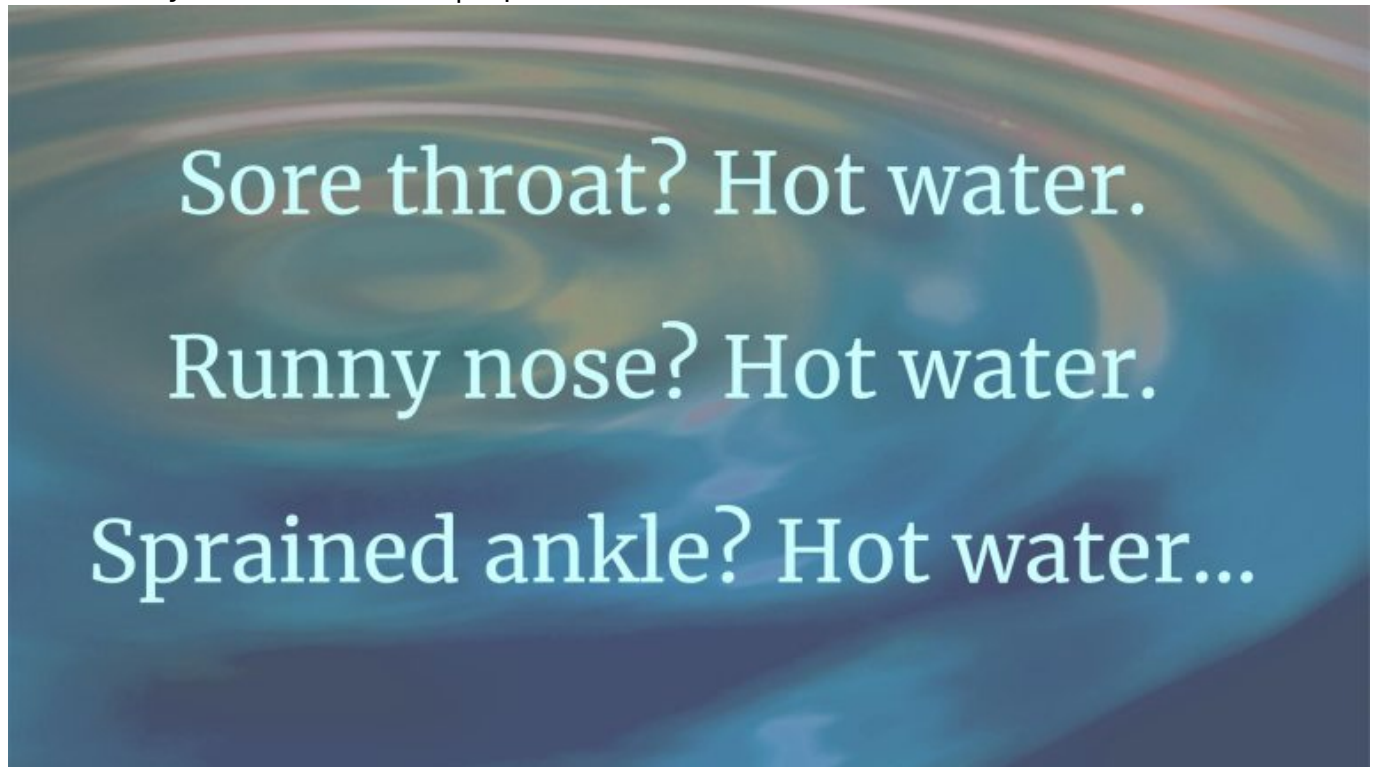


Hot Water Cures (Almost) Everything

Category: Stories

written by Victoria Qian | April 30, 2024



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If, like my parents, you had immigrated across the world to America with only \$200 to your name, feeling hesitant to speak whenever you needed something for fear of people doubting your intellect, you might develop a certain degree of wary self-reliance.

My parents have had to fight for everything they've achieved here, including voices that would be heeded despite their accents, and equal treatment despite looking different. It's no surprise that they value working hard over fitting in and feel that they must be nothing short of perfect. These standards inevitably influenced their parenting methods and shaped who I am today: a first-generation Chinese-American daughter, always striving for an impossible perfection while never letting the pressure show.

Like many immigrant parents, mine viewed becoming a physician as the pinnacle of the American dream: well-respected, stable and wealthy. So as a dutiful daughter who owed all she was and had to her parents, I set out to achieve that goal.

Paradoxically, my understanding of Western medicine was severely limited. My parents didn't believe in it; they feared the adverse effects of the medications that doctors seemed to prescribe without a second thought. Instead, our family's ailments were treated with home remedies.

My siblings and I had a running joke that anytime one of us felt under the weather, our mom would tell us to drink hot water. Sore throat? Hot water. Runny nose? Hot water. Sprained ankle? Hot water. If that didn't work, we turned to herbal treatments. For viral infections we had *ban lan gen*, a pungent root tea that made me gag; for canker sores, a vile, bitter powder called *xi lei san*; and for coughs, *pei pa koa*, a sticky, soothing menthol-loquat syrup.

My parents' suspicion of Western medicine gradually escalated into skepticism about physicians. Growing tired of waiting for hours in the office only to depart after a fifteen-minute visit with recommendations that they could have found on the internet, my parents eventually opted to rely on their own self-awarded "Google MDs."

When my pet rabbit bit a chunk out of my leg, my mom carefully cleaned the wound, dressed it with gauze and bandages and wrapped it with her childhood handkerchief. Her careful, gentle movements as she bound my leg with a silken blue reminder of her past felt like the best medicine I could receive.

At bedtime, she would stroke my hair, singing softly until I fell asleep, but during the day, if tears threatened to fall from my eyes, she would squeeze my hand and firmly chide, "Tough it out." It was a reminder that while she was always by my side, the rest of the world didn't care about our struggles, and that we couldn't let them see any weakness.

Another mantra my mother shared was: "The best are the happiest." My parents always endeavored to be the best in their fields, chasing the next promotion and putting in more hours than their colleagues to stand out. So I knew that I couldn't just *try* to be the best: I needed to *succeed*.

I emulated my parents' work ethic, giving up socializing and outside interests in hopes of achieving the elusive happiness that they never quite found. I became a violin prodigy, competed nationally in math competitions, scored nearly perfectly on standardized tests, went to a top-tier university, completed a Fulbright fellowship and got into medical school.

Yet, after all that, I still wasn't happy. Every success was not a thrill but a relief—a momentary reprieve before I sought out the next challenge. At age twenty-three, feeling exhausted, I realized that the things my parents and I had given up for success were things that also might have brought us joy. And, unfortunately, given our years of sacrifice and toil for empty, prestigious goals, it was only a matter of time before one of us broke.

In November 2018, when my dad picked me up at the airport for Thanksgiving break, he warned me that my mom had not been herself lately.

I had no idea what to expect. My mother is the strongest person I know—she is vibrant, loud, passionate and a fighter. But when I saw her in her room, she was a shell of her former self—wasting away, unable to eat or sleep. She stared listlessly at the wall, her empty eyes barely registering my presence.

"At night my thoughts race," she told me. Her former meticulous planning and

obsession with keeping our house spotless had turned into compulsions—distorted, endless streams of consciousness that she couldn't escape. Yet despite her obvious deterioration, and despite my family's urging that she seek medical help, she adamantly refused.

In Chinese culture, mental illness is only for the weak. How can a person be so tormented by something that no one can touch or see? To seek help for mental-health ailments is to admit defeat—to be labeled crazy or unstable. But now my family was facing a problem that no amount of hot water could fix; there was no herb that could ease my mother's mind.

As a family who'd always viewed happiness as the natural sequela to success, we had never imagined how devastating the effects of mental illness could be. Finally, after three months of suffering, out of options and desperate to feel human again, my mother swallowed her pride and turned to mental-health professionals for help.

They didn't save her the way it's shown on TV, with ambulance sirens, flashing lights and nurses rushing around while doctors shout orders. They saved her by listening carefully, quietly reassuring her and patiently explaining how the medicine they'd prescribed would help her, not hurt her. Throughout the months of her healing process, her doctors never gave up on her—and to me, my mom's return to herself was nothing short of a miracle.

I'd always wanted to be a doctor, but I never knew what it meant beyond prescribing medicine and helping people to improve their physical health. Watching my mom recover taught me that, as a physician, I will see people at their most vulnerable and will be entrusted with caring for them as human beings who are more than their disease, while also reminding them that they are not alone.

Having grown up in my parents' household, I deeply understand the mistrust that many immigrants and minorities feel towards Western medicine. But helping my parents to embrace its benefits has taught me something, I hope, about how to build trust between minority communities and modern medicine.

And though I'll always work hard to do and be the best I can, nowadays I also try to seek happiness as well. I do my best to cherish my relationships and extend compassion to those around me. After having spent so many hours studying alone, I now spend more time collaborating with my peers for the advancement of medicine.

Finally, for all my parents' love and sacrifice, a lifetime of gratitude seems hardly enough: But I hope to make them proud.