

# The Path of a Healer

by Sally Lester

*Eric Meyer-Reed  
with wife Stefany and  
daughter Neshama*



Eric Meyer-Reed is a hometown boy. Growing up in Santa Cruz and graduating from Harbor High, UCSC was the only college to which Eric applied. He took general education classes but didn't really connect with any of the disciplines. After his first year at UCSC, he realized he didn't know what he wanted to do in school and with his life. So in 1994, with the money he'd saved from his job working around Santa Cruz swimming pools, he left school and took his high school sweetheart, Amanda, on a trip to Spain, Greece, and Turkey. Eric says they "traveled by postcard—we'd look at a postcard and go there! It was an adventure—a great experience."

Back in Santa Cruz, Eric and Amanda married, and had a daughter, Michaiiah. About this time Eric was realizing a growing fascination with alternative medicine and apprenticed himself to Chinese acupuncturists and herbalists Michael and Leslie Tierra who had solved a lot of his health concerns. To fulfill prerequisites to be admitted to a masters program at Five Branches Institute of Traditional Chinese Medicine, Eric returned to UCSC part-time, then took a few classes at Cabrillo. He began the masters program at Five Branches in June of 1996 when his daughter was six months old.

Eric loved being a parent, juggling work, school, and fatherhood. But his life changed dramatically in January of 1997 when Michaiiah was diagnosed with Tay-Sachs disease. Tay-Sachs is a rare genetic illness that requires both parents to carry the mutation for the disease to appear, and it is fatal. Eric and Amanda quit working to care full-time for Michaiiah.

Through Buddhist meditation, Eric explored his feelings and beliefs about life and death, and his concern about what would happen to his daughter when her life ended. He reached a 'knowing, trusting place' by January 1998, which helped him allow Michaiiah to die rather than trying to keep her alive as long as possible. She passed away at home in March.

Because Tay-Sachs is a genetic illness, Eric and Amanda were left struggling with the possibilities of future children having Tay-Sachs. They focused on their friendship, and in 1999 they dissolved their marriage. The following summer

Eric lived and worked in a Zen monastery in France. He considered becoming a monk, but took the more difficult road for him and returned to life in the US. Back in Santa Cruz, Eric invited a female friend, Stefany, to go to a production of Shakespeare Santa Cruz with him. Within a few weeks they were seriously involved, and they married in June 2002.

Eric graduated from Five Branches and was licensed to practice acupuncture with a board specialty in acupuncture orthopedics. He was interested in people's medicine and so worked with Western doctors. While Stefany worked on her masters degree, Eric had a private practice in Santa Cruz and Palo Alto, and opened a clinic in Watsonville. Within a year he had a heavy caseload of 60-70 patients a week. He saw mostly workers' compensation patients on referral from medical professionals in the community to whom he marketed his expertise. At the end of 2003, changes in the workers' compensation laws resulted in Eric not being reimbursed for his work. However, he kept the clinic going for 3 months out of pocket.

Eric was uncomfortable about the lack of national standards in his profession that left practitioners at the whim of the political climate in each state, so he got involved in the boards of state professional organizations. He also became increasingly uneasy about drug/herb interactions when prescribing herbs to people who were on many drugs.

Eric thought, "if I was a physician, I could make the impact I'd like to in these people's lives." He began to see acupuncture as one tool in a bigger bag of medical tools. During his Chinese medical studies, Western doctors often encouraged him to attend medical school. Eric and Stefany learned they were expecting a baby, and he was propelled by the professional factors, the desire for more knowledge, and the feeling that he had a greater potential.

All these factors culminated in Eric returning to classes at UCSC in the summer of 2004. Though he'd always been a good student, he was now more focused and his grades improved. He had learned how to study while at Five Branches, and learning and memorizing vast volumes of information gave him an advantage. His goal was to fall in love, to find the passion with the material within the first

two weeks of each quarter. In order to get into the science classes he needed, Eric spoke with faculty early. He learned that this strategy allowed him to meet faculty before classes started so they knew his name, and they established a rapport. Eric declared his major as Health Sciences before fall quarter began.

Staying organized has been critical to his success. He uses a computer organizer to keep track of his assignments, work, study and class time. What's left is family time. After his daughter, Neshama, was born in September, 2004, he'd go for runs with her rather than going to the gym. He wasn't, he says, "looking for a mate, or a date, or to have fun. I had it. I think that made my life more structured and more suited to academic expectations."

Eric's focus has helped him cope with unexpected setbacks. Riding his bike down the steep section of Spring Street last fall, his bike malfunctioned and he was pitched over going about 30 mph. His aikido training had helped him learn how to fall, but the initial impact broke the top ends of both arms in the elbow. With help from his dad, he got voice recognition software loaded and trained on it very quickly so he could continue his studies. This was a humbling experience, too, since there were a few times he was trapped in bathrooms on campus because he forgot they didn't have a pushbutton door opener and had to wait until someone came in to open the door for him. This experience gave Eric an appreciation for the ease with which most of us spend our lives.

The real challenge for Eric as a re-entry student has been juggling his roles as husband, father and child, part-time work as an acupuncturist, coursework, studying for the MCAT, applying for medical school, and helping care for ailing grandparents. Eric says, "My wife would say I'm a very passionate person. In Chinese medicine the word for heart and mind are the same word, so my heart really rules my mind. And I have a clear vision of going to medical school."

Eric applied to 29 medical schools. He got 16 interview offers and took 9 of them. To date he's most seriously considering the University of Nebraska Medical Center (UNMC). He's being actively pursued by UNMC and offered a lucrative financial package, and the family support in the area is "priceless. My and sister and brother-in-law are there and very supportive. The family have pledged support financially, emotionally, everything. My mother and father-in-law are there every six weeks, so we would see them much more often than we do now." His parents support whatever decision he makes, though they're hoping for a California school. Eric's greatest desire is that his family has a happy and sane experience while he's in medical school.

Eric is interested in private practice, teaching, and research. His experience in acupuncture was primarily general and internal medicine, and he's most interested in subsets of internal medicine. In his heart he's a general practitioner but he won't rule out specialities. The closer he gets to medical school the less decided he is about his ultimate path.

As Eric approaches graduation from UCSC, he reflects on the role his soon-to-be alma mater has played in his life. Eric's dad graduated from UCSC in one of the first graduating classes. Eric's mother, a re-entry student, completed a computer science degree at UCSC while he was in junior high school. In addition, his wife, brother, and brother's girlfriend are graduates of UCSC—Eric will be the sixth UCSC graduate in his immediate family. His daughter, Neshama, is at the Infant and Toddler Center. He's sure she'll go to UCSC though and, says Eric, "that's a lot of Slugs!"