

This is Anarcha-Herbalism: Thoughts On Health and Healing For the Revolution

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My medicine chest is a council of bioregions, with representatives gathered together as I make my way around the world west of the Rocky Mountains. The Coptis root was picked out of the churned-up scar left by an excavator, at the retreating edge of the Idaho wilderness. The tiny amount of Pipsissewa leaves came from an ancient grove above the Klamath River just feet away from where the District Ranger sat on a stump talking about his plans to cut it all down. I am drying Nettles from the California creek where salmon die in the silt left after a century of industrial logging.

Every jar holds a story (often a ghost story of dying ecosystems and places gone forever). I am honored to have known the plants in their home places and to have studied their uses as medicine. But for people not lucky enough to roam throughout the wilds, purchased herbal preparations such as tinctures may be the link back to this sort of healing.

Like so much in this consumerist society, it is easy to ignore the connections between a bottle on a shelf in some store and a living, growing plant out in the world somewhere. It can be hard to know if the plant grows a mile away or on another continent. There is much to be said for reconnecting, for educating ourselves about the herbs we use and gathering our own medicine when we can. That's how we will be able to build a whole new system of healing — one that can support our movement away from the corporate power structure that medicine has become.

The development of a new medical system, or the recovery of ancient models, will be another link in our safety net when industrialism fails. It will keep us alive and kicking out windows now in the system's last days when so many people have no access to industrial medicine. And it will reestablish our connection to the real medicine that is the Earth.

An alternative to “alternative medicine”

The sort of herbal medicine popular these days (presented to us by the media and green capitalists as yet another exciting fad) has brought with it very little thought of a new way of healing. The plants, reduced to capsule form or, worse, to their “active ingredients”, are just new tools to work with in the same body-machine that industrial medicine sees people as being. They become no different than pharmaceutical drugs or a scalpel blade: something to pry into the body-machine with and use to mess around with the parts. Except of course much less effective, because the herbs have been taken out of the system of healing in which they have their strength.

When the marketers of herbal products get their hands on a new “miracle cure”, it can mean extinction for the plant. This is especially sad when so many living creatures go into useless products or are wasted on conditions that they don't treat. (Has anyone else seen that Echinacea shampoo?) The classic example of this is Goldenseal, *Hydrastis canadensis*, a plant close to extinction in the wild. It has a couple of amazing actions in the human body but has mostly been marketed as a cure for the common cold, which it will do almost nothing to help. By the way, the largest brokers of wild-harvested Goldenseal and many other big-name herbs are multinational pharmaceutical corporations. Given American society's obsession with herbal Viagra, weight loss pills, and stimulants, most of the herbs on the mass market are being sacrificed to these ridiculous causes.

There is an alternative to “alternative medicine”. Southwestern herbalist, author, and teacher Michael Moore probably said it best in one of his recent digressions from a lecture: “In this country, the herb business mostly revolves around recently marketed substances with new research,

and it comes from them to us. Whereas we're trying to establish as much as possible (in this "lower level" if you will) the fact that we need to create a practice and a model that's impervious to faddism. We're trying to practice in a way that derives from practice rather than from marketing. Not from above to below but from below around. Keep it local. No centralization because centralization kills everything."

Herba-primitivism

So we need another way of looking at our bodies and the plant medicines. Seeing the two as interconnected and in balance is new to industrial culture, but in reality it is the most ancient healing model on earth. We knew it before we were people. Animals know how to use plants to medicate themselves. Their examples surround us, from dogs eating grass to bears digging Osha roots. Probably every human society has had some way of explaining how the body works and how plant medicines work in us.

One thing all herbalists know — dogs and bears included — is that a health problem is best treated before it begins. In more primitive societies where people have the luxury of listening to their own bodies it is easy to spot an imbalance before it turns into an acute disease state. This is where herbs are most effective. They work at this sub-clinical (and therefore invisible to industrial medicine) level of "imbalances" and "deficiency" and "excess".

This old/new healing system is subtle and requires a lot of self-knowledge, or at least self-awareness. It uses intuition as a diagnostic tool. Emotion, spirituality, and environment become medicines. The spirit and environment of the plants we gather affect their healing properties, and our relationship with those plants becomes very important.

Green Herbalogy

When we take herbal medicine we are taking in part of the plant's environment. Everything it ate and drank and experienced has formed the medicine you're depending on, so you better make sure it gets all the best. When we are healed by plants, we owe it to them to look out for their kind and the places where they live. Traditional plant-gatherers often have a prayer they recite before they take anything from the wild. I usually say something along the lines of "OK, plant. You heal me and I'll look out for you. I got your back. No one's gonna build over you, or log you, or pick too much while I'm around." So this true herbal healing system has at its heart a deep environmentalism and a commitment to the Earth.

The bioregional concept is important to this model of healing. Plants' actions in our bodies are really quite limited by the chemicals they can produce from sunlight and soil. For every big-name herb on the market cut from the rainforest or dug from the mountains, there is most likely a plant with a similar action growing in your watershed. Some of the best medicines to maintain good health grow in vacant lots and neglected gardens around the world.

Anarcha-herbalism

A society of people who are responsible for their own health and able to gather or grow their own medicines is a hard society to rule. These days we are dependent on the power structure

of industrial health care — the secret society of the doctors, the white-male-dominated medical schools, the corporate decision makers with their toxic pharmaceuticals and heartless greed and labs full of tortured beings. That dependence is one more thing keeping us tied down to the State and unable to rebel with all our hearts or even envision a world without such oppression. With a new system of healing, based on self-knowledge and herbal wisdom, we will be that much more free.

Offering real health care alternatives will help to calm some people's fears about returning to an anarchistic, Earth-centered way of life. There is a false security in the men with the big machines, ready to put you back together again (if you have enough money). What is ignored is the fact that industrial society causes most of the dis-eases that people fear. Living free on a healing Earth while surrounded by true community and eating real food will prove to be a better medicine than anything you can buy.

What steps can we make now towards creating this new system of medicine? We all need to learn what we can about our own health. This can be through training in one or more of the surviving models of traditional healing and/or through self-observation. How do you feel when you're just starting to get a cold? What kinds of problems come up repeatedly, especially when you're stressed out? If you're a womyn, how long is your cycle and what does the blood look like? Understanding how our bodies act in times of health can help us recognize the very early stages of dis-ease when herbs are the most useful.

People who have some background in healing (in the traditional or industrial systems) can be a great help to those of us just learning. Healers who are working to form this new model, whether collectively or through their individual practices, should keep in mind that commitment to the Earth and a decentralized form are central to truly revolutionary medicine.

In these times of change, everything is being examined and either destroyed, rebuilt, or created from our hearts. Industrialism has affected every aspect of our lives — we are just starting to realize how much has been lost. Medicine is just one part of the machine that we have to take back and re-create into a form that works for the society we will become. Every herb, pill, and procedure should be judged on its sustainability and accessibility to small groups of people. We can start with ourselves, within our communities and circles, but should never stop expanding outwards until industrial medicine rusts in a forgotten grave, a victim of its own imbalances.

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