

Connecting with the Spirit of Chinese Medicine in Changing Times

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Twenty-first century acupuncturists can find a great deal of wisdom in the classical texts of Chinese medicine. While the faithful exploration of established insights of the classics provides a solid basis for clinical practice, our rapidly changing culture creates unprecedented disharmonies, which might best respond to innovative approaches to the practice of Chinese medicine. *Qi Gong* practice demonstrates that movement and flexibility contribute to a healthy body and attitude. Bringing some of that flexibility to diagnostic thinking could give practitioners insights to adapt effectively to changing social circumstances.

For instance, *Sun Si Miao* could not have predicted a society in which many healthy young adults choose to relocate far away from their family of origin to places where they are isolated, anonymous, and unknown to their neighbors. Lacking the closeness of extended family and village or neighborhood, people can create connection through participation in their adopted communities, and through online social networking sites.

However, many people who experience loneliness may lack the social skills needed to bond easily in a new environment. While we all still experience the same elemental emotions people have experienced for thousands of years, the healing power of relationship- being known and cared for- may be less available in modern-day urban and suburban America than it was in a 17th century Chinese village or in small-town America 60 years ago.

In my acupuncture school training, I received instruction in *qi gong* and *tai chi* to develop deeper awareness of my own body's energies. Practicing slow meditative movements enhanced my ability to regulate my own mood during times of stress. (Since I was working at a challenging job half time during my first year in acupuncture school while memorizing large amounts of information for frequent exams, like most of my fellow students, I became familiar with stress.) Learning *qi gong* helped to balance the necessary exposure to detailed content.

What seemed to be missing from my training was a personalized orientation to the terrain of healing relationships. My experience as a psychotherapist led me to recognize that what goes on in a healing relationship can be just as important as accurate diagnosis of a pattern of disharmony or choosing an effective combination of points to needle. I was surprised and disappointed that there was very limited personal supervision when we began treating clients in a student clinic. As a social work intern in my MSW program, I'd had weekly individual supervision, where I could discuss the clients I was working with, and the challenges I experienced with some of them. As an acupuncturist in training, I received no guidance when I'd encounter a client who I felt angry at after every encounter, or a client whose hopelessness felt contagious. I felt I could have benefited from an energetic understanding of what goes on between practitioner and client when the healing is not easy.

Several continuing education classes on treating depression and anxiety provided some specific

ways to choose points or herbal formulas, but I wasn't finding the insights I hoped to develop to have some better understanding of what was happening when all was not well between me and my client.

As a practitioner, I've found Thea Elijah's Five Element based classes to be particularly valuable in helping me use the ancient wisdom of Chinese medicine to understand and treat individuals grappling with complex modern situations. Studying with Elijah provided an embodied experience, which touched me in different ways than the conceptual understandings and clinical techniques that I found in most other continuing education classes. Elijah engaged all of my senses through participatory exercises, demonstrations and colorful metaphorical language to bring her Five Element classes to life.

Elijah grounds her teaching in classical Chinese medicine, while coming up with original and creative insights that ring true to American practitioners in the 21st century. Her "Six Stages of Love-Induced Disorder," based on the classic "Six Stages of Cold-Induced Disorder," brilliantly examines the pathology of illusion in romance by looking at the thermodynamics involved. Some practitioners might object that Elijah is "making up" a new paradigm. In my mind, she is working like a skilled jazz musician or artist; she knows the melody, and is improvising in a beautiful way that remains true to that original melody.

Elijah's teaching about the Confucian transformations of virtue takes her students beyond the ability to identify the negative emotion associated with each element. She teaches how pathologies can provide a gateway to growth. While none of us readily chooses to suffer, we learn that suffering can be a doorway into discovering patterned ways of missing the mark. Elijah's model of Chinese medicine clearly maps emotional as well as physical territory, which allows self-awareness to become a catalyst for healing. Elijah uses numerous case histories and clinical examples to elucidate how the physical and emotional transformations of our clients are mutually entwined. She is unafraid to use her own life history to illustrate her teaching, while gently and supportively challenging her students to confront their own patterns and discover their own paths to self-cultivation and greater effectiveness.

Elijah encouraged me to attend the Building Bridges of Integration conference sponsored by TCM World Foundation, where I've been exposed to the inspiring teachings of Heiner Fruehauf, PhD and Stephen Cowan, MD. Fruehauf's lecture on the pivotal role of the emotions in classical Chinese medicine is one of the most informative and fascinating lectures I've ever heard.

Much of what he spoke about is included in the following article-
www.classicalchinesemedicine.org/2010/03/all-disease-comes-from-the-heart-the-pivotal-role-of-the-emotions-in-classical-chinese-medicine/ Dr. Cowan lectures on ADD and autism, from a Chinese medicine perspective.

His new book *Fire Child, Water Child* helps parents understand ways to address their child's unique needs in relation to attention. I highly recommend taking the time to get a taste of their work and I look forward to studying more with Dr. Fruehauf and Dr. Cowan.

For more information about the teaching of Thea Elijah, LAc, please go to www.perennialmedicine.com and look for her article on Confucian Elemental Virtues in the Appendix to my forthcoming book *Before Pharmaceuticals: Emotional Healing and Chinese Medicine*.

