

A Personal Reflection by Dr. Angela Wu

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Recent events have led me to contemplate the path I have followed to this point in life, and to share a few observations that may be helpful to others on their journeys.

When I first came to the United States from Taiwan in 1976, I expected to practice traditional Chinese medicine. But upon my arrival, I discovered it was not legal for me to practice acupuncture here. So, I told myself, I had better go to a western medical school.

After I settled in California, I committed myself to a second mission: gaining custody of my two children, Devin and Robyn, who were still in Taiwan with their father. As I worked to achieve this goal, my life priorities shifted dramatically. Caring for my children was far more important than medical school. And so, instead of pursuing a western degree, while raising my children I worked to make traditional Chinese medicine a viable profession in the United States, for myself and others. With our efforts, California recognized acupuncture and Chinese medicine both professionally and legally in 1982.

My understanding of Chinese medicine and my experience in my own body have taught me to be aware of challenges with my heart. And in July 2015, I was diagnosed with atrial fibrillation — A-Fib — an abnormal heart rhythm characterized by rapid and irregular beating. The condition can cause heart palpitations, fainting, shortness of breath, chest pain, and fatigue.

When, in December 2015, I couldn't wake up fully, I realized I had reached a critical point with my own health issues. As I came to terms with the possibility of moving on to the next level of being, I was comforted in knowing I had made the right decision when I first came to the United States, to make my children my priority instead of pursuing a western medical degree. I was thrilled that my children had turned out so well. I had done a great job! Both Devin and Robyn were very successful in their professions. Even more important, both had turned out to be wonderful people. They weren't just my children, they were my best friends.

As I reflected, I realized I am thankful for the life I have lived and what I have achieved. Having grown up in a culture that limits and undervalues women, I was passionately committed to break with old Chinese traditions and enable my daughter Robyn to experience a better life. I saw she has done just that, achieving and flourishing at an amazing level. I am so proud of her!

My son Devin was born as the fourth generation of the first son of a first son. He was also born under a lucky star, which, according to Chinese tradition, meant I was not supposed to gain custody of him. Winning custody of Devin cost me all my wealth in Taiwan. It was worth every penny. I am proud that he has turned out to be a well balanced and evolved individual, one I admire.

On June 2, 2016, I had surgery to correct the A-Fib. Never in my wildest dreams could I have anticipated what I would go through in the year between diagnosis and surgery — physically, emotionally, mentally — particularly the powerful side effects of western medications. I was prescribed nine different drugs over the course of the year. My body reacted to eight of them poorly. In addition, I was admitted to the emergency room 10 times. In one incident, when my heart rate dropped to 30 beats per minute, the paramedics came to the clinic where I work.

It wasn't until August 2016, two months after the surgery, that I began to feel like my old self, both physically and mentally. Once my clarity returned, I had my "ah-ha" moment: Life is always a gift, even when the package it's in seems to suck! As long as you have the courage to open up the package and see what it reveals, wisdom will be found within, no matter how poorly it is wrapped. Contemplating the past year and my challenging recovery, I asked myself: What is inside this package? What is the gift underneath? As I delved deeper, here is what I discovered.

In my youth, I wished to go to western medical school. This past year I got my wish! My condition provided me with the opportunity to take a crash course in western medicine, and a greater opportunity to understand what others are experiencing when I see them in my practice. This jewel of a lesson is far more valuable than anything I could have learned in a med-school class or from a book, and is a great reminder that life is a gift; our task is to learn how to receive it.

And so I continue my journey with big smile, welcoming every day what life brings! I continue to care for myself, using what I learned in my one-year "medical school" experience and what I know from Chinese medicine.

Finally, I feel like, and am back to being my old self again, with one important exception: My heart, the seat of gratitude and love in traditional Chinese medicine, is even more full. And that is a gift I hope to share with you.