

ALL IS NOT LOST

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“Energy cannot be created or lost; it can only be transformed”, announced our high-school physics teacher, as our ticker-tape trolleys trundled down narrow runways perched on dark-varnished benches. As the trolleys came to rest – often on the floor – it was hard to see where the energy of the noisy, rushing vehicles had gone, but we were reassured that it was still somewhere in the laboratory.

I wonder if knowledge is a bit like energy. Can it ever be lost, or does it just re-appear in different forms? I’ve been thinking about this question in the context of knowledge of medicinal plants.

Many people are concerned about the loss of indigenous and traditional knowledge, and are looking to the old ways of knowing the world for solutions to our current ecological crises. As Fikret Berkes writes, in ‘Sacred Ecology’,

“The lessons of traditional knowledge, especially of the ecological kind, have practical significance for the rest of the world. There is a growing line of thought...that we are moving in the new millennium toward different ways of seeing, perceiving, and doing, with a broader knowledge base than that allowed by modernist Western science.” (Berkes, p. xiii)

‘Indigenous’ and ‘traditional’ are weighty words, boulders which anchor intellectual concepts to earthy origins, but despite their solid nature, they are slippery terms to define. Here is my attempt:

‘Indigenous’ implies that the knowledge is restricted to a particular group of people who have lived in the same place for a long time. It suggests that these people know their place in a unique way, specific to their culture.

‘Traditional’ often refers to a continuity of transmission of beliefs and practices, with adherence to social conventions, but also with responsiveness to change; new discoveries can become incorporated into the historical. Thus, there is an evolution of herbal knowledge, with different groups of people – not all indigenous – contributing to knowledge systems.

As an ethnobotanist from Scotland, who has lived in Africa for over 20 years, what kind of knowledge do I have, when learning about the uses of local medicinal plants from African herbalists? Clearly, I am not indigenous to Zambia where I do most of my research, and these are not my traditions, and yet I now hold some of the same practical knowledge as the healers who taught me. I would answer by acknowledging that, while I have *factual* knowledge of African plants (my “knowledge base”, according to Berkes), my *way* of knowing them and their healing properties is neither indigenous nor traditional. I did not learn about them in the same way as the healers did.

The Zambian traditional practitioners with whom I have worked say that they were trained from childhood by an elderly relative – often a grandmother or grandfather – who not only showed them how to recognise, harvest, and prepare the plants, but also taught them how to diagnose illnesses and prescribe specific remedies for each patient’s needs.

One healer, known to me as Christopher, describes his childhood dreams as being filled with visions of particular plant leaves falling around him as he slept. When he eventually told his herbalist grandfather about these dreams, the elderly man understood that Christopher had been called by the ancestors to follow in his footsteps as a traditional healer, and he began to train him in the art and science of herbal medicine.

This brings me to consider how the first human beings came to know the healing properties of plants. Who taught the first herbalists? How did the San bushmen of the Kalahari, for example, who are considered to be among the few remaining ‘indigenous’ peoples, even though they have been displaced from most of their traditional lands, discover that devil’s claw roots can reduce pain and inflammation in arthritic joints?

The conventional reply is that it must have been through trial-and-error; that, over the course of thousands of years, people ingested concoctions of various roots and leaves and found, by accident or happy coincidence, that all manner of ailments from coughs and skin rashes to dysentery and malaria could be treated with selected parts of specific plants in the right combinations. I have to say that I find this hard to swallow!

Like Christopher and his dreams of plants falling out of the sky, people from all over the world report that visions and voices of ancestral spirits guide them to plant-wisdom. Some also recount how particular plants ‘talk’ to them, calling to them when a specific cure is sought.

Stephen Harrod Buhner, in ‘The Lost Language of Plants’, presents his findings on how the plant-medicine people of non-industrial cultures came to know the healing properties of specific plants. In the vast majority of

cases, indigenous healers said that they obtained their knowledge from “dreams, visions, direct communications from the plant, or sacred beings” (Buhner, 2002, p.33).

In ‘The Secret Teachings of Plants’, Buhner explores further “this gathering of knowledge directly from the wildness of the world”, and invites the reader to:

“come to our senses, to reclaim the ability each and every one of us has to see and understand the world around us...in ways far more sustainable and sophisticated than reductionist science can ever attain.” (Buhner, 2004, p.3)

He writes of the intuitive mode of cognition, and reassures us that it has not disappeared and is not limited to ancient cultures.

For aren't we all indigenous to the Earth, regardless of our specific culture? Wherever we live can become our home; if we stay a while, we may come to know the place well. It is not only traditional healers who may experience special relationships with particular plants; we are all capable of opening to our fellow beings. Even if we did not grow up learning about the plants in our neighbourhood, we need not be permanently excluded from their world. We can become better listeners and begin to hear their language, learning the properties of plants directly from them.

Goethe's holistic approach, as practised by Margaret Colquhoun of Pishwanton in Scotland, Craig Holdrege of the Nature Institute in the USA, and a growing number of scientists around the world, offers a way for Western-educated people, who may not come from an indigenous or traditional culture of plant knowledge, to experience directly the qualitative properties of individual plants and to nurture deeper, ethical, relationships with them. This approach is based on a distinctive way of knowing plants, rather than on a factual body of knowledge.

Berkes, too, emphasises the need to examine “knowledge as process, rather than as content” (Berkes, p. xxiii.), describing indigenous knowledge as “holistic”, in the way it deals with our complex (uncertain, self-organising) natural world. (Berkes, p.193)

I have been discussing knowledge as though it exists solely in the human realm, but the plants have their own way of knowing and, thus, are the original holders of this ancient wisdom. Human societies and cultures may come and go, and with them their factual knowledge, but as long as we have botanical diversity, and holistic and intuitive ways of understanding the plants' language, the knowledge cannot be lost forever.

Thus, plant knowledge is like energy: it can disappear from our awareness, but it is always present in one form or another: if not in our cultural records, it is within the tissues and processes of the plants themselves. Even if we forget, the plants will teach us again.

References

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