

An Herbology of Relationship

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Introduction and History

The importance of connection and relationship has been recognized since the beginning of recorded history. In shamanic traditions and indigenous healing modalities, there has been a constant emphasis on stories, song, and meaningful interaction between healer, plants, and patient. What exactly do we mean when we talk about these interactions? Why are connections important? How do they work? Many have considered these issues over time. Today, we will look at some salient concepts from Western thought, and attempt to see how these ideas can be brought to bear in herbology and herbal healing.

Plato (IV cent. BCE) outlined the connections between *forms* and *ideas*, giving rise to a system of thought that has been with us ever since. The natural world, he argued, is a collection of forms that are reflections of universal ideas: a stone and a mountain both express the idea of ‘solidity’ in a tangible form; a cup and basket both represent ‘capaciousness’, or the ability to hold (from *Phaedo*). One can get more specific with this system: licorice, for example, can represent the idea of ‘moisture’, while white oak stands for ‘dryness’. In reality, most every form embodies a combination of multiple ideas – but the important point is that a *correspondence* exists between the tangible and the intangible worlds. In other words, a meaningful relationship exists between ideas and forms.

Hermetic tradition, which has been traced to both ancient Greek and Egyptian philosophies (dates uncertain – I cent. BCE to III cent. CE) elaborated on the doctrine of correspondences and established a concept that has resonated throughout time: “What is below is like that which is above, and what is above is like that which is below” (from *The Emerald Tablet* of Hermes Trismegistus). This concept is sometimes referred to as the mirroring of the *microcosm* and the *macrocosm*, and emphasizes that there is a similarity and an idea-based relationship between ‘levels’ of the natural world, and that tapping into this relationship can give new, profound understanding. This was an initial exposition of the mechanisms behind, for example, astrology (the patterns in the heavens mirror the patterns in our lives), the doctrine of signatures (patterns in the body are reflected in the plant world).

Hildegard von Bingen (XI cent. CE) was a mystic who, enraptured by visions of divinity in the natural world, came to emphasize the fact that an energy coursed through all of life, and that this energy was responsible for the mirroring of patterns at all levels of reality. “The Earth gives its vital energy,” she writes in *Physica*, “and through the beneficial herbs, the Earth brings forth the range of mankind’s spiritual powers and distinguishes between them”. While this concept had been

explored before (Plato, in *Timaeus*, outlines how the Soul of the World brings ideas into form), Hildegard specifically emphasized how *viriditas* (green, vital, natural energy and strength) is the key to making the relationships and correspondences in the natural world work. It is because of this vital energy that the yellow juice of yellowdock root looks like human bile: the same pattern in this energy created both, at different levels. It is also because of this vital energy that yellowdock can heal the liver: disease is a disruption in the flow of this energy, but health can be restored by applying a substance that is in direct relationship with the imbalanced system.

Paracelsus (XVI cent. BCE) represents a turning point in the study of the power of relationship. An expert physician, he formalized the concept of ‘vital force’ and how it relates to health, emphasizing the correspondence between humans, diseases, nature, and remedies, and how these should be taken as a ‘whole picture’. Until that point, therapy was administered just to increase or diminish certain ‘fluxes’ in the body/mind. But Paracelsus argued that there were specific patterns in plants that mirrored specific patterns in people, and healing that was based on these specific relationships was deeper and more effective. In essence, he finally applied the doctrine of correspondences to healing. The downside of his philosophy, however, was that many began to see the specificity itself as most important, rather than the relationship between disease and remedy, and from this came the idea that refined, isolated constituents were the most powerful.

For the next 300-400 years, until basically the XX century, the new discipline of ‘science’ attempted to get more and more specific by reducing the natural world to its smallest components, arguing that the great machine of the Universe could be completely understood if we could just dissect its parts to a basic level. With few exceptions (notably, **Samuel Hahnemann** and the homeopaths), this reductionist thinking consumed all of Western thought.

More ‘modern’ thinking is, however, starting to rediscover the importance and power of the relationships within the natural world (as opposed to the importance of the components). Psychology has come to emphasize the ‘gestalt’, or ‘whole picture’ of the individual, including all the social and emotional relationships in the concept of a ‘person’. **Kurt Lewin** (1930s) advanced a model in which behavior is generated based on complex relationships between interior needs, and how these needs interact with external stimuli. His ideas emphasize a ‘tension’, or energetic flow, between needs and environment. Here we see echoes of the doctrine of correspondences. **Harry Harlow** (1960s) ‘discovered’ that strong maternal and social relationships are essential for proper development of individuals. This acknowledgement brought the importance of connection back to the discussion of the human mind.

In physics, **Werner Heisenberg** (1930s) overturned much of scientific dogma with his now famous *Uncertainty Principle*, which inescapably underlines the

all-important connection between our selves and the world around us. The drive of science to measure the most specific, smallest components of reality was halted in its tracks: ultimately, at the quantum level, the relationship between observer and substance has more power than the substance itself. Shortly thereafter, **Ludwig von Bertalanffy** (1940s) outlined this shift in focus through *systems theory*, arguing that the important properties of any system, from a cell, to a plant, to a human, all the way to planets, and the Universe, emerged from the interrelations of all the parts within the system, as well as the system's relationship with the world around it. From this point of view, it is ridiculous (and impossible) to attempt to gain knowledge of nature by dissecting it: every division severs a relationship, and precious information is irretrievably lost. **James Lovelock** and **Lynn Margulis** (1970s) connected many of these concepts into what they termed the *Gaia hypothesis*: our planet is a system of relationships, interconnecting the natural world through a living, breathing *consciousness* represented by Gaia, the archetypal goddess of the Earth. It is remarkable how similar this idea is to Plato's conception of the Soul of the World, and the correspondences within her that are fuelled by a dynamic, vital and intelligent energy that flows through the whole system. Finally, *Chaos Theory* provided a crucial concept to round out modern research on relationship: more often than not, related systems connect with no apparent cause-and-effect pattern. In other words, it is no longer important to seek out what *causes* what, rather we must examine what *relates to* what: to use a now classic example, it is ridiculous to think that a butterfly flapping its wings in Indonesia will *cause* a thunderstorm in California – but chaos theory shows us that the two events are nonetheless *connected*. These relationships are termed **acausal connections**, because, like the chicken and the egg, one cannot tell which came first.

There are many ideas in this history that are crucial to a discussion of the power of relationships and interconnection. The main points are:

- **Correspondence.** There are patterns of similarity between all levels of the natural world. These patterns are contained in relationships within nature, and in relationships between nature and ideas.

- **Vital Force.** This is the 'first idea', the drive of life to exist and take form. It permeates everything following defined patterns of organization, which manifest on all levels of reality and appear to us as correspondences.

- **Acausal Connection.** The relationships defined by correspondences and animated by the Vital Force cannot be seen in terms of cause-and-effect. They exist as an interrelated system, a whole 'gestalt', in which the connection itself is what gives them meaning and power.

The Nature of Relationship and Connection

The world of 'ideas', images and thoughts, is a way of describing patterns we see inside our selves (mostly our minds), but as with all patterns, ideas are reflections of the organizing tendencies of the Vital Force as it flows through nature. This is why Plato's *ideas* are mirrored in *forms*: both interior and exterior landscapes are organized and animated by the same energy. The interior landscape, for sake of discussion, has been termed the **Astral Plane**, or the 'thought' plane. This is the realm in which ideas exist – but it isn't separate from individual to individual, it rather forms a cohesive fabric interweaving the thoughts and emotions of all life. It is important to remember that the Astral is not separate from the Physical – the two exist together, as expressions of the Vital Force.

The Vital Force is thought to move through the Astral and into the Physical as it manifests reality. But as with any form of energy, it requires a conductor in order to move at all! This conductor, simply put, is **relationship**. It is the connection between ideas on the Astral Plane and forms on the Physical Plane that allow the Vital Force to animate nature. Again, it is important to keep in mind that these connections are **acausal**, meaning they do not follow a cause-and-effect linear relationship between their components. Rather, the whole thing comes into existence at the same time, as a multi-level manifestation of the flow of Vital Force expressed through a relationship. If you consider this for a moment, you will come to the realization of the 'basic', or **primal relationship**, underlying all of nature: patterns of acausal connection exist as manifestations of the Vital Force, and the Vital Force exists and moves thanks to acausal connections. Notice the absence of cause-and-effect in the relationship between Vital Force and acausal connection!

Implications and Practical Examples

Healing. In a healthy individual, the Vital Force flows smoothly, maintaining balance and well-being within the interior and exterior of that individual. During disease, a relationship is severed or damaged: the individual becomes disconnected in some way from the rest of nature. Taoists would call this 'loss of the Way'. In order for the Vital Force to return to its balanced flow, the relationship needs to be re-established, following a two-step process: first, one must determine what the nature of the severed relationship is. Then, based upon this information, the connection is restored by bringing a medicine to the patient that is related to the person, the healer, and the severed relationship. This establishes a conduit through which Vital Force can flow again, and a new balance can be formed. One important point: disease itself is a relationship, and has important implications for long-term balance for an individual. It is just a part of the whole system outlined by Paracelsus: person, imbalance, plant, and nature. Once again, there is no cause-and-effect.

Medicine – making. The Vital Force has no moral implications: that is, it is neither ‘good’ nor ‘bad’, neither ‘helpful’ nor ‘harmful’. It flows through connections, whatever they may be. In creating medicines, the modern world relies on connections that are centered around technology, exploitation, and humans as centers of the Universe – so it is easy to see why the Vital Force has taken our culture in the direction it has. We, as a society, are in danger because of the connections we have formed. We rely on medicines whose primary relationships with the world involve money, control, and separation from nature, and giving power to these relationships has manifested those ideas in a reality of exploitation and domination. In addition, however, modern medicines are less ‘connected’ in general: pharmaceuticals place no importance on the link between medicine and nature, opting rather to break this connection. Since Vital Force moves through connections, it is clear why today’s medicines have less vitality. Herbal medicine, on the other hand, relies on intent (an emotional relationship between herbalist, healing, and medicine), and focuses on ecology (relationship to environment). It is inherently more ‘connected’. Ultimately, pharmaceuticals will leave the patient ‘empty’, drained of Vital Force, while herbal medicines will leave him/her ‘full’, augmenting the individual’s Vital Force.

It is important to note that herbal medicines can be crafted without intent, connection, or relationship to the environment, in much the same way as pharmaceuticals are. They can also be administered without explaining why, or where they came from: in other words, they can be administered without relating. This is a dangerous road to travel, and will ultimately lead us to the same place we are in today. Conversely, healing can be accomplished without using actual physical substances at all, rather by just opening channels of relationship between the patient and the natural world. This is the essence of Plant Spirit Medicine, and is a crucial component in any event. So again we see that it is not the substance, but rather the relationship, that holds all true power. Keeping this at the forefront of our minds will help us craft truly healing remedies!

Herbalism. As humans, we have a unique capacity to form abstract ideas, to think, in other words, we have the ability to *directly manipulate the Astral Plane* with our ‘minds’. Because of this, we have a unique power to collect, channel and manipulate Vital Force, amplifying it by just forming relationships between ourselves and the world around us. Since the flow of Vital Force is two-way (no cause-and-effect), we can return this amplified Vital Force to the natural world as we see fit. This is important in healing people (as discussed above), but it is equally as important for healing the natural world and maintaining a balanced flow of Vital Force. We have a unique power and responsibility in this situation – and the plants we rely on as allies know this. They need us to relate to them at this point in time as much as we need them to heal our disconnected souls!

Techniques for building and applying relationship

•**Observation.** Spend time daily just observing the world around you. Include feelings, memories, ideas that come to your mind, and record the whole picture in writing, image, music, or whatever medium you feel comfortable in. Try observing different places, at different times. Examine how the physical, external things you see relate to your internal landscape.

•**Intent.** Using your mind and emotions, open purposeful channels between yourself and the world. Acknowledge, in an active, co-creative way, that you are channeling Vital Force through yourself and back to nature. This can be a general exercise, using breath (for example) as a symbol of the constant connection between yourself and the world, or it can be more specific, focusing on a consciously selected subset of all your relationships (for example, you may want to explore the connection between yourself and a Calendula flower: bring in images of sun, warmth, soothing, think of your aunt who was helped by the Calendula oil you made, and with each personal relationship, feel that flow between yourself and that flower).

•**Healing.** When helping someone, be sure to tell them a story that both of you can relate to. This has the effect of opening a whole spectrum of channels through which the Vital Force can flow, helping to restore a balanced picture. It doesn't matter if your story is 'accurate' or 'scientifically proven': what matters is that you both can understand and relate to it, thereby forming a powerful bond. It can be a story of how the herb works, or a story of growing the herb, how you came to know this plant, or a testimonial of its effectiveness. Be creative. When it's right, you will feel it clearly as the Vital Force moves.

•**Divination.** Throughout history, many have relied on oracles to aid in the decision-making process. Oracles (such as the Tarot, or the I Ching) are collections of symbols to which we have deep connections. When we need to make a choice, divination can help us to just relate to the matter at hand, seeing it as a set of acausal relationships, rather than our decision as a 'cause' leading to an 'effect'. This helps us learn to trust intuitions as valid components of a whole system of relationships that represent the present moment.

•**Alignments.** This concept simply means 'the set of all my personal relationships'. These can be as general as 'I am male' (acknowledging my alignment with, or relationship to, 'maleness'), to 'I am a breath of Wind through the Elder tree' (which brings in more relationships than I can write here). Record your alignments as you discover them through observation, intent and/or divination. Soon you will have a broad list of powerful images and relationships that you can call up at any time to gather Vital Force to yourself, for whatever purpose. Again, these don't have to be in writing. Use any medium you are comfortable with.

•**Story and Song.** These techniques are the mainstay of shamanic healing and power. Stories and myths rely on deeply embedded relationships we have with the world around us, and help to infuse nature with *meaning*. Meaning is relationship, and vice-versa: telling old stories, sharing dreams, creating new yarns all have the function of increasing the avenues through which Vital Force can flow. Songs are stories set to melody: in this sense, they have even more meaning, and operate on a vibrational level to affect the deepest core of our being. Sometimes just humming a simple melody can reawaken ancient memories, spark connection, and fill us with inspiration and power.

•**‘Giving back’.** As they say, ‘tis better to give than to receive’. To build relationships with plants, consider how you, in some small way, can work for them: perhaps you can start a small garden in which to nurture certain allies, perhaps you can become involved with organizations that protect native stands of botanicals, or perhaps you can teach a friend about the beauty of a particular herb. Use your powers of intuition and intent, and if you open the links to the natural world, I guarantee a way for you to give back will quickly become apparent. The Vital Force flows two-ways!

Conclusion

Herbology and herbal healing, the study and knowledge of how to relate to plants, is of crucial importance in today’s world. The relationships our culture has built in the last 300 years are based on the concept that the Universe is meaningless: therefore, many in this day and age feel empty and disconnected, longing for something that can restore meaning, and belonging, to their souls. We know that it is the relationships themselves that possess the power to affect reality directly and dramatically, and it is our responsibility to use this knowledge to call all our allies to us, to open as many connections to the natural world as possible, take in the Vital Force as it flows through these connections, and send it back out, strong and amplified, to help heal the rifts we see all around us.

May we learn to heed and trust the knowledge we obtain through all our relationships and alignments, and may positive, open, co-creative channels enrich our lives and those of everyone around us!

Suggested Reading

Stephen Harrod Buhner, The Lost Language of Plants, Chelsea Green, 2002

An in-depth and brilliantly poetic analysis of the lack of connection to nature (*biognosis*) that our culture is experiencing. Rich with stories and techniques for rebuilding relationship.

Fritjof Capra, The Web of Life, Anchor Books, 1996

A detailed history of holistic and systems-based thought, integrating the whole picture into a clear theory of interrelation, life, and deep ecology for the future.

Hildegard von Bingen, Physica, translated by Priscilla Throop, Healing Arts Press, 1998

A lucid collection of the personal relationships of a very mystical woman. Written with a tangible joy and rapture for the world of nature.

Matthew Wood, Vitalism, North Atlantic Books, 2000

A historical overview of Vital Force philosophies, from Paracelsus to Dr. Bach, exploring homeopathy, flower essences, and more.

Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim, Three Books of Occult Philosophy, translated by James Freake, edited and annotated by Donald Tyson, Llewellyn, 1995

A classic of magic and occultism, it relates the science of western correspondences as well as discussing elemental theory, Plato, the Soul of the World, and more.

James Lovelock, Healing Gaia, Harmony Books, 1991

Explanation of the Gaia hypothesis along with practical implications of living in a web of relationships.

Larry Dossey, Space, Time and Medicine, Shambala, 1982

Outlines a paradigm shift that must occur in healing and medicine, urging an abandonment of linear time and disconnected healing.

Katya Walter, The Tao of Chaos, Element, 1994

Chaos theory, acausal relationships, DNA, and the I Ching rolled into a concept of a self-similar, self-relating Universe.

Richard Wilhelm, The I Ching, Bollingen, 1990

The classic Chinese Book of Changes, detailing the patterns of energy flow in the Universe, also an excellent oracle.