

ONE

What Is Folk Medicine?

I'm just trying to give some ease.

*—Tommie Bass, nationally acclaimed
folk herbalist from Sand Rock, Alabama*

WE PARKED THE truck on top of Billy Ridge at the crack of dawn to go ginseng hunting down the mountainside. The early cool of the September air was crisp and clean as we zigzagged our way down the mountain, cutting a path through the understory brush and along the ravines. Granddaddy Light carried a walking stick cut from a young sapling to ease his old bones through the woods and to fend off snakes. His hands shook with palsy and his steps were slow, so we moved at a leisurely pace to accommodate his affliction. Daddy carried the ginseng or sang hoe over his right shoulder and a burlap sack in the other hand. The sang hoe had a pick on one side and a half a hoe blade on the other and could be used to dig deep into the dirt and lift out a root.

As the day wore on, we had nothing to show for all our morning's effort. No sang had been found. *Sang* is short for American ginseng and is a term which is used throughout Appalachia. Everyone was feeling a bit glum and a bit tired as we rested on the big rocks around the blue hole outside a Cotaco Valley cave, grateful for the deep shade of the densely packed trees around the sinkhole. Tangled fishing line littered the lower branches, signs of failed attempts to cast for the fish that swam between the blue hole outside the cave and its sister blue hole inside.

Caving was one of my favorite activities, having been introduced at a young age by my father. This particular cave was alluring—its great room was magnificent, with a cathedral ceiling that seemed to stretch upward forever. On the far cave wall, intricate rock formations created a water fountain effect with little pools of water flowing from one smaller pool at the top of the cave wall downward to the next larger pool, and on until it reached the largest pool at the cave's floor. In the middle of the great room was the blue hole, a sinkhole filled with fresh water. No one knew how deep it was, only that it connected to a similar one outside the cave.

But today, there was no time for caving; ginseng was an important source of cash income and the day was getting on. Empty-handed, we headed back toward the truck, a long walk up the north face of the mountain on an overgrown and long-deserted roadbed. Little shrubby pine trees and greenbrier poked up here and there on the old roadbed, the forest reclaiming its land. Down one side of the road was a deep wash, formed by many years of rain rushing down the mountain. This old road had never been paved, having only been used by the folks who had once lived in the settlement at the mountain's plateau shelf.

As we headed back up, I spotted a solitary chimney in the woods and went over to investigate. The chimney (or chimley, in local terms) was all that was left standing from a house in a once prosperous settlement. The houses had been abandoned years ago when a new road was built a few miles to the east, bypassing the lowest part of the valley which was prone to flooding. The owner of the general store had abandoned the settlement, resettling on the new road. The people had followed the store, packing up and moving, abandoning their wooden shacks and chicken coops to the workings of nature. For you see, the people had never owned the land their houses were on. The vast acreage was all owned by one family, as was the general store. They rented to tenant farmers who worked the cotton fields in the valley below. Soon only stone chimneys and fallen-down buildings stood as reminders that people had once occupied the land and that cotton was no longer king.

Abandoned homesteads were always an exciting discovery, and exploring them was one of my favorite activities. To explore the sites where people had once lived, raised their children, and buried their dead was the most intriguing activity in the world. Sometimes, the houses were abandoned, with all the furniture and house goods left inside. This happened when elderly parents died and

their children, now living in other states, had no time to rescue possessions left behind in the backwoods of Alabama. These old houses and their belongings could sit for years and years until the land was finally sold and new owners took possession.

My brother Norman and I loved to do this type of exploring. Once, in similar circumstances, we had found an old trunk full of women's clothes from the early 1900s. What an amazing treasure! You just never knew what you might find in abandoned houses. On this day, I found an old fruit jar, discovered several small bottles which had once held patent medicines and hair tonic, and unearthed a handful of marbles. To a child, these were amazing discoveries which I would later flaunt to younger siblings and cousins.

There were usually fruit and nut trees around the old settlements and homesteads, and this was no exception. The pear tree was ripe with fruit already falling thick on the ground, and a muscadine (wild grape) vine clung to the last of its thick-skinned yield not yet eaten by the birds or possums. Both would make wonderful jellies, preserves, and syrups. Abandoned settlements were also good places to find herbs, especially in the cleared areas around old chicken coops or pig pens.

I was so intent on my explorations that I jumped when Daddy shouted for me to "Come on!" They had found some sang.

Every plant has an ally, a companion, and a use. As we dug the ginseng, Granddaddy said that ginseng, deer, and rattlesnakes are often found together. Granddaddy talked really, really slow, partially because of his palsy and partially just because that was the way he talked. Any story that Granddaddy started could take awhile. He talked slower than molasses running uphill on a snowy day, as the old saying goes. Sometimes his pauses would be so long that you'd think he had finished the story and so you would start talking. Then Granddaddy would suddenly get his wind back and, with great indignation for being interrupted, finish his story. It was disconcerting, but taught us patience and gave us all good listening skills.

According to Granddaddy, deer eat the ginseng seeds and the seeds pass on through and drop as the deer move around the woods. The seeds then roll down the sides of the mountain until they rest on land that is level enough and moist enough for them to grow. And that's one way ginseng travels around the woods to new locations. That's why following deer trails often leads to ginseng.

Rattlesnakes make winter nests in the sides of mountains near ginseng patches but above wet ground, and they are looking for their winter's nests about the same time ginseng is ready to dig. Most ginseng hunters run up on at least one or two rattlesnakes during a season. According to legend, because rattlesnakes and ginseng live so close together and share the same land, they made a pact. If you injure one, the other extracts revenge; what you do to one, you do to the other. Killing a rattlesnake is always bad luck; the spirits don't like that. And even worse, if you harm a snake, the ginseng can stop working for you.

We finished gathering the sang and were almost back at the truck when we heard the rattle. It was a granddaddy rattlesnake coiled right in the middle of the old roadbed and ready to strike. Daddy moved to one side of the snake and Granddaddy walked over and stood between it and me.

"Shoo, old snake, we don't want no trouble," Granddaddy said. But the snake stayed coiled, rattling its tail.

"It's too late for talking," Daddy said, "it's done hissed at me." Daddy picked up a big rock, ready to deal with that rattlesnake.

"Get to the truck," Daddy said, motioning me onward. But I was frozen, staring at the evil-looking, arrowhead-shaped snake head. "Go on," I said. And I knew he meant it this time and so I headed toward the truck, giving the snake a wide berth. With one last look back, I saw Daddy draw back his throwing arm and I knew we had seen the last of that old snake. Daddy had a fearless attitude about handling snakes or killing poisonous ones. He had been known to grab a snake by the tail, swing it around and around and pop off its head with a whip-like action. He also liked to keep a rat snake or corn snake in his tool shed to keep down the rats. It also kept Mama out of his shed too. She was extremely afraid of snakes.

With Granddaddy's story fresh in my mind, I knew that killing the rattlesnake was bad luck, and I was worried about what might happen to Daddy if he killed the snake. I called out to him, but he just motioned me toward the truck, his eyes never leaving the snake. They were in a contest and there would be only one winner. And that was the end of that old snake.

Ginseng was the only medicinal plant my Daddy ever used until late in his life when his brother B.J. moved to northern Florida and sent him an aloe vera plant and a gallon of aloe vera juice. After that, Daddy said that aloe vera did what ginseng couldn't do, and he would sit in his easy chair and rub aloe vera on

all the spots on his skin. Both Daddy and Granddaddy felt that ginseng, in the right amount, could do most everything. I spent years learning those amounts and those uses.

I ate my first ginseng when I was only a little girl. It was fresh dug from the ground, and the smell of the rich-woods dirt filled my nostrils as I took a bite. I was taught to chew on a tidbit of the woody root...slowly...savoring every drop of its sweet bitterness. I could keep a bit of sang in my mouth for hours, worrying it around and around the way a cow chews a cud.

We always kept some dried ginseng in a kitchen drawer, the one where all the odds and ends of the kitchen end up. There among the matches, can openers, screws, and receipts were the dried broken bits of the sang that were too small to sell. The collection grew every year. I still have a few of those broken sang roots, given to me by Mama when Daddy died of an unusual blood cancer that reminded me of the bite of a rattlesnake. They were a last gift and reminder of those precious times in the woods. The roots are as hard as a rock, and many have been dried thirty years or longer, but I can still chew on one for quite some time, letting the sweet bitterness fill my mouth, conjuring up memories of life the way it used to be.

Living with a plant, the way I did ginseng, is the perfect way to get to know it and for it to know you. Ginseng has its own personality, a quality that permeates its medicine, affecting all levels of the body. It can be wiry and tough, offering armor against invasion, keeping out that which is not needed. At the same time, ginseng can be gentle, influencing the body on a deep, cellular level, supporting the immune system and fortifying the spirit. As with many herbs, the dose makes the difference. As a tonic, a little ginseng each day, just a little, supports the body and improves health.

Producing only two or three seed heads each year, ginseng uses its energy wisely, storing most of its vitality in the roots. Ginseng likes to grow on the north side of the mountains in well-drained soil, but will grow in most any hardwood forests. And unlike other herbs of the woods, ginseng, the King of Herbs, is not merely harvested or gathered, but rather it is hunted. Hunting implies that the plant has an innate intelligence which is used to hide or defend itself from attack and capture. Granny Light told me that ginseng, or Little Man, is smart and can become invisible unless it wants to be gathered. And from my experience, I believe this to be true.

Ginseng is sneaky. You can be standing in the middle of a patch and not even know it. Or sometimes you can walk around and around a patch before you realize it's there. But on rare and glorious occasions, you can just walk into the woods and there it appears at your feet, in total welcome and acceptance. Sang has a rare mysterious and magical quality. When I was young, I was sure that ginseng could just pick up and walk through the rich wood's dirt to evade capture.

Sanging is a magical word itself, being used as both a verb and a noun. That day, we went sanging together, and later Granddaddy would tell the rest of the family about the sang. As you might have gathered, ginseng hunting was an annual event in our family that was anticipated with excitement and enthusiasm.

Every sanger has his or her own way of hunting the plant, a system they felt sure would work. I was taught to look for running water, deer trails, and rattlesnakes as signs or markers that sang was nearby. I also learned that little flat ledges on the sides of the mountains often hold the plant. My ginseng education included instructions to never take all the plants in a patch but to leave some for future growth. I was also taught to break off and replant the arm of the ginseng plant for immediate growth. This is something that modern ginseng hunters don't do—the international market requires the root to be intact. This has sped the decline of wild ginseng populations because hunters aren't replanting. And I understood the necessity of keeping my ginseng patch secret, because others might steal every single plant if they could find them.

No matter their favorite methods of ginseng hunting, everyone in the family agreed that ginseng is found in the snakiest places. Aunt Jewel was known to wear heavy Army boots with metal stove pipes tied around her lower legs to protect against rattlesnake bites. She would often brag about how many strikes she heard pinging against the metal pipes as she walked through the snaky brush.

My uncle Waylon continued to hunt ginseng after my Daddy had stopped, carrying on until his heart and legs just couldn't make their way up and down the mountain slopes anymore. Waylon was little and dark, with the coloring of a Creek Indian, the face of an Irishman, and the fiery temper of both. He fought for and protected his ginseng patch with knife and wits, and few old hunters wanted to cross him in the woods. When Uncle Waylon was in the hospital, nearing the end of his life, I had the opportunity to hear tales of

ginseng hunts from the older men who came to visit him. It was a rough-and-tumble business, and people protected their patches fiercely. Money was scarce and herbs like ginseng, pink root, butterfly weed, button snakeroot, and smilax, or greenbrier, brought in much-needed cash. Men earnestly protected the location of herb patches and gathered the plants in secret.

One of the most important lessons in how to find a patch of ginseng took place in Moon Hollow, so named because the only light at night which could be seen shining through the trees was the light of the moon. Moon Hollow, a thousand acres of uninhabited land, was a favorite of ginseng hunters as well as fox hunters. On this particular day in late June, Daddy and I set off to Moon Hollow right after breakfast. He said, "Sister, you need to learn how sang looks at all times of the year if you are going to hunt it." Mama expected us back home by dinnertime (lunch) when food would be on the table promptly at 11 a.m.

Daddy and I passed an abandoned grist mill; the wheel was missing but the apparatus was still there. We continued to hike deeper into the hollow than I had ever been before. We walked and walked, until Daddy suddenly stopped. He pulled a Zane Grey paperback Western novel out of his back pocket and settled himself on the ground at the foot of a big tree and leaned back against the trunk to read.

"Between that tree," he said, pointing, "and that rock and the creek, there are six or seven ginseng plants. Let me know when you find them, Sister." And he started reading.

I looked around me and every plant looked the same: green and about a foot tall. I couldn't locate the ginseng by looking for their red berries; it was only early summer so I didn't have that sign to guide me. I walked around, back and forth between the creek, tree, and rock, but I couldn't find any ginseng.

"Are you sure there are ginseng plants here?" I asked him. "Yup," was the only answer I got.

I looked some more, walking back and forth. I stopped to examine the leaves on a plant. I still couldn't find any ginseng.

"Hurry up, Sister," he said. "It's almost dinnertime." Time was running out.

Frustration is too mild a word to describe how I felt as the morning wore on. "If you're going to learn about herbs," Daddy said, "this is how you learn."

I was about ready to cry. I just couldn't find any ginseng. I stood there, in the middle of all these green plants, closed my eyes, took a breath, and felt the

tension leave my body. I just didn't care anymore if I found any plants, and in not caring, I became calm and quiet.

The woods surrounded me. I kept my eyes closed and let my other senses sharpen. I heard the sounds of the birds in the trees and the wind rustling limbs and leaves. I felt the wind as it flowed over my skin. I felt the sun on my head, hot and constant. I smelled the water from the creek and heard its sound moving over the rocks in the creek bed. I smelled the musk and decay from the deep leaf litter on the ground. I heard Daddy breathing and heard the turning of the page in the book he was reading. I smelled life: the life of the land, rich and thick. And in that moment, I became a part of the land too. I couldn't tell where I began and ended or where the land began and ended.

I opened my eyes and the ginseng plants were just glowing, simply glowing. They were vibrantly green as I pointed to them.

"Here they are," I called to Daddy, pointing them out. He stood up, looked to where I pointed and put the book back into his pocket.

"Let's go eat," he said, and that was all the praise or comment I ever got. But that was his way, the Indian way.

And that was how my path with the plants consciously began.

What Is Folk Medicine?

Folk medicine is only one aspect of folkways within a culture. American sociologist William Graham Sumner described folkways as "usages, manners, customs, mores, and morals" which are practiced unconsciously in every culture. David Hackett Fischer in *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America*, describes folkways as, "the normative structure of values, customs, and meanings that exist in any culture." Folkways are the everyday actions that drive our cultures with society.

Folkways can encompass everything aspect of culture, including patterns of speech; ideas of courtship and marriage; ideas on child rearing; beliefs about the supernatural and religion; customs of dress; attitudes toward food and diet; attitudes and beliefs about health, disease, and medicine; attitudes toward time, money, guns, and most other aspects of life. Southern Folk Medicine is one of the folkways of the Southeast regional culture in the United States.

Does this mean that only Southerners will benefit from Southern Folk Medicine? Absolutely not! Anyone can learn and use Southern Folk Medicine. Its practices and principles cut across regional cultures in the United States, and actually across global cultures. It's easy to learn, intuitive, and conceived in the English language, so its idioms are common for English speakers especially.

However, just to make sure we're on the same page, some definitions are in order to avoid any confusion. This might seem a little boring, but is necessary to make sure there are no misunderstandings. The following definitions are ones that I use and are fairly standard.

Folk medicine is defined as a system of medicinal beliefs, knowledge, and practices associated with a particular culture or ethnic group. Generally, these techniques have not been scientifically tested; there are no animal or double-blind studies. But they have been used for hundreds or thousands of years, accumulating massive amounts of empirical evidence and information that supports their effectiveness and safety. The emphasis of folk medicine is on prevention of disease through healthy lifestyle behaviors. Remedies that support health are nontoxic and are mind, body, and spirit oriented. Folk medicine may be used by itself or in conjunction with conventional medical practices.

Southern Folk Medicine and Southern Appalachian Folk Medicine (SAFM) are umbrella terms for the folk medicine of the Southern United States. Due to migration patterns immediately after the Civil War and again in the 1960s and 1970s, you can find Southern Folk Medicine in most major cities in the United States, in the Midwest, and northward to the Great Lakes areas.

Hoodoo is the herbal and spiritual African-American folkway which is found predominantly in the Deep South but which spread northward during the great migration of blacks out of the South. It is a combination of the spiritual practices of Africa and Europe, mostly Ireland, and Native American uses of the herbs of the New World.

Native American Medicine, in the context of this book, pertains to the remnants of the folk practices of the Cherokees, Creeks, Choctaws, Chickasaws, and Seminoles, or the Five Civilized Tribes of the Southern United States, including their use of herbs which have become a part of the Southern folk healing tradition.

According to the World Health Organization, *Traditional Medicine (TM)* is "the sum total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on the theories,

beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures, whether explicable or not, used in the maintenance of health as well as in the prevention, assessment, improvement, or treatment of physical and mental illnesses.” The use of Traditional Medicine may or may not be supported by scientific research. Its use is focused on the needs of the individual, not the needs of the group. Traditional healers, herbalists, spiritual healers, and bonesetters are all types of traditional medicine practitioners.

Also per the World Health Organization, *herbal medicine* is “the use of crude plant material such as leaves, flowers, fruit, seed, stems, wood, bark, roots, rhizomes, or other plant parts which may be entire, fragmented, or powdered. It also refers to the long historical use of these plant remedies to support the healing function of the body. Their use is well established and widely acknowledged to be safe and effective, and may be accepted by national authorities.”

An *herbalist* is a person who uses plants, foods, and other natural healing techniques to support good health and the body’s innate healing processes. Plants used by herbalists have a broad definition and include not only herbaceous plants but also shrubs, trees, mushrooms, lichens, and fruits and vegetables. A commonality among herbalists is their love of the land and plants, and a feeling of a special connection to the Earth. The herbal perspective is holistic, viewing the body as mind, body, and spirit, all rolled into one.

Natural medicines such as herbs shine in the prevention of illness and the reduction of risk factors for illness. The emphasis is on prevention of illness, use of plant medicines at the beginning of an illness, and a return to homeostasis. We can all benefit from the strengths of herbalism when the need arises.

Conventional medicine is the dominant medical system as practiced by Western physicians. Its use is supported by medical insurance companies, HMOs, physician’s associations such as the American Medical Association, and clinical trials. Conventional medicine is based upon the needs of the group, not the individual. The perspective is reductionist, viewing the body as individual physical components and organ systems. This philosophy has created a system of medical specialists such as internists, podiatrists, cardiologists, and urologists.

Conventional medicine shines in traumatic situations such as car accidents, acute infections, medical emergencies, surgical techniques, and in the use of diagnostic machinery. Its emphasis is on treatment after diagnosis and

symptom management. We can all benefit from the strengths of conventional medicine when the need arises.

Alternative medical systems are built upon complex systems of theory and practice. Often, these systems have evolved earlier than the conventional medical approach used in the United States, according to the World Health Association. According to the National Institutes of Health (NIH), *complementary medicine* is the adaptation of traditional medicine to the dominant medical system.

Complementary and alternative medicines (CAM) are those healthcare practices not currently considered an integral part of conventional medicine. They include but are not limited to herbs, homeopathy, chiropractic, hypnosis, and acupuncture. According to the NIH, “These practices may lack biomedical explanation, but as they become better researched some...may become widely accepted, whereas others...quietly fade away, yet are important historical footnotes.”

Integrative medicine represents an effort to provide a therapeutic model that insists on conventional or alternative medical practices that have received thorough and serious evaluation.

The Language of Folk Medicine

This is an important concept to understand in our discussion on folk medicine. The language, the vocabulary of any folk medicine, such as Southern Folk Medicine, is old as the hills, common to a large portion of the population, and familiar to most of the population within the group or culture. There is no special folk medicine language designed just to be used in special situations. Folk medicines use the everyday language of the everyday peoples, which insures that everyone understands it. Conventional medicine, on the other hand, uses a special language just for doctors, which makes communication difficult between physician and patient and sets physicians apart from their community.

The folk medicine vocabulary and language are intimately woven into the common vernacular of everyday language. In other words, the language of the healers and herbalists is so commonly used that it is difficult for the specific concepts to be conceptualized as a concise folk medicine philosophy by the uninitiated. Sometimes, folk medicine phrases might seem like clichés to those outside

the culture. But these sayings speak volumes to those who understand the full depth of the analogies or metaphors.

According to Ruth Trickey, Australian herbalist and author, “In many cultures these concepts become so entwined with the language and a common understanding of health and disease that only a thin line exists between ‘commonsense’ and the knowledge of the practitioner.”

I find this to be very true. For example, if I ask a client, “How are you feeling?” and they answer, “Pretty good,” I immediately know that they aren’t feeling too well. That they’ve been having problems of some sort but aren’t going to let those problems get them down and are trying to keep a good attitude. I also know that it’ll take some pointed questions and a bit of trust before they will fully divulge their health issues. I understand all this from those two simple words.

Across the world, each regional culture has built into the common vocabulary those idioms and phrases that give pages and pages of inferred information...if you understand. In the South, almost everyone knows the meaning of water on the heart, sugar in the blood, high blood, low blood, high blood sugar, holding water, thick blood, and bad blood. These descriptions inherently relay a vast amount of information about health based on their common meanings, but these words and phrases are not acknowledged by the medical community as anything other than colorful phrases that don’t really have a medical meaning. Pay attention! What a simple and common communication pathway.

The use of common, ordinary language as a health language is comforting to clients. It helps put them at ease and relaxes any perceived barriers that might exist between client and practitioner. Using the language folks understand helps create trust between client and practitioner, opens lines of communication, and empowers the client with knowledge. The understanding and knowledge then allows the client to fully participate in any decisions regarding their therapeutic protocols. It enables the client to be able to ask important questions regarding their treatment or procedures, or side effects of medications. A common vernacular is a language of support and empowerment.

It’s quite easy for common folk to be intimidated by medical language, especially by physicians who use it as a barrier. This limits communication and trust in the therapeutic relationship. It also limits understanding of the health situation by the patient and creates a paternalistic relationship where the physician makes the decisions.