



PHILOSOPHY

Caring for Refugees in Greece

Jennifer Moiles, LAc

If I once believed in fairytales, the dreamy blue Greek islands were certainly one of them.

At the beginning of 2016 I had no idea what was in store for me, but I was looking forward to a personal retreat on the Greek island of Paros; a graduation gift to myself after 22 years of motherhood, and four-plus years of Chinese medicine school.

That first trip to Greece really was a dream come true. I saw with my own eyes that the water and sky are indeed *that* vast, and *that* astonishingly blue; and I experienced that the Greek people are indeed uncommonly outgoing, warm, and joyful.

Trouble in Paradise

Even in that first breathtaking and dream-fulfilling trip to Paros, Santorini, and Athens, the signs of trouble in Greece were undeniable.

The Greeks make it their business to ensure that the international crisis occurring within their borders does not detract from the enchanting experience meant for tourists — for those who choose not to wander beyond designated tourist havens.

However, just outside of these beautiful destination areas, the back of the house, you might say — there is an eerie emptiness; abandoned real estate, barren storefronts, and uncomfortably quiet, over-grown and run-down villages.



Learning About AWB

While studying TCM, I followed and admired the work of Acupuncturists Without Borders (AWB) and felt clear that community style acupuncture and not-for-profit relief work would be in my future.

Admittedly a bit of a starry-eyed idealist, I knew from the get-go that our ancient, holistic, energetic and economically practical medicine held extraordinary potential to heal some of the deepest wounds of our troubled modern world.

It seemed serendipitous, when I graduated from TCM school and my life circumstances relocated me to Europe, that AWB was mobilizing its throng of activist-healers to address the refugee crisis in Greece.

I reached out and dove in. I was soon to learn that visiting Greece as a relief worker is a vastly different experience than that of a tourist.

Helping in Crisis

The Greeks, grappling with extreme poverty, unemployment, and political unrest, are host to an estimated 62,000 displaced people who have navigated treacherous crossing from the Middle East, by ordinary transportation means or even on foot, to arrive within the relative safety of Europe's borders.

They are dispersed among 50-some-odd refugee camps, barred from migrating to other European countries due to border closings. It is anticipated that some will be deported back to their countries of origin, and could face detention or death.

The lucky ones may receive legal asylum in Greece, even though the economy cannot support

them. These gruesome facts notwithstanding, I have been astonished by the generosity and concern of the Greeks I've met, who have transcended their own adversity to provide what relief they can.

New Team at the Camp

The first day I arrived in a refugee camp with AWB, I was with a small team of acupuncturists. We carried our mobile clinic neatly stashed in our backpacks — what I saw, felt, and sensed made me feel small.



The NADA five-needle protocol is used for the treatment of trauma.

I thought, "What can a few of us do, really, to make even a tiny dent in the profound suffering we are witnessing?" A message scratched on a wall in one of the camps spoke volumes, "We are not animals." In a moment we had gained an education about the world, and realities not like our own.

The conditions we encounter in refugee camps are unpredictable at best, and challenge us to employ skills we cultivate in our personal meditation and Qi Gong practices.

Acutely aware that we were standing in the heart of catastrophic human suffering, we endeavored to remain composed amid chaos, clear in our purpose, and present to our patients' needs. It was essential to be able to think on our feet, anticipate and function as a team, and deliver our medicine with steady and skillful hands.

Our team of healers collaborated with camp volunteers to identify space where we could set up our clinic. Circumstances were reliably less than ideal, and inconsistent. It was often too cold or too hot, dirty, and lighting was poor.

We used whatever supplies, furnishings or materials we could get our hands on to set up our clean field, and make the floor comfortable.

We spent time walking around the camp, introducing ourselves, attempting to communicate with residents about our services with signs printed in Arabic and Farsi. We were excited and relieved when we meet residents who spoke English and agreed to help interpret for us in the clinic.

Five-Needle Protocol

The simple yet potent standardized auricular acupuncture protocol we use in AWB field clinics is the NADA (National Acupuncture Detoxification Association) five-needle protocol, which was developed to support recovery from addiction.

On the AWB website they explain that "The use of acupuncture for drug addiction led to its use for the prevention and treatment of trauma. Research in the past decade has shown that acupuncture is a helpful somatic therapy that rebalances the brain after significant stress, as well as the nervous and hormonal systems. Acupuncture treatment, especially shortly after exposure to traumatic events, can help prevent the development of post-traumatic stress (PTS). With more extended treatment, acupuncture can also restore resiliency for those who suffer from long-term PTS."

Change over Time

In the eyes of the refugees we encountered, we saw immense sadness, grief, pain, frustration, and loneliness. We also saw undeniable signs of love, healing and hope. As we continued to return to camps over time, we were enthusiastically welcomed, as residents lined up for treatment.

We were invited to have tea in refugees' tents. We listened to stories of bombs that fell on workplaces, children lost to war, and of family members imprisoned or stranded in other parts of the Middle East and Europe.

We met volunteers who had been working in the camps for many months or longer. Some came for short stays and then extended their service period. They became attached to the residents and saw the volunteer organizations were short-handed and that the needs were great.

Several we spoke to reported they worked long hours, slept poorly, ate poorly or not at all during the day, and described the work environment as highly stressful. We recognized the symptoms of secondary trauma and arranged community clinics for volunteers in the evenings.

During treatments, we were able to observe the positive effects of our medicine. We saw our patients becoming calm; some nearly falling asleep sitting up. We were told, through interpreters,

that some slept better, felt more relaxed, and there were reports of reduced pain. On some level, our work there helped.

Satisfying the Need

One of the most satisfying things about our medicine, for me, is our ability to connect, in a way that transcends words.

Without imposing anything, we show up to create a sanctuary. We hold space for quiet meditation, and skillfully elicit subtle, spontaneous reorganization of organs and systems. We perceive each encounter as a seedling for individual, family, and community rejuvenation and rehabilitation.

Since last May, AWB has sent six volunteer teams to work in four refugee camps. An essential aspect of AWB's mission is to train Greek acupuncturists to do this work, which expands its capacity to provide relief.

So far, AWB has trained 20 Greek acupuncturists who now work in teams to provide treatments twice a week in the Oinofyta and Ritsona camps, near Athens. AWB's goal is to expand treatments to three more camps this year.

Rather than doing nothing, or simply watching from afar, we are doing *something*. We are showing up, offering our time and our gifts; communicating with words and with our medicine that our deepest desire is for a more harmonious and peaceful world.

For more information about the AWB Refugee Support Project and to view a video of AWB's work in Greece, please visit acuwithoutborders.org.

Resources

- Smith H. "Greece: severe weather places refugees at risk and government under fire." The Guardian, Jan 2017.

APRIL 2017