

# Embodied Belonging

Wild-harvesting Explored as a Restorative Practice

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the Masters of Holistic Science Degree Program

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August, 2011



*'Whatever great, beautiful, or significant experiences have come our way must not be recalled again from without and recaptured, as it were; they must rather become part of the tissue of our inner life from the outset, creating a new and better self within us, continuing forever as active agents in our [becoming].'*

(Goethe, 1949: 154)

## DEDICATION

As an herbalist's daughter and now apprentice, I have received nourishment and healing from plants throughout my life. I offer this project as a gesture of gratitude and respect for the innate intelligence of these beings, and for the lineage of healers throughout our shared history who have, with great tenderness and skill, cultivated, safeguarded, and listened to them so carefully.

## THANK YOU

To the brilliant and generous teachers, students, cooks, and helpers of Schumacher College,  
et Yan Marais, mon amour.

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## ABSTRACT

Harvesting medicinal plants from the wild, an increasingly contentious activity in an era of overconsumption and poor practices, is explored through a lens of reciprocity and right relationship to illuminate potential for transformative learning in an ecological context. Through stories, literature, and fieldwork, wild-harvesting is established as a practice of reconnecting personal and ecological wellbeing through conscious, embodied participation with place.

Traditional harvesting patterns and protocols are oriented within emerging understandings of complexity in natural systems, opening up possibilities for the realignment of harvesting with conservation, restoration, and, moreover, the cultivation of ecological selfhood. Excerpts from conversations with healers and wild-harvesters of the Pacific Northwest are presented to illustrate the qualities and characteristics of relationships being built and maintained among people and local plants. Finally, through the author's experience of working with the medicinal shrub devil's club [*Oplopanax horridus*], Goethe's scientific method is offered as a framework for developing an appropriate *way of seeing* for wild-harvesters.

To conclude, insights, questions, and suggestions for further research are offered in the hopes of carrying this work forward in the future.

**part one** · GENERAL INTRODUCTION

*'Since all life forms share a common origin, it makes sense for all life forms to understand one another through their individual spirits... This state of existence, characterized by the common origin of all life forms and their interconnection has given rise to the development of protocols of respect and constrain between all beings.'*

(Nuu-chah-nulth Chief Richard Atleo, 2004: 131)

*'What are the needs of all these plants? This is a critical question for us.  
Rest, protection, appreciation and respect are a few of the values  
we need to give these fellow passengers through time.'*

(Haida Elder Barbara Wilson, quoted in Turner, 2004: 216)

## **preface** · PLANTING

“You plant so they can cut,” our foreman explained, shrugging his skinny shoulders and piling the tree boxes on the edge of the restricted-access logging road, a ragged line through a clear-cut that stretched to the horizon in every direction. “So bang them in.”

The forest was a massive absence I moved through that first long spring, a silence broken only by a hollow wind and the ping of my awkward shovel against an infinite, implacable plate of granite - the Canadian Shield. Stumbling slowly in difficult slash, slipping through broken alders and toppled, skinny birch, I leaned into a landscape of continuous and vanished pathways, of resting places and gathering grounds where countless lives had arisen and parted before mine. *Nakina. Nakina - land covered in moss.* From the tree line in the far distance black spruce still swayed and sighed against the opened skies, still wove their webs of shallow roots and spoke, in secret, with each other. They were slow alchemists, I learned that spring, hauling bright pitch and beauty from that stone.

Later in the season, dizzy from heat and dehydration, I would unhitch my heavy bags of saplings and slip into the forest edge alone. The temperature would drop into coolness and I would blink against the sudden change in light. In that moment of darkness, my eyes adjusting from the sharp brightness of slash and sky to the gentle play of dappled light and shadow, I was touched first by fragrance and then the rustlings of wings. Slowly then, the forest would reveal itself, its families of nodding ferns and flowering medicines, pale-skinned birches and mosses opening in stars. Fringes of tender lichens in all the colours of flint and goldenrod were hooped and crinkled on every stone and spruce, telling me stories of their great age, their stillness, and their patience. I would stand there, breathing deeply, filled with the scent of earth, and rain, and light. Of a hundred million years of learning, together, to become.

Then I would hold my breath to leave them. I would harden something in the center of my chest and push myself back into a landscape of loss, where almost everything had been cut and taken, or burned.

Over the springs and summers of my university years, across the northern stretches of Ontario, Alberta, and finally British Columbia, I learned to keep my head down all day and my eyes on my rows of trees. To pay for school, for travelling, for addictions, for our lives as artists and writers, we honed the motions of planting to the barest minimum - *two strides, shovel swing, slice to the right with a hand in the bags, tree in, stand and kick, two strides* - the best of us moving and bending with the rhythm of our own rough breath. Zigzagging across the slashed faces of hills, back and forth in disciplined rows along the frilled edges of bogs and the crushed banks of little creeks, line after line after line over long swathes of ripped up bear country and the scattered remnants of shy caribou's calving grounds we moved, tracing the loss with our shovels and boots and aching, duct-taped hands. And then we left.

Years later, in the middle of winter, I dream of planting. I see myself from above, alone, walking in the falling light of dusk across the clear-cut. The curve of my tired back bends and rises in the familiar pulse of northern work, but there is no line of standard trees behind me - I strain then to see my hands, hidden in shadow but moving with a tenderness I cannot yet explain. I drift closer as night gathers, and when I'm able at last to see what it is I am planting, I close my eyes. Finally, I think, allowing my heart to break.

It is wild honey - slow, thick, luminous. It is the balm my mother gave me. For healing wounds.

## chapter one . QUESTIONS AND THE JOURNEY

Six years ago I dreamt of pouring wild honey into the broken earth I walked across, and woke with something clarified inside me. Since that morning I have contemplated and sought out practices of reciprocity, of forgiveness and thanksgiving that might lead us toward a mutually healing relationship with the generous and fragile community of life. This quality of right relationship can be defined as a “coherent, co-evolutionary, and mutually sustainable orientation” (Schroll, 2007: 31). It speaks of a two-way flow of communication, generosity, and care. Central to this dedication is a deep sense of belonging, a felt intimacy with the ecological realities of the places in which we dwell. Poet and teacher Gary Snyder writes that “it is not enough just to ‘love nature’ or ‘be in harmony with Gaia.’ Our relation to the natural world takes place in a place, and it must be grounded in information and experience” (1990: 39). It is in this spirit of grounding - in the understanding that right relationship is cultivated literally *on the ground* with muddied hands and whispered prayers - that I have begun to explore specifically the linkages between wild-harvesting, resilience-based conservation, and ecological selfhood in the context of the Pacific northwest, my home.

To do this, I have asked the questions: how does studying, harvesting, and healing with native wild plants reveal and deepen our own, very real membership in a biotic community? And how is this embodied ecological understanding connected to conservation? How can a practice of wild-harvesting medicines, in other words, contribute to the restoration of ourselves as well as the land that holds us?

And how is such a practice to be cultivated?

### 1.1: RESEARCH GAP

In documenting and promoting adaptive wild-harvesting practices within meaningful cultural and ecological contexts, ethnobotanists and the communities they work with draw our attention to the linked processes of ecological and cultural loss and, conversely, restoration. My thesis finds fertile ground in the eco-cultural restoration work being done by these remarkable people, yet seeks to carry the notion of reciprocal healing forward in a general and inclusive sense, opening up possibilities of meaningful ecological

participation for people of all backgrounds and ethnicities. To develop this holistic framework of inquiry, I weave ethnobotanical discourses together with those of systems theory, deep ecology, ecopsychology, and bioregionalism in experimental ways. Through an interdisciplinary and openhearted exploration of the patterns and processes of wild-harvesting, the deeper and more personal implications of conservation behaviour are revealed in new ways. Concurrently, through the lens of gathering plants, discussions of ecological selfhood – at time over-theorized and prone to semantic stumbling blocks – are grounded in the realities of place, the body, and the humble work of our hands.

#### **1.2: AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

In investigating practices and rituals associated with harvesting wild medicines, my aim is to explore relationships of reciprocity – of symbiosis - between people and plants, and to articulate the implications of these relationships on personal and ecological wellbeing. In doing so my intentions are threefold:

- 1) To establish a context for right relationship between people and plants by outlining the role of traditional ecological knowledge in resilience-based conservation, beginning with an in-depth look at harvesting practices and protocols that have proven sustainable over long periods of time.
- 2) To link this ethnobotanical discourse with the ‘radical ecologies’ of bioregionalism, deep ecology, and ecopsychology to explore and discuss the role of wild-harvesting in the cultivation of ecological selfhood.
- 3) To suggest a methodological foundation for a beginner’s practice of restorative wild-harvesting rooted in direct perception and deep ecological understanding through Goethe’s phenomenology of nature.

#### **1.3: SCOPE OF STUDY**

Gathering and healing with plants from the wild is a daily activity for local peoples around the world. It is something all of our ancestors have practiced; knowing the plants of our home area and

monitoring their wellbeing alongside that of our own communities has, until very recently in human history, been synonymous with life. With this in mind, I have chosen to focus on wild-harvesting carried out by individuals on a small scale for personal, family, and community use, listening above all to the voices of historically marginalized others - indigenous people, women, herbalists and traditional healers, rural folk, and the wild plants themselves. In so doing I aim to expand the discussion of healing with plants beyond that of medicinal constituents to include the *medicine of good relationship*.

#### 1.4: PLACE OF STUDY



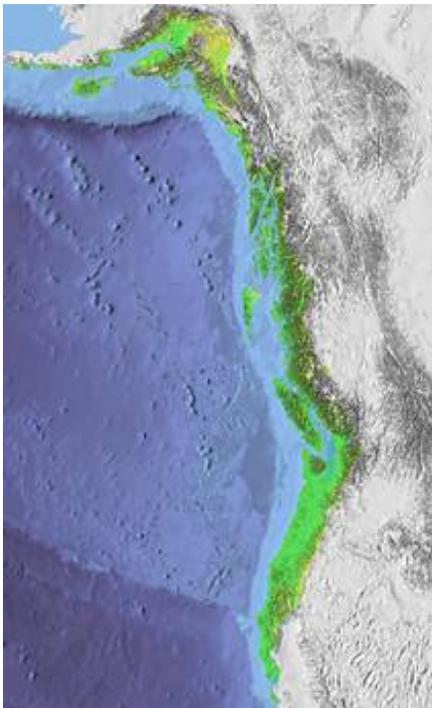
([www.eoearth.org](http://www.eoearth.org))

The Pacific Northwest coast of British Columbia, Canada, is both the landscape I am travelling over and the literal ground on which much of my thesis rests. This bioregion, stretching along the Pacific coast of North America from Oregon north to the Copper River delta on the Gulf of Alaska, encompasses a slender strip of jagged coastline bounded on the inland side by the Coast and Cascade mountain ranges and ending at its western extreme in a scattered spine of rugged islands called Haida Gwaii. The Pacific Northwest, generally

characterized by a relatively mild climate, temperate rainforests, and a profusion of coastal marine life, is composed of a diverse range of ecological niches with sharp temperature and moisture gradients, including: low-elevation meadow; rainshadow (Douglas-fir) forest; coastal rainforest; montane forest; freshwater marshes and swamps; riverbanks and lakeshores; freshwater bogs and fens; and tidal wetlands (Turner, 2005). Since the last glaciation sculpted and left the land approximately 10,000 years ago, the coast has woven itself into a stunningly complex and productive ecological community. It remains home to many hundreds of species of native plants and animals, including the migratory wild salmon whose inland runs permeate and nourish the whole extent of this bioregion. And yet, to date, over half of coastal temperate watersheds have been commercially logged - 97% of this via clear-cutting – and partially replaced with

single-species, even-aged, fertilized and sprayed tree plantations. Vancouver Island alone has lost one million hectares of old growth rainforest (Sierra Club Report, 2009). We are only just beginning to understand the implications of such aggressive 'resource extraction' on animal and plant communities, weather patterns, water quality, and local people.

The culturally and linguistically diverse indigenous groups of the Pacific Northwest have long and well-documented histories of plant use for material and spiritual purposes, and their systems of ecological knowledge and wisdom offer reverent yet pragmatic approaches to gathering and using plants for medicines. This area is also home to many highly respected and dedicated ethnobotanists who have established in their field a strong tradition of participatory action research, which seeks to honour and empower the many people who struggle to carry these important teachings forward to future generations.



My fieldwork has taken place on the south and central coast of British Columbia - in the very centre stretches of the bioregion - though findings can be extrapolated to the entire Pacific Northwest and offer, I hope, material relevant to anyone interested in coming to know the plants of their area. My own ten-year journey of learning the plants here – as a tree-planter, an ethnobotany student, and now as herbalist's apprentice – has been one of continual unfolding into home. As such this work is also an expression of love for and devotion to the complex, living beauty of this place.

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## chapter two · METHODS

### 2.1: TOWARDS A KINCENTRIC WAY OF KNOWING

In his book *Tsawalk: A Nuu-chah-nulth Worldview* Chief Richard Atleo of Ahoushat, Vancouver Island, states:

The major difficulty with, and limitation of, contemporary research is that current methodologies do not, or perhaps cannot, cope with the multiple variables presented by a theoretical assumption of the unity of all things... It is the *value* dimension of existence that poses the most serious implications for Western culture. For example, the human value of *generosity*, according to Nuu-chah-nulth lived experience, can be considered part of the original design of creation and is therefore as much of a natural law as any known physical law (2004: 126).

As an exploration of right relationship with the other-than-human world, my thesis dwells within the values dimension highlighted by Atleo, investigating the practice of wild-harvesting within a context of complexity and interconnectivity. As such, rather than carrying out experiments in search of objective information, my methods are interpretive, experiential, and openly in search of meaning.

As biologist Brian Goodwin writes, “a perspective that seeks to articulate a view of life with intrinsic meaning may be of value not only for understanding organisms, but also in seeking our own place in a world from which we have alienated ourselves as a result of a particular cultural exploration” (2007: 98). With this in mind I have begun my journey from a *kincentric* viewpoint, making the critical assumption that “there is a unity, or meaningful interrelationship, between all the variables of existence” (Atleo, 2004: 125), and that all life forms are therefore related and mutually responsive. I have endeavored to practice what David Abram identifies as “a way of thinking that strives for rigor without forfeiting our animal kinship with the world around us – an attempt to think in accordance with the senses, to ponder and reflect without severing our sensorial bond with the owls and the wind. It is a style of thinking, then, that associates *truth* not with static fact, but with a quality of relationship” (1996: 264).

## 2.2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The first half of this paper presents an extended literature review linking ethnobotanical research with deep ecology and ecopsychology. As indigenous people in many areas of the world have demonstrated strong traditions of adaptive, ecosystem-based conservation that *have not precluded use*, any discussion of wild plants, reciprocity, and conservation finds its proper beginning in an exploration of traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom. Thus, in Chapters 3 and 4, I outline protocols and practices that have long allowed plant communities to benefit from small-scale, cyclical harvesting, as well rituals of supplication and thanksgiving that deepen a sense of respect for and kinship with the plants themselves. In presenting case studies and narratives of symbiotic relationships between people and plant populations of the Pacific Northwest coast I suggest that ecological understanding, based in close observation and receptivity to feedback, is the foundation of skillful and sustainable harvesting.

I go on in Chapter 5 to investigate how the practice of acquiring ecological knowledge directly from healing plants and their communities can lead to deeper levels of personal transformation. In the context of ecological selfhood I seek to identify parallel processes of healing – nurturing the individual self *through* nurturing the land, and vice versa – to situate wild-harvesting within a wider and more holistic discourse of healing.

## 2.3: FIELD AND FORESTWORK

### 2.3.1: THE PART WITHIN THE WHOLE

Through open-ended interviews and gathering excursions with a diverse community of herbalists and foragers on Vancouver Island and the central interior coast, I explore how and why deep connections between individuals and plants influence both personal and ecological wellbeing, and how these connections are fostered. I have initiated conversations about healing relationships between harvesters and plants in the spirit of participatory action research in the following ways: by openly sharing with participants my questions, intentions, and personal as well as academic journey; by listening authentically; and by seeking to participate in their lives and projects (Kindon et al., 2007; Reason and Bradbury, 2006). In connecting with herbalists of folk, community, or indigenous traditions, I have focused on the teachings of those who have

been actively working, living, and breathing with plants native to the Pacific Northwest for long periods of time. In general, though not always, their learning pathways have been established through one-to-one apprenticeships with teachers and/or family members, and all have accumulated years of direct experience with these plants in their whole, ecological contexts. As such I have connected with those individuals known and respected locally as ‘masters’ – people with advanced and yet deeply grounded understandings of ecology, conservation, and healing.

These willing and gracious individuals – all of whom are teachers in some capacity - have included community herbalists Saci Spindler, Sheila Wray, Diana Mongeau, Ayata Aeola, and Yarrow Willard; Cowichan and Halalt elders Della Rice-Sylvester and Joe Norris; and Heiltsuk healers and elders Pauline Waterfall and Evelyn Windsor. I was able to visit and speak with some for just a few hours, and others for lengthy periods over the course of one week to several months to, in the case of Saci Spindler, several years. All conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed, then shared with interviewees for approval before being incorporated as direct quotes under thematic headings in Chapter 6. To the best of my ability I have presented their views and stories in an unbiased way, revealing and embracing the continuity as well as the fertile diversity of harvesters’ thoughts, words, and actions.

Inevitably, in emphasizing the contributions of these individuals many other voices have been left out of this project, including those of young harvesters, skilled yet novice harvesters, and commercial harvesters. Also, and crucially, missing here are the voices and stories of those elusive individuals who work very quietly and privately with wild plants in these areas, and who have not wished to share their knowledge of plants and medicine with the academic community or the public for many complex and appropriate reasons.

### 2.3.2: THE WHOLE WITHIN THE PART

Finally, in Chapter 7 and 8, I have explored the role of Goethe’s ‘delicate empiricism’ in a holistic practice of wild-harvesting through my own work with the medicinal shrub devil’s club [*Oplopanax horridus*]. Over a period of one month, I visited a large stand of plants in the Cowichan river valley several times

weekly for one to two hours. During this time I moved carefully through the research methodology outlined in Goethe's own writing and the critical work of Margaret Colquhoun, Henri Bortoft, and Nigel Hoffman. From the grounds of my experiences, I suggest that Goethe's phenomenology of nature and plant morphology, rooted in the direct perception of qualities, patterns, and relationships unfolding over time and space, can *very rapidly* foster ecological understanding and connectedness within practitioners. An exploration of this way of seeing leads to concluding reflections on home and belonging in Chapter 9, and, in Chapters 10 and 11, questions remaining, areas for further research, and conclusions.

**part two · REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

*'There is reverence in the woods, sacredness – every shrub and tree - because it's a part of life. Now we can't find medicines and have to depend on doctors. Doesn't cure like Indian medicine. Devil's club, it's now very rare, but it and other medicines used to be plentiful around the inlet. Now we have to go up island. In the old days, we couldn't take anything without ritual, without thanking the creator for the item, thanking when we picked it. Things were not just destroyed.'*

(Saanich elder Dr. Samuel Sam, quoted in Turner, 2005: 144)

## chapter three · GATHERING WILD MEDICINE

In this chapter I begin by exploring the topic of wild-harvesting medicinal plants within a global context, identifying the need for protocols of harvesting grounded in ecological understanding. I turn to systems of traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom to establish that such understanding is best developed over long periods of careful observation and participation with landscapes. I outline adaptive harvesting techniques and practices of wild-cultivation that have proven effective for countless generations, highlighting connections between indigenous systems of conservation and new understandings of complexity theory – the way things flow.

### 3.1: A GLOBAL HARVEST

More than 400,000 metric tons of medicinal and aromatic plants will be traded this year alone, and about 80 percent will be harvested from the wild (IUCN website). These herbs will be prepared and administered locally and internationally to protect, strengthen, soothe, and heal the literally billions of people - including myself, and my family - who rely on or seek out traditional plant-based therapies. Yet many of these healing plants are vanishing, exhausted as they are by the mounting pressures of deforestation, urbanization, pollution, and the introduction of non-native species to their delicately balanced ecosystems. Over-harvesting compounds these pressures, often leading to tipping points in population and habitat stability. The Medicinal Plant Specialist Group of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature declared recently that approximately 15,000 species, or 21 percent, of wild medicinal and aromatic plant species are now at risk (IUCN website), and these figures are only predicted to climb as the popularity of herbal medicine grows.

A diverse group of researchers is now actively documenting the anthropology, sociology, ecology, and economics of wild harvesting in countries such as Nepal (Ghimire et al., 2004), India (Shahabuddin and Prasad, 2004; Madhusudan and Shankar Raman, 2003), Argentina (Estomba et al., 2004), Chile (Costanza-Torri, 2010) and Thailand (Delang, 2006), to name just a few. The collection and sale of non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like medicinal plants and fungi is often and for good reason promoted as a sustainable

alternative to industrial forestry for rural communities,<sup>1</sup> and yet with the introduction of wage economies and the international commercialization of plant medicines, many traditional harvesting practices are being replaced by less time-consuming, less labour-intensive, and more destructive habits of collecting (Panayotou and Ashton, 1992). While medicinal plants are often only partially harvested, leaving the plant capable of continued growth under good conditions, greedy or unskilled wild collection can cause structural damage that results in less fruit and seed production in following years. In addition, repeated selective harvesting of plant ‘elders’ can alter the genetic composition of wild populations, fragment plant populations, and cause compaction of soil in high-traffic gathering areas (Turner, 2001).

For all of these reasons, conservationists and international governments are now taking a serious interest in defining sustainable harvests and regulating the use of these precious medicines.<sup>2</sup> Yet policy makers and regulating bodies, disconnected as they often are from the ecological complexity of wild places, are still grappling with a lack of understanding of the long-term effects of intensified wild-harvesting on individual plants and their ecological communities. Research focusing on particular kinds of plants and plant products, for example, has led to a disproportionate number of studies on the effects of fruit and seed harvesting (Hiremath, 2004). Yet as most herbalists know, *roots* not only provide some of the most highly valued traditional medicines, they are also the most difficult to harvest well. Indeed, 82% of the most endangered medicinal plants in North America are slow-growing perennials prized for their roots and rhizomes, including American ginseng (*Panax quinquefolius*), golden seal (*Hydrastis canadensis*), bloodroot (*Sanguinaria canadensis*), black cohosh (*Cimifuga racemosa*), lady’s slipper (*Cypripedium spp.*), osha (*Ligusticum spp.*) and echinacea (*Echinacea spp.*) (Klein, 2000).

How do we ensure the survival of these elders? Land activist Peter Forbes writes: “we’ve made the assumption that we can protect land from people through laws, as opposed to *with* people through

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<sup>1</sup> NTFPs represent a much greater variety of valuable species and marketable products than timber trees alone, and while yields per area are smaller, plants can generally be harvested on cycles of shorter frequency. Unlike most logging operations that see profits funneled to multi-national corporations and governments, much of the economic benefit of non-timber forest products is also reaped at the local level (Panayotou and Ashton, 1992). In some areas of the world, India in particular, trade of non-timber forest products such as medicinal plants used in Ayurvedic medicine can account for up to 40 percent of household income (Shahbuddin and Prasad, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Most notably, the IUCN’s Species Survival Commission has developed the International Standard for Sustainable Wild Collection of Medicinal and Aromatic Plants (ISSC-MAP) in cooperation with the World Wildlife Federation.

*relationship*. Laws exist for when relationships fail” (2009: 167). By focusing exclusively on enforced quotas and harvesting limits in our efforts to prevent species extinction, we obscure the most vital questions of responsibility and balance in our individual lives and collective cultures. What is our relationship to the plants we harvest? What motivates us to nourish and protect them? How much are these plants really worth, and what does their gradual disappearance mean to us now?

While it is easy to give value to plants that are sold, market prices tell us nothing of their intrinsic value, of their crucial roles within their own forest communities, or their importance to local peoples who depend on them for their physical, cultural and spiritual wellbeing (Costanza-Torri, 2010). In many cultures it is profoundly difficult to separate concepts of healing from understandings of spirituality and the power inherent in natural things; medicines are considered to be sacred gifts, and some people do not like the idea of selling them at all (Turner, 2001, 2004). Such holistic conceptions of medicine and healing are not accepted within the dominant western worldview, and yet they are outcomes of countless generations of empirical testing, observation, and experience (Atleo, 2005).

In an exploration of restorative wild-harvesting and the medicine of right relationship, turning to indigenous peoples for help and insight makes sense on many levels. As long-term residents of places, native communities “have learned through systems of knowledge, practice, and belief to conserve, maintain, and promote their resources *in situ*” (Clifton and Turner, 2009: 181). In the Pacific Northwest, Coast Salish nations, who have been actively working with the regenerative and healing capacities of the land for at least 10 000 years, are now actively defending the connection between ecological integrity – of which medicinal plants can be key indicators – and their own wellbeing. In an era of startling alienation from the soils, airs, waters, plants, and animals surrounding and sustaining us, we are invited to remember that the embodied ecological knowledge of local peoples is deep in our blood and bones, though we may no longer feel it. By exploring and honouring the wisdom of our elders, we might begin to practice remembrance.

### 3.2: HONOURING TRADITIONAL ECOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE

*'Our survival depended on the sea, the rivers, the lakes. We completely depended on Nature. The garments we had, the houses that sheltered us, the foods we ate, the medicines we had – Nature supplied it. And this is the reason we respected Nature as we did... Mother Nature does not want you to take from her and not put anything back... Nature will not survive if we don't put anything back.'*

(Kwakwaka'wakw elder Daisy Sewid-Smith, quoted in Turner, 2005; 148)

Traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom (TEKW) is defined as “a cumulative body of knowledge, practice, and belief, evolving by adaptive processes and handed down through generations by cultural transmission” (Berkes, 2008). TEKW encompasses people’s specific and practical knowledge of identifying, harvesting, preparing, and using plants for food, medicines, materials, and technology; understandings of ecological processes and their own relationships with their environments; and philosophies and worldviews shared through integrated learning processes (ibid).<sup>3</sup> TEKW emerges from and reflects long-term, vital, and evolving relationships between people and places, and as such it can offer a depth and breadth of insight and information about landscapes unmatched by conventional, academic ecological studies.

Traditional phenological knowledge (TPK) is that element of TEKW related to the observation and study of species life cycle events and biological change. Physical environmental indicators such as the onset of seasonal rains, fogbanks, directional winds, snowfall and melt patterns, as well as biological indicators such as the leafing-out or blooming of particular plants, the singing of certain frogs and birds, or the migrations of other animals, could each signal or predict optimal times for specific activities such as foraging, hunting, or beginning seasonal ceremonies. Not only is this intimate understanding of species’

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<sup>3</sup> For many years the word ‘traditional’ was problematic for researchers in development and anthropology because of its associations with ‘simple, static, and savage’ attitudes (Warren, 1995). Nevertheless the terms ‘traditional ecological knowledge’ and ‘traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom’ have become established. For the purposes of my paper I will use the terms ‘traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom’, ‘place-based knowledge’ and ‘indigenous ecological knowledge’ interchangeably.

lifecycles in relation to environmental cues crucial for the survival of place-based peoples, a phenological approach to ecology brings the relationships between plants, animals, land, water, weather, and climate systems into a *dynamic* reality (Lantz and Turner, 2003). Phenology is described as “the study of the mature naturalist, the gate through which nature becomes personal”:

Phenology requires a complete immersion in place over time, so the attention, the senses, and the mind can scrutinize and discern widely – the dates of arrivals and departures, the births, the flourishings, the decays and the deaths of wild things, their successions, synchronicities, dependencies, reciprocities, and cycles – the lived life of the earth” (J. Turner, 1995: 337).

Rich reserves of phenological knowledge are carried within communities who consciously inhabit a place or a seasonal round of places for many generations. They serve to sync human activities with the rhythms and patterns of their surroundings over time, further building our capacity for “observing, identifying, monitoring, and reacting to variations in resource availability, ecological relationships, and biological responses to particular circumstances” (Turner and Berkes, 2006: 497).<sup>4</sup> Such an acute sensitivity to relationship and change within the natural world plays a crucial role in the development of appropriately timed and ecologically sensitive wild-harvesting practices (Lantz and Turner, 2003; Berkes et al., 2000; Clifton and Turner, 2009). Plant species respond differently to harvesting, depending on a great variety of biological and ecological factors, while the desired qualities and constituents of plant medicines also vary both seasonally and yearly. Traditional harvesting protocol has therefore been determined by the plants’ own regenerative and vital capacities as they expand and contract across time and space (see table I).

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<sup>4</sup> The ecological and phenological knowledge of local people is especially relevant now in the context of climate change, as even the best ecologists and environmental scientists may be unaware of the nuances of change discerned from cumulative observations by long-term residents of a place: “[traditional phenological knowledge], becomes even more powerful when it is used to complement other sources of evidence, including archaeological and paleoecological data, weather and climate data (including climate modeling), plant and animal physiology, genetics, phytochemistry, and phytogeographical studies of species populations and interactions” (Clifton and Turner, 2009: 186).

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TABLE I: TRADITIONAL APPROACHES TO WILD-HARVESTING

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PLANT PART	HARVESTING PRACTICES
Whole plants or leafy branches	Most materials selectively harvested from living plants by season and life-cycle stage
Leaves or shoots	Materials selectively harvested from living plants that can then regenerate from rhizomes
Flowers, fruits, and seeds	Harvested from living plants according to season and lifecycle stage
Pitches, resins, and latex	Pitch removed from insect-damaged or injured trees, or from bark blisters or buds
Bark tissues	Barks usually removed from whole twigs or very selectively from a number of different plants (trees not girdled); twigs sometimes rooted; cuttings sometimes transplanted; cultural sanctions against girdling or overharvesting
Roots	Materials selectively harvested by size and life-cycle stage; fragments capable of regeneration often left behind

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(Turner and Peacock, 2005; McDonald, 2005)

### 3.3: WILD CULTIVATION, WILD RESTORATION

The potency of root medicines native to the Pacific Northwest such as Oregon grape [*Mahonia aquifolium*; *M. nervosa*], stinging nettle [*Urtica dioica*], western dock [*Rumex occidentalis*], goat's beard [*Aruncus dioicus*], Indian hellebore [*Veratrum viride*], and devil's club [*Oplopanax horridus*] increases in the early to late fall, after the plants have completed their processes of flowering and fruiting and have begun to die back. At this time the plant's vital energy has moved downward to its underground tissues where it will rest quietly

throughout the winter months in preparation for spring. Harvesting sections of a plant's roots within the brief window of time after the downward movement of potency and before the first frost of the year – or, for some plants, after the spring thaw but before the uprising of the new growth - ensures not only that the medicine is strong, but also that each plant has had a chance to produce and disperse its seeds. By loosening and spreading segments of root or rhizome, many plants can also be encouraged to spread and produce more vigorously in the coming years (Saci Spindler, 2010: personal correspondence). By harvesting in this way, local people have long bolstered the fertility and potency of the plants they rely on season after season, generation after generation, establishing a mutually-nourishing relationship with plants based on giving and receiving in equal measure.

As with root medicines, trees and shrubs traditionally used for their bark medicine, including cascara [*Rhamnus purshiana*], grand fir [*Abies grandis*], red alder [*Alnus rubra*], Pacific yew [*Taxus brevifolia*] and arbutus [*Arbutus menzesii*] are especially vulnerable to poor practices. Gatherers traditionally harvest sections from fallen or living branches - rather than central trunks - in the springtime, when the development of new leaves and needles indicates that the energy of the trees is travelling upwards. When bark from a central trunk or stem *is* required, bark is cut in a narrow vertical or horizontal strip from the sunrise- or river-side of the tree. As this side of trees often grows more quickly (the diameter of a felled tree will reveal wider rings on the eastern or river edge), strips of bark taken from this side naturally heal more quickly (Turner and Peacock, 2005). Seeds and cuttings from trees whose bark is taken can also be transplanted, increasing tree numbers and ensuring that one stand does not become exhausted. In the case of resins and pitches, medicines can be collected so carefully and modestly that a permanent 'medicine tree' can be maintained for many decades (ibid). Again, careful observation and attention to the rhythms and messages of the plants and their surroundings lead to the development of appropriate practices over time.

In addition to gathering plant materials at appropriate times and with respectful restraint, activities employed before or around harvest times encourage plant re-growth by mimicking ecological processes. Ecologists and ethnobotanists note that “many traditional societies seem to nurture sources of ecosystem renewal by creating small-scale disturbances” (Berkes et al., 2000). These small disturbances include digging and tilling, clearing and weeding, sewing and transplanting, pruning, and small-scale burning (see Table II). People also regularly fertilize their berry grounds with fish carcasses, seaweeds, and ash from cooking fires

to ensure that they flourish and grow for many generations (Turner, 2005). These techniques represent not only a sophisticated understanding of how energy and materials move in the natural world, but also – and crucially - knowledge of how human communities can meaningfully participate in this dynamic movement.

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**TABLE II: WILD-CULTIVATION METHODS AND ECOLOGICAL EFFECTS**

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METHOD	ECOLOGICAL EFFECTS
Selective harvesting and replanting	Leads to reduced interspecies competition; promotes intentional dispersal of propagules
Digging and tilling	Promotes incidental and intentional dispersal of propagules; creates local soil disturbance; recycles nutrients; aerates soil; increases moisture-holding ability of soil
Tending and weeding	Reduces interspecies competition; promotes soil aeration and modification
Sowing and transplanting	Replenishes population; promotes dispersal of propagules to new habitats
Pruning and coppicing	Removes dead material and thus increases plant vigour; stimulates vegetative reproduction and eventually flowering and fruiting
Fertilizing	Increases nutrients in soil thus improving plant vigour, reproductive success, and resilience to disease
Landscape burning	Reduces competition; accelerates recycling of mineral nutrients; blackened ground encourages spring growth; promotes synchronization of fruiting; maintains successional stages, creates openings in forest canopy

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(McDonald, 2005; Trusler and Johnson, 2008; Turner and Peacock, 2005)

#### 3.4: COMPLEXITY, CONNECTION, CHANGE:

##### WILD-HARVESTING FROM A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE

*‘They had no light in the beginning. Son of Raven suggested that they try to capture the day.  
Across the waters a chief owned the light of day, which he kept carefully guarded in a box.  
The people who lived in darkness grew tired of this and wondered what to do.’*

(from *How Son of Raven Captured the Day*, told in Atleo, 2004: 6)

Ethnobotanists Fikret Berkes and Nancy Turner write that “one of the major social mechanisms by which societies remember and build upon traditions of resource conservation is in the use of stories and myths” (Turner and Berkes, 2006: 500). They go on to point out that many of the traditional narratives of indigenous people that reflect lessons of respect, appreciation, and conservation describe a time of profound lack of resources, when people, sometimes with animal personas, “were deprived of even the basic requirements for life: sun, moon, tides, winds, water, fire, and proper food. The stories do not necessarily depict human negligence or overharvesting as the cause of this deprivation” (ibid). Rather these stories illustrate that transformation and change are natural conditions of creation – that, as Nuu-chah-nulth Chief Richard Atleo explains, “things and life forms do not just hold still. Existence appears to be dynamic rather than fixed” (2004: 63).

Such narratives and teachings are wholly consistent with emerging understandings of adaptation in ecological and social systems (Gunderson and Holling, 2002; Capra, 1996), and bring our attention to the inherently interconnected, systemic nature of our world:

They tell us that we cannot understand behaviour we see unless we pay attention to the synergistic nature of those interconnections and interactions... in addition to this focus on synergy or holism, complex systems thinking adds a focus on fluctuations. By fluctuations, we mean the propensity, within any ecology or set of interconnected elements of any kind, for variation, both spatially and temporally and with respect to any kind of classification (Boulton, 2011: 3).

Small, local perturbations will constantly probe and explore the stability of a living system. Tracked carefully, these subtle, relational fluctuations feed information back to local peoples, allowing them to monitor the linked

resilience of natural systems and their own communities over time and space - their ability, that is, to survive in light of changing circumstances while staying functional and recognizably the same. Enhancing this quality of resilience means fostering an increased propensity for both connectedness and diversity on every level.

If we ignore for a moment the possibility of fluctuation, physicist and systems theorist Jean Boulton explains, we make the dangerous assumption that a system's fundamental character is deterministic: "once the initial conditions are set in this non-fluctuating perspective, then the region of operation is also set; there is no way out, no way to learn and no way to adapt. Clearly this is an impoverished view" (ibid). Yet conventional, large-scale resource management, with its clear emphasis on establishing and enforcing maximum sustainable yields, remains a largely equilibrium-based science with an underlying assumption of ecological stability. Decisions informed by concepts of ecosystem determinism can lead to the gradual loss of resilience in natural systems, moving them towards tipping points or critical thresholds (Berkes et al., 2000).<sup>5</sup>

Of course, it is important to acknowledge that place-based peoples also have heterogenous histories. Resource depletion, natural and human-mediated, is part of a long and complex human story; countless groups of people have "learned the hard way" from failed practices and eras of over-exploitation that subsequently lead to scarcity or collapse (Berkes et al., 2000; Turner and Berkes, 2006; Diamond, 1993). These crises can become important tipping points for the development of new conservation strategies. Yet humans living for long periods in one place also learn how to live skillfully through slow and sustained processes of observation, reflection, and experimentation:

The ability or capacity to learn from small and incremental lessons and from the experiences of others potentially enables people to develop sustainable practices and ecological understandings without always having to respond to and learn from crisis situations... over time, *even within one lifetime*, experiences of others blend with personal knowledge and observations, compounding and accumulating to bring enhanced knowledge and wisdom (Turner and Berkes, 2006: 504, emphasis added).

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<sup>5</sup> Filkret Berkes writes that "resource management from a stability point of view may be characterized in terms of rules and regulations made by technical experts, often from a central bureaucracy and enforced by agents who are not themselves resource users" (Berkes et al., 2000: 1259). In other words, most resource management programs suffer from a lack of sustained and sensitive dialogue between people and places, resulting in decision-making processes removed from the ecological realities of evolving landscapes. Perpetuated by short study time frames and limited, project-specific research grants, this kind of science often provides detail-rich yet ultimately fragmented understandings of natural systems and our place within them.

In the story of Son of Raven, a major change is created by the introduction of light into the world, and the community must shift their behaviour and ways of being to suit the new environment. The people's survival depends on their ability to gather and pass on ecological knowledge in order to understand qualitative changes in the complex system of the landscape – to remain receptive to feedback from their environment, and adapt accordingly. This resilience-approach to conservation, also referred to as adaptive management (Berkes and Turner, 2006), acknowledges that environmental conditions will always change, requiring societies to respond by adjusting and evolving; that nature cannot be controlled and yields cannot be predicted; and that uncertainty and unpredictability are characteristics of all natural systems (Berkes et al., 2000: 1260) (see Table III). As such it is entirely dependent on intimacy with place and the close observation of interwoven and evolving ecosystem processes.

In short, for place-based cultures everywhere, responsiveness and generosity to the natural world has been a process of increasing their community's health and chances of survival (Hunt, 2006; Gadgil et al., 1993; Berkes et al., 2000). As Chief Atleo writes:

Giving is completely dependent on receiving, and receiving is completely dependant on giving. There is a balance and harmony here. Neither is generosity simply a romantic notion disconnected from the 'bottom line' of harsh reality. Giving as a general community practice over millennia has proven pragmatic. It is an economically feasible principle (2004: 39).

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**TABLE III: ADAPTIVE HARVESTING - GATHERING FROM A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE:**

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- 1) Harvesters have accumulated an ecological knowledge base that allows them to monitor the wellbeing of plant populations and respond to environmental feedbacks (such as changes in harvest per unit of effort);
- 2) Careful harvesting is most often carried out using locally-crafted rules that are socially enforced by the harvesters themselves;
- 3) Harvesting of different species tends to be flexible, with harvesters using area rotations, species-switching, succession management, etc.;
- 4) A diversity of plants is harvested for livelihood security, keeping options open and minimizing risk of overharvesting specific plants;
- 5) Harvesting is carried out using qualitative management wherein feedbacks of individual plant and whole ecosystem change indicate the direction in which management should move rather than towards a quantitative yield target;
- 6) Extensive time periods are considered in measuring responses to harvesting.

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(Berkes et al., 2000; Trusler and Johnson, 2008; Turner, 2001)

## chapter four · THANKS-GIVING

In this chapter I connect the physical elements of good harvesting practices to more subtle qualities of mindfulness and thanksgiving expressed and embodied in the act of gathering. In looking more closely at gestures of connection and love, we discover Kant's notion of beautiful action resting at the heart of restorative wild-harvesting.

### 4.1: RITUAL AND CEREMONY

In his essay 'Values Deep in the Woods', Holmes Rolston writes that "like the sea or the sky, a forest is a kind of archetype of the foundations of the world" (1998: 16). In my dream of pouring honey into the earth, the honey was an offering of healing to, and also a request for forgiveness from, this archetypal forest - the forest who mingled with my own psyche, my own self, and whose startling, horizon-wide absence was terrifying to me. It was a ritual to both acknowledge our intrinsic connection and mourn, somehow, our terrible loss. Richard Atleo writes that "all relationships have a spiritual dimension that may be latent or potent, depending on the perceptions and decisions of the human. Clear-cutting is an example where the spiritual dimensions of relationships between loggers and trees is latent, dormant, and completely ignored" (2009: 127). As tree-planters we knew that the industry we were working for was taking too much, yet like the loggers, our living for the year depended on those three long months of difficult piece-work. It took years for me to acknowledge just how painful those thousands of acres of clear-cuts were to me, and how deeply I ached to speak with the forest again.

In his early ethnography of the Kwakiutl people on the northeastern shores of Vancouver Island, anthropologist Franz Boas recorded translations of words spoken by harvesters to the plants they gathered:

Don't be startled, Supernatural One, by my coming and sitting down to make a request of you, Supernatural One... This is the reason why I come to you... to pray you, please, to [let me] take some of your blanket, Sore-Healer, that it may heal the burn of my child... (1930)

I come, One-Prayed-To, I try to come to you, means of mercy to me, that I may eat, that I may keep alive for a long time, you, Chief of the Upper World, you Life-Owner. Pray, let me come next year to stand again at the place where I am standing to pray to you. (ibid)

When I read and re-read examples of traditional prayers or “words of praise and appreciation” (Turner, 2005: 96) to plants, I am touched most of all by the great humility of the gatherers, by their reverence and respect for the intelligence of the plants they are asking for help, and by their hope that these plants continue to live close to them in the future. In their speeches and songs there is an acknowledgement that the plants’ existence directly enables their own, and that this cannot for an instant be taken for granted.

Nancy Turner points out that “relationships of kinship give rise to the special ceremonies and rituals to honour those entities that shaped and fostered the human condition and who, through their generosity, kindness, and wisdom, continue to nurture humans, as long as humans in their turn respect, value, and recognize their contributions and the wisdom they impart” (Turner, 2005: 93). What has become of this kinship?

While our hands can spread and bury roots, scatter ripe seeds and lay down seaweeds to nourish next year’s growth, to intentionally bring the spiritual dimension of this kinship from latency into potency requires a kind of bravery – a willingness to open ourselves, to awaken a more subtle level of our own consciousness that is effaced or shut down by necessity in a culture of reductionism. Practices such as meditation, singing, or prayer, when seriously undertaken, facilitate the arousal of non-egoic awareness (Greenway, 1995: 133) and create the kind of spaciousness in which relationship may be honoured and reaffirmed. Delores LaChapelle writes that such ritual “allows us to bypass the limitations imposed by the structure of our language” (1995: 57) – allows us to be woven again into a more-than-human world whose languages we speak fluently with our senses and our dreams. Thus, in performing a humble ritual of thanksgiving before or during harvesting - simple prayer, a moment of silence, the burning of herbs or scattering of tobacco - healing has already begun. Likewise, in the proper frame of mind, the act of harvesting may itself become a ceremony.

#### 4.2: BEAUTIFUL ACTION

Philosopher Arne Naess reminds us that moral acts are those motivated by the intention to follow a moral law at any cost, the supreme test of a purely moral act being that we perform it completely against our inclination. Yet, as Peter Forbes so eloquently writes, “*laws cannot protect what has already left the heart*” (2009: 169). In focusing our energies solely on establishing a moral environmental law through conservation policy and its enforcement, we address only the *symptoms* of widespread extinctions and habitat degradation. We need

environmental ethics, Naess continues, but asking people to unselfishly give up or sacrifice what they perceive to be their own interests, divorced from and in apparent opposition to those of the natural world, is likely a fragile basis for conservation.

If, however, we do what the moral law deems right on the basis of *positive* inclination – if our morals, that is, align with our deepest gladness - then we perform a *beautiful act* (Naess, 1995: 237). What we can achieve through altruism – the dutiful, moral consideration of other life-forms – is, in other words, eclipsed by the transformations possible through a process of expanding our sense of self. Through deep connection with the natural world, an internal alignment occurs: “through the wider Self every living being is intimately connected, and from this intimacy flows the capacity of identification and, as a natural consequence, the practice of non-violence. No moralizing is needed, just as we don’t need morals to make us breathe” (Naess, 1995: 233).<sup>6</sup> And so it is that conservationists, restorationists, those of us who ache to speak with the forest again – all of us must focus on restoring the human heart and psyche as much as the land itself. As ecopsychologist Margaret Kerr and wilderness guide David Key explain, “when we feel healed as part of nature, the motivation to live in more ecologically sustainable ways emerges spontaneously. Traditional ethics, which create a moral obligation to act out of duty, become obsolete. Instead, we act as *part of nature protecting itself*” (2010: 2). To behave beautifully is to shift our language from the terminology of ‘sustainability’ to that of connection, respect, joy, healing, and self-realization; we endeavor to repair the land by making ourselves whole again with it.

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<sup>6</sup> Naess uses a capital ‘S’ to denote the Self as ecological, a small ‘s’ to denote the self as egoic.

*'When you find your place where you are, practice occurs.'*

(Dogen)

## chapter five · TO KNOW THE SOUL IN ITS HOME

In this chapter I move more deeply into an exploration of wild-harvesting as personally and ecologically restorative in the spirit of beautiful action. I establish a definition of the ecological self through a deep-ecological and eco-psychological framework, distinguishing between conceptual and experiential/embodied understandings of this deepened, widened Self. From here I move into a discussion of parallel processes of healing and define wild-harvesting as a ‘practice’.

### 5.1: ECOLOGICAL PSYCHE, ECOLOGICAL SELF

*‘It wasn’t our wisdom - it came to us on wings when we opened ourselves.’*

(Jules Cashford, 2011: personal correspondence)

Chief Richard Atleo writes: “despite outward differences, *each life form depends upon the others for wholeness and completeness*. The apparent differences between life forms are real but not in any essential way. Community is a natural order of existence, and one of its functions can be to reconcile the apparent differences perceived among its members” (Atleo, 2005: 22, emphasis added). Emerging understandings of the ecological self – a term offered by Arne Naess to convey the expansion of identity beyond the skin-bound ego to encompass *the community of life as Self* – signal the resurfacing of an ancient teaching: our completeness rests within each other. They deepen our ability to connect patterns of personal, social, cultural, and ecological fragmentation and, for many of us, speak to our deepest intuitions. Phenomenologist David Abram writes:

By acknowledging that we are part of something so much vaster and more inscrutable than ourselves – by affirming that our life is entirely continuous with the life of the rivers and the forests, that our intelligence is entangled with the wild intelligence of wolves and wetlands, that our breathing bodies are simply our part of the exuberant flesh of the earth – depth ecology opens a new (and perhaps very old) sense of the sacred (Abram, 2005).

Jungian, depth- and eco-psychologists, along with deep ecologists and many spiritual teachers, are working in diverse ways to address the pathology of the self-other split and facilitate our experience of this sacred wholeness.

By revealing the continuity of consciousness running throughout the animate Earth they are also inviting a collective reawakening of the imagination:

Since the cut between the self and the natural world is arbitrary, we can make it at the skin or we can take it out as far as you like – to the deep oceans and the distant stars. But the cut is far less important than the recognition of the uncertainty of making the cut at all. This uncertainty opens the mind to wonder again, allowing fresh considerations to enter the therapeutic equation (Brown, 1995: xix).

Characterized by evolution and creative interdisciplinarity, these modes of inquiry resist institutionalization and challenge the foundations of reductionism. At their best, they are radical – radical in the sense of the original Latin, ‘radix’ – *of the root*. With this in mind, perhaps the most eloquent description of these interconnected dialogues can be found in the etymology of the word ecopsychology itself; composed of the Latin *oikos*, *psyche*, and *logos*, it can be literally, and beautifully, be read to mean *knowing the soul in its home*.

#### 5.2: PARALLEL PROCESS

Elder Theresa Sam teaches that after harvesting tree barks such as cedar and alder, the harvester must go back to visit the tree from which the medicines were taken: “After two or three days, you go back to see if the tree is healed and, if so, that means that the person is healed” (quoted in Turner, 2005: 92). To illustrate a similar teaching, Dr. Nancy Turner tells the story of harvesting devil’s club on the north interior coast, outside of the Gitga’at village of Hartley Bay:

Before we set off, elder Helen Clifton gave us careful instructions that she, in turn, had been taught by her elders. She cautioned that people gathering medicine, especially an important plant like devil’s club, should always approach this task with serious focus. They should not laugh or joke, or think or talk about anything other than the medicine and how it is going to help someone. They should go to a remote place away from the village or other frequented area. The plant will reveal itself to the harvesters if they follow this practice. They should give the plant an offering of tobacco or even a copper penny, to signify giving something back to the earth in exchange for what they are taking. Then, they should take only four stems – no more – at any one time: never take more than you need. If a person follows this practice, Helen said, not only will he or she be successful in finding the medicine, but the person for whom the medicine is being collected will have a *better chance of being helped* (2005: 96, emphasis added).

The implications of instructions like these are profound and far-reaching - they suggest that our healing is inextricably bound up with that of the land itself. When we draw our attention right here, to this interwoven wellbeing of our individual selves and our surroundings, we discover parallel process – the pathway of healing one both *through* and *with* the other. In recognizing that the world is the ground for our deepest wellness and personal meaning, a healing relationship begins to flow in two directions - we do not heal ourselves alone. In preserving, restoring, and celebrating ecological integrity on every level, we simultaneously preserve, restore, and celebrate our own belonging in the world.

### 5.3: WILD-HARVESTING AS A PRACTICE

Swami Sivananda Rhada once said to her students: “To practice is to become aware of what is, and to face that bravely” (quoted in Lalitananda, 2007: 17). Wild-harvesting, I suggest, is a practice in this sense – a heart-opening process of *fully paying attention*. Laura Sewall calls this ‘ecological perception’ and describes it as a devotional practice: “it is allowing one’s identity and boundaries to be permeable and flexible... It requires receptivity and participation of our whole selves, despite the potential pain. It means fully witnessing both the magnificence and destruction of our Earth” (Sewall, 1995: 204). As an expression of engaged meditation, wild-harvesting is a practice of moving completely into life from a stance of radical openness and compassion. As such it is never finished or complete, but continues and deepens forever.

Yet harvesting is also a practice in the sense of honing skills. Digging roots and gathering bark are at once very delicate and physically demanding tasks; they can be very difficult to do well. To learn from plants and bring them mindfully into our lives, then, is to unite our deepest contemplations with our daily action, asking and exploring what reciprocity looks like on the ground. David Abram writes that “it is only at the scale of our direct, sensory interactions with the land around us that we can appropriately notice and respond to the immediate needs of the living world” (1996: 268). To both gather and scatter a plant’s tiny seeds, to fill our mouths with berries and then leave a handful of wood ash at that huckleberry’s roots, is to connect our belly with the Earth not conceptually but *directly*, experientially, with the senses. It comes home to us – suddenly or perhaps slowly, almost imperceptibly, over the patient years - that our immune system, our circulation, our breath, our dreams and our psyche are those of the living Earth, manifest in the tiny flower as in the hand that plucks it for medicine.

It is impossible to maintain a sense of aloofness or distance, or even an idealized, romantic notion of wild nature with a mouth full of intensely bitter roots, face stung with the snap of early April rain, or nettle, or mosquito, hands brushing against a vine or mushroom capable, we know, of poisoning us more quickly than help would arrive. In these moments we intuitively understand that the world, as Gary Snyder writes, is “as sharp as the edge of a knife” (1995: 198). With such raw contact, Jack Turner continues, “we learn what primary cultures learned: that nature can be a ferocious teacher of the way things are – a profoundly wild, organic world of systems and raw processes, a maze of networks, webs, fields, and communities, all interdependent, interrelating, and mirroring each other” (1995: 44). We find ourselves alive once again in a whole landscape of breath and movement, capable, like ourselves, of healing or inflicting harm.

Comparative mythologist Jules Cashford explains that the ancient Greeks recognized two kinds of knowing: *gnosis*, and *epistamēa*. *Gnosis* is personal knowing, as within a relationship, which flows not singularly from knower to known but *in both directions at once*. Conversely, *epistamēa* is “knowing about”. It is that conceptual knowing which we cling to when *gnosis* has failed, or indeed that which we must suspend in order to access deep, relational understanding (2010: personal correspondence). And so to practice is to cultivate *gnosis* – to go out into the woods and fields with humility, smelling and touching and dreaming and listening, and watching for signs from the plants. And to practice is to allow ourselves to be known, in turn, by them.

**part three** · FIELD AND FORESTWORK

*'When I'm going to out, I usually know where I'm going to go out.  
So inside my head, inside my psyche, I send that out ahead, as if it was a great shout,  
to let them know that I am coming and my name is Hyamiciye'*

(Della Rice Sylvester, 2011: personal correspondence)

## chapter six · CONVERSATIONS WITH WILD-HARVESTERS

In this section I introduce the harvesters and healers I have spoken with. I have arranged direct quotes from our conversations into thematic groupings to draw parallels and also highlight differences between their approaches to harvesting, while presenting their words simply, clearly, and on their own terms. I follow with a discussion of the teachings I have gathered from these remarkable people.

### 6.1 AN INTRODUCTION TO HARVESTERS

**Saci Spindler** is a community herbalist and teacher on Salt Spring Island, BC. A long-time apprentice of herbalist Rosemary Gladstar, founder of United Plant Savers, Saci both wild-harvests and cultivates native medicinal plants. Saci is my principle herbal medicine teacher as well as a friend and mentor.

**Yarrow Willard** is a clinical herbalist who harvests his medicines from the woods, beaches, and meadows of the Comox Valley, Vancouver Island, BC. He is dedicated to the preservation of wild places and to teaching others about the deep connections between healing, consciousness, and the intelligence of the Earth.

**Sheila Wray** studied plant medicines for many years under her mentor, Norma Meyers, up until Norma's death in the 1980's. Her knowledge and wisdom has been handed down from both Native and European plant healers, as well as from the trees and plants themselves. She wild-crafts and teaches adults and children about local plants in the Cowichan Valley, Vancouver Island, BC.

**Pauline Waterfall (*Hilistis*)** is a member of the Heiltsuk Nation, the largest First Nations community on the central coast. Pauline is an elder, healer, educator, and leader of ground-breaking Heiltsuk eco-cultural restoration projects. Known as a “keeper of the knowledge” in her community, her name means “starting a journey and staying on course to complete and coming full circle.”

**Evelyn Windsor (*Nuwaqawa*)** is also an elder of the Heiltsuk Nation. She teaches those around her about traditional uses of plants for medicine, food, and technology, and was recently honoured as a First Nations Language Champion for her lifetime's work as a teacher of the Hailhzaqyla language.

**Della Rice Sylvester (*Hyamicye*)** is a member of Cowichan Tribes on Vancouver Island. She is an elder, storyteller, and traditional healer educated by her grandmothers. She continues to share her knowledge and wisdom about the cultural and spiritual uses of wild plants in the tradition of her family.

**Diane Mongeau** is a healer, teacher, and writer living near the Englishman River, in the community of Errington, on Vancouver Island. She crafts wild flower essences and leads workshops and learning circles focused on cultivating receptivity to the messages and teachings of plants.

**Ayata Aeola** began studying herbal medicine under Dr. John Christopher in the 1970's and continues to work with plants for personal and planetary healing.

**Joseph Norris** is a Halalt elder who was taught about native plants by his grandmothers. He shares his teachings generously in the hopes of inspiring others to reconnect with and protect the lands and waters that sustain us. He is currently campaigning against development proposals for the Chemianus River on Halalt ancestral lands.

## 6.2: SONG AND SPEECH

Many of the people I spoke with impressed upon me the importance of singing and speaking to the plants they harvest. These insights into the importance of harvesting songs and speeches, shared with me by Della, Evelyn, and Sheila, reveal understandings and experiences of an animate and responsive universe, one with which we are capable of, indeed called to, communicate.

*A lot of my 'thank you' is done in song. The songs come from the plants. The songs come from the plants – if I'm out there I might hear songs, and I may see whose singing them. Once I went out into the middle of a devil's club plantation without realizing I was in the middle of it, and then I heard singing. Then I looked to see who was singing and it was them who were singing, and they were all around me. So I sang with them. So I sing the songs that they're singing. (Della Rice Sylvester)*

*And one of the things that our people do when we pick our plants or gather anything from the forest, is that we tell the plant what we're going to use it for and thank this plant. It's old tradition I guess because there were people talking to the trees when they gathered the bark. (Evelyn Windsor)*

*I sing when I collect. It has to do with the song – the song identifies me to the plant, and the plant has its own song too. If you listen really carefully and you spend a lot of time around plants you can start to hear their music and their song. I can quite often stop and listen to the song of the trees because I spend a lot of time around the trees. And that is their vibration and their energy that they give out. And when you're in the woods or if you're out gathering, you can*

*sing to a plant. Especially when I'm gathering roots I sing because I find if I sing to a plant when I'm gathering its roots it will relax and let go. It calms it. In a sense you're saying 'its ok, this is who I am, this is why I'm using it.' And so you've created an understanding. And I always let them know I will give back the seed, for its children.*

(Sheila Wray)

### 6.3: BALANCE

Richard Atleo writes that “the law of generosity may be stated as follows: It is necessary to give in order to receive. According to this law it is not better to give than to receive because both giving and receiving are equivalent and interactive values” (2004: 129). The notion of reciprocity is essentially one of balance – of giving and receiving in equal and considerate measure. The offering of tobacco or other herbs is an important practice during harvesting and hunting in many parts of the world, including the Pacific Northwest. By solemnly acknowledging the sacrifices plants make when they give parts of themselves for our healing, the harvester enters a space of gratitude and mindfulness that, many healers teach, the plants recognize and appreciate. This process both strengthens the medicine of the plants themselves and grounds the harvester in a healing state of meditation or prayer.

*The medicine won't come with the plant if you don't honour and respect all protocols... If you want to create stronger, more sacred medicine, you're going to offer something of yourself as well. The classic native offering was tobacco. Sometimes I'll offer different herbs, sometimes we smudge with kinnikinnik, sometimes it's just my time that I'm offering... [The plants] just want your energy to be respecting and honouring and open in this way. (Yarrow Willard)*

*When I harvest a plant, whether it's just for the bark or the roots, or fruit, I always leave a gift. The gift may be a food item, it could be just a stone that I've been carrying around, or I also have some loose tobacco – whatever it is, it's the act of asking for permission, and explaining why I'm doing what I'm doing, and asking for forgiveness. That's [the most] important. (Pauline Waterfall)*

*Our people - society thought we were worshiping animals. We weren't. We'd shoot a deer and say thank you for giving us your life so that we can live. That's what we're talking about. So when you speak to the plants themselves –*

*there might be plenty, but you take one – you say thank you for giving up your cycle for us. That's the important part. Because then they really come to another area where they start working better for us in terms of healing.*  
(Joseph Norris)

*I remember the first lesson I ever learned. It was from the Native community back in my twenties. One of the first lessons I ever learned was the offering of the tobacco when you take anything from a plant. It's a good lesson because there are a couple of elements to the tobacco; there's the spiritual element – you're offering prayers, and the spirit of the plant actually feeds off the tobacco, but also in the offering of tobacco you are stopping and putting your mind into the space of thank you.* (Sheila Wray)

*If I see lady's slipper I just try to endow it with as much of what I call 'human medicine' as I can. I feel we have this kind of relationship – it's not just plants giving to us, but we also give back to them. Sometimes I'll walk right by plants – if I'm going to harvest medicine I'll never harvest the first one I see. Give your medicine to the first one you see, and look for its brothers further along. As well try not to harvest things on paths where other people can look at them and enjoy them. If I look at a plant, and I think "ah, what a beautiful plant," that plant is now radiating even more beauty, as it's been endowed with a little bit of my energy.* (Yarrow Willard)

*I'm really getting more and more how it is – it's not just creating it, it's that we have a symbiotic relationship with these plants. So what I want to do for them, for the natural world, is partly to give my gratitude. And I often just sit with them and just... just express that love you're not supposed to express in Western society. It's very powerful what happens when you do that. So one thing is just expressing that gratitude, and one is to be very mindful of what I take and where I take. I've always had that - Dr. Christopher taught us that right from the beginning – the most you ever take from one area is 1/3 of a particular type of plant. The third element is teaching people about this, helping them to have an emotional experience of this – that we can, and need to, have a loving relationship with the natural world and that's how we begin to protect it. And so we can see that these plants, whether they are wild plants or what we think of as weeds, that they will help us with our health, that they will help us to be healthy and to be whole, but that we also need to help them. We need to really love them enough to respect them, and to protect the environments that they grow in.* (Ayata Aeola)

#### 6.4: PERCEPTION

Having entered into a space of mindfulness or ritual, the material process of harvesting can begin. Skillful harvesting practices are rooted in a foundation of ecological understanding and close observation of plant morphology and phenology. In their own words, Pauline, Della, Sheila, Diana, Yarrow and Evelyn explain that by noticing and honouring the life cycles of the plants and their relations, we begin to see how our harvesting fits into a holistic and mutually beneficial exchange of care. From the simplest and most important principle – *do not take more than you need* – to teachings about when and where to harvest and specific techniques of digging roots, peeling bark, and remediating soils, we learn that nourishing and sustaining the plant communities and their environments is the essence of restorative wild-harvesting.

*One of the things I learned early on is that everything that's alive has a spirit - including the plants, and all animals of course - an energy, an energy that comes from all of the life forms, and that it's interchangeable and interdependent.*

*We rely on plants for our life-giving sources, and plants rely on us for their life sustaining sources. And so when I was taught to gather medicine, I was taught never to take more than what I needed, for example. And to pick an area where there was an abundance, and where I could choose not necessarily the hardiest plants, because those would regenerate to be stronger. I was taught to be very selective, and to always leave at least two plants in an area undisturbed, so they could propagate... I was also taught that there were certain times of the seasons and cycles when it was better to harvest plants than other times. There was also a time to harvest them in a way that was pruning.*

*One of the old people taught me that if we were going to clear an area for whatever reason, for example for a garden, that it was better to do all of our weeding in August, after the plants had had their babies. So there was this notion that plants had their own life cycles and that we had to be aware of that and to be in as much harmony with that as we could in collecting and using the plants.*

*There were areas where we were taught not to collect plants. We were taught not to collect plants in our immediate environment, because the plants that are here are already doing their work. And that if we were going to collect plants that we needed to go somewhere where they hadn't been disturbed by modern life as we know it. And so the more natural, the more remote, the more undisturbed, the stronger the plant will be. Because these plants, if you look around us now, they're all doing their work to sustain this environment. And they get depleted just like we get depleted if we're working too hard. So there's this notion that they're doing exactly what they're supposed to be doing, and we need to leave them alone. (Pauline Waterfall)*

*What we gather, we just only gather how much we need to use at the time being, rather than gather a whole pile, and then it's not going to be as strong as it is when it's fresh. So that's one of the things we try to do... And our people*

*always say don't gather it where people are living. Go further away. On the way to Old Town people aren't living there. It's best to do it there, that way, rather than get it from your back yard. (Evelyn Windsor)*

*Some things kind of go and go and go, and other things like mullein, it's a two-year plant. I harvest everything according to how it grows. For example fireweed; I love the fireweed when they're new tops, so I will harvest continuously when they're new tops, so one whole plant will end up being a bush. So I'll go to one whole area and do that... maybe two or three times until the plant says it doesn't want to do that anymore, it's going to make flowers no matter what. Then I'll leave it and let it grow. But other people take them when they're flowers or take them when they're seeds, but you've got to remember that those flowers also have to be left alone, so that they can carry on. (Della Rice Sylvester)*

*Nettles are one that not only spread by seeds moving all over, but by the roots. So when you harvest the tops of nettle, the plant is putting its energy back into the root system, which is then allowing that root system to expand. So if you do it properly, you can actually manage a plot of nettle, and instead of getting one harvest you can get up to three in a year, and also it can still grow. So you're not causing a problem. But again, you're always leaving patches of everything to grow, especially the runners – the furthest plants out that are expanding and taking on new areas, you're leaving those to grow. (Yarrow Willard)*

*You watch the flow of the leaf, because it shows you when the sap is at its fullest. When the leaves turn from bud to lime green, and are just fully opening, but before they go to their dark green, is a good time to take the bark. Because [the sap] is flowing. (Sheila Wray)*

*What we notice [about Oregon grape] is that it snaps off very easily. So when we harvest it, we tend to snap off where the root hits the ground. The root bark usually grows up about eight inches above the soil before the foliage emerges. Right away we see that there's so much bright yellow right there, why would we need to pull up the root and disturb all of its brothers and sisters? So learning about the plant is very important. Tuning into the plant is very important, but there needs to be some level of knowing about its physical nature. I don't even cut anymore. The way it snaps is a nice clean, natural break. We snap it off right there in the forest, leave the foliage to compost, and then carve off the root bark to expose all the yellow. That will dry up really quickly because it doesn't have the whole root to hold the moisture. It's really important to do this right away, because the root bark will start to dry quickly and be much more difficult to peel off. And that way we can honour the plant by not stealing all the energy that's underground that the other ones need to keep them growing and flowering. (Yarrow Willard)*

*Usually [you harvest devil's club] in the wintertime and it's the root. I rarely look at the plant any other time of the year. If I make medicine in the summer it's usually from the winter plant... All winter it's rebuilding itself, so just before it shoots buds back up, it's really, really potent. Just before it shoots buds back up you know that everything is going in the root. So when you're using a root plant you think about that: when the root is being fed. (Della Rice Sylvester)*

*I do think that touch and smell can be very valuable. I like to feel every plant I'm going to harvest, really roll it in my fingers, smell it, maybe nibble a piece of it, before I harvest a lot of it. I think it's great for harvesters to be sucking or chewing on a little piece of the plant they're harvesting. You know, a great one is devil's club, and it's very strong tasting. But if you put a little piece of devil's club in your mouth while you harvest it, all of a sudden it seems like everything changes. The flow of working and seeing how these roots open up and go along the ground seems much more apparent to me. (Yarrow Willard)*

*When you dig up a root, you're not only killing the life of that plant, you're killing all the other interdependent life forms around it. And so you need to be mindful of that, and have a conversation in your head about it, with those other life forms. And so at the end, when you've harvested your root, you try to repair it as best as you can. I always practice never to leave a gaping hole. Try and remediate it as best as you can. (Pauline Waterfall)*

*Obviously you never harvest more than you can use or process. A very important rule is that you process right away. So harvesting is only a very small part of it. You want to make sure that the steps to the finish are done in a timely fashion so that the medicine stays with the plant. Devil's club we whittle the root bark off. We only want to harvest as much as we can whittle the root bark from, and we know that it's going to take us four times as long to whittle roots as to harvest. We do very small devil's club harvests... If it's the right time to harvest it, it's very much...it's very much the right smell. If the ground is starting to freeze a little bit, all of a sudden the smell changes right away – it's a physical thing as well, not just spiritual, it's tangibly sensible. (Yarrow Willard, personal correspondence) (Yarrow Willard)*

*I know the potency of my plants because I have gathered that potency. When you're gathering nettles out in the field you're constantly looking at the potency. There are ones that are almost a black-purple colour – have you seen those? And then you've got the paler green ones, which I try to avoid because they just don't look as good. And when I'm*

*gathering I'll do a little of this and a little of that - and you're always gathering that potency so by the time you're finished you know what you've got. So you develop that relationship with your plants so you know what your medicine is. (Sheila Wray)*

*Each plant, just like each person, is so unique. They all have their own energy. Spending time with a plant before harvesting can help tune you into that, or even taking a bit of time to really change your lenses to be in the forest, to feel the forest. This will always help you to not just find the herbs that you're looking to harvest, but to pull some of their medicine and keep it with them... It has to do with taking time before you harvest to set up sacred space, or to tune your lens to the much more subtle energies of the forest. Our energies are big and strong and overpowering in a sense, so it's hard to see what other energies are until we, I suppose, recalibrate ourselves. So I've gone out harvesting and energies aren't feeling right, we'll just call it right off and say, 'Today is a good day to just stroll.' Or we'll go to harvest one plant and another will be calling us much more – so you must be in the moment. (Yarrow Willard)*

*When a plant stops me and I sit with it to get a feel for what it's about, it doesn't happen the first time only - I need to come back to the plant. I need to come back to get to know that plant. I need to come back in different seasons. I need to come back in different years. So there's continuity... It's entering into a relationship where we treat each other more as equals. (Diana Mongeau)*

## 6.5 FAMILY

A wild-harvesting practice based in right relationship culminates in the recognition of our implicit participation with the family of life. Each individual with whom I spoke emphasized the importance of being touched by and honouring their interconnection with the animate Earth, manifest in the act of harvesting and healing with plants. Through a practice of harvesting, our existence within a complex web of relations is revealed and reified.

*We have a belief that what makes up a plant, chemically, biologically, is very, very similar to what makes me, and that the only difference is quantity and arrangement... And so if it was necessary to cut down a tree, it was really taken as deliberately as if I had to take your life. If I had to sacrifice your life, or if you had to sacrifice your life for whatever reason, it would be my responsibility to tell you why, and to ask you for your forgiveness, and to thank you for the act of sacrificing your life. And it would always be for the purpose of sustaining another life form. There was never a hierarchy of life forms. And so when a tree was cut down in the old days - it was usually cut for a canoe or a big house project, where the diameter of the tree was required for whatever reason - there was a song that was sung to*

*the tree before the act of cutting it down. And this song was exactly what I said to you - the tree received blessings with explanations of why this was necessary, and asking for forgiveness, and making a promise that its life would be respected, but also that those of its relatives would not be taken. So there was an idea that there was a family of plants or a family of trees, and that they all communicated with each other. (Pauline Waterfall)*

*The burdock, I always feel it. It has a very strong energy and I always feel it when I collect. I think because it's so community oriented – you always have the mother plant or the grandmother plant in the middle, and then all the children around, and you really feel it when you're collecting her children. It's not my favourite to harvest because of that, but again that keeps you from overharvesting. Because you're really aware that the grandmother or the mother is watching you, and you let her know that you'll give her babies back. It's hard, as a mother. (Sheila Wray)*

*I really believe they also do want to become part of us, and work within us to curb our consciousness to become more aware of the planet's fragility. (Yarrow Willard)*

*I was watching the bees using the medicine – when you were gathering your rose petals you probably really felt akin to the bees? Where you go to reach for the petals and a bee beats you to it, and you kind of stop? At one point I reached for it, the bee went for it, we both pulled back together, I went for it again, he went for it again, and I finally pulled back and let him have it. It's almost as though you're looking at each other – so you develop a relationship to all of life when you're out here. (Sheila Wray)*

*I see that we can't heal separately from the natural world. It's all one. (Ayata Aeola)*

## 6.6 LEARNING

For thousands of years the peoples of the Pacific Northwest knew the plants. Yet over the course of two centuries of systematic colonization and industrial development, much of this knowledge and wisdom was fragmented or driven below the surface of community life. Now, in solidarity with indigenous communities around the world, the Cowichan, Halalt, and Heiltsuk nations are addressing the connections between learning and healing in courageous and powerful ways. For others who have never been invited or encouraged to connect

with the flow of life around them, no matter their ethnicity or personal history, the need for deep ecological learning remains profound. These teachers from different backgrounds point to patterns and processes of holistic education that not only engage the mind and body in healing work, but also weave communities back together and facilitate a genuine flowering of the heart.

*We have a teaching that when a child is four months old [in the womb] God puts the soul into that child and it starts to move, it comes to life. My own personal teachings my grandmother started telling to me when I was four months old, when my mother was still carrying me. So when I was born her voice was very familiar to me. When she spoke to me I looked around and I knew who she was. Society doesn't understand that. We have to start addressing these things: where do the teachings begin? (Joseph Norris)*

*I was always curious about life. I knew intuitively that we must have had a whole knowledge base, because the Hieltsuk have lived here continuously for at least 10,000 years, and over time the knowledge would have evolved to include traditional medicines, herbology. When I moved back home I ended up being more curious out of ignorance, so I spent a lot of time with the old people, but I also had a grandmother who was my mentor, Beatrice Brown. She understood where I was coming from, because she herself was also displaced from her community and culture. She moved away when she was five, but she didn't stay away as long as I did. So out of my own ignorance, I really started asking questions. I made it my life's mission to spend time with the old people of the day, and either observe or just ask direct questions. In time, as they grew to understand that it wasn't just a passing phase, they started to take it seriously... But I think imparting the value of life and teaching to respect it is the greatest lesson to teach from as early an age as possible. A lot of our people have lost that connection for various reasons. But our children, when they go to a place like Koeye [a traditional village site and center of eco-cultural restoration programs for youth], they're learning that. We're all interconnected. (Pauline Waterfall)*

*I needed to learn how to open myself up to being in my heart enough, to actually communicate with the spirit of the plant... And to relate to a plant in that way gives you an entirely different relationship, and entirely different perspective... We are serving each other. When we begin to relate to plants and plant communities, our own connectedness with life is so much deeper. I believe that it influences decisions in our lives in general – choices that we make, that we live in this way or in that way. We begin to see ourselves, all of us, as one whole, interacting being. (Diana Mongeau)*

*A big part of it seems to be showing people how to really come into their hearts. When you're in a heart space you're very receptive, very open. Culturally, we're so mental – everything is just cognitive and rational – but when you're in your heart, your whole body and your senses are fully awake, and you can be receptive. When you enter into relationship with the natural world, and specifically, say, with healing plants, you effortlessly begin to restore that natural balance that indigenous people have always experienced – that intimate relationship with Earth. One of the things is that there is a feeling of belonging that happens... if I'm using herbs and feeling healing happening, then there is a deep bonding that happens. A huge part of that is the gratitude, the appreciation – I can go gather these plants that just grow there, and they give their gifts so freely, and it helps me, it gives me health – what an incredible gift. But that's only part of it. The other part of it of course is giving back, and however you give back - whether it's through gratitude or protecting the plants, protecting the environment - that instills in you a sense of self-worth as well – there's something that I'm giving that is really important.*

*Coming into relationship with the natural world and the plants, it gives us this feeling of connection and a sense that we have something to give, too. A lot of it is hard to articulate, to put into words, but when you begin to have that relationship with the plants its like you're kind of filled out in ways that are hard to even describe. You start to blossom somehow. (Ayata Aeola)*

*The plants will teach you right away. If you do it incorrectly, they'll just let you know - look, you've got half the energy here, but it will be better next time if you do this. You're always refining and tuning in, and even your refined step will have to be back-stepped and refined again – perhaps you need to be slower next time, or breathe differently. Like anything in life, harvesting is a process of gradual learning. It's an honour to be harvesting, more than anything else that I do. (Yarrow Willard)*

## 6.7: SUMMARY OF LEARNING

In speaking, walking, and harvesting with these skilled and generous people, I've come to recognize in their words and actions a remarkable depth of holistic ecological understanding. Their knowledge of natural processes and patterns has emerged not only from extensive study, but also through long-time participation with the ebb and flow of wind, roots, rain, sun, and the scent of springs and frosts. Their work with plants unfolds as a dynamic reality across meaningful ranges of time and space, and is defined above all by relationship. Each is dedicated to teaching and sharing what they know in some way, and as such these diverse individuals are all active leaders in bioregional learning and healing. Below is a summary of observations and lessons regarding the characteristics of restorative harvesting that I have gathered from time spent with them:

- Plants are treated as active and sentient subjects in continual communication with harvesters and the biotic community surrounding them.
- The practice of harvesting is situated within a worldview of interconnection and complexity.
- Extended observation of how plants grow leads to detailed understandings of morphology and phenology.
- Experiential or phenomenological learning is the foundation of practice.
- Cultivation of the appropriate mode of perception, or *way of seeing*, is vital.
- Harvesting affects the wellbeing of plants in positive or negative ways; this is tied into our own wellbeing, both explicitly (in the potency of medicines) and subtly (in the energetic/spiritual dimension).
- Harvesting facilitates and strengthens natural, uncontrived, and intuitive experiences of ecological selfhood; these experiences influence perception as well as behaviour, and as such are healing for both self and landscape.

*'Given our blatant need for ecologically conscious and consistent behaviour,  
the development of skillful ways of seeing offers a direct path for  
conscious intervention and behavioural change.'*

(Laura Sewall, 1995: 203)

## chapter seven · GOETHE'S WAY OF SEEING

*'What is a plant? A plant is a relationship  
between the earth and the sky.'*

(Margaret Colquhoun, 2010: personal correspondence)

Restorative harvesting requires not only knowledge and skill but also a mode of perception that facilitates receptivity and communication. In this section I review Goethe's phenomenological method and suggest that it offers practitioners a pathway towards this *way of seeing*. To illustrate this process, I present the outcome of my own Goethean studies with devil's club [*Oplopanax horridus*].

### 7.1: PHENOMENOLOGICAL ECOLOGY

Physicist and Goethean scholar Henri Bortoft points out that we cannot perceive the whole by distancing ourselves from that which we observe: "on the contrary, because the whole is in some way reflected in the parts, it is to be encountered by going further into the parts instead of by standing back from them" (2010: personal correspondence). Goethe's science of qualities above all embraces and explores this paradox: by moving deeply into the life of a plant with our senses and imagination, we are capable of touching on wisdom and insights that are universal and magnificent. Scientist and professor Margaret Colquhoun explains that Goethe worked towards his illuminating encounters with plants by rigorously training his awareness. He called this process *bildung* - the cultivation of capacities (2010: personal correspondence) - and initiated it with a line of questioning that allowed him to open to the phenomena he sought to know. Rather than looking at a plant and asking himself 'what is it?' Goethe regarded the living creature and asked '*who are you?*'

This subtle linguistic shift cannot be overemphasized. By acknowledging the sentient subjectivity of the plants we study, we meet the world from a perspective of equality and dignity. This nourishes our intrinsic ability to perceive and experience the interconnectivity of the natural world, potentially giving rise to the kind of complexity- or systems-thinking previously explored in the context of traditional ecological knowledge and

wisdom: “When nature is viewed as an alive and open mind, as it is in the apt and effectual manner we find so often in Goethe, this mind feels the life and the universal relatedness within nature; it has a presentiment of the universe as an organic whole (Hegel, 1970: 202). And so it was that Goethe, through his very disciplined studies of individual plants and their morphological patterns, was able to touch on the essential unity of nature, *including the scientist within it*. He rediscovered a continuity of life processes in a perpetual state of becoming:

Since the rise of modern science, our attention has focused on that which has already become – that is, come into manifestation as finished work – through the analytic style of thought that best treats it. This mode of cognition opened the inorganic realm to us. But while we are fully conscious of the fixed and dead, *becoming* enters perception more tacitly, on the edge of consciousness, and can be made explicit only through a greater intentional effort. Such an effort had become, for Goethe, a necessary step in his own *Bildung*, for he now saw nature as the driving force in this ascent towards humanity (Brady, 1998: 108).

To follow this process in our own time is to “be transformed in following the transformations of the phenomena. Thus for Goethe, the ultimate aim of science is nothing other than the *metamorphosis of the scientist*” (Amrine, 1998: 37). Arne Naess might describe such a metamorphosis as Self-realization – the experiential insight that our wellbeing, that our *Self*, is inextricably bound up with that of the plants, the rivers and the skies. This qualitative, descriptive research, like other practices that dissolve or render transparent the ego, reveals an intimate relationship between observer and observed. In this sense it “has the power to strengthen individual responsibility and concern toward natural and built environments” (Seamon, 1998: 8). Recalling notions of ecological selfhood and beautiful action, we see that Goethe’s method fosters gnosis - *knowing through relationship*.

Above all, this method is phenomenological: “it begins with the phenomena, proceeds through them, and ends with them, returning at last from the [archetypal phenomenon] to the particulars whose claims have not at any point been abrogated” (Heinmann, 1934: 79). As a plant is given the opportunity to express its unity and wholeness within our consciousness, we are coaxed to once again trust our own senses and experience in a landscape of kinship. As Goethe so eloquently expresses, “we are adequately equipped for all our genuine earthly needs if we will trust our senses, and develop them in such a way that they continue to prove worthy of our confidence” (quoted in Amrine, 1998: 45).

## 7.2: METHODOLOGY

The following stages are distinct but closely related to each other, and can be understood as highlighted moments within the continuum of the research process (Hoffman, 1998).

### **Intuitive Precognition - First Impressions**

The first impression emerges from our initial meeting with a plant - the crucial moment before a plant has become familiar, ordinary, or conceptually defined, and when our sense perception is at its most heightened. This phase is defined by a calm openness, a willingness to let the plant speak on its own terms and in its own time (ibid). It results in the conveyance of the overall 'mood' of the plant, and though often vague and generalized, over the course of the research a first impression may be carried through and distilled into a very clear insight.

### **Stage One – Exact Sensorial Perception - Earth**

This stage is characterized by a disciplined and detailed study of the solid phenomena itself as experienced immediately and directly with the senses. We ask the plant: *who are you?* The aim here is to gather as much precise, empirical information as possible. Making drawings and paintings from observations as well as from memory can facilitate our clear-seeing of these 'external facts' (Margaret Colquhoun, 2010: personal correspondence).

### **Stage Two – Exact Sensorial Imagination - Water**

This stage of the process involves consciously moving into a more fluid observational mode wherein we begin to see the *relationships between* the plants' external qualities and characteristics. We now ask the plant: *how do you grow?* "To enter the second stage of the research process is to open oneself to the dynamically relational character of the plant and to apprehend how one quality derives from another, one part from another. The aim, in other words, is to experience the plant's time dimension and its growth process" (Hoffman, 1998: 133). We invite the

generative movement of the plant into our own consciousness through the inner eye of our imagination. As Goethe himself wrote:

If I look at the created object, inquire into its creation, and follow this process back as far as I can, I will find a series of steps. Since these are not actually seen together before me, I must visualize them in my memory so that they form a certain ideal whole. At first I will tend to think in terms of steps, yet nature leaves no gaps, and thus, in the end, I will have to see this progression of uninterrupted activity as a whole. I can do so by dissolving the particular without destroying the impression itself (Goethe, 1995: 75).

#### Stage Three – Seeing in Beholding - Air

This stage involves a deepening of the insights that arose during our ‘watery seeing’ in order to sense the continuum of expression that is the plant, the inner *gesture* that conveys a definite meaning. We begin to apprehend the *idea* that lies behind the formative movements. Our participation with the plant deepens, and our findings may be expressed most accurately through visual or even musical forms. Appropriately, this level of cognition is more artistic. Meaning is given permission to come to light; our cognition acquiesces into meaning.

#### Stage Four – Intuition and Co-creation – Fire

Finally we experience what Goethe called the pure or archetypal phenomenon as it is – creative, potent, unbounded, unfixed. We touch into the insight of the plant as formlessness emerging into form and returning to formlessness. Art or poetry is the most natural medium of expression for our discoveries during this final and most deeply participatory stage, and through it the plant itself may be brought into new light (Margaret Colquhoun, 2010: personal correspondence).

*From the pine tree  
learn of the pine tree.  
And from the bamboo  
of the bamboo.*

(Basho)

## chapter eight · PRACTICE

### 8.1: DEVIL'S CLUB

Devil's club [*Oplopanax horridus*], a spiny shrub in the ginseng family, can be found in rich, undisturbed forest soils at low to middle elevations, especially moist but well-drained seepage zones close to rivers and creeks, throughout the Pacific Northwest (Pojar and Mackinnon, 1994: 82). An important indicator of ecosystem health, devil's club is also one of the most culturally significant medicines of the area (Nancy Turner, 2006: personal correspondence), known throughout its range as a very strong healing and a protective agent. The list of maladies, both physical and spiritual, for which it is sought is lengthy and diverse. The greenish, fragrant inner bark of the stems and roots is most commonly gathered for internal use though the berries can also be employed for external cleansing and purification.



fig. 1. Devil's club grove under big-leaf maples near the Cowichan River

The 'rules' around its harvesting are embedded in a belief system which counts devil's club as a living, spirited being with the capacity to help or harm, depending on how it is approached (Turner and Berkes, 2006; Turner, 2004; Lantz, 2001). "Devil's club sets you straight," explains Yarrow Willard. "It's a very powerful and sacred plant" (2011: personal correspondence). Harvesting well requires that we meet the plant with a very refined quality of awareness. Respect and proper deportment – mindfulness of thought, word, and deed – are crucial. Because devil's club very quickly and at times savagely humbles the harvester, and because I had not personally harvested it before, I felt that it offered me the opportunity to adopt the stance of a beginner and commence my practice afresh.

## 8.2: APPROACHING

I finally see them as I descend into the deep seam running through the moss-drenched forest - a slow river rippling in an almost imperceptible breeze. I have the sudden impression that the biggest leaves from the canopy have fallen nearly to the forest floor and then paused, growing spines. Their massive leaves are beautiful, delicately arranged, the loveliest of sun-lit greens – and yet they are also prehistoric and palpably fierce. Whispering my introduction, I experience a wave of excitement and then an acute and powerful shyness; though hovering at the edge, I sense that the whole grove already knows that I am here.

Entering is difficult. My awkward steps sink knee-deep into rotten logs and snap the long fronds of sword fern, upsetting the elegant arrangement of devil's club stems and causing a tremble that travels through the understory. The dry spines are strong enough to lift my wool hat from my head as I bend down and draw blood from a briefly misplaced hand - I feel a deep embarrassment, longing then for a quieter, natural grace.

Finally within them, crouched carefully on my toes with my arms folded tightly at my sides, I hold my breath. I look up at the illuminated undersides of their enormous leaves to see the delicate shadows of what has fallen into their open hands - eddies of pollen, a thin branch, a small butterfly poised lightly between the spines. Kneeling here, invisible, there is a feeling of absolute protection, and suddenly I know how the deer must feel, picking their way deep into the family of devil's club for shelter from the wolves. I

notice a beautiful spider, fine and light as dust, spinning an invisible web between two spines on the underside of a leaf. She finally settles on me when I am still, blessing me with her willingness to include me in this world.



fig 2. View from below

#### FIRST IMPRESSIONS

A strong family, a collective presence of fierce strength. An expression of the forest's inner capacity for self-defense - yet also openness, protection, and tenderness.

#### STAGE ONE - EARTH

*Who are you?* Through close study and careful drawing, I discover the infinite, intricate details of the plant before my eyes. Devil's club is a tall and stately shrub composed of a long, curving central stem

and seven to ten very large *leaves* unfolding horizontally from long leaf stems at its upper length. The leaves, opening to widths of up to 35 cm, are a deep, vibrant green, and give off a bright, almost lemony fragrance in the forest. The largest, presumably because of their great weight, quite easily snap and bend down at mid-stem. Each leaf is composed of seven deeply toothed lobes (though the smallest are at times not completely distinguished) and are similar in composition to those of maple or thimbleberry.

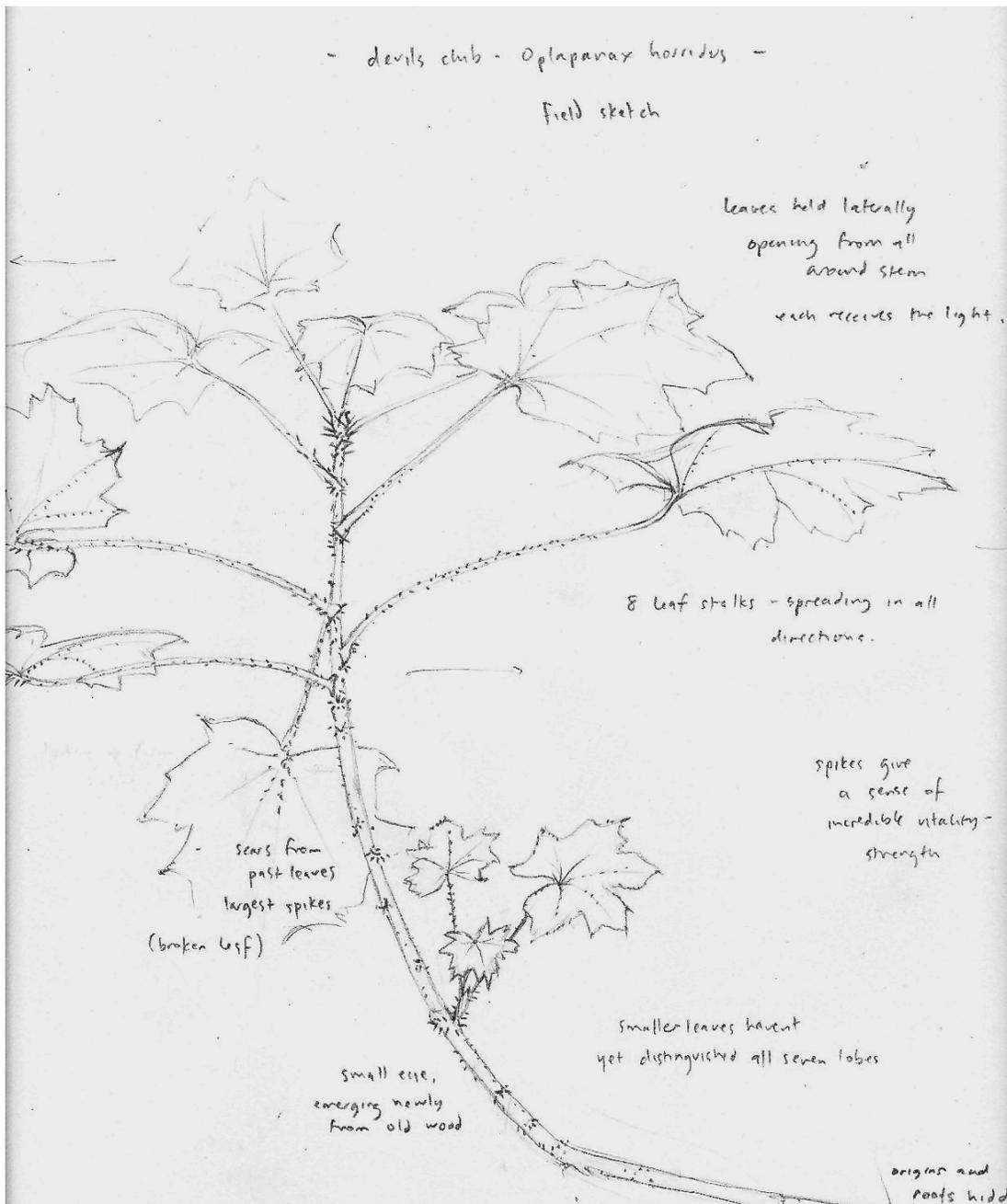


fig. 3. Devil's club field sketch

The leaf veins are lined on the upper- and under-sides with flexible though very sharp needle-like spines of 1-5mm. Each leaf is anchored firmly by a green, half-moon-shaped stem-base, very broad and strong. Leaf stems are pale green with reddish streaks, and covered all around with green spines.

*Stems* are up to ten feet long on mature plants, very woody at the base, up to two inches wide, and covered in generous *spines* up to 2cm long as well as many varieties of moss. Lower spines are long, grey and brittle, incredibly sharp, and dry. On the upper portions of the stem the *bark* is a paler grey and more delicate, though still covered spines of a green colour. Upward-curving half-moon scars walk up and around the stems and give the impression of joints on an arm. These scars mark past points of attachment of leaf stems and are each bordered by a bristle of tall, almost vertical needles. The distinction between *root* and stem is subtle as the base of the stem curves along the ground for lengths of up to a meter, and is capable of developing rootlets at any point where it touches the forest floor.

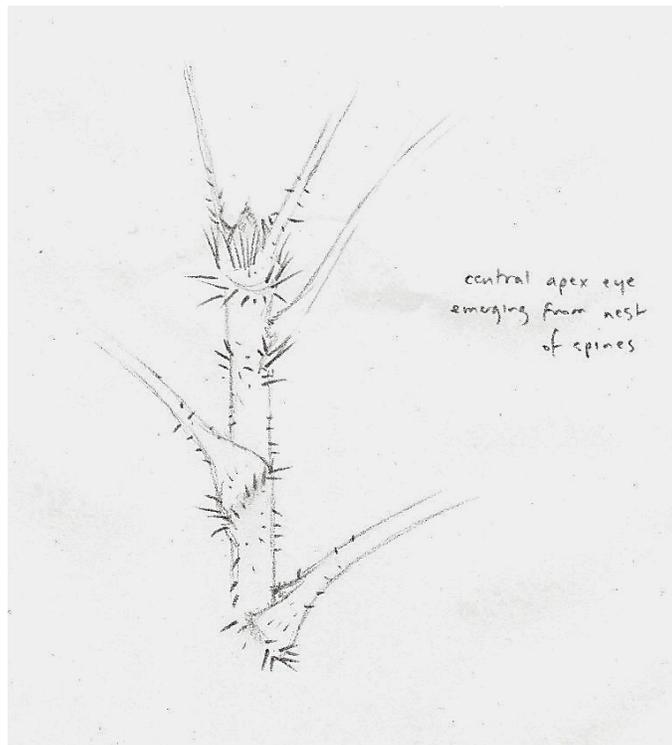


fig. 4. Field sketch of eye

The tallest point of the stem culminates in the thick, pale green *eye*, nestled within a mantle of spines and the bright green shawls of leaf bracts. The bristles are thickest and longest here. *Flowers* are white clusters set on a single stem that have also emerged from the base of the apical eye. They are arranged in a narrowing cone shape, similar to those of chestnuts. *Seeds* begin as small, ovate green swellings at the base of fertilized flowers, gradually developing into hard, flattened green ovals with delicate lines along their length and sepals remaining at the tip. These eventually turn a deep, cherry red. Both green and red seeds exude a pungent, deep, lemony-green smell, as the leaves but more concentrated. The berry clusters are held in a distinctively vertical orientation and stand out brightly amongst the very wide and spreading layers of the leaves.

The *general environment* is very quiet, moist, and lush. The devil's club stand dominates the immediate area, though sword and maidenhair ferns as well as many kinds of thick mosses creep below their canopy. They are sheltered by big-leaf maples [*Acer macrophyllum*], and beyond them the thick forest of cedars [*Thuja plicata*], sitkas [*Picea sitchensis*] and Douglas firs [*Pseudotsuga menziesii*].



fig. 5. Stem and hidden eye, surrounded by spines

## STAGE TWO - WATER

*How do you grow?* Devil's club does not demonstrate significant metamorphosis of its leaf form as it grows. The lateral expansion of the leaves, the upper expression of flowers and finally the concentration of berries are the most readily apparent of the plant's metamorphic processes. Through the process of 'exact sensorial imagination' I gather all information gleaned from the previous stage and allow it to dissolve into fluidity within the actively receptive space of my mind. I experience most of all a palpable sense of *reaching* – of the plant's yearning outward and upward as it pulls energy from the earth it leans against. The sensation of lifting is balanced by one of spreading. I see clearly that the spines are emerging as natural extensions of this *potency moving outwards*. This sensation plays over and over again in my consciousness, and culminates in a dream of devil's club as a person spreading their arms in a gesture of both warning and invitation.



fig. 6. Watercolour painting of spreading and expanding movement of growth (from memory)

### STAGE THREE - AIR

The expression or *gesture* of the plant that arises from this process of allowing its movement to flow through my own consciousness is made clear in my dream: devil's club spreads outwards, opening in a gesture of both warning and receiving. Its presence marks something very important in the forest.

### STAGE FOUR - FIRE

*Fierce watchman,  
guardian at the doorway:  
you open sacred space,  
becoming sacred space -  
within the forest by the river,  
as the forest, as the river.*

### 8.3: SUMMARY OF LEARNING

Over the past ten years I've spent countless days in the coastal forests of the Pacific Northwest. And yet, in a relatively short period of time spent moving through Goethe's process with this fierce and spiny plant, I felt I was coming to know an element of the forest's character I had never before experienced. As I followed Goethe's method over the course of the month, I began to see devil's club as an expression of the forest's wholeness, both different from and emergent as its surroundings. I glimpsed this plant as "an organ of the landscape rather than an organism in the landscape" (Hoffman, 1998: 166). My experience of this was richly paradoxical. From my initial impression of the plant as both fierce and tender, to my sense of it as both individual and collective, and finally my own sensations in its presence - at once joyful and humble - devil's club drew me very quickly into a dynamic threshold space of both/and.

I also felt very strongly that as I was getting to know devil's club, it was becoming acquainted with me. This brought to mind what David Abram calls the 'reciprocity of the sensuous':

To touch the coarse skin of a tree is thus, at the same time, to experience one's own tactility, to feel oneself touched *by* the tree...We can perceive things at all only because we ourselves are entirely a part of the sensible world we perceive! We might as well say that we are organs of this world, flesh of its flesh, and that *the world is perceiving itself through us* (Abram, 1996: 68, emphasis added).

This experience deepened my understanding of reciprocity - of how the very act of opening ourselves to feeling and being felt by the plants is in itself a profound exchange. Now, harvesting a small length of root bark, I feel the gravity and also the utter naturalness of my task. It is not easy - my hands are still awkward and the spines are dangerous, puncturing my gloves and reminding me of how much I have to learn - and yet new insight into its morphological gesture allows my harvesting to merge more easily with the whole plant's growth and reproductive processes, and our individual but linked healing processes begin to unfold. Nibbling a piece of the pungent, lemony leaf as I work carefully, I am conscious of how radically different devil's club and I are, and yet also, simultaneously, how little separates us. Looking up from my harvesting with devil's club already in my blood, I see both the uniqueness of this being and also the continuity of life running seamlessly throughout the forest and myself. Our presence in each other's company is a simple expression of the unity in diversity that is our living world.

What resonates most deeply for me about Goethe's methodology is its intrinsically participatory nature; Goethe himself wrote that "through an intuitive perception of eternally creative nature we may become worthy of participating spiritually in its creative processes" (Goethe, 1970: 31). He saw our knowledge of a phenomenon as intimately related to the phenomenon itself: "for [Goethe] the state of "being known" was to be understood as a further state of the phenomenon itself. It is this stage that the phenomenon reaches in human consciousness" (Bortoft, 1986: 66). The knower, then, is not an onlooker, but rather an active participant in the land. By cultivating this way of seeing and experiencing the natural world, by inviting our own metamorphosis through these in-depth studies of plants, wild-harvesters are able to contemplate entire ecosystems from a perspective of wholeness and integrity and carry their practices forward from this standpoint of kinship.

As all forms of meditation, Goethe's radical empiricism requires good instruction and a high degree of personal dedication. It can, at times, feel elusive and frustrating – Goethe himself acknowledged the enormous grit his studies required - and yet it asks of the practitioner little more than time, devotion, and perhaps some pencils and paints. With these simple tools, available to all of us, we can begin. Thus for wild-harvesters:

Goethean science provides a rich, intuitive approach to meeting nature and discovering patterns and relationships that are not only stimulating intellectually but also satisfying emotionally and spiritually. Goethe's method teaches a mode of interaction between people and environment that involves reciprocity, wonderment, and gratitude. He wished us to encounter nature respectfully and to discover how all its parts, including ourselves, *belong* (Seamon, 1998: 10).

*'You know, I think if people stay somewhere long enough – even white people – the spirits will begin to speak to them. It's the power of the spirits coming up from the land. The spirits and the old powers aren't lost, they just need people to be around long enough and the spirits will begin to influence them.'*

(Crow elder, quoted in Snyder, 1990: 42)

## chapter nine . HOME

Here in the Pacific Northwest, local people have documented declines in well over one hundred kinds of plant and animal species in coastal and interior British Columbia alone (Turner, 2005: 135). Halalt elder Joe Norris spoke to me of the great loss of plants in our own area, here on the eastern shore of Vancouver Island: “when I was seven or eight I would start walking out in the woods with my grandmother and she would point out plants. And I hate to say it, but there are a lot of plants that are missing. Industry wiped them out... how do we maintain them, how do we bring them back?” (2011: personal correspondence). The disappearance of so many medicinal plants – those whose lifelines have travelled with ours for millennia – points to the deeper traumas unfolding within and among us. Protecting these plants in no-pick sanctuaries is an essential but inherently limited response. As community herbalist Rosemary Gladstar writes, “our plant brothers and sisters have been essential healers for humans since the beginning. Today the very survival of medicinal plants is symbolic of the challenge we face as humans” (2000: ix).

It was E.F. Schumacher who reminded us that when the modern world organized its thinking “by some extraordinary structure we call objective science,” it discarded the two great teachers of humanity: the “marvelous system of living nature” and “the traditional wisdom of mankind” (quoted in Sale, 1996: 474). To forget or turn away from these roots is to diminish ourselves and, by extension, our surroundings, leaving even those few places we cordon off for preservation strangely changed: “wilderness [then] becomes an area, a special unit of property treated like an historic relic or ruin – a valuable remnant. It becomes a place of ‘vacations’ (a word related to *vacant*, empty). Humans are strangers there, foreigners to an experience that once grounded their most sacred beliefs and values” (Turner, J., 1995: 334). As Gary Snyder writes, rediscovering our foundation in the specifics of natural systems roots us in what it means to be human:

The trees we climb and the ground we walk on have given us five fingers and toes. The ‘place’ (from the root *plat*, broad, spreading, flat) gave us far-seeing eyes, the streams and breezes gave us versatile tongues and whorly ears. The land gave us a stride, the lake a dive. The amazement gave us our kind of mind (1996: 31).

And so by engaging these minds and bodies – our senses, intellect, and psyche - in the process of restorative wild-harvesting, we begin to experience full, wakeful presence within the life of our home again. We become not

*tourists on* but “*dwellers in the land*” (Sale, 1996: 471), participants in a distinctive and meaningful web of flora and fauna, landforms, flows, and elevations. To embrace and express this is to remember that “the biotic community is also a spiritual community – if we approach it from the intuitive, perceptual, subjective standpoint, and do not confine our observations to those that can be quantified” (Ralph Metzner, 1998: 38).

In all of our home landscapes climates are changing, waterways are shifting, plants are arriving and leaving with startling frequency. Now, more than ever, we are called to meet the ecological realities of our places, staying fiercely present with both the beauties unfolding and the losses being suffered around us. Now, regardless of background or circumstance, we can monitor the wellbeing of native plants, aligning our health with theirs and defending them accordingly. We can seek out, honour, and ask questions of those who carry local ecological knowledge and wisdom - indigenous people, small-scale farmers, lay naturalists, herbalists, scholars, children, elders – and help each other learn. And we can wild-harvest, healing the land as we heal ourselves, making visible and sacred those threads that weave us, always, from the Earth.

**part four** · FINDINGS, DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

## chapter ten · FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I have argued that a devoted practice of wild-harvesting medicinal plants, based in ecological understanding as well as phenomenological experiences of connection, can lead to transformation and healing for both self and land. By framing wild-harvesting within an interdisciplinary context and connecting with long-time practitioners, I have drawn out the following findings:

- Humans share a collective history of long-standing relationships with plants based in reciprocity and respect. Tapping into this heritage opens up possibilities for rediscovery of symbiosis with landscapes;
- Right relationship with plants is dependant on both ecological understanding and appropriate perception. These skills and capacities are linked, and can be developed through an ongoing practice of seasonal wild-harvesting;
- This practice can lead to personal transformation on physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels, widening our perception of self and influencing behaviour towards conservation and restoration;
- Goethe's phenomenological methodology provides an effective framework for cultivating appropriate perception within wild-harvesters. Incorporating Goethe's way of seeing into a wild-harvesting practice can quickly develop our ability to 'tune in' to the living essences of plants and their surroundings, and to harvest more skillfully and respectfully;
- Cultivating a wild-harvesting practice in a home landscape facilitates our own process of growing roots, of loving our place in the world, and protecting its wellbeing as an extension of our own.

Yet over the course of researching, writing, and continuing my own practice of wild-harvesting for this paper, I have been reminded time and again that practice, by its very nature, is experiential. Theoretical or poetic explanations, while good beginnings and guides along the way, are no replacement for arrival in the woods. How to explain the feeling of lifting roots and holding flowers whose wisdom our bodies recognize and long for? How to explain the love I feel for the plants whose generosity has sustained me since I was a baby? Or my sorrow at news of their abuse and disappearance? That spending time in the wild – and especially with medicinal plants, whose relationships with humanity are ancient and deeply vital - opens us to loving it as ourselves, and that this inherently changes us, feels to me hopelessly self-evident. To prove it definitively is at once impossible and utterly imperative.

Though ethnobotanists, ecologists, and psychologists from diverse backgrounds are examining and articulating the depth and complexity of our relationships to plants, research on the subject is far from complete. My sense is that cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural dialogue around the wellbeing of our precious wild medicines, of ourselves, and of each other, has never been more important. The highest aim of these studies might be to discover and map out what connects us, collectively, as a human family, to the Earth, and how we might protect and nourish this connection as though – indeed *because* – our lives and joy depend on it. To carry this work further and explore the full extent of its implications, many questions beg to be explored:

- I have implied that there may be similarities between phenomenological and indigenous modes of inquiry; what would a more substantial exploration of this look like?
- What are other methods of cultivating an appropriate way of seeing? How do we share these teachings and experiences with those who are interested – and with those who are not?
- How might these be incorporated into conservation and restoration biology as well as citizen science?
- How does the validation of local ecological knowledge impact issues of land tenure and stewardship?
- How does the validation of local ecological knowledge impact climate change research?
- What implications does the idea of restorative wild-harvesting and embodied belonging have on regional, national, and international parks systems - protected, no-touch areas where many seek connection with the wild?
- How can we explore these themes in the context of gardening and farming medicinal plants?
- How might these practices be developed in urban areas?
- How might these practices contribute to the cultivation of regional medicinal sovereignty as well as food security?
- What would a community of practitioners – local, bioregional, global - look like?

The reader, I hope, has many more.

It was mountaineer and naturalist John Muir who said that the clearest way into the Universe is through a forest wilderness. This, above all, was his invitation. To conclude, let it also be mine. Because in the end it is only relationship - complex, nuanced, experiential, evolving – cultivated in the depths or on the ragged edges of

those wild spaces we are still so blessed to know, that will coax from us our deepest understandings of life.

Relationship will teach us what it *means* to be alive.

## chapter eleven · CONCLUSION

Arne Naess taught his students that the beating heart of philosophy is the process of asking progressively deeper questions. In this sense, the journey this thesis represents began and remains a philosophical one, rooted as it is in the question to which I ultimately, and endlessly, return: *how can we enter into right relationship with this generous and fragile community of life?* I've looked for answers in many places – in memories and dreams, classrooms and books, conversations and silence. And yet this journey has also been *experience* – leading me back again and again to the pristine, ravaged, and recovering wild places of these islands and coastlines of my home. And so here, hands mingled with the brilliance of muddy roots and rhizomes, filled with the scent of cedars and of rain, I've found a living connection between reflection and participation, between a theory of relationship and its embodied, sensual experience.

I've learned here that the world is a fluid process, an eternal dance of becoming. As I finish this paper it is already changing, leaving my mind like a bird set free and travelling outwards. Meanwhile, the forests continue – spinning themselves up from light and earth, emerging and dying in endless, equal measure. As devil's club the forest spreads itself wide, warning and inviting, gathering medicine in its skin. As the river the forest flows, and carries its salmon home. As me the forest listens, and wonders, and loves. It gathers its baskets and knives and tobacco and begins, again, to practice.

## epilogue · HARVEST

“Now this is an offering,” she says as we lower our bags down and lean in close to the towering Douglas fir. We gently touch the slow cascade of shining, crystallizing pitch on the south side of its thick and corky bark, and look up to its beautiful, sky-set canopy swaying a hundred meters above. Then we look down to its hidden roots, the ones spreading far and deep beneath us, and picture them drawing this pitch up from the secret murmurings of mycelium, earth, and rain. We breathe as it breathes, sway as it sways, and smile. Then Sheila begins carefully scraping the thick pitch away with a small knife and collecting it in a metal cup. “You can’t get it any other way but to look for the trees. The ones who’ve decided to give.”

Sheila is teaching me to gather pitch. For years she has worked so closely with these trees that she now speaks to them with the easy familiarity of family, and I believe her in my bones when she tells me that this tree is consciously generous. We take a thin scraping of pitch, about a tablespoon in total – *it’s strong*, Sheila reminds me, *you don’t need much* – and scatter a mix of herbs around the wide trunk as a way of saying thanks. Then we gather our things and continue down the path.

We come upon a family of slender balsam firs and Sheila shows me the small, horizontal bubbles of sap gathered under the thin skin of the upper bark. I touch them and smile at memories of my sister and I covered in sweet sap and dirt at the lake. With the knife we carefully slice several of the blisters from the trunk, catching as much of the watery sap with our fingers as we can, and then instinctively lean back with our sticky hands to our faces, inhaling again and again and again. I feel euphoric from the clarity, from the sharp spice of the medicine that moments before was resting, alive, within the tree. When I taste it, the sap penetrates the tissues of my throat and stays there for hours, speaking its own bright word of wild astringency.

As I continue, walking from fir to fir with my little knife and bowl and moving my hands along the rippling, dark grey bark, Sheila kneels down to harvest low-growing Oregon grape. She’s had several people come to her with digestive disorders lately, and these plants carry powerful liver and gallbladder medicine within their bitter, inner bark. I know from past gathering that it’s the yellow

of pollen, rich enough to dye fibre and stain your hands with beautiful brightness for days. I hear her singing quietly and find her radiant face bent over the little bush, as calm and joyfully serene as that of a mother cooing to her child. The Oregon grape's roots finally let go, falling upwards out of the ground, and she moves the soil gently and quickly back over the hole they have left. She leaves tobacco in place of the root, and then closes her eyes for just a moment.

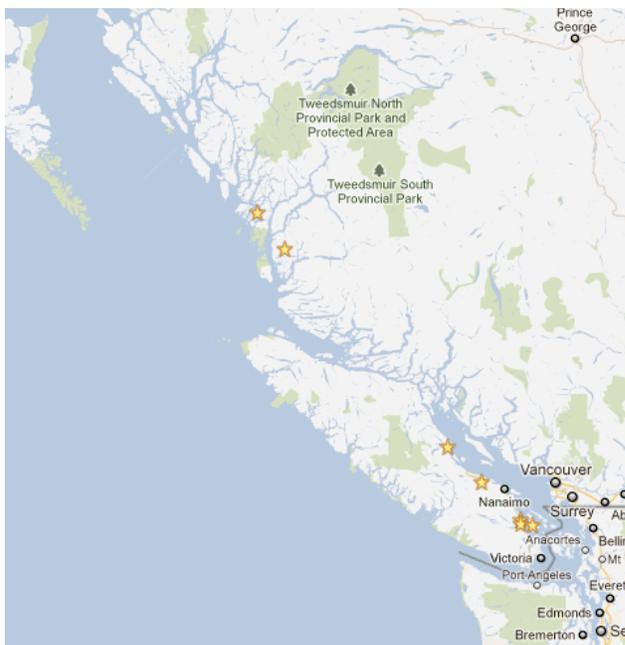
She comes to sit next to me and, nicking the root bark with her knife, shows me the thick, vibrant colour resting like magic beneath dun-coloured skin. Strong medicine. We are quiet for a moment, and then she asks me if I'm getting enough time to integrate what I'm learning, enough time away from the computer and with the plants themselves. I tell her about the thick stand of devil's club by the river, of how everything feels clear when I'm in the forest, and how I hold onto that when I'm sitting down in front of the screen. "Good," she says, nodding her head, "good."

For the rest of the day the image of her face and the tenderness of her hands stay with me. Walking home I step more carefully, looking around me, listening for song.

## APPENDIX ONE · QUESTIONS FOR HARVESTERS

- How long have you been working closely with the plants of this area?
- How have you learned about these plants – i.e. what have your learning pathways been? (For example: personal apprenticeships, family teachings, independent or formal study, personal observation and direct experience with plants, etc.)
- As herbalists and wild-harvesters, do we have special responsibilities towards these plants and their ecological communities?
- I am especially interested in the conservation of root medicines – do you have anything to add about how harvesters can protect and honour plants whose roots they gather?
- Having a close relationship with plants can be considered therapeutic or healing. Do you have anything to say about this?
- How, in your opinion, do we pass good harvesting practices and protocols on to the next generation?
- Do you have anything else you'd like to share about these issues?

## APPENDIX TWO · AREA OF FIELD WORK



Fieldwork was conducted within a geographical area stretching from Bella Bella on the central mainland coast through to the Comox and Cowichan valleys on the Salish Sea rim of Vancouver Island, British Columbia.

Starred points on the map indicate locations of individual or group conversations.

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*The perfect way is without difficulty.*

*Strive hard!*

(Suzuki Roshi)