

PLANT
SPIRIT
MEDICINE

*A Journey into the
Healing Wisdom
of Plants*

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part one



PLANTS, SPIRITS,
AND THEIR
MEDICINE



chapter 1



PLANT SPIRIT MEDICINE DREAMS

The American adventurer Peter Gorman is walking down a trail in the Amazon jungle. He is on his way back to the village after watching his Matsés Indian friend set a trap for wild boar. The Indian takes advantage of the walk to show Peter some medicinal plants growing along the trail. Within a few minutes, he has pointed out several dozen species and pantomimed their healing virtues.

Arriving at the village, Peter summons his interpreter and returns to the hunter's hut. He didn't have his notebook with him on the walk, he explains, and he couldn't possibly remember all he had been shown. Would the hunter be kind enough to say once again how the herbs were prepared and used?

The hunter-shaman smiles at Peter and then begins to laugh. He invites all his wives and children over to have a good laugh, too. When they have all laughed themselves out, he explains, "That was just to introduce you to some of the plants. If you want to actually use a plant yourself, the spirit of the plant must come to you in your dreams. If the spirit of the plant tells you how to prepare it and what it will cure, you can use it. Otherwise, it won't work for you. That was a good one! I've got to remember what you just said!" He laughs again.

Meanwhile, in Connecticut, a major pharmaceutical firm approaches a shamanic studies institute. The firm wants to contact shamans of the Amazon in order to get information on medicinal plants. The company plans to take samples of the herbs, isolate active molecules, and manufacture them in the laboratory.

I can imagine the scene when the pharmaceutical firm makes it to the Amazon: The shamans laughing uproariously as they collect their meager fees. The field workers rushing specimens back to the laboratory. Skilled technicians spending millions of company dollars researching new compounds, only to come up with one disappointment after another. The shamans will be discredited, but they won't care. They will still be in the jungle, working cures with the plants they have used for centuries.

The American firm, infatuated with its "superior" technology, will go to the jungle dreaming of profits from a patentable new drug. No one will think of asking the shamans what the active ingredients are. If they do ask, they won't like the answer. There is only one active ingredient in plant medicines: friendship. A plant spirit heals a patient as a favor to its friend-in-dreaming, the doctor.

To the people of the Amazon this truth is basic. Any four-year-old understands it. That is why the Matsés hunter-shaman called his children over to have a good laugh at Peter. They couldn't believe a grown man could be so silly!

The Matsés and many other non-European peoples understand that both nature and humankind are endowed with awareness and spirit. Therefore, humans and nature are of the same family. In all cultures there exist individuals who have especially vivid experiences with the spirits of nature. When properly trained and initiated, these people become shamans. Shamans make friends of the spirits of nature and call upon them for help with everyday affairs.

Plant spirit medicine is the shaman's way with plants. It recognizes that plants have spirit and that spirit is the strongest medicine. Spirit can heal the deepest reaches of the heart and soul.

There is nothing exotic about all this. Don't be misled by talk about the Amazon. If you want to meet the most powerful healing plants in the world, just open your door and step outside. They are growing all around you. If you don't believe me, or if you have a taste for romantic locations, you can try going elsewhere. But if you stay there long enough, it comes down to the same thing: dealing with the local weeds.

In keeping with this homegrown quality, I want to tell you what was happening around my home as I wrote this chapter. At first this may seem to have nothing to do with our subject, but bear with me; in time it will make sense.

I went to visit a Huichol Indian named José Benítez Sánchez. In certain circles, José was famous as a visionary artist. Among his own people he was known as a shaman. José lived part time in a village near Tepic, Mexico. The rest of the time he lived in the resort city of Puerto Vallarta. It was there I went to find him.

As I approached his home in one of the humblest districts in town, I recalled the first time I'd met José, the year before. This was a man who earned a huge income by Indian standards. Yet as he welcomed me into his house, it was apparent that he had but one material possession of any consequence—an electric fan. Our visit was brief, for he was due to leave in a few hours to meet with the president of Mexico.

José cheerfully admitted that he did not have money for bus fare. Looking down at his ragged cutoffs, he allowed that he also did not own a pair of pants to wear to greet the president. Evidently he sensed I was confused about why a successful man should be so destitute, for he told me the following story:

When I was a boy, I admired my grandfather. He was a powerful shaman. One day when he felt I was old enough to understand, he told me, “José, there are two types of power that one can acquire. One type is used for your own personal reasons. The other is used for the benefit of your people. You can walk the road to the first type of power or to the second. But let me tell you this: the second road is the road to happiness.” Because my grandfather was a very wise man, I took his advice, and I have stayed on the second road. Whenever the gods give me something, I immediately pass it on for the use of my people.

José's presence radiated contentment. Obviously his grandfather had known what he was talking about. I dug into my suitcase and came up with a pair of pants, which I presented to him, together with his bus fare. He accepted my gifts with sincere thanks and not a trace of surprise. Then he took off on his voyage to see the president, leaving me one small step farther down the road to happiness.

As I was reminiscing about that first meeting, I looked up to see José walking toward me. José was a good-looking, compact man of middle years. That day he was wearing long pants, a short-sleeved shirt, and a cowboy hat. The only sign of his background was his intensely colorful Huichol shoulder bag. He invited me into his house, and we sat down at a table with two of his paintings-in-progress. We chatted about the pilgrimage he would be leading in a few days. Children toddled in and out. A teenage girl stood outside, her chin propped on the windowsill, listening carefully. Eventually I got around to the purpose of my visit.

“I want to ask your advice about something, don José.”

“Of course. Go ahead.”

“Did you know an old man, a great shaman named don José Ríos? They called him Matsuwa.”

“Matsuwa, yes. He was a relative of mine.”

“Well, I met him years ago, and he helped me. Then, about three years ago, my father was dying of cancer. He said he wanted a shaman to help him, so I went to see Matsuwa. He was living in Las Blancas at that time.”

José nodded.

“When I arrived, I found that Matsuwa was as bad off as my father was. He was very weak and couldn’t get out of bed. He was moaning with pain; he said that his legs were killing him. He was lying in the hot sun, but he was shivering with cold. I had to put a blanket over him.”

José made a face to let me know he understood the anguish of the moment.

“It occurred to me to see if I could help Matsuwa. I gave him a treatment. Right away he stopped shivering and asked to have the blanket taken off. His legs stopped hurting too, although he was still too weak to sit up. When the people saw this, they asked me if I could help them too. One of Matsuwa’s nephews took me to see his father, who had been hit by a train and couldn’t walk. On the way to see his father, the boy asked me if I believed in the Huichol way of healing, using feathers. I said, yes, of course I believed in it. ‘In fact,’ I told him, ‘your uncle helped me a lot with his feathers. I would like to learn about Huichol healing myself.’

“The boy told me that there was someone in the village who was very good at healing with feathers. This man had learned his skill by making a pilgrimage every year for five years to a nearby peak.”

“That peak is called ‘El Picacho,’” said José.

“You know it, then,” I said.

“Of course.”

“Well, after that I returned to the United States, and I began to visit El Picacho in my dreams. I want to tell you what I saw in my dreams, so that you can advise me, don José.”

“What did you see?” José asked me.

“At the very top of the mountain there is a flat area where two trees grow. There is a person there, a Huichol man. He is short. His face is round; he has plump cheeks. He smiles all the time. The little man is accompanied by a small deer. The deer dances and does all sorts of antics. The deer and the man let me know that they can help me to heal people.

“I have dreamed of this place many times now. There have been occasions when people who live far away have asked me to heal them. Because I didn’t know what else to do, I asked the man and the deer to do the work. There have been some very good results.”

“It is exactly as you say,” said José.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“The tree you saw is the Wind Tree that grows on that peak. The short man lives there too. He is the magic of the Wind Tree. If you go there he will talk to you, just as we are talking. But you should tell him to talk with you in Spanish, because you don’t understand Huichol.

“I have seen this little Huichol man. He crosses my path when I am on pilgrimage to visit the gods. I ask his permission to pass. I explain that I am on my way to someplace else, and he lets me go. Just as you say, he is very short and has fat cheeks and thick lips. Actually, he is very, very old, although often he appears to be young. The deer lives there at El Picacho as well. Sometimes the antlers of the deer appear on the head of the little man. This is all the magic of the Wind Tree, which you also saw in your dream. The Wind Tree teaches people how to heal. It also teaches music. There is a world-famous musician in our tribe. It was the Wind Tree that taught him.”

I said, “You tell me that a Wind Tree grows on the peak, but there were two trees in my vision.”

“They are both the Wind Tree,” José replied. “One represents the left antlers of the deer and the other represents the right antlers. Many people go and make the sacrifice to the Wind Tree there at El Picacho. This is a very good thing. Because you have dreamed this, it would be very good

for you to go. The little man you saw does live there. If you go with faith and ask that he appear to you so that you can learn from him, he will appear in person.

“However, it would be necessary to consult first with someone who is familiar with the magic of El Picacho, someone who has made the sacrifice. I myself rarely go to that region. I keep busy with other sacrifices, other pilgrimages. There is someone in my village, though, who knows the mountain very well. His name is Guadalupe González Ríos, and he is also related to José Ríos. He is a very good man, not at all stingy with information. I am going to our village tomorrow. When I see him, immediately I will remember this conversation, and I will tell him about you. Perhaps you can come to the *fiesta* when we return from our pilgrimage. The three of us can talk together then. We should be back by the twenty-fourth.”

“What day of the week is that?”

“Thursday, I believe.”

“Friday!” said the girl in the window. This was her first contribution to the conversation.

“Too bad!” I said. “I will be in the United States at that time.”

“Never mind. Come by my house when you return, and we will go to my village together. Perhaps I will bring along another man who has also dreamed of the Wind Tree. He is a German.”

“Frenchman,” chimed the girl.

More than once during my school years, I awoke in the middle of the night with the solution to a mathematical equation that had completely stumped me during the day. I never told anyone that I had done my algebra homework in my sleep. I was afraid that people would think I was weird. Eventually I stopped having these dreams.

Much later in life I discovered that it is not at all unusual for people to learn from dreams. Nowadays I enjoy asking people if they have ever dreamed something that later came to pass. About 75 percent say they have indeed had a dream of this type. And everyone has dreams that take place somewhere other than the bedroom where their sleeping body lies. When we dream, we can easily travel to distant places. We can know the future. We are given special understanding that enables us to solve life’s problems.

For the most part, these wonderful dream powers lie dormant in our society, but the Huichols and the Matsés of the Amazon consider dream

learning to be true learning. Indeed, nearly every culture on earth, except our own, respects dream learning as true learning. We revere the rational, analytical method of learning that has been honed and polished since the days of the ancient Greeks. We do not realize that the shamans of our species have honed and polished another method. This dreaming method is neither rational nor analytical, but it works extremely well.

The key to this method is to get into the dream state of consciousness, keeping in mind what it is that you wish to learn or accomplish. The way you get into the dream state is incidental. Some shamans learn to go to sleep and dream about what they wish to dream about. Others use psychotropic plants. Many simply listen to monotonous drumming to induce the dream state.

When I first heard about El Picacho several years ago, I was eager to learn from the spirits said to dwell there. With the demands of conducting a busy acupuncture practice, raising young children, and attending my dying father, it was impossible for me to visit the peak in person, so I decided to visit in dreams. (At that time I was not aware that it could be dangerous to engage a sacred site this way.) I lit a candle and some incense to help set the mood, then I lay down on my back and relaxed. I affirmed my intention to visit the sacred site and meet any helpful spirits that might live there. As I listened to loud, repetitive drumbeats, my state of consciousness shifted. My dream helpers appeared to me and flew me to the peak, where I had the experiences I recounted to José Benítez Sánchez during my current visit, several years after the original dream.

My conversation with José confirmed that my dream corresponded with an ancient tradition. As a Huichol and a shaman, he had no trouble accepting that I had met a tree spirit who could help me heal people. Being a middle-class white American, on the other hand, I have been plagued for years with the question, “Am I making this up?”

This is the question—the monster—faced by every Westerner who ventures into the world of dreams. There is only one way to subdue this monster: put the dream to the test and see if it works. If the magic of the Wind Tree can heal people, does it really matter whether I am making it up?

Several years ago, I guided a group of my students to dream the medicine of the willow. We were sitting in a circle, sharing our dreams. One man, a physician, said that there was an aspect of his dream he did not know how to interpret. “Over and over again,” he said, “the willow spirit kept repeating to me, ‘Look up! Look up! Always look up!’”

A month later I again met with the physician, who told the following story:

I have a patient who seemed perfect for willow medicine, so I've given it to her three times now. When she came back after the first treatment, she insisted I tell her what that "wonderful medicine" was. At the same time, she kept turning to a potted willow on my windowsill. She said something strange and wonderful: "That plant is so lovely. I would like to be that plant!"

I asked the woman to tell me what the treatment had done for her, and she mentioned improvements in a long list of physical complaints. "But," she said, "this is the best thing of all. I didn't realize it before, but I have been depressed all my life. I was so negative! It was as if my mind's eye was always looking down at the ground, and all I could see was the dirt. But you know, from the moment I left here last time, I heard a voice inside that said, 'Look up! Look up! Always look up!' and now it's as if I am seeing the beauty around me for the first time!"

At that moment I told her that the plant on the windowsill and the medicine she had taken were both willow. I also shared with her my willow dream and said I had heard the same voice saying, "Look up!" She was so moved she began to cry. At the next treatment she brought in a poem she had written to thank the willow spirit.

The experiences of the class, the physician, the patient—where did they come from? Is there such a thing as a willow spirit? If so, what is it really? Does it matter? Evidently it *did* matter to the young physician. Despite his experience with the willow spirit and his depressed patient, he decided that we were all just making it up, and he stopped practicing plant spirit medicine.

As for me, it seems that plant spirit medicine keeps practicing me. I thought I would go to José Benítez Sánchez and find out about an entirely different kind of healing having to do with sacred mountains, dancing deer, and such. I instead found out it is all about the magic of the Wind Tree. So I'm still learning medicine from plants.

chapter 2



PLANTS

The year is 1970. I am an urban expatriate trying to live on the land in northern Vermont. It is early spring; there is still snow on the ground. Soon it will be time to fix the fence, and I need posts. I shoulder a bow saw and a machete and set off to my favorite part of the farm—the cedar bog that surrounds the waterfall.

The sun is shining brightly today, although the air is still cool. As I enter the woods, I listen to the wind sifting through the cedar boughs. I take a pinch of leaves, crush them under my nose, and nod a greeting to the trees. The cedars here grow in little families, with several trunks sharing their roots. Among these families are miniature meadows, soon to be filled with grasses and wildflowers. I will spend the next two or three days working in this place. Had I brought the chainsaw, I could have been finished by lunchtime today—dinner at the latest. I make a mental note never to bring the chainsaw.

I have never cut fence posts by myself before. This time I can do it any way I want. How do I want to do it? If I were a tree growing here in this bog, how would I want it done?

I turn to the nearest cedar and ask it how I should cut the fence posts. I don't expect an answer, of course, and I don't get one.