

The Practical Herbalist -- The Favorite Tool of the Healer

Hospitals and doctors often brag about the latest high tech equipment that they have for diagnosing patients. Often these machines give tremendous detailed and voluminous amounts of data to be analyzed. These machines have saved many lives and made modern healthcare possible. As a traditional healer I have been asked what fancy tools I have for helping my patients. I reply that I have a tool that most hospitals can't afford to give their doctors. I have windows in my office.

In Traditional Oriental Medicine we are taught to pay attention to the colors of the skin and the tongue under natural light as a way of determining what is wrong with the patient. In my office a more important purpose is served. I can see the street from my office. I can see a patient get out of their car and walk to my office door. I have a few back pain patients who I always watch arrive. From the way they get out of the car and walk up to my door I can tell where the pain is and how bad it is this time. I can see how they favor a leg when coming up a step, or how they adjust their pace on the sidewalk. All this can tell me more about pain than the usual response from a patient of just where it hurts.

I remember one patient in particular. She came in with a sore shoulder. She had never had a sore shoulder like this. It just wouldn't go away. She told me she doesn't know how it started, no particular trauma, it was just getting worse. I treated the shoulder with acupuncture and some pain relieving herbs, and told her that the problem was likely to come back if we didn't identify the reason for the sore shoulder. I asked how long this had been developing. She said, "about a month". I pointed out the window and asked how long she had had the fancy new car. She said "about a.....month." Some adjustments to the seat and steering wheel and the sore shoulder never came back.

A window also reminds me about the weather. Weather often affects how people feel. I get to see the weather every day. If a patient feels good today but was worse yesterday, knowing the type of changes in weather can provide a clue as to how their system is functioning and reacting to the environment. Just as modern medicine is recognizing seasonal affective disorder, depression affected by changes in light and season, Chinese Medicine recognized various types of pain that were affected by particular changes in weather. Weather became a diagnostic tool for prescribing the right herbs for the particular type of pain.

So when it comes to my most used tool in my office, the answer has to be my windows.

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