

Pillars of Support

*Whate'er exists hath properties that spread
Beyond itself, communicating good,
A simple blessing, or with evil mixed:*

*Spirit that knows no insulated spot,
No chasm, no solitude; from link to link
It circulates, the soul of all the worlds.*

Extract from "The Cosmic Spirit", William Wordsworth

Gotoh sensei, one of my acupuncture teachers in Japan and given to quasi-scientific reasoning, gave us this simple formula to ponder during a lesson:

Reaction = treatment + sensitivity.

He went on to explain what was implied by this: the same reaction can be obtained by carefully gauging the sensitivity of the patient and calibrating the intensity of the treatment accordingly.

Some of us are born with thick hides. Others are born sensitive. Still others are just wide open. Such people are the ones we call gifted, psychic or clairvoyant. Nowadays they are sometimes called empaths because their power of empathy is so strong that they often feel what another person is experiencing but is not yet consciously aware of.

The lucky ones receive guidance from a loving and nurturing relative or friend or even a culture which knows, appreciates and values the talent available. Most do not.

Our Western cultures, in particular, tend to cause such individuals to repress or hide and in some cases completely disable their abilities. No guidance is offered; instead every attempt is made in the name of religion, science and common sense to eradicate all traces of the anomaly. One learns to "fit in", however painful the process and disempowering the end result.

In fact the very act of disowning one's gift or ability can lead to serious illness - not surprising if we consider the act of disowning as a shutting down of a significant percentage of the energy available to that individual. Imagine for a moment the crippling effect on a human being of disabling a portion of say, the immune or hormone system and we can envisage what it might mean for a person having to turn off their gift of feeling, sensing or seeing types of energy which others among us cannot access.

We can even compare this to the effects of anti-depressant medication on people complaining of stress and anxiety. What seems to happen is that a portion of the entire response system is disabled, thus allowing the individual to cope with the level of stimulus coming in from the outside world. This effect is achieved however, at the expense of many levels of sensitivity throughout the organism. The person in question becomes to a significant degree anaesthetized. A kind of general cushioning effect comes into being, an effect which reduces many of the normal functions we associate with perception. The person becomes partially shut down.

This can be highly desirable for a certain period of time while rest and recuperation are facilitated, especially if dosage is carefully managed between medical practitioner and patient in collaboration. However, if we consider the cost in terms of increased dullness and non responsiveness - to say nothing of metabolic stagnation and subsequent weight gain - we might question the long term wisdom of this practice.

Increasingly, I have found that people coming for treatments learn to move back into their abilities, and embrace them for the powerful tools they are. Oriental medicine provides a wonderfully clear and thoroughly earthed framework for the re-development of these gifts and abilities, which then become avenues for creative growth instead of toxic burdens.

Some readers will begin to sense a kindred feeling here. What many of us actually go through on our healing journey is a kind of re-sensitisation, and here I mean either as patient or therapist or even as a support person to one going through the process. This is sometimes very pleasant, sometimes absolutely wonderful, powerful and liberating. Sometimes, however, it is very, very painful indeed.

Personally I belong to the fortunate group of individuals who experience healing - in the form of both therapy and education - as a series of joyful and liberating discoveries and even more so, re-discoveries. Memories flood back, experiences re-occur, sometimes at breakneck speed, and doors long closed swing open. Some readers will recognise this as being similar or identical to their own experience.

There are, however, those whose experience of healing is characterised by pain. These are the people we the practitioners of Oriental medicine have unique gifts to offer. The streams and structures of our traditions place a soothing and supporting frame around experiences long suffered and harshly repressed.

The associative trails of the five elements and in particular the five spirits give us accurate tools for sorting, annotating and characterising aspects of behaviour so that these empaths can begin to put their experiences into context, place them on a map and chart reference points for the re-structuring of thoughts, feelings and spiritual insights.

Above and beyond this we have the possibility to contribute to a wholesale recalibration of the boundaries concerning sensitivity. People who react to unkindness, brusque behaviour and provocative insults are commonly encouraged to be less sensitive - as if sensitivity in itself were a negative and destructive property.

Surely this is not the case. Sensitivity exists for a reason. One of our tasks might be to help those who are in possession of an uncommonly high degree of sensitivity to embrace it as a strength rather than shun it as a badge of debilitating weakness.

Properly managed, sensitivity is a tool for navigating uncharted depths and exploring heights rarely flown to. Part of our responsibility as practitioners might then be to reclaim our own sensitivity, hone it and raise it to new levels so that we also become empaths operating at higher levels of sensitivity, with access to our own special gifts and powers of perception.

Sensitive people can become powerful agents of positive change if they are given an empathic context to stabilise and flourish in. Shall we become their pillars of support?

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