

A Visit with Local Acupuncturist Gary Merel

By Mary Ledvina

In his work as an acupuncturist, Gary Merel practices what he calls "right action." "Acupuncture allows me to earn a living in a manner that is consistent with how I want to live my life," said Merel. This is demonstrated by his presence, which is serene, clear and focused. I met with him in November to discuss why he got into acupuncture and to receive an acupuncture treatment.

Merel has an MS in Oriental Medicine from the New York College of Healthcare Professions, where he studied both acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine. He has been practicing acupuncture for seven years, and currently has an office on the West Side of Ann Arbor near Jackson and Wagner Roads.

According to Merel's website, www.acupuncturecenteraa.com, acupuncture is a medical system that has treated more people than any other formalized system of medicine. The idea is that when your body is ill, your energy, called "chi," is out of balance. The insertion of hair-thin needles along certain points in energy channels called meridians brings your body back into balance. During a first treatment, Merel said that most people can expect to experience a very deep sense of relaxation, and a deep sense of being in their bodies. Many people fall asleep. Some people, if they are extremely ill, may have a healing crisis or a "transformational crisis" where they feel worse at first and then feel exceedingly better after a few more treatments.

Japanese acupuncture, which Merel practices, uses very thin disposable needles. Merel demonstrated how thin and flexible the needles were by poking one against my thumb; it bent instead of piercing me. The needles are inserted superficially, and fewer needles are used overall in Japanese acupuncture as compared to other acupuncture traditions.

Merel specializes in treating women, though he is happy to help anyone who walks through his door. He has worked at a holistic OB/GYN practice in Pennsylvania, so he has experience treating women's reproductive health,

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but he says that he works on all levels with people because acupuncture affects the spiritual and emotional levels. Each acupuncture point has a specific emotional, spiritual and physical influence. He said that he knows when he reaches "true healing" for his clients when they can make a conscious connection between their discomfort and their life. "Our symptoms don't live in a vacuum because we don't live our lives in a vacuum. True healing can really begin when you make connections to all the different points in your life."

Before becoming an acupuncturist, Merel sold large-scale computer software systems to insurance companies. His software company eventually became the largest vendor in the industry. He "used to love to hate" his job. On his vacations, though, he traveled to indigenous healers in Mexico, Peru and Ecuador. He said that visiting these healers "was the one true thing in my life that resonated with the foundation or the truth of who I was at that time." He became increasingly unhappy at his job although he was making lots of money. There was a disconnect between his spiritual life and the way he was earning a living. He said "If you looked at my life from the outside you would think I was doing extremely well, but I wasn't. I was really unhappy."

On a trip to Ecuador, Merel participated in an indigenous shamanic ceremony, and the shaman leading the ceremony asked Merel what he wanted. Merel described his reaction: "The only thing that came to me was I

wanted the same experience of healing that he has." Merel didn't know what that meant at the time because he certainly didn't think he could be a shaman in the United States, but that trip changed his life.

When he came back to his job, although he also had mounting expenses in his personal life, Merel had reached a turning point. "If I went back to work, I would die. Not figuratively, literally." He quit his job not knowing what he was going to do next. Merel found that it taken him "20 years, literally, to accumulate enough unhappiness in my life where I was more afraid of growing old and not being what I wanted, than I was afraid of growing old and not having money."

Merel had no idea of what he was going to do next, but grace intervened. "It just one day came to me. It was a gift." He woke up that morning and he knew he was meant to study acupuncture and become an acupuncturist. From there, things fell into place and he was admitted to the prestigious New York College of Health Professions, a leading institution in Holistic Health Care and Education.

According to Merel, his spiritual teacher, Brenda Morgan, has taught that we all have a unique blueprint of how we move in the world. Merel says, "Acupuncture, at that moment, was the first time in my life that I had gotten in touch with that print."

Although Merel did not follow in the direct path of the Ecuadorian shaman who helped heal him, he does use a medical system that was used by Wu shamans in China thousands of years ago. "They did make a connection between points on the body and some release or affect or change." Acupuncture continues to evolve since that time when it treated mainly spirit disorders, and it now intersects multidimensionally with Western science.

Though Merel had said that most people were needle-phobic, I wasn't. Once I had heard his whole story and had been in his presence for an hour, I knew that I could completely trust Merel with a needle or with my confidential information. I could see that spirituality was the basis of his life; he was so serene, open and caring.

Merel took a brief medical history by asking me a few questions about my health. He said these questions would be a little more involved if I were going to be an ongoing client. He felt the three pulses in each of my wrists and looked at my tongue. He had me lay face up and take deep breaths with his hand on my diaphragm. Then, as I lay face down he put his hand on my neck and low back as I breathed. He left the room so I could expose my back and lie on the table face down. When he returned, he made sure I was comfortable by covering my feet with a towel and bringing a heat lamp near my exposed back. He then placed the thin needles at points on my back. For each needle he asked me to take a deep breath. As I was breathing in he would hold the needle in place and as I was breathing out he would tap the needle into my back. For some needles, I couldn't feel them being placed in at all, and for those I did feel, it was only vaguely and for an instant, then the sensation ceased. He placed about 10 needles total, on both sides of my spine. Then as he left the room, he placed the heat lamp closer to my back and said he would be back to check on me.

I felt myself immediately let go and began breathing deeper, becoming calmer and relaxed. It felt so restful to be able to lie there with needles sticking out of my back. Wait a minute, needles were sticking out of my back, I thought, and I didn't want them to be removed from my body. In fact the needles did seem to enhance the experience. I felt more relaxed than when I do sitting meditation. I felt my breathing continue to become deeper and slower for about 10 minutes. Then Merel came back in and asked, "Are you relaxing?"



Photo by Kris Doten

Before becoming an Acupuncturist, Gary Merel worked in the computer software business.

I said simply said, "yes," though I couldn't describe the depth of my relaxation, and he just let me experience it.

He left for another 10 minutes as I breathed even more slowly and stayed present through this pleasant experience and allowed the beauty of the moment to seep over me. When the 10 minutes were over, Merel took out the needles slowly but with a deft touch that didn't hurt. After the session, Merel lead me to the door where I floated out. I felt happy to be alive and very relaxed but definitely not too spacey to drive. For the rest of the day, my breathing was deeper and I felt happier and lighter than I had before the acupuncture treatment.

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