

The Spirit of Herbs

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When I was a barefoot herbalist in Wolf Creek, inspired by my plant teachers to attend medical school, I dreamed that one day I would be able to think and act as an earth healer, but to speak with all the authority of a medical doctor. So, it's such an honor for me to be here with you, speaking for Mother Earth on Earth Day.

As a healer, I know that protecting the environment is perhaps the only health issue that really matters in the long run. Even if we can cure cancer or heal leprosy; Even if we can balance the human population explosion: We cannot stay well while the earth becomes ill.

So, the healers' work is about more than individual patients. It's about taking care of the earth, mother of all life, mother of us all. If we destroy her ability to sustain us, we will become ill, and then we will be gone.

The earth will recover, more or less. She will be poorer by the number of species we have eliminated carelessly, and it may take ten thousand years, just a moment in the span of earth's time. But the ancient forests will grow back. The rivers will be drinkable once again.

But, will our grandchildren be there to drink the water?

The whole earth is alive, all of it connected, related. We are all part of a single intelligent organism. Many call her Gaia, which means life.

Our human bodies are made of the stuff of Gaia, our mother earth. We call her mother, for in her love of life she gives birth to us. She grows the trees that breathe out oxygen. She rains for us, and for our animal and plant friends. She births the grains and fruits that nourish and delight us. She sustains us with all we need in every moment, and what's more: She has done so unconditionally since the beginning of time, and will continue to do so for as long as she is able.

Gaia expresses her love in the endless variety of living beings with whom we share this planet. Her love has shone through a multitude of divine voices, the Great Spirits, the Gods and Goddesses of human history. Her energy pours intricately through a vast web of life in which all things participate, in which all are valued. The *uni-verse* is one song, and each note is heard.

This song of life flows with the universal laws of give and take, expansion and contraction, birth

and death. Everything moves toward balance. Everything returns to the whole.

Gaia loves to play and experiment with endless possibilities of life: Whatever finds its balance with the whole, she keeps. Whatever falls out of harmony is transformed, is healed, and a new balance is found. Whatever cannot be transformed, what won't change: is discarded.

Health is a natural balance. When we are healthy, our energy flows in harmony with the energy flow of Gaia's greater whole.

Illness occurs when balance is disrupted: It is always a teacher! It teaches us how to find a new balance that works.

Disease symptoms are messages to the individual. They remind us to quit smoking, to eat right, to rest. Epidemics are symptoms of environmental imbalances. These are messages to civilization. They remind us to quit polluting, to treat farm animals right, to give back to the earth.

Everything we do has consequences. Yet we act as if unaware that the consequences of our actions may surface distantly and unexpectedly.

As human beings, we've become conscious of our individual selves. It's so easy to fall into the illusion that we are somehow separate, or even exempt from these universal principles, that we can get away with taking more than we give back. And now, as we explode across the planet, as we experiment with re-engineering Gaia's life support systems, this illusion of separation has become the great crisis and challenge of our time.

Gaia is powerful, but she is fragile. The web of life is a delicate balance: The living zone is just an arm span thick.

When we are healthy, Gaia delights to play through us. When we lose our individual balance, we get sick. When a culture loses balance, we face social catastrophes: epidemics, famine and the various forms of war. At the global level imbalance manifests as habitat destruction, pollution, mass extinction.

Now, healing is natural and instinctive. It's innate to all beings, both animate and so-called inanimate. Healing happens at all levels: physical, emotional and spiritual, individual, community and planetary. Even scars in blasted rocks will soften and heal with time.

But if the source of injury continues, the imbalance grows and accelerates and the symptoms worsen. So, if we continue to burn more and more fossil fuels, global warming accelerates and there's no chance for healing even to begin.

Or, the injury may be over and done with, but the damage may be so severe that materials and energy for healing are no longer be available. So, if the soil is gone, it takes a long time for the plants and animals to return. And of course, extinction is forever, no matter what else happens.

It's often taught that all beings exist to compete for resources, but this doesn't make sense. If it's

true, then why do plants feed us? Why do they make medicine? What do chamomile flowers intend when they become a relaxing tea? Why should the opium poppy relieve even the most intense pain? Why is a rose delightful to our senses? Why is the beauty of nature healing to us?

Look around and see how life arranges itself: The forest isn't a collection of competing beings, Its a cooperative community. Each supports each. Each has its part in the whole.

All medicines are expressions of Gaia's love for her children. She presents us with so many opportunities to be healed! It's as obvious and profound as gravity, and you don't need to have an apple fall on your head to figure it out.

Whatever the level of imbalance there is a corresponding level at which healing unfolds. Healing may come simply by surrounding one's self with nature's beauty: When we are weary or struggling with stress we need only to rest a few moments, breathe deeply and let the sound of the wind through the trees calm us.

Healing can happen any time. It may be gradual and subtle, becoming apparent only in retrospect. Or, it can be experienced as a dramatic, even miraculous revelation.

When we are receptive we may find healing before we feel any symptoms of disease. However, the experience of illness is often a teacher. It provides an opportunity for needed transformations. When the lesson is learned a new balance is reached and there is full recovery. If we listen to the messages Mother Earth is sending us now, that's what will happen in the years to come.

But, when we do not pay attention, healing occurs only after we suffer irrevocable consequences. For example, one might change a harmful habit only after a crippling stroke.

Or, we may choose to stop destroying an environmental habitat too late to prevent the extinction of a beloved species.

We humans have developed an amazing ability to modify this planet's physical plane.

True, our manipulations are only Gaia, experimenting with our consciousness and abilities. But, as we expand into every habitat across the planet, altering whatever doesn't suit us: What results can we expect? Are we a design to be discarded, or will we heal ourselves, discovering our place as conscious beings within Gaia's whole? What does Gaia require from us for success?

The mystery of why we are here as a species unfolds at its own pace. It may be simply for the sake of beauty and delight, or perhaps a greater destiny awaits. It doesn't really matter. As Gaia's children, it's clear that our well-being depends on us taking care of her. Let us open our hearts to her love. Let us love her, as she loves us. Let us heal her, as she heals us.

Yet so much has been damaged, and still the destruction continues!

I look at the polluted air that hangs over the valley like a shroud. I see the poisoned rivers and

streams from which we can no longer drink. After a while, this almost seems reasonable! And I remember the ancient trees, gone for a moment's use as paper!

So many of Gaia's children are sick because she is sick. We face unprecedented epidemics of cancer, auto-immune diseases never seen before, strange and inexplicable syndromes disabling many thousands. There are so many suffering from mental illnesses, from anxiety & depression: Maybe these are the sensitive ones who are *getting the message*, the ones who can't continue as if nothing is wrong.

So what can we do? How can we recover?

Whatever we do, its not enough to just know these things, to speak of them here. We need to act on our knowledge, to make the needed changes happen. We need to give back more than we take, for our own sakes. Our actions must benefit, not harm Mother Earth.

So what *can* we do?

We each have unique talents for taking care of and healing the earth. For most of us, this task should flow through daily habits, through our personal, community and professional life.

Many will be inspired to take direct action. We honor those who stand in the way of destruction, who place their bodies between the bulldozers and the forest. For others, simply living an intentionally beautiful life is of itself healing.

For all of us, I say: Turn to Mother Earth for guidance. When we still our selves and hear her voice, we renew our connection to our source. When we open our selves to her loving gifts, we have a chance to experience Gaia's healing presence directly.

The most potent healing gifts are often the simplest of all: beauty, fresh air, pure water, nourishing foods, a sense of purpose, love.

We grow aware of the consequences of our actions on this planet. Our roles as planetary healers are revealed. We thus find our own purposes and meaning.

May it be so.

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