**Wild Medicine**

As we struggle to negotiate the ever more challenging and complicated aspects of modern life, occasionally we discover that the antidotes to the poisons that plague us may be found in the wild. Maybe, we are overwhelmed by industrial pollution and are being labeled as having "Multiple Chemical Sensitivity". Or, we are faced with the common plague of Depression/Melancholy/Malaise that the grind of a 50-hour work week produces and which alcohol and "Dancing with the Stars" cannot cure.

Strangely enough, no matter what our "situation" often the best cures are found in wild places around us. The fresh air provided by the density of a forest, the soothing rush of the river, and the feeling of soft loam beneath our bare feet are all medicines of the highest magnitude. Our wild place may be a cedar tree at the corner park or a desert wash in our backyard or the view of the mountains in the distance. Maybe it is simply the empty lot in which "weeds" are fighting back against the oppression of concrete and broken glass. Whatever our wild place may be, it can be a threshold, a sacred place in which begin our process of reawakening our wild, vital self. Soon, we may find ourselves keeping odd hours, ducking out at lunch time to watch the birds, and pausing to really feel the wind brushing against our skin.

This is the beginning. In our future plants become friends and allies. Animals become teacher and mentors. The sun and moon become the only true clock. We are on the edge of true freedom. This is the journey towards wild medicine.

**Barefoot Doctoring**

A couple of decades or so ago, Japanese health practitioners began noticing an odd series of symptoms in patients. These included fatigue, stiff neck, anxiety, chronic pain, and weak immune systems. What was particularly odd about the patients with these symptoms was that they were all from urban areas. There were many ideas developed about the cause of these symptoms, but ironically one of the best cures for this "disease" was spending time in the countryside walking barefoot (this story is documented in Kiiko Matsumoto's book The Eight Extraordinary Meridians). What these traditional doctors had discovered was that cities were literally making these people sick.

While these Japanese doctors did end up developing an acupuncture treatment protocol to help patients who didn't have the freedom or luxury to head to the countryside frequently, to me the more important point is that Cities were making people sick...and the best treatment was to spend some time barefoot.

In the history of medicine, in pre-modern times, there is often the assumption that people suffered greatly and died in vast quantities at the slightest illness or infection. This story reinforces the power of our modern medical system and the story of the inadequacy of traditional medicines. What most people don't realize is that historically, in most cultures there were health practitioners with local plant remedies that could treat many common illnesses. Were these remedies as powerful as modern antibiotics? Definitely not. But many of them could be just as effective, if not more so and without all of the side effects that we are now seeing from the large scale use of antibiotics for decades. Were the traditional medicines able to treat very severe trauma the way a modern ER unit could? No way. But these traditional practitioners had very powerful treatments for even serious conditions such as broken bones and internal traumas (there's a whole branch of Chinese Medicine devoted to this called Die Da medicine).

Who were these practitioners of these older medical traditions? The wise or cunning women and men of ancient Europe, the Medicine men and women of North and South America, and the traditional doctors Asia are just a few. These "barefoot doctors" of antiquity wandered around dispensing remedies from their medicine bags treating people in their local areas. Most of their medicines were made from local ingredients, with perhaps a few exotic ingredients being traded for. Perhaps when they went to gather their medicines they would perform ceremonies, sing songs, or chant mantras before harvesting plants in a sacred manner. Imagine the power of someone so connected to the Earth and Place and People and the kinds of medicine they could dispense. Contrast that with people being made sick by living in cities.

This is what we mean by a Barefoot Doctor...this is one of the medicines that we as a people need now. And, it may simply be the future of medicine in our life time or our children's life time.

Assignment: Spend some time barefoot these week. Feel the connection between the "bubbling spring" acupuncture point (just below the ball of the foot) and the deep primal energy or chi of the earth. How do you feel when there is rubber or plastic between you and the ground? How do you feel when that is removed?

**Wild Ways intro**

I remember reading in one of Gary Snyder’s books a whole essay on the origins of the word wild. It was beautiful, enlivening, and rich (like all of his works), and it didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know. It definitely didn’t get me as close to understanding what being wild truly means as so many other actual experiences in nature. Time in nature, especially in truly wild places is I believe the secret medicine and remedy we are all longing for. It is a deep healing salve for the wounds that we carry from the strange psychological burden of living in civilization. At heart we are truly wild; truly animal. When we are allowed to explore this for even a brief time, most people experience a deep awakening. And a deep remembering occurs

It seems to me as if we humans are deeply confused and conflicted by our wild nature. We love it and hate it. We take this deep schism in our psyche and inflict terrible things on the natural world around us and each other due to this lack of healing. How is it even possible that we have forgotten that for most of our history as human beings, we roamed wild, free places literally living with the land? As we go forward into the 21st century, we must remember our wildness as part of healing this deep fracture. To be human is to be wild, and to be wild is to be close to nature. To be wild and close to nature invites reverence and respect for the natural world.

Following animal tracks and trails, dancing free in wild thunderstorms, seeing sunsets and moonrises from mountain tops shouldn’t be exceptional experiences of humans. They should be normal experiences that we have all the time as part of our expectation of being wild free humans: hunter-gatherer nomads. But the world can’t feed 7 billion hunter-gatherer nomads, and so we must find another way to feed ourselves and to also feed our selves.

The poems in this section are distillations and crystallizations of hours, days, and weeks spent immersed in nature and actively exploring deep connections that unveil the wild within. My hope is that they can provide glimpses, hints, and keys towards everyone’s own deep immersive nature connection and your own experience of the wild, natural, and free. May we remember our wild ways and in doing so feel ourselves more deeply interwoven into the fabric of the natural world. May we remember and experience the great Tapestry of Interdependent Life.

**Wild Medicine Musings**

If we are to truly practice Wild Medicine, I think it is necessary that we really take a deep look at what we mean by medicine and look at other ways of conceiving of it. For many of us, especially if we have been raised in modern culture without exposure to other ways of thinking, medicine is mainly associated with doctors, hospitals, and pills. However, the term medicine has a lot of other connotations and definitions.

Take for instance the idea of the "medicine man or woman". This concept is mostly used in the context of Native North and South America and is often equated with a holy man or woman (though sometimes African spiritual practitioners are also thought of as medicine men or women). However, in these cultures the giving and receiving of plant medicines, often within a ceremonial context, is inextricably linked with the sacred power that holy men and women possessed. This sacred power was cultivated through time alone in nature, guidance under a mentor, dreams and visions, and some form of self-sacrifice in the form of fasting or intentional hardship. In this sense, medicine means healing and also sacred or holy.

There is a specific teaching handed down around this concept and it's application to using plants for healing. Gilbert Walking Bull, a Lakota holy man who has now passed on to the spirit world, taught that in his traditional culture holy men and woman used different herbs and roots to heal people. However, they would put a certain power or "electricity" into the plant to make it work. Often they had been taught how to do this by the plant itself in the form of a dream or vision. If someone else tried to use the same plant in the same way, it would probably not work or even worse make the patient sicker or even die! These healers would only use the plants that they had this relationship with, and they might use less than ten plants to treat all of their patients. This concept of medicine is a far cry from our modern use of both hundreds of pharmaceuticals and also from the immense number of dried, powdered herbs available in every natural foods store around.

This idea of medicine extends beyond the plant realm as well. In this sense, medicine can become equated with the power or sacred ability of virtually all things. Animals each have a medicine. Objects have medicine. Natural phenomenon have medicine. Thus, we start to talk about Deer Medicine or Bear Medicine, Thunder Medicine and Water Medicine, Stone Medicine and Sun Medicine. This points to the idea that for something to be healing and holy and useful for treating illness (spiritual or otherwise) it does not necessarily have to be ingested into the body.

How would our practice of medicine in our current culture differ if we truly valued the sacred medicine or holy power of the practitioners who were dispensing medicines?

What if it was considered normal for healthcare practitioners to cultivate their own sacred powers and gifts in order to be more effective healers?

What if we were to support them in this practice rather than demand that they work endless work weeks crammed full of seeing as many people per day as possible and buried under insurance paperwork, phone calls, and practicing under sterile hospital conditions? (What kind of medicine does someone possess who is forced to practice under these conditions?)

What kind of medicine do we want for the future?

What is the medicine you carry?

More ways of thinking and looking at medicine to come...

**More Wild Medicine Musings…**

As we are rapidly moving towards both winter solstice, a full moon, and a lunar eclipse, I am inspired to write about another concept or idea of medicine that can inform our understanding of healing, nature, and our souls and spirits.

In both ancient Eastern and Western occult traditions, there is a stream of teachings around the process of alchemy. In some cases, in both traditions, there was a literal search for external elixirs that would produce immortality or for philosopher's stones that would turn lead to gold. However, both of these traditions also had the understanding that another level of the process was Internal Alchemy. In some ways, this was an even more important tradition or superior path. Looked at from this point of view, Alchemy is really about transmuting our bodies, our vital energy, and our spirit into something more powerful and divine. In the West, this process is referred to as The Great Work, and in the East it is the creation of an Immortal. Not only does this produce great harmony inside of us, it also produces great harmony in the world all around us.

How does one go about transforming into an Immortal? How do we go about the Great Work? In some senses, our life's path is all about this process. Our fate, our wyrd, our dan, our ming, our destiny is about engaging in the process of transforming our bodies and minds ever towards a more refined spiritual state. In the course of our life, we will be forced to confront and integrate our shadow and deal with the illusion of duality between our spirit and body. However, there are ways to become consciously engaged with the way as well. This is where we come to Internal Alchemy.

Internal Alchemy is a way of cultivating, "Medicine". In this sense, we are talking about an internal fusion of vital energy, deep layers of our essence, and our spirit. In Eastern traditions, this is illustrated in the Daoist-influenced traditions of qigong, taijiquan, baguazhang, and internal meditations. In these practices, a person learns to harmonize their internal rhythms with larger macrocosmic cycles of the sun, moon, and starts. They learn to absorb energy from nature and the elements that supplements their own vitality. They learn to store and save their own energy and not waste it through excessive talking, thinking, and stimulation. What happens if this path of cultivation is undertaken? The three treasures of essence, energy, and spirit begin to fuse. Stillness, peace, and brightness radiate from a person. They are simultaneously very relaxed but full of vitality. They become an embodiment of Medicine.

What are the implication of this for the practice of Wild Medicine? Well, some of the most powerful practitioners of the healing arts have also been practitioners of internal and external alchemy. The literally blend their medicine with their medicine, if you know what I mean. In order to be truly powerful healers and revive the power of Wild Medicine, we must cultivate our own Medicine and begin the process of the Great Work. How is this done?

The basis of this process is stillness and observation. So, as we approach Winter Solstice engage in these practices. What does the full moon feel like? Stand beneath it and feel it's silvery light caress your skin. How does this nourish you? What does the solstice feel like? What is the reflection of winter solstice inside your body? What can you do at this time of year to cultivate your Medicine?

***Stalking the Wild Goji***

I still remember the feeling in my body.  It was just like I had heard about years before in stories of wild Sages living off of sacred medicinal substances in the mountains.  Myriad teachers of Chinese Medicine had been right: the power of fresh wild medicines, especially the power of tonic herbs had a potency beyond what we cultivate in our gardens.  As the juices from the succulent, slightly tart berries lingered in my mouth, I literally felt like I could run up a mountain. The fatigue, burn-out and feeling of being overwhelmed by the desert sun vanished.  I stood looking to the west, and I could see row upon row of wild Goji berry bushes that had been cultivated by years of wildcrafting. I was looking at a historical medicine garden that had been tended by hunter-gather nomads in ancient times.  The years of effort that they had put into the land were still visible... and I wasn’t in China.

        Believe it or not, the above scene took place in Arizona.  I was part of a field study class at the Southwest Conference of Botanical Medicine, and we were out at an undisclosed location studying the medicinal properties of local plants.  If you ever want to really understand the Ayurvedic concepts of *Pitta* or *Vata*, the hot, dry deserts are an excellent locale.  Similarly, if you want to test your therapeutic skills from Chinese Medicine about treating *Yin* deficiency or Shen disturbance due to excess heat, the desert is an excellent place!  I had found myself challenged both personally and in my clinical practice with the above conditions.  I had come to the conference and taken the field class to deepen my understanding of how to treat the challenging situations I had encountered clinically.  I was also yearning for a deeper connection to plants and landscape. Luckily, I found a bit of both in wild gardens of Goji berries.

        This was not at all my first experience of Goji berries.  They had been a part of my Chinese Medical education from very early on, and my first Kung Fu teacher and later my Taiji master and shifu both drank teas from Goji and recommended them to their students.  In many ways, herbs like Goji were what got me into Chinese Medicine in the first place. I had been wooed into the field by stories of rare tonic herbs that promote health and longevity, and which support the deepest layers of the body’s energies.  Of course, I heard that they could help you fly like an immortal, see the spirit world, and make your Kung Fu really good as well.

        Goji berries have a variety of names.  Botanically, they are all part of the *Solanacae* or Nightshade family, and they are commonly called boxthorns.  The most commons species that is used medicinally is *Lycium barbarum* which is also sometimes known as *Lycium chinense*.  In English, you sometimes hear the plant spoke of as Wolfberry or Red Medlar or Matrimony vine.  Often these days the plant is known as Goji berry in English. The Chinese Medicine name for the plant is *Gouqizi* which simply translates as the fruit of the Gouqi plants.  In Chinese Medicine, the roots and leaves are also used as medicines but less frequently.

        Around the time I graduated from Chinese Medical school, the popularity of Goji berries exploded all over this country and in other parts of the world.  You can now find the berries at most health food stores, as well as a variety of tinctures, dried powders, and even juice extracts of Goji. What exactly is behind the popularity and what are the benefits of consuming Goji berries?

        I think it behooves us to answers this question very carefully.  Recently, in Arizona and some other places, there has been a rash of lawsuits against companies making dubious claims about the health values of their Goji berry products.  The FDA has also come down upon these same companies for making claims against cancer.

        Traditionally, from the Chinese Medicine paradigm, Goji berries have a few simple things that they do extremely well.  *Goujizi* is said to benefit the *yin* of the Kidneys and Lungs, nourish the blood and *yin* of the Liver, and to nourish the essence or *jing.*What this means is that Goji berries traditionally are said to be helpful for times when the fluids of the body are deficient and to help strengthen some of the deepest layers of energy in the body.  They are also traditionally described as benefiting the eyes and helping to brighten the spirit.

        One of the reason that eating Goji is so popular in Chinese culture is that consuming the berries is associated with longevity, sagehood, and even immortality.  One of the most famous stories of longevity from China in recent times is that of Li Ching-Yuen (Li Qing Yuan). This wild sage spent most of his time living in the mountains gathering wild herbs to sell at the market and to consume for his own benefit, including plenty of Goji berries.  Goji was said to be part of his daily regiment along with meditation, qigong, and internal martial arts practice. Although widely disputed, his age at the time of his passing in 1933 was reported between 150-197 years old.

        I think that another one of the reasons Goji berries have become so popular is that Chinese Medical practitioners have been recommending them for years, especially for vegetarians and vegans.  During my training, most if not all of my teachers talked about how being a vegetarian or vegan can be very hard on the body, especially if you lead a modern, active, life-style. In the colder climates of Northern China and in Tibet, vegetarianism often went with a monastic life-style of celibacy, contemplation, and conservation of energy.  If one were to lead a modern, active life-style and choose to be vegetarian, then it would be a good idea to consume special herbs that support the deep energetic layers of the body, especially the blood. *Goujizi* was often recommended as an affordable, excellent option.  Modern analysis of Goji berries has backed this up by showing them to be rich in amino acids, B-vitamins, and carotene.

        Over the years, I have found that Goji berries are an excellent resource for my personal constitution, and they are a regular part of our household health regiment.  I am excited by the possibilities of Goji berries now being grown in the United States, and I am attempting to grow them myself. There are a variety of ways you can consume the berries, including simply infusing them in hot water or simmering them as a decoction.  Many of my teachers mentioned that the juice of the fresh berries is also quite nourishing and potent.

        Are Goji berries right for you?  Good question. Almost every question I asked of my Chinese Medical teachers was met with the answer, “It depends.”  When I taught at the Asian Institute of Medical Studies for a few years, I found myself using that answer more and more.  However, almost all of my teachers also mentioned that consuming Goji is safe and helpful for most people. They shouldn’t be consumed if you currently have a cold or a flu.  They shouldn’t be consumed if you are having acute digestive distress or have chronic weak digestion. Other than that, for most people the answer would be that they are a healthy addition to the diet.  I recommend that people try to find certified organic Goji berries if they are going to add them to their diet.

        As for finding your own patch of wild Goji?  Well, there are a number of Boxthorn species with edible berries that grow all over the world.  They are often found in dry, arid climates. There are at least a couple varieties that grow in the deserts of Arizona and Southern California.  It’s very important to do extensive research in plant field guides and work with local experts to find out about your local bioregion. With the wild sources of Goji berries here their medicinal potency may widely greatly, but I think it behooves us in the challenging times we live in to find as many of our own wild, sustainable sources of plants that we can.

**Summary:**

**Name:** Goji, Goji berry, *Gouqizi* (mandarin)

**Latin Name**: *Lycium chinensis*

**Parts Used**: Although the leaves and the root are both used in Chinese medicine, we are talking about the berries here.

**Preparations:** Tea or decoction, juice, tincture, pills

**Properties**: Strengthens the fundamental essence of the body, strengthens the liver and kidneys, benefits the blood, benefits the eyes, gently enhances blood circulation,

**Uses:**

1) Drink a decoction of the berries daily as a health and vitality tonic for all people of all constitutions.

2) Drink the juice or use the powder, same as the above

3) Add the berries to soups, stews, and autumn and winter dishes to strengthen the body.

4) Combine with dried chrysanthemum flowers in a decoction or infusion to make a very soothing beverage that’s very healing and nourishing for the eyes.

***Nettle: Milarepa’s Special Medicine (this article originally appeared on my personal blog and also the now defunct medicinecrow.com)***

        In the springtime, I try eating Nettles at least once a day each week.  Sometimes, I even try and do a nettle “fast” for multiple days, consuming almost nothing but nettles and nettle broth.  Their vibrant green vitality is welcome after the cold, damp, dark Northwest winter. Even the sting of their almost imperceptible needles has a zest that helps waken us to Spring.

        Nettles are one of my favorite plants, and one of the few plants that can really be considered both a food and a medicine.  I am always amazed that a plant that has a very powerful and painful sting can be so useful. Many students I’ve worked with over the years begin by being quite wary of Stinging Nettles, and then end up quite enamored with them.

        For me, I think it was the story about Milarepa, Tibet’s famous wild yogi that got me hooked.  Apparently, during his sojourn in the wilderness Milarepa ate nothing but Nettle for years. Really.  There are stories of hunters coming upon him and demanding food, and Milarepa responded by preparing them some nettles.  When they demanded real food, food that could keep someone alive in the bitter cold of the mountains where Milarepa was staying, he simply gave them more nettles.  It was the only thing that sustained him through all the seasons on the mountains! Eventually, Milarepa developed many *siddhis* from his practice, and his skin turned a vibrant color with hints of green.  His hair also grew long, lustrous, and profuse. At least part of this accomplishment was considered related to his diet of nettles!

        There is a strong European tradition of nettle consumption as well.  There is a poem from Scotland extolling the virtues of Nettles:

*If they would drink nettles in March*

*And eat mugwort in May*

*So many fine maidens*

*Would not go to the grave.*

I am also drawn to the stories of early Christian monks in the British Isles (especially in Ireland) who would fast for extended periods of time on milk, nettles, and a little bit of sorrel.  In fact, during the potato famine in Ireland there are anecdotes of nettles being one of the main foods that families used to supplement their diets during the hard times.

        While this is all interesting from a historical point of view, what value could nettle play for us today?

        Simply put, Nettles or Stinging Nettles (*Urtica* diocia*)*as they are often called are one of the easiest and simplest foods and herbs to incorporate into our diets and our health regimen.  They have many of the same benefits as superfoods and exotic elixirs from far away places, but they are quite common and considered weeds by most people.

**Summary:**

Name: Stinging Nettle

Latin Name: *Urtica dioica*

Parts Used: Leaves-fresh and dried, also seeds and root

Properties: Fresh leaves- nourish blood and vital energy and minerals, dried leaves-drying especially to nose and respiratory system, Topical-treats pain especially rheumatic pains through stimulation of microcirculation

**Uses:**

1)  **Wild Food Supplement:** Fresh nettles can be carefully gathered and then steamed or cooked just like spinach.  They are incredibly high in iron, minerals, chlorophyll, and vitamins A and C. They can be incorporated into quiches, spanokopita, pizza, stir-fries, or just eaten by themselves after being cooked for awhile.  Cooking the nettles will neutralize the sting they possess. Many people really like the taste of cooked nettles. They have a slight nutty flavor and are not at all bitter like most wild greens. Eating them will nourish the blood (especially from a Chinese Medicine viewpoint) and nourish the hair.

2)  **Dried Herbal Medicine**: Nettles are easy to dry and use as a medicinal infusion or tea.  Hot water can be poured over them and they can be steeped for several minutes for a brief infusion or overnight for a more potent medicine.  Nettle in dried form seems to have some different properties than the fresh. The infusion is very useful for allergic rhinitis, and in my opinion may be the best option for many people’s seasonal allergies.  The infusion is helpful for urinary difficulty, as it is a potent diuretic. It can also be used for circulation issues. Nettle has the ability to increase microcirculation, and yet is also helpful in regulating heavy menstrual bleeding.

3)  **Fresh Medicine Topically**- Nettle also has some unusual properties when applied topically.  First of all, it is extremely good at stopping bleeding. It makes a great in the field 1st aid plant.  It is important to wash out any cuts or scrapes thoroughly first. Secondly, the sting of Nettle has some unusual and very potent properties.  A folk use of Nettles is to rub the fresh plant on areas of the body prone to pain, especially arthritic pain made worse by cold and damp. This creates quite a lot of stinging pain and strongly stimulates local circulation.  It was used traditionally for rheumatic complaints.

        It is important to realize that even though distinctions have been made above in using fresh nettle as a food, dried nettle as a medicine, and fresh nettle sting as a topical medicine,  Nettle in all of its forms has *some* of the above actions and properties.  For instance, dried nettle does still have some vitamins, minerals, and iron and can be used to nourish the blood.  Dried nettle can also be powdered and used to stop bleeding (though it is less potent than its fresh form). Fresh nettles are somewhat astringent and drying and can be helpful for hayfever and allergies (though not as useful as dried).  All in all it is quite the useful plant ally.

        There is one more aspect of nettle I want to touch upon and that is Nettle’s affinity for our hair.  This is referenced in the story about Milarepa consuming large amounts of nettle and literally becoming quite hairy.  Between its microcirculation enhancing qualities and its highly nourishing mineral, vitamin, and iron content Nettle really strengthens and revitalizes the hair both internally and externally.  A colleague of mine drank a nettle infusion everyday for a year, and her women friends all commented on the lustrous nature of her hair. When living in the Desert Southwest, I had a middle-aged female patient whose hair had become badly damaged by the sun and by hair products.  She was looking at having to cut off about 12 inches of hair that had become like straw. Drinking nettle tea and rinsing her hair in a nettle infusion every day for a few weeks *completely* restored her hair!

        If you want to gather your own Stinging Nettle, it is not too hard.  It is easy to identify by its opposite growing leaves, its square stem, its serrated leaf edges, and its tiny hairs or needles that are the producer of its medicinal sting.  I highly recommend using a reputable field guide to positively ID it. Or even better find someone in your community who knows what the plant is and have them show you. Also, please know the history of the site of where you are gathering from.  You don’t want to ingest unknown toxins or heavy metals since Nettle likes to grow in disturbed areas. A lot of people recommend wearing gloves while harvesting the plant. This is probably a good idea, however I also recommend you let yourself be stung at least a little by the plant to experience this form of its medicine!  Finally, while Nettle is prolific and it is hard to over-harvest, you can enhance its growth by only gathering the top 6 inches of the plant. If you leave the rest to grow, the plant will actually be stimulated to produce new growth.

        As we step into Spring, we can follow in the footsteps of ancient sages of Tibet or simply the folk practices of our own ancestors by bringing into our lives the humble but profound Nettle.

*Snow hides in shadows on hills,*

*Frogs sing at night.*

*Intermittent Sun during the daytime,*

*Nettles begin to reach for the sky,*

*Spring is here.*