

## **Spirit and Practice of the Wise Woman Tradition**

### **c. 2001 by Susun S. Weed**

As we enter the twenty-second century, herbal medicine is being integrated into mainstream medicine in the United States. Or is it the other way around? Are we in danger of adopting the limited, linear scientific view of a practice that is also considered an art? Are we abandoning the sense of delight that drew us to herbal medicine? Are we vulnerable to needing to be validated from outside because we don't value ourselves highly enough?

In order to answer these questions, we will use the model of the Three Traditions of Healing--Scientific, Heroic, and Wise Woman. Knowing the differences between these three views allows us to become informed consumers of health care, to repossess the power of our health/wholeness/holiness in a new and uniquely functional manner, and to maintain our dignity as herbalists in a world dominated by scientists.

I want to focus on the Wise Woman Tradition, its spirit and practice, because I believe it offers us a way to look at what we have as herbalists, and what society seems to be offering us, and to make a better-informed choice as to the path ahead.

What Are the Three Traditions of Healing?

The three traditions are ways of thinking, not ways of acting. Any technique, any substance can be used in any tradition. There are scientific and heroic midwives as well as wise woman midwives; there are MDs who are heroic and those who act as wise women, as well as scientific ones. There are scientific herbalists, heroic herbalists, and wise woman herbalists. There are preferred ways of working in each tradition, granted, but surgery is not restricted to the scientific realm, nor is a shamanic trance strictly relegated to the realm of the wise woman. To determine the tradition of the practitioner, we must look at the thoughts that lie behind their use of any form of healing.

Each one of us contains some aspects of each tradition. And these different aspects may want different things -- at different times -- or at the same time. The scientific aspect wants facts, the heroic aspect wants to be told what to do, and the wise woman aspect smiles and offers you a bowl of soup and some bread and cheese she made herself. As I define the characteristics of each tradition, identify the part of yourself that thinks that way.

**The Scientific Tradition** defines truth as measurable and repeatable. The whole is the same as its most active part. Herbs are reduced to standardized extracts; only the active ingredient is important. Healing is fixing. Linear thought, linear time. Good and bad, health and sickness always at war.

Nature is mechanized. Bodies are machines. Anything that deviates from normal needs to be fixed. Measurements determine deviation; drugs insure normalcy. Plants are potential drugs, safe only in the hands of licensed experts.

The legalized use of herbs in Germany follows the scientific model. Herbs are available by prescription and paid for by National Insurance because they are viewed and treated as drugs. Herbs are available only to those with a prescription written by an MD, who has received little or no training in the use of herbs, so the overall effect is to severely limit the use of herbal medicine and its availability.

Ready access to a wide variety of manufactured herbal medicines is a freedom that many American herbalists seem to take for granted. It is due, in part, to the strength of the Heroic tradition.

**The Heroic Tradition** is not one unified tradition, but many similar ones collectively known as the Heroic tradition. Predating the scientific tradition, the heroic view sees that the whole is a circle made up of all its parts -- body, mind, and spirit.

Sickness is caused by pollution of the body, mind, or spirit. Healing is the removal of the corruption, the detoxification. Puking, purging and bleeding. Removing curses. Cleansing the colon and the aura. Making everything light.

We are all filthy sinners. We have to pay for our fun. No pain, no gain. If it tastes bitter it is good for you. Food is the first addiction, learned at the mothers' breast. Control yourself. Control your thoughts. Control your appetites. Control your desires. If you want to get to heaven, follow the rules.

If you are sick, it is your own fault. You were negative. You were bad. You ate the wrong food, thought the wrong thought, sinned. You stepped outside the charmed circle. You need a savior, purification and punishment. The Heroic healer saves the day thanks to rare substances, exotic herbs, and complicated formulae. Powerful, drug-like herbs (such as cayenne and golden seal) and vitamin and mineral pills are favored remedies in this tradition. Most books on herbal medicine, and many on nutrition, are written by men of the Heroic tradition.

**The Wise Woman Tradition** is the world's oldest healing tradition. Its symbol is the spiral. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Life is a spiraling, ever-changing completeness. Disease and injury are doorways of transformation. Each one of us is inherently whole, yet seeking greater wholeness; perfect, yet desiring greater perfection. Whole/healthy/holy. Substance, thought, feeling, and spirit inseparable, intertwined.

Good health may be freedom from disease, but it is also openness to change, flexibility, and compassionate embodiment, even when dancing with cancer or healing from a serious

accident. Uniqueness rather than normalcy. Not a cure, but an integration; not the elimination of the bad, but a nourishing of wholeness/health/holiness.

Nourishment of wholeness/health/holiness is invisible, simple, grounded, holographic, both/and, ever-changing, woman-centered, and compassionate.

Nourishment is Invisible

Invisible as a bowl of soup. The World Health Organization says ninety percent of the health care provided in the world is given by women in their own homes. Invisibly. With a smile. A hug. A word of praise. In small daily increments, the wise woman builds the health of herself, her family, her community, her country, her world. She does it in the Tao, so she is invisible.

Nourishment is Simple

Simple as the weeds in the garden. Simple as in one thing at a time. Simple as in easy. Simple, common, single, unique. Open to subtlety, simply. The wise woman uses what is local and common, allying herself with one plant at a time, matching the uniqueness of the plant with the uniqueness of the person.

Nourishment is Grounded

Grounded as the earth, flowing with the seasons, ever changing, ever the same. Seeking to increase the power of the patient. Power flowing from responsibility. Planting the patient in the ground, to become rooted, to delve deep, to gain a foundation to grow up from. Praising the gift of the body, the ground of our being. Eating from the ground, locally, organically.

Holographic Nourishment

Holographic images contain the whole in every part. The more parts there are, the clearer the image. The wise woman nourishes all the parts of the unique individual so they become clearer, more filled with life. The wise woman herbalist gathers holographic plants, not active ingredients, not flower essences, but the amazing, complex, vital hologram of healing that her green ally gives away. A hologram that nourishes all parts, integrates all the parts, both/and.

## **Both/and Universe**

The both/and universe embraces all possibilities. Allows distinction, sees beyond opposition. Yin and yang cooperate, reach consensus. Walking in beauty along the rainbow path of peace. We are all alive and dead, whole and piecemeal, healthy and sick, good and bad.

No Diseases, No Cures, No Healers

Woman-centered, heart centered, the Wise Woman tradition has no rules, no texts, no rites. It is constantly changing, constantly being re-invented, open to the ever-changing perfection of the eternal moment. The focus is on the person, not the problem, nourishing not curing, self-healing not healing another. A give-away dance of exploration and experience, with no answer to the question "why?" No blame, no shame, no guilt, no reason, no answer ever to "why?"

## The Six Steps of Healing

The Wise Woman tradition offers self-healing options as diverse as the human imagination and as complex as the human psyche. How confusing! We need a way to cut through the confusion and decide which option to use when. I call it the Six Steps of Healing, a hierarchy based on the concept of: "First Do No Harm."

- Step 0 - Do Nothing
- Step 1 - Collect Information
- Step 2 - Engage the Energy
- Step 3 - Nourish and Tonify
- Step 4 - Stimulate & Sedate
- Step 5 - Use Drugs
- Step 6 - Break & Enter

I see the wise woman. From her shoulders, a mantle of power flows.

I see the wise woman at her loom. Every thread is different, each perfect and splendid, alive with sound and color.

I see the wise woman. She is old and black and walks with the aid of a beautifully carved stick. She speaks in song, in story, in dance. She lives in every herb.

I see the wise woman. And she sees me. She winks at me and spreads her arms.

"These are the ways of our grandmothers, the ancient ones. Every pain, every plant, every problem is cherished. Night is loved for darkness, day for light. Uniqueness is our treasure, not normalcy.

"These are the ways of our grandmothers, the ancient ones. Receive abundance with compassion, knowing you will be food for others. Know that dying is a portal just as birth is. Celebrate all comings and goings, they are the turnings of the spiral.

"These are the ways of our grandmothers, the ancient ones. The joy of life is the give-away. You are the center of your universe. You are the axis, life's matrix, the still point in the ever-moving. The designs of the universe radiate through you. You are god/dess, unique and whole."

I see the wise woman. And she sees me. She smiles from shrines in thousands of places. She is buried in the ground of every country. She flows in every river and pulses in the oceans. The wise woman's robe flows down your back, centering you in the ever-changing, ever-spiraling mystery.

Everywhere I look, the wise woman looks back. And she smiles.

This is an excerpt from [Healing Wise](#)

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