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Medicine Feet

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“As the Empire building of predatory capitalism begins to crumble beneath the weight of its excesses, and many First Nations people disappear or become radically changed before the ongoing forces of colonization, we find the world awash in cultural fragments and detritus. It is out of this broth of identity nutrients, this compost heap of social possibilities, that an archetype of human renewal is arising. I call this the 'sylva' (of the forest, and in its expanded sense, Nature) 'politan' (citizen of). The sylvapolitan is a bridge figure, alchemizing balance, and often synthesis, between the colonizers and colonized; the technological mind of modernity and perennial wisdoms; reason (eagle) and spirit (condor), male and female knowledges. The sylvapolitan represents our potential to survive this era of great extinctions, to act as co-creative partners with the great Evolutionary intelligences of the planet, and flourish as a species.”

- anthropologist, Morgan Brent

With the complex of issues around peak oil and climate change all coinciding upon us, the reality is unsettling that medicine for most westerners is synthetic produced in some far away factory. This points us towards the vulnerability of a very important aspect of living, our health. Even those who use natural medicines still purchase most of those medicines. Educating ourselves about these issues brings upon us the awareness that how far a food or medicine travels is essential. Those consciously aware people (of whom I imagine you count yourself among) already have been counting their **food miles** and their **ecological footprints**, but Rob Hopkins, founder of the Transition Culture Movement, warns us to start counting **food feet**. *How many feet are your foods traveling?* The same can be asked of our medicine. We need to count our Medicine Feet!

Most of our food and medicine needs to be grown locally. This can be accomplished sustainably implementing the principles of **Permaculture** and **Agroforestry**. Learning to grow and caretake forests is critical to our species thriving. The harmony of our species can occur at the edge of forest and field.

There are at least five ways that we can obtain our plant medicines more sustainably. First, we must remember that humans have always traded. Even with hardships we will exchange goods amongst ourselves. Thus, some medicines will come from afar still but they will be available less frequently and will cost much more.

Second, we need to learn thoroughly the local native plants and weeds from the elders in the region. The time to start that is now. With each passing month more and more elders pass on and more and more wild places get “developed”. You do not have to go far to begin walking the green path. Start with the weeds beneath your feet! Eating weeds will take care of most of our food and medicine needs. I am horrified each time people tell me they’ve been told that acorns and nettles are poisonous! I tell people it takes three to five years of learning about plants to be skilled in knowing them; of course, walking the green path is a life long journey. These are some of the skills we needed to have been taught as children. As adults we need to reconnect that missing link and pass it on to the next generation.

Most people’s needs will be met if we keep our population densities down and caretake the forests (the opposite of what we have been doing these last few hundred years). Read Thomas Berry’s The Great Work to get a sense of the tipping point we are now at as a species.

Third, seeds and starts of the desired medicines can be brought from afar and grown under similar conditions (using creative, low energy designs for greenhouses, cold frames and such) to widen the selection of herbs available. This can be done slowly over the generations starting near the plant’s native habitat and spreading out slowly.

Pre-Incan civilization used terracing techniques to migrate plants from the jungle to the Andes (and visa versa). We must be conscious to not try and reinvent the wheel by being diligent at revisiting our past while bringing innovation into the modern flow. Simple is often appropriate.

Fourth, one can learn the healing stories of the well-known world plants and bring that knowledge to the local species of the same genus and experiment to discover their similarities. When species of the same genus share similar qualities they can be thought of as **analogs**-where the local species can be substituted for a well-known medicinal species. This kind of research is central to my work of the last thirteen years. An example of an analog would be substituting the famous dong quai (*Angelica sinensis*) with one of the 21 *Angelica* species native to North America.

Lastly, we can establish a relationship with the plants around us and they will tell us how they can be useful as medicine. **Plant Spirit Medicine** and **Shamanism** need to be re-instated as legitimate ways of knowing. Through approaches such as **Phenomenology** we can reawaken our connection to nature. The famous George Washington Carver communicated with plants and introduced hundreds of ways to receive food, medicine and more from the **plant kingdom**.

If you love it enough, anything will talk with you.

I love to think of nature as an unlimited broadcasting station, through which God speaks to us every hour, if we will only tune in.

-George Washington Carver

Also, Luther Burbank communicated with plants with great success asking them to grow bigger for our benefit.

Flowers always make people better, happier, and more helpful; they are sunshine, food, and medicine to the soul.

We must return to nature and nature's god.-Luther Burbank

It is of immediate concern for any community seeking resilience that it assess what herbs are used (and in what quantities) by the local population. For instance, within your household, how many pounds each of nettles, Echinacea and ginseng are consumed a year? How about within your community? We need to make land and resources available to grow these herbs locally in substantial enough quantities to meet these needs. Start with current use but know the needs will grow so plan for that. Disperse the skills and means to make small yet significant gardens throughout the area. Make the changes on the grassroots level. The transition town of Totnes in England has a Health and Wellness Group that is looking into these issues and is moving forward the building of a community medicine garden. Check out their progress at:

<http://totnes.transitionnetwork.org/healthandwellbeing/home>

Space needs to be made for monthly and seasonal herb markets where abundant herbs can be traded away and desired herbs brought in.

All these issues are expressions of global local, local global in which one acts and lives very locally and also keeps an awareness alive of humanity's collective knowing, applying it when appropriate to local conditions. There are many levels from local to global.

Through the awareness brought on by looking at our medicine feet, we can see that our collective resilience is low. By approaching our health with the suggestions above we embark on a path of becoming neo-indigenous. Let us begin it now.

“Maximum Freedom to the individual, Maximum coherence to the Whole.”

-Mae-Wan Ho The Rainbow and the Worm

More Information:

Below are resources that will expand upon the ideas presented here. Also the terms bolded above can be avenues toward deeper learning through searching for them on the internet. This piece has emerged from my recently finished master's thesis. A larger book list can be found on my website:

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Transition Culture

Transition Movement: www.transitionculture.org

Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*; Harmony/Bell Tower; 1st edition (November 14, 2000)

Hopkins, Rob. *The Transition Handbook*; Green Books; (2008)

Permaculture/Agroforestry

Jacke, David and Toensmeier, Eric *Edible Forest Gardens Vol 1 and 2*; Chelsea Green (2005)

Mollison, Bill. *PERMACULTURE: A Designers' Manual*; Tagari Publications; Reprint edition (October 1, 1997)

Martin Crawford's website: www.agroforestry.co.uk

Plant Spirit Medicine

Cowan, Elliot. *Plant Spirit Medicine*

Tompkins, Peter; Bird, Christopher. *The Secret Life of Plants*; Harper Paperbacks (March 8, 1989)

There are a number of books on the famous gardens of Findhorn as well as, Michelle Small Wright's "The God in All Things" about here fantastical gardens in Virginia called Peralandra.

Wild Food

Plants for a Future: www.pfaf.org

Alan Muskat: www.alanmuskat.com

Sunny Savage: www.wildfoodplants.com

Planetary Medicine

Tierra, Michael *Planetary Herbology*; Lotus Press (1988)

Van Wyk, Ben-Erik. *Medicinal Plants of the World*; Timber Press (February 15, 2004)