

## Chapter 2

### Developing Intuition

I sat in a chair. It was a rickety office chair on wheels. My eyes were closed. I held an amber liter bottle filled with Siberian ginseng tincture in my hands. A woman stood next to me. We were in the back room of a doctor's office. The woman, Phyllis Bala, worked the front office — filing, paperwork, that sort of thing. She was a portly woman; large, solid and well grounded. Black hair, full features, American Indian ancestry.

She was guiding me. She told me how to invoke the spirit of the plant. I said the prayer.

En el nombre de diosa  
doy gracia al espiritu de esta planta,  
y tengo la fe con todo mi corazon  
de esta planta va curar  
los infermadades de la gente.

I said it three times to set the space and open my heart. She then asked me to request the spirit show itself.

I asked for the spirit to reveal itself. She then asked me what it looked like.

Well, I don't see pictures. And I don't see visions. And I don't hear voices. I'm just not psychic in any way. So I saw exactly what I expected. I saw nothing. I knew I was supposed to see something so of course something popped into my head. But it was no vision of a “real” plant spirit. It was a snapshot of a small dwarf-like being. Looked like a dwarf from the Walt Disney version of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Except a little less round with a thinner body and sharper features. Sharp lines in the hat. It wasn't a pointed hat, but there were fold lines in it.

That's what I “saw.” Just a hazy glimpse of a static small figure. Not just small in the fact it was dwarf-like, but small also in the size of the picture I saw.

She waited for my answer. What did I see? “Well,” I said, “if I had to say I saw something, it was....” and I described the figure.

She laughed and laughed. She said the spirit made itself appear small so as not to frighten me. I just shrugged.

Certainly I would have expected the spirit of *Eleutherococcus* (also known as Siberian ginseng) to be bigger and more solid. A potent adaptogen, I had used Siberian ginseng (no longer allowed to be called that due to a FDA ruling) to calm and regulate my stress response. I found it helpful in stopping and lessening the frequency of my herpes breakouts. And I recommended it to many people. I called it “liquid meditation” and considered it a staple for life in these times when we tend to live under constant stress.

I remember Tom Brooks, one of my herb teachers, describing this plant and how it related to modern humans. He had a “song and dance” that went something like this:

We were designed for a life as surfers. We were meant to catch that wave, get a rush of adrenaline, feel the heart pounding excitement and then lay on the beach and relax in the sun. Stress was meant to be short lived. The adrenals were meant to pour out adrenaline and then turn off. The hunt was a short lived, high stress, high action event followed by rest. Today, we get stressed out and we don't turn off. We are on all the time and are bombarded by constant stressors. Siberian ginseng resets the stress response. It turns off the adrenals. It is the only plant I recommend to *everyone* who lives in modern societies.

I refer to Phyllis Bala as a shamanistic herbalist. Her talents included psychic abilities, but she found the label psychic somewhat offensive. She could see “stuff”, interact with spirits and guides and had a great deal of power to move energy around. She did healing work in communion with plant spirits. I'm not sure of her background or training, but I know that she came to work at the medical office I worked at to learn more about people in disease. She would observe people in the waiting room and participate in medical consultations with the doctor.

The medical practice of this office was somewhat unorthodox for the 1990's. Dr. Jones used 95% herbal medicines and nutritional supplements in the treatment of her patients. Since she was able to offer her patients holistic treatment for their diseases, she was sought after for second opinions and holistic treatment of chronic and debilitating diseases such as Crohn's disease, chronic fatigue, environmental allergies and cancer. She also provided women with excellent holistic care to support healthy reproductive health and the transition to menopause.

We worked at the same office. I was the doctor's “chief medicine maker.” An accurate, albeit odd, title. I purchased raw materials and made a variety of herbal medicines for her. Primarily tinctures, but also salves, creams, tea blends, capsules and glycerites. My duties also included teaching interested patients how to make their own medicines. I'd fill up a class every couple of months and teach medicine making to 10 to 15 people. Most went away from the class with an appreciation for the process, but simply continued to purchase their medicine from our “pharmacy.” Herbal medicine making is simple, but time consuming.

Dr. Jones wanted to provide her clients with the most potent medicine available. On occasion, if it was possible, finished tinctures would be

sent out for chemical assay. In addition, I was to inspect the raw material to confirm proper identification by the suppliers and to make sure that the plant was harvested at what was considered the optimum point of growth. If leaf was used, it better be leaf that came in. If the plant was to be harvested in flower, then the flowers should be at their peak and not fading. Part of my work was the evaluation of the energetic properties of the herbal medicines we produced. I had limited expertise in this area. Sure, I had a sense when plant material was “nice,” but that was the extent of it.

Phyllis took it upon herself to train me further. We would work one on one as time permitted in the office. It was quite fun. I would sit with a plant in my lap and try to contact the spirit of the plant. One day trying to get a message from *Centella* (or was that *Passiflora*?), I got a vague picture of “black.” As I sat with the plant, I imagined another image of some hairy blob, like a haystack. She just laughed and told me that a large black blob had just left my body. “Funny,” she commented, “that people so often don't know what is going on.” In addition, she informed me that the person that collected the plant had long black hair. (This I verified with the supplier.)

I also participated in a workshop Phyllis gave as part of the practitioner course I was taking from Dr. Jones. Phyllis started the class by having us stand in a circle. Then after a short ritual, she went around the circle and gently pushed each person at the shoulder. I fell back when she pushed me. She smiled and laughed. She was checking to make sure each of us were grounded or rooted. I, of course, was easily pushed off center. I hadn't learned how to be centered and stay firm within myself. This was something that I would learn during the period of time she was in my life.

This particular session of the course was hosted by Mom's Head Garden (a local herb nursery). As part of the class we were to walk out into the gardens and allow a plant to select us. Here again, I knew I was

wasting my time. I don't hear plants, I don't talk with plants and I can't receive messages from plants. I couldn't imagine how a plant would be able to communicate with me and “select me.” I just didn't have this talent. This is an activity for other people, not me.

I did what I could. The instructions were to walk into the garden and have a plant select us. I knew how to walk. So, I left the circle of participants and walked slowly into the garden. I walked and walked in a straight path until I felt like I'd gone too far. My mind said softly, “There's no interesting plants out that way and if you keep going you'll be in the cow field.” I turned around and proceeded to walk back. After I'd walked back about 10 feet I started to get that feeling that I had gone too far again. The feeling continued to tug on my brain. By 15 feet I knew that I was going in the wrong direction. I turned around and looked back. That's when I saw it: a majestic *Verbena bonariensis*. I instantly felt recognition. “Oh, that's the plant.” My brain concurred; given who I was and my personality, verbena was actually a good match for me.

I remember meeting *Verbena* (also known as vervain) for the first time. I was on my first field course with Tom Brooks. We were in the Sierras. He was with a group of people stopped beside the road, looking at a plant. I hurried over from my car. From a distance the plant looked like a solid bush of indigo. As I got closer I saw that the plant was comprised of widely spread green branches with tiny indigo flowers. Tom gave us time to experience the plant before he began to describe it and its indications for use:

This plant has good vibes. It is tightly woven. Its energetic body is close to its true body, but still vibrant. It is good for subtle empty shakiness. Deficiency in the center, shakiness on outside. People that are in their body, but energetically seem to

have caverns inside. Vervain will make people brighter and sharper. It is an energizing astringent for people's auras. It is nurturing, supportive.

This was the plant that had selected me. It made good sense. I was a little shaky and unsure. I certainly was unable to stay centered. I tended to look outside of myself in an attempt to figure out what was right for me. I didn't know that I was enough as I was and that the answers I was looking for were within me. I had a lot of nervous energy. I was fidgety and uncomfortable in my body. Vervain was bound to be a good teacher for me. I bought the plant and took it home.

The lessons didn't end here. Phyllis told me to spend time with plants. "They will teach you." she said. As always, in my life, the greatest lessons come with the simplest instructions. There is much one can learn on one's own by observing and interacting with the world. Phyllis didn't give me any special instructions or rituals or practices. She simply told me to spend time with plants. So, I spent time with plants.

I was already an avid gardener. I loved plants. I liked weeding, digging in the soil, watering and planting. I was fond of trees and shrubs and vegetables and herbs. My earliest memories were playing in the mushroom compost pile before it was spread on our family garden and of growing tomato plants on my windowsill in the Michigan winter. As a child, I spent hours in the willow tree in our back yard and loved the apple tree outside my bedroom. When on vacation at our family cottage I would wander among the rows of pine trees my grandfather had planted and the nearby native hardwood forest.

I loved white pine with their soft lacy needles. And maples with their strong smooth trunks. Willows grew fast and were easy to climb. I

considered our back yard willow “my tree” and had a special relationship with it. (I learned as an adult that apparently my brother felt a similar bond to that tree and also claimed ownership.) I was certainly no stranger to plants. They had always been a big part of life. It was no wonder I was attracted to studying herbal medicine.

Despite my formal studies in botany and herbal medicine, I was hungry to learn more about plants. I had studied them, but I now had new tools that allowed me to learn from them directly. I took advantage of “talking” with plants at every opportunity.

I would say my prayer and then ask the plant spirit to show itself or tell me about itself. Perhaps I was interested in knowing what part of the body it affected or what kind of action it had. I would ask to be shown these things too. I then would use my trick. Remember, I can't really talk to plants and I don't see visions or get intuitive hits. My trick was to say to myself, “If you had to say you communicated with the plant spirit, what would you say the message was?” This is how I developed what people call intuition. I was learning to listen. I was learning to listen to myself and the information I had within me. Whether it comes from a plant spirit, a divine being, or is just random neuron firing I don't know. What I do know is that the communication process was enjoyable.

During this period in my life a lot of things were happening to me. For 30 years I had claimed that I was insensitive. Certainly I didn't have any intuition. I was a logical, practical person. Now, I found myself at a crossroads. The old insensitive shell was falling off and a new sensitive woman was emerging. Tom Brooks once stated that people having their first experience with “alternative consciousness” or “energetic awakenings” often make a big deal about it. He was probably talking about me. I was a little freaked out. I was feeling things I hadn't felt before and I wanted to know if they were real and what they were.

I recall calling people and talking about all the strange things I was experiencing. I'd have weird tingles on my face for no reason. Or find my body “dissolve” during a psychotropic reaction to an herb like *Pedicularis*. I was feeling strange things and searching for a way to have these things make sense. Any “normal” person would have passed these off as just oddities, but to me they were a big deal. Something was happening! It was something big! I just wasn't sure what it was and I didn't know how it fit into my old frame of reference. In retrospect, I guess I was just becoming more aware of subtle energy.

During this period I spent a good deal of time meditating. I would just sit on the couch and feel my body. I also would climb up into a great oak I had in my back yard and just sit there. This was me spending time with plants. I spent a lot of time in that oak. I would just sit there thinking there must be some way to experience the oak more, to feel more connected to it or in relationship to it. I would sit in the oak trying to stir up a conversation with it, but it would only hold me. That was me being with plants.

I would also go for walks in the forest. Sonoma County is a beautiful place to live. I enjoy the coastal ranges, especially in the winter when it's raining. There are some excellent trails on the first ridge off the ocean. In the winter I would walk them and collect *Usnea* and *Myrica*. *Usnea* is a lichen. It hangs off the trees dry and brittle all summer, but becomes moist and vibrant after the first rain. *Myrica* is a California native tree. The root bark makes a potent medicine for shrinking and stimulating tissue.

What was important to me was being with the plants. When I think *Myrica*, I don't think respiratory infection or slowly healing damaged gut. I think Winter Solstice, slight mist, the odor of rich humic soil, the confusion of intermingled roots from a nearby willow and the snap of *Myrica* root bark as it pops off under my bite, followed by a pungent taste. I think total bliss. I was never more happy then when I was out

in nature with plants.

On one of my adventures, I drove up the Northern California coast past Jenner. I pulled off the road and began walking through the woods. It was cool, but sunny: a perfect fall day. I was walking through a mixed evergreen forest, mostly live oak. Very, very nice. I walked until I came to a beautiful tree. It was old, huge and covered with moss. It was one of those trees with low spreading branches that are perfect for sitting in. I was reminded of my oak back home, so I sat down to enjoy the peace.

At home, when I sit in my oak, I feel like I'm sinking into a soft mattress. Well, the oak is not soft at all physically, but there is a quality of rich quiet or a deep peace. If I am anxious, sitting in the oak calms me. I sat down on this old moss covered tree and expected the peaceful feeling to settle over me. Instead, I realized I was feeling more agitated. I was actually becoming uncomfortable. I had felt more peaceful and still while I'd been walking than I did sitting in that tree. It was confusing. Then I looked up.

Well, it wasn't an oak at all. It was a bay tree. I laughed, of course it was a bay tree. Bay trees are also used in medicine. They are vasodilators, they are movers. The leaves can be used as a steam to clear out the respiratory passages, they can be added to baths to relieve muscle soreness from overexertion. I was laughing because I realized I had learned how to listen. I sat in a tree and it told me it was a stimulating tree. I became stimulated and agitated. I never get agitated when sitting in an oak tree. I would have never expected to experience a difference between bay and oak, but the bay was energetically stimulating, and given its clinical indications that is not surprising. I was delighted. In that moment, I understood the value of “spending time with plants.”