

Punking Part Two: Praxis and the Social Container

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Introduction

I wrote [*Punking: The Praxis of Community Acupuncture*](#)¹ because, after a couple of years of having a school for community acupuncturists, it became clear that we needed a detailed guide to what punks do in the clinic. Initially, like other acupuncture teachers before us, we thought it was enough to focus on topics such as acupuncture points, methods of diagnosis, and needling skills, but once we had clinical interns actually practicing the jobs they were in training for, we realized those categories barely scratched the surface of what punks do. There was a whole other set of skills, attitudes and capacities that our interns needed to identify and discuss in detail, so that they could practice them.

A couple of years later, we had pretty much the same realization again, except this time it was about the skills, attitudes and capacities related to creating and maintaining a social container for community acupuncture. A crucial part of the punk job is to be aware of all of the relationships, boundaries, resources and systems that are required to hold a community acupuncture clinic together, so that patients have a place to get acupuncture and punks have a place to work. Liberation Acupuncture affirms that **the value of acupuncture is in its practical usefulness to people who are suffering**. Or, as Ignacio Martín-Baró wrote, "True practice has primacy over true theory"², or *what you do is more important than what you say*. Acupuncture's usefulness to people who are suffering requires a social container for them to receive it in; otherwise even Liberation Acupuncture is just a set of theories, and just a lot of talk.

A pitfall for the POCA Cooperative in building its workforce is that many would-be punks are attracted to community acupuncture as theory, or as a kind of disembodied ideal. The flavor varies; the ideal that attracts seekers can be one of energetic "balance", cooperative utopia, natural medicine, or even healing justice. The problem is that community acupuncture as a disembodied ideal, no matter how noble or progressive, has exactly zero usefulness to the patients who need acupuncture most. The real challenge is the embodiment, the praxis, which is invariably messy, difficult, and less than ideal.

I wrote in *Punking*: The beauty of a community acupuncture clinic is in the way it serves as a container for healing, and somebody has to take care of the container. Taking care of the container isn't simple, and it isn't separate from treating people. It's a big job with big responsibilities. Unfortunately, though, there was a lot more that needed to be said about the container, and the work of taking care of it, and ideally, I would have said that stuff before I wrote *Punking*, as opposed to after. Because there's not a lot of use in

¹ Rohleder, Lisa. *Punking: The Praxis of Community Acupuncture*. POCA, Portland, 2018.

² Martín-Baró, Ignacio. *Writings for a Liberation Psychology*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA. 1994.

having clinical skills if you haven't got a place to practice them.

Better late and out of order than never, though. This is a workbook for punks and would-be punks about making and taking care of social containers for community acupuncture. It's an initial pass at one of our school's educational goals, *to provide professional development coaching for students to strengthen the key capacities for being a cooperative producer: resiliency, initiative, personal maturity, risk-tolerance, and leadership skills.*

A large part of being an acupuncturist is developing the skills to manage your energy, which is expressed not just by your ability to contact "qi" but by your control and awareness of your attention and your intention. Good needling, good rapport, and good communication in the clinic all require intense focus; it's impossible to be an effective punk if you're distracted or preoccupied. An overlooked corollary is that it's equally important to manage your intention and attention with respect to the clinic's relationships, boundaries, resources and systems. They require the same kind of respect and focus that needling does.

If you have only ever experienced ready-made social containers that were handed to you (for example, if you have only had jobs in large corporations), it can be a real shock to your system to be asked to be responsible for creating and maintaining them yourself. For some of us, that responsibility is empowering, liberating, and also a huge personal growth opportunity. Because it's so demanding, though, it's important to give yourself time to reflect on whether or not creating and maintaining a social container is a good choice for you, personally. This is why this workbook is a project for first year students at POCA Tech. We hope that it brings clarity to some of the otherwise invisible work of being a punk.

Hierarchy of Needs for Acupuncture

Before we can talk about the social container, though, we have to talk about a hierarchy of needs for acupuncture.



I'm a big fan of The Fat Nutritionist³, and it was her blog post “if only poor people understood nutrition!” that introduced me to Ellyn Satter and her Hierarchy of Food Needs. I don't know why it's taken me so many intervening years, not to mention having to start an acupuncture school, but I finally connected the dots. I realized that the concept of a hierarchy of needs for acupuncture explains every single argument I've ever had with the rest of the acupuncture profession, and much of what we've struggled to teach students at POCA Tech.

As Ellyn Satter explains, the basic concept of the hierarchy is that needs at each level must be satisfied before those at the next higher level can be addressed. If you don't meet the needs at the foundation, you can't move up. So without further ado, I'd like to present Rohleder's Hierarchy of Acupuncture Needs (because obviously, I'm very attached to it, and one way or another, it's all I can talk about).

³ [The Fat Nutritionist. eating normally is the new black.](#)

From the foundation up, here are the levels and what I think they mean for the relevance of acupuncture in 21st century North America. Do we really want a lot of people to get acupuncture in a meaningful way? Then this is what we need to think about, in order of priority.

Physical safety

First do no harm. Acupuncture that is likely to leave a patient with more physical problems than they came in with is not acupuncture that works, and not the kind of acupuncture we want to be doing.

This level includes the need for sterile needles, safe needling depths, red-flag referrals, and good needling technique that minimizes pain. I think it should also include adverse events reporting, collecting safety data, and engaging a feedback loop that comes from using an adverse events reporting database. Because acupuncture is basically a much safer practice than many other medical interventions, the acupuncture profession as a whole has gotten by with paying less attention to adverse events than is warranted — but we should fix that, in part because by definition (OK, by my definition) it's such a foundational issue.

Also worth remembering because it's foundational: acupuncture is much, much safer than pain medication or surgery and can potentially save lives by providing an alternative to dangerous forms of pain management, like opioids. For some people, getting acupuncture is of life and death importance, and this is a major reason why we care about it.

Economic access/stability

Acupuncture that people can't afford to try is acupuncture that doesn't work. Full stop.

While the most basic need of physical safety for acupuncture is relatively easy to meet, this level makes up for it by being excruciatingly difficult. This level encompasses not only affordability for patients but having an economic delivery mechanism for acupuncture that exists, as opposed to not existing. This level means acupuncturists who are in business, as opposed to not in business. This level means small businesses surviving more than a couple of years. It means practitioners not entering practice with levels of student loan debt that they'll never repay.

All sorts of beautiful dreams crash and burn at this level. The mobile acupuncture clinic in the Airstream trailer, the community acupuncture clinic that only serves people that its owner likes, the acupuncture clinic with the flexible, ever-changing hours built around its owner's surfing schedule. Hospital-based integrative medicine centers that go out of business because they can't make their revenue streams work, no matter how shiny and impressive they are, fail this level.

This level is where the POCA Cooperative lives. It's the co-op's reason for being: to provide collaborative, self-organized support for acupuncturists being in business and delivering acupuncture in forms that patients can afford to access. And the co-op came into being in part because almost nobody else in the acupuncture profession wants to hang out down here (or even acknowledge that “down here” exists, even though it keeps undermining the rest of the pyramid).

Acupuncture that people can't get, because there's no economically viable place to get it, is acupuncture that doesn't work.

Social safety

If people don't feel safe in the environment – including in relationship to their practitioner – they won't get acupuncture, and (say it with me now) acupuncture that people don't get is acupuncture that doesn't work.

Social safety is always relative because humans are so diverse. We can't guarantee social safety for anyone, let alone everyone, but we can work to make our practices socially safer. This level encompasses trauma-informed care and “low barrier” environments that are nonjudgmental and welcoming. It means not pushing people to change their diets or quit smoking, and honoring people's autonomy. It means practitioners who can take care of their own needs and boundaries. It's also a challenging level, but not nearly as hard as the prior one. You can't practice social safety if you've got no place to practice it.

Reliable access

From the GERAC ⁴ studies, and also from our own years of clinical experience, we know that when it comes to acupuncture, *dose matters*. Acupuncture that people can't get enough of is acupuncture that doesn't work or doesn't work the way we want it to. It doesn't matter what kind of acupuncture it is if the dose isn't sufficient. People need reliable access to acupuncture in order to fulfill a course of treatment. Social safety and economic access are the foundation for this level (because people won't get enough acupuncture if they don't feel safe and can't afford it) but it also requires practitioners who can competently give treatment plans and work with patients to fulfill them.

Acupuncture Theory (fits with any particular)

The GERAC studies also show that sham acupuncture works. In the real world, however, practitioners need a theoretical framework that makes sense to them. Once the needs for physical safety, economic access and stability, and relative social safety are met, and once it's possible to provide a sufficient dose of treatment, we can begin to consider

⁴ German Acupuncture Trials
<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamainternalmedicine/fullarticle/413107>

what kind of acupuncture we'd like to do.

The beautiful thing about acupuncture is that it's so old and so diverse that the list of options is vast. Dr. Tan? Master Tung? Japanese? TCM? Knock yourselves out, acupuncturists, you could spend the rest of your lives exploring the options. Just don't forget that the most theoretically elegant treatment delivered only once, because you didn't take care of the prior levels, will almost certainly be less clinically effective than, say, Miriam Lee 10 delivered twice a week for five weeks at a cost the patient can afford, in a setting where they can relax.

Seriously, never forget that.

Unfortunately, a lot of the acupuncture profession is obsessed with this level, to the exclusion of everything else.

Culture (fits with any particular)

This level might overlap with Theory so much that they shouldn't be separated, but I'm not completely sure about that yet. I think culture encompasses issues like practitioner clothing: wearing a white coat vs. a t-shirt with a POCA logo vs. a uniform with a Modern Acupuncture logo. It's not that culture's not important — in some ways it overlaps with issues of social safety — but in terms of what it has to do with the efficacy of acupuncture from a patient perspective, it's not on the same level as affordability or dosage. It's something we can think about when we've taken care of the preceding levels.

Unfortunately, a lot of the acupuncture profession is also obsessed with this level, to the exclusion of everything else. This is where issues of social status live. Do other medical professionals respect us? Some acupuncturists will claim that culture has everything to do with economic access/stability, but POCA knows that's not true. There are so many people who are sick and in pain and traumatized, there will never be enough of us to treat them, no matter how much other professions "infringe on our turf" or "steal our patients". If we do the work of creating economically accessible and stable settings for people to get acupuncture, people will use them.

Reflection questions

Many students are attracted to acupuncture school because they are, one way or another, fascinated by the theories of Chinese medicine.

1. To what degree is that attraction a factor for you in choosing POCA Tech?
2. Can you accept the idea that acupuncture theories are less important to patients than having acupuncture that they can afford and a safe, consistent social container in which to receive it, or do you struggle with making theory relatively less important than praxis?

Hierarchy of Needs: Poor People's Priorities

When punks have complained, over and over, that conventional acupuncturists don't "get it" — while also not being able to articulate what "it" is, to everyone's ongoing frustration — most of the time, I think what we meant was, the hierarchy of needs.

It's both difficult and emotional to communicate about what we can take for granted, especially relative to what other people can take for granted. Part of why I was thinking about Ellyn Satter's pyramid was that I've always thought that I never had any issues around food insecurity, because there was always enough food in my house when I was growing up. Recently I realized that's not entirely true. Having enough food in the house was accompanied by my father telling stories about what it was like for him as a child to not have enough food, to have to steal food, to eat the same foods over and over to the point that he never wanted to see them again which meant we never had them. (Mayonnaise on white bread.) And then I realized — I might not have experienced food insecurity myself, but it was a vivid reality to me nonetheless. I grew up not being able to take that first level of Ellyn Satter's food pyramid for granted, and that remains a difference between me and people who never had to think about it.

If you can take something for granted, it means you don't have to put effort into maintaining it. If you can take something for granted, it means it doesn't require focus and perseverance. You don't have to be grateful for it; heck, you don't even have to be aware of it. And if you have to admit that you can't take something for granted, especially relative to other people who can, you're acknowledging that you're a have-not and they're the haves, that you lack social power. You're admitting vulnerability.

I started writing about community acupuncture because I was finally able to admit that economic access to acupuncture, and economic stability in practicing acupuncture, weren't things I could take for granted. The acupuncture profession had told me that I could, and I should, but the enduring reality was that I couldn't, which had everything to do with who I was and where I came from, but also the state of the acupuncture profession itself. And boy, was I mad about it, and boy, did my writing strike a nerve. Because of course I wasn't the only one.

Remember the buckets and Ming vases article? ⁵ (See full article in the Appendix)
And Peter Deadman's response to it? ⁶

In hindsight, there could have been a lot fewer words in that exchange (though I had fun

⁵ https://www.pocacoop.com/wiki/jobs_wiki/File:Community_Acupuncture-Making_Buckets_from_Ming_Vases.pdf

⁶ <https://www.peterdeadman.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Community-Acupuncture-A-Reply-to-Lisa-Rohleder.pdf>

with the metaphors) and a lot less emotion, because all we were really talking about was the hierarchy of needs.

In his response, Peter Deadman starts out by acknowledging: a lot of people can't afford acupuncture and a lot of people can't make a living at it. BUT — the rest of the article is BUT, a model that prioritizes access over theory risks impoverishing Chinese medicine. Our model isn't best practice, and we're not complete practitioners, and to the extent that we're successful in propagating our model, it's a loss for Chinese medicine as a whole. One of his major problems with us is that we don't make patients take off their clothes, and as a result, "a swathe of acupuncture points is largely consigned to oblivion". In 2012 I was too mad to love this line, but I love it now: *POCA Tech, consigning back shu points to oblivion since 2014.*

In other words: the acupuncture theory level of the pyramid deserves much more attention and focus than the economic access level. Yes, the economic access level is arguably a huge mess, but that doesn't matter as much as getting the theory right. And if you prioritize the levels the way punks do, with economic access being more foundational than theory, you will impoverish the entire field of Chinese medicine. You could rephrase that as: **the priorities of Chinese medicine will look like the priorities of poor people.**

That's why we call what we do Liberation Acupuncture.

And that's where you get punks waving their hands in the air, stomping their feet and yelling Fuck yeah — that's what we want! and you get conventional acupuncturists being like, what? no, that's exactly what we don't want! So even when you take the emotion out of the argument, we're still disagreeing about fundamentals. Because of course, everybody would like to take economic access (to everything) for granted. What we're saying is: that's great that you can, but we can't.

The end of Peter Deadman's article is the most interesting part, to me. He writes that every patient, regardless of income or social status, deserves access to the best possible practice (which he defines as back shu points, TCM differential diagnosis, and lifestyle counseling — we'll skip the discussion about social safety for now). The reason that community acupuncture shouldn't succeed is that there has to be a better model, where you could treat just as many people, but you could still make theory your first priority. I think you could rephrase that as: what actually exists and is providing relief to humans who need it right now, is less valuable than something that doesn't exist but is ideologically purer. Or, *you should be able to do better than that* — which is something people with my background are used to hearing, about everything.

That particular argument doesn't belong only to Peter Deadman and the people from his side of the aisle, so to speak. POCA gets that argument from all sides, including

sometimes from POCA Tech students.

This many years into this work, I'm inclined to respond to that differently than I used to. The hierarchy of needs represents everything I don't feel like arguing about anymore, so I'm inclined to respond: Okay. You're probably right, that we should be able to do better than this.

The thing is, though – just doing what we're doing, the way we're doing it right now, takes everything we've got. We're not talking about the difference between what we have now and a better version, we're talking about what we have now vs. burnout and giving up, or what we have now vs. nothing. Because what we have now wasn't easy to create, and it isn't easy to maintain. The perfect is the enemy of the good.

If you can take something for granted, it means you don't have to put effort into maintaining it. If you can take something for granted, it means it doesn't require focus and perseverance. You don't have to be grateful for it; heck, you don't even have to be aware of it. The people telling us we should be able to do better, are taking what we're already doing for granted as a baseline to be improved on. It's not fun to admit that we can't take what we're doing for granted, and that we don't have the energy for improvement on top of maintenance; it involves admitting weakness, fatigue, vulnerability. There's also no indication that *anybody* else is up for maintaining anything that looks remotely like our baseline.

Making acupuncture economically accessible to the number of people that we do is, all by itself, a lot, because it involves small business, and small business is very difficult. Doing small business for a decade or more means that it gets easier in some ways, but in other ways, it really doesn't.⁷ It's funny, I feel like I have to keep outing myself as somebody with low-class priorities: if it exists, and I can afford it/make it happen/keep it up, it's more valuable to me than something "better" that doesn't yet exist.

I can't forget about the first level of the pyramid, physical safety, where it matters that acupuncture is so much safer than other forms of pain management. In 2016, more than 46 people died each day from overdoses involving prescription opioids. How many of them might never have tried prescription opioids at all if they had had access to acupuncture? Acupuncture that isn't happening is acupuncture that isn't saving anybody's life.

But if somebody can make the better version of what I do actually exist, and people without a lot of resources can actually afford it, I'd love to take notes. That's the purpose of POCA, to share the details of what works in reality. But until the better version has

⁷ See: Stamina. <https://www.pocacoop.com/prick-prod-provoke/post/open-sourcing-modern-acupuncture-part-four-stamina>

crossed the difficult barrier from ideal into reality, I'm just not interested in debating its merits, with Peter Deadman or anybody else. Make it real, and then we can talk about it.

Poor people's priorities are actually pretty ambitious — who knew?

Reflection questions

1. Do you think that community acupuncture should be able to do better than what it's doing right now?
2. Why or why not, and in what ways?
3. If you think the practice of community acupuncture could be substantially improved, explain how that can happen, who would be responsible, and where the resources for those changes would come from, including what your own responsibility and contribution would be.

But What IS a Social Container?

This is a surprisingly challenging question to answer in a satisfying way. You could say, a social container describes all of the relationships, boundaries, resources and systems that are required to hold a community acupuncture clinic together, so that patients have a place to get acupuncture and punks have a place to work.

Or: A social container for community acupuncture describes what's required for a punk to have a job doing acupuncture, as opposed to a hobby.

Or: A social container is made up of an enormous amount of invisible labor that supports the visible labor (acupuncture).

Or: A social container is the difference between praxis and theory.

Reflection question

1. How do you describe a social container? It's OK to answer with stories, metaphors, drawings, and/or lists.

Hierarchy of Needs: Too Sexy for This Work?

Got your attention? I hope so. This chapter is about things it's hard for people to pay attention to, so if it helps to play the "Too Sexy" ⁸ song by Right Said Fred in the background, please do!

The previous chapter was about punks complaining about how conventional acupuncturists "don't get it" — memorably demonstrated by somebody no less famous than Peter Deadman. This chapter has nobody famous in it (unless you count Right Said Fred); it's just about us, and what's going on (I think) when veteran punks complain that newbie punks, or potential punks, don't get it. This is about the unsexy levels of the Hierarchy of Needs, and how to pay attention to them.

I'm using the word sexy here with its more general meaning: attractive, interesting, appealing, captivating, glamorous. The first two levels of the Hierarchy of Needs are significantly less of all those things, I think, than any of the other levels, and so people often resist paying attention to them until it's clear that they absolutely have to. For the purposes of this chapter, I'm going to focus more on the second level of economic access than the first level of physical safety, because in general, physical safety in acupuncture is easier to get right with a lot less effort. Proportionally it requires less attention than economic access.

I've been reading Michael Pollan's book about psychedelics, *How to Change Your Mind*,⁹ and one of the excellent points he makes is that the therapeutic use of psychedelics, despite having a lot of promising research behind it, has been impeded due to the lack of, as he puts it, "a sturdy social container". The use of psychedelics for healing purposes, like acupuncture, comes from another culture, and our culture has had a lot of trouble figuring out how to make it work. Everybody knows that I think acupuncture is a psychedelic, that it works because it increases neuroplasticity, so I won't go on about that any further — let's just say that the lack of a sturdy social container is also the biggest obstacle to ordinary people using acupuncture.

Hello, level two in the Hierarchy of Needs! A sturdy social container for acupuncture encompasses all of the relationships, boundaries, resources and systems that are required to hold a POCA clinic together. Gathering them, organizing them, and maintaining them for the long haul, so that your community has economic access to acupuncture, is an epic amount of work. If you're not the person who did that work yourself, though, it's easy to overlook it down there at the bottom of the pyramid. And it's easy to take a social container, and the economic access that it provides, for granted.

⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5mtclwloEQ>

⁹ Pollan, Michael. *How to Change Your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches Us About Consciousness, Dying, Addiction, Depression, And Transcendence*. Penguin Random House, 2018.

And that's a big problem when it happens.

If you can take something for granted, it means you don't have to be grateful for it; heck, you don't even have to be aware of it. And if you're not aware of it, it's impossible to pay attention to it, let alone to take care of it. I think this is the substance of many (most?) conflicts between veteran punks and newbie punks, who are in a position to take things for granted that the veterans had to build from scratch. It can be an issue with training employees, and it's been an issue at POCA Tech; not only because veteran punks get mad about it but because, if newbie punks can't pay attention to social containers, they can't learn how to build or maintain them. The vast majority of POCA clinics exist because somebody decided to suck it up and learn how to create a small business, even though they probably didn't want to. When there were very few community acupuncture clinics, I don't think most of us who were making them assumed the process would be easy, or that we could take it for granted; we looked at the wasteland around us and figured it was going to be hard to build anything. Now that there are more clinics, it's more tempting to take those existing social containers for granted.

Cue Right Said Fred! Some would-be punks are just... too sexy for this work. Too geeky for this work, too dreamy for this work, too idealistic for this work. One way or another, they refuse to drop down to the grind of level two and pay attention to what it takes to make, and run, a clinic, particularly for the long haul. They'd rather float up to the higher levels.

Yeah, says the veteran punk bitterly, who wouldn't?

Let's talk about the stigma against small business. As I wrote in *Holes*¹⁰, the only useful business education I got was outside of acupuncture school, when my mentor showed me how to fill out IRS Schedule C and gave me a copy of Paul Hawken's book, *Growing a Business*.¹¹ Hawken describes how his upper middle-class family didn't think much of him being "a shopkeeper" and because of the stigma, he didn't immediately realize how interesting and creative small business was. A lot of acupuncture schools have their own version: the challenges of small business aren't compelling or valuable enough to put real time and energy into exploring — instead, let's just hope everybody gets hired by a hospital. (Getting hired by a hospital is sexy!) Being a lowly small business owner is, well, lowly, and being good at small business is a lot less impressive than wearing a white coat.

At this moment in time, though, the only reliably workable blueprint we have for a social container for community acupuncture requires creating a small business, or a nonprofit that supports itself like a small business. It's so, so tempting for people to look at small

¹⁰ Rohleder, Lisa. *Acupuncture Points are Holes*. Portland: POCA; Portland, 2017.

¹¹ Hawken, Paul. *Growing A Business*, Simon & Schuster, 1987.

business as somehow *extraneous to* community acupuncture, instead of *foundational to* community acupuncture.

Trying to transcend level two with magical thinking is pretty obvious when acupuncture schools do it, but POCA has to contend with more subtle versions, and alas, sometimes the worst of it comes from anti-capitalists. Yep, you know the ones who would rather dream about the sexy, sexy revolution than build an actual social container so that ordinary people can get acupuncture in their own neighborhood. Some would-be punks are, unfortunately, too radical for this work. They're quite skilled at critiquing social containers for acupuncture, but they themselves won't build or maintain any. Critique is all they've got to offer. As Peter Deadman demonstrated, it's easy (*cough* *lazy* *cough*) to negatively compare something that exists to something better and purer and loftier – that doesn't. There's a new-age version of this magical thinking too, where would-be punks don't understand why the veterans didn't just manifest a reality with more rainbows and unicorns. It's easy to create a social container, right?

Being good at small business is less impressive than being (insert relevant version of “sexy” here): being radical, being enlightened, being clever, being a free spirit, being charmingly contrarian, etc., etc., etc. The problem is, none of those things are foundational to community acupuncture because none of them will get you a social container, absent the work of building a business. And they can all be powerful distractions from the unsexy work of taking care of the container.

A really basic, really boring part of paying attention is identifying distractions and dragging your focus away from them. The upper levels of the hierarchy of needs can be a distraction from the lower levels. Sexy ideals can be a distraction from unsexy work. Attention really is magic, though, and I think the more practice we get, collectively, with hauling our attention back down to the foundational levels of the hierarchy of needs, the more people we'll be able to serve.

Reflection questions

1. What is your relationship to critique, especially academic critique?
2. How important is it to you to be able to promote opposing views and/or play devil's advocate, and why?
3. Why do you think an orientation towards critique could pose problems for a small business owner?

Or Is It... Classism?

How much of our collective difficulty with paying attention to creating and maintaining social containers is actually about classism?

The acupuncture profession in the US has worked hard to establish the image of the acupuncturist as a white-coated professional with, ideally, a doctorate and an upper-middle-class income. The economic and occupational reality, as we know, falls far short of this image for most graduates of acupuncture schools. Nevertheless, an aspect of the image that hangs around *even for community acupuncturists* is the suggestion that acupuncture is intellectual, abstract work for highly trained professionals and so...should those professionals really have to worry about making their own social container? Didn't they go to acupuncture school so that they could focus on more interesting stuff?

Isn't it somebody else's (lowlier) job, to worry about the boring, repetitive things like paying bills, cleaning bathrooms, managing (less important) relationships like volunteers and vendors, and generally keeping things together behind the scenes? Shouldn't all that labor magically get done without the acupuncturist having to think about it?

I've written in other places that discovering community acupuncture, for me, was all about being able to treat gas station attendants. Before I had access to the community acupuncture model, my practice choices for acupuncture were limited to charging prices that only wealthy people could afford or providing treatments that were somehow subsidized. The subsidized treatments were generally only accessible to people experiencing highly specific challenges: homelessness, addiction, certain diseases like HIV, or the aftermath of a disaster. There was simply no way to treat working-class people outside of those categories, ordinary people with garden-variety problems like headaches, arthritis, insomnia or anxiety; the conventional wisdom was that these people couldn't possibly be interested in acupuncture (only educated people were smart enough to be interested in acupuncture) and even if by some miracle they were interested, they weren't worth treating. (One acupuncture business coach of that era advised: Never be afraid to raise your prices, because the more you do, the more you'll attract *a better quality of patient*.)

In the acupuncture profession at that time, a gas station attendant with knee pain was entirely invisible: an invisible person, doing invisible labor, experiencing invisible pain. This invisibility was intensely painful to me because my grandfather was a gas station attendant. I had no way to practice in my own community. And so the community acupuncture model was designed for invisible people with ordinary problems, and it's based on what those people typically need from their acupuncturists: consistent, reliable

access to treatment in a low-barrier, welcoming setting. Successfully treating these people long term 1) is the antithesis of sexy, and 2) requires creating and maintaining a sturdy social container out of limited resources.

Out of all the amazing things that have emerged from the community acupuncture fractal, I am forever the happiest about gas station attendants (and other people who occupy that level of the socioeconomic ladder) getting access to acupuncture on their own terms. However, I've noticed that this doesn't always translate to acupuncturists and acupuncture students whose social networks aren't populated by gas station attendants. For them, social containers of community acupuncture (such as the clinics of Working Class Acupuncture and POCA Tech as an acupuncture school) sometimes seem to elicit a knee-jerk impulse to *improve* them. Because how could anybody possibly be satisfied with social containers so obviously made out of limited resources? How could we possibly be excited about relieving headaches for a bunch of gas station attendants? Don't we aspire to anything better and more idealistic than that?

As a result, there's continual pressure to make the social containers of community acupuncture look less like the people they were designed for and more like what middle-class and upper-middle-class people expect. (See also: [Modern Acupuncture](#)) Unfortunately, that pressure is sometimes accompanied by the attitude that if POCA can't do social containers any better than this, should we even be doing them at all? Which in turn can lead to our social containers being improved right out of existence.

Classism can manifest as idealism. Classism can also manifest as:

- not recognizing basic needs for consistency, reliability, and affordability as important priorities;
- an inability to recognize non-professional labor as *real work* with real demands of time, energy, attention, and intention;
- a refusal to accept the reality of limited resources or the validity of making decisions based on managing limited resources (see also: "you should be able to do better than that");
- a belief that what's abstract is inherently more valuable than what's concrete.

Classism in our society is ambient, it's in the air we all breathe, and it generally requires active effort to identify its influence on our perspective, our decision-making, and its potentially destructive impact on social containers.

Assignment

Read about the work of [Ramiro Gomez](#) and write a 300- 500 word essay reflecting on invisible labor, classism, acupuncture, and social containers.

Assignment: Worksheet

For most people who want to work in community acupuncture, there's a stark choice: you can be an entrepreneur yourself, or you can work with/for entrepreneurs, which entails getting along with them. Fill out the nifty worksheet below about the [personality traits](#) of entrepreneurs, and contemplate your answers.

Personality Traits for Entrepreneurs Rating Worksheet

Test yourself by checking the following questions. There are no right or wrong answers. Circle the answer that indicates what you feel or comes closest to it. Be honest with yourself.

1. Initiative/Self-starter

- a) I do things on my own. No one has to tell me to get going.
- b) If someone gets started, I keep going all right.
- c) Easy does it. I don't put myself out until I have to.

2. Attitude Toward Others

- a) I like people. I get along with just about anyone.
- b) I have plenty of friends; I don't need anyone else.
- c) Most people irritate me.

3. Leadership

- a) I can get people to go along with me if I start something.
- b) I can give orders if someone tells me what we should do.
- c) I let someone else get things moving; then I go along if I feel like it.

4. Responsibility

- a) I like to take charge of things and see them through.
- b) I'll take over if I have to, but I'd rather let someone else be responsible.
- c) There's always some eager beaver around wanting to show how smart he or she is. I say let them.

5. Organizer

- a) I like to have a plan before I start. I'm usually the one to get things lined up when the group wants to do something.
- b) I do all right unless things get too confusing; then I quit.
- c) Just when I'm all set, something comes along and presents too many problems, so I just take things as they come.

6. Industrious

- a) I can keep going as long as I need to. I don't mind working hard for something I want.
- b) I'll work hard for a while, but when I've had enough, that's it.
- c) I can't see that hard work gets me anywhere.

7. Decision Maker

- a) I can make up my mind in a hurry if I have to, and it usually turns out okay, too.
- b) I can, if I have plenty of time, make good decisions. If I have to make up my mind fast, I think later I should have decided the other way.
- c) I don't like to be the one who has to decide things.

8. Sincerity
 - a) People can trust what I say. I don't say things I don't mean.
 - b) I try to be on the level most of the time, but sometimes I just say what's easiest.
 - c) Why bother if the other fellow doesn't know the difference.
9. Stick to it/Perseverance
 - a) If I make up my mind to do something, I don't let anything stop me.
 - b) I usually finish what I start if it goes well.
 - c) If it doesn't go right, right away, I quit. Why beat my brains out?
10. Physical Energy
 - a) I never run down.
 - b) I have enough energy for most things I want to do.
 - c) I run out of energy sooner than most of my friends seem to.
11. Independence
 - a) Independence is important to me.
 - b) At times I like not having to make decisions.
 - c) I don't want to be in charge.
12. Assertiveness
 - a) I am confident that I can meet and overcome obstacles.
 - b) Usually obstacles do not block me from achieving what I want.
 - c) I often run into things that block me from achieving my goal.
13. Creativity
 - a) I enjoy trying new ideas and experimenting to improve the situation.
 - b) Innovation is helpful at times but being too inventive often wastes time.
 - c) There are good reasons to stick to current ways of doing things.
14. Realistic
 - a) I generally find myself able to complete my plans.
 - b) My plans get done some of the time.
 - c) My plans are rarely accomplished. There is never enough time or resources.

Reflection question

1. Would you describe yourself as industrious, sincere, responsible, organized, realistic, able to get along with others? These are the (unsexy) qualities that will help you start your own clinic, and usually, help you successfully work with people who have had the wherewithal to start theirs.

Stone Soup and Social Containers

OK, now let's talk about the social container. And stone soup.

Stone Soup and Social Business

A poor soldier is traveling home from the wars, somewhere in Europe or Russia. There's been a famine, and nobody he meets wants to share their food with him. He arrives in a village, and the villagers look over his ragged clothes and battered wagon and tell him that he should move on, they've got nothing for him. I have everything I need, he tells them cheerfully. In fact, I was planning to share my food with you.

He gets out a big iron pot, fills it with water, makes a fire, and when the water is boiling, he takes from his pocket a velvet bag and with great ceremony, opens the bag and drops an ordinary-looking rock into the pot. You see, I am very fortunate, he says to them. I have this magic stone, which makes delicious soup out of nothing at all. And he closes his eyes blissfully, inhaling the steam. I love stone soup, he murmurs.

The villagers look at him like he's crazy, but he keeps sitting there, looking rapturous and periodically licking his lips. After a little while he says happily, This is going to be an especially fine batch, I can tell. But you know what would make it even more delicious? Some carrots. Stone soup with carrots is an incomparable delight.

His happiness is hard to resist. A villager approaches him and cautiously offers him some carrots from her secret hoard. The ragged soldier is overjoyed and makes a huge performance out of lovingly cutting up the carrots and adding them to the soup. When he's done, he inhales deeply and says, It's perfect! The only thing that could make it more perfect would be a cabbage...

So of course, someone else goes and gets a cabbage out of their stash. The soldier couldn't be more enthusiastic. It's contagious; before long, everyone in the village has opened up their hoard and contributed something they were previously determined not to share: mushrooms, onions, potatoes, beef, fragrant herbs. The atmosphere is so festive that soon people are getting their guitars out and singing. It's a party. The soup turns out to be the best meal anybody's had in ages, and there is indeed plenty for everyone. By the end of the night, the villagers are offering the soldier outrageous amounts of money for his magic stone, but of course it's not for sale at any price.

Stone Soup is a fable about social business and multi-stakeholder cooperatives, at least the way we do those things in the community acupuncture movement. Like a lot of fables, it revolves around a trickster. In this case, it's about tricking people to act for the common good instead for their own selfish interests. In Stone Soup, everybody wins, but they were tricked into winning.

Stone Soup is a comedy; its opposite is a story called “the tragedy of the commons”. According to Wikipedia, “the tragedy of the commons is the depletion of a shared resource by individuals, acting independently and rationally according to each one's self-interest, despite their understanding that depleting the common resource is contrary to the group's long-term best interests.” In the tragedy of the commons, there's no trick involved. Everybody knows exactly what's going on, and everyone ends up losing instead of winning. More recent information suggests that “the tragedy of the commons” was actually corrosive propaganda in the service of a horrifying agenda.¹²

It's very hard for people to look past their own self-interest and see something bigger, something that includes both their own self-interest and other people's too. It's especially hard in the context of business, and even worse when the business in question is healthcare. OK, I confess: POCA is based on a Stone Soup trick. WCA before it too. I tricked you. Some of you don't need me to confess to this; you figured it out a long time ago, and you've been making soup with the exact same technique for years now. But I think it's time to explain the technique to everybody. If you're a POCA volunteer — and we need a lot of POCA volunteers — you have to understand how to make Stone Soup.

Let's start by looking at WCA as an example. WCA benefits possibly thousands of people, but it can't really benefit any of them without benefiting all of them. The nature of a low-cost, high-volume social business is that it needs a lot of people to support it; and if they do support it, for the most part they'll benefit proportionally to what they put into it. This is different than a conventional capitalist business, whose focus is on extracting profit disproportionately for the owners, and also from a charity, whose focus is on benefiting people who are not necessarily contributing anything to the organization. Stone Soup feeds the people who make it, and so it's a great approach for people who don't have a lot of resources.

Stone Soup is a poor person's trick. The scariest and most difficult part of it is the time after you've dropped your “magic” stone in the water and before anybody else has put anything in the pot. This is the part where you have to believe in something that nobody else can see, and you have to believe in it so hard that you can get other people to change their attitudes and help you make it. You wouldn't attempt this unless you were desperate. You wouldn't try it if you had other resources and other options. The part where there is nothing in the pot except a rock, and everybody's looking at you skeptically, is not something you do for kicks. (Ask anybody who was on the original POCA Steering Committee.)

Even some people who are into social business don't want to go through this to make Stone Soup. Their idea of social business is that you somehow make a bunch of money

¹² <https://boingboing.net/2019/03/07/scientific-fraud.html>

in a conventional capitalist way, but at some point, you find a way to use that money to “give back”. Maybe you figure out how to have a “triple bottom line” of “people, planet, profits”. In the Stone Soup model, you’re not even thinking about profits, you’re thinking about survival. You don’t have anything to give back, because you’re not starting with anything. You just need to eat, and you know that other people need to eat too, but for some reason everybody’s gotten paralyzed and nobody’s eating. Somebody needs to start somewhere, even if it’s only you and all you’ve got is a rock.

When I started WCA, I needed to eat and I needed to work, and I realized that other people needed acupuncture. Eleven years later, WCA is a lot bigger, but it’s still about people’s need to eat, work, and get acupuncture. Profit isn’t part of the equation. This is true for almost all of the other POCA clinics. The best part about WCA being much bigger, and about all these other POCA clinics, is that nobody quite has to go through the part about the empty pot and the rock in the same way anymore. You don’t have to sit there totally alone with your boiling water and the skeptical crowd; you’ve got a community of other people cheering you on. And enough people have tasted Stone Soup that they know what it is and they know that it’s good, and it’s worth putting their carrots and cabbages into the pot. Maybe they haven’t put their cabbages in your pot yet, but their sister in another city has been putting her cabbages into the pot that is the POCA clinic in her town, and she swears by it — so they’ll try it. The pot that is POCA as a whole is so big and so full of good things these days, that you really have to look hard to see that down at the bottom, under all the ingredients, there’s a rock. But if you’re going to successfully keep the pot going, you can’t ever forget about that rock.

The great satisfaction of Stone Soup is that you are simultaneously nourishing yourself and other people at the same time. That is what working in a POCA clinic, whether as a staff member or as a volunteer, should feel like: nourishing and also, creative. But in order to keep it feeling that way, there are a few important cautions. You can’t be too picky; you can’t be a control freak; you have to be aware and responsible; and you have to take risks. Momentum is important.

Stone Soup is perhaps not your favorite kind of soup. If you had a choice, maybe you’d prefer to eat a soup that came from a recipe in a book that a real chef had carefully followed in a nice kitchen — a soup made from ingredients that you had personally selected from a lovely farmer’s market. Maybe instead of the chaotic *mélange* that is Stone Soup, you’d prefer something somewhat more artful and elegant, like cream of heirloom tomato soup.

However, cream of heirloom tomato soup is not on the menu. In fact, there is no menu. We’re not even in a restaurant. From the perspective of conventional capitalism, you’re always supposed to be in a restaurant, and the point of everything is to order what you want, and the more of it, the better: The Restaurant of the Haves. Where we are is the Campfire of the Resourceful Have-Nots. There are not many Restaurants of the Haves in

the acupuncture world, and the few that there are don't seat many people. You can stand outside one of those in the cold for a very long time, or you can come sit down with us at our fire — the company is better, I promise.

But you can't be too picky. The cabbage that someone wants to put in the soup is perhaps not the kind of cabbage that you would have chosen. That does not matter as much as the fact that they are putting something in the soup. Smile and say, "Thank you so much!" You can't be a control freak. If you try to line people up in the alphabetical order of their donated vegetables and require them to drop them in the pot at timed intervals, you're going to lose their support (and your dinner). Just go with it and have some faith. You have to be aware and responsible. For quite a while, everyone else's attitude about the process of soup-making is going to depend on your attitude. Eventually they'll develop their own relationship to the soup, but at first, you set the tone. If you don't believe first, nobody else will. If you get tense and start complaining, other people will too, and there goes your soup. You have to take risks. See all previous advice about the wrong kind of cabbage, people dropping vegetables in at irregular intervals, and you believing first: these are all risks. Making Stone Soup does not involve much security. If you had security, you wouldn't need a magic rock.

Finally, momentum is important. Actually, momentum is everything. For people to contribute, they have to believe that this thing is going somewhere, and if not enough people contribute and the soup doesn't come together fast enough, it won't go anywhere and you won't be able to trick them into altruism. Conversely, the more people are contributing, the more people will want to contribute. That's why it's so important not to get hung up on trying to make your soup perfect. If a lot of people are contributing, it will definitely not be perfect; it will be deliciously imperfect.

I can make this confession now because the trick worked. It stretched out slowly over more than a decade, and sometimes it didn't look like it was working, but it did. I wasn't entirely sure until Providence POCAfest in 2013, when it was clear that the soup was delectable because it was full of the contributions of POCA volunteers who didn't happen to be acupuncturists. People had no idea that this was the exact flavor of soup that they wanted, but it was. Now that we know how good it is, we need to make a lot more soup.

It can be disconcerting to realize that there's a rock at the bottom of your soup. Maybe you didn't really want to know that the clinic where you love to get acupuncture has nothing in its savings account, or that the co-op that inspires you is sometimes only barely strung together by extremely tired volunteers. There's an art to letting people know how precarious our soup-making enterprise really is without scaring them off. Maybe the best way to say it is that we need EVERYTHING. Regardless of how full the pot looks, we still need everything. We need all sorts of skills; we need word of mouth marketing; we need goodwill; we need money; we need encouragement; we need

enthusiasm and imagination. Whatever you have to give, we need it, even if it seems to you like a negligible amount. That's the beauty of making something out of nothing: everything that you give counts.

Stone Soup and Social Containers

The Stone Soup fable applies to social entrepreneurship; it also applies to social containers, specifically, what it's like to make one. I guess that's another definition for social entrepreneurship: the willingness plus the effort to make a social container, out of nothing if need be.

Let's imagine a kind of prequel to Stone Soup, in which the hungry soldier tries every logical alternative before he goes all in with his improbable magic-rock strategy. Imagine that he asks people to share their food with him; they say no. He bangs on people's doors and demands they share their food with him; they deadbolt their doors. He goes to restaurants and offers to wash dishes in exchange for a meal; they tell him regretfully that barter's not in their business model and show him out. He writes an inspiring article about the need to feed hungry soldiers and shares it on social media; he gets all kinds of likes and re-posts and re-tweets, but nobody gives him any food. He writes a letter to his congressperson and gets a polite, encouraging reply on official stationery — also, no food.

In order to get to the point where he is able to literally make soup out of nothing, the soldier has to fully accept that nobody is going to solve his problem for him. Even though they have the resources and they could. They just don't want to; they're totally not interested; they won't get involved, and it doesn't really matter whether they're polite or rude about it. No amount of pleading, arguing, advocating, shaming, or even threatening is going to accomplish anything — except to make the soldier tired and even more hungry than before.

In this prequel, the soldier's politics could be anywhere on the spectrum, he could be a progressive or a conservative, and while that might change how we feel about him (depending on our own politics), it doesn't change what happens. Regardless of how he frames it to himself (or others), nobody wants to feed him. They have compelling reasons for not sharing their food which may or may not be political. He probably meets people who want to talk politics with him, and maybe religion too, so they can describe all the historical, cultural, and metaphysical reasons why there's no food for him and why he should join their political party or their church. It's all talk, though, and no food.

By the time the soldier picks a rock up off the sidewalk and recognizes it as magic, he's had to give up on ordinary methods. Like, really give up.

Why am I going on about this? Because I think sometimes an obstacle to being successful as a social entrepreneur is a resistance to taking responsibility for improving

a bad situation, for example the lack of a sturdy social container for acupuncture, which then leads to an inability to fully engage. I might have come up with the model years earlier if I hadn't been hoping somebody else would somehow solve my problem of how to be an acupuncturist in my own community. Because it was a really big problem! Surely it wasn't possible that nobody was interested in it, that nobody cared!

Plenty of people would care *later*. I had to care first. And be willing to look like a dork while I was doing it. I also had to risk 100% of my personal resources on my dorky enterprise of demonstrating that it was possible to make a living as an acupuncturist in my working-class community. Obviously, I would have preferred a better and easier alternative.

A lot of punks and would-be punks are resistant to taking responsibility for creating and maintaining a social container that allows people of ordinary incomes to have access to acupuncture. I get it; I was resistant too. And a lot of things about community acupuncture have changed over the last 17 years, but alas, the requirement for responsibility, risk, and full personal engagement with this problem hasn't changed. Or as my WCA comrade Cortney puts it, *you have to really, really want it*.

Let's talk about how the magic rock strategy works, in detail. If pleading, arguing, advocating, shaming, and threatening don't work, what DOES work to enlist other people in a solution? How exactly do you make a social container out of nothing, and what does it look like to really, really want it? Here's my experience, FWIW:

A.

You have to go first, in every way that matters. You have to put yourself out there in situations where other people don't understand and probably think you look stupid. You can't be too sexy to potentially make a fool of yourself for an important cause. You have to be the one to provide a solution. This is the part where you're standing in front of the crowd with your empty pot and your magic rock.

Reflection questions

1. Do you have experience with initiating projects?
2. Are you able to bring solutions, or do you prefer to focus on problems and expect other people to solve them?
3. What's your tolerance for risk?
4. You're not too sexy for small business, are you?
5. Has anybody ever described you as entitled? (Sorry, we have to ask!)

B.

You have to have realistic expectations of other people's contributions before you invite

them. If you're expecting somebody to walk up to your empty pot and pour in gallons of delicious soup, ready-made from your favorite restaurant, this is not going to work. Your role is to pull together a lot of different small contributions into something that's more than the sum of its parts.

Reflection questions

1. How realistic are you? Do you tend to have high expectations for other people's behavior?
2. Do you often find yourself disappointed in other people?
3. Would people who know you well say that it's easy or hard for you to ask for help?
4. What kind of experience with "project management" do you have? (Many aspects of parenting fall into the category of project management.)

C.

You have to radiate faith and goodwill, and set an overwhelmingly, contagiously positive tone. In my experience, this requires a lot of self-discipline. If you haven't yet taught yourself how not to complain, now's the time. Negativity is a luxury you absolutely can't afford; it's incompatible with magic rocks.

Reflection questions

1. Would the people who know you best describe you as a positive person?
2. What's your relationship to criticism and complaining? Almost everybody enjoys complaining at least some of the time, but for some people it's a serious hobby, and also the basis of friendships. Are you willing to strategically give it up?

See next chapter for more about setting a positive tone.

D.

At the same time you're radiating all those positive vibes, you have to focus. Almost every version of the Stone Soup story, across different cultures, describes how the soldier/tramp/monk/trickster never takes his eyes off the pot. There's nothing in the world more interesting to him than his pot with a magic rock/nail/axe at the bottom, and that sets the tone for the all those other people, the ones that he needs to get interested in his emerging solution, to follow suit. He's the antithesis of distracted.

Reflection questions

1. How's your ability to focus?
2. What are the potential distractions in your life and how are you going to manage

them? What's your relationship to drama and conflict — do you enjoy them?

3. Are you willing to give them up too so that you can focus on your social container?

E.

You have to let go of control. All those tiny, disparate contributions from dozens of people? If they're going to add up to something significant, you can't micromanage the contribution process. You have to trust and invite other people's goodwill and faith, and let the soup come together.

Reflection questions

1. Almost everyone has control issues; what are yours like?
2. Would the people who know you best describe you as a micro-manager?
3. How tolerant are you of errors made in good faith?

F.

At the same time that you let go control of the details, you have to take responsibility for the big picture. You're not micromanaging the small stuff, but you are managing the overall process and you have to keep it moving. Momentum is crucial when you're making stone soup. In a sense, you're guiding the skeptical crowd from one collective achievement (look, carrots!) to the next one (wow, celery!) to set the stage for the next one (wild mushrooms in this soup would be amazing...wait, you HAVE some???) UNBELIEVABLE!) If there's no momentum, there's no process, and no soup.

Reflection questions

1. How's your ability to see the big picture?
2. Do you have any experience with motivating other people?
3. Is your enthusiasm contagious?

G.

Gratitude, gratitude, gratitude, and also, don't worry about who gets credit for the soup. In fact, share credit whenever you possibly can. Everybody in the Stone Soup story is really important, and also really unimportant, at the same time. If you're worried about who gets the credit, you're not hungry enough. If you're not grateful as the soup comes together, you weren't hungry enough to begin with. Stone soup is for desperate people. Or, as an old woman in one version of the folktale puts it, "Well, THAT's something for poor people to know!"

Reflection questions

1. How hungry are you? How badly do you need your social container?
2. What's your relationship to gratitude, including expressing it?

For punks, it really comes down to: can you live with the idea that *nobody owes you a social container in which to practice acupuncture*, and can you take responsibility for creating your own if you have to? Do you recognize that putting in needles and having relationships with patients is the fun, easy part of this job (and even that's not that easy)?

The magic in this story, and there is real magic, is about how approaching a very challenging situation with creativity and faith can show you that you're resilient, capable and expansive in ways you might never have imagined. The transformation isn't just about a pot of water becoming soup, it's about you becoming a larger version of yourself. It's about a community of people with limited resources creating something that's more than the sum of its parts. This kind of magic is a beautiful thing; it's also a very demanding thing.

More About Positivity (With An Example)

Q: When you say, “you have to radiate faith and goodwill, and set an overwhelmingly, contagiously positive tone”, what exactly do you mean by that? You don’t mean “the power of positive thinking”, do you? What if you’re really angry about, say, the lack of access to healthcare?

A: Thanks for the clarifying question! Setting a positive tone while building a social container doesn’t mean pretending you don’t feel anything you actually feel, including anger. *Setting a positive tone here means practicing control and awareness with regard to your intention and attention; it’s about strategically managing your energy.* Anger can be great fuel, especially when you’re conscious of it, while negativity can be like a slow leak in your tires, where things keep being difficult and you don’t really know why.

A concrete example of how this plays out in real life for POCA clinics is **landlords**. Here are two possible perspectives on the very same situation:

1. My landlord is such a pain! I rent space in a multi-disciplinary building and the person who manages the space seems to mean well, but seriously can’t get it together. There’s been one issue after another about security, building access, parking, and then of course there was the time when they were working on the sprinkler system and the fire alarms went off three times while I had patients trying to rest! I’ve asked them for advance notification when they’re doing work on the building but even though they agree, they don’t actually tell me until noisy things are happening while I’m trying to treat people! Every time I turn around there’s another example of building-related chaos and drama, and I know it’s affecting my numbers! All I can think about is how much I wish I could own my own building, but that’s never going to happen.

OR

2. Having a positive relationship with my landlord has been a real challenge at times but I’m so grateful for the opportunity to be in this space! It’s a multi-disciplinary building that has some really cool community-oriented tenants, and a lot of them get treated at my clinic. (Even the building manager — she’s constantly stressed out, so she really needs acupuncture, haha!) The building is right downtown, very visible, ADA-accessible, and I can afford the rent. My treatment space has beautiful windows and great light. We’ve definitely had some bumps around communication and a few unpleasant surprises with some of the shared spaces in the building, but I know that’s to be expected when there are so many players involved and so many moving pieces. We all keep trying, and even though my numbers have had some fluctuation, over the last five years when I look back, they’ve grown steadily. This space isn’t perfect, but it’s been a

stable place for me to establish my patient base and to create some important relationships with people in my community that otherwise I never would have met.

Both of these perspectives are equally *true*, but only one of them is going to help the clinic owner take care of their social container. The second perspective is an example of radiating faith and goodwill and setting a positive tone that leads to building positive relationships in their community. Even if the clinic owner could easily justify taking the first perspective, it's a strategic decision to choose the second perspective instead.

It's important to note that it takes *energy, focus and intention* for the clinic owner to choose the second perspective. Most people would find it easier to default to the first perspective and let their attention remain on everything their landlord is doing wrong. Particularly because in this society, landlords generally have more power than tenants, and many people who are attracted to community acupuncture come into the landlord-tenant relationship primed to look for abuses of power, or at least a failure to take care of the tenant. It requires invisible effort to strategically choose a positive perspective in the service of maintaining a social container. Once you do it enough, you build up muscle and habit so that it becomes much easier, even reflexive. However, since the effort remains invisible, this is a prime example of something that the clinic owner has to do, that their employees — if they have employees — might not be aware of, and so might take for granted.

Even though it's invisible, choosing a positive perspective can be crucial to a clinic's survival. I can think of more than one unfortunate example of community acupuncture clinics that didn't make it because their owners put a lot of energy into pointless power struggles with their landlords. Instead of focusing their attention on what they could control and maximizing their efforts where they would make a difference, these clinics picked losing battles over issues which were, in the scheme of things, relatively minor, like who was going to pay for re-striping the parking lot. From talking to the clinic owners, it seemed like they were constantly comparing the imperfect but functional space that they had to a more perfect space that they didn't have, and probably couldn't ever afford. As a result, they had less energy to put into building their patient base and eventually got tired of struggling and closed their clinics. A big part of the struggle was self-created, though they didn't see it that way.

Setting a positive tone is about remembering that, especially where community acupuncture is concerned, *the perfect is the enemy of the good*. Making do, making the best of what you've got, is an important skill for punks. Rejoice in any good that you can find; it's a strategic way to reinforce your social container.

More About Positivity (With Another Example)

Landlord, Space, and Positivity

By Chris Rogers, Wasatch Community Acupuncture

Our first clinic location was on the third floor of a large unmarked office building. This building was challenging for patients for several reasons. It was hard to find the building, and almost every day a new patient would call, lost and frustrated. Once you found the building, the driveway leading to the parking lot was a tiny chute off of a busy street, and people often missed it and had to flip around and try again. After parking, patients still had to navigate a byzantine directory and questionable elevators and then find their way through a labyrinthine network of hallways required to reach our clinic. Once you finally made it to the treatment space it was nice and cozy, but then if you had to pee, well, let's just say you had to brave the labyrinth once again. Needless to say, the only walk-ins we ever had only happened because someone was lost looking for another business in our office building and would wind up in our clinic completely by random chance.

We decided that we should look for another location so that we could move when our lease was up. One that people might actually be able to find when they were looking for it, and as an added bonus, maybe a location with street visibility, one that would generate new patients from people walking, riding, and driving by. We had no idea how much work we were in for.

Looking for a new location requires a lot of time and a lot of excitement followed by repeated disappointment. We looked, very actively, for a new space for nearly a year and a half. We wanted a space that had street visibility, space enough for at least 16 recliners, though preferably more, and plenty of parking for all our patients, front-desk staff, and two massage therapists and their clients on any given day. And we needed to be able to afford it. After several hopeful prospects that didn't work out for one reason or another, we finally found a space that would suit our needs. The new space required major lease negotiations, lots of cleaning, and augmentation and buildout to meet our needs. We were on our way to having our dream space!

Finally, moving day. We did the move ourselves, with lots of volunteers. We only closed down for the weekend and reopened the following Monday in the new space. The logistics of moving also ended up being more work than anticipated but once we settled into the new space it looked and felt great. It had all the things we were looking for and it was more beautiful than we had anticipated so that was an additional bonus. We were ready for business.

Opening the new space up to patients also opened us up to hearing comments and

criticisms that long-time patients had about the new space versus the old. Many comments were extremely positive but there were several not-so-positive comments too. For example, “why can we hear people walking around upstairs?”, “the bathrooms are not very nice,” “it’s too cold and bright in the front room,” etc. It was frustrating to hear all of this after all of our hard work, and we began to dwell on a lot of the things patients pointed out, which went on for some time. We kept wondering if we’d made a mistake. We researched if we could somehow muffle or mitigate the heavy footsteps coming through the ceiling from the floor above us without spending a fortune, to no avail. We worked past those feelings and decided things were good enough, eventually feeling pretty good about our decision to move.

Then the building started farting on us. Literally, some strange plumbing issue caused trapped gas in the sewage system to randomly be released through the HVAC system, unleashing an unholy smell into our treatment space where our unsuspecting patients were resting peacefully. Another hang-up, which brought about more negative thinking regarding our space. Apparently, the landlord knew about this problem, but he didn’t bother mentioning it before we signed the lease. The landlord was also not overly concerned with trying to fix the issue.

Around this same time, the building’s roof developed a slow leak that only ran into our treatment space. It was difficult to troubleshoot because it only happened after it had been storming for a particular amount of time. The roof needed to be replaced, but again the landlord isn’t interested in spending money on the building. In addition, it’s difficult to control the climate in our space because the HVAC system is really, really old. The plumbing is old and the toilets back up if you’re not gentle with them, the entrance doors are not well insulated and they leak when it storms, and the sidewalks turn into lakes that patients have to navigate around whenever it rains or snows. These things kept coming to the forefront of our attention.

We just had a staff meeting and we are quickly coming up on our four-year mark at this location, which means we have just another year to decide if we want to renew our lease for another five years. The discussion of whether we should look for another location came up and most in attendance thought we should at least begin looking around especially considering how long it took to find a suitable place last time. However, the following day something hit us. We realized that even if we could find another place, it probably wouldn’t be perfect either and, besides, we may not even be able to afford this mythical place that would fit our description of perfect. It’s hard on us and on patients when we move, and there is something to be said for creating a stable place that people can depend on.

This helped us realize how lucky we are to have the space we do have. It’s flawed, but it’s also got everything we actually need to create the social container that’s required to provide our neighborhood with lots of affordable acupuncture. It’s got a small group of

dedicated people that love it and care for it, which has caused the place to become a palpable and substantial entity all its own. We've decided to love it, with all of its flaws, and to fill it with gratitude instead of dwelling on its imperfections. We cultivate a big colorful flower garden out front in the summer and admire the snow on the pine tree during the winter. We're grateful that our social container actually has a workable physical container. One that thousands of people in our community have come to rely upon. It's not perfect, but it works, and that's good enough.

Managing Risk

Let's reiterate: Good needling, good rapport, and good communication in the clinic all require intense focus; it's impossible to be an effective punk if you're distracted or preoccupied. It's equally important to manage your intention and attention with respect to the clinic's relationships, boundaries, resources and systems – and it's equally hard to manage a social container if you're distracted or preoccupied.

Which means we need to talk about risk. Small business and risk are inseparable; community acupuncture and risk are inseparable. [Wikipedia](#) defines risk as “the possibility of losing something of value”, as well as “the intentional interaction with uncertainty”. The fear of losing valuable things and the strain of constantly managing uncertainty can cause a punk to be distracted and preoccupied, and as a result, less effective both in the clinic and in managing their business.

It takes energy, focus and intention to manage risk. A large part of why this workbook exists and why it's an assignment for first year students at POCA Tech is that we think it's crucial for prospective acupuncturists to understand the risks involved in their chosen career. If nobody owes you a social container in which to practice acupuncture, that means somebody has to volunteer to take on the risks inherent in creating and maintaining one. Generally, whether you're an owner/manager or an employee, there's plenty of risk to go around, but the greater portion falls on the owner/manager (or whoever's signature is on all the important documents). Managing risk is a major category of invisible labor. It's not a one-time event when you sign a commercial lease; it's day-in, day-out, for as long as your clinic is open.

Let's consider what you risk when you volunteer to start up a community acupuncture clinic:

Your money.

Obviously. Whatever the cost of opening – rent, a security deposit, equipment, furniture, business cards, etc. – if your clinic doesn't make it, you won't recover those costs.

Your time and energy.

Even if you're a talented scavenger and you get all your recliners for free, you've substituted time for money and those are sunk costs. Opening (and running) a clinic requires an enormous amount of energy that you could be spending on something safer.

Your investment.

It takes a while for a community acupuncture clinic to establish itself, to incrementally build the relationships and word of mouth in its community that it needs to be successful. One of the lessons that Working Class Acupuncture learned when its third clinic, WCA Lents, went up in flames, was that our insurance covered our financial losses (thank God) but it couldn't cover our lost investment in the Lents community. Our clinic was three years old at the time of the fire and was finally -- finally! -- self-sustaining. We couldn't find another space in Lents, so we re-opened in another neighborhood six miles to the east; in most ways, we found ourselves starting from scratch. Those three years of painstakingly establishing our business in Lents were gone, and it was a huge setback. We went from treating 300 patients a week in Lents to treating less than 100 in our new clinic in Rockwood, and all we could do was take a deep breath and start over, one relationship at a time.

Your self-image and your reputation.

What everyone wonders about any new business is, will it survive? If it does, that success can be an important source of both self-esteem and respect in the community for the person who took the risk. If it doesn't, the loss has to be processed, integrated and re-framed. Other small business owners understand how hard it is to get something off the ground, but people who don't understand will make assumptions, some of them unkind. When you open a clinic, you're taking a risk with regard to how you see yourself and how others see you.

Let's consider the mechanics of managing risk:

You have to fully engage your attention.

This can include watching numbers like a hawk: cash flow, patient flow, the impact of the calendar, the weather, national politics (it's amazing what kinds of factors influence whether or not people schedule appointments for acupuncture) and how all these things affect how many needles you can afford to order at a time. Taking care of a new business has some important similarities to taking care of a baby; it needs you to pay attention, all the time.

You have to make important decisions with limited information.

You have to anticipate, estimate, take your best guess and hope you're right, and deal with the consequences when you're wrong. You can lean on your experienced POCA comrades for support and advice, but nobody can make decisions for your business but you.

You have to work on self-regulation.

Everybody has a range of risk that they can tolerate (more about that in a minute) and if you're hanging out on the edge of your personal range, you're going to have to manage your anxiety. Managing risk demands mental and emotional energy, and you have to figure out how to take care of yourself given how much energy you're expending and how much risk you're facing.

There's a very wide spectrum of risk tolerance among humans; on one end is people who feel most alive when they're balancing on a tight rope over a canyon, and on the other is people who feel paralyzed by the smallest uncertainty. Only you are in a position to honestly and thoroughly evaluate your own risk tolerance. (Don't forget to factor in that the risk will be ongoing rather than temporary; in some ways, being responsible for a small business is like constantly balancing on the tight rope over the canyon.) However, it's important to devote some time to doing just that, ideally BEFORE you embark on a career in a thoroughly marginal industry like acupuncture, which depends on small businesses for its social containers. Community acupuncture entails financial, social, and emotional risk, and nobody can manage those risks for you.

Reflection Questions

1. What kinds of risks have you taken in your life? How did you feel when you were taking them?
2. Make a list of the risks that a) a clinic owner/manager takes, and b) an employee punk takes. What risks do they have in common, and what risks are different? Are there any ways to share the risks that are different, and how much room is there for mutual support?
3. In your assessment, is risk good for you, personally? How much risk is good for you, and where's the line where it turns into the opposite? Would taking the risk of opening a small business be good for you or not?

Practice Seeing Social Containers, Part 1

Assignment

For each of these:

A small business of your choice (preferably a brick and mortar one, for example: neighborhood cafe, family farm, hair salon, bicycle repair shop, independent movie theater, hardware store, etc.), WCA, or your “home clinic”.

For each one, spend about an hour observing, researching, and really thinking about how they operate. Write a couple of lines about the relationships, boundaries, resources and systems for each one and reflect on how much energy they take their owner/managers to maintain. It’s less important to write everything down (this assignment could easily turn into a novel) than to really think about each of the categories and what it would be like to be responsible for them.

Sample: Bison Coffeehouse, Cully neighborhood

Read about [Bison Coffeehouse](#) and the article [Welcome to Bison Coffeehouse, Portland’s Only Native American–Owned Coffee Shop](#).

1) Relationships

Loretta, the owner, manages relationships with employees, customers, and suppliers. She started her business with support from her large extended family so she maintains those relationships as well. This is a LOT of relationships and must demand a lot of attention. She makes it look easy, but it can’t possibly be easy.

2) Boundaries

Each of those relationships requires different kinds of boundaries, and she has to manage all of them simultaneously. Unlike some other businesses, the Bison doesn’t have a lot of rules and instructions posted; the physical space is relatively small and it has a lot of people moving through it on any given day, so customers respecting boundaries are important, but there don’t appear to be any problems in that area, people intuitively seem to “get” how to interact with the staff and each other and the space. How does she make that happen? Worth thinking about.

3) Resources

Her community is definitely a resource for the business, and part of what contributes to making this coffeehouse a genuine “third place” where all sorts of people come to relax and connect, from knitting groups to Native American

political organizing. Another important resource is expertise: Loretta's own extensive experience working in other coffee shops and her in depth knowledge of coffee. As a solo owner, Loretta's personal energy, commitment and enthusiasm is probably the most important resource for the business.

4) Systems

The systems that the Bison requires (just from looking at it): ordering supplies, cleaning and maintaining the space, managing inventory, managing employees (hiring/firing/training/HR), baking (Loretta does all her own baking); making drinks; bookkeeping, bill paying, and managing money; marketing (looks like mostly word of mouth with some social media) and website; rotating artwork must involve some kind of system with contributing artists. As a solo owner, she is doing ALL of it.

Crackers and the Social Container, Part 1

An important thing to understand about social containers for community acupuncture, especially when they take the form of small businesses (which will be true 90% of the time) is that they reflect the personalities of the people who made them.

Just like punking itself, everybody who makes a social container does it slightly differently and everybody does it their own way. If you've ever worked in a multi-punk clinic and have had the experience of unpinning your coworkers' patients, you know that acupuncture treatments are kind of like handwriting. If I walked up to a patient with no idea of which punk in my clinic had treated them, I could figure it out by looking at the needle placement, the same way I can figure out who left a note on the whiteboard in the punk cave: oh, that's Moses, and there, that's Cortney. They don't have to sign their work; I recognize it because it has their stamp on it. Small businesses are like that too.

Which leads to what I think of as "that bitch eating crackers"¹³ problem with social containers for community acupuncture. This might seem silly, but I feel like it encapsulates perfectly the feeling of: OMG, I am so sick of YOU being YOU. Can you just...not?



Here's a story about a punk for whom WCA became That Bitch Eating Crackers (TBEC).

Let's call this punk Skylar. (Names and identifying details have been changed.) WCA hired Skylar at a time when we were, as usual, short-staffed, but after we had gotten together some on-boarding materials that we thought did a pretty good job of explaining who we were and what we expected. Skylar was a quick learner and had good patient numbers; we consistently got positive feedback about them, from both patients and coworkers. Skylar got salaried and then got a module because they said they were

¹³ <https://me.me/i/once-you-hate-someone-everything-they-do-is-offensive-look-20720749>

interested in doing some administrative work. Everything seemed to be going fine for a year or so...

And then various members of WCA's management collective got some cryptic emails from Skylar that were apparently about their module work. Skylar had some ideas; Skylar would like to improve things; Skylar requested a meeting with the management collective to make a presentation. OK, sure, we said, let's have a meeting about your module.

The meeting was not about their module.

After Skylar's presentation to us was over, once we all recovered from being speechless from disbelief and/or rage, we decided that their presentation would live in our memories forever as an example of the worst decision we'd ever seen an employee make. What Skylar really wanted to talk about was how WCA's core values and culture needed to change so that they, personally, could be happier with their job. They admitted that when they read all of WCA's onboarding materials, they internally rejected all our premises but had taken the job in order to "be the change" they wished to see, and over the intervening year, they had only gotten more determined. The essence of the presentation was that WCA being WCA was offensive to Skylar. WCA doing its thing, eating crackers like it owned the place (which, uh, it did), was driving Skylar up the wall.

WCA was too angry. Too intense. Too snarky, too gruff, too irreverent. Too unfriendly to non-community acupuncturists. The red fist was a symbol of everything wrong with us, and Skylar couldn't even stand to look at it anymore. (Also? Skylar would like us to replace our logo.) Furthermore, our policies and procedures about hiring, scheduling and taking time off were oppressive to Skylar's free spirit. Skylar wanted us to look in the mirror and ask ourselves why we couldn't be kinder, more flexible, more open to all possibilities (including Skylar working only when they felt like it).

We looked at each other and decided we were open to the possibility of firing Skylar.

After discussing it, though, we decided not to, because we were still (of course) short-staffed and apart from the presentation itself, there hadn't been any problems with Skylar's actual job performance. Skylar just didn't like who we were. Later on, I realized that more importantly, Skylar didn't really want what we had to offer. Before we had the term "social container", we referred to the concept at WCA as, "having each other's backs so that we all can have jobs". We called it, "sharing a patient base" and "collectively making acupuncture available to more people than we could individually". But regular hours, a predictable paycheck, a consistent work environment, and providing acupuncture to tens of thousands of people, weren't actually priorities for Skylar. We assumed they must be for anybody who was working for WCA, but that was a mistake on our part. Skylar valued flexibility, openness to all possibilities, and love and

light to the rest of the acupuncture profession much more than they valued having a social container. Eventually, to no one's surprise, Skylar quit. Last I heard, they were getting out of acupuncture altogether.

Over the years I've heard a lot of employee criticism of individual POCA clinics, not just WCA. The clinics are all really different, so the complaints are all over the map. I've heard criticism of clinics for: being too detail-oriented or not detail-oriented enough; way too chatty or not communicative enough; having too many policies and procedures or not having enough; being too political or too apolitical; being too mainstream or being too quirky...the list could go on and on, but the point is I finally realized that a number of the criticisms were basically profound irritation with the clinic owners sitting there eating crackers like they owned the place. And so my working theory is, anybody who has enough personal drive to create a small business, enough personal intensity to make a social container out of nothing, also has the potential to become TBEC for somebody. And it's more likely to happen when the somebody, as an employee, was attracted to community acupuncture as a disembodied ideal and consequently, has unrealistic expectations of what it takes to make and maintain a social container.

It takes a person or persons with individual personalities. It takes you being you in such a sustained and amplified way that somebody else could get really sick of it. And so it's worth reiterating that your options as a punk are limited to putting up with somebody being themselves as a small business owner/your employer, or taking on that role yourself. So far, no perfect, generic, un-irritating social containers for community acupuncture have been dropped out of the sky by angels; all the ones we have were made by flawed human beings. Successful punks get that and make their choices accordingly.

Reflection questions

1. Are you Skylar? (Sorry!)
2. To what degree were you attracted to community acupuncture as part of a disembodied ideal (almost all of us were!) and can you name the ideal – world peace, natural medicine, cooperative utopia, energetic/ecological balance, healing justice, something else or some combination? If you can name it to yourself, it will help disentangle any possible unrealistic expectations from the messy reality of providing community acupuncture to people who need it.

Crackers and the Social Container, Part 2

Let me tell you about Harper (not their real name; other identifying details have been changed).

I met Harper in the early days of CAN (pre-POCA), when they dropped in to visit WCA. Harper was one of the acupuncturists who never went to a community acupuncture workshop or later, a POCAfest; Harper spent a weekend in Portland, asked me and Skip a lot of questions, got treated, took a whole bunch of notes, and then went home and opened a very busy, very successful community acupuncture clinic. I've talked to Harper on the phone probably five times in the past ten years, and we have a mutual POCA friend who gives me updates as well.

Every time I've talked to Harper it's been for basically the same reason: Harper is driven to desperation by their acupuncturist employees and is contemplating closing their clinic. To say that Harper's employees don't understand the concept of the social container is an understatement; the majority of Harper's employees seem to be involved in a multi-year campaign to *destroy* the social container that is Harper's clinic, for reasons I don't fully understand.

Part of it is geography; Harper's clinic isn't close to any other POCA clinics, but the city where Harper lives has an established acupuncture school that supports an acupuncturist culture that isn't especially friendly to CA. You could say Harper is almost alone out on the edge of the POCAverse, with hardly any comrades to keep them company. Harper has gone through any number of acupuncturist employees who were basically slumming, meaning they saw Harper's clinic as an opportunity to get some experience to help them build their (expensive) private practices. However, it's not just about employees not really understanding CA, though Harper and I have talked plenty about deprogramming strategies for conventional acupuncturists. And over the years, each deprogramming failure has taken some of the wind out of Harper's sails.

Another part of it, probably, is that Harper is a very competent, very motivated person, and Harper made the work of making a clinic and running it look easy. It's difficult, because on some level for a community acupuncture clinic to work at all, its operations have to look easy to patients, because if things aren't generally running smoothly, they'll have a harder time relaxing. If you look around a busy POCA clinic during peak hours, mostly what you see is a lot of people sleeping. The vibe is very peaceful and relaxing. It doesn't necessarily occur to someone walking into this setting as an employee that there's a huge amount of non-relaxing labor going on behind the scenes to make this tranquility possible.

The biggest problem, though, is that Harper's employees seem to feel that the jobs

Harper created are inherently insulting to them, and so Harper as a person is fair game for all forms of resistance (and sometimes outright attack). As far as they're concerned, Harper is most definitely TBEC. I should say here that Harper had no intention of becoming an employer at the beginning; Harper was simply a talented punk who had a gift for making social containers, and Harper's clinic almost immediately had a waiting list. Harper just wants to treat a lot of people, and the only way to do that is to hire more acupuncturists. (Though Harper is certainly re-thinking that decision now.) Anyway, I can't get into too many gory details but suffice it to say that many (most?) POCA employers would have thrown in the towel sooner than Harper.

Amazingly, even with a revolving door of employees, Harper's clinic has consistently provided over 10,000 treatments a year for many years. (Evidence of how much the clinic's patient base loves and supports it.) When it closes, which I expect it will, because even Harper can't hold out forever, it won't be replaced by anything. Harper will be too tired and too burned out to start over. Harper's employees have made it clear that it's beneath them to think about details like treating enough people to cover the clinic's overhead, not to mention actually paying bills or doing bookkeeping (they've refused to do basic paperwork so that *Harper* can do the bookkeeping), let alone any kind of housekeeping. While they treat Harper like a terrible employer (which Harper emphatically isn't; I have that on the authority of a committed punk who worked for Harper), they would never dream of trying to employ anybody themselves. And so Harper's midsized city will, probably sooner rather than later, have no POCA clinic at all.

Harper's employees don't care about that, but I do, and so I'm motivated to make sure that POCA Tech doesn't inadvertently produce any graduates who are anything like Harper's employees (aka, Skylar of the previous chapter). I'm not saying Harper is a perfect employer; I'm sure they're not, because nobody is. It's difficult to be an employer, period, in a small business. Possibly Harper's employees are just oblivious; possibly they're suffering from a lot of entitlement/acupuncture professional classism; but the social container that Harper sweated blood to create has never been good enough for them, and their response has been to wreck it.

If you care about patients' access to acupuncture, you won't treat social containers like they're easily replaceable commodities. If somebody else's social container isn't good enough for you, *for whatever reason*, please be responsible and go do the work of making your own. Morale is a limited resource, so don't exhaust and demoralize people who are trying their best with demands that they do more. Just don't. Figure out what you need and want and go make it happen. If that's a tiny solo clinic, so be it. Any place patients can get acupuncture they can afford is better than no place. **It's OK to leave social containers that don't work for you; just please don't destroy them on your way out.**

Crackers and the Social Container, Part 3:

Motivation and Boundaries

I think an important part of preventing TBEC-type episodes in clinics is spending some time getting clear about motivation — your own and other people's — and about boundaries. Motivation might be the ingredient that's most important to the success of a small business. However, what is motivating to one person might be demotivating to another. (This is the main reason POCA Tech uses the Enneagram as part of our training program: in our experience, the value of the Enneagram is how it spells out exactly what motivates different kinds of people, and thus helps everybody to take other people's behaviors less personally.)

For example, what Skylar didn't understand is that everything that turned WCA into TBEC, for them, was also what made WCA successful enough for Skylar to have a job. WCA has always been motivated by anger, snark, and a burning desire to treat as many people as possible. Skylar, as far as we could tell, was motivated by an idealistic vision of acupuncture that had more to do with love, light, and universal healing (also unlimited personal freedom for acupuncturists). WCA's relationship with Skylar was functional only in the places where motivations overlapped: treating people. But since most of Skylar's job was, in fact, treating people, the relationship worked for longer than you might expect — in other words, as long as Skylar was *only* treating people. In a sense, administrative work was the beginning of the end for Skylar, because that work crossed a boundary and drew them into contact with other aspects of WCA where love and light would be on an inevitable collision course with anger and snark. Love and light, alas, just aren't what gets WCA's collective management team up in the morning.

Similarly, Harper's employees and ex-employees don't understand that what made Harper want to hire them in the first place — being motivated by the goal of treating as many people as possible — was substantially different than the motivation to make jobs for acupuncturists that fulfilled all of their acupuncturist dreams. From Harper's perspective, part of the reward for being an acupuncturist is getting to treat a lot of people. From Harper's employees' perspective, *having* to treat a lot of people in order for the clinic to stay in business is a substantial personal hardship that can only be compensated for by high wages and endless deference from Harper. And so there's not enough overlap in motivation to make the relationship functional. Harper's employees and ex-employees also don't understand (or care) that Harper's motivation is a resource that patients depend on and can be exhausted.

It's helpful to do a kind of personal inventory: what exactly motivates me to be a punk and to make or maintain a social container? How might that be different from what motivates my coworkers/business partners/employers? Where is the overlap, where are the boundaries, and how am I going to respect them, for my own sanity and everyone

else's?

Here's an example:

Skip: I want to treat as many people as possible, because people need decent healthcare, and I really like doing it, and I also really like getting other people to do it.

Lisa: Both punking and making a social container have been my way of affirming that people like me, working-class people with limited resources, are worth taking care of. Every treatment that somebody otherwise couldn't afford? Is a fucking victory.

OK, this looks pretty good because there's a lot of overlap. Skip's motivation is in a sense more personal — more about connecting with individual humans — and less angry. Mine is more about carving out a space in society to take care of people who aren't perceived as valuable. If Skip were doing WCA alone, there probably wouldn't have been much energy for creating partnerships with other nonprofits like CareOregon and CODA. Overall, though, the boundaries aren't hard to respect, because they're compatible. *Even though we don't want exactly the same things, we can both get what we want from the same clinic.* As opposed to this situation:

Dissatisfied punk: I want to be paid a wage that reflects my status as a highly trained professional, and also, I'd like to work in an organization that is perceived as cool and progressive, at least by some people, because it supports a certain image that I cultivate. I want my job to support my lifestyle. I prefer to treat people who I can personally relate to, people with conscious, holistic lifestyles and an appropriate style of communication.

Clinic owner on their way to becoming TBEC: I want to treat everybody in my neighborhood. Everybody. I'll muddle through the stuff like HR and payroll as best I can, but what really keeps me going is seeing the positive impact of my clinic on my immediate community. My clinic systems are a mess sometimes, but who cares when I'm treating the entire local chapter of the Rotary Club?!? Nothing perks me up like making some crusty old skeptic's headache go away. I have a real soft spot for the folks who are cranky because they're in pain.

Spoiler alert: these people are not both going to get what they want. The boundaries are going to be hard to respect. The clinic/social container is probably going to suffer.

Because social containers are a lot of work to make and to maintain, it's helpful when people who don't have the exact same motivations can figure out how to create enough overlap and respect each other's boundaries enough that they can share the work, and

the rewards, of the same social container. That's generally more sustainable than each person creating and maintaining their own. Some people, however, are going to have motivations that are individual and specific enough that they need to be a solo entrepreneur. There's no objectively right or wrong way to approach the choice of working with others or going solo. The important thing to remember is that motivation is a precious commodity; find a way to respect both your own and other people's.

Reflection questions

1. Do the inventory! What exactly motivates you to be a punk and to make or maintain a social container?
2. How might that be different from what motivates your coworkers/business partners/employers?
3. Where is the overlap, where are the boundaries, and how am you going to respect them, for your own sanity and everyone else's?

Practice Seeing Social Containers, Part 2

POCA Tech

POCA Tech is also a social container created out of limited resources, and we have learned the hard way that students who can't see and appreciate the invisible labor that goes into maintaining the school tend to struggle with making, maintaining, and most importantly, *not wrecking* social containers after they graduate. It's very sad to see a graduate with excellent clinical skills have no place to use them because they don't have the attitudes and capacities to effectively work with social containers. And so part of the purpose of this workbook is to be very explicit about how to be in school at POCA Tech *as preparation* for how to be effective in a POCA clinic after graduation.

This is an excerpt from an email I wrote to a student who wanted very much for POCA Tech to take on some projects to improve the school:

If everything turns out the way we all hope, in a couple of years you'll be running your own successful POCA clinic. And if you're successful, you will attract people who see what you're doing and want to improve it. Here's an example based on something that happened with WCA a few years back: a patient approaches you and says, I love your clinic so much, I love coming here for treatment, there's just one little thing. I'm a single mom and childcare is really hard for me. Your waiting room is super nice and you know what would really make my life better, is if you would help me organize a child care co-op in your waiting room so that I and all the other single moms can get more treatment, more easily.

Noble goal, right? She goes on: you really won't have to do anything much. I'll write some grants to pay for everything. It would mean so much if you would support me in this way! And all the other single moms!

As it turns out after some research, though, you "not doing anything much" involves changing all your insurance policies and negotiating with your landlord to allow childcare on the premises. Your patient might want to write the grants, but because you have all the information that is required on the applications, it's basically the same amount of work as if you were doing it yourself. Your name is on everything, so you have to be involved in every step of this process. The energy you would spend on figuring out this very worthy project is energy that gets taken away from you doing the basic tasks of running your clinic, like bookkeeping and ordering supplies; when you're tired, your patient numbers go down and it can get harder and harder to cover basic overhead.

This scenario has 3 possible outcomes: 1) you explain to your patient that you're sorry but you just can't help her make a childcare co-op in your waiting room, because running a clinic in its most basic form is already a ton of work, and on her part, she

takes it well and figures out how to meet her own needs for childcare elsewhere; 2) you explain to your patient that you're sorry, you just can't, but she keeps pushing you and finally she flies into a rage and demands why you don't care about single mothers, you're supposed to be running a clinic *for the community* and how can you be such a hypocrite – which leaves you feeling demoralized and with less energy to take care of your other patients; 3) you bend over backwards to make this childcare co-op happen no matter what it costs you, and also the next beautiful improvement somebody brings to you, and then the next one, and in about a year your clinic closes because you've gotten so far off mission and away from the basics that you're exhausted and distracted and you're not attracting patients anymore.

This means that all the people who were happy with your clinic the way it was, who felt like it was a great resource for them to manage their health, the people who were maybe depending on you to provide them with the basics, now have no place to get acupuncture.

If you want to have a successful POCA clinic, you are going to have to say no to a lot of beautiful ideas and improvements and hang on to the basics for dear life, in the face of pressure and opposition. If you don't actually love the basics, you're going to be continually tempted to tinker with the clinic until you break it.

My concern right now is that you seem to have a lot of energy for beautiful ideas and you're not thinking through their impact on the basics. It's also my job to know this and to tell you: everyone in the faculty and the administration is working flat out, just to keep up with the basics of having a school. I know the same is true of many students, who are trying to balance being in school with work and family obligations. POCA Tech is right on the very edge of what someone can afford if they're working their way through school at close to minimum wage, and even then, it's grueling. In the same way, given the tuition that someone can afford if they're working their way through school, the school itself is right on the edge of being able to do everything it needs to do to keep its doors open, in its most basic and unimproved form.

I realize that in most schools it would be out of line for the director to say that the staff and faculty are overwhelmed and just barely keeping up. The thing is, though, if you all do what we hope you'll do after you graduate, a huge part of your job will be to be present with people who are overwhelmed and barely keeping up with the basics. Those are the people who this is all *for*. They're who you're here for, right? So think of dealing with us as practice for dealing with your future patient base.

Reflection questions

For students, making the best of a social container composed of limited resources is important practice not only for caring for a patient base with limited resources, but for being an entrepreneur, or working for them, after graduation.

1. Can you tolerate being at a school where resources are limited and many, many, many beautiful ideas aren't possible?
2. How are you going to use POCA Tech's (many) imperfections as a way to prepare yourself for working in an imperfect social container of your own?

More about POCA Tech's Social Container

What does it really take for us to have an affordable community acupuncture school so that POCA members can become licensed acupuncturists? Here's a breakdown of the relevant relationships, boundaries, resources, and systems.

The basic components of an acupuncture school are: a classroom and classes; a clinic and intern shifts; and a ~~bureaucracy~~ ahem, an administrative structure that is set up to meet the requirements of accreditation. POCA Tech is unusual among acupuncture schools in that the total cost of the program is relatively low (under \$25K) and it doesn't have its own school clinic but uses clinic facilities and staff donated by POCA clinics like WCA; these things are very much related. POCA Tech couldn't exist as a school without the contributions of WCA, and it's important to understand that *the same set of people* maintains both organizations. Let's look more closely at where everyone's time and energy goes and how much of it, proportionally, is needed to sustain each component of the school. In order of priority:

Clinic: 50%

WCA is, as acupuncture clinics go, a big machine, powered by its 60K+ treatments per year. It provides POCA Tech not only with clinic facilities and a big patient base, but with personnel who are capable of teaching community acupuncture both in the classroom and in the clinic. Without WCA, we wouldn't have enough qualified teachers, and our teachers wouldn't have practices that provided the majority of their income. WCA is also what motivates our teachers to keep teaching: POCA Tech provides the workforce that will sustain WCA after we all retire. WCA is the foundation, and without it, we wouldn't even try to have a school. Keeping WCA running also demands the greater part of our collective energy. We're very excited about the Away Clinics project because it brings more resources to this part of the school's social container.

We also believe that what students learn by working in clinic is, hands down, the most important part of their education, and so the clinic is the most important school resource.

Students can support this part of the social container by volunteering as receptionists, and by being serious and committed in their clinical internships.

Participating in this part of the social container is valuable for students because it's on-the-job training for working as a punk as well as running other clinic systems, like reception.

Administration: 30%

Next up in the queue of demands is the administrative structure that it takes to keep the school accredited. This is leaner than ACAOM probably thought possible until they saw it in action, and its leanness is a direct function of the school's sociocracy. This part of the social container includes everything related to the massive paper trail that's required to run an acupuncture school: financial systems, HR, records, Board governance, admissions, catalog, website, information management/document organization, program evaluation, etc., etc., etc. Some things that you might think are part of classroom teaching are actually part of the administration, like creating and managing the curriculum; we would do the curriculum very differently if it weren't for the demands of accreditation. But if we don't have this part, there's really no point in having anything else.

Students can support this part of the social container by participating in the sociocratic governance structure, and by being conscientious and responsible for their own paperwork (for example, clinic forms, payment plans, etc).

Participating in this part of the social container is valuable because this is where students can practice organizing, which involves skills that are crucial to running a clinic and managing community partnerships. It's also possible to learn some useful things about entrepreneurship here.

Classroom and Classroom Teaching: 20%

What makes a good punk is not a lot of facts, or theories; what makes a good punk is praxis. So what happens in the classroom is valuable, from our perspective, primarily in that it supports the learning that students do in the clinic, and also it prepares them to take the Board exams, which are a necessity for licensure in most places. The classroom is last on our list of energetic priorities. It's too bad that so many program hours are allotted to classroom teaching, but we don't have any choice in the matter (yes, we did ask). We're not primarily interested in *talking* to students about community acupuncture, but in making sure that they can DO it, and only a small part of the latter happens in the classroom.

Students can support this part of the social container by having realistic expectations of their teachers and by following the code of conduct for the classroom: be engaged, be responsible, be communicative, and be understanding. It's important to show teamwork and cooperation with classroom teachers because whoever they are, the majority of their energy has already been claimed by taking care of some other part of the social container (clinic or administration).

This distribution of resources reflects the Hierarchy of Needs (economic access is more

foundational than theory) but it can be very challenging for students who were attracted to acupuncture school primarily because they loved the theories of Chinese medicine. You could say that POCA Tech doesn't really want *students* (insofar as they're identified with being students). POCA Tech wants punks who are temporarily inconvenienced by their lack of training, experience, and an acupuncture license and who are motivated to fix those deficits as quickly and pragmatically as possible so they can get to work serving their communities. POCA Tech needs students to approach their education as a vehicle to get to punking, as opposed to a destination in its own right.

Reflection question

1. How easy it for you to keep your eyes on the horizon (preparing yourself for work after graduation) versus focusing on having an amazing acupuncture school experience for yourself as an educational consumer?

But What If I Really, Really Want to Change Something about POCA Tech?

Here's another excerpt from an email exchange with the same student:

If you want to involve yourself in something that affects the whole school, you really need to be attending General Circle meetings, because you need to know what's going on with the other circles and where the school is as a whole. The GC is the place where circles coordinate. The point of our educational goal, "provide opportunities for students to learn organizational management through the praxis of school and clinic operations" means that you understand the big picture, the limits and the requirements, of having an ACAOM-compliant institution (otherwise known as an institution that can qualify people for licensure). This particular game has lots and lots of rules. They're not the same rules that will govern your own future clinic, but there are enough similarities that it's valuable for you to understand what the school needs in order to run. It all comes down to organizing.

So I'd like to use this as a teachable moment about organizing. As you said, you're new at this. A basic organizing rule is that if you try to change something without understanding how it works and what it needs to function, you will 1) get nowhere, and 2) make people mad at you. Before you propose changes or new relationships, you need to do your homework.

If you want to propose a change that affects any Circle (Faculty, Admin, BOD) beyond your own, you need to bring a proposal, in writing, to the relevant Circle and/or to the GC as a whole.

A written proposal to the GC or any other Circle has to have these elements:

- 1) Who is the proposal coming from?
- 2) A short summary of the proposal?
- 3) Who will this proposal impact? (which Circles might be involved, etc)
- 4) What resources/capital does this proposal require? Spell it out (budget, people, responsibility, etc.). Who will this proposal create work for, and how much?
- 5) What's the timeline?
- 6) Why would we want to do this?

See also: Student Governance Manual ¹⁴

¹⁴ <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e5ISQhowcSi6pEzNgxb4Y3hAcotIuRcDYuLTxMnWtUw/edit>

Assignment

Write a Sample Proposal

Identify an imperfection of POCA Tech that bothers you and write a proposal to change it. If it looks like something that actually might be able to happen, consider officially submitting it to the relevant circle!

Occupy, Resist, Produce: Keynote 2011

Assignment: Occupy, Resist, Produce

Read the following blog post and write a 300 to 500-word reflection on how you feel about being a producer alongside other producers within the cooperative. What challenges do you foresee for yourself?

This is a unique time; the community acupuncture movement is in the process of shifting its foundation from CAN to POCA, from a 501c6 nonprofit to a cooperative. There's change happening at every level. We're only about five years old as an organization, and yet we've done a total overhaul already.

In the interests of exploring that change, I'd like to spend some time talking about producers and consumers.

In May 2010, some of us from WCA took a field trip and drove up I-5 to visit the Northwest Cooperative Development Center in Olympia to talk to the experts about cooperatives.

They had all these brochures about setting up co-ops published by the US Dept. of Agriculture and they gave them to us. The covers of the brochures all had illustrations of things like combines and tractors. I remember taking them and feeling kind of reverent. I thought, see, that's how you know things have gotten serious – when farm machinery is involved.

You can convey a lot with an image, even when it's just a line drawing of a tractor on a brochure. As you all know, I'm sort of obsessed with the images that the acupuncture profession uses to represent itself, so I'm going to talk about those for a while. I promise, I swear, this is not just egregious snark, I'm going somewhere with this – producers and consumers.

I've noticed, in looking at acupuncture websites, there is often a kind of template for how the acupuncturists describe themselves. In the “about us” section. For example.

“While seeking her own path, Jane Doe L.Ac. discovered the ancient art of Chinese medicine. She has traveled many times to Asia to study in various programs and found that these experiences greatly enriched her practice and her life. She is fascinated by energy work, qi gong, and the healing power of nature. She enjoys gardening, hiking, long walks on the beach, spending quality time with her family and friends, and quietly

contemplating the beauty of the natural world. She also devotes a great deal of time to her yoga and meditation practices. She embraces acupuncture as one of many paths to a rich and balanced life.” Especially for herself.

Seriously, is that what you would put on a resume? From the perspective of normal people – which is to say, not acupuncturists – what does any of this actually have to do with work? And don't get me started on the photos that usually accompany these bios. Like the text, they are often more suited to a dating website than a business. But there's a reason for this.

If the acupuncture profession had to make the kind of brochures that the Dept. of Agriculture does, instead of pictures of tractors, we would probably end up with lovely illustrations of reclining acupuncturists, gazing at the moon. Not doing acupuncture – just quietly contemplating its beauty and complexity. Dreaming about our lifestyles.

Because one of our big problems is that we acupuncturists are not producers, we are consumers.

Skip actually brought this up quite a while back, when we were talking about the issue of renting spaces for clinics. Ten years ago, when we found our big, cheap, ugly space, there were no other acupuncturists in our particular neighborhood in Portland – and if there had been, they would not have touched that building with a 10-foot pole. Ten years later, there are still no other acupuncturists in our particular neighborhood in Portland, although there are over 800 licensed acupuncturists in the Portland metro area. We have noticed that they tend to concentrate themselves in a few trendy, pretty areas – which of course does not and never will describe where we live. This kind of issue can also come up with community acupuncturists when they are looking for space: they often go for something too small and too expensive. Instead of looking for the biggest, cheapest space that they can find – something they could grow into over time, something that would allow them to reach the most underserved people – they gravitate towards what they think of as a desirable location. Which often means a place that someone else has already made desirable, and of course pretty. They are approaching the issue of finding space from the perspective of a consumer, not of a producer.

I've written about this before in a few different blog posts, and we've all talked about it periodically, but I think at this point in our collective evolution, it's really worth digging into – there are two main business models within acupuncture, and I'm not talking about the community model and the conventional model. I'm talking about the business of acupuncture, and the business of acupuncture education. Most of what we call “the

acupuncture profession” is really just an aspect of the business of acupuncture education. A lot of us think that being an acupuncturist means being a very serious, very committed consumer of acupuncture education. It's not really about doing it, it's about endlessly learning to do it, to the point that you don't know when you can stop learning and just get down to business with what you've got.

Often this looks like being a consumer of knowledge: going to seminars and workshops and classes, maybe even going back to school to get a DAOM degree. Because we never question that consuming more knowledge makes us better practitioners, right? I'm not saying learning new things is bad. I am saying that there is a noticeable emphasis among acupuncturists, and it's very uncritical, on the process of consuming and absorbing knowledge, and a very noticeable lack of emphasis on using whatever knowledge we have to help real live people. We tend to be passive rather than active. And like the template that you see in so many acupuncturists website bios, it's all about us and what we consume, the fascination of Chinese medicine and the fascinating lives we have, not on the results we can produce – such as relief from pain – for people who need those results.

One of the challenges you often hear to the community acupuncture model is that it doesn't allow for patient education. When you treat 6 or 8 people an hour, how can you talk to them about how acupuncture works? You can't, of course; you don't have time. You do have time, and you can listen to them tell you about how *acupuncture works for their lives and their bodies*. I'll get to why that's important a little later. But you can't give them lectures about the seasons and the elements and damp-producing foods. When I first started talking and writing about the model, that particular criticism was one that I heard all the time, and especially as a reason that there was no market for community acupuncture. People seek out alternative medicine, I heard, because they are drawn to learning about holistic concepts. They don't just want to experience acupuncture in silence and draw their own conclusions – that's ridiculous! – they want to hear their acupuncturist talk about it. I think there are some very interesting assumptions in there about who is coming to acupuncture and what they are coming for, and whether they have the luxury of learning an entirely new paradigm about how the universe works in the midst of also being in pain, but that's all I'll say about that for now.

There really are a lot of elements in the acupuncture profession that resemble multi-level marketing, and this idea of patient education is one of them. Many of us became acupuncturists because we were fascinated with the concepts of Chinese medicine, and we paid a lot of money to listen to people talk about them. Now it's our turn, and so we

go looking for people who will pay us to talk about those concepts, and we call that having a practice, and we like to think that we are in business for ourselves. But like all multi-level marketing schemes, the only people who truly benefit from this arrangement are the ones at the top of the pyramid; in the end, it's all their business, and we are still just the consumers, even if we have managed to create another level of consumers under us. The acupuncture schools are at the top of the pyramid, and everything else supports them.

You know what's interesting about this, is that acupuncture itself is poorly suited to this kind of multi-level marketing, and poorly suited to a consumer mentality, period. And that of course is what I love about it, what a lot of us love about it. Essentially, it's so simple: needles and cotton balls and stillness. It's so powerful, and when it works, you don't really know why. There's nothing flashy that you can grab and show off to the world; there's really nothing that you can sell. There's just a person sitting quietly with needles and finding relief from pain or stress or tension. There's not much there that you as a practitioner can claim – not if you're really honest – because the source of the power is inside the patient. The experience of healing belongs to them. How terribly inconvenient for capitalism.

It's been 20 years exactly since I started acupuncture school, and during that time, I've met an awful lot of acupuncturists who didn't really believe in acupuncture. And I think this is why. I've met even more acupuncture educators and acupuncture practice management gurus who didn't believe in acupuncture. I've heard over and over, if you want to be successful, you can't just do acupuncture. You have to give patients herbs. You have to give them counseling. You have to sell them supplements and scented candles. You can't make a living just doing acupuncture. The irony here of course is that successful acupuncturists who make a lot of money selling supplements and scented candles and doing lifestyle counseling didn't really need to go to acupuncture school. They could have skipped the whole thing and just gotten a really good inventory of supplements and scented candles.

I'm going to propose, that if you do a lot of acupuncture, or even if you get a lot of acupuncture – and if it's just acupuncture, not a kitchen sink full of dietary theory and scented candles and balance balls – it will actually ruin your ability to be a good consumer. It might even knock you right out of the pyramid. Because it will give you so much direct experience of healing itself, which can't be bought or sold.

A lot of patients describe how they feel when they get acupuncture as being centered. Feeling like themselves again. Even getting their lives back. This is actually the opposite

of being a consumer. When you're a consumer, you're reaching for something outside yourself. There is almost always something off balance, even desperate about it. Acupuncture cures that kind of imbalance. It allows you to drink from your own wellsprings. It allows you to be nurtured by your own energy.

And that makes our jobs as acupuncturists into something that is, ideally, simultaneously very humble and very sacred; very simple and very respectful. We do a lot of standing back and getting out of the way while people heal themselves. That position is not conducive either to being a consumer of acupuncture education, or to creating other consumers. We're not interested in showing off all the knowledge we have that patients don't have, in hopes of trying to sell it to them. We're interested in letting people discover their own experience of acupuncture, which is often the same thing as helping them have a deeper experience of themselves. Not of acupuncture theory; of themselves.

A lot of us went to acupuncture school because we bought, without knowing it, a fantasy. A fantasy about being a healer – and I know that the version I paid for did not involve images of me getting out of the way while my patients did all the really important stuff themselves. There are several school websites that suggest that being an acupuncturist, professionally, is about being an agent of transformation. They're sort of hazy about what that actually looks like; you wouldn't necessarily assume that it looks like shutting up and getting out of the way. A lot of us bought a fantasy about the kind of life we would have as an acupuncturist; we would have a great work-life balance, for instance. When we weren't being agents of transformation, we'd have lots of time for walks on the beach. Unfortunately, we didn't realize that we might have more time than we really wanted for walks on the beach because we wouldn't actually be working or making a living by doing acupuncture. We didn't realize that we were approaching acupuncture as if it were a kind of decoration, a kind of lifestyle accoutrement, rather than a genuinely demanding vocation. Getting out of the way, over and over and over, for lots of different kinds of people, demands discipline and patience and a certain kind of selflessness. It's work. It's not a pleasant fantasy about a personal lifestyle – it's work.

The truth is, healing doesn't look like much, and being a healer isn't glamorous. It's lots of things, but glamorous isn't one of them. I think those of us who really get into being acupuncturists, who treat lots of people over the long haul, do it because we know that it benefits us to cultivate that kind of discipline and patience and selflessness. It makes us better people, and we need to be better people. We stay in this job because we're the ones who need to be transformed. We are aware that consuming pleasant fantasies – or even consuming fascinating knowledge – isn't going to do it for us. To be transformed,

we need to do something. In fact, we need to do something over and over, and we need to do it for other people. We need to be useful. We need to work.

I'm going to stick with what I said earlier – you know things are serious when there's farm machinery involved. Our version of those drawings of tractors is Circle Community Acupuncture's line drawing of a recliner, which I am proud to see on the cover of our documentary. Recliners are our tools, and as such, they have beauty and dignity. (j/k) Becoming a producer gives you some dignity that being a consumer doesn't. Being a producer means being continually creative, and continually useful. It's hard, but it's hard in a good way; ask any farmer. Being a consumer can be fun for short bursts, but if you're committed to it as a lifestyle, it's pretty depressing. It's particularly depressing if what you're consuming is a fantasy; an artificial dream that someone else dreamed for you; a dream that was constructed for the purpose of making someone else some money. It takes energy and initiative to dream your own dreams, especially the kind that you can turn into reality by working on them. Being a consumer involves less effort, and plenty of other people will facilitate it for you. Being a producer takes some courage.

In 2001, the economy in Argentina basically collapsed. Many businesses went bankrupt or were shut down because they were no longer profitable, leaving their workers without jobs and without a means of supporting their families. And then something very interesting happened. They call it “the movement of recovered-companies”. Workers formed cooperatives and took over the abandoned factories in a desperate attempt to keep their jobs. And it worked. Apparently, it's still working. There are hundreds of factories that were abandoned by their owners that are now engaged in production again as cooperatives and are self-managed by their workers. The slogan of the recovered-companies movement was, “Occupy, Resist, Produce.”

One of the most common questions I get from people outside of the community acupuncture movement – and occasionally from people within it – is, “So where do you see this thing going?” They want to know if I expect that acupuncture schools will begin to teach community acupuncture, if I expect that more insurance companies will pay for acupuncture, if Western medicine will embrace us, if Walmart will set up community acupuncture clinics in its stores. (That particular Zang Fool blog is still hitting some nerves.) And often I don't know what to say. In part that's because I can't see the future any better than anybody else, and in part it's because it's really challenging, even if you spend a lot of time on it as I do, to fully get your head around the economic state of the acupuncture profession. But I keep trying, and I'd like to share my latest best guess.

My latest best guess is that we should think hard about that slogan from the recovered-

companies movement, maybe try it out for POCA. Occupy, resist, produce.

Awhile back, a very senior practitioner who is also a public figure in the acupuncture world wrote a blog post in which he wondered whether acupuncture would survive as a profession in America beyond this generation. He didn't give a lot of details, but he was alluding to the situation that everyone knows but most people don't want to talk about, which is the simultaneously high failure rate of acupuncturists and the skyrocketing tuition at acupuncture schools. Basically, it looks like not only the acupuncture profession, but the acupuncture education profession itself, is unsustainable. Right now, we are most likely experiencing a bubble. An acupuncture education bubble, in which tuition keeps expanding, and at least for some schools, enrollment expands as well. It expands and expands and expands. Right up until the moment that it pops.

I hate to be cynical, but sometimes from my perspective it looks like we have things like licensing laws and independent practice acts and state acupuncture associations only as window dressing for the real product, which is schooling. Most acupuncturists aren't producing anything, although we like to think that we are; we are really just the consumers in this scenario. And I hate to suggest that the people involved in the acupuncture establishment are anything less than scrupulous, but don't you think it's odd that they are not worried about the failure rates in the profession? Don't you think it's strange that we – this community – have emerged as a kind of collective professional gadfly, that we are always the ones bringing up the issue of sustainability? What do you think the odds are that the people in the acu-establishment, like the owners of the factories in Argentina, are going to abandon the whole mess when it is no longer convenient and profitable for them?

I want to propose to you that there's a lot of overlap between our situation and the situation that sparked the recovered-companies movement. In the case of the factory workers in Argentina, some things were a little more obvious: they had jobs and were getting paid, and then one day they weren't getting paid, they still had jobs but were owed back pay, and then the next day, the factory where they worked was shut down, and they didn't have jobs at all anymore. Most of us in this room never had jobs in the first place unless we created them for ourselves. But we did think that we had a profession. We went to the schools, and we sat for the tests, and we applied for the licenses, and we thought we had a profession. But from where we stand right now, we can see the hollowness of what we thought, at one time, was solid. Our profession doesn't have a padlock on the outside, like the factories in Argentina, it doesn't have a sign that says, "closed for business" but if we look carefully, we can see how it could empty itself out. We can see how, when it ceases to be a vehicle for extracting money

from unsuspecting students, it could just collapse altogether.

I have been thinking a lot about the Occupy Wall Street movement, and it's so encouraging, and I'm almost afraid to get my hopes up about it. But regardless of where that all goes, I think we need to think about what we occupy and how we occupy it. There are other places besides Wall Street that need to be occupied. Such as, our own creativity. That is one of the things you give up when you acquiesce to being just a consumer. You give up being able to create your world, and you settle for buying someone else's version. You give up your power and your imagination and your love, in return for a certain kind of validation and safety, maybe a certain kind of anesthesia. But when you're a producer, you need all of your power, all of your imagination, all of your love, because you are responsible for the process of creating. When you are a producer, you have to occupy your own creativity. You have to hold your own center. And that's where your dignity comes from.

The factory workers in Argentina demanded the right to be producers. They occupied the means of production, and they resisted any force that tried to take that away from them. What can we learn from them? The hollow shell that is our profession actually has tremendous potential. The parts of it that don't have any value for anyone else have value for us. This is our chance.

It has been hard for the acupuncture profession to define itself or to brand itself because, as I mentioned earlier, it's hard to sell acupuncture. The other day one of my patients was telling me about how she had learned about community acupuncture. A group of her friends was talking about acupuncture, they had all had it, and one of them was describing community acupuncture. One of her other friends said he would never want to be in a room with other people getting treated. My patient was laughing and saying that she wishes she could tell him that the thing about community acupuncture is that it's not like being in a room with other people, because actually, you're not there yourself. I thought that was funny, but it's also a good description of one of the paradoxes of an acupuncture treatment: it both returns you to your center, but it's also this incredibly charged, empty space. That charged empty space is what we have all been building our clinics and our clinic communities around, and it works great for that. But a charged empty space is not the easiest thing to market.

So what has happened, in the process of branding, is that acupuncture has been used as a kind of decorative adjunct to things that are more familiar, like the education industry, or the beauty industry. There's a lot of weird, problematic overlap between the beauty industry and the so-called alternative medicine industry in general, and the overlap

happens because of how the money flows. But it's no good when you start confusing health with beauty, or health with knowledge.

One of the things that happens to you as a community acupuncturist is that you end up spending a lot of time with people who are in very challenging circumstances, both with respect to their health and to everything else. Many of our patients with chronic conditions end up having to redefine what health is for themselves, and that definition is not something that is going to reconcile with the beauty industry's definition or the education industry's definition. The World Health Organization defines health as physical, mental and social wellbeing – and wellbeing can look a lot of different ways for a lot of different people. Health isn't about a number on a blood test or a number on a scale; it isn't about what you look like or whether you can meet somebody else's standards of physical or mental prowess. I would say, watching a lot of very brave, very gracious patients, that health is basically about your ability to love, to be connected to the people and the things that you want to be connected to, to live your own life in a way that is satisfying to you.

One of the main things people get out of acupuncture is a sense of wellbeing – we hear that all the time, and we hear it from people in all kinds of circumstances, including people who are dying. One of the things I love about POCA is that it includes patients, and that reflects the reality that patients are the ones who produce and create their own health. They are not passive consumers, they are active producers, and they produce a marvelous diversity of wellbeing. That's why it's such a great thing to listen to them describe what acupuncture does for them – because the answers are all different just like their lives are all different. When we listen to their answers, we affirm their creativity. Since we don't know how acupuncture works, we affirm the mystery.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and suggest that acupuncture is never going to be a big commercial success in the way that a lot of people hoped. They hoped, and so they tried to make it part of the beauty industry, and they tried to make it part of the education industry. I'm going to suggest that the purpose of acupuncture is not to make money, it's to make people well, however they define well. And so, to the people who have been using it as a decorative adjunct to the beauty industry and to the education industry, I'd like to suggest that it's not going to work for you in that way. And so would you please stop waving it around as a marketing gimmick, because we would like to actually use it.

If we are going to use it, we need to occupy, resist, and produce.

We need to occupy our own profession.

We need to resist consumerism. This can be harder than it sounds, because consumerism is often like a trance. You don't always realize when you're walking around entranced, as most acupuncturists are. Waking up is an ongoing process. I think we need to understand that we have been conditioned to be consumers, and that our default setting in how we approach most things is as consumers. Our default setting is passive rather than active, uncreative rather than creative; it takes some effort to shift that.

A lot of us find this out in our practices when we realize how active, creative and engaged we need to be in order to be successful; it's a shock. On some level we all thought that if we did what we were told to do, if we just hung up a shingle in the right place, patients would walk through our doors. We thought we could consume our practices rather than create them, and it's a painful wake-up call to find out it doesn't work that way. You have to give all of yourself, and you have to do that first; you can't wait to commit until you're sure that it's safe and patients will love you. You have to love first.

This also applies to POCA. Ask not what your co-op can do for you; ask what you can do for your co-op. A cooperative is pretty much the antithesis of consumerism. But plenty of co-ops have failed because their members have approached them with a consumer mentality, waiting for the co-op to give them what they want before they put anything of themselves into the co-op. I really believe that POCA has the potential to utterly transform our profession and to create a kind of collective security for all of us. Paradoxically of course, that isn't going to happen unless we collectively take the risk of investing ourselves and our resources first. If we hang back until we're sure it's safe, nothing good is going to happen here.

The recovered-companies movement has been going on for a decade now, but it's not that easy to find English-language updates. I did find one translation of an Argentine research study from 2009 that said, looking at how the recovered-companies were doing, a lot of them struggled with self-management. It's hard having that much responsibility, and it's hard to work together. Some of the self-managed companies struggled even more because the people who had marketable skills often left to work somewhere easier, somewhere they could just get a paycheck and sit back. And sometimes these were the people who had the management skills or the technical skills, which meant the co-ops were left without those things. The people who stayed in the recovered-companies, in the self-managing co-ops, were generally the ones who had nowhere else to go. Who had no other way to make a living. And so they had to make

their co-ops work.

I think that will be true of us. Community acupuncture is enormously demanding, all by itself. To build a new economic foundation for it by means of a cooperative is only for those of us who have nowhere else to go. Or who don't want to go anywhere else. It's for those of us who are desperate, or desperately in love with it and with our patients.

The primary thing that we need to produce, with POCA, is a new society for ourselves. Consumerism is isolating, and conventional acupuncture culture is especially isolating. One of the purposes of POCA is to give us a structure to really relate to each other – both socially and economically. But it's not there for us just to walk into; we need to build it.

Everything you'll hear this weekend is basically about how to be better producers within the context of a clinic – how to produce better clinical outcomes, how to produce more treatments by being more efficient in different ways, how to produce opportunities for patients to volunteer for the movement. And there are a lot of details involved, there's a lot to take in. But I hope as you move through all the breakout sessions and the presentations, you'll keep the big picture in the back of your mind. Our profession, the acupuncture profession, is basically standing empty and idle. It's not doing what it could be doing for society, it's not doing what people need it to do, whether they are patients and practitioners. We can change that. We need to change that. We need to occupy, resist, produce.

Writing by Other Punks about the Social Container

Jersey Rivers:

I Am Closing My Clinic

I'll be joining another community clinic just two miles down the road, as an employee. After more than six years, I am grieving my emotional attachment to this place. As is always the case with grieving, though, amidst all of the intangibles – the thoughts and feelings and memories - there are the THINGS that need to be handled. The STUFF. All of the contents of the clinic need to be cleared out. Every post-it-note and paperclip. All the recliners, the rolling stools, the boxes of tissues. I need to touch and re-home every physical item in the place. All the comforts: the cough drops and the blankets and the earplugs and the quilts covering the cold cinder-block walls painted chocolate-brown.

And my desk drawer, a snowstorm of reminder notes and thank-you notes and breath mints and dried-out highlighters. And the lost-and-found box: temporary home to essential things like cell phones and house keys and prescription glasses (people always come back for those); permanent resting place for the smaller accessories people shed as they prepare for treatment: folks literally and figuratively letting their hair down, leaving the plain brown elastics behind to keep company with the sassy-patterned reading glasses and the lone dangly silver-feather earring, the homework assignment – balled up, smoothed out, then folded impossibly small, and the sobriety coin that slipped out of a pocket, unnoticed.

My mind wanders to what else people have left behind here.

Many left their back pain, as those same 10 pins, five each in a hand and a leg, did their thing again. And again. And again.

Some left a layer of grief, as three pins placed evenly along the inner forearm, a pattern called Three Scholars, stood upright in parallel formation, bearing solemn, sagely, and silent witness to the cold autumnal rain of tears.

Skeptics left their disbelief, as a single pin placed in their palm near the pinky finger melted away that three-day migraine.

Caregivers left behind the relentless tidal pull of those they take care of day and night, clearing out, at least for this hour, an oasis for themselves.

Newbies left behind their first-time acupuncture jitters.

At least one person left behind her identity as “patient, fertility (frustrated)” She traded it for “parent, adoptive (joyful)”. Five pins, in a NADA constellation, whispering comfort into her ear, weekly, for months.

Everyone left their money, 15 and 20 bucks at a time: from hard-earned wages or a closely-managed monthly check.

Some left their hope for relief from whatever was tormenting them. Acupuncture was their last try before moving ahead into whatever mixture of resignation and acceptance would be their long-term home.

Others left their despair, as time, patience, repetition, and hundreds of pins created a shift in their glacially stubborn symptoms.

And many left, at least for a moment, their loneliness: resting peacefully in community, during a shared moment, a mutual recognition of the most basic truth of human suffering.

And me, what am I leaving behind as I empty this space? And is it more like housekeys or is it more like a hair tie? At times, it has felt raw, like bloody, torn chunks of the flesh of Ego and Id, ripped and strewn like carrion. I had completely identified with my clinic, like the whorls of my fingerprints were pinwheels. I would meet people around town and start talking, and they would light up and say “Oh! You’re Pinwheel!” and I would light up in response: “Yeah, that’s me. I’m Pinwheel.” My good reputation in town has fed me and fooled me... a hummingbird addicted to the colored sugar-water. What a boost of energy! But wait... I’m crashing... I need some more...

My identity as the founder and creator of the clinic was feeding an old, old weed of self-esteem, rooted in the relentless capitalist rubric: production + power = value. But the weed has proven to be very fragile, discredited by every single patient interaction. Every time I roll my stool up to a patient’s chair, I know just how much I am NOT in charge of what’s about to happen. How much it’s all them, and the pins, and the forces at play that are far, far, beyond my control. I do not have the power to produce results for patients. All the power is in the people. I am the fortunate and profoundly grateful witness.

So, I hope to leave behind a scaffolding of ego that has served me until now – the same one that will suffocate me if I don’t part ways with it. I leave behind “owner,” “founder,” “president,” and “sole practitioner” for “employee,” “punk,” and “team member.”

I'm also leaving behind the desk chair where I learned what depression feels like for me. It's heavy arms. Like some mixture of lead and clay that can't be lifted to the keyboard to respond to that email or produce that IRS report. That wouldn't sweep away the cobweb in the corner or go clean up the Big Gulp a neighbor left in my parking lot. The same ones that regularly couldn't be persuaded to check voicemail or post something worthy on Facebook or any of the thousand lonely things clinic owners need to do to keep their clinics busy.

I'm not expecting to leave behind the depression cycle itself. But I am hoping to find some peace, away from the demands I could no longer meet on a regular basis. Away from the self-judgment and criticism that came so easily, paired with a crushingly heavy suit-of-armor persona as all-competent, all-capable, solo practitioner and founder.

I want to leave the desk chair and hang out on a rolling stool. All the sad and broken, and all the soft and human and kind and playful parts of me, being light. Thanks to someone else who is willing to be the owner, I get to hang on to the privilege of rolling from chair to chair, sipping the true nectar of love and connection with the people under the pins.

Cait Cain:

On Beginning, Again - for new and old punks.

I'm finally writing a POCA blog - my name is Cait and I own Lincoln Acupuncture Project here in Lincoln, Nebraska. Some say adaptability is what keeps us alive, but it's also what keeps us engaged, expanding, growing and learning as individuals and, as a community. Being a CA punk is ALL about adaptability, it's crucial for success - being flexible, not getting unhinged with upgrades and changes to systems/ paperwork/websites/ schedulers, not letting erratic patient behavior change the steady, solid environment you, your clinic and co-workers have set up, dealing with and accepting revenue fluctuations and changing patient numbers and not freaking out when staff changes or your clinic has to find a new location, to name a few examples. (PS - I didn't say it was easy.) Change really is the only universal constant though and our willingness, ability to and success with adapting molds us into who we are, what we're made of and what we'll do.

Good news is we tend to adapt with more ease when we know ourselves which is another really important skill for a CA punk. The more we embrace, understand, accept and work with who we are - how we move in the world, why how and what we do, what both our strengths and weaknesses are, the less change bothers us. Once upon a time, WT said something like, "Vancouver was where you learned

about the world, Oakland is where you've learned how the world works and Nebraska is where you'll get to put it all together." Something like that. While leaving Oakland/SOAP was hard, it's not difficult for me to adapt - I like it, it's challenging and fun. Which helped because my Adaptation List included morphing from a punk employee part of a very successful 3 clinic location team of 10 to a solo punk clinic owner; exchanging the ocean for the prairie; leaving a blue state for a red one and being out of work for a super long time while I studied, re-licensed, searched for clinic space and, eventually, opened LAP 6 months ago. Amazingly, my partner and I are still together - we're both healthy, we have an excellent community of friends, family and neighbors and we even have a new cat friend. Crazy great, I love it here! Each day, Lincoln Acupuncture Project grows stronger, more supported and financially stable. And, in turn, I become that too. Here's some things I've learned so far:

1. I've always known that opening more successful CA clinics and having more skilled CA punk employees and owners working in those clinics is crucial to POCA's continued success. But I can't say I really knew HOW crucial. We have come a long, long way and there is so very much more to do. So many people don't have access to community acupuncture, and they ought to, they really ought to. It's a crime a mid-sized college town aka city like Lincoln, population 290,000 plus had 5 acupuncturists, none of which I could/can afford, before LAP arrived. This is a liberal city in a conservative state that thrives on family, community, agriculture (large and small) sports and beer. And everyone's got a health concern. Each time we, as POCA members, look at a US map with CA clinics on it and we feel so happy and thrilled that there are so many - stop and look at those huge swatches where finding affordable acupuncture is like finding a very thin 18 x 15 acupuncture needle in a warehouse of feather beds. We desperately need more CA clinics in places where they are not. And we need folks to own them and work in them and for them to be great at what they do.

That said...

2. Most people were shocked when I decided to move to Nebraska, they felt like I was moving to another planet - some people didn't even know where Nebraska is. Deep down, though, everyone supported me because I think they knew I'm built for this. It's true, if you're gonna leap out of your comfort zone and bring CA to a place that doesn't have it already, the stage is set for you. People will appreciate you showing up for them more than you could ever imagine and, believe me - I support you, I applaud you and I will do everything I can to help you. Do, however, study up on where you're going - land in a place where you have friends or family and, if you're going with a partner, make sure your relationship is as stable as the two of you can make it. I spent a year studying Lincoln and the state of Nebraska, which is where my partner's from. I followed

an entire Huskers football season before I even got here regardless of whether I cared about college football or not. Now, I can keep up with any die-hard Huskers fan which is actually important to having CA clinic here. I sent letters to a couple of Nebraska senators before I arrived too, about acupuncture legislation and then I talked about what I wrote and why to some LNK folks and they wrote letters also! That immediately got everyone interested in and directly involved with LAP and CA, which was super important. And while people knew Mollie and I were moving here and they knew CA was coming to town, I built on that as much as I could when I was in Oakland which made the clinic come together a lot faster with tons of community support and energy.

Lastly,

3. The gratitude, respect and love I have for my SOAP family is immeasurable. I became a superpunk in Oakland cause I was surrounded by them every day. I got taught by example and I was taught really, really well. Observing other successful punks, working side by side with them, following their careers, knowing their stories, asking them questions, taking in whatever guidance and wisdom they have time to give is, along with knowing who you are, so important to your punk success. I'm so glad I became involved in POCA when I did, I'm thrilled I've gotten to attend so many POCAfests and I did the right thing by joining circles, teaching, keeping up with threads and mentoring others both in POCA and POCA Tech. All of it has been so very helpful. Thank you everyone - I would not be the punk I am now without all the mentoring I've had and continue to have. Our POCAverse has a terrific sample of owners who have become employees and employees who have become owners and even owners who became employees who then became owners again. LAP succeeds because of all those before it. It also sustains itself, out here in the Dry Zone because of what we have done and continue to do together. Stay tuned for more.

Michael Kalebich

Worst Job In POCA Series:

First Day of October Membership Drive!!! Woووو!!!!

Hello, all you POCA-People out there in POCA-Land! If you're reading this, it means that we're all in the process of experiencing the absolute JOY of a MEMBERSHIP DRIVE!

YESSS!!!!

So, why I'm coming to you here on the blog with the rah-RAH that I usually save for the daily numbers posts, is because I've got some EXTRA special Membership Drive content for all of you FABULOUS lovelies! How would you like to hear my

STORY of what was quite possibly the WORST job in POCA? Would you like to hear a story of watching a clinic-entity DIE, and of how *I* had to help sort and bury its BONES?!

WELL?!?!?!?

"Gee, Mike, I dunno...That's kind of a stark shift in tone for a Membership Drive, isn't it?"

Well, you see, there's two things to this. One, the theme of this 'Drive is "Don't Stop Believin'", and I do feel that there is some of that in what I experienced at the Worst Job in POCA/CA. I don't necessarily think it's the way most people might imagine, though.

The other thing is something correctly pointed out by someone at the most recent POCAFest (<3 all the Canadian punks and POCA People SOOO MUCH <3). Having had the first-hand experience of what exactly it looks like when someone deliberately goes out of their way to travel the exact opposite direction of where POCA's basic principles of community-acupuncture are trying to send them, means I do have a bit of a unique perspective on said principles. "Proof by Contrapositive" n' such. And so, yeah, there's probably something there for people who may be still trying to wrap their head around what all this POCA/CA stuff is supposed to really look like, not simply mean (wasn't there a book put out recently about how theory and Praxis relate when it comes to punking? Too lazy to Google that at this exact moment...)

But, really, there's a third thing, too.

The third thing is that, I've been thinking about how to do this for a while. I got out of TWJIP/CA on 02 July 2017, and I definitely had a sense of there being some "content" to be had. However, the reason I've mostly only talked about it here-and-there with people is because I do have a real sense of wanting to get this *right*. Especially since said clinic is no longer, and so unavoidably I would be providing at least some semblance of "last word" with regards to it, and the clinic was much, much more than just what happened while I was there.

Oh yeah, SPOILER: the clinic has since been closed down. No surprise to anyone who knew about what was going on in the end, of course.

For almost five years before I got there, this clinic was a real resource for its community. It was a wonderfully cozy space, full of excellent patients, AMAZING volunteers, and punks who were plugged into the mission of POCA; the phenomenal Fractal was in full-effect. The clinic wasn't this one-off, "outlier"

operation that was always skirting the edges of “viability”. People who cared about the mission of POCA had built it, and the community it served embraced it back sincerely, and really helped in the continual process of the clinic’s care and feeding. Most of the history of this clinic was a lot better than what it ended up being, and I don’t want that to be lost.

Even after everything started to go sideways (and well beyond into some truly non-Euclidian territory), that community was still there trying to support it, and even supported me when I had become the only employee left that still gave a damn about helping people with acupuncture; as opposed to selling them a “lifestyle”.

The experiences I had at this clinic, which is to say the experiences I had with the community of people who were a part of its greater history, very much made me the punk I am today (working now at a much, MUCH better clinic at FSPA Community Acupuncture in Wisconsin). I feel like that if I inadvertently reduce my first clinic’s memory to something that makes people just roll their eyes, or a punch-line, or a cold, detached case-study of Exactly What Not To Do, and How Not To Do It, then I would erase the vibrant community that was behind it in the process. After everything else that happened, I didn’t feel like adding more insult to injury, to say the least.

So, I’m gonna try my DARNDEST not to. Yeah, this is going to be an at times truly wacky detail of Just How Bad Things Can Get, in addition to what at times felt like a heart-wrenching experience of watching a varied community of people lose, inch by inch, a valuable healthcare resource. The circumstances of its passing should be mourned, of course, but its greater life and the way it touched so many people’s lives should in at least equal measure be celebrated.

Now you may have noticed by this point that I have not yet mentioned the specific name of said clinic. To which, I can only say.

You’ve been paying attention, 10 points to Ravenclaw!

But honestly, the reason why said job I had at said clinic was TWJIP/CA was because my boss was AWFUL. Just, AAAWWWWFFFUUULLL. And, before taking the reins at this clinic, 1) had a legal background, 2) was and likely still is exceptionally vindictive and petty, and 3) liked to stalk people who upset them. Further, the decisions they made were at times both cartoonish and seriously bad stuff, and I don’t even want to begin the risk of what they did somehow mistakenly becoming attributed to the good people who ran the clinic before my boss got there. If knowing exactly where this happened really matters to you, message me privately and I’ll be happy to tell you where.

I'd sincerely appreciate that people not immediately post where this was in the comments on any of the public-facing places on POCA, and that includes the POCA Members Facebook page. This isn't part of the "bit", I really am asking you to do me this favor right now. Thanks, I appreciate it.

(And, in case *you* happen to be reading this right now, I want to take this serious moment to create a special message JUST for you...

I want you to know in your heart-of-hearts, right down to your core, that I wanted to be MUCH nastier during that last phone call, but I was too tired and frazzled to do so. Not because of the eight-hour drive ahead of me, either, but because that's often the state people find themselves in after having to work for abusive narcissists for a year and a half. I hope you enjoyed yet another unearned free-pass.

I want you to know that I'm living SO well now, and I'm starting to regularly pull off 80+ treatments a week, even accounting for the usual kind of cancellations and people forgetting they had appointments.

I guess that friend of yours wasn't so "psychic" after all, huh?)

So, I've definitely teased all of the rest of you cruelly enough by this point, so with all that aside, let's start this off and get all the way down to the nittiest of gritties....

Part 2 in the Saga of WJIP/CA...

Hello again, everyone, and thanks for stopping by!

This time I ABSOLUTELY promise to give you much more of the details you have been EVER so patient for! We're going to start at the beginning, of how I got started at the Worst Job In POCA/CA.

Sometime in the afternoon during October 2015, I sat in my car having a phone call. I remember that it was the kind of cool day that happens as Summer becomes fall, because, as I tend to, not long into the phone call I got up out of my car and started walking around the house I was staying at. I'm a bit of a pace-er overall on the phone but was especially nervous about this one in particular. The phone call was an interview for a job at a POCA clinic in the Midwest, and while still at the level of introductions, the person I was interviewing with (who would become my new boss at the WJIP/CA) talked about how their big plan in mind for the clinic was to turn it into a "Multidisciplinary Wellness Center!"

...

Yeah, that phone call sucked.

But I wanted to get that job, and so I swallowed my gag-reflex and interviewed to the best of my ability. I did well enough that they wanted to follow up soon with

an in-person interview at the clinic, and by the time that was over I'd accepted the job. During the eight-hour car ride home as I drove down long stretches of road through the middle of the night through and about two states, I played "Stayin' Alive" on repeat, largely in an effort to keep myself from tumbling too deeply into a yawning depression that I felt creeping up to me as my mind started to process what I'd may have just gotten myself into.

Now, you may be asking, "Well, if you knew from the start it was going to be such an awful experience, why'd you do it? Why not just find somewhere else to go?" and, to that I can only thank you for asking the PERFECT question! Because, you see, that's not *really* where it all started for me and the WJIP/CA. Yes, that was *technically* when my association with the clinic started, but it doesn't really cover it adequately. Where it all *really* started was back in acupuncture school.

Acupuncture school (or, as I prefer, ack-skool) was a time in my life full of suffering and pain. For one, I almost died before the end of my first semester from a severe anemic event. The reason was because I'm American, and so therefore had really sketchy healthcare during my twenties, and subsequently hadn't been going to the doctor when I should have been. Halfway through my first semester at acupuncture school, I went to the hospital for what I thought was a cold that wasn't responding to antibiotics, but actually LOL NOPE you need to figure out your power-of-attorney now, Mr. Twenty-Three year-old because you have, like, NO blood left in you at this point!

Needless to say, I didn't die, but things didn't improve that much. I was able to get back in shape blood-count wise, but my health was still pretty poor, and I still didn't have the cash to keep following up with my doctors like I should have been. I have Crohn's disease, and that can be a challenging diagnosis by virtue of the fact that Crohn's is localized in the GI tract but can affect other places in the body in other ways by virtue of being an auto-immune condition. My legs were awfully swollen almost all of the time, I literally had to walk around at ack-skool with a cane for a while after I tried to pick things back up again the semester following the hospitalization. The pain was literally indescribable, and for a solid year during the worst of it I barely walked without a limp. On top of the health-issues, I had about five addresses total for the duration of the three-and-a-half years I spent at acupuncture school, and obviously this all I meant I wasn't able to work. This was of course WELL in addition to the usual "eccentricities" people have to deal with ack-skool, so it was all just BARRELS of fun, let me tell ya'...

I could keep going, but that's a story that has been told at greater length already by much more talented individuals than myself. And, there is only one really, really important detail in all of this that I need you to understand in order to

wrap this back in to the WJIP/CA; and the reason I sucked it up through a sucky interview.

There was just one, singular reason I stuck out acupuncture school and board-exams all the way through, one only: POCA. And, the idea that one day I could get to punk (not "practice", "punk") at a POCA clinic that was dedicated to the mission of getting acupuncture to as many people who could use it as possible. That was the only lifeline that could stand up to all of the pain, all of the craziness, all of the loading-unloading-reloading all of my handful of possessions into and out of my car again and again that I did while in acupuncture school. That was the only thing could make it all something bearable. It was about a six-hour round-trip drive up to my school in Chicago from the suburbs where I lived (which I made every time I went to class for all but about five months of said three-and-a-half years total). Especially towards the end (I discovered POCA initially about halfway through my program), all that sustained me during my painful, burnt-out rides back home was my MP3 player and dreaming of what it'd be like spending whatever time I might have left by then treating lots, and Lots, and LOTS of ordinary people. (*SPOILER- the job I have now was definitely worth all of it.)

But, just having a hard run of acupuncture school wasn't the only reason I was willing to hold my nose and leap into what I knew would be a "temporary" position. By now, I think you can understand what I really, really wanted upon graduating, and just *maybe* a few of you can guess what I encountered out there in The Real World when I tried to get it-

...

Got an idea yet?

That's right, it was ACUPUNCTURE LICENSE REGULATIONS!!!!

And, the fact that each state is practically its own feudal-realm when it comes to them; especially on the coasts (which have at least a couple of clinics on them). As I was getting close to graduation, I'd been volunteering for just about a year-ish in Membership Circle and was getting ready to head out to POCAFest 2015 in Rhode Island. Just before, in anticipation of meeting clinic owners there who may or may not be looking to hire people, I sent out some emails and looked into state regs as to where I could work. I started with the "Jobs Posting" section of the website, and one by one just about every prospect that might seem to have existed turned out to be states I couldn't work in. I actually had to TURN DOWN a job offer or two from reputable BDCs. When I actually got to POCAFest, one person seemed so excited to have found what could be a decent possible hire I could've swore they were going to throw me in their trunk before I could leave. (In an effort to allay concerns for a moment that I might have crawled completely

up my own ass here, I want to emphasize that 2015 was a time when POCA Tech was very much still new and a bit uncertain in places. I think the first cohort had started only briefly before RI 2015 POCAFest, and so possible decent acupuncturists who were already installed in the culture and work of POCA perhaps had a bit more "sheen" at that time.)

So, yeah, upon graduating ack-skool with six months (and counting!) before student-loan payments were to start, in yet another unstable living situation that the fuse was running out on, and no work history for the past four years because my health was so screwed up, and an absolutely hell-bent desire to somehow find a way some-HOW to a good POCA clinic, you had better believe that I was ready to beg, borrow, and steal to get the CA experience I thought I needed. Now, yes, of course I tried sending some applications out to more Midwestern clinics. Again though, there aren't quite as many clinics in those parts, and by extension, not as many BDCs. Given the somewhat "Strict Time-Table" I was working with, and given the fact that the three months I spent beforehand of my "grace period" before loan payback would start chasing what felt like red-herrings was making me feel EXTRA stupid, yeah, I heard of an opportunity in a state I could work in that was close enough to grab onto and went for it. I could have MAYBE tried to find a way to stick a bit longer at looking for other clinics in states I could actually work in that might be hiring, but again, again, time didn't seem to be on side for a couple of reasons.

That's the reason why I pushed forward despite within seconds of the first phone call with my soon-to-be new boss knowing that the job was NOT what I wanted. But, there's something else to this tangent-bordering-on-sequel that I just coughed up. When I start getting into the weird stuff (and TRUST me, it's gonna get pretty David-Fucking-Lynch up in this Motherfucker), I want you to keep in mind everything I've just said here. I want you to have this close by and easily referenceable. Because when the barn finally does start to roast and you might ask yourself, "Really, really? REALLY?!?!", and you'll wonder why it is that this dweeb stayed (other than the fact that I was stuck in a lease with my apartment), and why he didn't stand up for himself/the clinic/the patients/Reason, or otherwise try to "Do More", I want you to remember this part. Also, we're going to re-visit it at the end, and it's going to make clearer why this sprawling mess actually DOES highlight the theme of this drive. Why it is, ultimately, about Continuing To Believe.

The other song that I was really feeling following that long car-ride home back to Illinois after my in-person interview, was one I'd been listening to a lot by Golden Earring, with the line,

"Where am I to go \ now that I've gone too far?"

Well, I think it's time we start getting into what exactly too-far was...

Part 3- "Look too close and you might see the stitches."

"Okay, Mike, the "bit" is wearing pretty thin at this point, and you're really not *that* funny or talented enough to begin with to really keep that up, anyways. So where is this great "Weird Tale" of the worst- job-at-some-and-such you keep talking about?"

Hey now, no worries! No-PROBLEM, I see you! I see how AWESOME you are and AWESOME you've been, and without any further ado, I am now going to begin recounting, in full, the story of all the at-times Kafkaesque garbage I had to put up with at the WJIP/CA. But first,

"..."

Hold on, hold on! I've talked about how *I* got to said clinic, but I feel I should explain a couple other important details. Namely, who left some rando who wanted to build "Floatation Services" into an otherwise capable community acupuncture-clinic in charge? Well...

The clinic was initially started about five years before I had gotten there by someone very plugged into the spirit of POCA, and what then I assume would likely have been called CAN (Community Acupuncture Network, if you hadn't heard). They ran the clinic pretty successfully, and they were able to hire a dedicated front-desk person, in addition to another punk. After about four years, life had happened to this person, and they decided to sell the clinic and move to where life was demanding them. They were lucky enough to find someone also grounded in POCA/CA to buy it, and they picked it up from there.

I want to take a brief moment and emphasize that this is merely and only *my* understanding of what happened, and for my purposes here in this brief description, I feel that's enough. However, I'd be a fool if I didn't say that I might not get everything 100% accurate, especially when I'm intentionally trying to be oblique for reasons already discussed. So, be aware of that. Also, more importantly, I want to be clear that I don't want to inadvertently paint the person who started the clinic as anything less than damn decent. I don't want them to come off as someone negligent or "uncommitted", "abandoning" anything to "future ruin". Based on what I learned about them from the patients I treated at the clinic in those early days, and the reputation this person had among them, I would never conclude anything less than a sterling report of their character. I never met them (and I wish I had been able to), but I will absolutely stand by that. Life will happen, regardless of literally anything else. That's it, I don't see any real reason to further qualify that.

The person who the clinic was sold to by the founder came down with a cancer diagnosis not too long after they started up at the clinic. I know based on what people who were there told me about it primarily, and what I was told was that while this 2nd owner definitely spent time punking and running the shop, things progressed pretty quickly for them. By the time I got there, they were alive while I was interviewing, and had passed more than a month before I had gotten there (I started interviewing in the middle of October 2015 and moved January 2016). All total, there wasn't very much time from when they were diagnosed to their passing. Who would become my boss at the clinic came in after no one was really able to find anyone else to take over the clinic? After it became apparent that ownership of the clinic was going to have to change again, everyone involved gave it a pretty extensive effort, but no one else really found. This isn't necessarily a surprise, of course. I mean, close your eyes for a moment and imagine the kind of person who would agree to buy and run a small "alternative" health-clinic under sudden, unfortunate circumstances. Now imagine how you would explain what a CA clinic is to this person in such a way that would appeal to their sensibilities; keeping in mind it's likely a 50/50 shot if they've ever even HAD acupuncture anywhere at all before you started talking to them. And, of course, the owner-before-my-boss was running on a bit of a time-frame, and definitely had things they needed to get done (to put things VERY, VERY lightly). It wasn't an ideal situation to have the person who would become my boss (Hm, I realize here that I'm going to need to come up with a name for them. How about, "DA"? Yes, I think that'll work!(more on why those letters later)), but they were able to pay the asking price for the clinic, and they did have(at that specific moment in time) a good relationship to a more long-time clinic volunteer(DA was the volunteer's partner(more might come up about that later)).

The point is, it wasn't some "accident" or gross mis-judgment of character. It was conscientious people working around quite a bit of unfortunate circumstance and running into a non-inconceivable wall. In that void, a volunteer who was friends with the person who was the owner of the clinic brought in DA; it was rough, but it wasn't random, and was in response to some trying circumstance. And, that's basically how we get to where I come into all of this. Like I said, the owner before DA (By the way, this is not in any way an "acronym" for their name, their real name doesn't even possess any of those letters. More on this in a while.) passed while I was interviewing, and I was interviewing specifically because DA was obviously in need of another full-time punk. When I got there, the first punk hired by the original owner was filling about three five-or-six hour shifts but wasn't in a place to want to go full-time (for VERY good reasons I would learn). There was a fill-in punk before that who was covering a couple extra shifts on top of that for a while after the before-DA owner(I'm going to call them the "2nd Owner", since after all, they were chronologically the 2nd owner of the clinic), but I was told by DA that they were let go after a dispute. DA had told me this fill-in

punk was initially interested in becoming the full-time punk, but then all-at-once changed their mind and repulsed DA (when DA told me what they believed happened more fully at one point over lunch, they started to get so wound-up that their partner had to put their hand on their shoulder to calm DA back down again. Kind of like how an adult handles a child who is becoming grumpy about not having gotten their way. Early "Red Flags" is what I'm trying to say.) Hence, more specifically where my "job" came in.

And, that pretty much brings us up to speed with where everything "started" from. I moved to where the clinic was from Illinois on January 15th, 2016. For a brief few days prior to my first shift, just having an "opportunity", no matter what it was, felt like progress. After all of the insanity of acupuncture school, and the demoralizing reality-check of how difficult it can be to navigate the "structure" of the "acupuncture profession", I got some "quiet" for a few days after I'd moved. Little did I know for how long that was supposed to last.

Now, like I said about a thousand-or-so words ago, I didn't exactly go into this without doubts. There was absolutely a palpable tension as DA interacted with people who had been with the clinic for a while. I didn't know the exact details(yet), but I was already pinned at least a bit between my own rock-and-a-hard-place; so, yeah, I was trying to make the best of it and give DA the benefit of the doubt. Even when he told me that he was planning to move the clinic(okay, sure, rent was kind of high), and expand the "alternative therapy" options(I mean, the clinic had massage therapists for a while who did some adjunct stuff, so it's not like that could be TOO bad), and add sensory-deprivation tanks (ummmm...wah?), a Far- Infrared Sauna(...because why not try/fail as hard as you can?), and Heating Pads That Cost Around \$800 A Piece By Virtue Of Having An Unnecessary Amount of Crystals In Them(...)

But again, I was trying my best to give DA the benefit of the doubt. I mean, they had so much Business Experience (SPOILER- But, not around actually RUNNING a business (at all, even remotely)), and did seem for a while to be into keeping the clinic around for patients. And, the palpable tension I was feeling likely was what contributed to me showing up early on my 2nd day at work, and leaving the door unlocked for about 30 minutes (WHOOOPS!) after leaving to briefly get something from my apartment. I mean, yeah, they chewed me out pretty hard for that, but I mean, I did fuck up pretty hard. And, the next day, when the other punk who I was training with couldn't make it in to work and subsequently meant I would be flying solo, DA called me before my shift and seemed to be pretty moved on from what I did the day before. So hey, maybe they weren't so bad after all! Maybe I just needed to be patient, work hard, stay sharp, and I could turn these lemons into some top-dollar lemonade! That feeling of nervous scattered-ness these last couple paragraphs probably convey was about

the feeling I had for that first month and a half. I knew something was up, I just didn't know what yet, and honestly, there was enough with just figuring out the basics (from DA's point-of-view, admittedly) and training for my first CA job to really dive into it.

Now, there was one bright spot in these very-early-stages that I want to take a moment to talk about. When things got bad, I would come back to what I felt and experienced then to remind me why I was doing what I was doing, and what Could Be. The 2nd owner was involved with and had friends in POCA, and one of them had volunteered to become DA's "Mentor" in running the clinic. In DA's mind, it would be a good "training experience" for me to go and spend some time observing at their clinic, even though it was a few states over. I headed out near the end of January/beginning of February to "train/observe" at DA's mentor's clinic.

I got there a day before DA did, as they and their partner were taking the long way to check out "Float Centers"(this was a major feature of this phase of things, DA doing what they could to get as much experience as they could checking out floatation-tank centers so as to not mess that up when they got to the point of opening that service at the clinic. They mentioned traveling to check out other CA clinics once or twice, I think.) I'm obviously very grateful, because it gave me a chance to experience the feeling of being in a functional, efficient clinic that was solely directed at helping get acupuncture to as many patients as it could; without getting caught in any Looming Darkness at the same time.

DA's mentor's (ack, this is getting on my nerves. Assume "Mentor"= DA's mentor) clinic was excellent, which was no surprise given the reputation they had in POCA. It was a big space in a larger building which was a mix of different offices and shops, and what struck me was how seamless everything and everyone involved, patients or otherwise, moved through it. Despite how large an operation it was with at least five punks total and around four front-desk people, the heartbeat of the clinic was totally focused on taking care of patients and preserving the structures in place for that. It's obviously hard to talk about a clinic when you're trying to be really indirect at the same time. But this sticks out in my mind because, barely a month into a new job "back home" which was full of uncertainty (and more than a couple of red-flags), getting another chance to really be in the space of an entity which wasn't all over the place felt important. It was a reminder of what I was ACTUALLY in all of this for, WHY I was doing what I was doing.

At the time, it felt like it gave me some hope to hold on to that maybe, just maybe, there was still a chance back at what was then becoming "my" clinic. Some chance that maybe, even if I couldn't all-the-way change DA's mind, I could preserve at

least some of that carefully-cultivated "space" for people who needed it. (Obviously, that didn't pan out. Likely, it was just my mind trying to find something, anything firm enough to really hold on to amid all the Fear n' such) Mentor was also very kind, as were their punks, and I think they understood the situation I (and the clinic) was in (One of Mentor's punks actually said to me when no one was around, "Why not just finish observing and then come work here instead?"). I never got the impression Mentor was enthusiastically signing off on all of these dumb ideas DA was coming up with, but like other people I'd met, was trying their best to at least keep the clinic alive long enough that just maybe it could have a shot at some kind of "recovery". I lost touch with Mentor about as soon as I'd met them, unfortunately. Obviously, as things started to really Go Down (which was in full-swing by the end of that April), confiding in them didn't feel like a great move. Again, Mentor seemed a bit uncomfortable about things, and putting them in the middle between DA and myself felt like an unkind thing to do. Still, much later on when things would get rough, the experience I had of their clinic and their people would hold me up. I don't mean to gush or make too much of this, but it was those small, but bright, moments that kept me going later when things got very, very dark. A lot of good people that I met throughout that helped me make it through via small things I never got to say "Thanks" for, and I wish I could have. It's easy to admit how dark things got at points, and much harder to admit how much I wanted to just throw in the towel on this whole CA/POCA experiment in those times.

During very lonely moments, clinics with real punk jobs that weren't *weird* and conditional seemed to only exist in states where I couldn't work. The idea of pushing through what I was dealing with for what felt like was only going to be the privilege of getting to do it all again was a wide, deep chasm that felt myself at the edges of. The small moments of kindness I received from different people while out there at what was becoming DA's clinic were what helped pull me keep me from going any further. Given where I'm fortunate enough to be at now, I really appreciate that. So, thanks, Mentor. And, thanks to all of the other people who helped provide hope, I'll do my absolute best to remember you.

If this reads scattered, well, that's what I, things happening around the clinic, and the clinic itself was at that time. There was a real sense of foreboding as big, demonstratable changes were either happening or in-process, and the slightly better affect I had driving back from Mentor's clinic didn't obviously wasn't enough to physically change that reality.

Everything felt tenuous to those of us who were not as keen to the more specific details happening behind the curtain. I felt it, some of the volunteers felt it, and the patients definitely felt it. It was a fear of what was coming, because something *was* coming. It was likely going to be bad, and there was no way to tell exactly how bad, and in what ways it would be bad. All amidst the kind of scattered way

DA was slowly revealing their plans for what was becoming their clinic.

Graciously or not, we would not have to wait too much longer to discover what the dawn was about to bring us.....

Part 4, "April to November"

Ay! How's everyone doing? I hope well, of course. Let's FINALLY get down to some juicy bits!

So, picking up where we left off, I had made it to the clinic in early January, spent some time training in another clinic by late January, and had gotten back. I'd like to take some time to bring up what was, at this time, DA's official plan, circa my getting back from where I trained. This might seem a bit banal, but I just want to try and point something out.

So, starting February, the plan was-

*Start advertising/getting some more word for the CA the clinic ostensibly still doing, especially in light of a new punk and a new schedule(DA jumped the schedule from about eighteen hours total across three days before I went out to train, to about forty hours total, seven days a week(and, yes, they did at one point vocalize how "weird it was" that the numbers seemed to dip and stagnate all at once shortly after; gratefully they never directly blamed me for it.))

*Get to work on a space which could accommodate CA, float-tanks, sauna, and reception for all of this, via a new build-out, which I was told should be worked out by the end of April (SPOILERS: lol)

*Until the move that should be happening around the end of April to the new space, the prices for CA was to stay where they were, \$15-\$35, *possibly* going up to \$20-\$40

Okay, just wanted to note all of that. So, moving onward...

Like I've already alluded to, things were SLOW for most of February and into March. At this time, I still believed that more was possible in terms of turning things around than actually was possible, and I spent a lot of that time trying to solve that puzzle while reading through the Mighty CA Wiki searching for possible answers.

I didn't find any, of course, but I did learn a LOT about punking and POCA (seriously, "three cheers!" now and always Mighty CA Wiki), and that was pretty cool. DA only intermittently popped by the shop to look busy and fuss with old files, and occasionally ask me and the other punk there at the time what would be needed for the "CA" portion of the Frankenstein's Monster of a clinic they were developing. That really gave me the space to stay more focused on learning this new skill called "punking". Didn't last forever, but I got to meet a lot of patients, and the volunteers who had been helping at the clinic, and that was nice.

At this moment, I'd like to take a moment to talk about the other punk that was there at this time. Assume OP, Other-Punk, is referring to them.

They had been at the clinic for close to more than four years by the time I'd gotten there, they were the first and only real punk hire at the clinic prior to my arrival. Meaning, they were eminently capable, and plugged into everything going on, and weren't very much at all a fan of DA. I had sensed pretty early some tension between OP and DA, but didn't have the specifics, and in the initial stages of things, basically just tried not to think about it. It's not that I ever thought they were just being "ornery" because new things, but in general, if something doesn't directly deal with me, and I'm not necessarily in a position where I "need" to know something about it to perform the basics of my job, I tend not to want to pry. And, you know, "Looming Darkneses" n' such.

Since I can't think of a more clever transition to the part where OP did finally lay out all of the weird shit happening behind the scenes, let's just transition right to the part where (by about sometime mid- March/early-April) they laid out all of the Weird Shit happening behind the scenes-

For starters, OP said that DA literally just appeared at a staff meeting one day; no warning, no email, no "heads-up" from their envoy to the clinic (which was their partner who was also a massage therapist at the clinic, and a friend of the 2nd Owner). Just real all of a sudden. I mean, yeah, 2nd Owner's health was getting pretty rough, and things were happening fast, but still. The meeting was basically, "I bought your clinic, and am your new boss now."

Shortly thereafter, DA fired the paid front-desk staff arbitrarily after taking over, obviously doing their best to start things off on the Right Foot (FYI, DA originally appeared and started doing all of this stuff around six months before I got there in January 2016, so I never met this person/wasn't here for it all.) I mean, I guess the *reason* was because said paid front desk staff was Latinx or Hispanic, and DA wasn't sure if subsequently they would have been completely "legal"(which is TOTALLY an easy mistake to make as a white person(if you also happen to be FUCKING RACIST)) (Oh, and, yeah DA is white, just FYI.)

And, OP gave me the down-low on the Fill-In punk who was there before I got there, and who would have appeared to have "wronged" DA so badly they got about as riled up as a toddler whenever anyone mentioned them. So, Fill-In had started covering shifts before DA came into the picture and had also gotten another job in-town where the clinic was. The methodology, if I recall, was that way the clinic wouldn't have to bring them in as a "full employee", and they could

be just a "Fill-In" according to what the clinic and 2nd Owner needed as 2nd Owner's illness progressed. Maybe a little "impromptu", but it did help bring some stability to the clinic and give 2nd Owner a chance to step back when they needed and seemed to work out for a while.

When DA got there, Fill-In wasn't very keen on going full-time (GEE, I WONDER WHY?), and I suppose said so in various more and less direct ways. DA, however, seemed to just simplify that all down to, "Yes, of course I will go full-time for you!", which seemed to cause a bit of friction between them. Especially when DA was arbitrarily demanding of Fill-In's time, particularly in ways that caused conflicts between the clinic and Fill-In's other job. After a certain amount of this, Fill-In decided that they should just step away from the clinic (GEE, I WONDER WHY?). And, it turns out that what really riled DA up about this, was that when Fill-In did so, they removed their license-information from the account linked to the website DA used to buy needles.

I could *maybe* understand the kind of bummer that would be, except that OP mentioned that DA was apparently still more than able to get a hold of needles when they needed, so...yeah...? I *guess* that calls for getting so mad to the point where you can't even refer to them directly in conversation...I think? Oh, and shortly after this happened, OP mentioned off-handedly that they and their partner were planning to have another child, their first getting close to a year-old(to give you a sense of how much they'd been pulling for the clinic), and without too much hesitation, DA responded in a decidedly non-jokingly kind of way, "Don't do that."

So, yeah, I guess that explains things a bit. I wasn't "angry" to hear all of this, just a bit shocked at how "deep" the well of incompetence seemed to go with DA; which is funny in retrospect given that we'd really barely scratched the surface at this point. It was rough to hear at that moment, but in its own way felt a bit liberating. *I* wasn't inventing a sense of things being very off, of not being able to fully trust the "management", there WAS malarkey a-foot, and, it wasn't just me that thought it. As rough as that might have been, having OP and the other volunteers around was helpful. Especially given how crazy April was about to get.

So, about two-weeks after this private meeting I had with OP (which would put us into mid-April at this point), DA scheduled a meeting with OP and myself to let us know how things were coming with the new location. For starters, we were told that because CA was underperforming, at the new location pricing would change beyond slight adjustments to the sliding scale. DA immediately followed that with how they hadn't at all done any new advertising of CA since I'd gotten there, but that all of the advertising around the float-tank stuff they had been

doing seemed to be really going well. All of the visiting float centers and telling everyone who may be interested we were going to start adding that seemed to be paying off, and DA felt that the town the clinic was in was really into the idea of float tanks (Did you catch it?). DA also updated on how the construction at the new space was going. Namely that it hadn't. They apparently hadn't even gotten the lease figured out because of weird reasons.

So, since we were set to move in two weeks, instead of moving to the "New" location, we would move to a temporary location for about two months so then everything could have time to figure itself out (LOL). This was the first OP and I had heard of that plan, and definitely the first any patients had heard of it! The best part though, FAR and AWAY, was that the two other massage therapists (aside from DA's partner) that had been renting out a room filled with what I assumed was at least a few-hundred dollars of equipment between them, weren't updated of this change until about five days before the move was set to happen (OOPS!). The only reason they knew it was happening at ALL before it was time to move was because OP and I had mentioned it casually in between them seeing clients. Because, you know, there was NO WAY they COULDN'T have been updated by that point the whole operation was only a few days out from moving, RIGHT? I mean, they had a massage-therapist meeting with DA's partner three weeks ago, so CLEARLY they must have gotten SOME sort of update, RIGHT?

LOLNOPE!

I'll never forget the look of shock and surprise on the massage-therapists faces when they found out what *was* actually happening. And, yeah, I sat there and agreed with everything they said about DA right then. As the end of April did finally roll around, we packed up the clinic, moved it across town to a strip mall, and it was Summer. Oh, but two days before, we had a "Free Day" to try to reach some new patients; moments before we were about to move to a place that I don't think I'd even been given the address for yet. Right as our numbers were starting to inch back up to about fifty-treatments a week after a decided slump with the massive schedule change. With MINIMAL direct notice to most our patients (OP and I telling everyone we could who was still coming in for treatments was pretty much all they got) that we were moving. hmmm

After we did move, OP sent an email to DA and quit, by the way. This wasn't a big surprise, given that OP and two volunteers (who were both tough as nails) shortly before we were to move had it out with DA during the middle of one of the quite-moments during a shift (of which there we often plenty).

Understandably, people wanted to know what exactly it was DA had planned with

everything, where they were coming from, and where their decisions would leave a LOT of patients who had been relying on the clinic for YEARS at that point. DA didn't have much to say, other than, A) CA wasn't making enough money in their eyes, and B) what did they want to do as volunteers in that new place. Like, literally, just, what do you want?", but also, "not if you want to keep the things the way they are, because that doesn't work."

DA also took a shot at one of the volunteers, implying he didn't assume they, as a not rich-white-person, would have the "fortitude" to make the kinds of \$200,000 decisions (we'll get to that shortly) that DA was. Said volunteer rightly countered that they actually DID have a large amount of money related to their family that they managed, not just totally for their own sake, and the concept of important decisions around meaningful resources actually WASN'T all that foreign to them.

But, yeah, very kindly, OP both informed me beforehand that they'd be quitting (because I guess letting coworkers know in advance when possible about big changes coming is a thing some humans do? lol), and mentioned what they were planning to put into said email relating to it and asked some of my opinion because they didn't necessarily want to inadvertently cause any blowback onto me. Like I said, they were pretty awesome.

In retrospect, I was very nervous and scared at that time, because I only wished I could quit by virtue of being in a lease in my apartment until July 2017. I did look into what it might have meant to break my lease, and in short, it meant a lot of extra money I didn't have at the time. So, I was stuck. And, the idea of being stuck with a narcissist that was also unhappy with me was EXTRA terrifying, because I'd actually had a *lot* of experience with that in my life well before that point. After I had gotten the news initially from OP as to the color and shape of things more directly, I called my punk mentor in stitches once or twice by this point. They were The Best (Thanks, Jim! <3), though, and were both patient and helpful about ways to somehow actually still punk amid all this crap. Still, "confidence" in anything, myself included, wasn't exactly anything real to me at this point. Which is too say, I kind of asked OP to go a little lighter in that email they were about to send. In retrospect, I wish they hadn't listened to that, and had gone more in DA. I do still kind of regret that, in all honesty. Still, I appreciated that at least someone was trying to be thoughtful amidst everything. Which isn't too say they exactly went completely "soft" on DA. They still gave them a bit of a lacquering, and definitely gave DA a dose of medicine they totally deserved by that point. OP is a very tough person, much more so than I'll ever be. I admired how, throughout their time at the clinic, they found ways to remain strong and still lean on DA when stuff started to get REALLY weird and found ways to stick up for the patients in all of it.

Looking back, I was really starting to become a bit of a mess at that point. Which made me grateful for that fact, post-move, the Summer was rather quiet. With the lease still being negotiated, and subsequently details to be worked out on the build-out to handle all of the new-fangled spa-crap we'd be adding, DA would pop by the "temporary" clinic only intermittently, and usually to comment on how much they appreciated me sticking around and trying to do my job well (DA's partner had abandoned things by about the end of June/sometime in July (and no shade to them for that, at all)).

The clinic was still only \$15-\$35 community-acupuncture, and the space we had moved to was actually kind of nice (by the time patients were properly informed n' such...). It was in a strip mall, and largely just a big, empty space with ceilings that ran up about twenty-feet and a bathroom in back. The tenants to our right were a barbershop run by a really nice lady, and to our left was a bar that graciously adjusted its music for us after a few days. Our setup was using a big dresser and some screens to wall-off a "reception" area with a desk, which people saw upon walking in the front door, then behind us about ten recliners in two rows facing each other. Another desk with the "punk" computer was situated behind the second row, facing the chairs.

Because DA fired all of the volunteer receptionists at once when we moved (did I mentioned DA did that? Well, they did. Luckily for DA, we were so slow I was able to punk/reception all by myself generally without issue :-p), it could get pretty lonely in the clinic. But, after everything else that had been going on, it was at least "quiet" for a time. As calming as quiet shifts could be in a distressed CA clinic, I suppose.

I had a lot of think about, is what I guess I'm trying to say, and I had suddenly found myself with some time to think about it. I spent a lot of my time on shifts starting out the front of the clinic, a row of huge windows that went up almost as high as the ceilings from one wall to the other, and I watched the trees around the edge of the main road in front of the clinic blow in the wind. I watched the people moving in and out of the cars to go to wherever they wanted in the strip mall from the parking lot, doing my best not to stare, of course. I thought about how desperately far away February 2017 (when I at first thought my lease was set to expire, more on that later) felt from the perspective of that Summer of 2016, what and how I would "so" something about this situation I had found myself in. With little else to do, I tried to just "process", whatever that meant by then.

At first, I was very anxious about not getting paid (did I forget to mention that DA had been paying OP on pretty much no schedule for a while? Yeah, that's why they waited to quit when they did. Not because of how *sick* a burn it would be, but because that's when the check cleared, and they didn't feel like going after DA

legally(rightly not worth the effort)), but after DA's partner quit the operation I figured DA'd have to at LEAST pay me regularly to hold on to the last employee they had. I was salaried, and at the time, that felt like it lent an extra sense of insurance to my pay (FORESHADOWING!).

In between all of this thinking, I did get to see some patients. They were all lovely and appreciated that I was at least keeping everything "open" enough that they could get a few more treatments before whatever next crisis which was surely on its way approached. A couple of the old volunteers stopped by for treatments, and I manipulated the available free-treatment-passes in POCAPoint so they'd always have enough to stop by when they wanted (DA didn't pay much attention, obviously). We'd usually talk for a bit after I unpinned them, about all kinds of things. One in particular, "M", stayed in touch pretty frequently, and was immensely helpful with quite a few things even after they'd been "fired".

Via the small handful of people I knew through the clinic, I met one or two other people and got to hang out and do stuff here and there. The town the clinic was in was beautiful, it had plenty for people of all stripes in addition to a huge state university situated in the middle of it. In between staring out the window at work and keeping my head above water among all of the Looming Dread, I got to get out explore where I was a bit. Everyone I met was lovely, and I really enjoyed the time I was able to carve out of that Summer to actually enjoy myself a bit. I really liked that town, and in an alternative timeline, I might have stayed. I considered possibly trying to stay there and trying to start up some other CA and bounced back and forth between that idea for a good while in truth, but in the end had neither the financial nor emotional resources to do so at that point.

The clinic would end up staying at the "temporary" location it was meant to be at for two months for about six. We *finally* moved in November, even though the location wasn't *actually* all built-out for the new spa-crap by then. The float-tanks hadn't moved-in until about a week before we did, and one of them (we were set to have three total) wouldn't fit in its doorway and had to be moved to a temporary location. The whole place was still really dirty, too. Lots of leftover nails and scrap from the construction workers, whom DA would go back and forth about paying because I guess they weren't doing a very good job(?).

Well, we did have an impartial third-party confirm said construction company didn't often do a very good job on their contracts during that year, but I still choose to believe it was because DA was just incompetent at paying people on time. Mostly because he didn't pay me for the entire month of November, even though I spent the first two weeks of it working non-stop rarely-any-breaks eight-plus hour days doing whatever DA's beck-and-call was as they fussed over how wrong everything seems to come out in their mind.

Now, admittedly, I should be fair. They did ask me in October right before we moved if I could "go without a paycheck" for a pay-period at the beginning of November. At that point, I just appreciated that I was getting some form of warning to literally anything, and like the prisoner I was, said, "Sure DA, so long as that 2nd one will be coming right behind it!"

I showed up to work at the very beginning of December(having had to blow through all of my savings to keep paid up on things like rent and bills like a fucking adult or some shit), and had made up my mind that the ONLY thing DA could do which would result in me doing anything other than walking out and reporting their ass was to reach into their pocket and pull out something I could take to the bank. Lucky for them, they immediately wrote me a check for about half what I should've gotten that month. It turns out, the problem was that the computer which the accountant was supposed to hook up to remotely in order to process employee payments on QuickBooks hadn't been hooked up. Ergo, no employee payments.

There is so, so much GROSS incompetence and lazy negligence described in that particular sentence, my mind still freezes a bit when I think of it.

Since going any further would take me into December, and that's not what the title /\ up there /\ says (and I think I'm pushing closing to 3500 words, here), we'll wrap this post up here.

But, stayed tune, because the fur is REALLY gonna start flying next time!

Part 5- "Death"

(maybe there should be a content-warning for when I start talking about the "entity" dying and death in general later on?)

So, I know we're pretty full-steam-ahead at this point, but I want to double-back for a minute on something that I just talked about at the end of my last blog for just a *wee* bit more. Having to sit here and take stock enough of what happened to the point where I can condense the most of what happened has made me realize how AMAZINGLY INANE some things were to a degree I hadn't even been able to process initially. Namely, DA not paying me for the entire month of November.

Like, I *need* to vent about this a bit harder. Just a bit.

Don't worry, you'll have an entire bevy of juicy-bits to chew on afterwards. Promise.

So, just to reiterate, after spending half-a-year at our "temporary" location, we move into our "final" location in November 2016, and then DA proceeds to not pay me for November. They do write me a check at the beginning of December when I confront them about this, and the accountant does eventually get me the rest of my "back pay"(did you catch it?) by the middle of January. Now, it's very important to mention that when we did FINALLY move, the clinic was not at ALL ready to "get going" with all of its new spa-bullshit. Like I'd mentioned, there was still at least two-and-a-half months' worth of work, and I spent the first two weeks of November pulling nonstop eight to ten-hour days (with actual breaks in any capacity maybe a few times throughout those fourteen days?). And, admittedly, for the first half of a couple of those days my time may have only amounted to showing up early and not doing anything for a few hours on account of DA not showing up at all when they said they would.

Still, the place needed to be cleaned following the construction crew just finishing up days before we got there, none of the tanks were working(and one couldn't get into its room), the sauna hadn't even arrived yet, the Unnecessarily Expensive heating pads weren't there yet, and I don't think the scheduler was even all-the-way ready to handle patients between all of our "services" yet. It took until December to get the tanks working, and it wasn't until January 1st that clients were finally run through them.

Why I contend this was the WORST time to not pay their employee (as if there's ever somehow a "good" time to not pay your employees?), was that if I actually had better boundaries and more self-esteem at the time I may have just walked away altogether after getting that check. If I had, DA would have been COMPLETELY up the creek without a paddle; a creek made of lava, full of lava-resistant bears swimming in it.

If I had quit later after everything was up and running, DA might've been in deep, but at least they would've had a shot at making it all work since everything would've been "live". If I had quit sooner, everything was in limbo for so long, they probably could've just weaseled-out before they would've crossed into "Sunk Cost Fallacy" territory.

But, no, instead they elected to not pay me EXACTLY as they were absolutely in the hole with a big, empty, not-even-close to opened clinic. While I was working the hardest for them, and while their clinic was most vulnerable, they just lost track of whether or not their employee was actually being paid for their work.

Oh, and yeah, DA spent close to TWO-HUNDRED THOUSAND dollars in total for the equipment and buildout at this new location. They said they cashed out

their 401k (WOWOWOWOW) for this. And, they had absolutely NO business plan at all when they did it!

So, yeah, No Big Deal, or anything.

(Oh, and, yes, you DID read that correctly; BOTH times.)

But before we dig into that, I want to bring things back around to a more serious note. I want to talk about the moment I felt the entity of the clinic die.

After those first two weeks of literally doing DA's dirty work(a lot of which was in practice following DA around like a toady so they could have a niffle (Read – item a young child carries around with them to feel safe in the Big Scary World) on hand to make them feel better while they bungled around trying to find out how to work the \$100K worth of fancy equipment that wasn't working. CA obviously got set up first and the fastest, as all we had to do was to wait on a fleet of ten brand-new recliners (with what I assume was only faux-leather, but I never really figured out because a person has to have limits) to get in.

The acupuncture room, which was about twenty-five feet wide, and about seventy-feet long. The acupuncture room was lined with windows along two sides of it. So, with my desk and some chairs, and the place "generally" cleaned up enough, DA let the needling start up again. DA's idea in terms of prices for the acupuncture was to keep the \$15-\$35 sliding scale for existing patients, and all new patients would come in at a flat \$35, with packages that brought the price down to \$25 a treatment for three treatments, \$20 a treatment for five treatments, and \$15 a treatment for ten treatments. In DA's words, "Anybody could afford \$150 when they needed it (LLLLLLLLLOOOOOOOOLLLLLLLLLLL)". After April, however, all acupuncture patients, existing or otherwise, were to be brought over to the \$35-a-treatment- plus-packages rate.

I'll get into how bad April was later, gotta try and finish this point I'm trying to make here. So, amidst all of this, morale was low. I think it was by the first week of December, a long-time patient came in, and after I put their needles in and asked if they wanted a blanket, a bit nervously they replied, "No, it's...something doesn't feel right,"

Sitting here putting this all together, I feel like it would somehow be more logical and coherent to say that my first thought was that we didn't have the music set up yet prompting said observation, but it wasn't. I'd had a "sense" of something being really "off" about the space since I first walked into it but couldn't really put my finger on it.

I should say that I'm not a big "Woo" kind of a person. Back in college (pre-ack-skool), I remember reading a quote meant to describe early Behavioral Psychology that went, "What see is what we know, and all we need to know is what we can see," and that fits me pretty well at the end of the day. Now, I'm by no means at all "Anti" people thinking and acting differently than me, I will always be the first to clarify this is only me speaking strictly for me, and I completely respect other people making their own decisions.

Needless to say, I did very much in the moment the patient brought it up notice a distinct *absence* of something that I had felt before when I needled people. I felt it at the original location of the clinic, and I felt it at the "temporary" clinic, but no-more at the "final" location. It was like when you walk off from the middle of a big group of people having some kind of social gathering outside, going from a breathing mass of energy to "loneliness" away from the group. You can "feel" the transition to loneliness, having been surrounded by people just moments before, and the patient pointing it out made that vague sense become more tangible in my mind. It didn't feel like a "CA" clinic anymore, it just felt like an "office" of some kind, something physical and utilitarian. The heartbeat was gone. I felt the last moments of the entity die, it's final expiration. I'll never forget that feeling, and I'm not trying to "show off", but I had to pause a beat at the end of that last paragraph because my eyes got a little misty.

A clinic, in my opinion, is MORE than just its structures and systems. The body runs on more than just bones and nerves, there's *something* that switches on after a certain point of growing in the womb, and then switches back off when certain conditions are met.

After that point, I tried my best to re-create that "feeling" for patients by my own effort and presence, and that was a lot of what contributed to the burn-out that had really started to set-in by the time we got to the new location. I was like a set-designer in film or theatre, expending a lot of energy and effort to make something look and give off the feeling of being "lived-in" to anyone that would stand in the middle of it, but from a distance is patently artificial. When that "presence" is coming from a "live" entity, I believe that is what helps enable patients to become so comfortable doing this weird thing called acupuncture enough to fall asleep in their chairs as easily as they seem to. It's not ridiculously hard to maintain in a proper environment with a healthy entity, but without those things, placing the building and maintenance on that kind of "set" all on the presence of a single person is going to inherently be a difficult, draining effort.

Working at the clinic I'm at now, which is absolutely a healthy, functioning entity able to handle the challenges that CA clinics face, treating three-times as many

patients as I did at my last job doesn't even feel like it comes close to the energy expenditure I had to put out to make needling at said last job work. It's literally not comparable. And, yeah, eventually having to shoulder just about ALL of the day-to-day operations at DA's clinic entirely by my F&^%ing self because of their incompetence exacerbated how much energy that took to keep the right "feel" going for the CA space, but still. Setting all of that aside, even when I was ONLY focused on needling at DA's clinic, it still felt like I worked a LOT harder at that job than my current one.

Now, there may be the thought, "Oh wow, Mike, I bet you appreciated getting this incredibly valuable object-lesson about what it really takes to work at a POCA clinic, huh?" and, no, not really. There's not so much the sense at all of being "lucky" enough to get what could be considered in some ways a uniquely exclusive access to something which could be valuable, so much as the awareness something had to die for me to be able to get that. "Responsibility" comes more to mind, and I'm really not trying to be fancy or hokey, here. I mean this.

That's what it felt like to be there the moment when an entity died. Perhaps unsurprisingly, shortly thereafter just about everything else started to get much worse and desperate from there. When the Con-Flaging tanks finally Flim-Shmottingly all worked by about mid-December (and that one that refused to go to its room had been finally properly coerced to go there), and the sauna was all hooked up, and the Needlessly Expensive Heating Pads Full of Dumb Expensive Rocks were all up and running, we were FINALLY able to get going after January 1st. During the New Year's holiday, DA had run a "Sorta-Grand Opening" special on floats, and I think about ten people passed through them. In celebration of the milestone, my schedule was jumped from about thirty-hours of needling to fifty-plus hours a week of running literally just about everything else at the damn place.

So, WAY back when we had just moved into this Final Location, I was told pretty explicitly that I would NOT have to worry about running all of the other spa-crap. I was told this was because there is no way that I could conceivably effectively do so while simultaneously running CA at the volume I needed (oh yeah, DA was so sure that the 150-200(!!!) treatments a week we would need to break even(!!!) were TOTALLY going to happen, because I did about thirty-five people in a single shift on a free day months ago) to keep acupuncture afloat (be a real waste if I didn't shoe-horn that pun in at some point). Point of fact, DA named about three people who would be brought on to do that, and I met them in-person because they helped us when we moved in (DA even talked to them about, "Making sure you get paid for this [helping move stuff in]," and I can only assume now that DA meant that they didn't forget their Monopoly Money on the way out). However, when everything mattered, it seemed it was only DA and me left to actually run

things. In a rash effort to not risk my schedule extending to 11pm every night, I volunteered myself for all of the early time-slots for the other services(which started at 10am every day, and floats were scheduled every two-hours) in addition to my usual acupuncture hours(which generally started at about 1pm every day and ended at 8pm, exceptions being Fridays and Saturdays which started earlier).

Let me tell you, those early floats were REAL popular. Oh, and DA also took ALL the floats/scheduling for services on the two days a week I wasn't there, because otherwise they said they didn't want to overwork me (HAHAHAHA!!!) For a while, we were still getting some old regulars coming in for acupuncture, even though one by one they were all spooked by how "ritzy" everything had become. Newsflash- patients AREN'T stupid, they're actually really smart, and they KNOW when they're charity. They know how conditional "charity" is, and they know when they don't "belong" at a certain place, and this has the entirely opposite effect of "endearing" them to your operation. And, no, you are never as clever at "spinning" it as you think you are.

For a while, the patients and I were all just trying to make the best of it. Here-and-there I'd get close to six or eight patients going at once, and that actually felt kinda good; even though I was always too harried to enjoy it. Impressively, all the way until the end, the reputation the previous punks and owners had built for the clinic persisted. We kept getting walk-ins for acupuncture who looked a little shocked upon entering that *this* was the clinic they had heard such glowing reports about. They pushed through anyway, though, even if they couldn't really afford at the new prices, we offered the amount of acupuncture they'd actually need. For a while, at least, I tried to focus on at least turning people on to what acupuncture was at all, and what community acupuncture *could* be. While giving the regulars and a couple of the previous volunteers who had poured so much into the clinic over the years a chance to get a few more treatments.

By the time April rolled around though, everything went dark. Not, as in the patients all dried up (to my surprise, honestly. I guess people really WILL give acupuncture a try if a practitioner can make even a paltry effort at making it to available to them, who knew?), but dark as in I found myself having much, much more trouble getting out of bed every morning. Again, April was when *all* patients had to start paying on the \$35-plus-packages rates, and we lost all but a few of whatever regulars we had left. The patients all knew that said change was not all by my design, and most thanked me for holding the line like I had been for as long as I did. I thanked them, too. More than a few of them I sent to a place across town that had started doing CA here-and-there, and which other independent sources confirmed wasn't too bad an operation. Kindly, all of the

patients I referred honored my request that they not tell anyone at this other location how they would have heard about them.

In general, the whole switch-over to being more of a "spa" acupuncture setup, even at comparably "affordable" rates made my job much, much harder. The price change was, again, in effect for new-patients since November, and between November 2016 and 2 July 2017(the day I left), the number of new-regulars we picked up under these new structures wouldn't even require all of the fingers on one hand to be counted.

Patient-bases are not SOLELY built on what your charging, they're based on the look, feel, and culture of your operation. It's in the Mighty CA Wiki in a number of places, it's in the books, it's hard to miss even casually browsing the POCA website. And, it is ABSOLUTELY that way for very, very specific reasons.

After the switch happened, our patients(aside from a handful of regulars who hung-on by the \$150-for- ten-treatments package) switched to- 1) people who needed a LOT of acupuncture but for whom we no longer had the flexibility to find a way to offer it to them, and 2) "Acu-Tourists"(people who don't have any pressing "need" for acupuncture, but mostly just want to try it because it's a "Thing") who never really came back more than three times total, if at all. "Tourists", no matter how good of a job you do of resolving any issues they may have, and no matter how wonderful an experience you provide, will NEVER get as excited about what you do like actual CA patients will. Tourists won't bring their family, friends, or spouses. They won't tell all of their coworkers, or the people they see at the library, or who does their hair for them about you. All they'll do is stop by once or twice, thank you and tell you in a rather lukewarm kind-of-a-way what a nice time they had, before disappearing back into the fog.

Now, sure, in reality some people in any given major metropolitan area can get lucky enough to find a way to make "tourists" work. If you're following the statistics out of the NCCAOM in terms of actual *numbers* around the Acupuncture Profession (blegh), though, you may notice that "some" may be too generous a descriptor for the number of actual practitioners who reliably (keyword) succeed at this In Reality.

In fewer words, it got really lonely after April. There's not a whole lot of "warmth" from people for whom you're just a technician, and it surprised me how much those interactions from long-term patients were sustaining me. Losing that felt like a life-line being cut, and it felt like the worst time for that to happen.

Like I said a bit /\ up there /\, I started working a LOT more hours all at once. Like I mentioned a blog or two ago, I was salaried, and my pay was \$30K/year.

Can you guess what my additional compensation for my hours-worked per week nearly doubling was?

Got something in mind?

That's right! My compensation increased by, ZERO dollars (USD)!

I mean, yeah, I guess it was my own fault for accepting a salaried position, but still. Despite acupuncture beginning to drop off sharply (again), the sherp-garmicking float-tanks were absolutely hoppin'.

You see, DA decided that the way to build up the necessary clientele to make rent each month and get people to check out this "new" thing called "floating", was to run a Groupon for the floatation services. To anyone that has ever interacted with Groupon before, or even just knows anything about it knows what a horrible,

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idea that is. It wasn't DA's first idea, though. That was actually to offer an incomprehensible set of possible package-deals for floating by itself, or in some combination with the other three services we offered (packages which made those offered by people trying to provide a Modern take on acupuncture seem downright intuitive by comparison, if you're pickin' up what I'm putting down here). After Groupon, though, Sunk-Cost (put this pun in the "maybe" pile?) Fallacy was in FULL effect, and DA became literally obsessed with "converting" the Groupon Tourists into full customers.

To put a little of this in perspective for people who are fortunate enough to be able to live their lives without needing to know these things, the "market rate" for most floats settles around what the higher- end is for market-rate acupuncture, between \$100-\$150(circa 2017, of course). I would wager that at least eighty-five percent of our float clients, from when we opened the service to when I left, came in on Groupons that maybe net the clinic around \$25.

I think we must've started the Groupon around late February or early March, and immediately after we did, the schedule booked solid. Every day, in addition to acupuncture and the occasional interloper looking for the sauna, I was handling up to sixteen float clients a day(I should mention of our three tanks total, one was large enough to fit two people at once, the "couples tank", for when one or both

people couldn't find a better way to inspire the other to want to break-up with them). The tanks generally kept their "interiors" clean via all the filtering but take a moment to imagine how mucky those rooms got constantly getting splashed by water that is 1,000:1 salt-to-water ratio. After every float, I had to run in and mop the floors, clean the showers (so people could wash the salty-water off of them), change out towels, and make certain the ear-picks and wax ear-plugs were adequately refreshed so people didn't get exceptionally-salinated water deep in their ear-canals.

In theory, people were supposed to spend a few minutes before getting in the tank getting ready to get in the tank, and then spend sixty minutes (but that could be up to 90 minutes) in the tank, get out and take a few minutes to clean up, and then be out in time for the person minding the tanks to clean everything up by next-call. At this point in everything, I'd be disappointed if you wouldn't have guessed that said theory RARELY survived in practice. When we were booked out for a day, "Success" was just keeping the damn trains on the tracks at all, regardless of when they actually arrived anywhere near on time.

And, again, imagine all of this while treating a handful of acupuncture clients (the majority of whom were tourists) at the other end of the shop, receiving and answering the phones, and still having a sauna and Needlessly Expensive Heating Pads Full Of Dumb Rocks to worry about. "Ragged" was a good day. We don't talk about the bad days.

Oh, and if you're wondering where DA was in all this, imagine them alert, active, and...Working from home.

Sure, when/if something happened (because I was NOT properly trained how to manage those grungly-zerzees tanks beyond, "Hey, put some of this stuff in every day, but not necessarily every day. It's also got to be the right amount. Yeah, that amount looks right. For now. I'm going to get angry and shouty at you for putting that much in at some point later, though, because it's far more stressful for you if I contradict my own directions arbitrarily now and again. You're welcome.") they'd show up closer to 12pm, but most of my days were flying solo until 4-6pm. Even when DA did get there, they *might* receipt a little bit, but mostly just go back and hide in their office. The only real difference between them there and not there, is when they weren't, I was nervous about what they might call me out for having screwed up that I genuinely didn't know I should have been doing when they got there. When they were there, I was still nervous, because then I had to worry about them "catching" me screwing-up in-process in front of clients.

Oh, and I was doing all of the laundry, which was plentiful given the consistent need for fresh towels all the time, and mopping the floors for the greater clinic,

and cleaning off all of the surfaces as bathrooms.

In the last three months before I left, I developed a bit of a habit of not sleeping and driving in to the clinic(because the final location happened to be only about five minutes from my apartment) at 2am to mop, because at least then I'd definitely know that DA couldn't pop in at random and assign me a bunch of extra chores to do all at once, and I could actually finish something (also, you know, I wasn't very "well" by this point).

Yeah, DA had pretty poor boundaries (SHOCKER!). A couple of times I had the really stupid idea to try and creep in on my days off to do or check something at the clinic early in the morning, *thinking* that DA's chronic tardiness would give me a window to get in and get out, but NOPE. The absolute nadir of this was one day where my total hours worked amounted to close to seventy, because on a holiday I popped in to try and mop the floors real quick, and JUST as I finished, DA sauntered in and enlisted me to help him(mostly just stand there being emotional support) while they tried to figure out why a certain tank room was smelly(it was because he hadn't been changing the filters for the pumps nearly as often as he should have been (EEWWW!!!!)). I probably should have started believing in a god after that, because I don't know what else could have prevented me that day from trying to run over DA with my car, backing up into them with my car, and then driving back over them one more time(because something that irredeemable and vile is the sorta thing you have to make certain to double-tap).

I know I'm describing a comparatively short period of time (again, around sometime in February/early March things started to pick up, and I was gone by July 2nd), but I assure you I it was all getting just that bizarre. As is probably pretty obvious, DA had no actual business plan, sunk a HUGE amount of money into this, and the vast majority of their customers were coming in on deeply discounted Groupons. Which is to say, all of the debt-collectors started calling in force. Definitely by June, I think we were up to about four (it could have been five, I can't remember exactly) different phone numbers I had to remember because they were debt collectors. Because I lived in the same "neighborhood", my utilities were through the same utility companies, and so I knew that things had to be bad given how much scarier the notices for the clinic's utility bills looked than mine (because, you know, I was paying my bills). I mean, paying bills on time and DA didn't seem to mix much anyways, given what happened in the middle of winter back at the original location, but still.

Oh yeah, did I mention that? In the MIDDLE OF WINTER, DA just *forgot* to pay the gas bill, it got shut off, and so myself and OP had to punk while the heat wasn't working in the clinic. IN. THE. MIDDLE. OF. WINTER.

I mean, winters weren't *quite* as intense as in the state where the clinic was as in my home state of Illinois, but still.

So, yeah, DA was starting to get a bit unhinged. Everything started to feel like it was coming undone, I called my punk mentor (really, thanks SO much, Jim, I don't know what I would've done otherwise) once or twice genuinely concerned that I'd show up to work and there'd be a lock with chains on the door, and there'd be some really big guy in a crisp suit and sunglasses named Vinny would keep telling everybody to, "Fuggedaboutit" if they walked too close to the clinic. DA had finally started admitting that their wealth of "business" experience practically amounted to something closer to pushing papers in some cushy upper-management position at a big company as opposed to anything even coming close to actually "running" a small business. Or, ANY business, for that matter.

I think it's pretty obvious at this point, too, that I could keep going on. In those five months between things going bananas to me leaving in July, so much just went so, so WRONG. Trying to total it all up and condense it into a coherent narrative, even having been there myself, it's all just feels stunning. If someone had told me this around the time I'd started, I'd have probably agreed there were some rough patches up ahead, but ALL of this? No, they HAVE to be exaggerating, and more than just a little bit.

As I've already mentioned, the only real reason I was sticking it out through all of this for as long as I did, hoping I wouldn't get caught in whatever cosmic justice was coming in reaction to DA's arrogance, was the lease I was in for my apartment. I was grateful that said justice waited until after I left.

Part 6 "Leaving"

As I've already said, I left on July 2nd, 2017. The 2nd was a Sunday, and that Friday my father snuck into town with his truck and a U-Haul. We left early Sunday morning, as it'd always been at least an eight-hour drive from where my folks lived in Illinois to where the clinic was, and we didn't want to have to find the place where the U-Haul was due back literally in the middle of the night. I worked that Friday and Saturday and worked quite hard on those two days to be able to get out "earlier" on Saturday. Or, when my shifts were "actually" supposed to end is DA could ever show up on time.

Like I'd mentioned, DA remained utterly committed until the end that somehow, somehow of finding a means to convert the zounds of Groupon customers we had into actual paying customers. Subsequently, our business pretty reliably reflected how near or far we were from the latest Groupon release, with a gradual

dwindling of people over time as DA had to incrementally raise the price to justify the repeated runs. Right before I'd left, we were decidedly in a slump. DA did know my "dad" was coming into town but didn't find out why until I had crossed over the border of the state the clinic was in during the trip back. When I did decide I was far enough from the clinic I promptly pulled over into a gas-station and shot off a quick text detailing that I was quitting, that my decision was final, and my notebook which contained all of the passwords for the computers/programs the clinic had been using was left at the desk. I figured this would be the only and last time I would ever be able to get away with breaking up with an employer "ethically" via text message, and you've got to seize those opportunities as they come.

Now, I've mentioned that prior to the clinic and DA, I'd had an unfortunate amount of experience being in situations with narcissists where they decidedly have leverage over me, and subsequently, didn't really plan to say much when DA called me following said text. My experience with those types of people is that whatever it is you may think you're going to say, it won't change their mind or behavior. Because if you talking to them ever could have, you wouldn't have to plan for months beforehand the EXACT moment you were going to escape them. DA was pretty much in stitches, and quite surprised, and I don't really blame them. Up until that moment, I endeavored to be nothing less than the best employee I could, even though I was being abused by my employer. I played the long game and did my best to ensure they would never think I was anything less than totally loyal, because I didn't think I'd much have the strength for the alternative.

I gave a lot of one-word responses during that phone call, and re-stated when asked why that I left because I thought the way they were running the clinic was outrageous, and that if community acupuncture on an affordable sliding scale wasn't going to be at the clinic, then neither would I. When I did actually start feel some real words rise up in me during that phone call (because DA at one point blamed POCA for all of their problems, and started trying to "explain" to me why affordable sliding-scale acupuncture "didn't work"), as if on cue my phone almost immediately cut out. It was still able to send and receive texts but couldn't seem to make or accept any calls (fools and children, n' such). DA then switched to begging me to stay via text-messages but gave up once I'd told them that I was about three-hours into an eight-hour trip well out of state to somewhere far away from them, and the embarrassing failure they had turned the clinic into.

The whole trip back, that phone call included, I did my best to remain totally alert for what surely would be the One Last Thing That Goes Wrong. No one gets out of those kinds of situations without sacrifice, and I was going to be ready, because

escape by any means from the clinic and DA was the only thing left that could keep my consciousness from shattering under the weight of what everything had become.

And, I did actually get one last "surprise" before finishing my long trek to safety.

At one point during said last phone call just a bit before my phone gave out, DA suddenly became a bit confessional. They confided that a lot of what they did with and at the clinic wasn't necessarily because it's what they "wanted" to do, but because that's what they thought would make the people around them happy and make them think DA was this great person. DA said how they'd never even heard of "Floatation Therapy" until their partner had brought it up to them, and that they mostly tried so hard to execute the tryng-blarghfut tanks in the clinic because of how excited it made their partner at the time. The idea of the clinic transitioning to a "Multidisciplinary Some-Such-And-The-Other" overall was another idea of their partner, one that said partner had "allegedly" been talking about with the 2nd owner before they fell ill. DA never really figured out if that was at all what actually happened, but again, it's what they figured would make their partner happy, so they tried it.

I should mention, that DA complained CONSTANTLY about how expensive and bothersome the CA was to maintain. They wanted to "make money", of course, and CA felt like this extra appendage they had to deal with while they built the rest of their Frankenstein's Monster of a spa. Wouldn't you know, that was as-well something they did because they thought it would endear them to all the people at the clinic they met via their partner. They thought it would make them look like a really "Good"(Ha) person if they decided to try and keep the vestiges of the clinic's social mission as they mucked with everything else. It was the only reason they kept trying to trudge along with that, in addition to building a spa they didn't much care for, too. DA said, rather, plainly, that if they knew everyone involved was all going to inevitably just "Get mad and leave them," they would've moved the whole operation an hour up the highway into a more affluent neighborhood closer to where they lived. You know, use the reputation of the clinic to make some "real" money in an environment with the necessary amount of upper-class people to sustain something like "Floatation Therapy".

Maybe it was the at that point chronic level of fatigue and dissociation I had relied on to get me through those last few months but hearing all of that come tumbling out of DA's mouth felt a bit, sublime. It all made *sense*, finally. I can still recall the angle the sunlight was hitting my car in that moment as heard DA explain all of that, how the rays of light looked passing through the trees.

Finally, I felt like I'd reached a real understanding of what exactly it was I had

just been through, and in turn, a real understanding of EXACTLY what kind of "D"umb-"A"\$\$ (do you get it now?) I had been dealing with from the start.

And, that was pretty much *it*. I was done with the Worst Job In POCA, and I was headed back to something which was a helluva lot closer to "home" than where I was driving from.

Honestly, I could go on quite a bit more, but I'm not going to. Like I'd said waaay back with my first entry, I don't want this to turn into something morbid, I want to try and as much as possible center the clinic and provide space for the good people I encountered who were a part of it. As outrageous as that may seem, these six (as of this typing) blogs about what I went through are really more the "Essential Cliffnotes" reading of what all had happened.

Regardless, I'm done, and there really isn't anything else practically worth sharing beyond this point.

EXCEPT,

for one-last story...

The more attentive of you listening from home who may have overheard me tell this story before in-person, may have noticed a certain key *omission* of a particular anecdote. The thing which I practically confess any time I start talking about what I went through at my old clinic. Something which I really, truly (really, I am actually stepping out of character for at least this statement) believe will HAUNT me until the end of my life.

But first, some quick backstory.

So, this DA I had to deal with fancied themselves a bit of a "Shaman" (as I believe I've already mentioned, this DA was decidedly "White As The Driven Snow" in terms of racial make-up). Equally attentive viewers may have noticed over the past few years an odd spat of white folks appearing through cracks in the floor and all at once calling themselves "Shamans". Something called "Core Shamanism" is largely what's to blame in terms of the problem these days. It's the creation of Michael Harner, a fellow who for a while in the late 50's and most of the 60's (according to Wikipedia) arguably did some actual academic work investigating different indigenous cultures in South America. By the late 70's, however, Harner had basically abandoned academia in favor of his own "Universal Theory of Shamanism", opening his own "Center" for studies into "Shamanism", and then publishing a book about his over-generalized cultural-appropriations in 1980. Basically, he thought he could Shaman, and you could,

too, via his weekend courses! Obviously, this more than appealed to white-collar burn-outs for whom the hole in their being left over by capitalism had started becoming just a little too upsetting (Read: exactly up this DA's wheelhouse).

DA I guess had done well enough in white-collar before wrecking the clinic that, prior to owning the clinic, hadn't actually "worked" in ten years. Ostensibly, they spent a good portion of those ten years taking and re-taking the weekend classes and was always happy to announce themselves as a "Shaman" whenever they could reasonably get away with it. Even to the point of announcing themselves as a "Shaman" in front of one of the clinic's volunteers who was an actual indigenous person, which isn't righteously shameful to hear someone was stupid enough to do as another white person AT ALL!

After the clinic at the final location got going, this DA started running a "Shamanic" session in the clinic every other week. Basically, it was just a drum-circle where only DA drummed while the rest of us were meant to ostensibly sit there and contemplate all of the decisions which we'd made which had brought us to that point, while DA burned some stuff which always set off my allergies. Thankfully, however, it didn't involve the DA doing any singing.

So, okay, with that aside, we'll get into what fucking SHATTERED my brain, now.

So, it's about five days from when I was about to leave. The clinic was quiet, it was just me, that DA, and the only float-client DA had that reliably paid for all of the floats they got. I want to emphasize this, said client was practically a "Unicorn" client by virtue of how many one-and-done Groupon clients we saw. This client tried everything, but focused on floating, came at least once or twice a week, brought their spouse in to float, and was even the only person to have bought in to DA's dumb "14 Transformation Package".

What was that, you might think? It's pre-paying up front at a discounted rate fourteen individual float sessions, to be completed one after the other for two whole weeks. It was something DA came up with after someone at a "Float Conference" they went to off-handedly mentioned that if someone floated that often, it'd "Transform their life."(SPOILER- about all that "transformed" with this client was becoming preternaturally fast at getting saltwater out of their hair)

So, again, all three of us are in the reception area, it's late in the day, I'm trying to get paperwork scanned into the computer, and DA and the only Unicorn they could find were chit-chatting, following Unicorn having just come out of the tank.

In the process of chatting, they start talking about "The World"(given this is America post the 2016 election), and DA off-handedly mentioned that they think

it would be nice if people could learn to be more "like trees." They explained that they had conversations with trees at different points, and the trees always remarked how they wished humans could be more "like" trees. You know, "rooted", "open", more "in-rhythm" with the natural world.

To further expound on their point, they talked about how trees "Didn't mind at all," when Christmas rolled around; it just meant it was time for "Happy Human Adventures!"(LOLWUT?)

I'll never forget the look on Unicorn's face after that incredible DA said those words in that order out loud, as Unicorn's brain tried to reconcile this person who they thought as a "Cool, New-Age" kind of person as an Adult who thought they could have actual, human conversations with inanimate objects. The way they immediately afterwards uncomfortably quipped, "Huh. That's pretty much a whole children's book right there, eh? Ha ha ha!"

I darted out of the room as quickly as I could with as much composure as I could muster, because lasting a moment more risked either- A) that I'd start laughing uncontrollably, or B) screaming uncontrollably. Especially given I was only a few days out from Freedom, I was sure as hell not about to let THAT be what caused me to slip up and let on to my colossal DA of a boss that they'd unknowingly been harboring a Commie this whole time.

Now, again, in summary- MY OLD BOSS THOUGHT THEY COULD TALK TO TREES! THEY THOUGHT THEY COULD TALK TO TREES! They THOUGHT they could TALK to TREES! TREES!! TREEEES!!!!

Like, I still have moments where I'd sitting there doing whatever, and it'll just rush back to me, "DA thought they could TALK TO TREES. Like, have a HUMAN CONVERSATION with a PLANT."

And, NO, it wasn't in that weird hippie-"Spiritual"- "You gotta root your feet in the ground and feel the pulse of the world, fellow star-child," but I mean they LITERALLY thought they could talk to trees! GAHH!!

There are so many questions. Like, can they talk to *other* inanimate things? Like, can they talk to rocks, too? What about dirt? Do they deliberately ONLY talk to trees, because it's easier than the cacophony of billions of grains of dirt trying to all communicate at the same time? Really, WHY trees? Is it because ferns are assholes? I mean, I don't know about you, but I'd sure prefer having a conversation with a tree over a fern ANY day of the week! The last time I tried to talk to a fern about something, the smug, willfully ignorant photosynthesizer just WOULD NOT STOP going on about the lamest David Icke level conspiracy-

theory nonsense. Like, okay, fine, whatever, even *If* (and that's a big *If*) chem trails are even REMOTELY a thing, who cares? There are plenty of documented problems and injustices as a result of the inherent prejudices in our world today, and via organizing around a common cause of Liberation, actual gains to be made instead of endlessly spinning our wheels around hearsay and supposition of people and things that are by design unable to prove or disprove.

But the Equisetidaen JERK just kept going ON and ON, and yeah, if not for the Ash hanging around at the time to hold me back, I probably would've really lost it. I mean, the tulips one plot over had my back, but then the person actually working at the Arboretum came up and asked me to stop because I was "Scaring the children," whatever that even could mean in the face of such un-mitigated ignorance. Ferns, I'm telling you, "contempt prior to investigation" ALL the way to their roots...

Trees.

TREES!

TREEeeEeEEeEeeeeSSSSsssssssSSSSSS.....

Even then, though, as my mind whiplashes back into some kind of working order, that wasn't even necessarily the only, or weirdest, thing DA talked about. Back in January when it was mostly just this DA's friends using the float tanks, DA and one of said friends (whom we'll call F1 for a moment) started having a conversation about "Traveling Through the Spirit-World". DA talked about how good it felt to be "there", and how sometimes they felt like they'd never want to "leave". DA was worried because another friend of theirs (called F2) seemed to be spending an unhealthy (by DA's standards) amount of time "there", and that F2 was using their trips to the "Spirit World" as a way to escape their responsibilities in "this" world.

F1, who I actually had evidence to prove WASN'T the kind of screwball who would literally piss away \$200,000USD on a clinic they didn't actually care about just nodded their head in agreement. "Of course, I can travel to other realms of existence! Some hack deposed "Anthropologist" told me it's just like my comic books, yippee!"

Like, how? HOW?

Like, if I could locate the exact part of my brain which upon being infected by my white-privilege makes me seriously believe THAT kind of utter tripe, I would GLADLY scratch it out with my fingernails in a HEARTBEAT. Whatever further

damage that might cause, it's STILL a risk worth taking compared to the risk of becoming whatever THAT is.

So, yeah, THAT'S how it all "ended". I discovered the person I'd been working for didn't even actually care about the business they took over, because they mostly just wanted to Look Cool in front of all of their Friends. And, apparently, someone left "The Two Towers" running on the TV at the same time they had their first LSD trip.

TREES.

Chris Rogers:

Boots on the Ground: We Have a POCA Tech Grad at Our Clinic!

I know it's been said before many, many times in the POCAverse and on the forums, but it's worth pointing out again: not every acupuncturist can be a good punk, no matter how good their intentions are. Many acupuncturists are "sympathetic" to what we do and will express how much they would like to provide affordable treatments to "those in need," but this, however, doesn't mean they want to be down-in-the-trenches punks, or that they are able to even if they want to.

Many of you know how difficult it is to keep a clinic fully staffed and it can be entirely frustrating when the need for treatment is so high. Many of you also know the feeling of being overbooked, understaffed, and full of heartache because you know that you're not able to keep up with the demand. The heart-blood that goes into running a thriving community acupuncture (CA) clinic is a very real thing and it can be exhausting, especially if you're doing most of it alone. It's also beyond exasperating to offer a service that is simple, accessible (or should be), in great demand, and highly effective at alleviating suffering in a field full of licensed professionals, some of whom would, rather than work in a CA clinic, prefer to complain about not being busy enough to make a living—all while you are doing your damndest just to keep your head above water with your overbooked and understaffed clinic.

Unfortunately, many POCA clinics have hired experienced acupuncturists to work for them only to find that their experience doesn't transfer very well or that a POCA clinic ecosystem doesn't jive well with their sense of entitlement. Imagine, for a moment, the following scenario that has played out countless times in many CA clinics around the country: Small clinic hits a growth spurt and now the single punk/owner needs help. Want ads, newsletters, word-of-mouth calls for help ensue. Enter interested candidate (usually a traditionally trained acupuncturist). The interview seems to go well, everyone seems to be on the same

page, and the clinic owner feels relieved to have finally found someone that really “gets” CA. Fast forward a few weeks or months and the realization that things aren’t working begins to sink in or, worse, the proverbial shit has hit the fan and it’s far more terrible than anyone could have imagined. Now, the person who was going to be the clinic’s key to future growth has to be fired or, more hopefully, both parties realize that it isn’t a good fit and a mutual departure solves the problem. This unfortunate story has repeated itself too often in too many CA clinics throughout the country. Sometimes a conventional acupuncturist can step up and learn the necessary skills to be a punk—but usually only after one or more years of experience at a CA clinic and lots of extra time and work on everyone’s part.

That brings me to the reason why I am writing this, which is to tell everyone how the creation of POCA Tech is changing things for community clinics in a very real and significant way. We here at Wasatch Community Acupuncture have been fortunate beneficiaries of what POCA and POCA Tech are doing. Like many POCA clinics, we’ve had experiences with both worlds, punk and not-so-punk. We’ve had traditionally trained acupuncturists come and go who were obviously not punks, and we’ve also had some who became real punks. Now, fortunately, Wasatch has had the honor and privilege to have someone from our clinic’s own community come full circle: going from patient, to front-desk employee, to POCA Tech punkling, and finally to full-fledged (and kick-ass) punk. Her first shift was this week, which was entirely full, and I nearly cried tears of joy at the occasion, not to mention the fact that I’ve not spent even one minute trying to deprogram this acupuncturist by teaching her the essential skills of punking (thank you POCA Tech!). In fact, I’ve already learned some pretty great things from her, which isn’t surprising since she has been learning from some of the greatest minds and hearts in American acupuncture for the past three years.

Punking requires a very particular skill set, a special mindset, and a good deal of open heart-space, and POCA Tech is creating punks who are ready to hit the ground running. Eventually, we won’t need to continue spending countless hours encouraging acupuncturists to learn a new and difficult skill set, or even more difficult, a change of heart so that they can become great punks. We are now able to hire acupuncturists who are trained to be punks—even better, those who actually set out to be punks. This means we get to keep more of our limited energy and resources focused on sustaining and growing our clinics and our profession so that they reflect the values that are important to the communities we serve. And I say, hell yeah, that feels really good.

POCA Tech is just the beginning point for this sea change and it needs our continued support. If you can give time or money to support POCA Tech, please do it—it will be greatly appreciated and will ripple outward to our communities in

unforeseen and positive ways.

Thank you POCA, and with deep gratitude, thank you POCA Tech.

<https://www.pocacoop.com/prick-prod-provoke/post/boots-on-the-ground-we-have-a-poca-tech-grad-at-our-clinic>

Lisa Baird:

Birth of a Clinic: POCAFest Presentation, Friday May 31st

I'm going to start by telling you how nervous I am, and that I might talk too quickly. If I'm going too fast, give me a signal, please, and I'll try to slow down. I need to acknowledge that we're on the traditional territory of the Narragansett people, and that I'm a visitor here. And, I want to say what an honour this is to be an opening act for one of my favourite writers.

I was asked to give a presentation on Guelph Community Acupuncture and POCA. I opened Guelph Community Acupuncture in Guelph Ontario, an underserved area, at the end of January, with the help of a \$7500 low-interest loan from POCA. Let's just notice that although we're calling it a micro-loan, \$7500 goes pretty far, especially as I had no savings, and didn't get the amount I applied for from the other loan agency. And POCA has been a huge ongoing support in other ways which I'll get into shortly. So, this presentation is me sharing with you what we are doing. In Guelph.

I signed a lease in December 2012. I got lucky out with the location. We're in the Guelph Community Health Centre building, right downtown. There are a few other service providers in the building, including Guelph Midwives, the Early Years Centre (for kids and their caregivers) and a walk-in medical clinic. Folks using the drop-in centre across the parking lot can come to the health centre for access to clean needles, showers, and foot care, from staff who give a shit. I notice that it's becoming fashionable among service providers to talk about the social determinants of health. The staff at GCHC seem to do more than pay lip service to things like Dignity and Access. I've been profoundly reassured while witnessing front desk staff interact with the public. They are respectful and kind, and they listen – didn't bat an eye when I approached them about sorting out access to a gender-neutral bathroom on the main floor.

Even more good news: community qi in Guelph is just as good as anywhere else. Not that there was any doubt. But I can't tell you about GCA without saying how lovely our patients are. Acupunking in a small city is good way to fall in love with a new home. To see your new neighbours at their raw and humble best. We've got regulars who initially had no idea they could feel so good, and now they count on their maintenance treatments to keep on feeling good. And we've had people

stagger in desperate for help with a spasm or a flare up and the referrals keep coming in. Word spreads fast in Guelph. I'm noticing the difference in attention span in a much smaller city (120,000 instead of the six million I'm used to in Vancouver.) People in Guelph hear about something new & interesting like affordable community acupuncture, and they'll often follow up on it within weeks, rather than months. A lot of Guelphers "get" community acupuncture. They like that it's affordable, they like their acupuncture dates, they are all over the bring-a-friend-for-free stat holiday specials. I'm treating a lot of families. So, I'd say that the rebranding of acupuncture as something ordinary and useful, rather than an exotic appendage to your countercultural identity, is well on its way in Guelph.

I will add that we haven't really reached folks who work in factories on the outskirts of town. I'm treating a lot of farmers, but of the thousands of people who work in factories around Guelph, we've seen very few. So my postering and flyer efforts there are missing something.

I don't know that I'd possibly be able to convey, in 10-15 minutes, how important POCA has been to the founding and functioning of GCA. The money was huge, but it goes way, way beyond the loan. This project of making effective healthcare available to as many people as possible is a beautiful, rich experience, and I wouldn't want to be doing anything else, but it's also a heavy weight to carry in the world sometimes. I was thinking about this the other day when I was filling out the status report required by the other funding agency I got some money from. They wanted a lot of numbers and 'was I on plan or behind plan' and there was of course no room at all to talk about the real people whose lives have changed in big ways because affordable acupuncture is happening in Guelph and I had the thought again: Thank god for colleagues who have a critique of capitalism.

It's a hard thing, being a gatekeeper. Once in a while the community acupuncture treatment room just isn't appropriate for someone, for a variety of possible reasons. A small handful of times at GCA I'd had to say, regretfully, No. Each time I've done that, it has absolutely been the correct decision, but it's been hurtful, and my own pain around making these decisions goes a lot deeper than guilt. I've made these decisions because yeah, I need to make the sound business move and I need to pay bills and rent and loan payments and myself. But I've also done it for the value and the motive beyond money — to make acupuncture as available to as many people as possible.

There's a distinction there, and I see that reflected in you people. Something I saw on the WCA website once comes to mind: we're doing capitalism with a twist. A very deep, very structural twist. It has been good for my sanity to have

colleagues and comrades in POCA who have a critique of capitalism, and a language to talk about how power dynamics work, and how they impact real people we care about – like our patients – even as we engage with things like marketing and interest rates and when to turn someone away.

I'm glad there's a lot of good news from Guelph to share today. Because it's been a tough 10 months since I moved to Guelph. Rewarding, regularly wonderful, but tough. When I lived in Vancouver, I worked full time at Poke Community Acupuncture. Poke employs 3 full time punks, giving about 200 treatments per week. Up until recently, I was referring to the loss of that job/community/anchor as the hole that will not close; absolutely the hardest thing about uprooting my whole life and moving to the other side of this landmass. Lately, that ache is subsiding. Next Sunday Stacey, GCA's new punk (who found us and messaged us through POCA) is starting regular shifts. (She's in Toronto getting Dr Tanned for the first time right now.) I am looking forward to sharing patients with her, to being open 6 days per week so our patients can fulfill their treatment plans, but honestly, most of all, I am looking forward to regular community acupuncture treatment in my life again. When I was punking in Van I thought for a while that I was cured of chronic pain. It kinda almost broke my spirit, to leave Vancouver and my acupunk friends at Poke and find out that actually, that chronic pain was just really well managed. With frequent, simple acupuncture treatment.

So it's been good for my sanity to be in contact with you, with this ongoing reassurance that community acupuncture is spreading like dandelions, that dandelions will come to Guelph – it's just a matter of time.

So thank you for being so generous with your opinions and enthusiasm and honesty, and for being so excited to lend me thousands of dollars. Thank you for telling me how you've fucked up, what you'd do differently. Thank you for providing space for me to say how I've fucked up. (This culture of shared error on POCA is magnificent. Every time one of us says "I screwed up here," it opens up even more space for someone else to do the same.) Thanks for getting into the nitty-gritty of recliner placement and how to promote a slow shift and how to find good volunteers and holding my hand as I try to figure out if online booking is a good idea (it is) and how to deal if someone pees on a chair and for disagreeing with each other in such interesting ways and being so boisterous and opinionated and wise. Thanks for continuing to provide me with acupunk community after I left Poke. My heart would have been a lot more broken about all that if it wasn't for all of you. POCA has helped keep me strong enough to do what I'm doing now. I'm so stoked to hang out with you all this weekend. Thanks for listening.

Addendum, 11 days later: Vicky covered for me while I was away at POCAFest. About 10 of the people who came in to see her have made a point (haha) of telling

me that “She was really great.” And Stacey’s first regular shift was yesterday; she gave 13 treatments and several of her patients came up to me afterwards to whisper, “She’s great – she has a lovely touch.”

So, it’s official. The punks at GCA have smooth insertions and know where to stick it, and acupunk community is definitely growing in Guelph. As Andy says: “Onward.”

Assignment

Read these blog posts and write a 300 to 500-word essay on what you learned about social containers and POCA clinics.

Epilogue: Self-Care

So, wow, social containers are a lot of work, huh?

It's generally recognized that people who are drawn to the healing professions have trouble taking care of themselves. Actually, that's a screaming understatement; a lot of us don't want to take care of ourselves, and/or have no idea what that even means, and so we substitute taking care of other people for tending to our own needs. Some of us were drawn to acupuncture as a profession because it's not only a way to avoid paying attention to our own needs, it's an irresistibly fascinating, ancient and magical way to avoid them.

But punking is such a demanding job, particularly when you include taking on the responsibility for creating and maintaining a social container in which to practice acupuncture, that it doesn't really work to avoid your own needs. You have to take care of yourself if you want to do it at all. A core aspect of strategically managing your energy in order to maintain a clinic's relationships, boundaries, resources and systems — not to mention also giving a hundred or more acupuncture treatments a week — is ensuring that you actually have energy to manage, and you don't run down, burn out, or otherwise collapse in a heap. You must be aware of your own energy and how you're really doing, deep in your core.

Just like a social container for punking won't magically appear out of thin air, the self-care you need won't just happen. Nobody is going to do it for you. Self-care requires intention and attention, respect and focus. Personally, I think it requires selfishness as well.

Punking is such a demanding job that I don't think it's realistic to approach it from a purely altruistic perspective. I don't think it's possible to sustain it, particularly all the energy that goes into caring for the social container, unless the work inherently meets some of your own needs. Punking can't solely be something you do for your community; it has to be something you do for yourself as well. On a selfish level, you have to get something personally significant out of maintaining your clinic's relationships, boundaries, resources and systems. It has to work for you, if you're going to do it for any length of time.

So, it's important to know yourself and your own needs enough to be able to evaluate whether or not the punking job is a match in that way. I suspect that a lot of TBEC problems in clinics are related to people not getting their own needs met and unconsciously expecting their employers, coworkers, or teachers to take care of them; meanwhile those people are probably working flat-out just to keep the social container together. Successfully being a punk over an extended period of time requires some fairly

ruthless introspection about who you are, what you want, what you expect from other people, and how all that fits in with what the job itself requires. Is doing something this difficult, this intense, and this counter-cultural going to be good for you, as an individual?

For a lot of us, the answer is a resounding yes. Making access to acupuncture real for a lot of people happens to be just what we needed to do for ourselves. Who knows why? If punking teaches you anything, it's that people are incredibly diverse, and human bodies and minds are mysterious. Some of us are personally weird and difficult in a way that matches the weirdness and difficulty of punking.

But some of us aren't, and that is, emphatically, OK. If it turns out that punking isn't for you, if you feel exhausted at the prospect of maintaining a social container, if small business terrifies or disappoints you, please don't try to make yourself do it anyway because you think it somehow reflects on your worth as a person or your commitment to your ideals. If you decide to be a punk, be a punk because punking makes you happy, full stop. Take care of your social container because it's a joyful thing to do (even when it's hard) and because it's also a way of taking care of yourself. Punking is a choice, and for some of us it's a right and beautiful choice, but it has to be made freely, not out of guilt or obligation.

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Resources

On Opening a Clinic

The Mighty CA Wiki

<https://www.pocacoop.com/wiki/acupunk-wiki/>

20 Steps to Opening Your POCA Clinic

<https://www.pocacoop.com/wiki/acupunk-wiki/File:20 Steps to Opening your POCA clinic-1.pdf>

Reflection question

1. Do you want to open your own clinic?

On Being an Employee: Punkling Guide to Jobs after Graduation

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1avGRIiK-JTDmPsaAXKtR89gsJcrBUozvn5ThlLoKgg8/edit?ts=5a29dbc7>

This Is Not a Normal Job, or Do You Really Want to Work at WCA
OR
Navigating the North and South Poles of Working at WCA for Prospective Employees

One thing is for sure: working at WCA is unlike any job that you have had before. The more you understand that, the more likely you will be happy and fulfilled if you choose to go ahead and work here (provided of course we decide to hire you.) Working at WCA demands much more from you than a normal job and also rewards you much more (and differently) than a normal job does. It's not everyone's cup of tea however, and it's emphatically NOT the right choice for everybody. You have to buy in to the internal logic of the organization in order to be fulfilled. Let us explain and then let's have a talk about your prospective employment. We'll start by describing the two poles of working at WCA.

The North Pole: Social Joy is Beautiful and It's the Fuel

If you've read Rebecca Solnit's book *A Paradise Built in Hell*,¹⁵ or even the summary in Lisa's book *Punking: The Praxis of Community Acupuncture* ¹⁶ you're familiar with the concept of social joy. What fuels WCA is the fact that humans are inherently social, cooperative creatures. Rebecca Solnit's book describes how "experts" like to try to paint a picture of people behaving selfishly, and savagely, when disasters interrupt normal life, but in fact most people become less selfish, more caring, and more cooperative in the face of disasters, so much so that many people cherish their memories of disaster situations as deeply fulfilling experiences. Similarly, when we first opened WCA, all the "experts" told us that nobody who had a choice would want to get acupuncture in a communal setting; the whole value of acupuncture was in its private and individual nature. What we learned, though, is that many patients cherish the experience of community healing. Even if they can afford private room acupuncture, for many of them, WCA is exactly where they want to be; it fulfills some kind of deep yearning to be with other people. In terms of patients, at least, what makes WCA work is something that we'll never run out of, because it's just who humans *are*.

At WCA we firmly believe that capitalism in healthcare is a disaster, and we're responding in the most pro-social way that we can. We love being punks in part because it fulfills that same deep yearning. We love needling as many patients as we can and we love being around a whole lot of people even if we are naturally introverted. To us it's a spiritual calling. We have found what we are supposed to do in this life, at least for the next several years, and we dive fully into it. We look forward to our next shift. The job takes us and realigns us. It makes us better people in the same way that disasters can

¹⁵ Solnit, Rebecca. *A Paradise Built in Hell: The Extraordinary Communities That Arise in Disaster*. 2009, Viking.

¹⁶ Rohleder, Lisa. *Punking: [The Praxis of Community Acupuncture](#)*. 2018, Peoples Organization of Community Acupuncture.

make better people. Our job is our micro solution to the macro problem of our fractured, suffering world. It changes how we see everything.

That's...not so normal, right? What we are saying here is that this job is qualitatively different than any job we've had before, even other jobs that we've liked. The final chapter in Rebecca Solnit's book talks about how difficult it is to translate who we are during disasters – our best selves – to who we are in “normal life”. Even though we want to, it's hard; normal life tends to make us more selfish and less social. That idea gets to how difficult it is, actually, to work at WCA as a punk.

Being a punk requires much more commitment than most jobs. Being a WCA punk additionally means working with a bunch of other punks, many of whom you don't normally see as they work at other hours and other locations and blending your energy with theirs to create a container that can provide treatment to tens of thousands of people. That requires flexibility as well as commitment on your part. When we started spreading the idea of Community Acupuncture into what would eventually become the POCAverse, and other CA clinics started opening, those clinics that had two or more punks realized that working together felt in some ways like a marriage: it's a kind of social joy.

The South Pole: Small Business Is Brutal and It's the Container

Small businesses outnumber large businesses in the US, but not everybody has worked in a small business, and it can be a huge shock if you're not prepared. Even people who have worked in a small business might not have had the responsibility of making sure the business stayed viable, i.e. owning it. And while you might imagine that you understand that it's tough to have a small business, until you run one, trust us – you don't understand. There is no safety net with our jobs and you always have to pay attention to the bottom line, unlike bigger businesses where you can go in do your 9-5 and leave for the night or weekend and forget about it.

Small businesses are brutal and unforgiving, which is why a lot of them don't survive their first few years. It's very odd that on the one hand, WCA is like this explosion of social joy, and on the other, it's this incredibly hard slog of providing a stable base for that social joy in the form of a small business.

WCA is a collective, meaning that all the punks are responsible and have an impact on whether the business stays viable. Whether we get paid, and how much, is a collective responsibility.

Everything you do matters and affects everyone else; you can have a very positive or a very negative impact on the business itself. We need to trust each other and work together. Each person needs to hold up their end and if they don't, the whole business suffers.

We are all accountable to each other. But what does being accountable mean? It relates to how much energy and focus you can put into WCA, how flexible you can be, how committed you can be, how much you're willing to work on your skills. It means navigating the autonomy boundaries between us. So, let's talk about autonomy.

Autonomy and Working in a Collective

It's possible for some people to be successful solo punks in their own clinics; for some people that's the right choice. The equation there is that in return for total autonomy with regard to their work schedules, their decision-making, really everything to do with their small business, they have accepted total responsibility for the success of their clinic.

One of the great myths about small business is that you have more freedom as a small business owner. In a sense that's true – partially – but the bigger truth is that small businesses eat your freedom and your autonomy in the same way that small children do, because small businesses demand care and attention in a very similar way. You can't ignore them; you have to put their needs ahead of yours a lot of the time; you are always thinking about them. If you can't step up to that commitment, you can't be trusted with that responsibility.

Those of us who work at WCA have chosen to share the commitment and the responsibility of running an unforgiving small business. This means we have strategically chosen to sacrifice some of our autonomy. We've thrown our lot in with each other and decided to put up with each other because we would rather do this scary thing together than alone. This means, for example, that we're willing to make certain sacrifices with regard to our work schedules as opposed to having exactly the schedule we'd choose as an individual. We're willing to put energy into working together as opposed to doing everything exactly our own way all the time.

For a collective to be functional, there has to be a balance between what people take out of the collective with what they put in. We all have to make some sacrifices in order to reap the collective rewards. If you're not in a position to make any sacrifices, probably you shouldn't try to work for a collective — you should go ahead and make your own clinic.

Don't Make the Choice When You're Drunk, or the Perils of Inspiration

The goal of this document is to clearly describe the choice you're making if you work for WCA, so that you can make a good decision for yourself (and for WCA). Unfortunately, feeling inspired by WCA and/or community acupuncture itself doesn't necessarily help you make a good decision. It's possible to get kind of drunk on a vision of the North Pole (social joy) and not give enough thought to what the demands and constraints of the South Pole (small business) mean for you and your life.

We don't want you to make the choice when you're drunk, so we're asking you to please be careful about feeling "inspired". We think a better question to ask yourself is, *Do you really need to do this?* Do you really need to be in the kind of space that people find in the aftermath of disasters, where there's not much security (if any) but the interactions are much more intense and meaningful? Do you need to resist capitalism in healthcare, for whatever reason? Is it worth it to you to get paid less because you know you're providing pain relief to people who otherwise could never afford it?

If you don't NEED to do this, you probably won't be happy at WCA. The work is too hard and the pay is too low, relatively speaking.

Is the pressure of a small business with very narrow financial margins a good thing for you, on any level? Is it good for you to have to make a commitment, to have to make sacrifices, to have no choice about pulling your weight? Or are those things all negatives, in which case working for WCA is probably a bad idea? For some of us, the way that small business has forced us to confront our own individual issues has been a good thing for our personal growth, even if it hasn't been easy. Will it be good for you?

Do you need to work with other people in a collective, or could you be happy as a solo punk in your own business? Are the trade-offs worth it to you?

Finally, this particular collective won't be a fit for everybody. The people who work at WCA are all desperate to do this particular work, each for our own reasons. More than once somebody has referred to WCA as "the Island of Misfit Toys" and what they were talking about was the staff, not the patients. We might be too weird for you; don't worry, we're not offended, we're too weird for a lot of people. If you're a similar kind of weird, though, we want to work with you.

Most of all, though, we want you to make an informed, thoughtful, un-pressured decision about whether or not WCA is the right fit for you.

Appendix

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Community Acupuncture: Making Buckets from Ming Vases

Abstract

Community acupuncture – as practiced by self-styled ‘acupunks’ – is a radically different vision and philosophy for the practice of acupuncture in the West. Patients are seen in a group setting, which allows for treatment to be conducted via a high-volume, low-cost sustainable business model. Spa settings and excessive Chinese medicine theory are unnecessary with such a model of treatment, as the needles do all the necessary work. This article describes the vision, aims and underlying philosophy of the community acupuncture movement.

Acupuncturists and acupunks

Community acupuncture¹ has a curious problem. It is a controversial subject among acupuncturists, admired by some for its lively idealism and despised by others who accuse it of ‘degrading’ Chinese medicine. At this point in time, the community acupuncture movement in the United States is still very much a work in progress but has developed significant momentum. It owes this momentum to a variety of factors, including the Great Recession, the increasing inaccessibility of healthcare for people with ordinary incomes, and the undercurrent of populism that is currently surfacing in the Occupy movement – community acupuncture seems timely. But the vigor of community acupuncture also comes from a careful and conscious rejection of the professional acupuncture culture that has developed in the US in particular and in Western countries in general.

Possibly the greatest challenge to the success of the community acupuncture movement is not acupuncturists who hate the thought of community acupuncture, but rather acupuncturists who love community acupuncture in theory, but misunderstand how to do it in practice. This misunderstanding sometimes comes from an inability to reject the professional culture of acupuncture – acupuncturists tend to like to keep their options open and try to ‘have it both ways’ by practicing community acupuncture and simultaneously striving to be respectable examples of the acupuncture profession who get along well with their peers. This does not work.

Genuinely successful community acupuncturists have to refuse to act like acupuncturists, think like acupuncturists – even think of themselves as acupuncturists. The movement has come up with a useful shorthand: we call ourselves acupunks, or often just punks. Upstanding representatives of conventional acupuncture culture in the US are more than happy to agree with us about that: we are the troublemakers of the acupuncture world.

Community acupuncture has spread as far and fast as it has in the US in large part due to the fact that I was able to write a column about it for the publication *Acupuncture Today*, but after a year the editors fired me as a columnist because they thought the column had, in their words, ‘dangerous potential’. This article is about the difference between an acupuncturist and a community acupunk. I hope it will be useful to acupuncturists who are contemplating practicing community acupuncture. Since you can’t have it both ways, you need to decide whether you are, at heart, a punk. An online dictionary (dictionary.com) defines ‘punk’ variously as ‘any prepared substance that will smolder and can be used

to light fireworks, fuses, etc., ‘something or someone worthless or unimportant’, ‘a young ruffian; hoodlum’ and ‘a style or movement characterized by the adoption of aggressively unconventional and often bizarre or shocking clothing, hairstyles, makeup ... and the defiance of social norms of behavior, usually associated with punk rock musicians and fans’. An early reviewer of this article was concerned that using the term punk throughout this article would lead some readers to prematurely dismiss its arguments. Such people might share the values of community acupuncture but would be turned off by the call to become a punk. It is therefore worth clarifying that turning off acupuncturists who think that they share our values is a conscious goal for us: we do not want to persuade people to do what we do - they need to want to do it enthusiastically, without persuasion and in the face of opposition and difficulties. Furthermore, it is a good thing for community acupuncture as a movement to be dismissed by acupuncturists who do not want to get dirty and disruptive, because the odds are high that those acupuncturists would be unable to make community acupuncture a living reality anyway. It is bad for community acupuncture as a movement to be embraced by acupuncturists who love it in theory but who are too well-socialized to make it real.

Community acupuncture needs people who are able and willing to smoulder, who can light a fuse and stand the heat. Community acupuncture needs people who are untroubled by being unimportant and glad to take care of other people who are unimportant. Community acupuncture needs people who are happy to be seen as ruffians by other acupuncturists, who can defy and shock the social norms of the acupuncture profession. Community acupuncture needs punks.

Orchids and dandelions, Ming vases and buckets

Acupuncture in the West is fundamentally out of context – it floats unmoored from the culture that created it, and is as yet unrooted in the US, the UK, Europe or Australia.² If acupuncture were a plant, it would be a fragile epiphyte - precariously attached to foreign structures and living mostly on air. How can acupuncture root itself in the West, and what might those roots look like? Community acupuncture has a vision of what acupuncture would look like if it were truly grounded in the West, and we are fixated on the rooting process. ‘Root’ in Latin is *radix*. Not only are we punks, we are radicals. If conventional acupuncture in the West is an orchid – a delicate and exotic epiphyte – we are dandelions: not much to look at, but tenacious, nutritious and challenging.

Our radical perspective on conventional professional acupuncture culture is that it is too passive and self-absorbed to survive in any meaningful way. In the US at least, acupuncturists as a group are not really a profession; they are merely dedicated, long-term consumers of the acupuncture education profession. There is a notable, uncritical emphasis on accumulating and consuming knowledge, as opposed to simply using what we already know to help real people. Many of us became acupuncturists because we were fascinated with the concepts of Chinese medicine; we were motivated to hear someone else talk about those concepts. Once we graduate from school, it becomes our turn: we go out looking for patients who we hope will want to listen to us talk about those same concepts and attempt to locate another tier of acupuncture education consumers below us. But we have trouble finding them. Community acupunks believe that this is because most potential patients of acupuncture are actually looking for something quite different than fascinating concepts. They want something that is less romantic, less abstract and more personally meaningful: they want relief from pain.

Acupuncture can provide relief from pain, with or without the theories of Chinese medicine to support it. A lot of acupuncturists treat their acupuncture training as if it were a Ming vase; they like to have it and display it so that other people can admire it. It is valuable to them because it is exotic, ancient and refined. They are resentful when other people don’t admire it sufficiently, because it is a rare and precious antique. It’s *their* rare and precious antique, which they believe entitles them to all kinds of social recognition. However, they have little intention of doing anything objectively useful in society with it.

Acupuncturists define themselves by what they know; community acupunks define themselves by what they do.

Community acupunks take the Ming vase off the shelf and use it like a bucket. We are not interested in venerating its ancient elegance, because we know people who need water. If there were the acupuncture training equivalent of a bucket that allowed us to pour the water of relief over as many suffering people as possible with as little fuss as possible, we would be delighted, since we do not care that much about knowing everything there is to know. In the US, however, you can only get an acupuncture license if you have a Ming vase – an education that is devoted to the theories of Chinese medicine. So, we acupunks go about devaluing' the Ming vase by filling it up and pouring it out over tens - maybe even hundreds - of thousands of people. These people do not even notice that it was a Ming vase that brought them relief; they only notice that their pain went away. This offends many acupuncturists, who have no desire for acupuncture to be so commonplace, so unremarkable, and so unremarked.

A low-cost, high-volume business model ...

Community acupuncture is not really about acupuncture - at least not the acupuncture that is defined by concepts and theories. It is a means of delivering something else altogether. The only hope of rooting acupuncture in Western soil, we believe, lies in recognizing that the worth of acupuncture lies in the solace it offers, not in its theoretical underpinnings. When I first opened my community acupuncture practice ten years ago, other acupuncturists repeatedly told me that working-class patients do not want acupuncture, as they are not refined or educated enough to appreciate it; they do not value their health enough to pay for acupuncture, because they spend all their money on beer and cigarettes. Thanks to such helpful advice from my peers, I had no difficulty rejecting professional acupuncture culture (rage can be a great source of clarity, not to mention motivation). Now that my practice provides some 700 treatments each week, it is hard for anyone to claim that working-class patients do not want acupuncture. But it is still hard to get acupuncturists who think that they want to practice community acupuncture to understand the difference between orchids and dandelions, Ming vases and buckets.

It is very sad to hear, as I do from time to time: 'Well, I tried to offer affordable acupuncture, but nobody wanted it.' When I first opened my clinic, I spoke with the director of a prominent local affordable acupuncture practice that focuses on treating patients with serious diseases such as cancer but who have few resources. He told me flatly, 'Affordable acupuncture clinics don't grow. Ours hasn't grown at all in 11 years.' His clinic is a non-profit business with other funding sources besides patient fees. In the years since that conversation, my clinic has grown some 10,000 per cent with no significant funding sources other than patient fees. Why is this? He was trying to grow low-cost orchids. I was cultivating dandelions.

The core of community acupuncture as we define it is that it is a low-cost, high-volume business model. The cost is lower than most acupuncturists can stand, whilst the volume is higher. The business aspect is critical. Early in the US community acupuncture movement we defined what we meant by low cost and high volume and set parameters around the business model (see <http://www.pocacoop.com/join-POCA>). Many acupuncturists were outraged by our definition, because a cornerstone of their identity as acupuncturists is being able to do whatever they want, however they want. But we wanted community acupuncture to survive. We deliberately chose to discourage the would-be orchid growers. As a result, we were called divisive, polarizing, and worse. Our little plot of dandelions, however, is fairly healthy, and so we think it was worth it.

... and its consequences

The average payment for an acupuncture treatment in my clinic is about 18 dollars (11.41 British pounds).

Many people pay at the low end of our sliding scale, which is 15 dollars (9.51 pounds). The goal in setting our fees was to try to be accessible to people who have jobs that are paid at or the near minimum wage. Our decision to create a business based on fees this low has had all kinds of consequences (as well as being vilified by other acupuncturists for devaluing the profession).

The first consequence was that we had to radically simplify what we did in the clinic. If patients could only afford 15 dollars per visit in order to get a full, clinically sound course of treatment, then we had to find a way to give at least six treatments per hour if we wanted to keep the lights on in the clinic and take home a paycheck that would let us buy groceries. This was not a theoretical dilemma. If we could not figure out a way to treat quickly, simply and inexpensively, then patients would not get acupuncture and we would not eat. Other acupuncturists told us repeatedly that there was no market for this kind of stripped-down, non-verbal kind of acupuncture, in which practitioners spend no more than three minutes or so talking to the patient before inserting the needles. What those acupuncturists forgot, or never knew in the first place, is that acupuncture – all by itself - really works. If the treatments are frequent enough and regular enough, the results speak for themselves, and there are enough patients of modest means who want pain relief – as opposed to a lecture on Chinese medicine – for a business like ours to thrive. Therefore, the first consequence of setting fees at rates that working-class patients can afford is that treatments have to be simple and fast. No matter how compelling the theory or philosophy behind treatment, if patients cannot afford to pay you to do it and you cannot do it six times an hour, then it cannot be done. Many acupuncturists are unable to accept this consequence.

The second consequence of a low-cost, high volume business model is that as a practitioner you depend on your patients for your livelihood. If you work in a public-health treatment center, parole officers or social workers or psychiatric nurses will ensure that patients come in for treatment, and you can rely on them to keep your schedule full. If your job is supported by charitable donations or government funding, you can rely on wealthy donors or the government itself for your income. If you are providing acupuncture as a volunteer, in a humanitarian context, your livelihood has nothing to do with it at all. But in a community acupuncture clinic in a working-class neighborhood, your livelihood depends entirely upon one patient after another walking through your door and paying you what they can afford. You have to have good social skills, be willing to provide first-rate customer service, and you also need a healthy dose of humility. The people who make your job possible are the same people that your colleagues think are spending all their money on beer and cigarettes. Some of them know that acupuncturists – and other medical providers – think this. If you think this, they will pick up on it, and if you believe that you are better than they are because you own a Ming vase, they will not support your practice. You are directly accountable to them.

Many acupuncturists find it difficult to accept the consequences of being directly accountable to, and dependent on, patients. Whether they admit it or not, they chose acupuncture as a profession expecting some kind of secure and privileged position in society. In the US, in fact, many acupuncturists are vocal about wanting to be recognized as doctors. Acupunks can live with the consequence of having no security other than solid relationships with individual patients and with their community as a whole. We have found that punks can make a living by providing fast, simple, effective treatments and by being directly accountable to patients. Not necessarily an extravagant living, but a decent living, which results in thousands of ordinary people having access to as much acupuncture as they want or need.

Acupuncturists who are thinking of providing community acupuncture need to ask themselves if this is really what they want.

What do you want?

A final, critical distinction between acupuncturists and acupunks is that punks want and need jobs. At least in America, many acupuncturists have given little thought to what it really means to work as an acupuncturist, day in and day out, year in and year out, with regular hours and prosaic demands like payroll taxes. For many it is far more interesting to ponder the routes of the transverse and longitudinal Luo. For too many acupuncturists, acupuncture is an exotic hobby. Being a community acupunk is not designed to be intellectually entertaining. Any long-term clinician who is honest with herself will admit that the same strategies mostly work over and over. There are occasional exceptions, of course, but many of the patients who seek care are not suffering from anything fascinating, and what will help them is not particularly complex. As a community acupunk, I do a lot of the same points and point combinations over and over. My treatments are rarely thrilling. What is thrilling are my patients in their amazing diversity, and the clinical outcomes that occur when people have access to as much acupuncture as they want for months or years.³ This is how we believe that acupuncture can take root in the West: by practitioners concentrating on what ordinary people want and need from acupuncture, and what structures we need to create in order to make it available to them. Being a community acupunk means setting aside your identity as an acupuncturist in order to concentrate on this – because such an identity can be cumbersome or even crippling when you are trying to be useful out in the world. This is our challenge to the acupuncture profession in the West: do you want to be acupuncturists, or do you want to help people?

Lisa Rohleder has been a licensed acupuncturist in Portland, Oregon since 1994. She is a co-founder of [Working Class Acupuncture](#), the Community Acupuncture Network and the [People's Organization of Community Acupuncture](#).

Endnotes

1 We define 'community acupuncture' as the practice of acupuncture: 1) in a setting where multiple patients receive treatment at the same time; 2) by financially sustainable and accountable means, whereby community acupuncture clinics are directly supported by the patients who receive acupuncture in them, rather than by grants, donations, or other funding; 3) within a context of accessibility, which we create by providing consistent hours, making frequent treatment readily available, offering affordable services, and lowering as many barriers to treatment as we possibly can for as many people as possible while continuing to be financially self-sustaining.

2 This may also apply to Israel. I regret that I am unaware of the cultural context of acupuncture in Latin America.

3 Since words cannot adequately describe this, community acupunks in the US produced a 35-minute documentary about community acupuncture which can be viewed online at <https://vimeo.com/69251326>.

Student Conduct – Draft, March 2019

The Student Conduct Statement in the catalog needs some expansion and here is a draft.

Students are expected to *practice teamwork and cooperation (and) protect and preserve POCA Tech*. This means some very specific things which aren't always obvious to students, so here's an effort to spell them out. *

In the context of sociocracy, students are expected to practice teamwork and cooperation not just within their own cohorts, but also with other Circles and their members: Faculty, Administration, and the Board. Teamwork, cooperation, and preserving and protecting social containers for community acupuncture (like the school and the POCA clinics that loan their resources to student interns) are extremely important skills for students to practice while they're in school. Graduates of POCA Tech will need these skills whether they're employees or owners of POCA clinics; they're often what makes or breaks a punk's ability to succeed in practice.

One of the most distinctive elements of the community acupuncture model is that it recognizes and accepts the reality of limited resources. Many people who could benefit enormously from acupuncture have very limited financial resources. People living with chronic pain have limited time, energy, and attention. Crucial skills for punks include making the most of what's available, particularly people's limited time, energy, and ability to show up. As a punk, if you're taking for granted people's ability to show up in your clinic, you're doing punking all wrong. Similarly, if you think that anyone owes you a social container in which to practice acupuncture, you've misunderstood a core aspect of your work, which is to take care of that social container (if not build it yourself, from scratch).

The structure of POCA Tech was designed with the reality of students' limited resources in mind. Tuition is kept as low as possible. Consistently scheduled modules facilitate students' ability to maintain work and family responsibilities. No-interest tuition payment plans are encouraged. Grading is pass/fail, we emphasize mutual support rather than competition, and we try to be flexible wherever we can, recognizing that acupuncture school is a huge logistical and economic challenge for most students.

Similarly, Faculty, Admin, and Board Circles expect that students recognize, accept, and work with the reality of the school's limited resources. POCA Tech has a relatively narrow mission and we're not aiming to be everything to everyone. We're also not aiming for students to have an amazing experience in acupuncture school (remember,

most of us had bad experiences with acupuncture school). We *are* aiming to prepare you as well as possible for the reality of working in a POCA clinic after graduation. Students who don't feel that they have anything substantial to learn from POCA Tech, or who want to learn material and skills that we don't teach, aren't a good fit. Some specific things that the Faculty and Admin Circles need from students:

to be engaged

Engagement is vital for the kind of hands-on learning that this program emphasizes; it's also vital for cooperation and teamwork. Your ability to engage fully with punking as well as with your clinic's small business will, more than anything, determine your success after graduation.

to be responsible

Our extremely lean administrative structure means that we can't chase you for paperwork or tuition payments. If we have to nag you for anything, that's not good. Being responsible with regard to paperwork and finances is important practice for owning or working in a small business/POCA clinic.

to be communicative

Especially if you're having problems. Communication is a crucial part of how we make the most of limited resources. It's also a key skill in small business.

to be understanding

Keeping tuition low requires keeping salaries low — very low, by acupuncture school standards. The school relies on a nexus of many overlapping cooperative relationships. Building and managing these kinds of partnerships involves a lot of invisible work (some people would call it emotional labor), very similar to the kind of invisible work/emotional labor you'll be doing when you own a clinic or work in one. Please be aware when you're asking us to do additional emotional labor, because trust us, we're already pretty stretched.

Some specifics for Faculty/Student interactions, in no particular order:

to be understanding

Both because we're trying to keep tuition low, and because we're a technical school that prioritizes some very specific skills that only experienced punks have, we made the decision that our teachers would be, as much as possible, experienced punks. Most of POCA Tech's faculty are also punks at WCA, which donates its facilities to the student clinic. What students should know about punk teachers: 1) they're probably tired

because punking is very demanding, and 2) they're weirdly sensitive in the way that you too will be weirdly sensitive after doing community acupuncture for a while. Punks who are good at their jobs (see also: Faculty Circle) are exquisitely sensitive to body language, tone of voice, micro-expressions, in other words, they can practically read your minds a lot of the time. Yeah, that can be a real problem under certain circumstances.

Please treat the faculty gently. We're really not kidding. We cannot afford to burn them out because there aren't replacements. If you happen to be thinking, well, let's just hire different teachers, 1) that's not what the Board wants/not consistent with the mission of the school, and 2) good luck with making the budget work. Please don't take the social container of the school and WCA for granted; they were very hard to construct and they're not easy to maintain. Please don't take for granted the Faculty's time, energy, and ability to show up any more than you would take your patients for granted in those ways. Because our faculty are, just like your future patients, really stretched already.

Please be aware of ways that you're presenting the faculty with resistance, no matter how subtle. You'll need to do this in the future with your punk coworkers/employers, because you'll all be tired, and you'll all be sensitive. Please do not correct/argue with faculty members when they're teaching, no matter how wrong you think they are; you can check in with them later, after class, or if you think lots of the faculty are wrong, please put your concerns in writing and bring them to the Faculty Circle. Likewise, please be aware of questions and comments that turn into major derailments or tangents that require the faculty to drag the class back to the topic at hand.

to be engaged

Disengagement can affect the whole classroom atmosphere in a way that makes teaching more difficult. Lateness, especially repeated, is a form of disengagement. Not doing assignments is a form of disengagement. Not participating in exercises: ditto.

to be communicative

If there's a reason, especially related to potential accommodations, that you're late/not participating/not doing your homework, we need you to communicate about it so that we can work with you. Please don't make us guess.

to be responsible

We're all adults here (right?) and you'll get out of your POCA Tech education what you put into it. We need students to treat faculty like colleagues whom you depend on to

keep your social container functioning, as opposed to: your parents, The Man, or a disposable commodity. If you need to rebel against or critique someone, please redirect that energy towards the many other possible targets out in the world, as opposed to POCA Tech faculty and staff, who are definitely not getting paid enough to deal with that kind of drama. (Your future coworkers/employers won't be paid enough to deal with it either.) Please keep your priorities in order and your attention on the goal, which is for you to graduate and get to work in your community.

Nobody in the Faculty, Admin, or Board Circles are fans of using formal discipline processes, but please take this as notification that it's always a possibility. Student conduct that doesn't reflect a sincere effort to contribute to teamwork, cooperation, and preserving POCA Tech will eventually result in us needing to use that process, which starts out with warnings and can end in termination.

POCA Tech's code of ethics states that we strive to proactively promote ethical behavior among peers in the work environment, so please consider this document in that spirit. At some point it's not ethical for the school to keep accepting tuition from students whom we don't expect to be able to practice community acupuncture successfully, including due to lack of engagement or inability to demonstrate teamwork and cooperation.

*with sincere gratitude to the members of Cohorts 1 & 2 who taught us so much in this area!