

My Latest Patient

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I treated a patient today for whom I have a special sense of empathy. With everyone I see, I try to call up the compassion that is available when I acknowledge that we all suffer, that we all have pain of one form or another; that pain and suffering are part of the human condition, and that they, if understood properly, can offer occasion for profound healing and connection between us. But with this patient I didn't have to try hard.

As soon as I saw him, I noticed something subtle but familiar: The almost imperceptible tension in the forehead that puts a new crease between the eyebrows, the ever-so-slight leaning forward, the extra care given to the placement of the feet upon the ground as if to tread quietly, the mildly accentuated kyphosis of the upper thoracic spine which is the posture of defeat. It was like looking in a mirror from my past! He even had my wiry build.

He suffers from chronic low back pain, and though he is only in his mid-forties it has been his steadfast companion for nearly a decade. During the intake he described his pain and his previous efforts at managing it in concise clinical language imbued with a confidence that showed the attention that he has given his subject for years. I had to resist my impulse to finish his sentences for him, or to say, "I know just how you feel," and sound patronizing. When I did finally tell him that it was back pain that had brought me as a patient to the medicine that I now practice, we shared a long moment in silence as he scrutinized me closely as if searching for signs of his condition and for the hope that it might be lifted. There was a sense of *déjà vu*, as I heard myself speak the very words that I had heard nine years ago when I had, out of desperation, gone to an acupuncturist: "I'm quite sure I can help you with your pain."

I helped him onto the treatment table and began explaining a little about the procedure. I thought back to the time when I was in his situation – in great need of some relief, some sign to give me hope that my life might someday be cleared of the constant nagging discomfort and episodes of agony. Then I remembered as though it happened today the feeling of elation when I stood up from the table so many years ago and searched for the pain or the drug

fog and realized that neither one was there. Instead I had this strange, yet exquisite feeling of being ... pain free. How I hoped today that I could offer the same to my new patient. Not everyone has the dramatic results that you had, I reminded myself. And not everyone needs to change careers in mid-life either. I chuckled aloud. My patient asked me what was funny. I had no choice but to explain, and as I did, the sense of connectedness, and the feeling of honor to be of service to someone who is suffering came over me. I took several deep, deliberate breaths as I placed the needles.

I wouldn't jump to any conclusions, despite the fact that his initial injury and subsequent symptoms sounded eerily like my own. Everyone's different, I thought to myself. I heard Master Guan's monotone say, "Treat according to differentiation of syndrome, not according to western disease state!" Though the "local" acupuncture points I chose were almost identical to the ones that were used on me years ago, the "distal" points on the legs, feet, and hands were quite different because of some differences in his presentation of other clinical signs.

I was able to maintain my professional demeanor, but inside I was experiencing a disconcertingly strong mix of emotions and thoughts about his story and my own. Like me, he had been put on pain medication and had developed a reluctant dependence on the drugs that temporarily, and with ever-diminishing returns, helped dull the pain. They also numbed him to the world around him and gave him bad dreams. He talked of his acute episodes of searing, incapacitating pain and of his good days when just a few ibuprofen could take the edge off.

I went to work on him ... with all of my attention and intention. We had both been driven, almost obsessively, in our athletic pursuits before the injuries that resulted in our back pain and had been unable to continue competing afterwards. When in a very matter-of-fact way he mentioned his occasional suicidal ideation, which he knew was a result of his incessant discomfort, I simply nodded slightly, but to myself I acknowledged for perhaps the first time that such thoughts had crossed my mind, too, more than once.

I gave him acupuncture, moxibustion, some tuina, and what can best be described as a prayer. He fell asleep on the table while I was getting his herbs from the apothecary, which is a good sign. When he got up after his

treatment and moved around, testing his back, he said, “Wow! ‘ feels pretty good!”

“That’s the easy part.” I said, smiling. “Now we need to make it stick.” He made another appointment, thanked me, took his herbs, and bounded out of the clinic with a distinct bounce in his step. I watched him cross the street and get into his car. He waved as he drove off. I thought about how fortunate we both were to have found this medicine.

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