

# The World, Alchemy and the Mysterious Feminine

PART TWO OF A TWO-PART INTERVIEW WITH LORIE EVE DECHAR, MAC

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Q: What changes do you see necessary in the roles of women in society or as healers?

A: In answer to this question, I have to first take a deep breath, as I feel that it is risky to make any general statements about gender. I do believe that, along with our genetic makeup, reproductive organs, endocrine system and physical structure, we are born with certain innate and somewhat gender-specific biological and psychological traits that are hard-wired into our nervous system and psyche. However, I think that we are moving toward a time when human beings evolve beyond rigid caricatures of masculine and feminine behavior. I think we are ready to exist in choice as ever-changing, mutable, vital expressions of *yin* and *yang*. Like a Picasso painting or a multifaceted crystal, each of us will be a strange and uniquely beautiful expression of wholeness. However, we aren't all there yet and the discussion of gender roles is still a necessary one, so I'll take a stab at it.

For the past 30 years, there has been a great deal of focus in our culture on the necessity for men to develop what has been culturally accepted as more feminine/*yin* qualities, e.g., the capacity for relatedness, emotional depth, inner life, creativity and vulnerability. In Jungian terminology, this development is referred to as a man coming into relationship with his *anima*; the feminine aspect of his soul. In Taoist alchemical texts, this is spoken of as a man learning to discover and cultivate his *yin* receptivity in order to balance the more easily accessed *yang* active side of his instinctual nature. Early 1970s feminists, and later the men's movement, stressed that this shift could help balance the heavily patriarchal bias of our culture, which prizes so-called masculine traits, e.g., ambition, competitiveness, outer-directed action, initiatory energy and invulnerability.

From what I have seen, this approach has done some, but not a tremendous, amount to change things. Most men, unless they are engaged in serious, intense, embodied spiritual practice, will not have the capacity to tether their wild horse #8211; their *yang* instinctual energies #8211; until they are well into their 40s and 50s. According to most alchemical and tantric teachings, men are not biologically or spiritually meant to do this kind of work until the second half of life. From a Taoist alchemical perspective, it is "she" who must take the lead and "he" who follows, not the other way around!

So, the way I see it, women are the ones who need to take the lead in rebalancing *yin* and *yang* in our culture. But it is not through the *yin* aspect of the feminine that this change will happen. The *yin* feminine's primary task is gestating and nurturing systems and organisms that are already created. I think that there is more than enough *yin* feminine existing on the planet these days, both in women and in men, keeping what's already in place nicely tended to. Rather, it is the *yang* aspect of the feminine that we need to call on for the task of transformation, the speck of fire in the water's depth, the power of the "Mysterious Feminine." It is this part of the feminine that comes to the forefront when something needs to die or something really new is ready to be born. She is one who comes around when the egg is ready to crack, the labor contractions begin, the volcano is ready to erupt. It is

the aspect of the goddess who says, "Now! It's time for something new." What this looks like in real time, in society and in healing is women (and men) discovering the part of them that can say, "It's enough! Now it's time to change things." It doesn't look like women trying to act or think like men nor does it look like placating, being nice, caretaking or any other outmoded so-called "feminine traits" of healers. Rather it looks like women finding the courage to take a stand and speak their truth, not only from their minds but from their bodies.

When I first began teaching and leading groups, I was absolutely terrified. I felt like an imposter, a blithering idiot who couldn't articulate a clear thought. But I had this nagging voice in me that kept insisting that I needed to find a way to express what was going on behind the closed doors of my treatment room. I had not been brought up to be an outspoken woman, but more to be the sort of quiet artsy poet who kept her visions and dreams to herself. The idea of speaking out about my work and ideas, which came out of very personal and private experiences, was very scary. Weeks before the first workshop I ever led, I was shaking, sweating and could hardly speak. I set up a consult with a man, an experienced group facilitator, to try and find a way to calm down. He told me to forget about trying not to be scared. He said, "What women don't understand is that it's terrifying to put yourself out there. You're afraid someone's going to come along and cut you down. It's the secret men have been trying to hide for centuries. But if women don't start taking up some space, men are going to just keep bungling along, and the job is too big for men alone." His words have stuck with me for the past 10 years as I have developed my work and teaching. I'm still terrified every time I open my mouth. I've just gotten used to it.

Q: As a faculty member of the Tri-State College of Acupuncture, you have an insider's view of our educational system. Do you feel it is doing a sufficient job of educating students in these directions?

A: I think the colleges are doing the best they can within a very challenging situation. We are trying to find a way to teach people five millennium of information in three years. We are also trying to translate the terms and values of a completely different consciousness into our own. Then, on top of that, we are trying to make sure our students can pass the boards, get licensed and find a way to make a living wage!

I am very grateful to Mark Seem for giving me the opportunity to bring my own vision and psychospiritual work to Tri-State College of Acupuncture, where the focus is on the use of acupuncture to work with physical-level symptoms, in particular orthopedic and myofascial pain. I think it took a lot of courage and a good deal of vision for him to do that. It's a risk to really open the door and look at the emotional, psychological and spiritual aspects of our patients' suffering rather than simply trying to make the physical pain go away. Our experience at the college has shown that there is a great hunger among acupuncture students for information and tools that will allow them to work with their patients at all levels. Although it is very challenging to teach spirit-level material #8211; which is by nature non-quantifiable, immaterial and ungraspable #8211; my students have demonstrated an amazing willingness to endure the confusion and uncertainty that is a prerequisite for gaining an embodied understanding of this aspect of Chinese medicine. If there is anything I would want to say to the schools in this regard, it is that we need to not shortchange our students by underestimating their desire for spirit-level training. By including this level of work in the curriculum, we are maintaining the true integrity of traditional Chinese medicine even if the material does not show up on the NCCAOM exam.

Q: I am always interested in professional opinions to the question: Is it in the best interest of Oriental

Medicine to be integrated into Western medicine?

A: I do think there is value in bringing Oriental and Western medicine together, if the fundamental differences in the paradigms of the two systems are fully understood. Western medicine has a very *yang*, bright, mental, linear and definite way of organizing reality. While the rational logic of Confucian and more modern aspects of Chinese medicine #8211; Eight Principle acupuncture and certain forms of Chinese herbal pharmacology #8211; can hold their own in this kind of Western medical environment, the more *yin*, embodied and mythical aspects of the Taoist healing tradition are easily eclipsed, as are some of the cutting-edge post-rational topological and resonance theories currently being developed here and in Japan. The rhythmic watery awareness of the Taoist tradition can easily dry out and flatten in a Western medical setting, much the way the subtle luminosity of a dream image disappears in the bright light of the morning sun.

Perhaps the answer for now is to just give each kind of light the space it needs, let these two healing traditions sit next to each other for a while, and then see what new possibilities show up in between them rather than trying to force a premature mixing of the two.

From what I have seen, TAI Sophia Institute has been quite successful at interfacing with high-powered medical institutions such as the National Institute for Health, the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine and many others, without losing the integrity of their vision and values. One thing they have done at TAI Sophia, which I think is very smart, is to come at the process of integration with great care around language. How we talk about this process really makes a difference. Integrating Oriental medicine into Western medicine implies that our goal is to add our tradition into an already existing structure. It's like we are saying, "Maybe a little more salt would make this soup taste better, but let's not fundamentally change what we're cooking."

Rather than calling it "integration," I notice that at TAI Sophia, they tend to use the word "partnership" when they talk about their connections with other institutions. I think this distinction is important. When we come together with our Western medical colleagues to form a partnership, rather than to be integrated into their world, we are coming together as two equal, already complete entities with different gifts, insights and strengths. Partnerships engender alchemy #8211; two different elements coming together to form some new and more complex substance. Merging just engenders a mess.

Q: Is there anyway to bring the philosophies you espouse in *Five Spirits* into one's practice?

A: Yes, I am currently working on an *Alchemical Acupuncture Sourcebook: An Integral Approach to Whole Person Healing*. The *Sourcebook* will be the "clinically oriented follow-up" that you mentioned hoping for in your book review of *Five Spirits*. It will expand upon, as well as ground, the concepts introduced in my first book, *Five Spirits: Alchemical Acupuncture for Psychological and Spiritual Healing*. This new book will be both theoretical and practical. Designed in a workbook format, its approach will be integral with practices designed to activate magical, mythical and mental levels of awareness. Exercises, meditations and case studies will support the development of specific diagnostic and therapeutic skills, as well as the states of consciousness and expanded vision necessary for soul and spirit-level healing work.

Although this book will look a lot like a workbook, it is not meant to be work in the ordinary sense. It isn't intended to be hard, tedious or draining. Rather, the book is meant to be lived with, related to, used gently on a daily basis. I am committed to making the writing, the reading and the use of this

book a sustainable endeavor, one that will lead us on a journey back to our own source, the well of wisdom at the center of our own being.

In addition to the *Sourcebook*, with the assistance of my partner Benjamin Fox and several of my senior supervisees, I have expanded my teaching to include an Alchemical Acupuncture Mentorship. The mentorship will serve as a year-long training program for licensed professionals. The program is designed to support practitioners in developing skills to work at the "spirit level" with symptoms that arise from or are entangled with the immaterial, psychic or soulful aspects of our being. Through the mentorship, students will gain mastery of specific diagnostic and therapeutic skills drawn from Five Element Acupuncture, Archetypal Psychology, Consciousness Studies and the Zen Buddhist Tradition, as well as from my own practice of Inner Sensing and Five Spirit Healing. Beyond the acquisition of theoretical understanding, skills and clinical experience, the goal of the mentorship is to support each participant in discovering his or her own unique alchemy, his or her own way of bringing spirit to the acupuncture needle and transforming the lead of pain and suffering into the gold of healing, wisdom and compassion.

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