



YOUR PRACTICE / BUSINESS

Building From the Bottom Up

HONORA WOLFE, BOB FLAWS, THEIR COMPANY AND OUR CAREERS

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I caught up with my dear friend Honora Wolfe, in her Colorado painting studio where, if she is not praying in Bhutan or doing charitable work in a Nepali free clinic, she spends most of her time now. She recently retired from both her ownership and her work at Blue Poppy and I am grateful that she is willing to pull herself away from her gorgeous watercolor landscapes to reflect back on the role she and her husband, Bob Flaws, played in the development of their business and the blossoming of our profession.

I asked Honora if she would tell me the story of her life and Blue Poppy Press and what she wanted to share with the young people who take our profession forward. Graciously, she did.

"I learned early on that I wasn't made to work for others," Honora said. "So, I had to start businesses myself. Because I believe work is an important way of giving, a way of dancing with the world, I started businesses early, in 1974 at the age of 26, I helped found and became the first director of the Boulder College of Massage Therapy. The only massage schools at that time were the Swedish Institute in New York, at Esalen Institute in Big Sur, Calif., and a few tiny schools in the Midwest. I cleaned houses to support myself during that start-up phase and helped turn it into a successful non-profit organization. In 1980, I moved on, leaving other capable people to run it. It folded last fall after 38 successful and impactful years due to the recession and because there are now hundreds of massage schools all over the country. It was no longer a unique educational entity but, in its day, it served many and brought new skills and vitality to the community of Boulder, Colo. It's graduates practice all over the world."



Honora Wolfe and Bob Flaws

Honora said her life was full of the sweet, happy qi of fulfillment.

"That is when you are most attractive to others," she said. "My life was fun and interesting when I was running the massage school. I was blossoming into my full self."

In 1978, Bob Flaws walked through the doors of the massage school and into Honora's life. He came to study Asian/Chinese massage. They married in 1979 and had a son in 1981.

A practicing Buddhist from his early 20s, Bob had considering a career in Tibetan medicine. After being introduced to Chinese medicine in Boulder, however, he decided it was a more viable option for practice in the West and determined to go study in China. There were a few acupuncture schools in the U.S. by the early 80s: ACTCM in San Francisco, NESA in Boston and CAC in California. However, there were very few books in English (two, to be precise: *Felix Mann's, Acupuncture: The Ancient Chinese Art of Healing and the Essentials of Chinese Acupuncture* published by the Foreign Language Press and compiled at several medical schools in China) and Bob thought it was better to get training straight from the source. So, between 1982 and 1986, both he and Honora went to study at the Shanghai College Of TCM, each of them three separate times.

Blue Poppy Press Is Born

During this same time frame, Bob Felt and Martha Fielding, the founders and owners of Redwing Books/Paradigm Press, published the first version of Bob's book, *The Path Of Pregnancy*, and Bob and Honora's co-authored *Prince Wen Hui's Cook*, the first book in English on Chinese dietary therapy. However, wanting to make more literature on Chinese medicine available in English and

to publish on their own, Honora and Bob founded Blue Poppy Press to further this venture.

But what was the source of the name?

The Indian blue utpala flower is used frequently in Tibetan Buddhist iconography (thangka paintings). It is the flower usually held by Green Tara, the Mother of the Buddha's, the sacred protector of the high ground within us all, the one who can be called upon to come to our aid in an instant if we have devotion and faith in her power, the one with many faces and manifestations in the world we can see and the worlds we cannot. However, as the word "utpala" wasn't going to work for a U.S. corporate name, they chose the common translation in English, "poppy," instead. The blue poppy flower in this context represents Tara's supreme and total generosity to all beings, that which we, as our best selves, might aspire to accomplish as beings, as healers and helpers.



Honora Wolfe and Bob Flaws in the early years

During their study in China, they enlisted a translator at the Shanghai College of TCM to translate Chinese medical texts for publication in English. However, when China became part of international copyright convention in the mid-1980s, rights to newly-published books had to be purchased unless they were pre-modern classics already in the public domain. "That was one reason why we started publishing classics," Honora explained. "Simply that the content was free!"

It was around this time that Bob began to study medical Chinese. He had resisted it for years even though his first teacher of Chinese medicine, Dr. Michael Broffman, had told him that for anyone who wanted to really learn the medicine, learning Chinese was not optional. "Bob put years into this effort," Honora said. "The desire to understand the medicine from its source made him persevere and he collected a huge library of Chinese medical books, more than 30 on gynecology alone, for example. He also had subscriptions to more than a dozen Chinese language medical journals every month for years. Organizing the most useful material from these myriad sources and adding his own clinical experience was how he created so many useful clinical textbooks. I have great respect for the work Bob did and his consequent deep understanding of the medicine."

By the end of the 1980s, Blue Poppy was publishing extensively, Bob's books and other people's submissions as well. There were some embarrassing problems in the early years: typos, imperfect indexes, book construction issues. But they were learning how to be publishers and working as fast as they could to help create the literature needed for the fast-growing, English-speaking practitioner market. Ultimately, they published about 100 books by 20-or-more authors during their tenure at Blue Poppy. We once discussed their publishing a book on the erotic practices that I teach but that was considered a bit "out there" for what became a conservative and academic publishing company.

Maintaining healthy clinical practices during the 80s and 90s, Bob and Honora had gained a respectable level of knowledge with the medicine. As a gynecologist, Bob used mostly decocted bulk medicinals with his patients. In 1998-99, however, he created a line of ready-made formulas he had found to be especially effective with his patients. This was when China began to have factories that could make high concentration-ratio extracts. Taiwan had been doing it for years but their prices were high. When China got into the game, prices came down and Blue Poppy began to produce herbal products.

Early Mistakes

Like all new businesses, Honora said she learned a lot in the beginning after making a few mistakes.

"We moved too fast, especially during the early years, selling the wine before it's time if you will. A good example of that were the problems with typos and poor book designs. Once we even bound and delivered a book with a mistake in the spelling of the author's name on the cover," said Honora.

Honora also said they often ran into conflicts between ease-of-marketing and content decisions.

"Believing we were ahead of the curve, we sometimes thought we knew what the profession needed," she said.

The best example she noted was their use of the terminology in *A Practical Dictionary of Chinese Medicine* by Nigel Wiseman and Feng Ye, which became the standard for all their books and courses.

"While I still believe the Wiseman terminology to be far more accurate than any other source for

translating Chinese medical terms into English, it was not popular, nor was it ever adopted by NCCAOM. Some customers didn't like books filled with terms they thought were difficult to understand (people still dislike the word "vacuity," for example, even though it is the best term to represent the Chinese word *xu*). It was the right thing to do academically, but it limited the size of our market share in Chinese medical textbook sales, no question," Honora said.

Eventually, the company was bought by a partner who had already owned some shares. The deal was finalized in October 2011. Honora said she stayed on for two years as part of the sale contract, doing writing and direct marketing such as tradeshow, speeches and school visits.

"In 2012, I visited 18 schools, did lots of lectures and gave away lots of free samples. Every company needs someone who can speak comfortably in public and I was the public face of Blue Poppy up until my departure in October 2013," said Honora. "Tangentially, I have focused on helping practitioners be more financially successful, writing a book and doing many classes on that subject, a blog that I still continue and many lectures and webinars on practice building."

Bob stopped working at the end of 2010. He retired, lay down his work and let it go.

"It was an amazing thing to see. When we were young he dove in and spent more than 30 years working hard to build the company and the profession. Then he just set the stone down for others to carry. He didn't look back. He is once again enjoying being a committed, full-time Buddhist. Chinese medicine is a completed story in his life. It's over," said Honora.

Lessons Learned

"I was brought up to believe that I could do whatever I wanted if I worked hard enough at it. Maybe it was post war enthusiasm, but I think many young people today don't have that same belief, which is too bad. Right or wrong, believing that really helped me build successful businesses. It just never occurred to me not be successful!," said Honora.

Overall, Honora said she is grateful to have been able to make a positive impact on the acupuncture profession.

"In general, however, Bob and I were blessed as practitioners and businesspeople. We tried to keep it clean, to be fair trades-people and good employers and bring our best to the practitioners who came to depend upon us. I do feel honored to have had Bob Flaws as a partner, a teacher of the medicine and business associate, irrespective of what we got right or wrong. We put our hearts into the work and were grateful for the success and support we had from the profession. It was a good ride, but we've sold that car and handed over the keys," said Honora.

It is a fact that we have all gained by Honora and Bob's work. The benefits brought by their integrity, skill, dedication and energy will affect practitioners of TCM and their patients, for generations to come. And that, my dear colleague, is the closing of a magnificent chapter in our profession.

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