

ACUPUNK

Field Notes of a Contemporary Alchemist

by Kaz Wegmuller, L.Ac.

Guarding the Fire

Rain! What started out as a soupy mist is turning into a true drizzle. It's been a relatively dry winter, and with spring around the corner this feels like it may be one last chance to play in the rain. Lukas and I put on sweaters and rain gear, then I lace up my hiking boots and pull on his galoshes. We get in the car and head towards It's Beach, backpack ready with snacks and a shovel.

When we get there, the beach is deserted except for a few dogs and their people, the mermaids carved into the rocks, and a couple of guys who had spent the night there. As it starts to rain harder, they get out of their sleeping bags, pack up, and leave. Their fire, which had kept them warm through the night, is now almost out.

Lukas and I have our work cut out for us. He makes it his job to find blackened chunks of charcoal ("black chalk") and throw them into what's left of the glowing embers. I shift the one log around a bit until some newly exposed wood starts to burn. The rain is beginning to come down hard, so we start piling rocks over the embers, creating a makeshift roof to keep the fire dry. "Gotta guard the fire or else those hobos won't be warm tonight," I tell Lukas. (Vagrants? Drunks? Indigents? What's the best word to implant in a two-year old's impressionable mind?) Lukas responds wordlessly, chucking a big piece of charcoal into the heart of the little blaze burning amidst this welcome torrent.

Gotta guard the fire. There's a whole school of Chinese medicine based on this principle, which found its most eloquent expression some 300 years ago in the theories of one Zhang Jingyue. In a nutshell, this school believed that the *yang* fire of life was what kept people alive, so the fire had to be protected and stoked to maintain health. This was accomplished primarily through the use of warming herbs like cinnamon bark and processed aconite, as well as through acupuncture and moxibustion. But lifestyle was and still is considered a very important health

factor in Chinese medicine, so the practice of guarding one's fire extended to a close attention to the many details of daily life. A simple activity like the cooking of a meal was embraced as an opportunity to balance energetically "cool" foods like bamboo shoots with important "hot" ingredients like ginger and chili peppers. A morning walk was considered healthy not just because of the exercise involved, but because it allowed one to absorb the warming *yang qi* of the rising sun.

Traditional Chinese medicine today is a pragmatic discipline, embracing many theories other than Dr. Zhang's "Warming and Supplementing School." We know that some people are too "hot" and don't need warming, and others don't have enough *yin* fluids so additional *yang* heat just burns the *yin* even more, making them sicker. But with the cold weather we've been having, it kind of makes sense to guard your fire. After all, what is life but a slow (we hope slow) burn from birth to death? Why speed up the burn rate with frenzied over-activity? Why not protect the fire so it doesn't go out too soon? Why not eat yummy hot soup on a cold winter day?

Lukas and I sit on the beach, content. The fire has been saved and the hobos are back down on the beach drinking beer. We eat some sandwiches and fruit, hungry after our hard work. It's about time for Lukas' nap, so we head up to the street, get in the car, and start driving up the coast. Driving usually gets him to sleep, but he's all fired up from the morning's activity. "Lukas help fire," he says. In fact, he doesn't stop chattering and we're all the way up to where Bonny Doon Road meets Highway One, and he's still talking about gathering and burning black chalk. I turn the car and head into the hills. We get off at the Bonny Doon Vineyards tasting room, where the nice lady gives Lukas some grape juice. I get my own grape juice, a glass of their Ca' del Solo Sangiovese, and feel its warm glow like a little sun shining deep inside of me.