

A RIDICULOUS FAIRY TALE

Stephen Harrod Buhner

(Written in boredom, then irritation, as I worked on a book about COPD after I continually stumbled across comments from “experts” attacking the evidence that revealed a microbiome in the lungs.)

Once Upon A Time in a land and time not so different than this one there was a kingdom ruled by a series of neither especially wise nor intelligent kings. The land was happy and bountiful yet as the years passed a lamentation arose among the people. They had, they said, a great pain in the bowels that would not end and so great was their suffering that they petitioned the King’s physicians to help them.

The King’s physicians looked upon the multitude, examined them most seriously, and discovered to their dismay that portions of their bowels were being eaten away. In their wisdom they then told the people that they did indeed know the cause of their pain and suffering. The physicians said that the people were too tense and anxious, that they must meditate and eat only bland foods (such as overcooked vegetables), that they should avoid all spices, and never ever become stressed. It was all these things, they said, that together was causing their pain. If the people would simply follow their advice the horrible pain they were suffering would cease.

So, the people, having great belief in the King’s physicians, did as they were told. Few of them enjoyed the meals they now ate and they tried as hard as they knew how to not become stressed, but life had its way with them, as it does with all of us, and they found that stress

seemed to be inevitable – what with their jobs and financial worries and all.

Many of the people reported that they were just not able to stop worrying no matter how hard they tried (what with their jobs and all), so the king's physicians, after much discussion and examination of the entrails of mice and rats, said to the multitude that they had discovered a magic potion that would make it so that the people would never worry again. When they heard this a great clamor arose among the people for the magic potion (which some called an antidepressant) and the alchemists found themselves busier than ever. Nevertheless, the pain in the people's bowels remained – though most did find it more difficult to worry about.

A great many of the people began to meditate in an attempt to relieve their stress (though they often found it boring and sometimes fell asleep) and the Buddhist temples throughout the land suddenly found themselves to overflowing. Despite this the pain in the people's stomachs continued to plague them. Their lamentations grew louder and more insistent and the noise began to disturb the physician's sleep. In exasperation the physicians told the people that they were cured, they just did not realize it. The pain was now all in their minds. And besides they were probably not doing what the physicians told them to do (because they were peasants and could not follow simple directions) and besides just take the magic potion. Yet despite all this the pain continued and the lamentations of the people increased and finally in desperation the physicians called in the surgeons who then removed parts or even all of the people's stomachs.

Unbeknownst to all however, in a far part of the kingdom, there lived a young physician who had been ever curious about the world around him. And one day, just as he was casting about for something new to interest him, he was approached by his friend who said, "Verily, I have found something you must see." The young physician accompanied his colleague to a

nearby alchemical laboratory where he was shown something astonishing: an evil spirit had taken up residence in the bowels of the people and it was this, his colleague insisted, that was the cause of the people's pain and sorrow. Thus it was that for many weeks and months afterwards the two young physicians spent marvelous days and nights learning everything they could about the evil spirit. Finally, after much thought and discussion, they announced to the kingdom that it was this evil spirit that was the cause of the people's suffering.

When the King's physicians heard this, they were outraged and appealed to the king saying "No, no, this cannot be, for we have long known that this disturbance of the bowels is caused by worry and spicy foods and you must stop this heresy." The King heard their plea and sought to succor his physicians for they often gave him much gold and besides their tailors were the talk of the land. Nevertheless, the young physicians would not cease their proclamations and word spread throughout the land that a marvelous cure had been found and that any who partook of it could eat whatever they wanted. A great clamor then arose demanding that the people have access to the marvelous cure, a powerful potion called by the alchemists who prepared it an antibiotic. So pressured was the King that he bowed to the will of the people and told his physicians he could do no more for them. At this, the alchemists found themselves busier than ever and the older physicians, still seething, gnashed their teeth.

However, in unremarked corners of the kingdom, the herbwyves had also heard this tale of the evil spirit and began to treat their neighbors with plant simples. In their gardens and the wild woods they gathered the roots of goldenseal and licorice and comfrey and marshmallow. Drying, then powdering them fine, they gave them to their neighbors and families and indeed the pain in their bowels was eased. The herbwyves said their potions came from the land, which had

always succored the people in their times of need, and were much better than the magic potions of the alchemists. Besides they were free to all (much to the dismay of the alchemists).

It was only the poorer people listened at first for they did not have the gold that the king's physicians demanded of them. But soon others began to hear the tales of simples and the wisdom of herbwyves and they began to come in their thousands for healing. And once again the King's physicians were outraged saying, "No, no, this cannot be. They know nothing of healing nor have they been taught by the great universities of this land and besides they dress and speak oddly. And besides our alchemists have found those plants to be poisons (especially the comfrey). The people of the land are in danger and you must stop it."

And the King listened, for the physicians still gave him much gold and indeed their tailors were very fine. Despite this the King found that he could not stop what was happening. For the herbwyves were hidden throughout the land disguised as housewives and carpenters, bread bakers and wheelwrights, and so it was that when the soldiers went to seek them they found only simple people going about their daily work.

Thus it was that two forms of healing came into the land. One owned by the King and His physicians, the other a more secret and simple one – one that has been, as all herbwyves know, part of village life as long as villages and people had been – and always will be, of course. For kings and their physicians come and go. Plants and herbwyves are forever.