

What the Ancients Have Taught Us

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Life is simple ... essentially. This is what the ancients have taught us: For every end, a beginning; for every beginning, an end. In the life and destiny of a student, these polarities are lived repetitively with each class, with each year and finally with graduation. What contributes to the stress of the TCM student is that we need to retain everything from every class! And more than that, we need to learn and retain much that is not presented in the classroom.

I have often written about what I feel is the difference between a mere practitioner - one who simply goes through the motions of medicine with little personal development or involvement - and the true adept, who realizes that the patient is an exercise in the little Dao, an opportunity for the practitioner's own personal growth and evolution. For me, graduation looms just around the corner, the board exams just beyond the seeming end, and then into the great unknown. What gives me some sense of relief is that many have gone before me, received their degrees, and then taken the boards with all the rote memorization, and finally entered into the "real world," where no teachers are present to counsel concerning the diagnosis or prescription.

Do I feel ready to meet this challenge and face my destiny? Do any of us who have walked this rather long and windy road? I am reminded of what warriors must think in the dawn of battle, not knowing what the morrow will bring to them, maybe death and maybe victory. Will they stand tall or will they buckle under the pressure and flee for the hills? Dramatic, to be sure, but within each of us this conflict is a living experience. The difference, however, is how we meet it.

I feel the argument for the discipline we are called to live is contained also in this portion of the path. How we meet these stressors is an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation. For me, I have never been good at tests. Like many of you, the anxiety of the possibility of "not knowing" has plagued me since a small child. So, what are my options? If I am true to what I have been saying in this column, I would look to the past for support. What do my ancient teachers have to tell me?

Somewhere inside me is the information I need; alas, it is the *yi* becoming *zhi*, the long-term discipline that will serve me. If I have learned anything, it has been how to learn. But what do the ancients say to me? Just do it? I don't think so. The answer, I feel, is to rest on not only my personal development, but also the development of the medicine as a whole. In essence, we practice a folk medicine. To be sure, the Cultural Revolution sanitized and (for lack of a better term) hospitalized the protocols.

Nonetheless, this is a medicine of the people, practical and immediate. In a sense, every patient is a test and every diagnosis points to protocol, formula protocol - these are all tests. Like the combination of a lock, we have to find the right numbers, the right sequence to unlock the pattern and help set it aright. Much like sleep is the nightly practice of death, so, too, do our patients test us with each session. They ask us, "Can you release the latent healing within me?" If we look at it this way, how prepared are we? The one difference is that one test is theoretical and one is real. In the end, the fact

is that when one chooses the path of healer, life is continually measuring our ability to be present and available.

Perhaps I am romantic in my assessment of those who came before us, the venerated masters of our craft, but I like to think they are there looking over us - not only as practitioners, but as students as well. They know all too well the difficulties of a life devoted to medicine. I have said before that we are not trained as physicians.

Still, physicians are not trained to be truly present with another human who is suffering. It is more than simply memorizing lists of information, but how can we truly assess another's deviation without the foundation that our schools supply? The task of medicine is to balance between these two, the left and right brain, the actual and practical. If this is not approached properly, every action that follows is wasted movement.

So, a prayer before every test is not uncalled for; reliance upon our teachers and their teachers before them is a necessary reliance. In the end, we must pull from every aspect of our education as well as our lives to get through this ritual with strong spleen *qi* and a liver unobstructed. This is a time for celebration for each of us, regardless of where we are in our education. This is the time to stop and consider where we've been and where we're going. And remember, if we are here with purpose and compassion, we are helping people we will never meet. For those of us who are facing these ritual tests of initiation, let us keep in mind that along with all the material we need to have in our brains, we also must have an abundance of self-compassion in our hearts.

Editor's Note: With Timothy Smith graduating from Five Branches Institute, the Student Corner is in need of a new contributor (or contributors). If you are an AOM student and are interested in writing for *Acupuncture Today*, send an original article, brief bio and high-resolution color photo to editorial@acupuncturetoday.com.

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