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Medicine Making

By Howard Woodwind Morningstar, MD

Medicines help restore our balance of health when we lose that balance and become ill or injured. In our culture, many of us have been conditioned to think of medicines as human creations that flow from doctors’ prescription pads, pills purchased at the pharmacy or from capsules you buy at the health food store.

While these may be appropriate, effective and even life saving at times, the actual act of medicine making is often at the very heart of one’s lasting healing. That’s because we become ill and need healing when we lose our balance with mother nature’s greater energy flow. When we consciously make medicines, we align ourselves with her healing power, often releasing unexpected and surprising healing benefits. One’s intention to heal, generally discarded by modern science as “the placebo effect”, adds an alchemical dimension to medicine that transcends the physical and pharmacological properties of whatever substances we may be compounding.

Imagine you’ve decided to comfort a sick friend by bringing them some soup. Picture the best canned soup that you can buy. Now visualize yourself bringing them the best soup that you can create in your own kitchen. Even if both soups are made from identical ingredients, your loving intention to heal transforms your soup into a healing elixir for your friend. My grandmothers, who blessedly are still here to teach me, assure me that love is the secret ingredient that makes their cooking so wonderful, and I believe them.

At this point I invite you to put down this paper and go to the window, or better yet, go outside. Quiet your mind for a moment and open your heart. As you look around, you may become aware of the incredible variety of medicines that mother nature lovingly offers us in so many different forms.

This awareness is the sacred space where medicine making begins. It begins within you, when you learn to see and feel the healing medicines that are all around us. There’s medicine in the song of wind blowing through trees, in the music of falling water, in the deep silence of a starlit sky. There’s medicine in the sweet fragrance of spring herbs blooming in meadows and woodlands, by riverbanks and in hedgerows, in our window boxes and gardens. Even if you’re in a city, where nature’s quiet voice may seem to be drowned out, look for healing medicines growing in “vacant” lots and sprouting up through sidewalk cracks.

The beauty of nature is a powerful healing presence that is always available to us when we need it. The simplest medicines are often the most potent of all; fresh air, pure water, wholesome foods, the touch of the earth, a friend's caress or a kind word. You don't have to pick a rose to experience its beauty, it's enough just to delight in its sweet company. Sometimes we are healed from what ails us just by lying in the sun, cheek to the fragrant, living earth, or by going for a walk in the gentle rain, feeling the plants' gratitude as they drink in the precious gift of water.

Other times we may need to combine and compound the medicines that mother nature offers us into specific herbal formulas. The art of medicine making is rooted in ancient wisdom that's been passed along through countless generations to the present time. My intention here is to introduce a way of thinking that will help you begin making herbal medicines for yourself and your family. For more details, read the chapters on making medicines in one of many excellent herb books, such as *Herbal Healing For Women* by Rosemary Gladstar. Or better yet, find out who your local herbalists are and learn from them first hand.

It's best to start your medicine making adventures with simple, non toxic formulas that use herbs with which you are already familiar. You may wish to begin with recipes suggested in herb books or by a professional herbalist. Treat only those health problems that you know how to deal with confidently.

The quality of the herbs you use is the most important single factor in determining the quality of the medicine you make. It's often best to grow your own fresh herbs, as this can put you in touch with the plants' healing energy from the start. If that's not practical, be sure to purchase high quality organically grown or responsibly wildcrafted herbs.

Wildcrafting, the art of entering nature to collect herbs can be extraordinarily healing. When wildcrafting, I still my mind's inner chatter and enter a meditative state in which I am able to perceive the energetics of individual plants and the effects of my actions on the plants' community. I pick herbs and make medicines mindfully, with intention to heal, often while singing or chanting healing songs. As many herbs have become endangered because of careless over harvesting, I gather only those that offer themselves abundantly. It's important to gather herbs growing on land that isn't being sprayed with toxic biocides or contaminated with automobile exhaust fumes or other pollutants.

Each herb experiences daily, monthly and seasonal rhythms that determine its medicinal potency. As you become aware of these often subtle cycles you'll learn to harvest herbs when these synchronize to create optimal conditions for the medicine you are making. For example, it's best to gather medicinal leaves in the morning, as soon as the dew has dried, in the early part of the lunar month when the moon is waxing, in the time of year just before the plant is about to flower.

Sometimes, we can apply herbal medicines directly without any further processing, as we

spread aloe juice on a burn, or nibble on parsley to relieve indigestion. Or we can make a simple poultice by applying crushed herbs to the skin with a clean cloth.

More often, we tend to process and preserve herbs to be made into medicines, so we can use them throughout the cycle of seasons. Herbs should generally be dried gently in a shady place with good air circulation, quickly enough so they don't mildew, but slowly enough so their often delicate volatile oils aren't dissipated. Properly dried herbs will retain their fresh smell, color and wholesome, vibrant appearance.

Many medicinal herbs are most effective when taken as tea. The art of making herbal teas can itself be a delightful ritual that starts the healing process even before you drink it. Teas' smells and tastes, the way they feel on your tongue or in your throat initiates healing by uniquely engaging all of our senses even before the plants' "active" compounds enter your bloodstream. Also, herbal tea formulas are easy to individually adjust and customize and are generally less expensive than tinctures and other more processed forms of herbal medicines.

It's important to make medicinal teas correctly, in order to fully extract and benefit from the herbs' healing properties. When treating chronic health problems, try a daily dose of a small handful of fresh herbs, or 4 to 6 tablespoons of dried ones in a quart of pure water. It's best to *infuse* most delicate leaves and flowers. To prepare an herbal infusion, place a handful of the herbal mixture in a non-reactive stainless steel or glass quart jar. Pour boiled water over the herbs and fill to the top. Stir, cover tightly and drink throughout the day. You may wish to strain and sweeten the mixture after 15 or 20 minutes. Some people find that making the next day's herbal infusion to be a soothing bedtime ritual.

Most roots and barks need to be *decocted* by simmering them in gently boiling water in a non-reactive covered vessel for 10 to 15 minutes in order to fully extract their medicinal properties. If your formula contains both roots and leaves or flowers, as many do, first decoct the roots, then pour the mixture over the leaves to be infused afterwards.

Many herbs, especially those with strong, unpalatable tastes are best taken as *tinctures*. Tinctures are more concentrated than teas, and are immediately ready to use without further preparation, so they're often helpful when you're traveling or otherwise unable to make teas. Tinctures can be taken straight, or diluted in water, juice or even herbal teas.

Tinctures are quite easy to make. Harvest the herb to be tinctured at it's peak of medicinal potency, place in a glass container and cover completely with an alcohol such as brandy to extract the plant's medicinal properties. Seal tightly, turn the jar daily, and strain after two weeks. If you're taking, for example, one dropperful of tincture three times a day, then a quart of tincture will suffice for one person's medicine for an entire year.

Medicinal oils, often used to treat skin conditions, are made much like tinctures, except that olive, almond or another good quality oil is used to extract the plants' medicinal qualities. Salves are

made from medicinal oils by gently heating and adding melted beeswax. When you start making medicines for yourself, you'll begin to gain confidence and will no doubt experiment with these and other endless possibilities.

Medicine making nourishes our awareness of our connections to the healing gifts offered to us by mother earth. As we learn how to see that which is healing all around us, we regain the balance in which true health is rooted, and we are healed.

As always, this overview is presented for educational purposes only. For advice regarding specific health conditions please consult a qualified health care professional.

This article originally appeared in ***Sentient Times***.

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