

CONTEMPLATIVE PLANT STUDY – seeking Nature on a deeper level

The Wholeness of Nature

As Vegan Organic growers and Medical Herbalists, we know, both on an instinctive as well as a practical view, that working with Nature involves being mindful on many different levels.

Our interest does not stop just at the objective factual level of modern science, as we wish to embrace all the mind-body-spirit realms of the phenomenological experience of living systems and the complexity of cosmic connections woven through them. Where a wholeness in Nature is apparent, people are attracted to experience it and so the seeds of community are also sown. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts and changing one part affects the whole.

We strive to embrace this wholeness in our impact on what we do on our land. Hence, we undertook a landscape study to observe what natural features were apparent so as to determine what shape our new hedgerow and herb/vegetable beds should take. At the same time, we are also interested in getting to know more about the herbs we use as medicines by a similar approach. We are able to do this using a simple yet hugely insightful method based on the little known scientific writings of Johann von Goethe (1749-1832) – Germany’s Bard. His world view challenged the greatest scientific theories of the time including his alternative theory of colour to that of Newton. His contention that the fully evolved human being is the greatest instrument to interpret Nature via an intuitive knowing, was the basis for his botanical observations. His interest was in the discovery of the nature of the living principle of an organism itself and he understood that to consider the parts of an organism separately (as modern science does) would not yield the living principle that explains it.

Philosophical considerations behind Goethean/Contemplative Science

Goethean/Contemplative science has shades of shamanism, relating to an old tradition of how our ancestors would look at plants in the past. It is not just about a new tool to get information, it is more about changing our perception of life and mindset and is in effect a two way process – if we want to know about the plant can we accept that the plant wants to know about us? Our task in this modern age is to bring this trance-like state into full consciousness. It opens up a new world of friends in the plants and an insight into their characters and personalities. It makes us realise how unobservant we are and how in general we talk down to Nature– we have to stop and look and listen. You can never say you know everything about one thing, you are always learning, opening up to spirit and that part of one’s nature.

Contemplative science is like acting, you have to practise being the character of the plant. It opens up a new world of friends in the plants and an insight into their characters and personalities The process is scary because it rocks your foundations. The modern path of Initiation is the journey of self development; it is a process which starts spiritual growth. It involves a type of breathing: going out to the plants but by taking a step back and spending time in. The whole process can get very emotional.

In a way, the use of Contemplative science provides a structure to give meaning to something you already know in a step-like process. It is about making conscious the

obvious and is more than just initiating the dynamics between you and the plant (or whatever you are studying). It's about consciously going through a process so a person finds the answer for themselves – finding the essence of their being, finding new meaning of life and where they are now.

You can use the same methodology to look at things other than plants, landscape, for example, or the relationship between a community or even moving with this work to look at an individual's life.

Goethe advises us that if we have some degree of vital intuition into nature, we should strive to keep as flexible and pliable as the example she provides ie this is present in the living, not in the dead (ie what has already taken shape and rigidified). What we are considering here is that which is forming out of itself – spirit in action or Nature in her lawfulness and how one part follows the other emerging from an ideal unity.

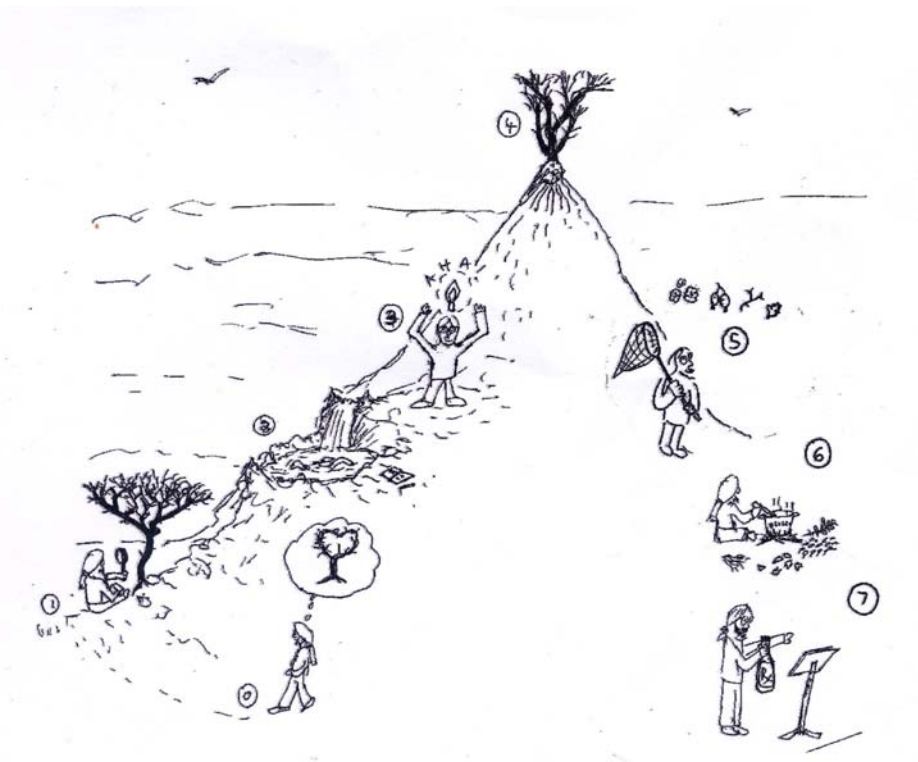
To do this you have to go out of and beyond the senses. The 'idea' of the plant is beyond the stars. The plant calls the cosmos in as it grows and this pulls the image of the plant out. How could we achieve this? How can we commune with spirit in action (the plant) through our ideal unity and honour its essence within our level of understanding?

Consider the concept 'Ginkgo' (or any other plant/tree being studied). How does the seed/flower/leaf/root get inside this gesture or 'spirit in action' and express it? We are trying to get to the point where when we look at the bark, we can taste the fruit. Any part of the plant contains the whole, so you can *see* or visualise the idea of fruit or flower, even if they are not there in time. One tries to grow a relationship between oneself and the plant to merge with the same dynamic that is the plant itself. Thereby observing how the different parts of the plant reveal the 'idea' of the plant and how that is distilled to full expression.

Application to a plant study or person based on Goethe's Contemplative Method

The whole process is akin to climbing a mountain and being a different person from the experience of the journey when you come down the other side (please see overleaf).

Fig 1. Climbing the Mountain.



Pre-stage **FIRST IMPRESSIONS** -begins even before meeting the plant on the basis that something has attracted us to meet this particular plant or person and is said to result from an openness of 'soul' on first meeting - an 'intuitive precognition'.

Participants are encourage to explore this meeting as subjectively and open-heartedly as possible in order to achieve a deep soul level experience which captures the 'mood' of the plant. After allowing a few minutes to let this experience begin to settle physically and in our inner world, each person is asked to contribute one or two words which captures the mood or first impression for them.

For example, for a Pussy Willow (*Salix caprea*) plant study, subjective descriptions included

“uplifting, opening, soft & bright, exuberant, open celebration, light, welcoming, comforting, conduit, refreshing, dancing, lush rush, soul salve”.

You can already see how there are similarities in some of these terms and when we all return from the field site, we continue trying to catch some of the mood by drawing with pastels, allowing more etheric representations to take form. We come together again as a group to explain what qualities we were trying to capture and what colours and textures were part of the image we were trying to recreate

Figure 2. Mood pastel drawing of Hawthorn.



Stage 1. EXACT SENSE PERCEPTION is familiar to conventional science as factual information gathering i.e. of keenly observing the physical attributes of the plant or a person's life story.

After fully exploring the subjective view of the plant, we turn to the objective observation. It is best if we stick to only factual description, taking it in turns to start with general habitat we find the plant in and its general dimensions before moving to ground level to observe how the plant establishes itself, looking at roots and lower stem/trunk. Only moving on when all minute details of botanical features of each part are described until every detail of stem, leaf, buds, flower and fruits if present have been exhausted.

Fig 3. Detail of rose flower bud.



Stage 2. EXACT SENSORIAL IMAGINATION is analogous with synthesis, the putting together of facts to allow appreciation of the plant or patient as a living growing being. It involves following the growth process of a plant, for example, how it looked this time last year or will look this time next year or identifying a person's core, inherent constitution and how or why the person has deviated from that in the present time.

Figs. 4 & 5. Rose growth sequence and meadowsweet pressed leaf sequence.



Stage 3. GLIMPSING THE BEING This can be seen as an “Aha!” experience as something about the plant ‘clicks’ within us and follows a meditative group rebuilding of the plant from memory whilst observing any inner movement within us related to qualities and emotions eg warmth travelling to stomach area and feelings of expansion and freedom.

Stage 4. BEING THE BEING is that of attaining conscious intuition or ‘becoming one with’ or ‘co-resonating’. In other words ‘being at one’ with the ‘essence’ or ‘idea’ of the plant or person eg, this plant would be useful for tight cramping in the digestive system and could help a person become open to problems relating to their solar plexus and/or issues seeming at first overwhelming and difficult to digest.

Stage 5. CATCHING THE ESSENCE is concerned with condensing or capturing the idea arrived at in stage 4. This requires a further synthesis of how to best express the intention of the plant: which part could be used (root, stem, leaf, flower or fruit or mixture) to best resonate with aiding a person to reset their healing intention. A rebuilding group meditation of the study experience so far is key at this point to ground the gesture of the plant.

Fig 6. Installation of Pine study collating all aspects explored.



Stage 6. **INCARNATING THE IDEA** is growing the idea or remedy into matter involving an 'alchemical' distillation of stages 4 & 5.

When studying plants, once a consensus on the plants' possible medicinal use has been achieved, the decision of how to produce certain extracts or preparations from the plant are made. These are often collected and prepared on site and with active participation of the person encouraged as part of this refinement process. The form of the medicine is experimented with (eg. it could be prepared as a tincture, infusion, massage oil, essential oil, foot and hand bath, herb pillow, talisman to wear, seed to sow and grow etc.) as well as dosage and frequency of administration determined.

Figure 7. Exploring different media for preparations of plant's healing expression



Stage 7. **PRODUCTION OF MEDICINE** and is the production of the new medicinal product.

Figure 8. The final preparation of a flower essence of Hemp Agrimony



Conclusion

Following this method results in a more satisfying whole connection to the natural world and particularly plants and our patients. It is also an amazing gift to both individuals within the group and the group process itself in terms of enlightening insights into personal and professional development. The relevance of this approach and advancement of scope in terms of clinical application is outstanding and necessary. I hope you might agree.

“What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.” (Aristotle).

Maureen and Keith Robertson are Medical Herbalists practising on the Isle of Arran where they live with their 3 young sons. Vegan co-founders of the Scottish School of Herbal Medicine, they have dedicated their 16 acre vegan organic herb farm and emergent woodland to contemplative plant study. They can be contacted on keithandmo@tiscali.co.uk or via www.herbalmedicine.org.uk and new at end of April www.veganherbal.com