

Mother Nature's Healing Powers

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In the early 1980s I was living a very simple and pastoral life in the mountains above Wolf Creek, Oregon. As I worked the land and wandered the beautiful woods and meadows, it felt like the plants I was tending were somehow communicating with me. Now, I was brought up to believe that if plants are conversing with you, you should go to your doctor and get medication so that they will stop doing that. I called my father, an accomplished computer scientist, and told him how it seemed that plants were actively communicating with me. The phone fell silent, until he asked me gravely: "Have you told this to anyone else?" He strongly advised me not to.

Out of the blue one day, a busload of herbal students led by Rosemary Gladstar arrived at the meadow, asking to "tour" the garden that I was working in. Apparently, it had been a well-known herb garden in years past, but had since completely gone to a wild jungle of weedy plants. Rosemary, a wise woman in every sense, strode in among the tangled thickets and animatedly started pointing and exclaiming: "Look how everything knows how to grow just where it belongs! Look how the chickweed is sheltered under the nettles and everything is in harmony!"

Something clicked for me just then, and I understood that the vague plant murmurings I'd been hearing weren't just my imagination, but represented a focused way that Mother Earth communicates her wisdom to us. It was through this teacher, who literally appeared on my doorstep just when I was ready, that I realized that herbal medicine was to be at the heart of my life's work.

After a few idyllic and illuminating years, I began asking myself: "Now that you're learning how herbs can heal- what are you going to do with this knowledge?" It became clear that there was more in store for me than this beautiful but invisible life up in the mountains. I felt it was important for me to learn modern medical science, and earn the credentials to speak authoritatively about natural health and healing. With this ambitious intention in my heart, I was admitted into and later graduated from Yale Medical School as a medical doctor.

While contemplating medical school, I remember being afraid of the effects that scientific knowledge would have on the heartfelt and spiritual healing that I so treasured. I worried that the more knowledge I acquired, the less I would be able to trust my intuition.

Instead, I found that scientific study increased my awe and amazement at the intricacy of Mother Nature's healing wisdom. As I studied plant biochemistry, I learned, for example, that chamomile creates more than twenty distinct pharmacologically active drugs. This little plant may undertake

fifty or so separate enzymatic steps to make each of these drugs. I wondered: “Why on earth does this plant bother to make such a complicated group of medicines?” This led me to the broader question: “Why do plants make medicine?” (I am leaving this to you as a thought question)

I would like to talk for a few minutes about “natural law”. These are principles of cause and effect that hold true throughout all of creation at all levels of existence. Symptoms of illness occur when we lose our normal state of balance with the greater energy flow of nature that flows around in accordance with natural law. Symptoms are valuable messages that alert us to an underlying problem, and can guide us back to health if we are attentive. When civilization loses its balance, we experience war, epidemics and various social catastrophes. When a species loses balance it may suffer habitat destruction and extinction.

Healing is a universal and natural process that even so-called inanimate objects experience. So, if you look at a fresh, raw scar from a landslide, and go back to that place year after year, you’ll see how that scar heals. It heals because lichens grow, plants regenerate, soil is formed and the wound is healed.

So, if healing is a natural process, why do some people remain sick? Why do people need to go to healers if it’s a natural process that’s going to happen anyway?

Even though healing is a natural process, it can’t proceed if the tools that attend healing are unavailable. Sometimes, the damaging force continues, so there’s no room for healing to occur unless that blockage is overcome. When we get stuck in imbalance, our suffering is really Gaia’s suffering expressed through us.

So, why do plants make medicine? And beyond that: Why is the beauty of nature such a powerful healing force?

I perceive the loving energy of Gaia is expressed to us through the beauty of nature. I find that the most profound healing gifts aren’t herbal teas or allopathic drugs, they’re simple things like fresh air and pure water, the beauty of nature, or the loving kindness of caring people.

We often find that consuming herbal medicines is helpful when we are ill. But very often healing unfolds at a more subtle vibrational level. This kind of healing occurs when you sit with a plant and absorb its healing energy. An energetic field with tangible healing power may be created between you and a living plant. You don’t always need to pick leaves and flowers to make tea or tinctures.

Healing can happen at any time. It happens even when rocks are injured. It certainly happens when we are injured. It occurs naturally, like gravity, unless it is blocked. Healers simply help us find and free constrictions in the flow of energy. The healer doesn’t have to do anything most of the time, except perhaps be a mirror so one can see what is missing.

Sometimes healing happens before we even feel the symptoms, perhaps triggered by an

instinctive feeling, or a dream. But sometimes healing is delayed until one suffers irreversible consequences of illness. For example, one may suffer a stroke and no longer speak clearly or move a limb, and only then decide to reduce dietary fat or quit smoking. When healing occurs at this late stage, there often is no returning to where you wish you were. On a larger scale, we may destroy habitat so that species become forever extinct. It's too late then to come to our senses and say: "We'd better stop putting that poison stuff in the river".

As human beings we have this incredible ability to alter the earth. Except perhaps for the forests, we currently exert the greatest biological influence on our planet. As we become more and more powerful (and numerous!), we must become more responsible for our actions.

It's important to be aware that whatever we do may have distant and unexpected consequences. I was backpacking with my son, sleeping under the stars, and one night we were being eaten alive by mosquitoes. As we lay awake, he challenged me to explain what possible "valuable role" mosquitoes could provide for us. But when we spray lakes and watersheds with insecticides to kill the mosquitoes, we also eliminate a major food source for fish that live by eating the mosquitoes. And so on through the food chain. If I were a clever and inventive trout, I would invent mosquitoes to fetch little bits of those big juicy mammals back to me.

Our well being and perhaps our survival into the future will depend on renewing our balance with Mother Nature. The healers' greater role at this moment in history here is to help turn our individual and cultural attention to the earth. No other health or political issue is as crucial as the crisis of our separation from this reality. May we become ever more aware of what the earth needs from us, as we begin our journey into the new millennium.

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