

Plant People Speak

Jessica Marais, Vancouver Island, 2013

*'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)

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?

I began my research into honourable and restorative wild-harvesting practices with these central questions in mind and heart, born from the knowledge that here in the Pacific Northwest, as in so many other places across the living earth, local people have documented declines in well over one hundred kinds of plant and animal species (Turner, 2005: 135). 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 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 *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 nurture 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.

Here in the Pacific Northwest, Coast Salish nations have been working with the regenerative and healing capacities of the land for at least 10 000 years. These individuals and communities are now actively defending the connection between ecological integrity – of which medicinal plants can be key indicators –

and their own wellbeing. In this excerpt from my thesis, and with their permission, I offer direct quotes from my conversations with several indigenous and land-based herbalists, healers, and wild-crafters living in the Pacific Northwest about their relationships to sacred and healing plants. Their words are arranged into thematic headings to draw parallels and also highlight differences among their approaches to harvesting, and to illuminate a quality of connection to the earth that emerges from mindful participation over generations. They speak for themselves; may it always be so.

AN INTRODUCTION

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 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 Hailhzaqvla 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.

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.

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.

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)

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.

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 worshipping 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)

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, 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)

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)

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)

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)

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)

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 in turn 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 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)

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 Koeeye [a traditional village site and center of eco-cultural restoration programs for youth], they're learning that. We're all interconnected. (Pauline Waterfall)

SUMMARY

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. Pauline, Evelyn, Joe, Della, Sheila, and the many other herbalists I have had the privilege of spending time with over the past decade are all dedicated to teaching and sharing what they know in some way, and as such these diverse individuals are active leaders in bioregional learning and healing. In an era of startling alienation from the soils, airs, waters, plants, and animals surrounding and sustaining us, they remind us 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 – both plants and people - we might begin to practice remembrance.

WORKS CITED

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