

Living in Harmony with Nature:

Appreciating Wild Plants for their Gifts of Food, Medicine, and Utility

Presentation to North Country Herbalists Guild (3 Aug. 2016)

Matthew Alfs, MH, RH (AHG) has been an herbal clinician and an herbal educator for almost twenty years, a wild-foods forager since the mid-1970s, and a student and lover of Nature his entire life. He has taught herbal medicine at both universities and colleges in the Twin Cities area and has lectured to many organizations, associations, and groups on the subject--both locally and nationally. Numerous articles from his pen have been published in both journals and magazines (incl. *Journal of the American Herbalists Guild*, *Medical Herbalism*, *Journal of the American Chiropractic Association*, and *Herb Quarterly*). Matthew is further the author of the widely-acclaimed books *Edible & Medicinal Wild Plants of the Midwest* (2d ed., 2013) and *300 Herbs: Their Indications and Contraindications* (2003), as well as a 1500-page curriculum on herbal medicine for the Midwest School of Herbal Studies (www.midwestherbalstudies.com), a forum for herbal education that he founded in 2003 and directs to this day. His newest book, just now released (but not in bookstores or available through internet booksellers until the fall) is *Diary of a Country Herbalist*, available tonight for \$15 (tax incl.)—normally \$17.50 + sales tax. (See www.diaryofacountryherbalist.com for more on this new book.)

1. Western Society Has Lost Harmony with Nature and Has Even Seriously Disrupted the Balance of Nature.

a. Modern civilization has poisoned the water, the air, and the earth, resulting in sickness and death for man, animals, and plants.

b. In using most wild lands for industry, residences, shopping centers, etc., modern civilization has dissected lands to such an extent that only small chunks of land are available for wildlife—habitable by prey, but not by predators which need large swaths of land to live and to roam. *Where the Wild Things Were*, a book by William Stolzenburg, shows that this sad circumstance has disrupted the balance of Nature and allowed Lyme disease to proliferate because the host animals--white-footed mice and deer-- for the Lyme spirochete are proliferating to an unhealthy degree owing to the lack of predators.--Stolzenburg 115-117

This situation has also reduced the quality and diversity of wild-plant growth in the above-described areas, owing to the proliferation of deer. One example that Stolzenburg documents is for the trillium, called “beth root” by herbalists and used as an astringent.--Stolzenburg 105-114

c. In losing touch with anything, one progressively also loses its appreciation. The book *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv, details in mind-numbing ways how the divorce between Nature and our children is leading to dire consequence--both for these youngsters and for the future of wilderness.

2. Primitive, Indigenous Peoples Largely Lived in Harmony with Nature

- a. "Speak to the Earth and It Shall Teach Thee" (Job 12:8)
- b. "Be at one with the dust of the earth. This is primal union." – Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*
- c. "The old people came literally to love the soil and they sat or reclined on the ground, with a feeling of being close to a mothering power. It was good for the skin to touch the earth and the old people liked to remove their moccasins and walk with bare feet on the sacred earth. Their tipis were built upon the earth... The soil was soothing, strengthening, cleansing, and healing." – Chief Luther Standing Bear, *Land of the Spotted Eagle*
- d. When forced by the U.S. Government to sell his ancestral lands, Chief Seattle of the Duwamish Indian tribe, Washington Territory, gave a speech in 1855 in which he tried to communicate the Native-American view of the land in contrast to that manifested by the white people:

"Every part of this earth is sacred to my people--every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every clearing, and every humming insect is holy in the memory and experience of my people. The sap which courses through the trees carries the memory of the red man.... We are part of the earth and it is part of us.....

We know the white man does not understand our ways... The earth is not his brother, but his enemy, and when he has conquered it, he moves on.... He kidnaps the earth from his children. He does not care.... He treats his mother, the earth, and his brother, the sky, as things to be bought, plundered, sold.... His appetite will devour the earth and leave behind only a desert.

The air is precious to the red man, for all things share the same breath—the beasts, the trees, the man, they all share the same breath.... All things are connected. Whatever befalls the earth, befalls the sons of the earth." – as quoted from a television program presented by The Human Dimension and aired in Pittsburgh in Winter of 1972

- e. An Apache Indian saying dating to about 180 years ago said that the farther that a person's feet were removed from the earth, the less respect he winds up having for the earth and for its denizens and eventually even for man himself.
- f. Stalking Wolf, a celebrated Apache Indian healer, told his chief student, a boy who had just stalked and killed his first deer for food and and who felt sad about killing this creature whom he had come to know during the hunt: "When you feel the same way about plucking a blade of grass as you do about killing a deer, you will truly have found harmony with nature." – Tom Brown, Jr., *Tom Brown's Guide to Wild Edible and Medicinal Plants*.
- g. Omaha Indians
"Do not needlessly destroy the flowers on the prairies or in the woods. If the flowers are plucked there will be no flower babies (seeds); and if there be no flower babies then in time there will be no people of the flower nations. . . . Then the earth will be sad. . . . The world would be incomplete and imperfect without them." – Melvin Gilmore, *American Indians of the Missouri River region*

- h. Indigenous peoples such as the Cherokees believed that the plants had allied themselves with the “two-legged ones” (humans), partly out of pity for the devastation that insects had brought upon the humans (bites, stings, disease, etc.), just as these insects had likewise done to the plants. However, indigenous peoples sought the aid of the plants and even learned to communicate with them; they treated these plants with respect and thanksgiving and showed appreciation for their aid.
- i. During the Ecological Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s, a number of white nature teachers began inculcating the idea of harmony with nature through their books, articles, lectures, and television appearances. One was Rachel Carson, whose book *Silent Spring*, initiated the research that led to the banning of dangerous pesticides. On April 3rd, 1963, she appeared on a CBS television program, along with Robert H. White of the Cyanamid Company. White lambasted her, saying that her teachings would lead us all back to “the Dark Ages” and that “Miss Carson believes that the balance of nature is a major force in the survival of man; whereas the modern scientist believes that man is steadily controlling nature,” to which Carson responded that some people might believe that “the balance of nature is something that was repealed as soon as man came on the scene. You might just as well assume that you could repeal the law of gravity. The balance of nature is built of a series of interrelationships between living things, and between living things and their environment.”
- j. In the last book that Carson wrote before her death, *A Sense of Wonder*, she had this to say: “Those who dwell... among the beauties and mysteries of the earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living.”

3. Achieving Harmony with Plants as Healers and Showing Them Respect, Thanksgiving, and Appreciation

- a. As noted above, Native Americans have always believed that it was possible to communicate with plants. In fact, a classic Indian adage is: “If you want to know how a plant can offer assistance, just ask it.” Tom Brown, Jr., who was mentored by the Apache Indian healer Stalking Wolf, offers tips as to how to do this in his book to which we just earlier referred. Brown says that it is a matter of tapping into your intuition, inner voice, or instinctual knowing, stating that ‘the heart is where all communication occurs, not the mind.’ One must recognize first, however, that we are not superior to plants but that humans, plants, and animals are all connected through “the spirit that dwells in all things.” (Even the ancient Jewish book of Ecclesiastes, in the Bible, states that “there is no superiority of the man over the beast, because they all have the same spirit.”)

The next step, he says, is to talk to it – either audibly or silently. He says you must not let logic or past learning interfere with your belief that *your voice is being heard*. He then mentions that scientific experiments *have* shown that polygraphs have registered reactions of plants. Although he does not go into detail on that point, let’s do so now...

- b. In 1966, a man who operated a polygraph school, Cleve Backster, hooked up the electrodes of a polygraph to the leaves of a plant on a whim. He wanted to see if intended harm to a plant would elicit any response. To his amazement, when he

simply *thought* of getting a match and burning a leaf on the plant, the polygraph needle went flying!

The next experiment he performed was even more incredible: He chose six students for a test in which he put two plants in a room, one of which was attached to a polygraph. One student was randomly chosen, without the knowledge of Backster or his fellow students, to take the plant in the room not connected to the polygraph and throw it to the floor and then stomp on it. This was done. Then, all of the students left the room and the door was closed. Finally, each student, one by one, opened the door and entered the room. The polygraph was motionless until the student who had assaulted the plant entered the room; then, it went wild!

- c. Once a plant is supplicated, how does one receive the answer? This comes through the intuition or inner voice. Brown notes that this can be achieved in a variety of ways, depending on the particular person; it might be through “mental pictures, images, dreams, visions, emotions, and inner feelings, to mention a few.” Kenneth Cohen, in his book *Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native American Healing*, suggests that if one places the plant under one’s pillow before going to sleep at night it may enhance understanding of that plant through one’s dreams.
- d. Steven Harold Buehner offers some thoughtful material on plant communication and appreciation in his marvelous book *Sacred Plant Medicine*. He shares the story of a woman who felt hollow inside. To help heal her, he experienced “a strong and visceral response about one particular plant that might be of help.” He then took her on a walk to meet the children of an angelica plant with whom he had sat many times over the years – angelica being a plant with a *hollow* stem. After sitting and spending some time with one of the plants and touching and experiencing it in many ways, she finally offered the thought: “For the first time, I don’t feel hollow and alone inside.”

4. Harmony with Plants During Foraging and Harvesting

- a. How does one find plants to harvest? First, as Brown and others mention, you must establish a genuine need for finding the plant: food, medicine, or utility – for one’s self or for another human or animal.

Secondly, one will fix one’s inner voice on finding a smattering of the particular plants. Then, one may encounter what I call a “sentry” plant – a gatekeeper to a colony. I often ask this plant permission and direction on where to find a colony, explaining why I need some of his or her brothers or sisters and that I will take no more than ten-percent.

- b. When a colony is found, it is best to locate the “grandfather” plant (usually the largest plant) and explain why you need to take some of the colony, asking permission and making an offering of some kind. That may be tobacco, as was done by some Eastern tribes, or per other tribes--as Kenneth Cohen notes, in his book *Honoring the Medicine: The Essential Guide to Native American Healing*-- “cornmeal, pollen, beads, shells, or other substances.” Some prefer simply to offer sincere thanks and a promise to re-plant seeds of the plant. One might also offer a song, as plants love sweet music, even as experiments at Temple Buell University once noted: Plants grew nicely, remained healthy, and leaned in the direction of a speaker when jazz, classical, or easy listening music was played. (Contrariwise, they leaned *away* from the speaker and even died when hard rock was played!)

5. Listening to Particular Plants

A. Boneset (*Eupatorium perfoliatum*)

White flowers

Symmetrically structured

B. Bull thistle (*Cirsium vulgare*)

Stiff appearance

Spines that Prick

C. Cocklebur (*Xanthium strumarium*; *X. spinosum*)

Sticky burs

D. Field Pennywort (*Thlaspi arvense*)

Notched seed pods

E. Mullein (*Verbascum thapsus*)

Hairy leaves that get larger toward the bottom of the plant

F. Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*)

Flowers at center of plant, red-violet in color

In *Diary of a Country Herbalist* (book), the main protagonist--an herbalist named Samuel Rogers--has a personal encounter with a native plant known as **Spiderwort** (*Tradescantia*), leading to a new healing application for this plant.

6. Other Ways to Live in Harmony with Nature

- A. The Food We Grow – Does it Hurt Wildlife in the Vicinity through Pesticide Use?
- B. The Cleaning Supplies We Use – Do they Pollute Our Waterways?
- C. The Machinery and Equipment We Use – Do They Pollute the Air or Water?
- D. The Technology We Use – Does it Hurt Children or Animals or Pollute?
- E. How Do We View and Treat Wildlife? Livestock Animals?
- F. In *Diary of a Country Herbalist*, the protagonists set an example in *all of the above* regards with respect to *living in harmony with nature!*