

On Drugs, Herbs & Healing

~ By Richard Whelan (MNZAMH) ~

IMAGE: Calendula, Mary Allan © 2014

Does anyone question that our species is becoming ever increasingly medicated?

I want to share some long developed thoughts about all this, but before I go on I need to clarify that I am not philosophically 'anti' Western conventional medicine. On the contrary I am deeply appreciative for the tremendous work being done in such areas as palliative care, less invasive surgeries, wound and trauma response etc. My commentary here is specifically and entirely directed towards the management of chronic illness because it is here that the exact same approach to relieve overwhelming symptoms that works so well in emergency medicine so easily turns into a situation where health problems become stuck in a kind of limbo – not getting worse, not getting better. It is here that I see so that many of our population have become caught – chronically ill and dependent on potent pharmaceuticals to relieve their symptoms so that they can 'carry on'. This is not the way of healing.

It is said that the prime directive of the physician is to relieve suffering ...and of course that should be true, but what if the physician relieves discomfort so well that the person is enabled to carry on exactly as they were, doing exactly the same things that led them to become sick in the first place? Is the physician not then giving cause to

an even greater suffering in time because is it not true that any disease that is not met with a correction of the cause can only worsen with time and age...

I do not think for a second that people are 'bad' for wanting to relieve their pain, only I do see that for many people there comes a point where either a) the relief just doesn't work anymore and/or b) they have a kind of epiphany where they realise that there is no end in sight to these drugs and they really are not well and not getting better.

At either point is often when they seek me out, and I must say I do find it an odd business that so many of my patients have taken such a plethora of incredibly strong chemical drugs *before* rather than *after* coming to the gentle art of herbal medicine. I do not presume that my medicines are somehow 'stronger' than the pharmaceuticals they have taken and yet the herbs clearly work - people get better, they really do, how is that possible?

Perhaps even more importantly, why *doesn't* healing happen? I have long pondered the enigma of which of my patients get a cure and which stay as they were. Following are some of the consistent patterns of that difference that I have discovered over the years.

R_x for Healing

☞ It seems clear that Nature must take the first step. 'Nature' is a broad concept, it could be called 'that' which is within the herbs, but equally it could be the right food or a loving touch, or even some kind of prayer... In this analogy I could define 'Nature' as that 'healing essence that comes *to* the person rather than *from* the person'. I often feel that I can't really help someone until they have got to that point where they are truly ready to ask for help and be open to receive it. Sickness is the ultimate crash course in humility – you can choose whether you blame out and build resentment or accept that you by yourself have been beaten by a problem that you could not resolve. Such acceptance does not lead to despair; it is a simple recognition that you need the kind of help that is more than relieving your symptoms. 'Let Nature in' I exhort my patients, giving them some drops of some herb or another that rocks their pulse and their body. Then they go home with the bottle and I fervently hope they at least remember to stop for a minute to remember those words when they take their daily doses. Listening to the birds and getting back to Nature might come later, with time and healing...

☞ After, not before, that first step from Nature, it seems equally clear that the person must take their own vital step to somehow change their life and begin their healing. Even when Nature is brilliantly coming to the party with the best of all possible supports, if the person who has become stuck with a chronic illness adopts the passive mind-set of the health consumer wanting relief from their problems without owning any responsibility for them then we do not expect healing to happen -- this journey requires two feet!

That second step could be anything at all. It is often something to do with one of the three great lifestyle determinants i.e. sleep, nutrition or exercise, but it equally can be something in their work or home life, one of their core relationships, or even something to do with how they have fun or find meaning in their lives. Maybe we will look at more than one option together in the process of a conversation, maybe there will be issues that come to light that will need attention further down the track but this enquiry is squarely directed at 'what is the single most important thing in their life right now that is causing them the most pain or disturbance?'

I am a huge advocate for the holistic approach but I know of few greater follies in practice than to guide a patient to take two, three or more steps before they have taken that first one. I think it is excellent and necessary that students of natural medicine are taught to draw up extensive programmes that cover multiple bases (how else will they learn to see a bigger picture?) but when it comes time to actually work with the chronically sick a different approach is required, one that imbues patience in the relationship, an understanding that any journey must start with the first step. It has been my consistent experience that people with chronic illnesses flounder and fail

if you give them multiple directions to take at once. The way of healing is one step at a time, starting with what is affecting them the most. You can be certain that this will be more than enough to begin.

☞ I see that when the person is taking the right herbs or other support and at the same time they are taking that key action towards a primary cause to their sickness that there is nearly always a significant 'shift', within several days of their starting the treatment. This shift usually precedes a fairly radical and positive change in their health over the coming weeks but it will often take the form of a healing crisis whereby certain things get worse before they get better.

I do not commonly predict a healing crisis when I meet someone because I do not know that it will happen in this way, only that I do hope to see and hear of a change. Sometimes the shift takes an entirely different appearance and from early on we see a healing conquest with such things as sudden improvements in sleep, appetite, vitality and well-being – but it can go either way...

If I am working with someone who has become stuck in chronic sickness and I see an absence of a shift by the second appointment then I will probably be concerned that my approach is merely supporting the status quo and I may take it as an indicator to go back the beginning to start again. I am here to attest that sickness is not the only teacher of humility – *'there are a hundred ways to kneel and kiss the ground'* (Rumi).

By the way I am so sorry that the 'healing crisis' has been bagged by some influential writers in the field of natural medicine as a mistake of wrong prescription. Of course that might sometimes be the case but so often it is actually the best thing that could possibly be happening to the patient! I am deeply worried by this and other signs that our profession is becoming overly oriented with our allopathic cousins into thinking that our job is to placate the patient and alleviate their symptoms. We are not here to play God in such ways, to valiantly intervene to stop the expression of every sickness as if every person who presents to us has no hope of a cure! We are not soft doctors using natural drugs; we are agents for Nature Herself; our job is to identify and work on the causes of a problem whilst enlisting the support of that healing force that gives life to us all.

☞ The most important thing I can offer towards another being's healing is my compassion, my support and my willingness to challenge them when I see what is doing them harm. You cannot put a price on the value of the therapeutic relationship; neither will you ever replace it with a substance or a machine. Speaking for myself, what allows me to connect, to find the right herbs, to see the right step is one simple truth: I am a wounded healer; I am not above you, or below you, I am with you. Our medicine is our being together with the intention to heal. Everything follows from there.☞

