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Leta Herman of Belchertown left a lucrative career as a systems analyst and became a practitioner of classic Chinese medicine

Comments (8)

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By Mark Roessler

Leta Herman doesn't miss her life as a systems analyst for Avaya Technologies, though it was the kind of life many an office employee dreams of.

While she worked for a corporation, her office was in her house. A Smith graduate and technology expert, she spent her workdays on the Web and the phone, not having to get out of her slippers while she worked with people in suits and cubicles across the world. At home, she was more available for her son and husband, and without a commute, she had time to report and write syndicated technical columns. Financially, she was comfortable. Prospects were good.

But she gave it up for something totally different.

She unplugged from the digital and virtual world and became interested in the metaphysical and physical ones. In her new occupation, instead of tapping at a keyboard, her fingers began pressing and probing living, breathing flesh. When she spoke to her clients, she looked them in the eye. The systems she analyzed were human, and the techniques and networks she learned were hundreds, if not thousands, of years old.

Leta Herman became an acupressurist with a practice in Belchertown. She has spent 10 years training in the Five Elements, one of several different schools of Chinese medicine. Business is good.

She has been a studying acupressure for 10 years and seeing clients for eight. After the last five years devoting herself wholly to her new practice, she's become just as comfortable as she once was as a technology systems analyst, and prospects are even better.

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Herman's decision to change direction was not sudden or random, she explained to the Advocate in an interview last week.

As a young adult she had endometriosis, which gave her great muscle pain. After years of seeing medical specialists, undergoing an operation that offered no relief, and trying many suggested remedies (including giving birth), she turned to Chinese medicine. She found her symptoms eased the day she began and were gone in three months.

Curious, she signed up for a class called "Plant Spirit Medicine" given by Elliot Cowan in Colrain. Cowan combined a mastery of Eastern acupuncture with Native American shamanist traditions.

"I grew up in academia," she said. "My parents were both academics, and I hadn't been raised to be spiritual. I was curious, and I wanted to understand why acupuncture worked for me. I went wanting to understand better what my 'chi' was," she said, referring to one of the central principles of Chinese medicine. Her acupuncturist had used the long, slender needles to remove internal blockages, she had explained to Herman, so that Herman's chi could move more fluidly within her.

She was expecting a series of lectures and was surprised to find the class was a training. Rather than sit and absorb information, she was expected to participate. The course took a year and a half, with a series of seven-day stints of intensive training with masters, and then weeks of independent studying and practicing what had been learned. Upon graduating, though, "I felt like I'd only scratched the surface, and there was so much more to learn," she said. "I considered going into acupuncture school at that point."

She and a group of students from the Colrain class began working with Niki Bilton, the academic dean at Ongiara College of Acupuncture and Moxibustion in Ontario. Trained in England, she is a Master of Acupuncture and a teacher in the Five Element school of Chinese medicine, a discipline Cowan had also been trained in. Herman and her fellow students were already practitioners, but they needed more experience, and they each accompanied Bilton on client visits. While working with Bilton, Herman learned acupressure methods, applying pressure with the hands or other devices that don't require piercing the skin.

In a few years, Herman first started treating her own acupressure clients on the couch in her living room. Then she turned a bedroom into an office, but it was awkward to have clients come through her kitchen. "It felt like we were always scrambling to clean before people came over," she said. Now, with the help of her industrious husband, a wing of the house is devoted to her clinic.

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Still, as much progress as Herman was making working with Bilton, she started to feel a conflict between her day technology job and this new passion.

"For the first four years of my studies," she said, "I was really depressed." As much as she wanted to pursue the Five Elements and acupressure, devoting herself to it would require abandoning the career that paid for-along with everything else-her training. "I felt like I was sabotaging my current career, rather than using it to get what I wanted," she recalls. "It was like I was working against myself."

Eventually, after training a very glum Herman for a number of years, Bilton told her, "You've got to stop the suffering." She coaxed Herman to reconsider her situation.

"I thought: 'I've got a high-paying job. If I sat down and made a plan for myself, and used the money I'm making to manifest this new thing, then I won't be depressed any more,'" she said. "After I did that, in about a year, I was ready to take the plunge. I had my finances in order. I didn't know how long it would take for me to return to the money I was making, and I was prepared to go into debt if I had to. And I did."

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The study of Chinese medicine is said to have started thousands of years ago, and as with all traditions and schools of thought, there are many different varieties, each with its own proponents and critics. The form most widely known today is Traditional Chinese Medicine, or TCM for short, and it's the form that has started to gain some acceptance by Western medicine.

"The use of acupuncture experienced a gradual decline during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century," she said, "and the Communists essentially resurrected it. They were interested in promoting all things Chinese. Acupuncture fit into that, but because they were atheists, the spiritual stuff didn't really appeal to them. Their version focused more on symptoms-how do you get the worker back to work? So TCM acupuncture works really well if you have something bugging you like tennis elbow and you want it to feel better.

"The Chinese really tried to strip the language of spirit out of acupuncture," she said. But it was difficult if not impossible. "The different points are called Blue-Green Spirit Dragon, or spirit-this or spirit-that."

Leta Herman's training had been with followers of the Five Element school of thought, introduced to the West over a half-century ago by British practitioner J. R. Worsley. He sought to reintroduce the philosophy back into the medicine.

"Worsley said, 'What we want to do is a kind of older Chinese medicine. We want to go to the root of the problem, not just treat the symptom.' That's where I always try to come from," Herman said. "He spent a lot of time in Asia, and he learned from some of these older practitioners who had been in China before the revolution and learned about the spiritual aspects. He taught that you always needed to treat the body, the mind and the spirit. Never just one." In the West, he felt medicine focused too exclusively on the body and mind.

In order to practice acupuncture, Herman would have needed to train for four years to get a license that reflected the American medical-TCM school of thought; she chose to pursue acupressure instead.

"The more I've studied, the more I've learned that there's stuff Worsley left out, too," she said. "He felt he needed to come up with a program anyone could learn, so he was always trying to simplify his teachings. And that's fine, but it's almost as if he focused so much on treating the spirit that sometimes there were physical problems that weren't getting fixed. So what I've discovered is, you really need to find a mixture of philosophies that work for you. If your arm is killing you, you can't work on your spirit, because your arm is frickin' killing you! So over the last five years, I've been focusing more and more on Classical Chinese Medicine, a third category."

The Communists weren't the only ones who have been interested in simplifying Chinese Medicine: over the centuries there have been several attempts to unify thinking and determine doctrine by promoting some practices and condemning others. Practitioners of Classic Chinese Medicine try

to be as comprehensive as possible when studying tradition, and not just focus on one school of thought, or the latest incarnation.

To that end, Herman has begun studying with Jeffrey Yuen, an 88th-generation Taoist priest and Chinese medicine healer. In his particular tradition priests are celibate, and Yuen was chosen before his birth. His grandfather began Yuen's training when he was only five years old, and he has access to an oral tradition that has largely gone underground in China. He now gives lessons in New York City's China Town.

According to Herman, Yuen's body of knowledge is so profound that he regularly introduces concepts that challenge what even life-long masters thought they knew. When she first began her training, her teachers only taught one set of meridians, but working with Yuen in China Town, she has begun to explore three others that other acupuncturists are aware of but rarely employ.

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The chief delight Herman finds in her new-found work is seeing the transformation of her clients. Often Herman, who is also a licensed massage therapist, finds that her clients' physical pain might be related to something spiritual that also needs her attention. Sometimes, though, she needs to work on a client's physical complaint for a while before the client is willing to consider letting her address the problem using her techniques for spiritual healing.

She tells the story of one man who came into her office complaining of arm pain he thought might have been caused by a golf injury. He was able to achieve some temporary relief from pain using her physical therapies, but it was never permanent. After working with him for several months, Herman learned more about his recent history, which included an ugly falling-out with a business associate he had found embezzling from him.

Working patiently with him, she was eventually able to explain that some of the same pressure points she was working to relieve the physical pain, if worked differently, could address the emotional pain he felt at having been betrayed. This therapy is what finally brought lasting relief.

She uses a variety of techniques in her practice. For physical ailments, one technique she uses is Gua Sha-gently scraping the client's skin with a spoon. The practice is very popular in Asia, and because it leaves bright red marks, Vietnamese immigrants to this country initially were accused of child abuse when the apparent bruises were discovered. Herman says she's able to stop flu with her spoon if she recognizes the symptoms early enough.

Along with pressing on pain relief points, a more rigorous technique she uses is something she calls energetic massage, based on Japanese acutouch massage. "It's an alternating of deep and light pressure," she said.

"I do another technique called moxa," she said. "It's the mugwort herb. Sometimes people get a pain and it makes part of their body feel cold. You take a stick of moxa and warm the area. This brings the blood to the surface. You do this a few times and it can relieve the pain very quickly."

These techniques she uses for body pain, but for deeper illnesses and internal issues, she focuses on pressure points. "Each organ has a meridian, and there are twelve meridians," she said, "and there are twelve pulses." These pulses are different from what we're familiar with in Western medicine. Though read similarly-by touching different points on the body-the Eastern practitioner is measuring an energy pulse as opposed to the flow of blood. In Chinese medicine the different pulses can be read to understand what's happening in each of the organs.

"Each pulse has three positions and two levels-it's very complicated and takes years to learn. Say you have chest pain. Say it's not asthma or a heart attack, but your energy is just blocked. You got really angry, and now your energy isn't flowing through your chest. I'm able to press a point on the end of one meridian, then another, and get the chi to start to flow." The effect can be sudden and dramatic when the client suddenly finds himself able to breathe again.

"It's so cool," Herman says with obvious delight.

While helping people with their physical pain is rewarding to Herman, the greatest transformations she sees are from her other field of expertise, something known as alchemy.

"The Chinese believe that you are already born perfect, but you just don't know it," she said. "Alchemy are a set of techniques to help people find that perfection. The idea is kind of, you get what you expect. There doesn't need to be any such thing as aging; you could live forever if you don't have that thought in your head. It's not an idea that's widely taught in the West.

"It's called 'alchemy' in reference to the idea that your body is like silver-it needs to be constantly polished and taken care of or it tarnishes and degrades. But your spirit is like gold. You can bury it in the ground for a hundred years, but it still comes out shining and perfect. You can't destroy it. So it's a metaphysical idea where you're trying to turn your physical presence into something that's gold, like your spirit."

While having blocked meridians is commonplace, sometimes the blockage is so deep that it can affect the spirit and actually change a person. "Your true self has somehow become perverted. I call this a 'heart-level block.' Some actually call it 'evil-chi,'" she said. "There are these ancient protocols where you do this set of points that can open the heart and bring back the flow of your true self. It's really incredible. Transformational."

She also offers a less aggressive protocol which helps clients who generally feel well, but feel stifled by something emotional holding them back. She calls this cleaning out peoples' skeletons, and it's a four-hour process done to music she puts on shuffle on her iPod with a wide variety of genres. She uses the music to control the pace and intensity of her treatment.

Through these two protocols, she hopes to help her clients "clean out all the junk" and achieve a greater sense of freedom. Once this has been achieved, she offers a gradual program she calls "getting to fly" that helps clients realize their full potential.

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By learning more about chi-the movement and energy that happen between the life forces of yin and yang-Leta Herman has been able to move her own life toward its full potential. She speaks about what she's learned with unbridled enthusiasm and good humor and says if she misses anything about her former life, ironically, it's the health insurance.

Under her care, it's been years since her family has been sick, and while she would be happy having major medical (if she broke her leg or got in a car accident, she says she would want to be sent to the hospital), Massachusetts law requires her to pay over \$700 a month for full coverage she doesn't feel she needs.

A dream of hers is to develop an alternative health insurance system for Pioneer Valley health care workers where services can be bartered. Some of her colleagues have shown some interest, but so far nothing has gotten off the ground. Given Herman's proven ability to plan and achieve dramatic changes in her own life, though, who knows what will happen in another five years?

Leta Herman is a Licensed Massage Therapist in Massachusetts, and also a Certified Practitioner with the AOBTA.

## About the Author

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Herbs for Vision Support

Amazon.com: Chi X (Dr. Wheeler's Chinese Medicine Eye Drops) 15ml

Health Beauty

Eye Lid Twitch Chinese Medicine Cure

Developing traditional Chinese medicine for eye diseases treatment

Eye fatigue Treatment with chinese herbs for Eye fatigue symptoms

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