



OREGON COLLEGE *of* ORIENTAL MEDICINE

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## White Coat Ceremony Keynote Address

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Professionalism.

We have an idea of what professionalism looks like: appearing clean and well-dressed, wearing a white coat.

We have an idea of what professionalism sounds like: not saying too much, saying just the right thing, sounding well-educated.

Of course those things are important, but let's consider that professionalism is the ability to thrive in your profession. In this profession, then, we need to go a step further in order to really help our patients.

In this profession, in order to help patients, it is necessary to cultivate ourselves. This time in the clinic should be a period of intense personal transformation as you navigate your interactions with faculty, classmates, and patients.

I will be speaking today about self-cultivation, the highest level of professionalism. We can use the five elements of Chinese medicine as a guide in this, emulating the positive qualities of the seasons and elements found in nature. Starting with Water:

### **Water**

We are currently in the season of Winter, with the associated element of Water. This is a natural time of darkness, quietness, stillness, and inner reflection.

It is from this place of inner stillness that we can cultivate ourselves as a container, just as land contains an ocean. Being a container means that we are able to hold what is coming to us from another person. This allows us to listen deeply and quietly without distraction. We realize that leaving a thought unspoken can give it greater ability to germinate and to manifest more powerfully when the time is right.

Another aspect of being a container means that we are empty. When we are empty, we are able to be filled. This allows us to be receptive to information, knowledge, and wisdom.

Just as the consolidation and inner activity of a seed in the wintertime is what prepares that seed to open and grow when spring arrives, it is this time that we spend, alone and quiet, in deep inner reflection, in the dark cave of winter that will allow us to move forward in our own personal growth afterward.

### **Wood**

This brings us to Spring, with the associated element of Wood. During this time there is a process of growth, as leaf buds develop on trees and seeds begin to sprout. We can grow in a similar way, evolving spiritually and emotionally. The movement and forward motion of Springtime is mirrored in our own personal shifts and changes as we develop a sense of purpose, making plans and decisions about our futures.

This is also a time of clear vision, assisting our evolution with insight and a view toward our future selves as we gain experience, seeing new possibilities for ourselves.

This vision can allow us to more fully see our patients, witnessing someone in all their humanness, their messiness, their disharmony, their imbalance, seeing with a clear eye every place where they may wobble from their center, knowing that a pathology will shift only when it has been witnessed without judgement.

It means simultaneously seeing the patient in their fully manifested state, in their perfection, their capacity for kindness, generosity, and brilliance, their wholeness, and their creativity in adapting to an often imbalanced world.

## **Fire**

The culmination of this growing, upward and outward motion, is in the period of Summer, with the associated element of fire. This is a time of opening, blossoming, and maturation, and of connection, joy, and engagement. This may be how you felt during your first week of classes in this first year, before sitting in classrooms for hours every day for weeks and months on end. That feeling of enthusiasm often comes bounding back when students arrive in the clinic, and see the magic of the medicine in action. This is a time to literally blossom and mature into the healer that you are becoming.

This fiery summertime is a time of community, connection, belonging, and the exchange of warmth between people. You may have noticed that there are times when being in a large group of people will amplify the feelings that are present in each individual, so that the things we would normally feel become much stronger because they are being felt by everyone together, simultaneously. We can harness this phenomenon for our own self-cultivation by meditating in a group of people, or by singing chants with other people and noticing that we can become more greatly immersed in the experience due to the presence of others.

One of the organs associated with the fire of summertime is the heart, and it is important to learn when to open and close our hearts. You will benefit by keeping your hearts open to receiving knowledge and to the people who can help and guide you, to the wisdom you can gain from your patients (who are your real teachers), and to the new experiences and opportunities to succeed and to fail. However, it is equally important to recognize the times during which it is appropriate to safeguard your heart and to understand the healthy opening and closing of the gate to the heart; these are embodied by the two other fire organs, the pericardium and triple warmer.

## **Earth**

Following summer, we move into the end of summer, known in Chinese medicine as "Late Summer." This is a time of harvest and gathering. This is a time when we are able to witness all our hard work and study paying off, and to enjoy and appreciate the fruits of our labor.

The associated element of Late Summer is Earth, which is about nourishment, the idea of a Mother Earth, or parent who nurtures and cares for us. We can use this idea to reconnect with the inner child inside, who is longing to be cared for, and to be a "parent" to that child and to heal those wounds of childhood. Part of this is engaging in self-care: eating well, going to bed on time, keeping a schedule and a structure in our day, taking care of our bodies, saying "No" to dangerous experiences and dangerous people, and finding friends who are caring toward us and beneficial for us to be around.

The associated organs of Earth are the Spleen and Stomach. These represent the ability to receive nourishment, and also to digest. This can mean digesting information, experiences, and ideas, and being able to assimilate this new knowledge into our developing selves.

The emotion of Earth is sympathy, and we can add to that compassion and empathy. Learning how to balance these is another essential skill as we sit with our patients. Recognizing a struggle in another person without needing to fix it. Recognizing our own areas of neediness, and not asking patients to report their improvement to us so we can feel good momentarily, but instead allowing them to process their experience more deeply by not speaking words out loud about it.

## **Autumn**

As Late Summer turns to Autumn, we watch as trees drop their leaves and we realize that it is time to let go of the abundance of summer. The associated element is Metal.

This is a time when things get real, a time to eliminate all the garbage that is represented by gossip, distractions, and false beliefs that may be self-limiting. Just as the metal of a knife or scissors can cut what is unwanted from what is wanted, the metal element can inspire us to cut out the parts of our existence that are weighing us down, so that we may take in the more beneficial aspects that inspire us and lead to greater self-awareness.

We can see this practice in the ascetic lifestyles of monks, nuns, yogis, and old-time hermits, where the comforts and pleasures of life are removed in order to attain spiritual development. This is a very old idea; that enduring hardships and self-deprivation will bring one closer to "God." "God" can be any religious entity that is meaningful to you, something that allows you to recognize something greater than yourself, and to feel the emotion of awe in

response. For some people this is achieved simply by being outside in nature.

We don't have to go sit in a cave in order to cultivate this aspect. Seeking out experiences where we push our comfort envelope, such as spending several days in the wilderness, practicing taiji, or willingly parting with something that is of value to us. It is important to regularly seek out experiences that pull us out of our everyday noise and which allow us to cultivate more expansive views of life and of our existence.

Decluttering our psyches in this way, breaking our tendency to attach our self-esteem to "things," such as money, achievement, and status, allows us to see more clearly our purpose, our path, and our personal mandate. As a metal object shows us our reflection, seeing and acting on this clarity in order to achieve our dreams and goals can lead to a greater sense of worth and self-esteem.

Of the five elements, most people identify with and embody one or two of them more than the others.

The highest ideal, however, is to be in balance in all five elements equally in order to access our full potential. This is called being in the center. As we work with patients, we are using herbs, bodywork, and needles in an attempt to nudge them closer to their own center, either by removing obstacles or by tonifying deficiencies.

We don't have to wait for each season in order to cultivate the virtues of each season and element; working on each as they call out to us is a lifelong, never ending quest to arrive closer to our own center.

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Founded in 1983, OCOM is a single-purpose professional graduate school that offers first professional and postgraduate degree programs in acupuncture and Chinese medicine. OCOM's mission is to transform health care by educating highly skilled and compassionate practitioners, providing exemplary patient care, and engaging in innovative research within a community of service and healing. Our 1,500 graduates practice, teach, and research Chinese medicine in 50 states and across the globe, and have provided an estimated 10 million treatments over the past 36 years. Additional information about the college is available on our website:

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