

Slow Medicine:
Taking the time to relish our medicinal roots.
By K. Sequoia Ladd

The Italians started the Slow Food movement, promoting slowing down for lengthy meals and conversation, enjoying flavorful, well-prepared food and recognizing the uniqueness and the beauty of place. Thanks to this movement, a greater awareness of the need to slow down and savor life is spreading throughout the world. The two things I love most about the Slow Food movement are the emphasis on leisurely communication between people at the table and appreciation of the differences in soil and climate within bio-regions to produce a unique flavor in that locales food and drink. To say it more succinctly, the movement is promoting human to human relationships and human to land relationships using good food as a bridge. Obviously, other people think it's a good idea as well because Slow Food groups are gaining more members annually throughout the U.S. For more information on the Slow Food movement go to www.slowfood.com, www.slowfoodusa.org or read Slow Food, the Case for Taste by Carlo Petrini.

When I first heard of the Slow Food movement, my immediate reaction was, wow, I wish we had a similar movement for herbalism. The ideas line up so well. My next thought was, why don't we start one? So over the last few years as I've worked out curriculum for my herb students, the idea of Slow Medicine has developed and taken shape.

Slow Medicine goes against the common U.S. medical model promoting a quick, silver bullet cure for disease and very little time for communication between doctor and patient. Unfortunately, the global herb industry is following the same model in order to sell product to busy consumers. Many herbalists have been offering an alternative to this methodology since the dawn of time, maybe we just need to reframe it for the public and make it personal. Here are some of the points of Slow Medicine, I would appreciate your input.

- It is bioregional, recognizing the unique medicinal plants and growing conditions of different areas. For example, yarrow growing in an urban lot in Tacoma is very different than yarrow growing in the Palouse of eastern Washington, which is different than the yarrow growing near the beaches of Waldron Island. An herbalist in right relationship with the land will use this knowledge to protect and nourish wild plant stands, embrace urban plant stands and use them both in a sustainable manner.
- It is also bioregional in that the emphasis is on community. The herbalist lives within and participates in her/his community, adapting an herbal practice to meet community needs. Every region and herbalist is different in their own unique way and as

such meets the varied needs of their particular community. A standardization of practice would stifle experiences and creativity and limit the interactions between patients and healers. Using an ecosystem as a metaphor, lack of diversity leaves it susceptible to detrimental invaders and collapse. A diverse ecosystem makes room for non-natives and over time they develop their own ecological niche. Slow Medicine shuns categories and standardization while emphasizing personal responsibility (healer and patient) and empowerment through education. Selling snake oil becomes a risky business when everyone knows where you live.

- It recognizes that healing and making medicinal preparations, like cooking good food, takes time. In my experience, hypertension is very treatable, but it takes several months to see a sizable reduction in numbers. Likewise, proper St. John's Wort oil needs at least a month of sitting in the sun to reach full potency in my opinion. I actually leave mine in the sun all summer and the efficacy is amazing, rushing the process doesn't give the same medicinal quality.
- It promotes the patient being as engaged as the healer, communication being central to this reciprocal relationship. One of my students asked me how to help someone that wouldn't listen. My response was that until that person asked for help and was willing to go forward with their healing journey, she could listen and observe, but no more. You couldn't force that person into a situation that they were not ready for.
- The medicine should grow/be grown in the surrounding area (native or otherwise) for ease of access, to provide unique medicinal qualities, to save resources and cost and to give pride of place. This makes herbal medicine sustainable, affordable and promotes a connection between the herbalist, the community and the ecosystem they live in/interact with. This is just another part of bioregionalism, and promotes protection of the plants.
- It respects and honors the wisdom of our ancestors and the people who lived/are now living on the land before us, as well as the generations who will follow us. Thank you Julie Cordero-Lamb and Julie Alessio for patiently listening, contributing, and making sure I didn't forget this one.
- It favors prevention over treatment for two reasons. Preventing illness is enjoyable (fun really) and doesn't tax the patient's body. It promotes sleep, exercise, right relations, laughter, tonic teas and nourishing food. Basically pretty easy to talk people into if you can get them to slow down. A prevention mind set also saves wild plant stands from over harvesting. American consumers spent more on herbal supplements last year than pharmaceutical medication, according to many sources this trend is going to

continue. The western medical model of treatment throws a lot of medicine at a problem without necessarily solving the root of the imbalance and enforcing the need for the patient/consumer to come back again and again (\$). This is not a sustainable model for herbalism because the demand is growing much higher than the wild plant supply. Growers are valiantly attempting to keep up with demand but plant populations are still decreasing at an escalating rate. A paradigm shift needs to occur toward a prevention model.

- It is egalitarian, allowing feminine energy and masculine energy to dance together in all aspects of the practice. Slow Medicine is based on reciprocal (mutually beneficial) relationships bridged by plant medicine.

Slow Medicine's mascot is the turtle, an animal that moves at a leisurely pace like the Slow Food movement's snail. The three stories that illustrate this choice are Aesop's fable of the tortoise and the hare, the children's book Old Turtle by Douglas Wood and the Native American story about Turtle Island (I would appreciate knowing which tribe or tribes this story originates from).

I am a student of the plants and the earth, an herbalist by calling. My heart is breaking as I watch the commercialization, standardization and exploitation of plants and people in the name of progress and profit, praying that our diversity of species and practices will survive. I refuse to let my grandmother's teachings disappear without a fight. The Slow Food movement started as a counter to "fast life", the Golden Arches and all that it stands for in our global society. It promotes slowing down, being in right relationship and experiencing the variety and wonder of our world through food. Working together, Slow Medicine could be the next ideological step to help people relish their medicinal roots, both ancestral and botanical. It is human nature to protect that which is personal. Sláinte! May the revolution continue!

© Copyright February 2005, Kathryn Sequoia Ladd

It is illegal to duplicate or reproduce this document or any of its contents without obtaining express permission from the author.