

**“I CAME TODAY
BECAUSE I THINK MAYBE I’M CRAZY”**

My talk – on Sacred Plant Medicine – had been arranged by someone I only knew slightly. It was being promoted by a local organization that would forward my fees later. I was to speak about the process whereby historical indigenous people developed their knowledge of plant medicines and, to some extent, how, in this present time, we could explore that process for ourselves. Over the weeks leading up to the event I had received periodic calls to update me. There were 8 people coming, then 14, then 25 – could I come back often? Perhaps once a month? There were so many people coming. I was excited. A huge crowd for my first talk in New York City. A friend met me at the train station and, after she had hailed cab, we drove to the teaching center.

Our destination, when we arrived, had, like many businesses I’d seen on the way, a long green awning stretching toward the street, a few short steps leading up, and a set of impressive doors. Like many of the buildings in New York it had apartments above and a business at street level. I gathered my things, paid the driver. and we walked up the steps. I grabbed the beautiful brass handles and pulled the doors open.

As the air whooshed out I got a good whiff of the place. The smell was 1950: Old creaking offices, ancient elementary schools, empty and echoing government buildings. As my eyes adjusted I saw that the floor was covered with actual linoleum (made from material impregnated with linseed oil) in a large green and white checked pattern. The walls were painted with the dirty-tan, army-surplus paint common on the walls and ceilings of my elementary and high schools. Across the room was an ancient counter-top covered with the first formica, a

hallway behind. No one was present; a few florescent lights spluttered and hummed overhead. I felt an impending sense of gloom.

I peeked around the counter. "Hello?" I called out. Silence. I glanced back at my friend, hesitant. She smiled encouragingly. Tentatively, I made a foray into the darkened corridor. An office on my right. I peered in. Someone was lounging behind the desk, reading a book. A youngish man with upthrust, short-cut hair, an athlete's stocky body. "Yes?" he said.

"Er, I am here to teach the workshop. Where do I go? Can you help me?"

He shrugged. "Everyone is gone, I'm just helping out. Didn't you see a sign?"

"Er, no," I replied. "Uh, you don't know how many people are coming by any chance do you?"

"No," he said, irritated, "but there's a sign out there."

I paused, indecisive. He began reading his book again. I retraced my steps.

"What's up?" My friend asked.

"Er, I don't know, no one seems to know anything. The guy back there said there was a sign out here someplace."

I scanned the room. Nothing. She nudged my arm. "How about that?" I looked closer. Across the room, taped to the wall, was a sheet of lined paper roughly torn from a notebook. It drew me closer. "PLANT WORKSHOP" was crudely scrawled on it in pencil, an arrow underneath pointed to a shadowy doorway on our left. I walked over, peered in. Steep steps, covered with the dark-brown rubberish material that I remembered from childhood, climbed a narrow stairwell. There was blue powder sprinkled along the baseboards (for cockroaches, I later learned).

My friend stuck her head in, "HMMMMMM." She looked at me questioningly. My hand clutched the narrow, and rather sticky, round bannister and I started up. The stairs creaked. At the top, under a dim recessed light fixture, was a landing and, on the other side a door. Its twin had filled the doorframe of my high school English class. It was painted the same tan-colored, army-surplus paint and in the upper-middle was a small square window of glass. Filled with a lattice of tough metal wire it reminded me unpleasantly of juvenile detention. I went in.

Scattered around the room were the tan metal desks from my high school. The battered teacher's desk rested at a rakish angle in front of a blackboard dusty with powdered chalk. Four or five abandoned notebook pages lay scattered on the floor. Light bleakly filtered in through elderly windows to my left. There were some desiccated plants in green plastic pots along the sills.

Sitting in the front row facing the desk was one young caucasian woman, about 28 years old. She turned hopefully at our entrance.

I paused in midstride. "Uh, hi. . . uh, uhmmm, I. . I'll be right back," I stuttered. I set down my bags and raced down the stairs, found the young man still reading.

"There's only one person up there! Is that *all* there is coming?"

He looked up, expression blank. "Oh, I'm sure there will be more in a few minutes." He looked back down at his reading. I stood hesitant, waiting for him to say more. He kept reading. I reluctantly retraced my steps.

The young woman turned again at my entrance. "Are you the teacher?" she asked.

"Ummm, yes, but there seems to be a problem. You appear to be the only one coming. I think you should get your money back."

It's very hard to teach a class with less than five people. There is so little energy that the whole thing never gets off the ground. With one person it's impossible.

Normally a speaker's gaze roves the room, looking at this person, then that. Eye contact only occurs with each person every so often. Facial expressions that indicate interest or intent listening or an emotional response to something being said are spaced with periods of resting in between. But with only one participant the undiluted gaze of the speaker is trained on her the whole time. In short order she runs through all the appropriate facial expressions and a glaze sets in as the face fossilizes into one, set expression. Generally it's an expression she thinks mimics polite, interested listening. It is actually horribly doll-like – glassy eyes surrounded by unmoving, semi-lifelike, plasticized skin. In short, I was determined, for both our sakes, to avoid it if at all possible.

Then she looked up at me and said, "But I've come so far, won't you stay and talk for just a little while?" Something in her expression stopped me and I softened and said, "yes."

Mentally I gave it 15 minutes; I thought there couldn't be much to talk about that would take longer than that (before plasticization settled in). And so I sat on the desk, leg swinging, and spoke of how it was for indigenous people long ago. Just as I was wrapping up the door opened and two more women walked in. I was over my internal integrity level; I was going to have to give the class. Nevertheless, I tried to get out of it.

"Ummm, you know, I think this is all of us. I think you should get your money back."

"Well, hell," one of them said. "We come all the way 'cross town. We ain't got anything better to do. You might as well teach." She put a hand on her hip, daring me to disagree. The other one nodded approvingly. So I waited as they got settled, ranging themselves on either side

of the young woman before me.

This was strange. People invariably sit scattered around a room; they feel safer to the back or the side – safer still if there is space between them and the person next to them. It's rare for people to sit right up front, much less do *all* the participants sit together, in a row, in front.

We were chatting as they settled themselves and something in what they said struck me as odd, so I asked them if they knew anything about herbalism or plant medicines. None of them did. And this was very strange because the people who come to hear me are usually herbalists. So I asked them, "Why are you here?"

And they told me the truth. (Such a strange thing for them to do to someone they'd never met.)

The woman on my right, perhaps 45 years old, answered first. She had been born in Jamaica and her accent was still strong in spite of her 30 years in NY. I love Jamaican accents and can listen to them all day long. No matter what they say it sounds beautiful and moving and deeply poetic. ("Yeah, mahn, I goin to Jamaica mahn, get some rum, den tings be ahree.")

She looked up at me and cleared her throat and there was a funny feeling in the room. And she said, "Well mahn, lately I haven't wanted to live." And here she paused and took a deep breath. "But my granmamma, she come to me in my dreams an' she tell me, 'Chile! You got to get your fingers in de dirt.'" She moistened her lips, her voice dropped to a whisper. "Yeah mahn, every night she come to me an' she tell me de same ting, 'Chile! you got to get your fingers in de dirt.'" She shifted in her chair and looked up, going on more briskly.

"So, you know I kep' tinkin wha' to do? And den I hear 'bout dis place, a commoonity garten dey call it. It cos' twenty-five dollar'. So I save my money for two mont's and take de

subway. An' you know what mahn? when I go dere and put my fingers in de dirt I know who I am again." She stopped once more then looked at me earnestly and said slowly, "Such a ting has nebber hoppend to me before. An' I come today cause I tink mebbe I'm crazy."

There was a stillness in the room and I realized the rest of us were holding our breath. There was a sudden rustling of clothes and indrawing of breaths and we all shifted in our seats. I turned to the next woman, the young white woman who'd first arrived. She looked like she'd been raised suburban middle class, maybe in New Jersey. And I asked her. "Why are you here?"

She looked up shyly, nervously, conscious of the women on either side. "Well," she said, "Lately, I have been thinking of becoming a naturopath. So not too long ago I flew out to Portland to the naturopathic college there to see if it was something I wanted to do." She paused and moistened her lips, her head tilted slightly down. "They offer a tour to prospective students, you know, where you go through the buildings with a guide and hear from present or former students how great it is. Well, there were ten or fifteen of us and we were stopped in the middle of this hallway. I wasn't paying attention to what the guide was saying, my mind was wandering, thinking about something else, when out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse as she opened a door to my right. I turned and looked and it was the room where they keep all the plants, all the herbs they use for medicine. And I could hear each one of the plants crying out to me, talking as clearly as I am talking to you now. And there were hundreds of them." She paused for a minute then went on. "I came today because I thought, that perhaps, something in your talk could help me understand what had happened. I have been thinking you know," and here she moistened her lips again and looked nervously around, "that maybe I'm crazy."

We were entranced, listening to her. And when she was done there was a flurry of

breathing and shifting, and a funny, sad feeling in the room. I turned to the last woman. She was, like the first, a black woman, middle-aged, but obviously born and bred in New York city. Her features were hard, her face angular, her cheek bones sharp. She had come up hard and it showed in every movement and intonation, in her clothes, in the fierce determination in her face, and in her strong work-roughened hands.

"Tell us why you are here," I said.

She looked up. "Well, my man, he left me. And I haven't known where to go with my life now he's gone. I live in a little efficiency apartment and I get up early in the morning when it's dark. I work all day and when I come home it's dark again. I don't have a yard," she laughed grimly, "this *is* New York, but I like plants and so I grow them inside . . . in pots." And here she paused and in a shy voice she said, "They like it when you talk to them, you know? They grow better." She shook her head. "Anyway, there is this one. It grows all up the wall and across the ceiling. It has big leaves," she gestured with her arms to show me, holding them in a big circle which narrowed down to a point where her hands came together. "Well, when I get up in the morning, the leaf at the end of the plant, up on the ceiling, it's pointing this way." She held her arms like a big pointed leaf again and gestured off to her left. "But when I get home it's pointing this way." She gestures off to her right. "I thought that maybe it was the sun but none of the other leaves were doing it. And every morning and evening it was the same. I kept thinking about it and wondering and then one day I realized that the plant was trying to tell me what direction to take with my life." Here she stopped and cleared her throat. "You know, nothing like this has ever happened to me before. And I came today because I thought that maybe I was crazy."

The room was quiet when she finished. Ripples from what they had brought into the room

lapped against the walls, ebbed inside us, slowed and were still. And in the stillness I looked inside and saw the wound laid down within all of us. The damage to our interior world from the belief that we somehow crash-landed or inexplicably emerged on a ball of rock hurtling around the sun, the only intelligent inhabitants of Earth. The wound that comes from believing we are alone amidst dead uncaring nature. And I saw, too, how that interior wound and the exterior wound we see around us every day of our lives in the clear cutting of our forests and the degradation of the natural world are only mirror reflections of the same wound, laid down in us long ago. Then I took breath and began to share stories of a time when the world was young, when everyone knew plants were intelligent and could speak to human beings. When it was not crazy to have your granmamma come to you in your dreams and say, "Chile, you got to get your hands in de dirt!" When it was not crazy that a plant would care enough to tell you what direction to take with your life. A time when it was different.

After while I was done and they nodded and thanked me and left. And my friend took me out to a wonderful dinner.

The next day my friend took me to the train station and I traveled home to my family. And, of course, the people in NYC never did send me what they owed for teaching that day. But I did get paid, in coin far more valuable than money. It lives in my depths – I think it always will. Sometimes, when I wake at three a.m., and the darkness inside me begins to whisper my name, saying “there’s something we need to talk about,” I remember the stories they told me that day.

They remind me that while we have forgotten the world, it has not forgotten us. Despite our blindness we are still loved. Ancient intelligences still reach out to us every day of our lives helping us to become ourselves. They touch the core deep inside, telling us there is another way

to live. That the wounds inside us can be healed. That the long loneliness of the human species can end. That we can take another path. That we can at any time reinhabit our interbeing with the world. That we are still wanted and needed for what we bring. And in that moment, if I ask what secret I have been hiding from myself, the knowledge just comes. Once more I begin the work that the darkness has set in front of me – just as I have done thousands of times before. I engage in the difficult soul shaping that the world offers to each of us who are willing to listen. And I continue to make the path, one slow step at a time.

(A slightly different version of this story appeared in *The Lost Language of Plants*)