

This letter to the editor of Asa Hershoff DC,NC, Santa Monica, California was first published in 'Homeopathy Today' (2000, Vol.20, Jan.:14), the newsletter of the National Center for Homeopathy, Alexandria, VA, USA, (www.homeopathic.org) edited by Julian Winston. It is presented here with kind permission.

Theme of this letter to the editor is the extension of the principle of similarity and the discovery of the correspondence of the nature of the substance itself and the person by the aid of intuition and the doctrine of signature.

Healing Plants: The Undiscovered Country

Asa Hershoff

A thin green film of organic life that sheathes our planet, plants have dominated the earth for two hundred million years. All other forms of life depend on them, even for the air they breathe. Plants are the ultimate alchemical crucible, transforming solar light directly into substance, drawing carbon from the air, assimilating nitrogen and water from the soil and producing matter from energy. Today these organic powerplants are still the world's main source of fuel and energy. Plants feed us, clothe us and shelter us, while providing our medicines, perfumes, resins, paper, paints, oils, fibers—a seemingly endless stream of useful and essential elements of daily life. With plant substances we create our homes, furnishings, musical instruments and our artists' paints. Field and forest provides a consistent source of recreation and enjoyment, enriching us with their vast and limitless beauty. As the basic matrix of our lives, plants have always been a rich source of symbolism and inspiration for the artist and the spiritual seeker, as well as for the common person. They stimulate us, drug us and addict us, as well as open doorways to worlds of magic and of grace.

Because of their profound material and immaterial impact on our lives, the study of plants and their grouping into families has immense importance. The science of plant relationships and nomenclature (taxonomy) can be purely academic, providing a broader knowledge of the natural world. But it also yields many practical benefits for growing, using and preserving the diversity of plant life that surrounds us.

Yet for the homeopath or herbalist this is largely undiscovered territory. Though there have been attempts at categorizing or listing healing plant remedies according to their families, this has had no real practical application. Indeed, for traditional homeopathy, the actual origin of the medicine has seemed almost irrelevant. The symptom-picture of the remedy, and how close this matches the patient's complaints, has been all-important. The goal has been to match the symptoms produced by a remedy with the symptoms of a sick or well individual.

Gradually, a new vision of matching person to remedy has arisen. Rather than merely matching symptoms, a number of cutting-edge homeopaths look for the essence, the storyline that pervades the whole case. In this view matching the nature of the original healing substance with the nature of the person becomes as important as matching the symptoms produced by each. The development of homeopathy has led us to this point, through a gradual evolution and progression of ideas and understandings.

The first hundred years of homeopathy was a time of experimentation and consolidation, where the practical methods and modus operandi of homeopathic cure and treatment were developed and clarified. Like all the early sciences, what was paramount was the accumulation of information and the testing of the accuracy and validity of the method in that ultimate crucible, clinical practice. In this it was broadly successful. The great cornerstone, the "rule of similars" expressed the truth that symptoms are a natural expression of the body/mind, a reactive attempt to bring us towards wellness. The remedy pushes the body in a

direction that it is already trying to go, as indicated by its symptom reaction. The appropriate homeopathic medicine was shown to correct maladaptive or fixed response patterns (miasms) and free inherent healing capacities and resources. Scores of remedies were researched (proved) during this time, and extensive literature was produced which still forms the cornerstone of homeopathic practice.

In the modern era, homeopathy has been occupied with integrating this rich heritage of healing remedies with present-day knowledge of psychology, and the dynamics of human personality. Vithoulkas has emphasized the emotional "essence" of remedies and many authors, including Coulter, Zaren, Morrison, Baily, Sankaran and Herscu, have tried to encapsulate the personality of homeopathic substances and epitomize the emotional and mental profile of the remedy-and the person who needs it. Basically though, this approach perceives the person and the remedy as a fortuitous match. There is little question here about the nature of the substance itself, and the correspondence between person and substance is a still a matter of coincidence. We know that chemical, psychological and toxic effects produced by a material drug are the basis for homeopathic symptoms. But how to explain the extraordinarily detailed psychological experiences, dreams, and emotional states that are produced- and cured- by remedies? How is it that there exists within a plant (or mineral, etc.), such a complex of meanings and functions, and how do these meanings correspond so perfectly to human states and human dysfunction? How can it be that our values, belief systems, identity and way of perceiving find their analog in a weed growing by the wayside? How can the information contained within a growing shoot or vine transform our health, both physically and psychologically. Somehow, homeopathy has continued to work effectively, while neither answering or asking these questions.

Thus it is a strange irony that homeopathy, or rather homeopaths, have overlooked one of the greatest discoveries ever made by humankind, a discovery that has been in their possession all along. Homeopaths have been busily involved in the clinical work of finding a medicine, derived from natural substances, that exactly match the person's psychological profile: their hopes, aspirations, background, traumas, development, values, relationships and so on. They know that they have medicines that, under the exacting lens of homeopathic research or "provings," correspond in minute detail to their patients psychological make-up. Yet few have asked the obvious question-how is it that such a correspondence exists? How can a plant or mineral contain within its nature, the similitude of a human psyche, a human ego, a human spirit? The fact that such a relationship does exist, and that this information is-somehow-within each separate species of plant, is a startling revelation, one that turns our understanding of life, biology, evolutionary theory and the nature of the manifest world itself on its proverbial ear.

This brings us to the most recent development of homeopathy, which could be termed "archetypal." While it also seeks the theme which underlies both the psychological and physiological symptom profile, it relates this to the very nature of the natural substance from which the remedy is derived. Though we might feel reasonably adept at determining the nature of a person - their psychological and biological profile and typology - we have difficulty conceiving the nature of a particular plant species. This is as much a fault of our contemporary science as it is our own, in acquiring a habit of no longer seeing meaning in living things, apart from obvious functions having to do with reproduction, survival, etc. The pitcher plant catches insects, which it digests and subsists on. There is a functional meaning here, but what are the archetypal, formative forces that would create such a monstrous plant?

These questions are not merely philosophical or academic. This archetypal theme is clearly embodied in the form and function of the remedy itself. In the case of a plant, the shape of the leaf, the fragrance of the flower, its relationship to soil, sky, insect, and to other species, and its particular struggle with its habitat and environment, all speak eloquently-and accurately-

about the theme they embody. Should one consider such relationships between substance and person as a merely poetic or just a handy device for memorizing remedies? Shaman, seers and visionaries, both ancient and modern, have already voiced these connections for us. Still, all this might be idle speculation were it not for homeopathy itself. Homeopathic research or provings have given us the key to both prove and verify that such patterns of meaning exist within plants, and have gone further to define the exact nature of this meaning. Homeopathy takes us out of the realm of subjectivity and overactive imagination and presents startling facts about how the natural realm mirrors our body and mind.

The next, and logical step beyond this, is seeing the broader relationships between individual plant (or animal) species, and the overall meanings inherent in natural groupings of species families, orders and superorders beyond them. Some teachers have focused on "functional" groupings of related medicines. Yet natural plant families provide a rich source for investigation. By weaving through the tapestry of botany, plant lore and mythology, intuition and insight, herbal tradition and homeopathic science, overall meaning-themes emerges and assert themselves.

Some modern teachers, particularly Rajan Sankaran, Massimo Mangialavori, Lou Klein, Jan Scholten, Vega Rozenberg and Joel Kreisberg have taken the family and archetypal/signature approach, each in their own way and to their own degree. Though such approaches represent different and even divergent methods and understandings, there is a common thread in this overall movement to understand how forms in nature correspond to our internal processes, and how this knowledge relates to the practical work at hand.

This new road of discovery, enticing and exhilarating, is also demanding and not without its pitfalls. Inaccuracy and speculation, uninformed guesses, baseless conclusions, or highly personalized concepts or fantasies, can attract us with their novelty and cleverness. The key to navigating these difficulties is knowledge, and integration of knowledge. To understand, in this case plants medicines and plant families, there must be more than a cursory mastery of botany, taxonomy and the vast body of accurate scientific data about the plant world. A rigorous reliance on traditional provings, repertory and shared clinical experiences can be augmented by individual observations and cured cases, and by personal insight, free from bias, fused in the crucible of clear intention and unrelenting effort.

The undiscovered country of homeopathy beckons, offering rich gifts and treasures. In ancient forests, in heat-drenched grasslands, in small yellow petals nodding by the banks of green flowing water, dwell precious and unique healing stories. Transformed by homeopathy's alchemy, they yield their secrets, allowing the physician to wield healing forces that are both powerful and sure. Let the journey begin.

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