

Wherefore Humanity?

Steven Alpern, LAc

Oct. 10, 2008, in the Sierra Nevada foothills: I walked out the front door of my house this morning, and saw a doe with her young fawn grazing for pine nuts and other tasty morsels in my yard. The sun was warm this morning, with a hint of the impending chill of autumn in the air. It's a great time to be a human being, even though it's been a really lousy month to be an economic being.

A close friend who owns a small business shared with me his profound sense of impending doom. While his investments to transform production methods during the past year have diminished his payroll, thus making his business more resilient to a downturn, this week he reported feeling "like he's going to die." His identity and self-worth have been so entangled with his business accomplishments that he "can't see beyond" the current crisis to a time when life will again be "normal."

Modern Chinese medicine (TCM) teaches practitioners to classify this man's difficulty sleeping, eating and digesting into imbalances of the *zang fu* (vital and hollow organs), which communicate directly with the primary channels. He exhibits a heart-kidney imbalance, dampness stagnation of the spleen with spleen *qi* deficiency, and perhaps deficiency/cold of the gallbladder. That somatic classification can be looked at experientially as weakness of boundaries (spleen) and sense of self (kidney-heart) during this financial crisis, which opened him to internalize excessively and worry about it.

While these basic diagnostic differentiations are accurate, managing such imbalances often requires ongoing treatments. They describe how a patient is currently implementing distress, but the roots of that person's suffering and the keys to resolution often remain obscured. Why have recent events in the news impacted some people so profoundly?

There may be no better time to draw upon the perennial wisdom of classical Chinese medicine than when people are struggling with a cascading crisis that they don't clearly understand, and which can't be easily controlled from the outside. Whether that crisis is initiated by physiological distress or generates it from mental stress, the applied clinical philosophy of Chinese medicine provides valuable insights for finding a way through it.

Each person is an embodied spirit, which constantly transfers influences between the individualized *shen* (spirit) and *jing* (essence - the embodiment or soma). From the time an individual is born, influences come in from the outside, are digested according to the individual's alignment, and a portion of the product integrated into the being. That is how embodied spirits generate postnatal *qi*, and it's also how individuals integrate socializing influences. Just as the *jing* (essence) grasps the individual's *shen* (spirit), the (social or other) influences that an embodied spirit integrates are also grasped.

Grasping is a survival reflex. We internalize physical and experiential phenomena to grasp their meaning, including whether to continue holding them or to release. When someone picks up a hot

skillet, the initial reflex is to grasp it tightly. The embodied spirit releases the searing handle only after it has registered the burning sensation. When embodied spirits are willing to be aware of their uncomfortable experiences, they can begin releasing them.

We see a clear example of this in the well-known "Five Stages of Grief." The first four stages have been clearly identified precisely because people are so unwilling to slow down and be present with the event for which they are grieving. The most common reaction to difficult experiences is to attempt running away. In the case of grief, individuals typically escape into shock, denial, anger, and depression before they're finally willing to accept their grief, and thereby process through it. As long as one is running away from an experience, the embodied spirit continues to unconsciously grasp it.

Indeed, spiritual wisdom from a myriad of sources exhorts people to focus on the present moment precisely because that practice is so challenging. We are attached to both our projected interpretations and our emotional reactions to prior experience. These stagnations roughly translate somatically into accumulations in the distinct channels and the *luo* vessels, respectively. When the primary channels are afflicted mainly by current experience, treating them directly can have a lasting effect. However, when they are afflicted by stagnations emerging from the interior, such treatments can only control symptomatic expression temporarily.

My friend's personal crisis arises from the influence internal attachments have on his current experience. That influence is somatically expressed in the individual's imprinting emotional reactions onto his blood, so his stagnant blood is sustained by his attachment to personal interpretations that perpetuate repetitive emotional patterns. Only the 150 miles between us prevented me from carefully examining his body for *luo* vessels, which *Lingshu* (chapter 10) identifies as the only visible system of channels. These typically appear as spider veins, although there may also be skin tags, lipomas, or simple discolorations or other physical signs that indicate stagnations of either blood or fluids.

When *luo* vessels hold stagnant blood, they can be bled with a lancet. Plum-blossom needling stimulates the patient's embodied spirit to expel both blood and fluid accumulations, so it works well in both cases. However, that procedure takes more time than some practitioners choose to spend with each patient, and many patients find it quite painful. Yet these mutual reasons to forgo plum-blossom needling his *luo* vessels would not have deterred me. This therapy can provide an embodied spirit the emotional space to find a new way to experience the circumstances and events of life.

The distance separating us prevented plum-blossom needling, so I gave my friend a meditation. I briefly explained the grasping reflex, using the hot handle of a cast iron skillet as an illustration. We discussed both physical and experiential aspects of grasping, and how our lives depend on them. We grasp and hold both air and food/drink within our bodies to generate postnatal *qi*, supporting vital function. Likewise, individuals (experientially) grasp their points of view in providing a "sane" persona that then engages experience.

Finally, I asked my friend, "How long do you need to grasp the handle before you can let it go?" He paused for a moment over that question, and took a few deep breaths. That challenged his embodied spirit to notice and begin releasing the self-talk that consistently narrates his life. His attachment to succeeding at handling the challenges of business has been a pillar of his personality for more than 15 years, and his need to create that external success grew from even deeper urges. Yet, where that role had been a comfort, now it causes him a sense of loss and pain.

Within this personal crisis, my friend has the opportunity to release attachments that had been

constraining the growth of his embodied spirit. Indeed, we can all benefit from recalling that we experience the present through "filters," which project personal interpretations onto current events and circumstances. Those interpretations are based on previously unfulfilled emotional reactions, and they pre-determine the nature of our current experience.

Among the eight branches of Chinese medicine, working with a patient's self-talk through their meditation is often considered the highest. Inspiring patients to pay closer attention to their lives and support their vitality empowers healing more than any passive care therapy. It allows people to understand and respond to their struggles in life, rather than reacting reflexively and attempting to simply decrease them.

Transforming self-talk provides the most accurate and effective way to address the internal cause of disease, which is the individual's inability to resolve conflicts of the seven emotions. Unresolved emotional conflicts generate physical pathology because the embodied spirit imprints them onto the blood, which displaces a spiritual stagnation (of the emotions) into a somatic one. Experiencing those emotions is not pathological. Indeed, bringing the unresolved emotional conflict back out of the somatic "closet" into conscious awareness, where the embodied spirit has another chance to release them to the outside, can allow the individual to resolve his or her internal sources of pathology.

Best of all, the end of an acupuncture session generally provides a wonderful opportunity to practice this therapy. Most often patients are particularly grounded into the intrinsic nature of their embodied spirits and, thus, somewhat less entangled in their habitual reactions of personality. A question or comment posed to the embodied spirit while the practitioner removes needles may become the most important part of the entire process. If that input doesn't trigger a reaction from the patient's personality, it may reverberate for days or even weeks to continue stimulating release of emotional conflicts - the internal causes of disease. Indeed, touching the embodied spirit in that way can stimulate healing even without acupuncture.

Nearly two weeks after our initial discussion, I asked my friend how he was doing. He responded, "The sky is clear, the air is fresh, and it's a great time to be alive." He paused for a moment and then added, "Even if business is still a mess."

DECEMBER 2008