

Jungle Medicine

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Jungle Medicine...the original pharmacy

My study and use of plant medicines and healing took me out of the dispensing pharmacy and into the rain forest where I joined an ethnobotanical expedition into the jungles of the Amazon many miles up the Yarapa River, south of Iquitos, Peru. We participated in an intensive course about the medicinal bounty of nature and how indigenous societies are able to identify and use many plants of which we Westerners are unaware.

The rain forest's overpowering size and expanse had a depth and density that I had never seen before. The realization that this vastness held an undiscovered store of medicinal knowledge which indigenous peoples were tapping into right now gave me a sense of wonderment, and a new sense of purpose. Besides being rich with an overpowering verdant fecundity and colorful wild life, the rain forest holds secrets that could change the course of medicine as we know it.

Jungle Medicine: Peru

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I had worked with plant medicines for years, but was really unprepared for the magnitude and layered richness of the Amazon rain forest. The Garden of Eden does exist and I was in the middle of it. I was at the site of natural creation, watching the ultimate masterpiece unfold before me. The rain forest's pure aliveness is uncluttered by our civilized neatness and what we consider to be the necessities of life.

That first trip into the Amazon jungles, nearly two decades ago, changed my life. Returning home, I enfolded the ethnobotanical knowledge and experiences into my work as a teacher,

lecturer, writer by founding the Association of Natural Medicine Pharmacists. As I worked with plant medicines, I knew in the back of my mind that I would return to this magical and sacred place of the Amazon rain forest. The opportunity came when I heard that the shaman I had met during my first visit there needed volunteers to help him set up a medicinal plant garden. I jumped at what I saw as a legitimate reason to return, as my mind swung into euphoric recall. The magic of the rain forest had left an imprint on me and it drew me again.

Recalling my last trip, I limited my expectations

with an attitude of "How ya gonna top that?" as I made preparation to return again. I would soak up the splendor and I learn more about healing plants by tending the gardens. My friendship with *curandero* don Antonio, the native shaman and garden keeper, would be renewed.

Having been in challenging jungle conditions before, I packed proper clothing and protective footwear. As a meticulous pharmacist, I also included a more than adequate first-aid kit. We would be many hours by high speed boat from the nearest medical facilities.

Unfortunately, within a week I contracted a jungle induced malady. Even with my good shoes and hygiene, my left big toe became badly infected by some unknown microbe. As the toe throbbed and enlarged, the nail began to float and ooze a nasty fluid. The pain became unbearable, and my shoes did not fit. My pharmaceutical antibiotics and creams didn't help.

Don Antonio, a local jungle shaman, was my only source of on-site health care. He examined the oozing toe and said his primary concern was avoiding a blood infection that could travel up my leg and infect the groin lymph area. He would prepare a foot bath of medicinal plants to use for a couple of days, and if that failed he suggested using a machete to slice open the toe-nail and relieve the pressure. Needless to say, I welcomed an herbal foot bath over the prospect of a two-foot long machete blade performing first aid.

With me hobbling behind him, don Antonio gathered seven plants from nature's outdoor pharmacy for his medicinal brew. Experiencing no change from antibiotics, I decided to trust the traditional jungle medicine process. Don Antonio made the foot soak from the leaves of the Casho, Pinon blanco, Arnica, Paico, Papaya macho (only the yellow leaves would work, he said), Camote, and Sangre de grado. To this concoction don Antonio added some ordinary table salt. I understood the rationale for the salt, the rest I just trusted. I felt like the pharmacists of history who grew and harvested the plants, concocted the plant mixture, and compounded the final medicine. I was dying of pain and living a moment of original pharmacy.

As water was heating on the fire and don Antonio made preparations, I referenced the plants in



an ethnobotanical dictionary to see if science had catalogued anything about their uses. From the book and don Antonio, I learned that Casho, Pinon blanco, Paico, and Sangre de grado are used for infections; Papaya macho and Camote treat fungus; and Arnica is used as an antiseptic and anti-inflammatory. We would soon find out.

For the next few days, we repeatedly soaked the foot in freshly prepared plant baths, and the infection slowly resolved itself. The swelling went down, discoloration abated, and thankfully, the pain went away. The oozing under the toe-nail dried up, and the toe-nail did not turn black and fall off as don Antonio had originally anticipated. I was amazed at how quickly it healed and was delighted that the first aid machete was not going to be used.

The most amazing thing about the treatment was the unquantifiable ingredient of don Antonio's ministrations. He paid attention and showed care for my discomfort and condition. He blew sacred tobacco smoke on my legs. He sang and hummed shamanic plant-spirit healing songs as my foot was being washed and soaked in the fresh green aromatic bath. The "medicine and the magic" I call it. Who's to say whether it was the invisible medicine of the spirit, the physical medicine of the plants themselves, or the tender care pouring forth from the shaman's heart that was doing the healing. That kind of attention had never been lavished on me in a Western medical setting, regardless of the severity of my condition. It reminded me of our medicine's term "attending physician" or one who "attends" the patient and how frequently that promise is not delivered.



Trained in modern high-tech pharmacy, I sometimes find it difficult to believe that "those little green leaves" can cure "a big problem." And certainly something as elusive as the invisible medicine of the spirit was never taught in pharmacy school at the University of Minnesota from which I graduated. As pharmacists we're taught to single out the pharmacologically active ingredients.

Modern Western medicine will probably discount my foot healing as anecdotal. Some will propose that until laboratory analysis is made on the seven plants used, we only had a subjective native cure.

In the scramble for progress through chemistry, we have forgotten how much our lives depend on potent plant medicines such digitalis, curare, and taxol. The curative power of plants is far broader than our current research has catalogued. Medicinal plants from the rain forests used by traditional societies may prove to be an important source of potentially therapeutic drugs today, as in the past. Deep in rain forests lie yet to be discovered secrets that may cure today's devastating diseases.

Until the 1950's, pharmaceutical research relied heavily on plants as sources of medicines. Today, with the millions of prescriptions issued in the US, 25 % of the drugs are still isolated from plants. Many were discovered through the ethnobotanical technique of studying indigenous uses of plants.

The hope is that native healers will give researchers a direction in which to concentrate their drug discovery efforts.

Rain forest healers have a remarkably extensive knowledge of plant medicines. It is transmitted from generation to generation, usually through on-the-job training apprenticeships. Don Antonio is passing on his knowledge to his son who works beside him in the jungles, and to me his only non-family apprentice. Unfortunately for our future and the preservation of this knowledge, few native young people are following in the *curandero's* footsteps. As ethnobotanist Dr. Mark Plotkin sadly observed, "every time a shaman dies, it is as if a library burned down."

Not only are the native healers declining in number, but the rain forests themselves are being destroyed at an alarming rate with little thought of preservation or conservation. Tropical forests cover approximately 7.75 billion acres worldwide and provide habitat for about 125,000 species of flowering plants. And less than 1% of these plants have been studied for their active components. Many species that potentially hold the key to life-saving new medicines are facing extinction daily.



The danger of losing this untapped knowledge and the native practices is the impetus prompting medicinal scientists throughout the world to endorse rain forest conservancy. Realizing my part in this conservancy effort, I've founded the Center for Spirited Medicine. It is dedicated to conserving rain forest habitats by promoting knowledge, awareness, and proper stewardship of these precious resources; as well as preserving the ancient healing art of shamanism, the keepers of the knowledge of medicinal plants and spirited plant medicines.

Experiencing the healing power of the rain forest and partaking in original pharmacy was life changing for me. It was exciting to be part of nature's medicines, picked fresh from plants and put to immediate use to relieve human maladies. The green medicine of nature has renewed the fascination I felt for pharmacy when I entered the profession long ago. For that, I am truly grateful.