

# Eating under your own apple tree: Celtic Shamanism in herbal practice.

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**Introduction:** My interest in Celtic Shamanism started about nine years ago. I had been running a successful clinical practice since 1984 and for many years been involved in the study and practice of Ayurveda. For some time I had been aware that on a deep level I felt like I was missing something important. This feeling persisted and I eventually realised it related to an inner call to reconnect with the land and traditional healing wisdom of my ancestors (of Britain and Ireland) and the herbs and animals of this land. I was feeling a sense of disconnection and loss, and felt instinctively that reconnection would in some way be healing for me. This feeling led me to join the Order of Bards, Ovates and Druids that gave me my first experience of Celtic Shamanism and healing. My experience since then has also been greatly deepened by training with the well-known Celtic scholars and authors Caitlin and John Matthews.

In order to further this process of reconnection I embarked upon a period of intensive study of the traditional healing of Ireland (the Midach and Banliag), of Wales (Physicians of Myddfai) and of Scotland and that of the ancient Greeks and of Northern Europe. To reconnect with nature, and learn more about local herbs and the spirit of the land I also did courses in Bushcraft, Plant Spirit Medicine and trained as a Permaculture designer.

**Shamanism in brief:** Shamanism is probably the oldest form of healing practised by humanity. The shaman was traditionally also often a herbalist and naturopath. Most tribes or localities had a shaman who was asked for help with all manner of problems, spiritual and temporal.

Shamanism considers that everything is connected i.e. this world with other subtle worlds and times, and that they can influence one another. Shamanism allows travel and communication with the spirits of plants, people, animals and other beings between different worlds and times. This is not such a farfetched idea when we look at the work of Carl Jung in the field of transpersonal psychology and also the work of modern quantum physics. It is further explained in the writings of others such as Dr. Rupert Sheldrake (Morphic Resonance and Morphic Fields), Lynne McTaggart (The Field), Deepak Chopra (Quantum Healing), Bert Hellinger (Family Constellations).

The world-view of interconnection or the '**web of life**' has been the norm in many cultures

throughout human history. It is only with the rise in the West of patriarchal, mechanistic and linear thinking that it became sidelined. Modern physics is however coming full circle and is now proving this reality of interconnection in scientific terms.

There have also been experiments using shamanic healing in areas of modern psychology and healing. It is however something that is best experienced to be believed.

Shamanic journeys usually involve a method that takes the shaman beyond the normal state of consciousness, into what a Jungian psychotherapist might call a transpersonal state. There are many ways to achieve this, repetitive drumming is a common method. Shamanic training involves the guidance of experienced teachers and I strongly recommend you do not try it without such a teacher. Journeying into 'Other worlds' can be dangerous for the psyche and the soul, and can affect you physically.

The shaman learns about the dangers along with methods of protection and ways to make sure the journey is authentic. Shamanic journeys can be made for oneself, or on behalf of others (but only if requested). Common techniques for helping others include power retrieval, soul retrieval and extraction of intrusions. These are powerful techniques that are best undertaken by an experienced shaman. They are all forms of healing through reconnection e.g. restoring lost power, reintegrating fragments of the psyche or soul parts lost through trauma or illness. The extraction of intrusions removes something that is in the wrong place and sends it to where it belongs.

When journeying you can connect with power animals and spirit guides, with healers (etc) for personal healing or to help others. Or, you can ask a shaman to do this for you. Importantly for herbalists you can also connect with plants and trees and learn valuable information about their healing properties. One aspect of this form of shamanism is known as 'Plant Spirit Medicine'. A large part of the inherited knowledge regarding the traditional use of herbs we have has likely to have been gained in this way by shamans.

**Universal principles and the field:** The shamanic principle of connection (the web) relates to what is known as the 'field' in modern terms. This is based upon research into the fabric of creation expressed as frequencies or resonances (patterns of energy), or 'fields'. There are individual fields for everything e.g. plants, geographical regions, different cultures, a family, healing traditions, an individual person. All fields are connected or woven together into the tapestry of existence, and can influence one another. This is partly why traditional healing systems share the same universal principles (the elements etc), and a perennial philosophy of which the web is just one part. Shamanism communicates and works between different fields e.g. between plants and humans. Some fields seem to resonate together more harmoniously and connect more easily e.g. some people seem to resonate more harmoniously with a particular healing tradition.

The psychotherapy work of Bert Hellinger uses the field of a family (including the ancestors) to heal problems today and make sure destructive patterns are not passed on to the next generation. This is a modern form of shamanic work in that it restores disconnection with

ancestral power and wisdom, healing trauma in the family field.

In the same way that Hellinger found that the field of a family is healed, my own wellbeing was restored by reconnection to the field of my ancestral healing tradition, local herbs and land. As healing in one part of a field has a ripple effect that moves throughout the rest I suspect that the field of the Western psyche and modern world would benefit from more people reconnecting to these same wholesome roots.

**Modern plagues and healing disconnection:** During one shamanic journey I saw that the modern plagues that Dr. Christopher talked about also stemmed (directly or indirectly) from different forms of disconnection within Western culture that affects the body, soul and the environment. I saw this in many aspects of modern life, not only between modern culture and the healing wisdom of our ancestors and the use of local herbs, but between the head and heart (intellect not balanced with compassion and wisdom), between one another (isolation, excessive competition), between humanity and Mother Earth (abuse of the environment).

I realised that the modern psyche is conditioned to mostly look outside of itself for the solution to its problems. We look for more possessions to make us happy when we can find happiness within, or from simple pleasures. We are quick to blame someone else rather than look within to see if we have something to learn from a problem. With our long history of global trade we are conditioned to place value on products from outside Britain, whilst not valuing local products that are often as good (think Supermarkets vs. Farmers markets).

In a similar way I had in my desire to improve my work also looked outside Britain, to India. Although Ayurveda is a wonderful system, I had fallen into the unconscious pattern of assuming it was better than my own traditions partly because it was imported. I started to feel that maybe the opposite was true, local herbs and traditions would naturally be suited to local people.

**A shamanic journey:** To give you some idea of a journey I offer the following shortened account of one. I went on this journey to visit one of my spirit teachers. I asked the question: "What would be the best form of medicine for the world today?" My teacher looked at me as if this was a stupid question, then spread an arm out wide, a gesture indicating all the trees and herbs, the rocks, running water, the fresh air and the sunshine that surrounded us, and he said "You just need to use what is around you." He then stretched his hand towards my chest and said "And that which is within you." And went on to add, "In this way you also honour and protect the earth".

On other shamanic journeys I have detected a great sadness within the field of our land, and our ancestors about the way we ignore the richness, wisdom and practicality of our own tradition.

**Herbs and Celtic Shamanism:** Our ancestors empowered the use of their herbs through

Shamanic techniques that connected with the spirit or energy of the plants.

Many of our native herbs have non-chemical healing actions that can also be tapped into using shamanic techniques. This does not devalue the importance of the chemical constituents of herbs but adds another whole area of use. It is a case of "It is not what you do (*or use*) but the way that you do it."

We know the ancient Celts were a very practical and logical (as well as a spiritual) people so I imagine they would appreciate the benefits of modern science in herbal medicine and would want to integrate this with shamanic and holistic practice. They might see modern Western herbal medicine as having a good head, but a heart that is in need of more help.

The ancient Celts revered nature and were a very eco-logical people and they would no doubt recognise the value of modern Permaculture that applies principles of sustainability (achieving more by doing less) with available resources. They used foreign herbs, but imported mainly those for which there was no local equivalent. With the environmental crisis we have today I imagine they would plant large areas of forest gardens, and emphasise the use of local produce and renewable energy.

In my practice I use some herbs from different parts of the globe and will continue to do so if this can be sustained in an ecological way. My emphasis now though is on continuing to learn how to practice more effectively with local herbs. You will probably also find as I have that some of your clients will instinctively feel a resonance with local herbs (and traditional healing), and that these will work better for them, they will also likely work more effectively if you have connected with them in a shamanic way.

My path has taken me to many honourable healing systems but I have come full circle and feel very happy to be home once more. The wise old saying I first heard at a Master Herbalist training many years ago probably sums up much of what I have been writing about: "*Eat under your own fig tree.*" But as I live in Somerset I prefer "*Eat under your own apple tree.*"

#### **Supportive reading and websites:**

'The Celtic Shaman' by John Matthews.

'Singing the Soul Back Home' by Caitlin Matthews. [www.hallowquest.org](http://www.hallowquest.org)

The Order of Bards, Ovates & Druids: [www.obod.co.uk](http://www.obod.co.uk)

'The Workings of the Soul in Shamanic Rituals & Family Constellations' by Daan van Kampenhout  
[www.hellinger.co.uk](http://www.hellinger.co.uk)

'The Rebirth of Nature, the Greening of Medicine & God' by Dr. R. Sheldrake. [www.sheldrake.org](http://www.sheldrake.org)

'Plant Spirit Medicine' by Eliot Cowan. [www.bluedeer.org](http://www.bluedeer.org)

'The Field' by Lynne McTaggart. [www.wddty.co.uk](http://www.wddty.co.uk)

'Permaculture in a Nutshell' by Patrick Whitefield. [www.permaculture.org.uk](http://www.permaculture.org.uk)

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