

# The Art of Community Acupuncture

Lisa Rohleder, L.Ac.

*"We can build up our hope by making, by creating."*

*Corita Kent, artist, educator, and advocate for social justice*

*"The secret of life," said sculptor Henry Moore to poet Donald Hall, "is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is — it must be something you cannot possibly do."*

*Via Rob Brezny*

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# Introduction

Acupuncture is centuries old, and very diverse in terms of both its theories and practices. There are a lot of different ways to do it, as well as a lot of different ways to think about it. Community acupuncture represents a specific perspective on both how to do acupuncture and how to think about it; you could say that community acupuncture, on all levels, is designed to be *as user-friendly as possible*. It's meant to be easy to receive and straightforward to deliver.

This zine is for anyone who's considering learning how to practice community acupuncture or who's already learning it, at any stage. Because I work in a school for community acupuncturists, I've spent a lot of time thinking about how to train practitioners. This might be unconventional, but over time I've come to think that approaching community acupuncture primarily as a creative practice is an important framework for setting a tone that's empowering, realistic, and liberating.

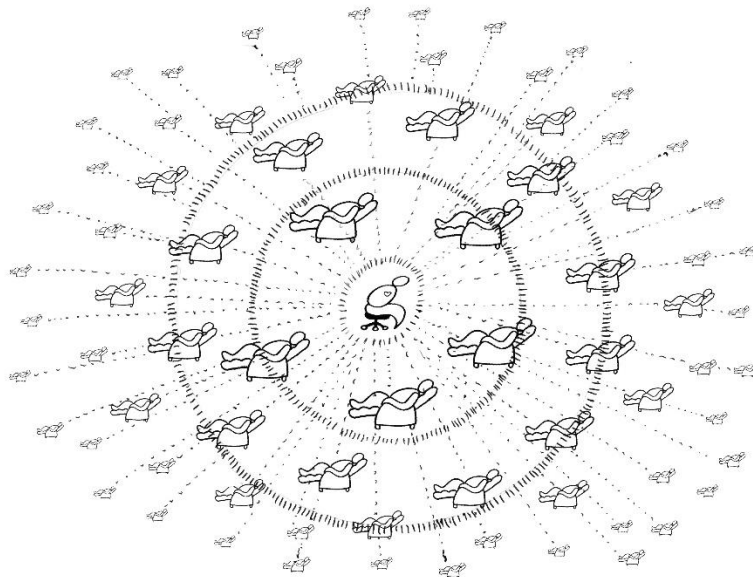
It's all about community acupuncture *as art*.

What's most important about community acupuncture isn't abstract but concrete. The value of community acupuncture is determined by human beings receiving acupuncture and benefiting from it. A community acupuncture clinic establishes its worth by racking up a long, long list of different kinds of relief: headaches banished, menstrual cramps dispelled, panic attacks averted, nights slept through without being interrupted by pain, all the ways that yet another human gets through yet another day a little more easily. Community acupuncture is about making a resource that's tangibly useful to a wide variety of people, which means it's fundamentally about *making* as much as healing.

And making community acupuncture has so much in common with making art that I think we might be better off just calling it art, period.

Just like being an artist, being a community acupuncturist represents a somewhat difficult occupation in this society. If you want a community acupuncture practice (whether or not it's your full-time job) you're going to have to fight for it in some of the same ways artists have to fight for the space, time, and support to make art. It's rare for anyone to receive that space, time and support as a neatly packaged gift that drops into their lap. Some people get interested in community acupuncture (or acupuncture, period) without realizing that having a practice involves deliberate, systematic effort. It's something that you have to make happen, if you want it — nobody else is going to make it happen for you.

What do we mean by “a community acupuncture practice”? There are many variables but at its core a community acupuncture practice looks like this:



*artwork by Moses Cooper, L.Ac.*

At my school we call this “the nucleus diagram” because it follows the pattern of an atom with a nucleus at the center of a cloud of electrons. If you’re a community acupuncturist (or maybe an acupuncturist of any variety) your practice is you at the center of a little cloud of patients, the people who come to you for treatment. Your practice is fundamentally about you making connections to a group of other people. The composition of that group is always changing to some degree because people come and go, they get better as a result of your treatments or they realize that acupuncture isn’t a fit, they move away and then they come back. If you have a healthy practice there are always new people finding you.

Sometimes acupuncturists don’t realize that a practice is something you have to *make* and that learning how to do acupuncture in a training program is not the same thing as consistently having the opportunity to do it in the real world. This can lead to a lot of frustration and disappointment. So let’s just make this clear from the beginning: You have to apply intentional creative effort in every part of the nucleus diagram to make a practice for yourself. There’s art all over that diagram! Each individual treatment you give to each of the patients in the little cloud is a piece of art. Each of the “atomic bonds”, the relationship between you and each patient, is also art. And how you make yourself into a practitioner so you can hold space for all those people, so that you can *be the center* — that’s a long artistic process too. Every bit of that diagram is something that you have to bring into being, not

something you can buy or get from someone else.

In this zine I'm going to use the term "community acupuncture" in its broadest possible sense, in the hopes that it can be useful to anybody who's allowed under the law to apply needles to acupuncture points. In some states, professionals like physicians, physical therapists and chiropractors are legally qualified to use acupuncture needles on acupuncture points with very little training, and some of those professionals might be interested in providing community acupuncture if they had some more context for it. In some states, laypeople and professionals like nurses, counselors and social workers can be trained to use what's known as the NADA Five Needle Protocol, or 5NP for short, which is five needles in the ear to address stress, trauma, substance abuse and detoxification. People who use 5NP are called AcuDetox specialists or auricular acupuncture technicians; nonetheless much of this discussion about how to make a community acupuncture practice could apply to their work.

And finally, some licensed acupuncturists who were trained to practice conventional one on one acupuncture might want to create a community acupuncture practice. This zine assumes that all of these people — and probably some people not on that list — could engage in the art of community acupuncture. Many people who went to conventional acupuncture schools didn't get the perspective that a practice was something that they had to make for themselves, so I hope this perspective on acupuncture practice as art is helpful to them too.

For POCA Tech students (that's our acupuncture school) I hope that this zine can provide a big picture overview of our program, as well as an introduction to our series of Praxis zines that we use throughout the curriculum. And for prospective students considering POCA Tech, I hope this zine provides enough context for you to make a good decision for yourself about whether this particular art is for you.

# Community Acupuncture as Art

Let's look at some of the overlaps between community acupuncture and art in more detail.

First, there's no one right way to make art and there's no one right way to practice community acupuncture.

Just like a potter or a painter, art for community acupuncturists involves some constraints that you have to learn, particularly related to safety. Kilns are hot! Oil painters shouldn't breathe in the fumes from open containers of turpentine. *Everybody* needs ventilation. Similarly, there are ways of inserting acupuncture needles that cause injury and so those are off limits. There are ways to cause pain unnecessarily with needling and those should be avoided. There are ways to help people feel safer while receiving acupuncture from you and it's important to cultivate them.

Beyond certain basic limits, though, as long as you're paying attention to safety, you're free to experiment and learn, through trial and error, what works best for you and your patients. A significant amount of the knowledge that acupuncturists have about what's effective is empirical. Certain acupuncture points and treatment strategies are known to work because many people over time have observed that they work. Part of your job is to continue that exploration. Creativity means trying things, combining and recombining, imagining and reimagining. Nobody can tell you what will work best for you — you're going to have to find out for yourself. This applies even if you're using a protocol like 5NP and nothing else; there are still plenty of variables because the art of your practice is not synonymous with “where you put the needles” — it's much bigger than that.

Within the constraints of safety and practicality, the vital core of your practice, like the vital core of any art, comes from you. Nobody can breathe life into your work but you. It's not your patients' or your community's responsibility to animate your practice and make it thrive, it's yours. And what brings a practice to life is personal, individual, and deep.

Second, just like art, the act and the process of creating are as important as the “product” of community acupuncture. A lot of what makes community acupuncture effective and appealing to so many people is the vibe of *continual process*. A community acupuncture clinic is not unlike an artist's studio. When you walk into a community acupuncture treatment space, what you see is people working on their health in one way or another. Community acupuncture shines when it comes to managing chronic conditions, which means for many patients there's not really an endpoint, there's just constantly engaging in creating a better quality of life for themselves, and the clinic is an important part of their efforts. A community acupuncture clinic is never “done” with its work, it's always doing it, and the quality of doing it is what makes it fulfilling to both acupuncturists and patients.

A community acupuncture practice suits people who enjoy the ongoing process of making and remaking, and who aren't frustrated by the lack of a final product.

The best way to become a better artist is to make more art, and the best way to become a better community acupuncturist is to give more treatments! "More" is better than "right". It's fine to read books and go to seminars and otherwise research possibilities for your practice, but there's no substitute for learning by doing. At POCA Tech, the center of our program is the student clinic because we know that patients are the most profound teachers.

A community acupuncture practice suits people who want to challenge *perfectionism*, especially their own.

On the topic of books, certain books about art helped me with aspects of my community acupuncture practice in ways that books about acupuncture didn't:

[The Artist's Way](#) by Julia Cameron

[Big Magic](#) by Elizabeth Gilbert

[Make Your Art No Matter What and Your Art Will Save Your Life](#), by Beth Pickens

I recommend looking for resources that support artists, and considering how those same resources could support you as a community acupuncturist.



# Being Good with People

One of the most important skills related to the art of community acupuncture is the skill of being good with people. This skill is foundational not just to building a practice but to working in your clinic and enjoying it, which is important because enjoyment gives stability and longevity to your practice. (Also, life is short! Don't do community acupuncture if it's not enjoyable to you!) Because this particular skill isn't associated with arcane knowledge or fancy techniques, a lot of acupuncturists undervalue it. Being good with people arguably helps anybody succeed in any occupation, but it's crucial when your job is about working with people who are stressed out and/or in pain.

A major focus of POCA Tech's program is to turn out graduates who are good with people. This applies particularly to people who are suffering. Desperate people and shattered people show up in community acupuncture clinics looking for relief, so it's important to be able to receive them kindly. Not all acupuncture schools treat this as a priority.

Technical skill with acupuncture is obviously important to success, but unless your technical skills are so mind blowing that they're on the level of "raising the dead", they probably won't be enough to compensate for *not* being good with people. Remember that many prospective patients are afraid of needles, period. If your job requires people to voluntarily sign up for you putting needles in them (and as a community acupuncturist your job does indeed depend on this), you can't also have an abrasive or chilly personality. At least not in clinic, not if you want to build a practice.

The most efficient shortcut to being good with people, in my experience, is to figure out how to love them. You could describe and analyze all kinds of other variables related to your verbal and nonverbal communication, like how you greet people and how you make eye contact, but I don't think having a long list of variables is all that helpful — especially when you're busy, and community acupuncturists generally need to be busy. So, I suggest you focus on love. Everything responds to love.

Which is not to say that love is easy — obviously it isn't. Love in a community acupuncture context, though, is *straightforward*. The force that bonds your patients to you in the nucleus diagram of your practice is a type of intentional, impersonal love. Your patients might not think of that connection as love or be willing to use that particular word for it, which is fine. However, they definitely know whether it's there or not — and if it's not there, they won't be either. Many acupuncturists don't realize that it's important for your patients to know that you're happy to see them, and many acupuncturists, unfortunately, don't actually like sick people — and their practices reflect this. Because a community acupuncture practice requires by definition that you treat a lot of people, you have to be willing to work on generating intentional, impersonal love *that other people can feel*.

Love is an indispensable part of the art of community acupuncture. If you're not into cultivating love for people, you should find a different art, because this one is very likely to be frustrating and unfulfilling. If you ARE into cultivating love for people, though, community acupuncture can be endlessly rewarding, in part because it gives you so many opportunities to practice.

Love in community acupuncture manifests primarily as nonjudgmental, accepting, empathic, focused attention. Because community acupuncture is a form of healthcare, it's inherently impersonal and it also requires strong, healthy boundaries. (We talk about boundaries a lot at POCA Tech.) Love in community acupuncture means being able to sustain the same quality of empathic, focused attention with patients you don't like on a personal level as well as patients you might enjoy hanging out with. It also means not treating patients that you like any differently *because* you like them. Another word for this is professionalism.

There's an element of self-discipline, which includes being able to offer the exact same quality of nonjudgmental, empathic attention to people no matter how you feel about them or how they feel about you — including people with whom you disagree about politics. The person who shows up in your clinic wearing a campaign button or t-shirt for a candidate that you loathe is a test of your skills! (Bonus points if the actual candidate shows up and you have to turn off your loathing in order to treat them!) One of the great things about community acupuncture, incidentally, is not having to talk much to people you might not like, so it's easier to get through clinical interactions without wandering into personal territory. Love in community acupuncture represents a choice, it's something you've decided to do as opposed to something you feel spontaneously, and it's something you probably have to work at (because after all, you're only human).

Whatever issues you have with love — and who doesn't have issues with love? — will likely show up as similar issues in your practice. You should expect this and expect to have to work on them. As the Buddhists say, how you do anything is how you do everything. Because community acupuncture is in some ways such a stripped-down kind of art, there's nowhere to hide from yourself. The good news is that the love you cultivate for your patients will spill over to yourself if you let it, which can result in self-acceptance and self-forgiveness, which can in turn make you a more loving person as well as a better practitioner — so there's a kind of virtuous cycle at work. Love, like community acupuncture, is about practice, trial and error, getting better as a result of not giving up,

We could probably fill a whole book with examples of the way issues with love show up for practitioners, so here are just a few to provide some context. These examples don't represent real individuals, they're more like composites or "greatest hits" at the intersection of community acupuncture and love.

A community acupuncturist who struggled with despair about human nature found her practice to be healing, because it allowed her to see humans in their vulnerability, where they're easier to love. Watching over a clinic space filled with sleeping people, each in their own way working on their health, allowed her to feel on a deep level that *people are good*. This feeling was actually a little scary and required working through some fears about trusting people based on past bad experiences.

A community acupuncturist who struggled with overworking in their life found their practice to be exhausting, because they were unconsciously trying to do too much with every treatment. They had a tendency to overextend themselves in their personal relationships and in the clinic, this translated to putting in too many needles and trying to address too many issues with individual treatments for fear of letting patients down in some way. Their patient base was large and devoted to them, but they were constantly tired. Clinic offered them an opportunity to practice healthy boundaries which translated positively into the rest of their life.

A community acupuncturist who struggled with commitment found his practice to be challenging because it required him to consistently pay high-quality attention to patients even when their problems weren't complicated or particularly interesting. He found himself getting bored with the repetition of ordinary health issues (so much knee pain, so much constipation!) and as a result he had a hard time building a patient base. Patients sense a lack of interest and commitment, and they respond in kind.

Repetition is actually one of the good things about community acupuncture, because it offers you many opportunities to practice and improve. Patients often get better incrementally (more about this later) and so do you in terms of your skills. Over time, this repetition helps you cultivate confidence that you're building something good for yourself and your community — not necessarily because you're brilliant or innately talented (though if you are, great!) but because you just keep trying. This confidence that you can build something good is itself a kind of self-love.

# Healing Weirdness

A key way that community acupuncture is like art is that a community acupuncture practice is more than the sum of its parts, and the “more” is something alive. There’s a living spirit that arises out of the material thing.

Of course, the “more”, the alive part, the spirit, is difficult to write about or even talk about, but learning about it is a crucial part of training for community acupuncturists.

So let’s try coming at it sideways, by unpacking how community acupuncture is different from conventional one on one acupuncture. Some of those ways overlap with technical stuff (more about that later) and some don’t — but all of them contribute to the aliveness, the spirit. Community acupuncture isn’t better or worse than conventional acupuncture; the two are just very different. Certain things are possible in conventional acupuncture that aren’t possible in community acupuncture, and vice versa.

To start off, let’s compare the ways that people get better in community acupuncture with the ways they get better in conventional acupuncture — from the standpoint of the acupuncturist. I was trained as a conventional acupuncturist not a community acupuncturist, and I’ve practiced in both roles, so I’m relatively qualified to unpack this bit.

As a conventional acupuncturist, I learned that my patient getting better depended on two main factors: my skill as an acupuncturist and my patient’s willingness to comply with what I told them to do. If those factors were missing, healing wasn’t going to happen. Part of my skill as an acupuncturist included making a very specific, relatively labor-intensive kind of diagnosis about their energetic imbalances and then calibrating my treatment very carefully to that diagnosis. If I chose acupuncture points that didn’t conform to the diagnosis, my patient wouldn’t get better. An important part of the diagnosis was identifying ways that my patient could change their lifestyle (including their diet, their sleep patterns, their exercise routine, what kind of tea they drink, and even possibly much more intimate and central things like their sex life, their job, and even their spirituality). If the patient wasn’t willing to make these changes, healing wasn’t going to happen. And this kind of labor-intensive acupuncture treatment is best delivered one on one, so I expected to have plenty of time to make my diagnosis and even more time to talk to my patient about all the things they needed to change.

In this framework, it’s not uncommon for practitioners to “fire” patients who aren’t able or willing to make lifestyle changes. In some ways you can see the influence of the Protestant work ethic on this approach to acupuncture: good results have to be earned by effort, along with everyone doing everything *right*.

What I learned as a result of treating thousands of patients (in a variety of settings) was that

healing through acupuncture often didn't work that way at all, regardless of whether the acupuncture happened one on one or in a group. Doing a lot of acupuncture on a lot of people over a lot of years gave me an entirely different perspective on how acupuncture works than what I learned in school. Often, the things I thought were important didn't seem to matter much in the real world. *Getting things right* turned out to be a lot less significant than *lowering barriers to treatment*.

As a result, the community acupuncture model is designed to maximize the elements that seem to contribute most to positive results for patients in the real world. At the top of that list is *access*.

As a community acupuncturist, I've observed that my patients getting better depends primarily on them being able to get enough acupuncture to make a difference in their health — not perfect acupuncture treatments, but *enough* treatments *close enough* together to make an impact. Sometimes that's ten treatments in ten days, sometimes it's two treatments a week for six months, sometimes it's once a week for decades. It's not clear to me that an energetic diagnosis makes a significant difference to the outcome and there's research<sup>1</sup> to back this up. It's more about the process of receiving acupuncture and how the patient engages with that process and less about where the acupuncturist puts the needles.

I also noticed that acupuncture is often effective whether or not patients change their lifestyles, which meant I didn't need to fire anybody for being unwilling to, say, quit their job at my command. In fact, the less pressure I put on my patients, the more willing they were to show up to receive enough acupuncture to make a positive impact on their health. Recognizing this was very freeing!

Community acupuncture is all about *good enough*, with a big emphasis on *enough*. And the most important ingredient of a successful outcome is the patient figuring out how to use community acupuncture, on their own terms, to manage their health. Part of my clinic's mission statement is: "Our goal is to offer people as much acupuncture as they want, in support of whatever goals they have, so that they can use it in whatever way works best for them."

So, if a precise diagnosis is less important than sheer volume of treatments, and if lifestyle counseling doesn't matter as much as patients' willingness to show up, then providing treatment in a one-on-one setting with a lot of time for conversation isn't necessary for good results either. To be clear, some patients might prefer a one-on-one setting just like some patients prefer a community setting, and obviously a place where someone is comfortable is a place they're likely to show up to more often. Doing treatments in a group, however, allows

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<sup>1</sup> German Acupuncture Trials (Gerac) For Chronic Low Back Pain Randomized, Multicenter, Blinded, Parallel-Group Trial With 3 Groups. Michael Haake, Phd, Md; Hans-Helge Müller, Phd; Carmen Schade-Brittinger; et al. 2007

the acupuncturist to charge less per treatment because multiple patients can be treated per hour. And treatments being less expensive equals patients being able to come more often, which can be crucial to getting good results.

In other words, acupuncture doesn't have to be complicated or expensive in order to be effective. For many people, the simpler and more affordable it is, the more effective it can be, because simplicity allows them to engage with it more. Lowering barriers is important to getting good clinical outcomes.

This basic distinction leads to some other differences between community acupuncture and conventional acupuncture.

Community acupuncture can be presented in a less medical style. Acupuncture is definitely a form of healthcare, but it doesn't need to be dressed up in white coats and insurance codes in order to do its best work. Certain acupuncturists have vested interests in packaging their occupation as a highly paid *medical profession*, but that doesn't have much to do with acupuncture itself and how it works with real people. That kind of packaging isn't turning out so well for acupuncturists anyway (more on that later).

In any case, community acupuncture is often particularly useful to those patients who are stigmatized in the healthcare system (like people with chronic pain) and who have had traumatic experiences there — so deliberately stripping acupuncture of medicalized decorations can make it feel less threatening and more accessible to the people who need it most. There's a short list of materials you really need in order to provide community acupuncture and the most important things on it are needles, cotton balls, and stillness. Beyond the need for basic materials and basic safety, the setting can be extremely flexible. The spirit of community acupuncture can animate all kinds of settings.

Community acupuncture can accommodate a greater diversity of patients. Because it's so simple, in order to participate in community acupuncture as a patient all you have to be able to do is show up and sit down. You don't have to be willing to take off your clothes, disclose your history, or believe in "energetic medicine". You don't have to be willing to change your lifestyle. The less acupuncture treatment is medicalized, the less patients have to do to receive it, which means the pool of people willing to engage with it is much larger. Community acupuncture can be successfully delivered across a language barrier and across polarized political beliefs.

Community acupuncture involves different roles and responsibilities for the patient and practitioner than conventional acupuncture, where there's the implication that a professional will "fix" a patient. The community acupuncturist's role is to hold the space and the patients' role is to use the space. This involves a lot less hierarchy and a lot more potential trust.

Community acupuncture emphasizes patients having access to a space for healing, and they co-create that space by their presence. It's about tapping into a collective resource, as opposed to anybody fixing or getting fixed.

All of this gives rise to (for lack of a better description) the healing weirdness of community acupuncture. For many patients, resting with needles represents a break from their daily reality which is otherwise burdened with pain and stress in various forms, so this break is an integral part of the relief they get. For many people, receiving community acupuncture is about entering an altered state where they can rest in a way they don't rest anywhere else. When people do that together in a room over and over, the room itself develops an atmosphere that's both healing and, let's be honest, *weird*. Community acupuncture is dreamy — literally.

My favorite thing about my clinic, which as of 2023 has been using the same rooms to deliver community treatments for 21 years, is the texture and the vibration of the clinic space itself. It feels like a pool that you can sink into, and the space is charged with a peaceful, soothing, accepting ambience that's also deeply weird. This is particularly true when it's filled with sleeping patients, but it's equally true when all the chairs are empty. It's like the accumulation of all that dreamy relaxation has sunk into the walls and the furniture, so it never goes away.

Years ago, an acupuncturist who's also a musician walked into my clinic for the first time and started laughing (quietly, because it was full of sleeping people at the time). "What is this, performance art?" "Yeah, kind of," I replied. In some ways community acupuncture is more like performance art than anything else, and the patients aren't just the audience, they're integral to the art itself, they make the healing weirdness happen. Community acupuncture is a social art and a social practice. Lowering barriers as an acupuncturist allows you to invite lots of patients into your practice so you can make (weird, healing) art together.

## Technical Stuff

Most acupuncturists and prospective acupuncture students, whether they're interested in conventional or community acupuncture, have a distinctly nerdy streak. The technical aspects of acupuncture are fascinating, and they're an important component of community acupuncture as art. One of the essential ways that acupuncture differs from other forms of healthcare is what anthropologist Tyler Phan calls "horizontal epistemology". This is another way of saying there is no one right way to practice acupuncture.

Merriam-Webster defines acupuncture as the "practice of inserting fine needles through the skin at specific points especially to cure disease or relieve pain" and acupuncture points as "specific locations on the body that in the practice of acupuncture and acupressure are stimulated (as by the insertion of a thin needle or by the application of pressure) to produce beneficial health effects (such as the relief of pain or promotion of healing)". So, an acupuncture point is where you put a needle, and acupuncture itself is the process of putting needles in particular points. Wait, which points? You know, the ones where you put the needles.



And if you're thinking, but that's just what a modern American dictionary says, surely if you dive deeply into the history of the practice and theory of acupuncture, you will get a much clearer and more precise understanding of what acupuncture REALLY is...



Nope. You won't. What you'll get is endless iterations of "acupuncture is because of acupuncture points and acupuncture points are because of acupuncture" — those same turtles all the way down. And the deeper you dive, the fewer answers there are, and the more questions you end up with — including really troubling ones like, do acupuncture points even matter? Or is it actually more about channels and zones?

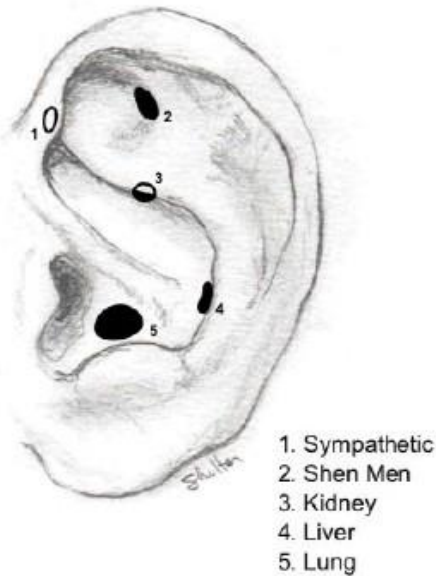
Ironically, being perplexed by acupuncture theory doesn't necessarily get in the way of being able to help a lot of people in your acupuncture practice. (It helps if you like the healing weirdness better than you like intellectual theory.) At POCA Tech we teach the principles behind creating acupuncture treatments so that our students graduate with the skills to craft their own personalized treatments in their own personal styles, in accordance with generally accepted acupuncture theory.

This requires knowing your way around the basics of the theory, and that process is a lot like learning a language. It involves many hours of memorization, including memorizing information that initially doesn't make much sense, not until you start actually using it. (One example is the category of "transport points", a list that POCA Tech students have to drill into their brains before they actually use these points in clinic with patients). But all of that detailed information rests on a foundation of mystery about what acupuncture is and how it works. (See also: healing weirdness.)

That mystery is another reason that community acupuncture is more like art than anything else.

The alternative to learning all the theory that allows you to create your own treatments is to use ready-made acupuncture point protocols. The most famous protocol is probably 5NP, the five auricular points that were originally chosen for detoxification treatments and that also address stress, trauma, and addiction. Rachel Pagonis' book [\*Acupuncture as Revolution: Suffering, Liberation and Love\*](#) tells the story of how activists in the South Bronx developed 5NP in the 1970s. This process is a great example of trial and error and the empirical uses of points; 5NP came into being as a result of people experimenting with different ear acupuncture points in a particular clinical setting until they found a combination that reliably did what they needed it to do.

Around the world, all kinds of people (from high school students to peer mentors to psychiatric nurses to prison workers to people living in refugee camps) have been trained to use 5NP in their communities. The limiting factor is state or provincial laws. Otherwise 5NP is easy to teach, easy to learn, and safe to practice.



*drawing by James Shelton, L.Ac.*

Another famous protocol is “Miriam Lee’s Great 10”. Born in China in 1926, Miriam Lee was a midwife and an acupuncturist trained in a Taiwanese style of acupuncture (what’s known as Master Tung acupuncture). She lived in Taiwan and Singapore before immigrating to California in 1966. She took a factory job, joined a church and soon started treating her friends though it wasn’t legal for her to do so at that time. Her clinical results drew crowds, and in order to be able to treat as many as 17 patients an hour, she developed a ten-point protocol specifically targeted to the stresses of modern life. The acupuncture points in her protocol are Large Intestine 4 and Large Intestine 11, Lung 7, Spleen 6 and Stomach 36 (that’s only five individual acupuncture points but if you needle them on both sides of the body, that’s ten needles). Her goal was to make a protocol that would help any patient with any problem, and she succeeded.

Either 5NP, or Miriam Lee 10, or the two together, would be a fine technical foundation for your community acupuncture practice. Memorizing protocols and how to use them represents enough knowledge to help plenty of people. Individually designed treatments aren’t necessary to get good results. You could create a practice with only those technical tools. Remember that what makes up a practice is a lot more than where you put the needles.

Learning ONLY those things, however, is not something you can currently do in an acupuncture program that leads to acupuncture licensure, due to how acupuncture licensing laws are written. That doesn’t make much logical sense, but it’s the way things are. However, if someone already has the legal ability to use needles (like physicians or chiropractors in some places), learning these protocols and nothing else would be enough to allow them to set up a community acupuncture practice which could — see above — help hundreds or thousands of people. And so, this option is worth considering, if you’re in that situation.

A good reason to learn how to create your own personalized treatments from scratch by remixing various aspects of acupuncture theory is not because you'll help more people by practicing that way — there's no research anywhere that says you will — but because you LIKE it. Because practicing in that particular way is fun and interesting and it keeps you engaged in your art. Some people get bored with doing protocols and some people don't. From a patient perspective, though, all of it *works*.

In general, the technical aspect of your acupuncture practice is a variable that you can dial up or down, depending on a variety of factors. One of those factors is how nerdy you are, personally, and how much you will enjoy being an acupuncture theory nerd. Acupuncture theory is a rabbit hole you can go down forever, if that's fun for you; you'll never run out of things to learn. Another factor is whether the resources to become an acupuncture theory nerd are accessible to you. If they're not, don't let that stop you from helping people by using protocols, if protocols are what you have. Art that's made with very simple materials is still art; the most important ingredient is you.

At POCA Tech, students start their clinical internship at the beginning of their second year, after they've spent the first-year learning acupuncture theory. However, for the first month or so of actually treating patients, our student interns only use Miriam Lee's Great 10 protocol, or ML 10 as we call it. This allows them to focus on all the aspects of treating patients that **AREN'T** about crafting individualized treatments, which are many and challenging, as well as giving them an opportunity to see how much a protocol can help when a protocol is all you've got. Being good with people, particularly, is more important for a successful acupuncturist than having exquisitely designed individual treatments, and so we prioritize that in how our program is structured.

Since there's no right way to practice acupuncture, every acupuncturist has to choose what to value and emphasize in their practice. For community acupuncturists, it's about valuing inclusion and patient-centered care. Since acupuncture theory is so vast and there's so much to choose from, community acupuncturists can emphasize the parts of it that support inclusion. Because inclusion is also art.

# Safety

Obviously one of the most important factors in designing treatments is patient safety. “First do no harm”, or at least, do *less* harm, as little as possible! As an acupuncturist, it’s your job to value and prioritize patients’ safety above every other factor. In community acupuncture, you can break down the topic of safety into two components: basic physical safety plus a kind of safety that’s more complex and holistic, that includes considerations of social and emotional safety. I call it Big Safety for short. Because community acupuncture depends on patients engaging with treatment, Big Safety isn’t optional, it’s a core part of being *good with people* and so it’s also a core part of having a practice.

Creating safety is also art and so it gets a lot of airtime in POCA Tech’s program. Topics we spend time on include boundaries, organization, communication and self-care for practitioners; harm reduction, trauma informed care, and risk management; consent and social safety — all in service to the overarching goal of building a culture of safety, so that we can have positive and productive conversations about safety and all its subcategories. We don’t want safety to be a source of anxiety or shame for acupuncturists, we want safety to be a shared creative project!

Let’s start with basic physical safety. Although it’s possible to seriously injure a patient with acupuncture, that’s also straightforward to avoid. Acupuncture isn’t an intervention like surgery, where some collateral damage is inevitable. If you never needle acupuncture points that are located in the vicinity of organs, the spinal cord, or the brain stem, you can’t inadvertently puncture those structures. Some acupuncturists limit their point selection to those that are very unlikely to result in serious injury, such as points on the arms and legs. This is a valid clinical choice! Other acupuncturists value certain points on the torso and have gotten such good clinical results with them that they can’t imagine giving them up, which is also a valid choice. It just requires some thoughtful risk management. Like so much else related to acupuncture, there are no absolutes, only trade-offs.

In general, the more needles you use and the deeper you insert them, the more risk of needle safety issues you’ll have; that’s just math. Similarly, the more needle stimulation you do (dipping, twirling, thrusting) the more risk of tissue damage you’ll have. The larger the needles you use, the more potential for patients to feel pain. Community acupuncture prioritizes patients’ ability to relax while the needles are in and even fall asleep (see also: healing weirdness.) so community acupuncturists typically focus on gentle styles of needling with relatively thin needles.

However, no matter what style of acupuncture you practice, safety issues of various kinds will arise because you’re dealing with human bodies, human minds, and human perceptions. These are all highly variable and so acupuncturists need to expect the unexpected. The more

people you want to include in your practice, the more you have to think about aspects of safety beyond basic physical safety related to the physical act of putting needles in another person's body.

Without Big Safety, it's hard to include diverse people in your practice, especially the kinds of people who benefit most from community acupuncture. At POCA Tech some of our first classes offer an introduction to Trauma Informed Care. TIC recognizes the prevalence of trauma and its effects on patients, clinicians, and organizations, and strives to mitigate those effects — in particular, to avoid re-traumatizing people in a clinical setting.

TIC doesn't mean that you can make your practice accessible to everyone with a history of trauma. What TIC does do is offer a framework for understanding how trauma affects people, as well as clear and systematic guidelines intended to make acupuncture more user-friendly for people with trauma histories. A benefit of these guidelines is that they can also make your acupuncture practice more user-friendly for everyone, which means you can treat more people, which means your little electron cloud of patients can get bigger and more stable.

Here's an example. A lot of TIC is about minimizing ways in which patients might feel pressured, coerced, or pushed into an adversarial relationship with a practitioner. In a community acupuncture setting, we generally ask patients to take off their shoes and socks and roll their pants up to their knees before relaxing in a recliner. If you offer those directions to a patient during their orientation, but they don't follow them — in fact they sit bolt upright with their shoes and socks still on — both TIC and a desire to *be good with people* mean that you don't get irritated with the patient for not following your instructions. You notice their tense body language and their still-covered feet, and you think, "Hmm, it looks like this person might not feel safe about letting me needle their feet. No big deal! There are lots of great acupuncture points elsewhere and I'm happy to adjust my treatment strategy!" Community acupuncture clinics have any number of patients who only allow their acupuncturists to needle their head, or their hands, or their ears. Working with what the patient offers you is a way to cultivate social safety.

A pragmatic reason for practicing TIC is that when someone does get triggered, it can be disruptive to the peaceful, healing weirdness of the community space. In our example, if you were to apply pressure (even politely) and insist that the patient take off their shoes and socks, it's possible that what happens next is the patient gets triggered, which can look like a panic attack or an explosion of anger. Both can be noisy and create safety issues — imagine somebody getting up and running out of the treatment room (possibly with needles in) or yelling at you. It's not worth the risk! Better for you to adjust your treatment strategy with the goal of making acupuncture a good experience for this person on *their* terms, even if *you* have to let go of using some acupuncture points you really wanted to use.

If you can accommodate people in this way, you might be able to make acupuncture accessible not only to someone who has reasons to not feel safe in a clinical setting, but also to people who just happen to wear skinny jeans to their acupuncture appointments and can't actually roll their pant legs up! This is what we mean by TIC making your practice more user-friendly in general. The more patient and flexible you're able to be with patients in general, the more people you can include in your little electron cloud.

This is another way of saying that building a patient base involves recognizing that inclusion and safety are more valuable than doing the "right" acupuncture points — because who even knows what those are?

# Commitment

Another way that community acupuncture is like art is the commitment that it demands. Just like other working artists, you won't get anything out of your practice unless you put a certain amount of time, effort, resources and love into it. A sculptor needs to work on skills like sketching, molding and casting; they need a studio to work in and materials to work with; they need to find people who want to buy their sculptures, and meeting all of these needs won't happen unless the sculptor is committed. As a community acupuncturist, you also have to make a commitment, both to nurturing the relationships that make up your practice and to taking care of what we call "the social container" — which usually means small business.

Let's talk about the small business part first.

In a recent [New York Times article](#), this description of three different kinds of work popped out for me: "There is a job, which pays the bills and lets you live your life; a career, where you feel a sense of satisfaction from the work, but it doesn't own you; and a calling, where you are willing to sacrifice other areas of your life for your work because this is your identity."

Many acupuncturists and prospective acupuncture students aren't clear on those distinctions, and particularly, those distinctions in relationship to small business.

As a result of running an acupuncture school and also trying to employ acupuncturists, I've met a lot of people who went into acupuncture expecting to find either a job or a career, only to end up disappointed. I must disagree a little with the definition of "calling" in the NYT article, because while acupuncture has definitely been a calling for me, it's not my identity and I don't want it to be. However, my experience with acupuncture was that it wasn't a job or a career even if I had been looking for that. Acupuncture work didn't actually allow me to live my life in the way that a "normal" job would, and it did own my time, my energy, and my attention in a way that's really different from a "normal" career.

Practicing acupuncture in a way that allowed me to make my living was more like raising a child than anything else. And this isn't because I'm a community acupuncturist instead of a private room acupuncturist, it's because I was running a small business, period. Successful acupuncturists, no matter how they practice, demonstrate similar levels of commitment and investment. So, I think the crucial point is about what you expect to get out of your acupuncture work versus what you expect to put into it. (Yourself!) For both jobs and careers, you can get money and a certain kind of stability out of them without first pouring in your heart's blood. Acupuncture work, not so much.

Acupuncture work in this country now and for the last forty years has been, at its core, about small business. And an immutable law of small business is that you have to love it for it to exist.

Just like a child, you may not always feel warm and fuzzy about your small business or even like it at any given moment — but its survival depends on your willingness to pour your energy, your attention, your time and your resources into it. You can't ask it what it's giving you back because for a long time the answer will be too depressing. You can only ask yourself whether this test of your love and your stamina is a good way to spend your time. You have to put in so much more than you take out in order to take out anything of substance that the act of putting in had better be valuable and rewarding in its own right — or it just won't be worth it. For me it was worth it. Ultimately, I got out way more than I put into my acupuncture practice but that's not true for everyone so be careful, your mileage may vary.

Having a small business also requires personal risk and vulnerability in ways that having a job or a career just doesn't. One of the first things we do at POCA Tech is to talk about small business, specifically its parameters, because almost everybody is confused about that. Did you know that the practical definition of a small business according to the US Census in 2023 is a business that has less than \$5 million in annual revenue? That means that the vast majority of organizations in the acupuncture profession — everything except the biggest schools and the biggest needle companies, and there aren't many of those — are operating at a small business scale. And many acupuncturists aren't just operating small businesses, they're operating microbusinesses: they are sole proprietors who employ only themselves. For a microbusiness, you really have to love it for it to exist! It's *all* you.

Some people who practice community acupuncture, particularly 5NP, may be able to do their work within the context of a larger institution, like an addiction treatment program or a hospital, or through another kind of partnership with an organization. Because of the ways that community acupuncture is as marginal as art in this society, though, even someone who practices in connection with a larger institution generally has to put attention and care into their “social container”, which can mean grants, contracts, and departmental budgets that make it possible for their practice to exist. Nobody in community acupuncture gets to take their social container *for granted*.

This gets us back to making a commitment to relationships.

Community acupuncture shines in the treatment of chronic conditions, whether those conditions are physical, mental, emotional, or behavioral. Some of the people who get the most out of receiving community acupuncture are using it to manage a problem that's never going to go away; the goal of treatment is to improve their quality of life. Patients often get better incrementally over time, which means they need you to show up to treat them over and



over and OVER for years or even decades. They need you to build a social container to hold those treatments, whether it's in the form of a program in a larger institution or your own small business, and that's the part that many acupuncturists aren't prepared to do.

Community acupuncture is magical (and dreamy). Sometimes it delivers miraculous results. But the magic is grounded in workaday routines and mundane virtues like consistency, predictability, and stability. Sometimes the idea of acupuncture as a career is attractive to dreamy, ungrounded people who haven't come to terms with the real-world requirements of making a practice that's actually useful to patients. At POCA Tech, we try to address that mismatch sooner rather than later.

Maintaining a social container for your practice, whether it's your own small business or a program within a larger institution, requires paying attention to how people use your services. Community acupuncture is set up to be user-friendly, but patients still won't consistently use your services unless YOU are deeply committed to your practice. And if they don't use your services, your social container won't survive; the small business will fold, or the program won't keep its funding. You have to show up first in order for other people to show up, and you have to show up consistently if you want them to keep showing up too. A lot of acupuncturists want patients to appear before they commit themselves, but that's the opposite of how it works.

At POCA Tech, we dive into the details of what we call accompaniment, which is a term borrowed from Liberation Theology to describe the kind of relationship we cultivate with our patients as they navigate all kinds of challenges. We're not trying to be authority figures who fix them, we're trying to be respectful witnesses who keep them company on their journey and offer as much relief as we can. Accompaniment is grounded in solidarity.

At POCA Tech we also dive into the details of small business as it applies to community acupuncture. A core piece of our program is practicing the skills needed to run a clinic; students are responsible for almost all aspects of the student clinic, including managing reception, taking payment, discussing treatment plans, and maintaining the physical space — in addition to providing acupuncture treatments. One of our goals is to make *acupuncture school* feel as much like *acupuncture work* as possible.

However, neither accompaniment skills or small business skills will amount to success after graduation without commitment from the acupuncturist — and commitment is something we can't teach at POCA Tech. We can only demonstrate it. We've observed that some people have ambivalence or even antipathy to commitment, possibly because it feels confining. There's no art without commitment, though. Please be honest with yourself how you feel about commitments in general *before* you try to commit to community acupuncture.

# Uncertainty

One of the most important and overlooked aspects of being a community acupuncturist is managing uncertainty. A person's relationship to uncertainty can have a profound effect on their relationship to practicing acupuncture, to owning or managing a small business, and to their success or lack thereof with both.

Most people find uncertainty challenging, and plenty of people flat-out hate it. They don't want to learn to manage it, thank you very much, and they can get very angry at the suggestion. Acupuncture, however, is full of uncertainty. Sometimes people are drawn to acupuncture's other good qualities without realizing that uncertainty is part of the package.

One of the first questions that people unfamiliar with acupuncture tend to ask is, "does it work?"

This [article from the JAMA Network](#) asked, "What is the certainty or quality of evidence in recent systematic reviews for use of acupuncture in adult health conditions?" It identified 434 systematic reviews published since 2013; of these, 127 assessed the certainty or quality of evidence of their conclusions. Overall, 82 systematic reviews regarding 56 health conditions were mapped, and most reviews concluded the certainty of evidence was low or very low. Despite acupuncture having been the subject of hundreds of randomized clinical trials and systematic reviews for dozens of adult health conditions, there were few conclusions that had greater than low certainty of evidence.

If you need an abundance of research evidence to provide certainty that acupuncture works for any given condition, you are out of luck. Not knowing exactly what's happening when we insert needles into acupuncture points is part of the healing weirdness.

Recently I heard about an argument between community acupuncturists and conventional acupuncturists in which the conventional acupuncturists said, "Community acupuncture isn't REAL acupuncture." They were especially upset about something I wrote: "Acupuncture is a concentrated, minimalist, elegant way of helping people." They thought that "minimalist" was insulting. Acupuncture isn't minimalist, they said — it's comprehensive!

There are a lot of strands tangled together in this argument, but I think the most important one might be the uncertainty about how acupuncture works in the body. Because we know so little about that, many acupuncturists retreat from the uncertainty by surrounding acupuncture with other therapies which can feel more familiar and solid, like massage, nutrition, herbal medicine and even physical therapy exercises. Some acupuncturists like to say, "Acupuncture is part of a complete system of medicine".

That isn't necessarily true, historically. Sometimes it was and sometimes it wasn't. In China, acupuncture was banned outright for periods of time while nutrition and Chinese herbal medicine weren't. Leaving that history aside, for me it's useful to imagine different forms of acupuncture on a spectrum. On one end, acupuncture looks more like bodywork or physical therapy, whether that's Zen Shiatsu and Tui Na (a vigorous form of Chinese massage) or trigger point stimulation. Patients take their clothes off, practitioners think about where muscles attach, maybe auxiliary therapies like moxa or cupping come into play. On the other end of the spectrum, acupuncture looks more like nervous system alignment. That's where community acupuncture shines with its safety, its inclusion, its accessibility — and its healing weirdness.

Community acupuncture is not going to satisfy somebody who wants acupuncture that's like Tui Na, or maybe wants Tui Na with their acupuncture. That's fine, people want different things and acupuncture is flexible! For someone dealing with a chronic condition, whether that's high blood pressure or irritable bowel syndrome or insomnia or some form of chronic pain, being able to access a lot of gentle treatments over a long period of time, without having to take their clothes off, might be more helpful. I don't think there's any value in arguing over what REAL acupuncture is, because it's all real. Accepting that acupuncture can work well for different people in different ways in different forms, though, requires tolerating uncertainty.

And then there's the question of how to make the social container for your acupuncture practice. If your container is a small business, that's a whole other kind of uncertainty to contend with.

Small businesses are inherently fragile and vulnerable to risk, and the less social power their owners have, the more fragile they are. (If we didn't know that before COVID, we know it now!) At the same time, many low income people start small businesses because their other options for supporting themselves are worse. Starting a small business is an expression of hope and a container for hope.

But being an entrepreneur isn't just about learning specific skills like bookkeeping, marketing, negotiating with landlords, etc. You certainly need those skills, but any of them are arguably easier to attain than the overarching mindset that makes somebody happy to work in a small business setting. This requires accepting and learning to manage uncertainty.

Making a living in late capitalism via a small business is a lot like transporting yourself through a city via bicycle. The terrain was built for cars, but you don't have a car; you're surrounded by things that are much bigger than you are, driven by people who don't even see you as they whiz past. If you let yourself get discouraged about how hard it is to ride a bike through traffic in the midst of big scary cars, you might not have the energy to peddle up the next hill, so you can't let yourself get discouraged. However, you also can't ignore the degree

to which you're vulnerable and exposed and need to be able to respond, quickly, to any surprises. If you're going to survive your commute, one thing you absolutely cannot do is to pretend, even for a moment, that you're NOT riding a bicycle.

A lot of acupuncturists really want to pretend they're not riding a bicycle. A lot of them would prefer to cruise through city traffic in a Hummer (second cousin to a tank). If they can't have a Hummer, okay, they'd settle for a nice solid Volvo. And so, they pretend that's what their bicycle is. Of course, many of them won't get on a bicycle at all after they graduate from acupuncture school (which might be a good decision for them) but others do get on their bicycle and then expect it to behave like a Hummer. When it doesn't meet their expectations, they get angry.

At POCA Tech, our goal is to teach you how to ride a bicycle through city traffic; not only that, we can teach you to ride it through a low income neighborhood, where there are probably more potholes than average, some surprisingly deep puddles, pedestrians walking in the street because there aren't enough sidewalks, and maybe even a loose dog or two. Our version of acupuncture school is like training wheels for that kind of ride. But what we don't have, and can't give you, is a Hummer. Or a Volvo. Or even a used Honda Civic. All we have is a bicycle.

And we can't teach you to ride a bicycle in a low-income neighborhood if YOU don't actually want to. If you're going to continually be disappointed that we're not offering you a Hummer so that you can feel as safe, as secure, as insulated from risks and surprises as you want to feel, you should not be learning acupuncture at POCA Tech.

Awhile back, my sister sent me an article (I can't remember now which one) about how people who had chaotic childhoods sometimes make good small business owners not in spite of the stress of their upbringing, but because of it. I went down that rabbit hole of research and found lots of interesting stuff about how growing up in an unpredictable environment may have given me a range of entrepreneurial advantages: flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, facility at updating my "working memory" (or being able "to forget information that is no longer relevant and to attend quickly to newer data that is"). The main take home message was that not expecting anybody to save you is an adaptive advantage for entrepreneurs. A lot of acupuncturists and would-be acupuncturists, unfortunately, are unprepared for the level of self-responsibility that a small business demands. That bicycle is powered and guided by YOU; if you expect an invisible thousand-horsepower engine to magically kick in when you need it, you're going to be in trouble, out there in traffic.

POCA Tech itself is a small business, and we use our setting to demonstrate how we've made our peace with uncertainty. Living with the risk and fragility of small business, along with the uncertainty of acupuncture itself, is possibly the most important thing we teach.

# Conclusion

Arts advocate Beth Pickens defines an artist as someone *who needs to make art*. If an artist doesn't create, their quality of life is diminished. Michelangelo said, "It is well with me only when I have a chisel in my hand".

I think the most important question for prospective community acupuncturists is, do you *need* to do this? Would creating a community acupuncture practice help you in a way that nothing else would? There are lots of ways to contribute to society and lots of them are easier than this. Would being a community acupuncturist give you something particular that you can't do without?

Practicing the art of community acupuncture gave me a lot of things over the course of my career but maybe the most important was perspective. From my seat on a rolling stool in the middle of a room full of sleeping patients, I got to see human beings in their vulnerability and their courage. I got to see some hard truths about our society from a vantage point that didn't disempower me or make me cynical, but actually gave me strength. I got to watch people metabolize all kinds of pain, and I took notes about how to metabolize my own. I grew and I healed in the space that community acupuncture gave me, in ways that I don't think I could have anywhere else — because of how many people that space included.

I count myself fortunate that I got to make something that served me well, along with a lot of other people, even though our needs weren't exactly the same. Community acupuncture gave me the opportunity to nourish my own hope and other people's hope too. May it do the same for you.