



PIP WALLER AND LUCY WELLS

**TOUCHED
BY NATURE**

**PLANT SPIRIT
MEDICINE JOURNEYS**

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Pip Waller and Lucy Wells

AEON

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*For the plant spirits,
our beloved teachers Eliot and Alison,
and all of our colleagues, clients and students
with love and gratitude*

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FOREWORD

By Eliot Cowan

From the perspective that we hold in plant spirit medicine, which is similar to the perspective that is held in many of what can be called traditional medicines, the state of the world and the state of the people in it is manifesting a lot of problems due to what can be called poor relationship.

Poor relationship to oneself, poor relationship to others, and poor relationship to the world itself. The way people, certainly in the dominant culture, relate to life, and to the world, is very out of balance. People see the world through the eyes of the fears of the mind. The mind sees the world, other people, and even oneself, as presenting endless possibilities for loss and damage and hurt. Somehow we feel that we need to protect ourselves from all that, under the heading of trying to control things. The illusion that you can control things is driven by trying to protect a personal agenda. And that has produced endless amounts of needless destruction, illness, and suffering of various kinds. Because that view doesn't take anything else into account. It doesn't see the world as something that is related to us, that we're part of, and that we can and should have a good relationship to. Not only for our own benefit but for the benefit of others, both humans and the world itself.

We've created a way of life, under the heading of trying to keep ourselves safe, that offers much less safety. Because we are, from the point of view of what can be called ecology, destroying the world and all the relationships and systems of the world which are designed to support us.

Plant spirit medicine in many cases can and does reduce symptoms and so forth. But where does that come from? It comes from a place of people actually having a different experience of their relationship to themselves, their relationship to other humans, and their relationship to the world itself. It starts to bring those things back into balance, which means that it has a very important place in the world and is of great help. Is it the whole enchilada? No, but it's a very important part of it, because it does help to restore something at this deep level that needs to be restored, in a way that just alleviation (temporary, usually) of symptoms doesn't. What's needed is to really solve the problem.

And it does that in a way that's not a theory or a dogma or something that has to be believed. People experience it, they live it. A lot of times they don't know what it is all about, but they live it, they feel it, and that helps to bring that person into better relationship. And guess what, not only does that benefit that individual, but it also benefits all the people whom that individual touches and has relationships with, because they're experiencing something quite different and it produces what could be called a kind of beneficial infection.

There is often an immense benefit for a person's whole family or working companions. People may simply start making better choices and decisions in their lives which affect them and those around them for the better. So I say that besides the beneficial effect on the person we are treating, there's also a beneficial effect on those around that person; and this has a way of spreading, and starting to move things in the direction they have to move to solve these crucial, urgent, dangerous imbalances in the way that we are living that are creating a lot of suffering and a lot of unnecessary destruction.

Here I'm going to relate to another medicine, homeopathy. Without going into a lot of detail, what homeopathy demonstrates is that by a very small intervention, so small that by the standards of Western science it doesn't even exist, a tiny introduction of the appropriate remedy can have effects on the whole system. A good homeopath can give a person a tiny dose and it can change not only his or her state of health but whole life. So in that way I'll say that plant spirit medicine,

even though it's small, can and does have a big effect, helping people to move back into a form of living that is much more deeply satisfying and also sustainable, which the current way of life is not.

A good, well told story about plant spirit medicine is medicine itself. Stories touch us in a way that information simply doesn't do. When we hear or read a good story, something in us opens. And something comes through the opening and touches our heart. That's why I say that a plant spirit medicine story gives you a good dose of the medicine.

This is a book of true stories. It's designed to give you many experiences, many healings. Read through it and ask yourself, "What did I learn?" If you expected to learn techniques, you might say, "Well, I didn't learn very much." But I say you will have learned a lot because you will have been touched by a mysterious medicine.

Stories have an enormous effect. That's why in many cultures, the transmission of tradition is done through stories. If you visit indigenous people like those in the Huichol highlands and you think, "I'm going to learn about their medicine," and you expect people to give you a lecture, you won't find it. The way they teach and have always done is the way it has always been done by human beings—through stories.

Information just doesn't touch us the same way. Information speaks to our mind, which is always going to doubt and try to defend itself in the face of something as mysterious as plant spirit medicine. But there is a chasm between experiencing something and thinking about it. So read these stories. Get the experience. Let your heart rejoice in the good medicine here.

INTRODUCTION



We are in the midst of a quiet revolution, quiet because the plants don't speak out loud. Yet the necessity to listen to them is more urgent than it's ever been, now that we are generally agreed to be on the brink of complete environmental destruction, with human activity as culpable and degraded as at any time in history. Simultaneously there are strong voices telling us we've never had it so good as technology continues to rampage through our lives bringing apparent help whilst it ravages our social relationships and inexorably blocks our essential connection with the natural world.

Although plant spirit medicine, PSM, the subject of this book could simply be seen as yet another natural healing modality, this in no way sufficiently describes its depth, aliveness, and potential impact for us human beings when we engage with it. The astonishing benevolence

of the plant spirits is something many of us have become completely oblivious to, just as we are totally unaware of how out of balance we have become as products of an increasingly disconnected society. Although plants continue to give, in unceasing rounds of generosity via food, shelter, and medicine, their gifts have become mere commodities we use up with very little awareness or care of their origins.

As human beings we are busy enough denying our own spiritual natures, so to assert that a plant might even possess a spirit challenges many of us beyond the comfort zone of our current mindset. As organisms with complex physical needs and vulnerabilities we can try to make these the whole picture of being human. We also have another complex and vulnerable aspect, that of the mind, defined in this instance as the mental level of our cognitive functions. It is very specific to humans, having a mind. Other beings don't seem to have much use for one but as humans we need our minds to navigate the world, think, and communicate. Much is known about the complexities of the body and mind these days, it being now generally accepted that the two interrelate and exert a major influence on each other and our overall health. There is, however, a vital ingredient missing in this human recipe, that which gives flavour to the whole being, the indefinable essence that can never be adequately spoken of that is far beyond the reach of the mind. It is felt at key moments when we are fundamentally touched by a clear and heart opening moment: the gaze of a loved one, a stunning sunset, a piece of exquisite music, an awe inspiring landscape, the incredible loveliness of a flower, a peaceful dying breath. Life is spiced with these windows onto what we are calling spirit. Spirit affects the mind as the mind affects the body. Without the health, balance, and radiance of the spirit everything ends up feeling insignificant by comparison, regardless of wealth, success, and relatively good physical health.

We live in times that offer a lot of help and knowledge to heal the body. Unless we are too poor or disadvantaged we have access to medicine that can help our physical bodies. There is also a fair amount of nourishment for our minds: rich culture, wonderful books, theatre and films, fascinating knowledge, and many effective therapies to help heal the mind/psyche. But it is not so easy in our modern world for the life of the spirit to find nourishment and healing. Our societies do a very poor job providing for the health of the spirit. Living without a healthy relationship to spirit separates us from a deep sense of joy, purpose, and fulfilment, so much so that many of us have forgotten these

possible qualities in our lives. Such spiritual imbalance needs healing. Plant spirit medicine offers this. We were fortunate enough to learn from a great and inspiring teacher, Eliot Cowan. It was he who coined the term “plant spirit medicine” to describe the medicine he rediscovered, a household shamanic approach to working with the plant spirits in an entirely safe way that didn’t involve the same dangers that a deep traditional shamanic path contains. Eliot explains how he came to call the medicine plant spirit medicine;

Well, by design it’s kind of a double entendre. Let me say this first of all: it’s a form of doing healing work with plants, but not plants as objects or chemical factories—but as spirit beings, alive and feeling and wise and connected to the world around them, and to ourselves. So it’s a way of relating to plants as sources of spiritual healing. We like to say that it is the spirit of the plant that has the unique capacity to touch and heal the spirit of a human being. So it’s “plant spirit medicine”—meaning it comes from the spirit of the plant—and it’s also “plant spirit medicine,” meaning medicine for the spirit of the people who are receivers of their work. (From an interview: www.soundstrue.com/podcast/transcripts/eliot-cowan.php?camefromhome=camefromhome)

If a living butterfly astonishes us by alighting on our hand and we momentarily experience its beauty, we could say that our heart is touched in some way. If we catch the butterfly and pin it inside a display cabinet with its Latin name printed alongside, then our minds think we know something. This knowledge has already removed us from the direct experience of the living butterfly, how we felt in response to being in relationship with it. The mind labels every experience and thereby separates us from true connection with real life.

If ever help was needed to shift us unbalanced humans from our destructive patterns of separation back to a way of living in real relationship with the earth that sustains us, now is the time. This book is our attempt to share the awesome and astonishing depth of plant spirit medicine without pinning it down into a dry, dead thing. We weave together the voices and stories of many people whose lives have been touched by plants in general and plant spirit medicine in particular. These include contributions from some of the many wonderful herbalists using plant-based medicine in a way that goes beyond the physical,

biochemical model, and the bulk of the book, the majority of the voices herein, come from those who have been touched by PSM, as reintroduced by Eliot. An ancient medicine which the land knows, which is gently seeding across the world.

The stories are arranged in chapters which take the reader on a journey of discovery of this medicine for our time. It is sometimes said that in the time of greatest need there is the greatest help, and PSM has certainly emerged at a time of great need and challenge and is growing and taking root. The plants themselves, sentient and alive, are calling to many to awaken to a deeper experience of the energy of nature and of our human place in it. This can be felt and understood in direct relationship. The elemental forces that manifest the seasons offer a doorway to move into this perspective. For all the many reasons people may seek out the medicine, there will always be something deep and interesting to learn from an experience of it once we have made the connection. Anyone can learn to communicate directly with plant spirits and befriend them in a way that opens rich dimensions, and over time and with persistence and patience a quiet revolution of perspective can result. Becoming a healer, however, and practising as a healer, is a more committed business that holds as many rewards as it requires dedication, perseverance, and sacrifice. Plant spirit medicine offers the healer the framework of an elegant and rigorous methodology within which to access and effectively channel the energy of the astonishing realm of plant spirits. In the unfolding of our own journeys as healers and receivers of the medicine we witness an unfolding of consciousness in ourselves and our patients which offers something truly hopeful for the journey of the planet.

The plants also have a way of directing us towards the sense of heartfelt purpose a joyful spirit can feel. Acting as stepping stones or bridges, they help us find our paths. Our hope is that with their help our offering does something to illustrate the mysterious beauty and awesome power of this phenomenal medicine.



Touch Me Oak by Sarah Woolfenden.

