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Global Culture Rising: Listen to the Weeds' Stories

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Our world is in the midst of a macro-species die off. The sixth in the history of the earth. The human species is collectively responsible for the accelerating rates and deep impacts of these mass extinctions due to our demands upon the planet. Our modern lifestyles estrange us from the natural world. We have had a 100 years of accelerating consumerism all about us. I read recently when I was in London that each person there is exposed to over 1600 advertisements a day. That's enough to make one feel like a pincushion. But more of us are seeing through this masquerade of created needs. We are coming to see that everything originates from somewhere. And though our consumption is removed from the places of production-we are beginning to acknowledge the hidden costs of pillaging the earth and enslaving people. As our freedoms allow us choices, we are learning to assess more deeply the costs. Freedom comes with responsibility. I have been exploring the planet for 10 years meeting plants and hearing their stories. In recent years I've seen part of my work as gathering the plant knowledge of the indigenous peoples. Most recently I spent 5 months in southern Africa doing this work.

Whether we will survive this latest world shift is less my focus than looking at how we are now living and comparing it to other ways we have lived (and still do in some areas of the world). Sometimes I see more wisdom in the old ways as seen in pre-industrial gardening techniques. Other times I lean toward the virtues of contemporary ways as with our modern forms of transportation. Occasionally they are the same when age old knowledge survives the test of time.

Humanity is feeling the growing pains from becoming aware of our one-world-ness. Much of our older knowledge is being lost each day as the elders die without passing on their experiences. Though there is notable work being done by ethnobotanists all over the planet, more efforts need to be made in deciding what to introduce to this growing world culture.

Every region has its unique treasures. We each need to take responsibility for keeping alive our cultural heritage. Which stories have been passed on to you? Learn and record the plant stories in your community. There is certainly much more to discover than potential plants for pharmaceutical exploitation. Every aspect of our

modern ways needs to be scrutinized for much of our dis-ease personally and globally comes from lifestyle habits.

If our world culture is to be balanced it needs to re-introduce, re-search, re-member the plants that have been our allies since our beginnings. Indeed there are stories of how we humans were created by the plants to be their caretakers and seed distributors. As we look deeper into this growing world view we may be drawn to ask which plants optimize our survival (indeed, thrive!) and who are they to us?

That is a much easier question to ask than to answer. Of the more than one million species of life on the planet, nearly one third are plants. (Remember we, humans, are only one species!) With this incredible number of plant species I study them more at the genus level (around 5000 groupings) looking for commonalities and new insights as I travel about meeting healers, gardeners, and other plant people. There is a lot of work to do to compile, compare and apply to our lives the many options of how to live a healthy life.

At some level I have know Bidens all my life from it seeds clinging to my socks as a kid. I learned about Bidens (also known as beggar's ticks) as medicine in herbal school as an anti-histimine. I kept it in my herbal chest especially for allergies. In my recent travels in Africa I came across several species of Bidens commonly used as food though people there were unaware of its medicinal uses.

This plant exemplifies some very important work ahead. In this case educating people of the west to use this composite as food and the people of Africa for its use as medicine. Thus reminding us of Hippocrates' comment, "Let your medicine be your food and your food be your medicine." This globalizing of regional knowledge is some of our most important work in becoming one world.

The streams of humanity are drying up quickly as the hundreds of our most resilient cultures face the tsunami of modernness washing over the earth. Picture a bushman in jeans and t-shirt sipping on a soda. The plants that still exist and have moved with us about the planet are here to (once again) help us through these hard times.

A few springs back I walked for a month from the tidewaters of the Atlantic to the North Carolina mountains. This journey signified for me a rite of passage in applying my knowledge of plants in practical ways. Each day I relied on the land to supplement what food I carried on my back. Each morning and evening on my little fire I also made teas from the herbs growing around my campsite (any where from 10-25 herbs). I grew to relish those pots of tea for not only did they hydrate me--these teas also left me feeling fully satisfied. Throughout the days I would nibble the plants I knew. This changed me in profound ways.

I have heard that we use about 10% of our brains. Maybe the other 90% represents the pathways for our connection to the rest of the universe. By nibbling plants I am opening those pathways and gaining insights from what these ancient species have to share. (Humans have been here 100,000 years, plants have been here hundreds of millions of years. When did we decide that we were evolved beyond plants rather than descended from them? It's time to look again.) I know that as I nibble along (and smell

and touch and really look at the plants) I feel a wonderful sense of connection and grounded-ness. I become a part of this earth trip in a very real way.

Recently I was doing research on the flora at a remote retreat center in South Africa. The closest stores were an hour away by car (which I did not have anyway). At this center there is an amazing garden abundant in all respects. I figured it was a good chance to put more deeply into practice my beliefs in eating out your back door. In the 10 days I was there, I happily foraged most of my food from the garden making soups, salads, stirfries, steamed greens, on and on.

I was largely a student in Africa being exposed for the first time to a rich diversity of flora. But when I entered gardens I would immediately feel right at home amongst the international cultivars and weeds. If you learn the garden weeds and cultivars you will never be without friends around the globe.

You may be wondering where to begin? Get out there with people who know more than you do and start tasting. Once you start to get to know the plants, prepare them in various ways. Share what you learn with others. Follow your passions with the plants. Record in various ways what you know and what your family and community knows. Reference books are valuable to have around but nothing teaches like experience.

We of the modern culture must not get stuck in our minds being fed, clothed, and cured by unseen sources. For that is surely our end. Ironically as we have evolved into concepts we have lost touch with the weeds. I ask you, have you eaten nettles soup or steamed dandelion greens? Nettles are high in iron, protein, and vitamins A and C. Dandelions are also full of nutrition as well as many medicinal properties.

Why is it that every culture before the industrial era that lived around oaks consumed acorns as a major part of their diet (not surprising given that it is 43% fat, 45% carbohydrates, and 5% protein. Two handfuls of acorns provide most of your daily needs!) And yet they are thought to be little more than an annoyance littering our lawns in the autumn.

The famous wise woman herbalist, Susun Weed, declares that what we need most grows right out our back door. Let's start there--satisfying our needs--before becoming slaves to our desires and fears. We have forgotten how much plants have helped us all along the way. Use the ubiquitous weeds daily; use the scarce plants rarely. Within these weeds lies the abundance to meet all our needs, wants, desires. We need the weeds!

So much effort goes into growing exotic foods--clearing land, prepping soil, weeding (god forbid), protection of crops from opportunists. Yet, weeds are the beings thriving in these challenging times. Why don't we cultivate them? Why push against the river? Why not surrender and go with the flow. Harvest don't weed! The sacred weeds are our envoys to the world culture. I am at home in any garden anywhere in the world. Within the gardens we greet those who can thrive the world around.

Remember there is a spectrum of food to medicine to poison. Learn where each plant fits along this line. Get to know families (only 500 of these in the world) and learn general rules about who they are to us. Every plant has stories to share. Every green being has some positive relationships to us. They have nurtured us since our beginning.

And yet, surprisingly, in the last fifty years (closely paralleling the introduction of television and later computers) we, as a culture, have all but forgotten the plant stories that have kept all the human generations before us alive. Instead of listening to the elders we've locked them up in retirement homes. We have lost the voices of experience around plants. Many of the stories that remain have become impotent mind fillers like "Indians used this plant to treat headaches" without any details or "This plant was used as a coffee substitute" belittling its more significant contributions. Every plant species has a full story to share from the millions of years of living here.

Too many people maintain only an intellectual knowledge of plants. But the real walk is knowing them in every way. Plants are a part of our lives. Not until we fully acknowledge them can we fully appreciate them. Echinacea in a bottle can only do so much good if a person's lifestyle depends on modern ways. Echinacea's ability to help is limited if the person taking it only sees this medicine as pill or potion, not knowing it as a living being. Even as I write about Echinacea I can visualize its big orange cone of flowers surrounded by pink on a long stem with sandpapery toothed leaves so typical of this tribe of composites. This plant lives in me. The consumer feels none of this having never grown it or watched the bees buzz hungrily about it. The time has come to choose your path--on the earth or in the parking lots of malls. In the garden or on the channel of the home shopping club. Exploring the woods or punching the clock. Every day a plant species is going extinct. It is time for you to take the path or the sidewalk. You decide.'

The plants have stories. Listen to them and come to know our green allies. May you come to know the true abundance of nature, never knowing hunger or suffering. Feel our growing world culture through knowing the weeds. May you feel joy and love.