

A Physician's Apocalypse

(Being the full tale as originally written, a shorter edited version of which was published in the June 21, 2002 Issue of Medical Economics as “The Year I Chucked Conventional Medicine”, a title used despite protest from the author.)

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The age we live in has been the subject of much prophecy. The centuries of Nostradamus, the Edgar Cayce readings, the Mayan Sacred Calendar, the Book of Revelations, the infomercials of Miss Cleo and many more suggest that great events are to be expected in our time. What is the appropriate physician response? We physicians are not given much room for unguarded naivete. We are a reflection of society's measure and reason, after all, and while most of us admit that mistakes are our best teachers, we are trained to trust and abide within the safe boundary that our healing herd calls “science”. As prophets of old would warn, “Beyond this point there be dragons!” Any fool who strays too far beyond this common sense risks losing credibility among his peers, not to mention the perks of being visited by the pharmaceutical industry's finest, with all their neat pens and stress-relieving squeeze toys. But what if the end of the world as we physicians know it is at hand? I asked this very question and in doing so experienced a revelation of my own custom-made apocalypse.

The apocalypse to which I refer was well underway by December of 1999. It was the final stretch in my race of preparedness for whatever Y2K had in store for humanity. I

was putting the finishing touches on my little off-the-grid cabin in the wilderness, complete with generator, wood-burning stove, running water, composting toilet and acupuncture needles. I had a new mountain hardy massage therapist girlfriend and 6 months bulk supply of rice, beans, dried fruit, canned foods and rolled oats. I felt as ready as any prophecy junkie could be for whatever earth changes, police state or space vixens might come my way. The winter had graciously held itself back for what might be my last chance to collect wood before snow covered my little corner of the Rockies. Like the rabbit that shouts up to the eagle, “Don’t eat me!”, I was preparing for the worst.

I had come out to Colorado just over 5 months previous to embrace a way of life that seemed to make a lot more sense. The metropolitan consumer lifestyle that I had been stewing in towards the end of my family medicine residency made me feel like the Far Side cow that suddenly wakes up exclaiming, “Grass! We’re eating grass!” I was fed up with the whole “time is money and money is god” robotic approach to life. Oh, what a dream-come-true it would be wake up in a peace-loving self-sustaining community that respected the earth and sprouted its own alfalfa. I was ready to completely abandon conventional medicine with all its non-holistic insurance company algorithms. Having all the training of an energy medicine expert, I felt like a beach ball that was being held under the surface by my residency faculty in the pool of social conditioning. When I was released at the end of my residency, that beach ball shot so far into the sky that it landed in a remote mountain region just south of Pagosa Springs, where a community was just forming with the intention of self-sustenance on 71 acres of undeveloped high altitude wilderness in eyeshot of the Continental Divide. The therapists of the community had already opened a holistic healing arts center in town, a

place where I could both practice my art and wash my hair. I felt like I had finally come home.

Over the next months, the business of making this land of “Enchantment”, as many of the community members called it, my home both professionally and personally was often challenging enough to inspire my utterance of less than positive names for Southwestern Colorado. Though my practice of energy medicine took off well through the summer, it nose-dived when the tourist season ended. Apparently my purist approach to healing was not shared by the locals, who at times expressed they’d come to me if I also prescribed standard pharmaceuticals. By mid-November we had closed the healing arts center, and despite the fact that I too at times felt limited by my holistic idealism, I was still living my dream. Being ever the optimist, I didn't really mind not having the money, not even when my nifty SUV was repossessed. What value would green paper have in wake of the Apocalypse anyway? Of course, money sure does help when you’re trying to build a home, so my step-father eventually came out to help me build a humble cabin. (Apparently Mom had been uncomfortable with my plan to pick ax my way into the side of a ridge as a winter lodging.) I truly rose to the mantle of being an unskilled laborer, and after months of digging dirt, moving trees, cutting wood and hammering my fingertips, the 10’ x12’ cabin with a loft was now a warm place I could call my home.

With all the work I had been doing, my back had been bothering me more and more. A veteran of self-acupuncture, I finally decided enough was enough and pulled out my needles. Now of all places to do acupuncture on oneself, the mid-back is perhaps the most challenging, for apart from being out of sight, it's also practically out of reach. But having an increasingly skinny frame, I managed to locate and deeply pique my “ashi”, or

tender points. Lying belly down with four needles sticking out of my back, I pulled the warm comforter over me to keep the crisp December air away from whatever healing would happen underneath.

Acupuncture is, of course, an ancient art that touches into the subtle healing energies of the body. Differing from analgesics which function by suppressing the perception of pain, acupuncture is directed at removing the obstructions of energy flow believed to cause the pain in the first place. Treating these energetic blocks is not as straight forward as, say removing a crimp from a hose, for the whole body is intricately interconnected both energetically and emotionally. As any experienced acupuncturist will attest, sometimes symptoms get worse before they get better.

And this time my symptoms were getting worse. Not only was my back pain still there, I was also beginning to feel a little chest pain and a wee bit irritable besides. Removing the needles, I roused my peri-apocalyptic sugar plum from her slumber and described my symptoms to her. Being a massage therapist with extensive training in body-mind therapeutics, she reasoned that I must have some emotional back-log in my chest (now where'd she get that idea?), and didn't hesitate to straddle me and push her hands firmly into my chest to open up my heart chakra. This unfortunately only made things worse. When all attempts at trauma resolution had failed, we resigned to face the day, discomfort, grumpiness and all.

Today we had planned to go foraging for wood on the land, for once snow falls in Colorado, it can stay for the rest of the season. We started down the ridge, throwing into her pick-up truck any oak tree branches that had been downed in the process of creating my half-mile driveway. Feeling rather short of breath, irritable, with a great discomfort

in my chest, it suddenly began to occur to me what I might be experiencing. My diagnosis was confirmed when I auscultated over my right lower lobe and heard nothing. Perhaps it was some combination of blindly needling too deeply in an area where caution is indicated, the weight of the comforter on the needles and having my lung lovingly deflated by my mountain mama, but somehow I had given myself a pneumothorax.

Now most people, and certainly most physicians, would seek the best that modern medical technology can provide in such a circumstance, but not me. No, that would amount to relying on a technocracy of hospital bills and chest tubes, and I figured that as long as it didn't get any worse, I'd be better off on my own. Look at all I had done for myself, afterall. So, taking care to auscultate my lungs on a daily basis, I carried on my apocalypse preparedness as previously planned. Of course, chopping wood at 7800 ft in a heavy snowsuit is challenging enough, but you should try it with a pneumothorax! With only one fully functional lung I faced each cold and muddy trial that befell me with a determination that would make the most preoccupied delusional take time to laugh.

As fate would have it, my lung sounds gradually crept back down to my diaphragm, and in the crucible of time Y2K in Colorado transformed into the question, "Y 4 I B in Colorado?" Despite the virtues of hermitage, I began to feel that somehow I was falling short of my calling, my potential, my destiny. In trying to prepare for some prophetic version of the apocalypse, I had manifested my own personal version, complete with poverty, new age commune, stinky compost pile, a lack of medical technology and a whole lot of work, snow and mud. I began to question whether or not it was time for the prodigal son that I had become to return to my position in society, and after a few more months of trying to apply the strict alternative approach to life and livelihood, I returned

to Virginia to pursue a more balanced integration of holistic healing into the context of my training in conventional medicine. I guess I had finally spent enough lifetimes roughing it out with nature to realize that I didn't need to do that anymore.

In retrospect, I can't say I'm proud of my misadventures in Colorado, but I sure am grateful for them. In addition to teaching me about the virtues of refrigeration and the real risks inherent to certain forms of holistic healing, these experiences demonstrated my capacity to manifest my fears. I am the greatest fool that I have ever met, one who certainly has ventured beyond the boundaries of common sense. I have to acknowledge that folly every time I apply for the privilege to bill for my adherence to some non-holistic health insurer's algorithm, and this requirement to explain how I have used my time often makes me wish that physicians were given a little more room to make mistakes. I feel my mistakes have made me a better physician, and having personally met some of the "dragons" that dwell beyond the boundaries of convention, I can say with confidence that they're no different than the ones that dwell within each of us. Having passed through my own version of hell on earth, I no longer fear whatever destiny awaits me or humanity. Whether we greet the future in medical staff meeting rooms or in geodesic growing domes, our destiny rests in our hearts, and I am amazed by the Grace I have found therein.