



THE TWAIN SHALL MEET

An Interview With Napa Acupuncturist Dr. Irit Weir

by
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As we stand on the threshold of the 21st century, modern health care practitioners are turning an increasingly receptive and attentive eye toward ancient and traditional healing arts. Since the People's Republic of China reopened its doors to the West, medical researchers have applied their empirical methods of measuring and evaluating the efficacy of Traditional Chinese Medicine, particularly acupuncture, with convincing results. Unprecedented numbers of Westerners are turning to Chinese medicine to avoid the perceived pitfalls of Western medicine: the invasiveness of surgery, the annoying and sometimes dangerous side effects of prescription medications and the harsh toll of radiation and chemotherapy. The growing acceptance of Chinese healing techniques by the mainstream medical community, combined with the trend in the population to seek alternative care, begs the question: Can Eastern and Western medicine meet across two oceans and more than two millennia to forge an alliance on this continent?



Napa acupuncturist and herbologist Irit Weir believes this is not only possible but necessary.

"It is essential to look at the 20th century and ask 'What have we done so far? What is working and what is not?' We have to take stock of our experiences and then make decisions which will benefit the patient's health and humanity. We have to look also at the strengths of both forms of medicine. There are ways to combine technology with natural medicine to enhance our lives. The application of Western technology to medicine is

useful in some cases. For example, in emergency situations such as heart attacks, traumatic injuries and other acute conditions. And the use of MRI and ultrasound gives us the gift of looking inside...it really is a miracle. However, for chronic conditions such as auto-immune disorders, acute pain and the effects of stress, acupuncture and herbs can treat not only the symptoms but the underlying condition according to a patient's individual constitution. It encompasses both the physical and the emotional aspects and offers a shift into wholeness without the side effects of medication."

Dr. Weir studied for three years at the American College of Traditional Chinese Medicine in San Francisco, followed by a four-month internship at the Guangzhou Hospital in Canton, China, where she observed the Chinese medical system. "In China, there is no separation or fragmentation between Eastern and Western medicine. The hospital where I worked was a medical hospital which had an acupuncture department. They cook the herbs in a pharmacy at the hospital. Most Chinese doctors study both Western and Traditional medi-



cine." Therefore, it would appear that Chinese medical system has more readily embraced and incorporated Western medicine than their American counterparts have accepted Chinese medicine.

To gain insight into the philosophy and workings of Chinese medicine, Irit Weir recommends *The Web That Has No Weaver*, by Ted J. Kaptchuk. In this text, Kaptchuk explains that the logic which underlies Chinese medicine is based on the theory of two polar complements called Yin and Yang which "explains relationships, patterns and change...to describe how things function in relation to each other and to the universe. They are used to explain the continuous process of natural change...In this system of thought, all things are seen as parts of a whole."

In his comparison of Eastern and Western medicine, Kaptchuk attributes the difference to a fundamental disparity in logic. He cites Aristotle's *Physics* to represent the Western view. "Men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the 'why' of it (which is to grasp its primary cause)." Kaptchuk goes on to say, "For the Chinese however, phenomena occur independently of an external act of creation, and there is no great need to search for a cause."

According to the theory of

Chinese medicine, the organs of the human body are related to each other and to the whole, and bio-energy travels throughout the body from one organ to another along meridians or pathways which are close to the surface. When the flow of bio-energy is blocked or imbalanced it is possible to open or balance the flow of energy by inserting tiny, hair-thin needles at specific points along these meridians. Sterile, individually packaged and disposable needles are inserted at depths which range from less than a quarter of an inch to one and a half inches, depending upon the size of the patient and the area being treated. Insertion of the needles causes little or no pain and they are left in place for periods of up to forty minutes while the patient lies comfortably relaxed.

Chinese healing incorporates the use of medicinal herbs which Dr. Weir dispenses in her office. Some of the herbal supplements are active agents against certain types of illness, while others act to tonify and strengthen individual organs or the body system as a whole. Most of these herbs are indigenous to China, although some are locally grown or domestic varieties.

As part of the acupuncture

treatment, a process called moxibustion is also applied, in which a lighted stick of incense made from the mugwort plant is passed over the patient's body. Western medical studies have shown that moxibustion enhances the body's immune system. Massage therapy is sometimes recommended to augment the healing process by promoting blood circulation, muscle tone, relaxation and a general sense of well being.

Irit Weir, originally from Tel Aviv, Israel, was introduced to traditional medicine by her mother who practices a healing technique called "cupping", and her grandmother who practiced herbology. She began her own career as a practitioner of Chinese medicine in Berkeley while working as an office assistant to acupuncturist Frieda Simpson. "I worked with her for awhile, until it was time to make a decision about what I wanted to do professionally. It was then that I decided that acupuncture fit very well with my mother's cupping technique and my grandmother's herbology....I felt very at ease with Chinese medicine. I was searching the past and the present and looking at how everything affected everything else. And I definitely felt a calling for medicine which provides everything for body, mind and spirit. For the first time, I'd found something that felt



right."

Dr. Weir practices the art of healing in a pleasant, upscale professional complex located right in the heart of Napa's medical district. But, upon entering, one is immediately aware that this is no ordinary doctor's office. It is furnished and appointed in soothing pastel tones with a visually appealing yet eclectic array of art and photographs. The walls of the reception area are lined with neatly arranged jars, boxes and bottles of herbal preparations and nutritional supplements and a bookshelf generously stocked with a fascinating selection of health-related texts. Music, sometimes Native American or simple Chinese flute, other times classical guitar or contemporary new age, provides a soothing backdrop, and everywhere the exotic aroma of moxibustion perfumes the air.

A visit with Dr. Weir begins with a personal consultation, in which her patients have an opportunity to discuss their symptoms as well as other significant aspects of their lives. She believes that a patient's attitude and state of mind are crucial elements of health and well-being. "Allowing time for a patient's story to unfold in a safe place without judgment of criticism encourages the patient to return "Home" and feel whole again. This journey opens that space of returning to our authentic

selves which means feeling happy and creative again. The herbs and the acupuncture are instrumental in that process, utilizing this ancient form of medicine to connect us back to ourselves to find Balance and Peace. Healing begins within."

And, in Irit Weir's estimation, the same concept applies to the co-existence of Eastern and Western practice within the medical community. "I really strive for dialogue, so we communicate with doctors in the area. In the past two years, there are a few doctors who have become receptive to what we do, and that makes me feel good because there is a chance for dialogue. But, as acupuncturists and holistic doctors, we need to build credibility, to take the responsibility to expand education and to continue research, not only in the context of private clinics, but in hospitals learning how to function in the world of Western medicine. But practitioners of both Eastern and Western medicine need look at the goal of what is really important for the patient. From there, we need to take the steps to evolve, to do the research together, kind of like a marriage. How can you be married if you live in two separate houses?"

When asked about her vision of the future of health and wellness in the 21st cen-

tury, she replied, "It's a question that I ask myself every day. I want to be optimistic, but when look at I what is happening in the world right now, it saddens me. Visiting Auschwitz last summer and witnessing the horror of the 20th century, I ask myself "Have we learned anything from the past?" There is a part of me which likes technology, but I feel that it needs to be used in the context of humanity. And although I feel that there are a lot of individuals who are conveying a strong, positive message, all too often, the people who don't speak out are the people who have the most compassion. And, like the work that we do here, the message, if anything, is to voice our voices." 6

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