman," one of the most powerful American plays of the 20th century, one of the great tragedies of life is not getting to know who you are before you die. Use this work to get to know yourself. Take the time to self discover inside the light of this great tradition. This journey may end suddenly and all too soon. One never knows.

This was the case for Kathy White, PhD, DHM, LAc, one of our bright, shining stars. She was a licensed clinical psychologist, licensed acupuncturist, board-certified herbalist, doctor of homeopathic medicine and Ayurvedic medicine clinician who practiced psychology and natural medicine in Los Angeles. She served as President of the American University of Complementary Medicine, Assistant Clinical Professor of Medical Psychology at UCLA Medical School, and Professor of Clinical Health Psychology at the California School of Professional Psychology of Alliant International University. Kathy's life was dedicated to bringing ancient medical truths into a modern context and her tireless efforts for good have impacted and contributed to the lives of

many. Kathy left us last spring. Please pause momentarily to honor the blessing of her having been with us. She knew what her life was about. As a result, she brightened the world.

I am giving myself a turn in sharing a pearl with you. Each and every one of us has to respect the discipline and mastery of our own work. We need to be kind to ourselves and avoid self criticism during tough times professionally. If you study hard, work with commitment and open your heart with compassion to each patient, you will be reflecting the best that you have to offer. Honor that about yourself. Love your commitment to high standards. Even if you have to eat rice and beans because the economy is hard on your practice, do so with self respect and dignity. If you continue to learn whatever business skills are necessary to be effective and you do good work using both your head and your heart, I will write an article about your 40-year anniversary too.

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