Cherry Liley

Note from the author: It is a challenge to explain osteopathy to medical students who have not experienced it. Osteopathy is Like Cactus Conservation is a story to help with this task.

I am a patient of osteopathy, and have an MFA in Creative Writing.

A group of student conservationists stands around a six-foot desert cactus, looking at it, wondering about it—people who are new to cactuses, having never seen one before. It has a central column with two branching arms. Understandably, initially the students take it at face value, as a simple, rigid structure.

No, you tell them: Appearances are misleading, given the complexity within. Under the waxy shell are many different cells. There is succulent tissue, and even a hydraulics system. This collects and stores water in reservoirs that other animals depend on also. What looks like a plain exterior will, in season, burst out with blooms of vivid soft flowers. These are pollinated by an array of insects with their own curious lifecycles. Look closely, you say, and notice that fur of delicate spines, a cleverly designed protective mechanism. Some cultures actually revere the cactus beyond its visible and material parts because there's also a spiritual aspect to it, a holy purpose, perhaps.

So, too, osteopathy.

The cactus is only a tiny part of a bigger picture. You remind the students that a conservationist must take the immediate environment into consideration. The cactus is specially adapted to the desert, so it can patiently abide a drought. The sandy hollows around are inhabited by mice, which are feasted on by owls that nest in cavities in the cactus. They, and the snake, and the beetles, all do what they are supposed to do. They each depend on energy from the Sun. They act as workers of the Sun, dispersing its power. It cycles through all the channels of these creatures' lives, adjusting and rebalancing. The wise cactus conservationist provides for them, but does not limit or proscribe-she's aware of the greater mystery. Since there are still species yet to be discovered and labeled by scientists, she will leave room for these possibilities. She can't make rain, but she can permit and encourage the resilience each species was born with, the full scope of its own resources, to deal with the challenges of an arid season.

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A wise cactus conservationist, you tell your students, holds space for it all. He has studied the inter-relationships, knows the correct soil pH, the necessary temperature ranges, the beneficial microorganisms. He also appreciates the beauty of the moonlight's bath, the role of the poetry of light in the cactus moth's life.

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In this particular climate, even a fingerprint leaves an impact, introducing traces of moisture and salt. A hasty or clumsy move could scuff the sand and uproot the cactus—it's roots are not deep—or knock off a flower. That's why attention, watchfulness, and patience, along with gentle precision, are all attributes of an effective cactus conservationist.

SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

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Management of energy is fundamental—the vitality of each part contributes to the whole. Adjust nutrients little by little, you caution the students. A pollinating beetle requires only one rodent dropping in which to lay its egg. On the other hand, a cactus stressed by an over-proliferation of rodents will benefit from relief. Balance is key.

Yes, you respond, in answer to a student's question—in one situation, perhaps you will take out from the area an invasive species; but in another case, you might leave it, allowing that it appeared to compensate for something missing. Yes, if tire tracks near the cactus have caused compaction of soil, you can aerate the ground to allow nutrients to flow again and root tips to revive. Put supports in place if an arm of the cactus cracks, but be watchful; don't harm the helpful ants that excrete their own chemical bindings, or limit their opportunity. Primarily hold the space rather than actively interfere. Listen and respond lightly and gently to what is actually going on. Intense attention and awareness makes for presence, which is in itself an energy resource. Sometimes a demonstration of looking and listening is enough, is action in itself. At first, it had seemed to them so rigid, but by now the students can see how adaptable is the cactus. Be alert to the tiny details, you tell them—how, for example, by night, coolness draws moisture across the top layer of sand and the slightest indents from mice feet and snake tracks after sundown pocket drops of dew. This gentle refreshment encourages the cactus roots to fan out, for better support.

Finally, wrapping up, you advise them to consider time: Complexity builds over time. This cactus has become accustomed to certain habits, such as the behaviors of the mice, the particular way the breeze blows here, and how the air flows over this tiny ridge. The cactus has adjusted itself. Particularities have been incorporated. These reactions over the seasons to certain peculiarities make it unique. That's why there is no manual for cactus, only the consideration of individual cacti. The beauty of the world lies in its diversity, differentiation, and subjectivity, which the mind and awareness of the wise conservationist will strive to encompass.

