

The Fire of the Gate of Life

by Piper Dunlap, LAc

I closed my eyes while I was in line at the bakery stand last Saturday to enjoy the warmth on my face of the glorious spring sunshine and the pleasant din of the crowd of farmers' market shoppers. My wife, Crissy, was ordering a loaf of seedy sourdough and a couple of morning glory muffins when an excited voice broke my reverie.

"Piper, Piper! I'm pregnant!" The proclamation was so brimming over with genuine satisfaction and excitement that there was little room for consideration of our public setting. During the few seconds that it took me to figure out who was behind the Prada shades and the voice, I realized that several people, including my wife, were looking at me, expectantly, waiting for an interesting exchange. Then she said. "Piper helped me get pregnant!"

Now, it has been many years since I have experienced a good, full-blown blush – you know, the kind that feels like I would imagine half of a hot flash feels like, but last Saturday, as Crissy's left eyebrow slowly rose and the bakery cashier began to grin from ear to ear, I most definitely blushed.

Let's just call her Susan. Susan bounded over like a gymnast approaching the parallel bars with her two thumbs up to share more of her good news when it dawned on her. "Oh, I'm sorry. That didn't sound right. It's just we've been trying for over two years." At that point, at least five people whom I didn't know and a few whom I did, burst out laughing!

"Hi, Susan. This is my wife, Crissy."

"Oh, Hi! Nice to meet you. You probably get this all the time – strange pregnant women accosting him in the streets."

"Yes, it happens occasionally." said Crissy, as she tucked the seedy sourdough into her canvas bag and smiled. Being a practitioner in a small town has its interesting moments.

As an acupuncturist and herbalist I help many women with their women's health issues. Western biomedicine calls Susan's problem *primary infertility*, which sounds so final and demeaning. But, of course, it is not the job of medicine to mince words or be poetic. I still like the sound of Chinese Medicine's diagnosis for Susan's condition better – Cold obstructing the Uterus and its channels and causing the diminishing of the Fire of the Gate of Life. Another women might have difficulty conceiving due to a very different imbalance like Blood-Heat or Damp-Heat or Stagnant Liver Qi. It's a completely different system that is based on literally thousands of years of careful clinical observation and information gathering. Although this form of medicine is fundamentally naïve of endocrinology, it treats conditions of hormone imbalance brilliantly. It just calls it something else.

As in over 40% of reported cases of infertility, Susan's was, from a western standpoint, due to a disturbance in the hypothalamic-pituitary-ovarian axis. That is to say, it was a hormonal imbalance. Her period was irregular, and her basal body temperature was abnormal in that it was monophasic. It didn't have the typical temperature spike that comes with the increase in progesterone associated with healthy ovulation. Though her thyroid level was within the "normal" range, it was at the low end. These are all western observations.

When I put on my Chinese hat what I saw was a young woman who could not get warm. She loved hot baths and saunas. Her hands and feet felt cold to her and to me. She said she often felt especially cold during her period. Her tongue was pale pink, with a purplish hue, and the quality of her pulses was slow, deep, and weak in the Kidney positions. During her initial intake it came out that she had been a commercial fisherman in Alaska and had been exposed to extended periods of environmental cold and dampness. She said she always felt best when she went to Mexico. I did not need a blood hormone panel to know how to treat her with Traditional Chinese Medicine.

Susan received weekly acupuncture and moxabustion (the warming of acupoints by burning the herb, Chinese mugwort, near those points). She and her partner were shown how to do the moxabustion at home, and she was given a variation of a traditional bulk Chinese herbal formula called *Warming the Menses Decoction*. She took her basal body temperature daily before getting out of bed in the morning and made a graph as part of the fertility awareness method. Susan also included more warming foods in her diet. By the second month, she was feeling warmer, and her graph showed a slight upturn on day 11. By her own volition, Susan came up with a technique of meditative visualization where she sent nourishing, warm energy and intention to her ovaries and womb. At the end of the fourth month, she failed to have her period, but she said it felt different than her previous amenorrhea, and, sure enough, when she peed on the little stick it turned pink!

The look of satisfaction on Susan's face was a gift. Everyone around the bakery stand saw it and felt it. After my blush and the laughter there was a sweet moment of celebration of new life that felt as old as time.

I took Susan aside and said, "Congratulations. Your Fire of the Gate of Life is officially stoked! Now that you're pregnant, let's adjust the acupuncture and your herbs to keep you that way."

"Okay doc. Thanks. See you next week." She bounded off with her new aura of maternity.

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