

Pulses and Death

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As acupuncturists, our greatest tool in diagnosis is our ability to listen to the messages that the pulses give us about our patient's health and energetics. I had been taking my mother's pulses since I started acupuncture school in 2006. I knew them well. We were old friends. They were full and robust, always communicating the strength and heat that radiated within my mother. This same heat also led to the deterioration of her body's resources. Fire she had; yin she did not.

My mother battled with slow, progressive multiple sclerosis for 32 years. It slowly stole her body over time, but it was not until her last few years that it affected her mind and spirit. Her death was not a surprise to her loved ones, and yet it still shocked our family all the same. In fact, death and dying was an open conversation in our household, but when its presence was finally a reality, we still found it new and uncomfortable.

During my mother's last hours alive, my family and I became frustrated by our lack of understanding of death's process. It was then I realized I could provide them with an insight to my mother's internal health, one which the nurses and doctors could not. This is when I began taking her pulses.

I was unable to take the pulses on her right arm due to swelling, which included the lungs, large intestine, stomach, spleen, and kidney yang. But her left arm's pulses were ready to communicate and able to share with me.

I could feel immediately that her kidneys were gone. Her liver was weak and wiry, but her heart was still strong and vibrant. Her *shen* was still there and fighting with the strength it always had. About 15 minutes later, I felt her liver pulse fade. Finally, it was only my mom's heart continuing to fight, but I could feel it was also diminishing. As soon as I shared this knowledge with my family, her liver re-emerged, letting me know that her *hun* was not done. But soon enough, her soul departed, and eventually so did her *shen*.

I have always described my mother's multiple sclerosis as a disease in which her body did not listen to her mind and spirit. She wanted one thing, and her body did another. And so as her pulses, her life force, her spirit, and her mind transitioned on, I continued to observe the dichotomy of her life's existence. Her body continued to do its own thing on its own time, just as it had for these past 32 years.

For 30 more minutes, we watched her body continue to take its last breaths. Finally, there was the silence and peace that only accompanies death.

The ability to feel and listen to my mother's life force continue to communicate with me, even when she was beyond words, was truly the greatest experience of my life. And it is a gift only an acupuncturist is able to receive.

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