

## Engaging Vitality

I have just finished the second of three modules in an Engaging Vitality (EV) training with Dan Bensky, Marguerite Dinkins, and Rayén Antón, L.Ac. Chip Chace was a part of the original EV team of developers and teachers, but he sadly passed last year—Rayén will teach the third module next month. This is the second time I have gone through this training. (I think for anything you want to learn, it's important to expose yourself to it multiple times.)

It is a bit difficult to know where to start in describing this unique approach to acupuncture. It is so different that no other style approaches it in character or technique; it truly stands alone. Current students and seasoned acupuncturists with decades of experience are in the EV training with me, and both seem to pick up the work at about the same pace. Interesting that previous clinical experience in East Asian Medicine seems to not guarantee success in EV. What brings success is approaching the work with a spirit of openness and a willingness to follow the precise instructions given. Seeing the excellent performance of the students in the class, I find myself wishing I had come on this work long ago.

This quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, often called the Shakespeare of the German language, captures a bit of the essence of the Engaging Vitality work:

*“... man himself is the best and most exact scientific instrument possible.”*

That is quite a statement! Humans have built some amazing scientific instruments, but I believe Goethe here is accurate: All these machines pale in significance and potential accuracy when compared to a properly trained human. But the training of this level of perception is a deep calling indeed.

There is another quote from William Blake that I mentioned in a previous blog that bears repeating here:

*“Singular and particular detail is the foundation of the sublime.”*

Do we really in our own practices work in such a way so as to not miss singular and particular” details? Or do we work much of the time on a sort of semi-autopilot? In reality the full capacity of the human for refined perception is far richer than most styles of acupuncture call upon. This sort of subtler perception played hardly any role at all in my own master's degree training. I mostly learned point locations and protocols for treating this and that. Where I placed the needles was determined by a sort of heady analysis of signs and symptoms. (I acknowledge that knowing this approach to Chinese Medicine has helped me over the years with many patients, but it is not the only approach available—that's the main point.) If I palpated it was in

search of an *ahshi* location, not to gain needed information about the patient. I was certainly interested in the sort of study that I now find in EV, but there was no one to guide me along that sort of path.

In some popular non-TCM styles, for instance, we need know only where the report of pain is, and we will know where we are supposed to needle—all without ever needing to lay a hand on the patient. (Again, I am glad these sorts of styles are available to us, because sometimes we need to work very fast and try to be helpful in a short time frame, but it can't be seen as the highest expression of East Asian Medicine.) Of course, when the needling is performed in this sort of style, the patient will be palpated to varying degrees. But this type of palpation will be mostly to determine where to needle a given point, not to determine if a given point is a wise or helpful choice.

In EV practice numerous types of assessments are performed, and one learns to cross-check them to be doubly and triply certain that what one is going to do is a helpful idea. In working in this manner, the most surprising treatments can emerge, and I find this exciting and challenging. One can be led in the EV process to work on channels that one would never have thought to involve in a given the patient's complaint. When I say "led" I mean that our palpatory exams bring us to these channels and a quite specific point. That this is accomplished by palpation and not by our thinking and analysis of the case is liberating to me. I have to rush in though to clarify: In EV there is indeed a role for all sorts of acupuncture theories, but the EV assessments inform us if they will bring the needed changes for the patient.

Earlier in my career I would not have believed my hands up to the task of the EV assessments, but when I see how quickly students pick up the work, I realize it is all teachable and not a function of having seen years of patients. The EV team has been teaching this material for quite some time now, and their presentations are honed to the level of a high art. What the participants are to do and how they are to do it is always crystal clear.

Although the EV style represents a collaborative effort of the EV team, and as such is not the exclusive work of Dan Bensky, I want to make a few observations about studying with someone who has been in practice for 45 years and who has studied and practiced the entire time with focus and dedication. First, many do not know that Dan is also an osteopath with the impressive palpatory skills that come with doing that work seriously for more than four decades. This high-level palpatory sensitivity is brought to bear in how he practices acupuncture. And beyond his remarkable treatment skills, Dan is a gifted teacher. His pedagogical talent lies in precise preparation and possibly the clearest communication I have encountered from any teacher. It is evident he has thought about many aspects of our profession and has valuable insights to offer to his students. I recommend readers look at his translation (with Chip Chace) of parts of the first chapter of the *Ling Shu* to get a sense of the

nuanced understanding he brings to his work. Here are links to this two-part article from the EV website:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1kU70ETRinIOYuvYXh7L7s-HtMwtXlIB8/view>

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oSibsCLsEkuh3mnKIkVlw4ynAcINe6Nu/view>

In writing about EV I have come to refer to it as a “mature medicine.” I do not mean this as an insult to other styles; in any style if we dedicate ourselves, we can advance to a higher level of practice. So much effort over the centuries in innumerable styles has been devoted to advancing East Asian Medicine, and we have to be grateful for all of these efforts. Because of my position as co-owner of a seminar-hosting company ([www.pdxtjmseminars.com](http://www.pdxtjmseminars.com)) I have had the unique opportunity to study with many masters, and I have great respect for their work. But the EV practice calls on me to develop a level of sensitivity that is uncommon in our field—not unmatched perhaps, but certainly uncommon.

The Gregory Bateson, the late great cross-disciplinary genius once said:

*“All forms are transforms of messages.”*

One has to think a bit about the intended meaning here in this terse quote. It presents the same message we can find in Goethe’s scientific writings. (Goethe was much prouder of his unique approach to science than he was of his enormous literary achievements, though in his day his scientific ideas were often dismissed as the work of a dilettante, not a genuine scientist!) The message? *Nature is language*. That is NOT intended as a metaphor by Bateson, nor was it by Goethe. A tree is a story you might say, and by extension a human body also has a great deal of information hidden in its particular form. *Form is language* for those with the eyes (and hands) to read it. Engaging Vitality is a style of acupuncture that has taught me to access information from the story in the bodies of my patients that I had previously missed. I am grateful to have this new way opened to me. I encourage readers to key an eye out for further EV trainings.

See [www.engagingvitality.com](http://www.engagingvitality.com) for notifications about upcoming trainings.

Kind regards all around,

Bob Quinn