

## FINDING A SENSE OF BELONGING: Practicing Chinese Medicine In America Today

By Thea Elijah

One of the greatest benefits of practicing Chinese medicine in contemporary America is that when the insights of two different cultures come together, the results can be revolutionary and startling. Contrast provides opportunity for perspective and growth; but it can also provide opportunity for misunderstanding, conflict and alienation. How do we work with difference—of thought, of paradigm, of culture, of perception?

The answers are the same whether we are considering Chinese medicine in America, or any other situation in which disparate and different worlds come together with the intention of staying together—as in a marriage, where not simply two people but two heritages and histories come together, to create a new extended family.

In a sense, every meeting between two people is a meeting of worlds, and a chance to extend our family. As many of us have experienced, however, the creation of family—a sense of home, a sense of ongoing relation and belonging—does not occur automatically. The heritage of America has a great deal to teach us about the rights and freedom of the individual, while the Chinese 5 Element tradition has as its focus the interconnectedness and ecology of all beings as planetary family. By bringing the insights of these traditions together, this conference can be a working model of what it means to find a sense of belonging while developing our individual gifts.

So you decided to go to a conference, you paid your registration money, made your travel arrangements, and now you're here, surrounded by people you don't know. How do you feel about that?

For some of us it's really uncomfortable, really a stretch to be surrounded by this many strangers; we may feel a little lost and not know how to connect. Or we may be very good at this kind of thing, able to sail into new situations and always be able to think of something to say to the person standing next to us, then just as easily move on.

But we all have this in common: we came here. We will be here together for a few days. We have an opportunity for discovering and creating community, and for a personal sense of belonging within community—but this sense of Belonging is not an inevitability. It will happen under two conditions:

First, it will happen if we are open to it—and opening to it means admitting that we long for it—and admitting that we long for it means overcoming cynicism and admitting that we still think it is possible—and for many of us that alone is no small thing to ask.

Second, it will happen if we have the skills to make it happen. Community, and a sense of personal belonging within community, don't just happen. Have you noticed that? We need to make it happen. Since we are here now, and we have each other, and it is a good time to begin naming and practicing the skills of Belonging, the skills of making a community, a family, and a home.

This is a Chinese medicine conference taking place in America, right adjacent to the nation's capital. What does Chinese medicine teach us about making family and finding a sense of belonging? And what does the context and heritage of practicing Chinese medicine in the United States bring to our understanding of what it means, and what it takes, to find a sense of wholeness and home-ness together?

In some ways we have an unusual heritage in this regard, beginning with our nation's beginning:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

-- The Declaration of Independence

What does a nation founded upon the principle of individual liberty have to say about the concept of family?

Holism, unity, oneness-- they may not be the strongpoint of a culture based on upholding the rights of the individual. Let's face it, Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness are not exactly ecologically-sensitive concepts.

Our Chinese medicine background, rooted in the Tao, teaches us a great deal about holism, unity, and a sense of family that does not need to be formed by individuals—this sense of family is in fact based on the pre-existent oneness –and inter-relatedness—of all being. The American heritage by contrast informs us of the parts more than the whole, and the parts in relation to other parts, rather than in relation to the whole.

Let me illustrate a bit more about what I actually mean, and about how this seemingly contradictory dual perspective is actually an incredibly exciting and valuable opportunity, for Chinese medicine and for America.

I once read a book called American Ways by a man named Gary Althen. It was a very good book. It was actually a guidebook written for foreign students, to help out students from other cultures with negotiating the sometimes very different ways we do things here in America. It was not meant to be read by an American, that was clear; nevertheless I learned a great deal about myself, often to my embarrassment, by hearing my culture explained.

For instance it was a bit of a shocker to hear the author compassionately describing the American custom of making small talk, explaining that it is not that Americans are shallow and unintelligent; they just have this custom, which is important to them; and that after you get to know them better they are in fact capably of speaking intelligently and at depth about more important matters.

Page after page describes American customs and traditions which I certainly recognized, but which I had not identified as being particularly American—but the biggest shock of all came when the author strongly warned foreign visitors against inquiring directly of an American about any particular custom or tradition.

The author stated that Americans do not like to be perceived as following traditions or customs, and that in fact many Americans will be insulted if you suggest that they are doing something because it is customary or traditional, rather than their own individual choice. An American takes pride in being a free individual, especially in the matter of personal choices—even if it is perfectly clear to an outsider that they are just doing what everyone else is doing.

It is true that the spirit of individual freedom brings with it many gifts. I'm not here to argue against that. But does awareness of the Tao, and its earthly correlates in ecological awareness and community need to be a casualty of individual freedom?

I say not, and I say we are the people to model this paradoxical dual awareness --we, the Chinese medicine practitioners of America. Starting at this conference. Latent within us, right now in this room, is the model. I say we begin to live it out.

Here's my contribution to what I hope will be an ongoing discussion:

I have been thinking a lot about the skills of Belonging, which I am defining as the healthy sense of being an integral part of something greater than myself, without loss of my unique contribution to that greater whole.

I've identified some specific skill of Belonging, which I propose that we practice together this weekend. It's not an order; it's just an invitation. And of course it's NOT a definitive skill list; it's just my contribution. PLEASE also practice and share your own skills of Belonging and community-making.

The first set of skills I'm going to teach is related to the Chinese medicine concept of the three layers of our being—the Wei level, the Ying level and the Yuan level—and how through them, we come into healthy relationship with conformity.

Oooh, dirty word in America: conformity!

Yes there is such a thing as healthy conformity, and it's colloquially called being hip, and that's what I'll call it from now on. Everyone wants to be hip; it's an essential aspect of Belonging. I'm going to teach you some of the skills of being universally hip, for us to start practicing here at this conference.

The second set of skills I'm going to teach is related to what Pema Chodron calls the Wisdom of No Escape, the delightful and painful situation of “no exit” otherwise known as ecology or family life.

OK let's begin with what it takes to be truly hip, an insider, alive to the changing nature of the collective expression taking unique form through me—on the Wei level, the Ying level and the Yuan level.

For me it all hangs on this phrase, “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” I was thinking about this while looking out my window in my little town of Saxtons River, Vermont, watching the leaves fall and listening to the wild geese calling to each other high above me. What truths do we hold to be self-evident—not in the sense of truths evident only to ourselves, but in the original sense of truths that need no evidence because of an inescapable collective awareness?

Show me a self-evident truth—truth beyond opinion, beyond your beliefs or mine. Often our great fear in joining collectives is that they may co-opt our perceptions and our independence of thought. The only safe conformity is if we are conforming to a truth that is self-evident, and therefore greater than, and inclusive of, our individuality.

Examples? Right out my window. First, the geese flying high overhead in tight formation, calling raucously to one another. It reminded me of another house where I used to live in Maryland, in the middle of a huge cornfield. In the autumn, after the cornstalks had been all cut down and cleared, we were surrounded by acre upon acre of corn stubble—until the red-winged blackbirds came.

They must've come from many miles around just to gather in those stubbly cornfields, tens of thousands of birds. Day after day we would watch them in the beginning stages of flocking up, practicing their maneuvers together—first little batches of 15 or so birds, rising in unison, taking a few turns together, then settling back down again. Then the next day, those groups would come together into bigger groups, 45 or so birds all flocking up together, zooming up and down the fields, rising and falling together.

Next these groups formed bigger groups, 100 or more birds moving like clouds but making hairpin turns like one being, one body. The groups would get bigger and bigger every day, whole fields rising in unison of black wings with flashes of red, until one day they all rose together in a single body, and off they went, flying south.

Birds in their flocks, fish in their schools, wolves running in a pack, clearly hold some truths to be self-evident—or else how could they turn into the wind, or into the oncoming wave, in unison? Scientific studies have shown clearly that this is NOT a case of follow-the-leader; the reaction time is just too fast for that kind of unison. No, this is a case of hipness.

You want to fly in the flock, you got to be hip. You want to be part of the school, run with the pack, you got to know what the pack knows—and you have to know it on your own because no one is going to tell you—it's got to be self-evident. You remember that from the schoolyard, right? That's what it means to be yourself, and also part of the collective. You're in the know, and it's beyond communication—it is in fact the basis for deep and real and usually wordless, instantaneous communication.

Birds do it, fish do it, wolves do it, and we can do it too. In order for it to work safely and completely and well, it has to work on all three layers: Wei, Ying and Yuan. Let's start with the Wei layer (W-E-I, Wei, as in Wei qi).

Wei qi is the qi that runs along skin level—or a little above and a little below—but it includes the skin and it has the all-important function of, among other things, regulating the opening and closing of the pores. This has TREMENDOUS significance as far as our felt sense of separateness (or even isolation) in a crowd, versus our ability to flock up, and feel like one of the pack. Please join me in this experiment and you'll see what I mean.

I promise that I am not about to make you do anything crazy or humiliating. It's an INTERNAL exercise.

First, sit in your chair and be aware of your skin. Your skin is your dividing line, and it could be a dotted line or a solid line. For now let's make it a solid line. Close up your pores, and sit there inside your own skin like a little fortress. For those of you who don't like this feeling hang with me, please, I promise we won't stay like this for long but it'll help me make my point clearly if we all do this together for another moment or two.

Sit there in your skin, like an egg in a shell, and look around you at the other people sitting near you, also like eggs in shells, contained within their skin. Tune in to the sense of space between you and the people sitting beside you. You are in your skin, they are in their skin, and between you—nothing but emptiness.

Look around at this room, a big egg carton with all these separate eggs in their separate seat-slots—and all the vast space in this room between the people. Each in our own skin. Individual. One man, one vote.

OK enough of that for now—you can always go back to it if you like it, but for now I'm going to ask you to experiment with shifting your Wei qi, so open your pores! Open them up to breathe, open and free, inhaling and exhaling naturally through your skin. Open, let the sky in, breathe! You are not contained within your skin—what a silly thought! Your breathing space is so much more vast than that-- see if you can let yourself expand out beyond your skin by opening up your pores, and taking up your full space in this room—which may in fact be the whole room. We naturally occupy a great deal of space—so give it a try, without saying a word, go ahead and open and take up your full breathing space in this room.

Now look around. What was that about all this so-called EMPTY SPACE around here? There's NO empty space; the room is full of all of us, and in fact on a physical level as well as on the level of our mingling spirits, we are literally shedding millions of molecules every second; they are floating out around the room; who knows how many people in this room are now physically part of us? Were they ever separate? We are one body; we always were; but we only know it when our pores are open.

Even more importantly, when our pores are open, we are open to subtly sensing atmosphere. This is a big issue with my six-year-old son, Joshua, and it is the essence of hipness on a Wei level.

An example is when my son is very aware from within his own skin of the incredibly exciting thing he has just figured out how to do with chop stick, but has no awareness of the ambiance of the restaurant we're in, or the other people around us quietly eating dinner.

And what a HUGE DIFFERENCE it makes to my six-year-old son, to be reminded to open his pores and feel the restaurant and everyone in it—and thereby naturally find his place within it—rather than being told “Cut that out! If you do that one more time we're leaving the restaurant! Did you hear what I just said!?”

That doesn't cultivate hipness—it cultivates revolution, or at least a desire to head out west or across an ocean and put plenty of space between us so as to have unimpeded access to Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.

In terms of the experience of fitting in, “Put down those chop sticks!” is a kind of square peg in round hole kind of fitting in, whereas the former—opening up to atmosphere—is

based on an expanded sense of Wei-level hipness, and finding our natural place in the flock.

Open your pores right now to feel the atmosphere of this room-- this room in which there is no empty space. How does it feel? How would it feel different if you were surrounded by people waiting for medical test results? How would it feel different if you were surrounded by people silently praying for peace? How would it feel different if you were in this room alone?

This is the basis of wei-level universal hipness—keeping your pores open, so that you know what’s in the air. How else does every wolf lift its head into the wind and turn in the same direction at the same moment? The skill of Wei-level hipness is a deep attunement to what we are all part of: the living changing breathing world around us.

With your pores shut, you are aware of only your own internal experience. That’s fine in an environment that you are trying to shut out, like maybe a sandstorm or a blizzard. But if you want to be hip and identify truths that we can all hold to be self-evident, tune into what is greater than us all-- the truth of the Heavens above us and surrounding us, and our awareness of what each moment is being carried on the wind.

Let’s look now at Ying-level hipness. Ying is our circulatory system, our lymphatic system—it’s the gushy soup within our skin, the ocean in which we internally swim—all that freely flowing fluid inside of us.

In Chinese medicine it also goes without saying that whenever there are three of anything, one of them corresponds to Heaven, one of them corresponds to Earth, and the middle one corresponds to humanity. The Wei level corresponded to Heaven, or atmosphere. Here comes the middle layer, Ying, which is the oh-so-human layer.

Hipness in the Ying layer is a kind of metaphorphic soup of many flavors, like the local Chili Cook-Off in my little town of Saxtons River, Vermont.

Every year to raise money for the community recreation center there’s a big Chili Cook-Off. \$5 will get you in to sample chili made by everyone in town who feels like they’ve got something to share, and the willingness to make three gallons of it.

It’s a great example of a Ying-level energetic; everybody’s in the mix, and at any given moment nobody is sure whose kids are playing with whose dogs but it doesn’t really matter because they’re good kids and good dogs and we’re all watching out for them together.

There’s a prevailing metamorphic homogeny in which all the kids become neighborhood kids and all the dogs become neighborhood dogs, and it’s easy and it’s flowing; but within that fluid unity, we can still distinguish the shrieks of our own kids and the barks of our own dogs.

So the kids and dogs are running everywhere, and we all walk around for most of the day sampling each others' home-made chili. Some of the recipes are pretty spicy; some are easy and mild; some are very unique and some you taste and forget immediately because they taste so much like every other bowl of chili you ever had, but that's still pretty good. It all tastes different, but it all tastes like chili.

Coming to a conference like this, at its Ying-level finest, is like going to a chili cook-off. You are sitting here in this room surrounded by a few hundred human vats of chili. Sure, maybe you never met them before; sure maybe they are a recipe for chili that you've never tasted. Get your spoon out, because the bottom line is that people are people. Remember the Chili Cook-Off motto: It all tastes different, but it all tastes like chili.

Same with the different styles of Chinese medicine you're going to be exposed to here. Some of it may be unfamiliar. Some of it *clearly* is not gonna be the way that you learned the recipe. OK. Give it a taste, and share what you've got, too.

This ongoing exchange is the key to hipness on the Ying level. Everything you taste changes your own ying a little bit. As a result of what you take in—even little bitty samples, and whether you like them or not—your Ying isn't quite exactly the same flavor as it was a moment ago, nor the same as it will be a few minutes from now-- but there is always a kind of chef's signature on the mix that recognizably makes it your own.

You don't have to be consistent—in fact that's the secret to success at being hip on the Ying level. You go around tasting chili, approaching everyone as an opportunity to sample a new flavor of human or a new flavor of Chinese medicine, and you don't worry what yours tastes like—you just share it, knowing that it is always being changed anyway by what you yourself are currently integrating. And anything you taste from someone else, you know that's going to be different by tomorrow too. And you keep exchanging.

Truths that are self-evident slowly emerge over time on this level, through trusting the ongoing process of exchange. If you just keep sampling, and keep sharing, there is a familiarity which develops – a cohesion and continuity –but this one doesn't happen immediately, like the opening or closing of pores. Ying is the result of a digestive process, and we need some time to sample each others' cooking and digest each other. The important thing is to KEEP AT IT, keeping giving your samples, keep tasting, and over time among the slowly forming tribe there is a recurrence of flavor, a recurrence of theme that begins to feel like home.

Let's make this practical, because I want you to be able to really do this, not just think about it. When we speak with one another, we COULD be merely exchanging information. Nothing wrong with that, information is great stuff, but it just doesn't cut it as far as cultivating hipness on the Ying level. Let's do a Ying-sharing exercise so that you can actually begin to feel what I mean.

Just for a moment, tune into your own Ying, the vat of inner soup inside of you, which is basic human soup, personalized by your own particular favorite flavors of the moment. Taste yourself—taste the flavor of the richness of your inner world. Mmm.

You can't do this from up in your head looking down. You have to actually drop into your body—close your eyes if that helps you—and feel inside your body. Feel your blood and your moods flowing around in there. That ocean, that is your ying. This is what you have to share. This is the soup of you, beyond any information you might offer.

And we can offer it at the same time as we offer information. The information is the spoon. But this is the chili.

I'd like you to pick out someone you don't know sitting near you—wait until I give the full instructions before you do anything—and get back into your ying—into your body—re-find that feeling of the inner ocean, don't jump back up to the Wei level—it's OK—just find your gushy inner blood and mood world in there, and stay with it, even with your eyes open. It does take a little bit of practice, but we have a whole three days and usually it only takes a few hours to really get the hang of it. It's fine if you don't do the absolute best champion job right now, do a half-assed job and that's good enough for me to go ahead and template you with the direct transmission of how to do this.

Stay in touch with your ying-body, including the crazy nervous feeling that may be running through it now, stay in touch with it, and pick out someone sitting near you to whom you are going to say FROM YOUR YING—which means while being in touch with your ying, your flavorful inner world—“Hey, what's your name?” And when you yourself are asked this question, stay in touch with your ying, and reply with, “my name is-----; what's yours?” Guaranteed, if you stay in touch with your ying as you ask and respond, more than information will be exchanged—you'll share and sample the flavor of each other.

Go ahead, re-check that you are in your body, in your soft ying, and go ahead, ask someone their name.

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You can continue practicing this for the whole rest of the conference. Meanwhile I still have a few more skills to teach you!

Let's talk now about being hip on the Yuan level. The Yuan level is the deep core of our being, and the basis of our experience of individual identity. It is the jingshen, the Heart-Kidney axis. What truths do We the People hold to be self-evident on this deepest level of all? What truths would both Thomas Jefferson and Lao-tse hold to be self-evident?

The answer is as obvious as the leaves which were falling from the trees outside my window as I prepared this speech. The answer is Gravity, the earthly Absolute which we all share, but which we must be standing relaxed within our own individuality to be aware of.

It probably would be a good idea to stand up for this. Please stand up, if you would, and feel gravity moving through you. It's nothing new, you've been feeling it all your life, but tuning into it may be new. Open to gravity—sense gravity—and notice what you need to do in order to increase your awareness of gravity. For one thing, you have to be aware of your body. You can't be aware of gravity unless you are aware of your own body first. Being aware of someone else's body won't do it.

Try being aware of the bodies of other people around you for a moment. OK now come back to your body. Sink into it, let gravity help pull you into yourself; feel your relationship with gravity. This is YOUR relationship with gravity, and no one else can do it for you—nor can anyone else take it away from you. You know which end is up. You have a direct embodied experience of a self-evident truth, an absolute, beyond opinion or belief. No argument about which end is up and which way is down can cut any ice with you if you are in your body, feeling gravity to move through you.

Open your feet to feel gravity more fully. Open your legs, your knees, your upper legs and hips, to feel gravity more fully. Open your pelvis, open your spine, open your whole torso, shoulders, neck, head—

This is yours and no one can give it to you and no one can take it from you. And yet look around you—stay aware of gravity and at the same time look around you and FEEL around you with pores open what it is like to be in a room full of people all taking individual responsibility for identification of an earthly truth beyond opinion, beyond personal belief. We hold this truth to be self-evident. It's an incredibly strong basis for forming a community. And in fact, forming community WITHOUT THIS is dangerous.

You can sit down now.

There was an experiment I believe it was about 60 years ago, and I believe it was conducted by Kurt Lewin, involving a slanted room. The researchers set up a slanted room—not very slanted, just a bit slanted—with matching slanted walls, and slanted ceiling, with some slanted pictures on the walls, and a slanted chair in the middle of the room. They would ask people to go into that room alone, and sit up straight in the chair, while the researchers watched them from behind a one-way mirror.

I believe it was a full 50% of the people who went in and sat SLANTED in the chair. In the words of the researchers, this is called being Externally Referenced, rather than Internally Referenced. The Internally Referenced people were not fooled by the uniform slantedness of their surroundings; they sat up straight in gravity rather than straight in reference to the chair and the room. They knew from inside their own core, from the

balance of their own vertical axis, where the lines of gravity were running, and how to sit up straight.

This ability to keep in touch with what your own core is telling you about what's up and what goes down is clearly critically important in the creation of a healthy sense of Belonging in community. This internally referenced awareness is the difference between a mob and a tribe. This means maintaining hipness not just externally (Wei level) and not just interpersonally (Ying level), but also through tuning in to a Yuan level of reality that is so deep within me that it is greater than me; I live within its law. And although I sense it directly through my own internal axis, it is the same for everybody—we all live together on this earth under gravity's self-evident law.

Not even the most ardent individualist could be threatened by this kind of unity. With Yuan level hipness I can enter any collective without losing my bearings. This is the true E Pluribus Unum, and it is also knowledge of the Tao. This is the wolf pack together raising their heads to catch a scent on the wind, but it is also each individual wolf knowing inside what every wolf knows, but every wolf knows alone, together.

Now we can open wide our pores and join with the crowd without fear of becoming externally referenced and carried away by the mob. Now we can share in community our food our dogs our children in the neighborhood our ideas about Chinese medicine without losing our alignment with our core awareness of what nobody can tell us but everybody can know.

In a sense I have been presenting this as though being in touch with our core axis is important because it helps us get in touch with gravity—but really, getting in touch with gravity is important because it helps us stand in core alignment with self-evident truth. When we stand like this we are nobody's fool; give it a try.

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OK. Now, on this basis, having learned these skills, or at least begun to practice them, we are ready for The Wisdom of No Escape, and the importance of family—and by extension, the lessons of community and ecology.

Our country was founded during a time of expansion—there was no sense of living within a closed ecology—if you didn't like what was going on in your community, you could always move west, or start a revolution. The back door was always open.

In traditional Chinese thought, HOOEY! Where you gonna go to get away from the Law of the 5 Elements? Will you declare independence from the Tao? The trend of Chinese thought is learning to harmonize seeming opposites, seeing all “things” as contingent and interrelated, and in fact finding their apparent nature only in relation to their movement within the Whole.

All of this has direct bearing on how we relate to each other, our sense of Belonging, and how we do or don't form communities and attend to the ecology, of our homes or of the whole planet.

In a Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness based model, Belonging is a function of free choice, of bonds formed intentionally with like-minded others. Most of the time, this kind of Belonging is what Americans think of, and look for—a Liberty-based Belonging with those whom we freely choose, and who will hopefully freely choose in return to form community with us.

That is wonderful and I hope that everyone at this conference finds plenty of that sense of Belonging here, but I hope also that we will recognize together a whole other basis for Belonging more based on the Chinese Taoist model of unity. This kind of Belonging, and the skill set that it implies, is what I am referring to as the Wisdom of No Escape.

In preparing for this conference, when Nan Lu first asked the question, “What is family?” my first response was: family is the people you don't have a choice about being connected to. It may be other things as well, but one of the realities of families is a kind of stability—you know who you're going to be dealing with every day, maybe for the rest of your life, for better or for worse—and even the “for worse” is redeemed by teaching us the skills we would never learn without being cornered.

I do not want to forget that for many people, the word “family” has sometimes been synonymous with the word “nightmare.” I don't want to ignore that experience—I don't want to gloss over the rough stuff. I want to acknowledge it, and face it, and redeem it for what it's worth.

Let's face it, there are a lot of skills, interpersonal and otherwise, that we only develop in tight spaces. That's what I mean by the Wisdom of No Escape. The lessons of liberty, and the ways that we grow and develop based on our exercising of our freedom of choice about with whom we associate—friends for instance-- is NOT the same as what we gain by learning to get along with the people we simply have to live with. Sometimes they're wonderful and sometimes they aren't; sometimes if we could leave, we'd leave; but we can't, so we learn what only the Wisdom of No Escape can teach us.

For instance, I love my brother Dov dearly, dearly; having him as a brother has been one of the most profound ongoing treasures of my life, but he is also in many ways SO DIFFERENT from me that if we hadn't been wedged together in the same nuclear reactor—I mean nuclear family—I am really not at all sure whether we would have come to know each other, let alone love each other so well, based on temperament alone. I also have cousins like that—probably you do too—people who are in your family, and so you have learned to love or at least get along with that kind of person. This is a deep blessing. Sometimes it is not the kind of blessing we necessarily signed up for, but it is a deep teaching in learning the skills we just don't get from freely chosen relationships. It's a different gift, and a different skill set.

This familial Belonging in many ways is a Belonging more stable, and more profound than the Liberty-based Belonging of freely chosen associations. Those can be revoked. This can't. Those require us to "be good," whatever that might mean. But family is family, on good days and bad days; it's inescapable; it's beyond preference, beyond choice, irrevocable. This is a sense of Belonging that actually allows us to relax and be ourselves, because this sense of Belonging doesn't need to be earned. It's just a fact. A family is an ecosystem; if we can't escape, then we Belong.

The Wisdom of No Escape teaches us the most basic ecological relational skills through growing up in our family of origin, and finding healthy ways to work with whomever else we find there. And marriage—true marriage, with the back door shut and the commitment to face and work through with love anything and everything that comes up along the way, both challenges and matures these skills. There is love and deep wisdom that we only reach when there is no other way out but through. Family—whether by birth or by marriage—is all about loving and negotiating in some pretty tight spaces, for the sake of the deepest richness of Belonging that human beings can know together.

And then the final rounding-off of our Wisdom of No Escape skills of Belonging is getting along with our in-laws. Your family of origin, at least you grew up with them. Your spouse, at least you chose. But your in-laws! They're a bunch of aliens! Who the heck are they? Well-- they're your family. Oooh my my...

I would like to propose getting along with your in-laws as a skill-set model for world peace. Seriously. And I would like to propose it to be inclusive of the skill set earlier taught, of universal hipness on the Wei, Ying and Yuan level. Take those skills, and add to them the awareness that you are stuck with each other, you cannot get away, there is no longer an "away" to go to-- and now we're ready to talk family. Now we're ready to talk community. Now we're ready to talk global ecology. This is what it takes.

Time to accept the Wisdom of No Escape. Time to accept that WE BELONG to a closed ecosystem, and accept it not as a burden but as a precious treasure of life—to be part of, to belong, for better, for worse, in sickness or in health, to love and to cherish 'til death do us part—

because I have news for you: The back door on the planet is shut.

THEREFORE *the most important thing* that you can do for life on this planet is make yourself at home.

How to do that?

Let's begin at this conference. Look around you. Treat everyone you meet as someone you will know for the rest of your life, because even if you never see each other again, you are continuing to weave a web together—we share a very small profession on a very small planet.

We are what we've got. We are who we're stuck with, and who we therefore belong to. We are the tribe. We are a relatively small flock of birds, practicing our flying maneuvers with each other over this weekend, then moving out to practice these skills as part of a still larger flock.

Or to end with another image, you are here at this conference to attend a wedding. It is a celebration of the marriage of Chinese medicine and America. It's an arranged marriage—it was arranged by us. Look around you and what do you see? An endless number of in-laws to learn to get along with.

And how are you going to do that?

Be hip—

Open your pores

Sample each other's chili

Settle in gravity in your core axis

And know that you Belong—it isn't a choice—so go ahead and make yourselves at home.