

spiritual properties, allowing us to use them to heal the body, spirit, and soul. I learned of a tradition that understood that plants can be used to do more than just heal; they can be used to facilitate the evolution of consciousness.

This was a major turning point in my plant path. Since then I have come to understand that universal truths about Nature, plant medicine, and the healing journey have been represented throughout the world's cultural traditions. Each tradition has its own unique way of expressing these truths, but there is a golden thread weaving them together, a perennial philosophy that rests at the heart of Nature and encompasses a universal model of medicine, spirituality, and science. The split between my heart and mind was mended by reconnecting it with the underlying pattern of Nature.

My work has been to unite these truths into a cohesive practice of plant medicine, one that serves to heal the body, clarify the mind, open the heart, and accelerate the evolution of consciousness. This book presents a holistic model of herbalism that recognizes the wholeness of people and plants and acknowledges their connection to the wholeness of Creation. In this model of healing, herbs are not just used like a drug to remove symptoms; they're used to bring people back to their true inner nature, their essential self, and provide healing that contributes to the evolution of humanity so we can create a world in alignment with the Earth. This practice focuses on integrating ancient teachings to create a new paradigm of plant medicine: evolutionary herbalism.

## The Evolution of Herbalism

People's interactions with the natural world, and specifically with the plant kingdom, have been instrumental in determining the course of history, the development of culture, and the state of human consciousness.<sup>1</sup> The cross-cultural contacts facilitated by the spice trade, the shift from hunting and gathering to agrarian

society, the impact of Tobacco on human health, genetic modification of food crops, and the growing usage of entheogenic plants and mushrooms have had powerful effects upon humanity and the Earth—some positive, some negative, and others yet to be seen.

Humanity is utterly dependent upon the botanical kingdom. We build our homes from timber, weave our clothes from fibers, and eat plants grown in the soil or animals fed by plants. The very air we breathe is a by-product of plants. Whether we wish to admit it or not, our very existence is contingent on our relationship with plants. I would argue that the current chaos and imbalances in the world are due in part to this relationship having been unconscious for so long because the plant kingdom has been marginalized and seen as inferior to humanity. When we make our relationship to plants conscious and recognize that they are intelligent, conscious beings we can relate to, we become more conscious of life itself. We become more aware of not only our relationship with the natural world and our dependence on it but our unique place within it. Indeed, our relationship to the plant kingdom shapes the world.

One area of human interaction with plants that has maintained this conscious awareness is herbalism, which has been practiced cross-culturally throughout the world, with the oldest recorded systems dating back thousands of years. Of course, plants have been used for food and medicine since far before written records were first created. Today herbalism is often perceived as the use of plants to treat symptoms or as a natural alternative to drugs. What few realize is that plants have traditionally been used to not just heal the body but also to assist in deeper levels of healing the mind, heart, and soul.

The art and practice of herbalism have changed profoundly throughout its history. Our modern practice of this healing art looks quite different even from a hundred years ago. In today's era of radical change, I believe there is a necessity to create a new paradigm of plant medicine that matches the current state of human health

and consciousness. To do this, we must observe the human-to-plant relationship, specifically with regard to the practice of herbalism, and learn from its different stages of evolution. We must understand where it has been and where it is now so we can know how to move forward in a good way.

### *Indigenous Herbalism*

The first phase of herbalism could be referred to as indigenous or folk herbalism. If we imagine the very first herbalists, we immediately see they learned about the plants not from universities and obviously not through the internet but directly from the plants themselves. Traditional people have a radically different perceptual orientation from our modern, intellectually driven, reductionist model of the world. They saw things very differently from how we see today, and this led to a very different approach to their herbal art.

Their deep connection to the natural world was not an intellectual exercise; rather, they saw the world through the eyes of the heart. The plant was seen as a living spiritual intelligence, not merely a container for biologically active constituents. This way of seeing evoked a spiritual understanding of health, disease, and the plants they used, connecting the physical world to an invisible, spiritual reality.

Indigenous and folk traditions understood that the natural world is infused with intelligence and that we have an innate ability to communicate with it. In this way, they understood the medicine of plants and the causes of disease spiritually. Their vision enabled them to practice plant medicine to heal beyond the body and into the spirit and soul through prayer, ceremony, and other methods of interweaving the spiritual elements of healing. And yet, these traditional doctors were also well versed in the physical application of medicinal plants to heal acute symptoms and injury. As the primary physicians, they developed an approach to medicine that was exceedingly practical while at the same time spiritual.

These traditions were typically highly localized to specific bioregions, family lineages, and cultures. Medicinal knowledge was passed from generation to generation, teacher to student, elder to child, through direct oral teachings, stories, practical experience, and most importantly, kinship with the plants. Rarely were these practices transcribed, for it was not an intellectually based system of knowledge transferred from mind to mind; it was a bundle of wisdom contained within the heart. It is this wisdom of the heart that we must revive in modern herbalism.

### *Vitalist Herbalism*

Over time, these plant people's direct, heart-centered connection to the living intelligence of the Earth imprinted their mind with the pattern of Nature. Indigenous and folk knowledge gradually became transcribed and developed into systematized, "vitalist" models of medicine.

These are the great systems often referred to when considering herbal traditions—Chinese medicine, Ayurveda, Unani-Tibb, Greek medicine—as well as the later North American traditions such as Thomsonianism, Physiomedicalism, and the Eclectics, among many others. During the vitalist phase, plants were understood to heal through the vital force that expresses itself in the plants' energetic properties, directly influencing the individual constitution of the person. This vital force is the underlying intelligent pattern of Nature directly imprinted in people and plants, determining their unique qualities and characteristics. This model is often summarized through systems of *energetics*.

Energetics is not an esoteric concept; it is rather a holistic description of the relationship between whole plants and whole people. It describes the core properties of medicinal plants that operate *behind* their physiological actions and organ affinities. It understands the root causes of symptoms in the body by looking at the essence of disease. It is an ecological model of medicine, rather

than a mechanical one. These systems stress the uniqueness of the individual, outlined through constitutional patterns that are influenced by the energetics of the plants.

In vitalism, the causes of disease are not just spiritual; they can also arise from a misalignment between the organism and its environment. In other words, a person's interactions with the world around them affect them psychologically, emotionally, and physically. Vitalist traditions suggest that people get sick because of how they live every day, including the foods they eat, thoughts they think, people they surround themselves with, the weather, seasonal changes, and a host of other factors. The therapeutic goal is to achieve balance between one's internal constitution and the external environment.

Many of these traditions, born out of indigenous and folk practices, continued to honor the spiritual facets of both people and plants. The primary characteristic of the vitalist phase is that herbalism became systematized and standardized within particular cultural and geographic regions. Vitalism can be seen as striking a dynamic balance between the intuitive faculties of the heart and the rational nature of the mind. Unfortunately, modern medicine has neglected the wisdom of these vitalist models in favor of a strictly biochemical model of medicine, in which our knowledge is solely rooted in the reductionist perspective of the mind while paying no heed to the holistic nature of the heart.

### *Molecular Herbalism*

As Western culture became the world's dominant paradigm, the practice of herbalism changed along with the development of industry and technology. As we moved from the forests and fields and into the city, we distanced ourselves from Nature, and medicine followed suit by becoming mechanized. The standardization of the scientific method, materialism, and analytical and reductionist thinking led the holistic practice of vitalist herbalism to evolve (or devolve) into modern day molecular herbalism.

Whereas indigenous herbalism was born of the heart, and vitalist herbalism was a balance of the heart and mind, molecular herbalism is solely located within the intellect. In this model, which is highly popular in conventional perspectives on herbalism, plants are understood to heal not because of their energetic properties or their impact on the constitution, and certainly not because of their spiritual influence, but rather due to biochemically active constituents that trigger distinct pharmacological processes within the body.

This way of thinking led us down a rabbit hole into the eventual development of isolated compounds—what we typically refer to as drugs. We have taken the holistic nature of medicinal plants, the vast complexity of their intelligence, and reduced them to single active ingredients. Molecular herbalism and drug therapies are results of the desacralization of traditional modes of seeing meaning in the world—alchemy degraded into chemistry, plants into pills. As indigenous and folk traditions became colonized, and as the vitalist systems of medicine became mechanized, there was a gradual shift away from perceiving life through the heart and toward seeing it strictly through the mind. The organic, holistic models became reductionist and linear.

When we attempt to decipher the medicinal properties of a plant strictly through its biochemical constituents—when we try to learn about a plant by studying its parts in isolation—we lose sight of its wholeness. Most research on medicinal plants only studies single compounds injected into mice or petri dishes, and from those results scientists extrapolate conclusions about how the entire plant will operate upon a human. Skewed, diluted information pervades the world of molecular herbalism, ultimately crippling our ability to be effective plant healers.

In molecular herbalism, symptoms are commonly seen as the enemy, and health is defined as the absence of symptoms. Plants are thought to be effective against certain symptoms or diseases, rather than being seen in their specificity for different types of people and

patterns of imbalance. Whole plants are not used to treat the whole person; instead, “standardized extracts” or plant isolates are used to treat common ailments.

Although science has made incredible discoveries about medicinal plants, when it becomes the sole method for understanding and using plants, our practice of herbalism becomes divorced from thousands of years of traditional knowledge. Science has its place, although it is relatively new in comparison to the indigenous and vitalist phases and cannot be seen as the only way. Very few practicing herbalists rely on science alone to build an effective therapeutic model, yet we can still honor the profound understanding it offers.

### *Evolutionary Herbalism*

Each phase in the evolution of herbalism provides an essential component of a truly holistic model of plant medicine. I believe a great integration can occur to advance the practice of herbalism for the modern world, a synthesis of the indigenous, vitalist, and molecular models. Through this synergy we can strike a balance between the science and the spirituality of people and plants. This integration is what I refer to as evolutionary herbalism.

The new paradigm of plant medicine encompasses the chemical, energetic, and spiritual qualities of plants and people, allowing us to work with the holistic nature of plants to heal the wholeness of the person, because this is the level of healing that is so desperately needed at this time. Plants are recognized not only as healers but also as teachers. They have the ability to facilitate the healing of our bodies, the clarification of our minds, the opening and strengthening of our hearts, and the evolution of our souls. Their intelligence is vast, their spirits pure, and their chemistry brilliant.

In the new paradigm of plant medicine, healing and evolution are the stamen and pistil of the same flower. To heal ourselves is to facilitate the evolution of our consciousness. And to further our

soul's development, we must heal. In this way, we use plants to assist in transformational levels of healing that touch the essence of who we are.

The new paradigm of herbal medicine sees plants not in isolation but in relationship to the wholeness of life. Herbs are not just understood in terms of how they are useful for *us*, not just in the dim light of what they are "good for." They are perceived as intelligent, sentient, conscious beings, embodiments of the universal forces of life, mirror images of the whole.

In the new paradigm of plant medicine, people are not viewed solely through the narrowed lens of their symptoms. Our bodies are not machines; our minds and hearts are not merely constructs of our past. The human organism, like a plant, is a still pond reflecting the totality of life. The body, heart, mind, and soul are not separate, but intricately interwoven in a warp and weft that is the tapestry of our being. And that tapestry is but one thread in the organic unity of Nature.

Evolutionary herbalism sees that plants are not merely plants, and people are not merely people, but both are embodiments of the macrocosm of Nature, designed in accordance with the underlying blueprint of life. By communing with the vital intelligence of plants, we also commune with the powers of Creation that operate through them. As we study plants, we study the self, and as we study the self, we study Creation. The evolutionary herbalist sees that transformational healing doesn't just occur through the plants but also through the archetypal forces of life.

Evolutionary herbalism is a calling for a truly holistic model of plant medicine that can bring about a union of the science and soul of herbalism, an integration of the heart and mind, a wedding between the Earth and sky, a synthesis of the great herbal traditions of the world brought together by a natural language—*a universal model of plant medicine that transforms lives*.