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Deeper Waters of Soul - Leaning in to Trust the Self

In 2009 I published a peer-reviewed paper in a Chinese medicine journal entitled *Integrative Medicine: Combining the Practice of Orthodox & Alternative Medicine – Inclusive of ‘Other’ or just another path to Exclusivity?!*. While the main themes of that article were about exploring the co-option of ‘alternative’ or traditional medical models into the mainstream orthodoxy, my fascination was with the prescriptive and defining powers of language and the narrative frames and themes we use to communicate our values. On the cusp of graduation and with the intensity of a new recruit, I was interested in the way that language defined, created or limited the power and agency of my profession.

My article focused on the external language of definitions and placement. It was about how we position ourselves through language in a landscape

of a dominant cultural paradigm of Western and conventional medicine. It is a landscape that can be hostile to the ‘otherness’ of our shape as Eastern and therefore alternative medicine, but it will also be tolerant of that otherness, as long as it is diminutive and doesn’t threaten the hegemony and agency of the ‘real medicine’.

In other words, know your place and the birds of prey, those hegemonies of culture, will make a claim on the ‘things that work’. To some extent, Chinese/Eastern medicine is underpinned, fortified and anchored by Western scientific models because Western science finds the modalities we use (herbal medicines, acupuncture, moxa, gua sha and cupping) to have value and significant effects above and beyond placebo (ignoring that placebo in clinical practice may represent the acceptance of any intervention with the body). This means that the

truth of what we do is properly justified.

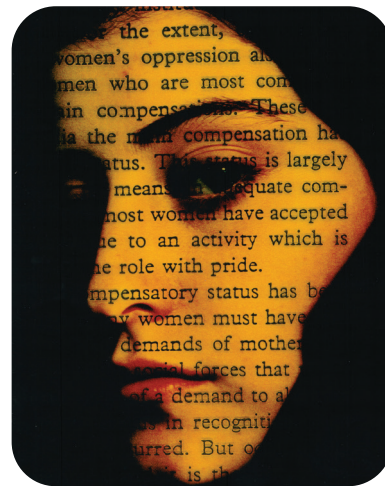
It is a valuable embrace, but it is not a defining one. That Eastern perspectives, modalities and knowledge are to a very large degree rationalised with the Western scientific frame means that the bones of the Eastern medical corpus have integrity. As a system and medical paradigm, it bears more than one way of looking, more than one approach, and this strengthens rather than weakens our authenticity. But it also places great strain on the understanding of the medicine by those who practise it without self-awareness and without some literacy in difference.

When I was first coming to grips with the language and terminology of Chinese medicine, I nearly tore my hair out. My sense of precision insisted that it was nonsense to have multiple words for spleen qi when one would do. Such was the inherited dogma I didn't even know I possessed. Fellow students were kinder about it, and kind to me too. My gratitude for their forbearance should be noted here; they know who they are. But for my own sake, I learnt to hone that need for precision into my acupuncture and palpatory skills, so at least my Western mind and scientific training wasn't wholly a meanness without application.

During my university studies, the many and varied ways perception was rendered in those endless textbooks was due, in part, to reading the medicine in translation. Each translator will have a different word to mean a similar thing; each lineage will prefer or monopolise terminology. But it is also, I suppose, the nature of the transformation that pictographic characters are being rendered into a very linear language. After many years, I now understand, ruefully, that it's a bit like being asked to describe the Mona Lisa. Is it an upturning of the lips, a smile, or a smirk?

Translation reminds us that there is almost infinite variety in interpretation. And *interpretation* is fundamental to our experience of reality.

My insistence on linguistic precision was about getting things right, to ensure a level of control over 'my reality'. It was hardly surprising; this is what a novice does. I was like a small child wandering into an unknown and ambivalent landscape. I needed precision and discernment to ensure I pocketed the nutritive rather than the ersatz, toxic fruit, and to keep to the Camino rather than get side-tracked into dead ends. As with all journeys, I have learnt that I need to reshape my requirement for precision. It is



no longer the precision of the path's unblurring lines I am seeking; rather, the precision of understanding what the lines and the spaces between them mean. As I have learnt to trust my own perspective and perceptions, that beautiful place where the Yi, Shen and Jing fold into each other, I am rewarded with the rich interweaving of an embodied knowledge. I have gleaned enough across each of the tiers of existence – mind, body, soul – to be able to trust in the informed and intuitive place within me. And this enables me to not only enjoy the variety of interpretations, but to seek it out against the dogma and prescriptive narratives which abound.



However, in 2009, as a newly minted Acupuncture and Chinese Herbal medicine practitioner, I was struggling with the articulation of a medical paradigm, and failing with the language I had been given by my university education around Chinese medicine. I was concentrating too hard on the externals and the identifiers. Was I alternative, complementary or allied? How would I navigate the national identity embedded within the medicine? Could I practise Chinese medicine when I wasn't Chinese? It was conceptually problematic, and like so many beginners, I focused on the yang or external aspect of the dilemma. This distraction meant that I missed the greater conversation for quite a long

time.

It may be a truism for those who have arrived at mastery, but the deeper, greater and more fulfilling conversation is within the medicine itself. Every journeyman and woman has glimpsed the insights of the embodied yin aspect. They know that it is the internal cultivation, the soul and spirits dialogue, that holds the abiding and soul-shaking treasure. There is a reason, a very deep and embedded reason, why the medical language of Eastern diagnosis is expressed in poetry and underpinned by the spirit of Daoist thought and practice.

David Whyte claims that poetry is the language against which we have no defence, and as a very successful modern poet, he would know². He speaks from a tradition inherited from the Celts, who honoured the power of words in blessings and curses. For the Celts, language was as material and foundational as wood, bedrock, water and steel. They asserted, too, perhaps because they were so fully cognizant of language as a twist tie, that the physical body is held in and by the soul. The soul is not a seed-like thing or abstract concept within us, but it is the enigmatic and auric holding around the physical self³. When we perceive the soul this way, we begin to appreciate that the soul deflects, absorbs and responds to caress or injury before the physical body has even been broached.



Interestingly, within Chinese medicine, the soul is said to be held in the Liver, the organ system with its sphere of influence (from the meridian to the organ) that symbolises our sense of vision. It masters the doing and organisation of things and is happiest and healthiest when unfettered, for it governs the free flow of qi, the interchange and absorption of information (externally environmental and internally emotional).

The ancient shamans of all directions, those honoured translators of the etheric and the holders

of the soul, were not so different to the Celts. They knew that to speak of all that the human heart-mind-body contains, as well as the context, space and environment that holds it, needs language that is expansive enough. In other words, generous and spacious, symbolic, metaphorical, nuanced and precise, especially when we are speaking to one, or the many, in need of care.

It is a source of continuing frustration and disappointment to me that the language of symbolism and metaphor, the figurative and poetic of classical medicine, has been stripped out of undergraduate and postgraduate studies in the interests of Western science and transactional language. Or worse, rendered literal in the small-hearted meanness of transactional minds. Such is the malaise of modern educational institutions everywhere. Perhaps it is part of how modernity distracts and fatigues us and our imagination through being so prescriptive with the formula, so controlling of the dreamers and their dreams. It is because the cosmology, the yin aspect of the art, philosophy, humour and relational messiness of the medicine, has been seen as disposable, unclean and somehow less than the bright clear yang of the technical, observational, muscular and scientific.

Kierkegaard puts it this way:

there is a compulsion to completely absorb oneself in either the finite or the infinite, for in doing so one abandons the responsibility of being a self. To lose oneself in the finite is to live a life imprisoned in what one perceives as being an inescapable environment... To lose oneself in the infinite is to live as though life is nothing but a series of endless experiments... To be a self requires that one balances those opposing tensions⁴.

There is no either/or.



And as we know from our very first lessons, the yin and yang are complementarities, they define each other. They provide in their own way the space for the other to exist. This is an articulation of existence. Yin and Yang can only embrace and define the other, with and by its own inherent qualities.

How, then, do we practise only within the light and busyness of the yang, without deeply knowing the rich yin of expansive darkness that represents containment, absorption, reflection? The night brings a liberation that the day does not. In the dark, the horizon is less visible, less obvious, less determining of the path and its placement.

What land do we inhabit as seekers, pilgrims, practitioners, and how do we connect when we have been disenfranchised from the language of our chosen profession, the calling of the healer's inheritance?

There are many ways forward; it is the nature of health that we have diversity. This is true for the bacteria in our gut as much as it is for our many ways of practising the philosophies and techniques. Be in conversation with all parts and lean into those parts that seem unlike you or cause discomfort. The exiled hold great wisdom.

Where is the art of our craft if we only employ the technical? The back of this medicine is broad; do not be corralled into specialities. Make your speciality the medicine. It produces far more than you can ever keep up your sleeve. And let go of always wanting to have or be the answer.



The ability to be discerning with the energies of our spirit and our life force best comes through the lens of kindness and our own seated awareness, rather than the mean shallows of tradition.

I urge you to find the richness and spiritual depth in the medicine, even when long clinical days wear you down. If you are burning out or have already done so, then let me assure you that now, more than ever, is the time to reconnect to the deeper waters of the soul. It is there that you will find the true reason for your fatigue, as well as the imaginative seeds that will rekindle your fire and love.

Let us not allow these days of fear and fright and viral contagion to blind us to the real infection and virulence of the distrust we have of our own self and of each other.

Blessèd be the space between us.



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