

This Is The Life: Pins and needles

It's a rare day indeed when I empathise with Gwynneth Paltrow. Nice girl though she undoubtedly is, reading about her is akin to being sent on a basket-weaving course in Geneva with the head prefect. When journalists eulogise her "poise, graciousness and candid charm", I long for them to suddenly uncover her lost years with the Church of Satan. And while Paltrow has been nurturing her unborn child by sticking to a macrobiotic diet, I have been gorging on Dairy Milk and toxic Scottish salmon.

But where Gwynnie and I do see eye to eye is on the life-enhancing qualities of acupuncture. The lithesome one says in this month's Vanity Fair that her acupuncturist helped her to reach "a new level" in her life, where she found love and learned to cope with her father's death. Now I managed the love thing on my own armed only with a bottle of Scotch and a willingness to say "yes", whatever the question. But grief, and the torpor that so often accompanies it, can make a girl break the habits of a lifetime and cry out for reinforcements. It can lay you so low that even the irrepressible fear that an acupuncturist will turn out to be the Taoist version of Olivier's dentist in Marathon Man will not stop you lying on the pin man's couch.

I was a 21-year-old student, locked in a bog-standard cycle of self-loathing and despondency following the death of my father, when I first found myself at an acupuncture clinic. I had no interest in Eastern philosophy or Chinese medicine and the only reason I was there was that my tutor had booked and paid for the session. To my surprise the acupuncturist spent an hour questioning me before any needles were produced and immediately proved to be far sager and more humorous than any of the idiot counsellors and shrinks that the college doctor had advised me to see.

More startling still were the currents of energy, like mini lightning strikes, which darted around my body with the insertion of some ultra-fine

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needles. By the end of the session I had drenched the couch with sweat, chewed my fingers off with terror, and yet felt somehow lighter and brighter than I had for months. I am not exaggerating the case when I say that acupuncture gave me the energy and will to sit my finals.

So you'd think the sessions would have heralded a golden age of spiritual and bodily nurture. Alas, no. Once I'd sat my exams I worked out that the fee could be usefully diverted to my shoe habit. And, to tell the truth, I never quite got over the weirdness of the sensation produced by the needles.

I remained a lapsed patient until last summer when a series of personal setbacks culminated in the news that my mother's cancer was terminal. On the blackest day for many a year my great friend Clare phoned and said briskly, "I'm sending you to see my acupuncturist, Gerad." Two minutes later Gerad was on the phone explaining that Clare had paid for a consultation and that he'd made time to see me ASAP. The next day saw me mildly panic-stricken in Gerad's spotless, white Harley Street clinic explaining that, yes, I knew acupuncture worked, but that in my experience it could also hurt. "Yes," said Gerad calmly, "it does sometimes."

I found his response strangely reassuring. There's nothing more infuriating than a medical or dental practitioner telling you that some wince-inducing process is utterly pain-free. As it turns out, the procedure Gerad practised on me, involving eight needles left in and one speedy jab - which made all the other points zing as though I was wired to the national grid - was quite painful. I yelped loudly, then walked out of there feeling better than I had in months - so blithe I almost collided with a speeding taxi, having forgotten about anything so worldly as traffic.

But the most unexpected side-effect of the acupuncture occurred the following day (sensitive male readers may wish to skip the next detail) when I ovulated for the second time that month - a completely unprecedented performance on behalf of my ovaries, the net result of which is the six-month-full belly which now swaggers before me.

I later discovered that Gerad is something of a fertility specialist and has achieved astonishing results where medics and IVF have failed. Four desperate, would-be mothers of my acquaintance have had, or are having, "a Gerad baby". At this point I can only reassure you that I don't do crystals, pyramids, self-help books or even the Atkins diet. All I know is that acupuncture works if you find the right practitioner. I'm now so brave with Gerad that I've let him stick needles in the delicate place where the bridge of my nose meets the hollows of my eyes - if you've ever seen Hellraiser, you can imagine what that looks like.

Curious readers should be warned that Gerad Kite's Harley Street practice is rather dear. But the truly adventurous should find he performs the same voodoo magic at a fraction of the price in south London. Just don't be surprised if your treatment for neuralgia results in triplets.

**By Rowan Pelling
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