

## The Comfort of Community

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Being part of a community and receiving nourishment from others is especially vital for those of us who are in a profession of giving. If you review the friendships that you have developed through professional contexts you will, hopefully, find a lovely tapestry of caring people and common interests.

Have you reached out to colleagues to broaden the spectrum of personalities in your life? Have you asked for help with patients or for support when you need someone to turn to? Likewise, are you a valued resource and friend for your colleagues? If so, your world is a kinder place.

Community can happen in a thousand different ways. I would like to offer a few "community building" examples that have come into my life.

A friend suggested I meet Robin, an acupuncturist from her hometown, North Carolina. Robin and I met during one of my recent visits. Robin's office was lovely. It had warmth, kindness and comfort in its decor. Having practiced for a decade, she has a strong sense of what she is good at professionally, knows the kind of patient she works best with and who to refer to her circle of support practitioners. She carries many of the same pharmacy products that I have worked with over the years. Our conversation spun from the commonality and differences in our thinking about herbal medicine to sharing our history and career backgrounds. It was fun to walk into a stranger's office and walk out feeling camaraderie. I have lectured extensively to CEOs in that part of the country and I now have someone competent, warm and intelligent to refer to. Our meeting was a win for everybody.

Another friend I met, Kyle, has spent the past 20 years bringing our work into the corporate sector through product development. He makes DVDs for machinists who typically incur hand injuries. He uses marshal arts training techniques to strengthen hands in ways that physical therapy falls short, and teaches hand safety tips rooted in *qi gong*. Our late night conversations started when I was looking for survey contributors for a series of articles about acupuncturists working in hospital settings. He responded and told me about his familiarity with my work. Now, years later, we have kept up with one another. I have promoted his product to some of my corporate clients. He has helped me with materials for a class that I taught at the Pacific Symposium a few years ago. We have never met in person but keep our friendship going through social media and phone calls.

Thirty years ago, I met another one of my good friends, Steven, when he was teaching a class I attended. There is a depth of compassion and empathy in our friendship that could only exist because we share this profession. Decades of late night calls sharing war and success stories has made our friendship unique. I once asked "Have you ever given a treatment that may have been too strong for a patient but you weren't sure? The vomiting and coughing afterwards may have been the result of too much moxa forcing *chi* upwards on the stomach channel. Or was it the flu? And his immunity is very weak, which is why I am treating him in the first place. I spoke to his wife a few days later but having not yet seen the patient again, I was wondering." I haven't had one of those in a decade or so but I did

recently. And, just like a decade ago, I called Steven. He was tired, using half sentences, typical of his speech pattern following a 12-hour day of patients. Did he understand? Yes, he said, he pondered such a question just a few months ago. No it doesn't come up often for him anymore. Yes, I need to go check the patient's pulse before I can conclude my answer. "But," he assured me, "he probably got the flu. You would never have done so much moxa as to have caused a problem like that on a cold, *tan tien* deficient, elderly man." Even if he's wrong, it's nice to hear him say that, to have his respect and to have someone believe in me when I doubted myself.

How comforting. Those warm fuzzies are what community is for. It eases the challenging hours.

Our work has an inherent precariousness to it and one can never be entirely certain of outcomes. There is mystery. No matter how precise your strategizing is about a treatment, the divine energy element - the chemistry between needles and body - is never completely predictable. Our control stops at the skin. A body will absorb a treatment in its own way and we cannot dictate what that way is. This lack of certainty and risk factor could make one's practice feel isolating. After 40 years I still tell every patient that the next treatment will be determined by how his/her body reacts to this one. A treatment protocol and pacing must bow to the direction a patient's body chooses in order to determine the next piece of work. No matter the extent of your training or how many years you have been a clinician, you will never eliminate the risk brought about by the transfer of *chi* from one body (yours) to another (your patient).

Couple that with the formidable challenges of running a business, and the maintaining and building of a practice in today's economy and you can see that the need to commiserate with comrades escalates. While those who practice primarily on the wealthy may not be feeling the bite, many of us are really hurting financially. Marketing and sales skills are very important and if you don't have them you will want to learn. Do you know of someone whose practice is blossoming? Even if you have never met they may welcome your initiation. And they may be delighted to share what they are doing that works.

There are many ways to meet new colleagues. It can be done in person by attending CEU classes and through current friends. You could get more innovative. How about calling all your colleagues within a five-mile or 50-mile radius - depending upon how sparsely populated your area is with acupuncturists - and inviting them to your office for a gathering. If you each bring one challenging patient to review there can be a lively discussion and rich learning. Make it a potluck. Make it monthly!

There are online options as well. Meetup.com has many groups built around acupuncture. Yahoo also has a whopping 600-plus groups. Going onto Facebook or other social networking sites can also introduce you to colleagues who would love to interact. With a little effort scanning a phone book or online resource, you can meet new people with whom you share a great deal professionally and personally.

Most of us would love to meet, be met and help out. Consider taking advantage of the camaraderie potential during these hard times. It's a way to bring light into the economic darkness. The people you reach out to meet now may become the most important friends you will ever have.

That's a risk worth taking.

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