

Evolving as Healers

An Interview with Bob Duggan of Tai Sophia Institute

Robert Duggan M.A., M.Ac., Dipl.Ac. is President and Co-Founder of the Tai Sophia Institute, an accredited institution offering master's degree and graduate certificate programs in Acupuncture, Herbal Medicine, and Transformative Leadership in Laurel, Maryland. Duggan held multiple master's degrees before he attended the College of Traditional Chinese Acupuncture in the UK in the 70's. He and Co-Founder Dianne Connelly (whose new book excerpt appears in the book reviews) quite literally pioneered acupuncture regionally with their birthing of Tai Sophia in 1974. Bob is a national leader and sought after speaker in the Healing Arts community with lifetime-achievement-award levels of service. He graciously agreed to talk with us recently.

Be Well: Thank you for taking the time to talk with us. The conversation we'd like to have today is destined for the Practitioner's Corner section of Be Well Frederick, where we address specifically the practitioners in the wellness community. So, on their behalf, what thoughts could you share with us on how we may continue to evolve as healers?

Bob: Well, I spoke at a national meeting about a year ago in Washington, it was a meeting of leaders in the integrated health and wellness field. And I think my message for you might be much like it was for them. I suggested that we are not going to make any progress until all practitioners throw away their credential cards, because they are all identified as . . . I'm an herbalist, I'm an acupuncturist, I'm a chiropractor, I'm a medical doctor, I'm a naturopath, etc. Because those labels, they divide us simply by our technique.

As far as I'm concerned, everybody is a practitioner, and everybody in America has to learn to be a healer. When I grew up in the 40's, it was very clear that the healers were the families on the block. Everybody knew the art forms to keep everybody well and moving forward; there wasn't a concept of seeing a professional. Yes, there were professionals, and there were people to fix a broken leg and the like. But in those days going to a professional was a rare thing . . . it wasn't the dependence we have today.

So the first message I have for practitioners is: Begin to think . . . are you practicing at home with your family



and, do you think of yourself as a client? Because if you understand yourself as a client, then you will know what the person coming to you is longing for. We all long for the same kind of gifts of life.

And on the flip side, everyone is a healer. Because every word we speak . . . everything I say to Tim is either going to inspire Tim and open Tim up, or, if I get mean with Tim, Tim will contract and feel tight. But if he feels open and inspired, I think it is well-documented that his immune system is going to be stronger. If he's upset and tight, he's going to be much more vulnerable to closing down and to disease.

So, I think of the obligation of everyone to be a healer . . . everyone. The parents, the people in your office, and you with the people in your office. Yes, there are sometimes when a specific technique can be helpful. When I tore the quadriceps muscles on my knee, it was important that there was a surgeon to put it back together, and an anesthesiologist to keep me quiet while he did. But I did look to see that those individuals had healing qualities before I went to the surgery.

So that's point number one, we all have to be healers. The technique is

secondary to the healing.

I take the tools, the acupuncture needle or the surgical scalpel, as an extension of the doctor. I take the herb given by Rebecca as an extension of Rebecca's words and life force. I take the homeopathic preparation given by my daughter to my grandchild as empowered by her healing presence.

The technique without that is maybe only 25 percent to 50 percent as effective as the technique in the presence of a healer. For 35 years now at the institute, we have always worked with the idea that everyone is a practitioner and that everyone should think of themselves first as a client. When we remember ourselves as a client and our family as a client, something shifts.

This distinction between patient and practitioner that is pervasive in our culture . . . may not be the most helpful distinction to use. Let me give you a specific example for this, we talk about providing better care to patients in hospitals, with integrated care and wellness care. I've watched many hospitals attempt to deliver this. But what they miss is that, if they decided to deliver wellness and healing to all of their employees, wellness and healing would automatically happen for all the patients. But the attempt to deliver it to people labeled patients, and not designed to deliver it to people called employees creates a very funny dichotomy, which is the reason I think a lot of these programs break down.

Be Well: So are there examples of environments where we're getting it right?

Bob: Yes, I can give you an example.

I was at a conference in London with Prince Charles, it was on Integrated Health. There was this study presented that had been done by the British Health Service in Northern Ireland. I believe it had seven or eight hundred chronically ill patients; these were high cost patients, seriously ill people with a range of chronic conditions. So they agreed to pay for massage therapy, herbs, acupuncture . . . several modalities. This was such a successful program in saving costs and in patient satisfaction, that the BBC did a news report on it. We saw snippets of the BBC report, and I saw the people who were doing the acupuncture, etc., attending to these folks, and I thought, this is an unusual group of practitioners.

Later, I went to see the person who ran this program and designed it all. I said "You didn't just advertise to attract your local acupuncturists and massage therapists, did you? You had some extraordinary people in this program." The woman said, "No, that's correct. We first screened all the applicants for their professional technical qualifications. Then we screened them again as to their healing abilities." They had worked out a screening system to separate out practitioners with good technique – good people but basically technicians – from those that brought to the table a healing presence. I don't divide the world by what technique you use. I divide the world, if I do at all, by those who bring a healing presence and those that simply don't have that quality to bring to the table. I would bet that the cost savings outcomes are related to the ability to be present in this way.

Be Well: So, would you have a closing comment for our practitioners on what the future holds?

Bob: The future is with practitioners who are highly skilled as wellness coaches who have the linguistic distinctions to empower their clients. There are several aspects to this, listening for example. Are we listening to categorize into a disease, or are we truly giving the gift of open and deep listening?

The man who designed our herbal program, Simon Mills, who is one of the world's leading herbalists and is internationally recognized . . . Simon will say, "I'm a self-care teacher who happens to know a lot about herbs." So practitioners need to trust their inner skills as evoking wellness, and hone their language skills so that they can be astute as to the difference between, say, this comment to a patient: "You should drink more water" and this one: "What happens to you when you drink more water?" These questions create two radically different world views.

The first one, for many people, sets up "I'm not doing what you tell me to . . . I do my own thing." The other says, "You're in charge of your healing." So I think the development of those skills, not so much the technical skills of their technique, but the language skills that empower people, that's where the learning curve should be. Unfortunately, that's not taught in many of the places that teach the techniques. That's what I think Tai Sophia is extraordinary at – the ability to both teach the techniques at a high level and teach the language skills for framing it towards the empowerment of everyone.