

Treat Her Right: **Lessons from A Medicine Walk**

by Kathleen Harrison



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Kathleen Harrison, ethnobotanist, has over thirty years of fieldwork experience in Latin America and has helped establish ethnobotanical teaching gardens in Peru, Costa Rica and Hawaii. For fifteen years she has participated in an exchange of nature-based knowledge with indigenous people in the mountains of Mexico. She teaches ethnobotany field courses for the University of Minnesota (in Hawaii) and Arizona State University (in Ecuador). Kat is also a botanical illustrator who enjoys helping people learn to see nature. She is currently writing a book about what she has learned.

To begin with, I'll go out on a limb: Nature loves it when we take psychedelics and wander around, appreciating her, in a state of respectful awe and gratitude. For the ease of language and because we don't know otherwise, I'll personify her—this grand, sentient, multi-formed presence. Some call her Gaia, an ever-transforming yet meta-stable entity who is far more than the sum of her amazing parts, but we'll just call her nature here. She is embodied in all the living things, the elements, the planet and, some say, the heavens.

Our psychedelic experience in nature initiates us into the awareness that we had as very small children, when everything was a wonder to behold; or that our ancestors had, not so long ago, until they got so obsessively rational; or that some indigenous people still know and cherish. Psychedelics are not the only way to get there, to this state of exalted perception, but they are indeed a class of species and related molecules that have come into our collective Western hands at a time in history that desperately needs medicine for its ills. Nature needs her humans to know and love her, to remember how to treat her kindly. So much of the human world is so very far from nature now, that even many of us who regularly send monetary contributions and vote to preserve or protect nature somewhere barely give ourselves time to be immersed in it.

In our lengthy cultural ignorance of the natural world, we've forgotten how to even look, much less see what's there. Being in nature is an opportunity to cultivate the child-eyes, the child-mind that neither knows nor presumes to know. We have learned that psychedelics can help us examine complex or hidden things and come to understand them, appreciate them, or untangle them. That's part of the

action of the medicine, and that action is how we are opened to seeing nature. To be able to truly see, we must truly look, we must want to see. Careful use of psychedelics can help re-animate and liberate our de-animated and colonized psyches—that's part of why these plants, mushrooms and molecules are still largely kept underground. Animation of the psyche and the recognition of animate nature go hand in hand.

Whenever we meet nature—in the garden, in the wild, in a dream, or under a starry sky, in any state of mind—we are illuminated by the effort. We don't necessarily understand all that we see, but by turning our senses toward her, we glimpse the great natural mysteries and bring some realization home to savor. This is even truer when we explore nature while a fine psychedelic heightens our senses. As a lifelong nature-girl, traveler, teacher, and as a mother, I've always been an advocate of outdoor education for all ages. Just go outside and look around, you'll learn something, and your troubles may be put in perspective. But I must say that my own experiences in nature with one of the venerable psychedelics have been some of the very best educational moments I've ever had.

Learning to See

In the ongoing love letter from my heart to nature, I can say there is nothing like being a human nestled in the natural world, enhanced by sacred medicine, somewhere off the beaten path, perhaps in a glen or garden that I know well, perhaps on my favorite hike.

In that state, we are really attentive, and wide open: open to seeing with new eyes, open to experiencing wonder. If we are in that state, then nature seems to come forward to meet us, showing us her sparkling day, her great soft meadows, her jeweled creeks, the birds singing in her hair. In that state, I trust that everything seen is real, and astonishingly true to itself. The aesthetic is reliably exquisite.

So let's say we go for a walk through the woods and over the hill on a beautiful spring day, a "medicine walk" some call it, which means the walker's perceptions are enhanced by psychedelic medicine. Of course we need to know the lay of the land, where the path is, where it leads, how to find our way back, where the shifty edges are, if there are dangers to be aware of, and we should be supplied with warmth, water, a little nourishment, a good hiker's common sense, and the finest medicine we can come up with, in a dose appropriately modest, for walking, for looking, for tuning in to what we see. (This kind of foray is not the best for melting, best save that for your inner sanctum.) We must keep our bearings, and most likely it's wise to have a friend along. We take time to invoke vision, expanded awareness, and protection. We honor the spirit of the place to which we have come. Small, spontaneous, intuitive ritual helps us cross over from our busy-mind world, to become present. We stop to thank the medicine and ask for clarity and insight on the path.

As we come into psychedelic focus, we begin to notice that the myriad designs of every member of the flora and fauna answer nature's fundamental operational question, "What works?" This works, they say, and this!: See my wings, my bark, my skin, my roots, my seedpods? See me nodding in pleasure as my pollinator visits me again, and again. See my spores waft away on the breath of the land? See how we species meet, and

cooperate, reproduce and reciprocate, even die and recirculate? And so as we watch with our clearest eyes, they carry on the show far beyond the described, explicit form and function; beyond our slim understanding of the niche each species fills; into the absurd, brilliant, touching dramas of our fellow beings. Or maybe they reveal entrancing or even ominous patterns: leaves seem to be arranged like beaded chevrons on undulating serpent skin.

Can it be, they appear to be arranging themselves as I watch, or is it an unfelt breeze? There we see a pattern of growth unfolding before our eyes, here we recognize the eons of strata revealed across the canyon. Eons. Branches seeking to grow away from the winds, nestled in the hollows, hugging the low spots, making shelter for the fragile ones, the ferns tucked into crevices. On this magical walk, we seek the roots too, the shade, a place to rest our backs against a big trunk in deep meditative empathy. We can feel the lifeblood of the tree running up to the sky, flowing throughout its limbs with nourishment derived from the absolute miracle of photosynthesis. Later, as we reach the ridge, the ocean breaks in the distance, wildflowers vibrate in the breeze, the sun hangs shy behind its thin veil of clouds, tall grasses like fur rise on the backbone of the hill. Astonished, we realize that we are standing on the head of some great beast lapping at the river curled around its haunches far below, leaning into the wind, sheltering its young, those hillocks behind us... "Wow!" is the appropriate comment. Foliage softens the edges, rocky outcroppings round out the subtle palette. We are overwhelmed with gratitude. We gaze over the vista and it is clear that nature and culture embroidered together form the quilt that now lies over the world.

Reciprocating

Experiencing a deep love of nature rewards us with insight and pleasure, and we are wisely grateful, but it also initiates the impulse to protect and nurture that which we love and recognize. This principle of reciprocity is inherent in traditional indigenous systems of both ecological and spiritual management. Everything is an exchange of energy and

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awareness. Practically speaking, the widespread psychedelic awareness of nature, coming out of the Sixties, helped birth the entire environmental movement. Many activists and key thinkers in this field have been motivated by their psychedelic experiences to embrace and expand the notion of environmental stewardship: caring for the land and its species, keeping the wild places wild, understanding what wild even means, learning the old ways that had a lighter touch, maintaining unspoiled shorelines, restoring health to damaged waterways, creating sustainable systems of farming that are not toxic to the land and water, and educating our young to love these places from the start.

In the arts, sciences and digital realms, experiences with these sacred medicines have been the ah-ha! moment in the evolution of a career or the solution to a problem. We all know this, it's just that psychedelics (whatever you choose to call them) are still taboo, so it's still hard for all those who've been inspired by them to admit their inspirational experiences. Well, those psychedelic revelations—revealed information—work the same way when we think about how to care for our home, our planet. People realize that we must take care of her, and this path of wondering can lead us to answers about how to take care of her. Of course the planetary stewardship meme is much more widespread than the direct psychedelic effect, but movements evolve that way: Uplifted and inspired by remarkable insights, people form a dream of a better way, then by tapping into ancestral memories, weaving in indigenous views, finding those elders who'll share what they know, and using our creative intelligence, a practical concept or a way to live ripples out into widespread awareness. We're seeing the fruits of psychedelic thinking in some of the many solutions that people are working on right now.

Treat Her Right

Nature, it seems to me, also reciprocates, and holds us with a special sweetness when we regard her through our sacred medicine.

One night I went to sleep asking for guidance, and to know a few key words that I could share with a crowd of psychedelic advocates who were meeting

the next day. As I awoke the following morning, I became aware of simple words that were waiting for me: "Treat her right." They were perfect as words to live by: Treat her—the planet, the plants, the feminine in all her forms—as though she were your own self, your beloved. Treat the psychedelic plants and their uses respectfully, and take care of the planet they and we live on. That means that, yes, we join the best environmental projects or groups that we can find or initiate, and that we also take time to be in Nature, wide open so that she can heal us of our grievous wounds. I think one of the coolest causes is bringing very urban kids to the country, the forest, or the shore, the kind of places they've never seen. They just open up and are amazed. They were starving for nature. Aren't many people starving for nature, and they don't even know it? So, to be clear here, I'm advocating "outdoor education" for all, and for some of us who are mature, up to it, experienced, and oh so careful, maybe a special enhanced day in nature?

Be careful, I must warn you, watch your step! The plants and fungi have been known to hijack humans! Many of us! Of course, those of us who've been hijacked seem to be pretty darn happy about it, so there's that. But so many people have turned toward plants, toward growing things, from what they thought was their career, it's laughable. In the Amazon, a number of native groups recognize a spirit-being that appears sometimes in the forest or at its edge: a small man, with a club foot or something that causes a limp, sometimes with a cane, a friendly enough fellow, but he's tricky and will ask you your name, then may ask you to come with him, to show you something, take you into the forest. You mustn't go, they say, because you may never come back. He takes people into the wild and they may be made to forget the world they came from, their families, and their homes. Who is that trickster? Why is there a story with a warning about wild enchantment and good judgment? Discernment is always important, whatever the endeavor, even or especially when we are engaged with powerful spiritual medicine. Who is asking what of you? Where will the unchecked impulse

lead you? The experienced people recommend that you not be fearful, just be discerning. In psychedelic investigations, both internal and external, balance the thrill, and the risk, with the means and knowledge of how to get home in good shape, the wiser for it.

Some of the psychedelic flora actually show you nature, and literally teach, even if you are not out in it, with your eyes open. Ayahuasca can facilitate various kinds of learning, but one that many South American healers cite as instructive is an archetypal experience that I had when I first encountered the medicina tradition in the Amazon in the 1970s: While I was sitting in a traditional ceremony, in a circle with savvy indigenous folks, I had a visionary experience of being taken by the hand, led along a path in the forest, stopping to examine certain plants. I was clearly told something about each of them, their personas and their use. The vine-and-leaf duo that make up ayahuasca are known as teachers, and they take their job very seriously, as other teacher species do too.

Years later I had taken a large dose of psilocybin mushrooms on beautiful tropical land that I knew well. As I sat in meditation, I was led in my mind down a familiar trail, past the marvelous plants that are native to that place, to a particular tree whose form I had admired. There, gloriously, stood Kuan Yin, framed in the cleft of the tree. I could barely cast my eyes on her beauty. She asked me a key question, then sent me back up the trail, back into my sitting body. I had received comfort, counsel in the form of a question, and I knew how and where to find her: nature in the form of a psychedelic mushroom opened the possibility to me. Nature in the form of a compassionate goddess drew me to her, then offered potent communication. Nature brought me back up the path and back to myself, to my waiting body: I who am nature too, just like you.

Awe leads to humility. It gets you outside yourself, and puts your story in appropriate perspective as an instant in a very long saga, the one we're all in together. That we humans, and human cultures, are embedded in natural cycles becomes obvious. The question—and psychedelics certainly raise more questions than they answer—is how do we best 'wear' and 'articulate' that fact of being creatures with unusual agency in nature's timeless epic.

Where the Path Goes

Part of tuning deeply into the natural world and its sentience is that one feels, in the roots of one's being, the profound tragedies of species and habitat diversity now lost forever, and the heartbreak of current teetering extinctions. We feel pain too from the fact that we humans hack away at the planet that nurtures us. Tears of grief may flow and that is fine, as it should be. Part of knowing and loving the natural world is mourning her suffering and that of everyone born of her. To be washed in your own wise tears is a cleansing that is in itself a gift. Grief integrates and becomes compassion; informed compassion arises as conscious action.

We humans have largely forgotten how to let nature intimately into our awareness. We have forgotten that we are nature, however fragmented and separate we may feel, yet it has not been that long since we knew we were part of it. The emergence of psychedelics into so-called Western culture is surely an offering from what's still possible—they are a key medicine that we need, golden threads that can at least help heal the rift, heal the world. Exploring the wonders of the world, and the worlds within, is part of the reunification of reality.

That revelation that you had when you focused in on the single dewdrop dangling on the tip of the leaf and you saw the whole world in it? That's the one to carry with you as you do your part. •

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