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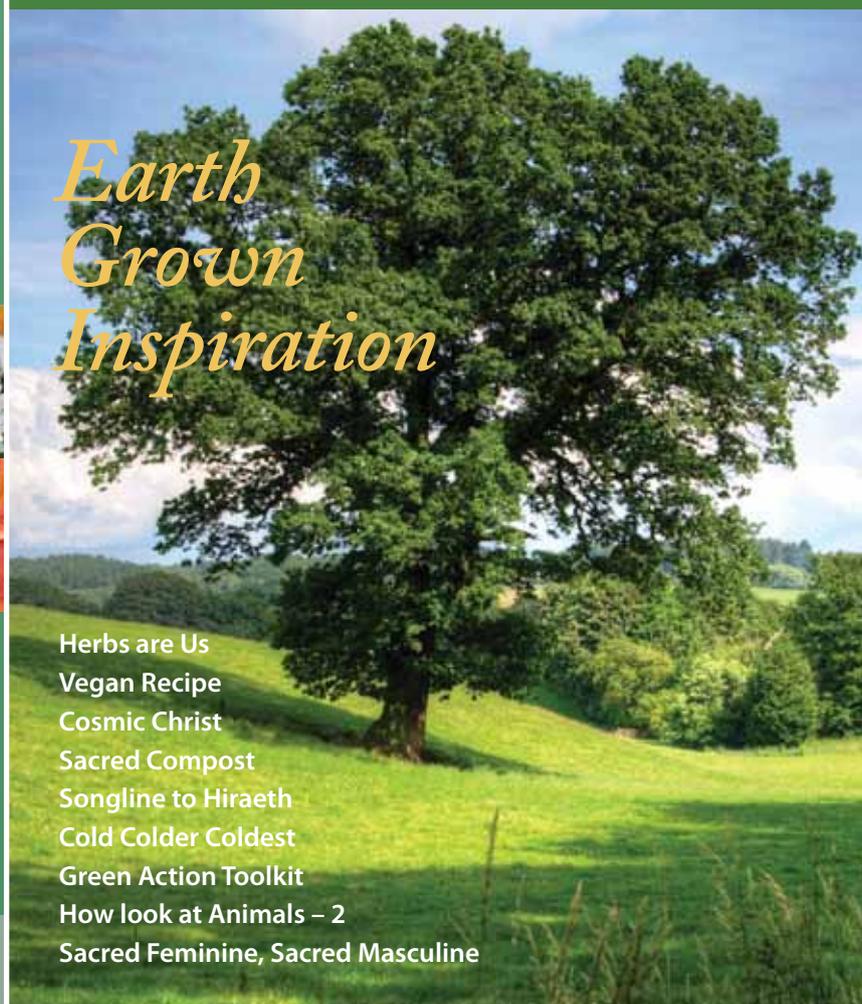
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Herbs are Us

RICHARD ADAMS

Introuction

Do we really need reminding how important herbs are to us; how plants co create biodiversity, provide food and produce air so humankind can live? When you look at the ignorance that allows our species to so damage the planets ecological biosphere, apparently we do. Professor Daniel Chamovitz (www.danielchamovitz.com), in *What a Plant Knows*, regards the complex biology of plants as being underestimated and completely underappreciated. He claims that if we do not embrace and learn from plant life, we may find a host of life-threatening problems await. I think a shift in the learning area of technology would help. A movement from the old human-based engineering to the even older technological approach of biomimicry is in order. Biomimicry is an approach to innovation that seeks sustainable solutions to human challenges by emulating nature's time-tested patterns and strategies. It generates better design and problem solving because it is inspired by an understanding of Nature. Take just one life threatening problem much in the news at present: If only we could design an enzyme that is compatible with its environment and digests non-biodegradable human made plastic that now litters the oceans. Well, let's look beyond the human because Nature has got there first. A marine bacterium has emerged that produces such an enzyme! What can we learn from this? How can we develop an understanding that enables us to be so close to Nature as to move from a relationship of separateness, or subject and object, to a consciousness of our oneness with the boundless complex system that is Nature?

A question of models

The Newtonian 'billiard ball' scientific system is full of objects that are marvellous in their own way but rely heavily on what is repeatable, provable, static and measurable. For in this model Nature must be objectified or broken into fragments otherwise it cannot be measured. One can see the natural world, however, as a more fluid, complex system with changing properties and interrelationships. The tools of scientific methodology, the lenses of science, are valuable within the process of understanding and will elucidate any object it identifies, but we must understand that what we can observe and measure is by definition not all that there is.

Plants are like people

One thing we find as we carefully observe and get closer to herbs is that they are physically much like us. Both plants and people are living things, which means that they are both made of cells, both have DNA, and both require energy to grow. Plants have scientifically documented senses like

humans. According to Professor Stefano Mancuso, who leads the International Laboratory for Plant Neurobiology at the University of Florence, plants are a lot more sensitive than animals. He discovered that the very root apex of a plant has the capacity to detect 20 different physical and chemical parameters including gravity, light, magnetic field, pathogens and more. Just as a genetic test can prove that you are related to your family members, it can also prove that you and all animals are related to plants. Evolutionary scientists estimate that plants and animals diverged from their common ancestor around 1.6 billion years ago. Although this was a long time ago plants still have genes like those that make an animal's nervous system, specific proteins that have been shown to have definite roles in neural function. This results in us behaving in similar ways. So, herbs and humans respond to light and dark and the planet's twenty-four hour daily circadian rhythm that promotes exertion and rest. To fuel such behaviours both have to take nutrients from outside their bodies and transform them into energy to enable the organism to function. Cells enable the human body to get energy by digesting food either by directly eating plants or eating other creatures that feed on plants. A herb takes in nutrients from the earth by its root system and by converting sunlight into energy to enable it to grow. In an indirect way when we eat plants for food we are eating transformed sunlight.

Have you ever considered that herbs might have social networks like humans? Peter Wohlleben, in his best-selling book the *Hidden Life of Trees*, has. He draws on scientific discoveries to suggest that trees behave like parents and 'suckle their children'. Furthermore, this social network enables trees to share nutrients with those who are sick, warn of forthcoming dangers to the interrelated family of trees, or to adjust to extreme weather conditions like droughts by altering their energy and water consumption. From such a perspective it could be said that plants breathe, talk, sleep, eat, have families, and adapt their behaviour much like people.

I am a bioscience based traditional Western herbalist with an interest in systems theory and the light it can throw on diverse disciplines like biology, technology and psychology. General systems theory looks into the relationship between a system's parts and how they give rise to collective behaviours of entities, like the climate or the living cell, that interact to form a relationship with its environment. It includes the study of non-complex systems where scientific reductionist approaches may remain viable. As a result, I use western

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Cowslip, *primula veris*

scientific language when speaking about plants. But, my relationship with herbs does not fit into one independent language or cultural perspective, it emerges from the space of observation, reflection and journeying beyond boundaries set by language, society, egoic persona or mask. I cannot describe easily what happens in such moments of reflection, but suffice to say to go beyond boundaries, you need to know where the boundaries are and to find the words you need, to know the silence.

The art of experimentation

Have you ever sat down in a meadow and had a flower, for example a cowslip, catch your attention? Perhaps you can cast your mind back. What did you notice and how did it make you feel? Did you know it was a cowslip and how? You might want to try this in the field or even as a thought experiment before you read on, before you hear my thoughts and experiences.

Below is a description of a process, step by step, of what has happened to me during such an experiment.

I notice the yellow dancing flower out of the corner of my eye. I am drawn to it. Questions arise in my mind like what is it? It holds my attention. I sit so I am close. I use my botanical knowledge to identify it, perhaps using a reference flora as a tool. I may assess its height, the shape of the leaves, the parts of the flower. I draw it. I compare it. I may recognise it and arrive at a name. I have objectified it. It is now a thing. It still holds my attention. Inwardly my sense of beauty arises. The space between us closes as my affection increases. I see so much of the herb's body is like mine. I identify with the herb. It is so close to me that maybe I can relate to it in love. My image and the image of the herb merges and I experience a sense of euphoric ecstasy. It is very heavenly to be here now in this meadow. Then peace, as the closing of my ego allows space for a being that is present to the presence. I

understand my body. The herb and all life has grown out of the biosphere and is related. We are the ongoing 'big bang' beginning of the cosmos, not a separate end product of it. We are more like waves emerging on the surface of the ocean of life. Interdependent dynamic systems we are. Here the skin of my body does not separate me from the skin of the herb we inform each other. Now, the skin is not a boundary wall but a bridge, in and out of which the cosmos flows.

If we could see the miracle of a single flower clearly, our whole life would change.

– Gautama Buddha

My experiment has taken me from separation and careful observation to identification of the herb, to identification **with** the herb, to identification with the cosmos. Science is good, separation is good, because there is always a union that follows; they are two sides of the same coin and exist because of each other. Science has created an opportunity for us to experience separateness, and thereby the opportunity to move beyond subject and object to the presence of the whole; to the awareness that being and non-being mutually emerge. We find our individuality by being related. Herbs as medicines materially inform our human bodies. Plants as teachers inform our minds by helping them to be formless and thereby experience peace, love and union which is the greatest healing of all.

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