

PREFACE

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Every view of the world that fades away, every culture that disappears, diminishes a possibility of life and reduces the human repertoire of adaptive responses to the common problems that confront us all. Knowledge is lost, not only of the natural world but of realms of the spirit, intuitions about the meaning of the cosmos, insights into the very nature of existence.

—Wade Davis, *Light at the Edge of the World*

Flying over the Bahamas archipelago, the azure blue waters lull the viewer into a serene and restful state. As you look at the scattered islands below and note how far you have just flown from the mainland, it is hard to imagine that historical events could have been so dramatic in such a peaceful and remote locale.

Before Columbus's first landing on the shores of San Salvador Island in search of gold, another culture had flourished for over 500 years. The Lucayans (also called Arawaks) are thought to have settled San Salvador Island around 800 A.D. Using large dugout canoes, they had worked their way northward from Venezuela as they were fleeing the fierce Caribs. The Lucayans were a peaceful people who lived well until the arrival of the Europeans. Their diet consisted of sweet potatoes, cassava, beans, pumpkin and other cucurbits, cocoyam, maize, land crabs, iguanas, and fish. Their use of plants for shelters, tools and implements was sophisticated enough to allow this group not only to survive, but to grow and prosper.

Interestingly, the few records of these peoples were from Columbus's notes. In his words,

All of those whom I did see were youths . . . they were very well built, with handsome bodies and fine faces. . . . They do not bear arms or know of them; for I showed them swords, and they took them by the

blade and cut themselves through ignorance. . . . They are generally very tall, good looking and well proportioned. [Columbus's journal 1492]

Columbus discovered that there was no gold to be had, but his voyage set the stage for the next most profitable trade, slavery. Before his landing in 1492 there were more than 40,000 Lucayans in the Bahamas. But within 50 years only vestiges of their villages remained: these people, their culture, and their stories were gone—their voices silenced forever. Their population had quickly diminished when they were abducted as slaves to work in mines and on plantations in Cuba and Hispaniola, and their numbers were further reduced by the depredations of introduced European diseases.

Presently, the population on the island is also very gentle, generous and comfortable with their surroundings. The residents of San Salvador Island today are descendants of slaves from the African nations, brought to San Salvador Island by the British.

In the eighteenth century, the British Loyalists living in the American colonies fled southward and established colonies on the Caribbean islands. By that time, many islands including San Salvador Island had already been denuded of large trees such as mahogany that were shipped to Spain and other European markets. Deforestation had

caused some of the thin tropical soils to wash into the sea under the force of frequent tropical storms and hurricanes. Soil erosion was further accelerated by efforts to establish plantations on the islands. In little time though, the Loyalists realized the futility of their venture because these islands for the most part had very little arable land, and were not suited to European-style agriculture. The plantation owners then abandoned not only their settlements but also their slaves. Like the Lucayans before them, the newly freed Africans began to develop a sustainable relationship with island ecosystems despite the seeming paucity of resources.

In the process of researching this book, we were privileged to learn from the descendants of former Africans. Sitting in their living rooms, listening to their melodic voices telling tales of using and harvesting the bush, I felt suspended in time. This very special generation is straddling two worlds. They speak from their memories of bush medicines, remedies, preparations, and places where they harvest. Smiles would faintly touch their lips as they recalled a story, a person, or an event that played out because of plant medicine. At times during interviews, there actually was this sepia tone to the visit: a scene of fading voices, memories rolling back searching for the name of the plant, the place, the event. Their smiles expressed their joy at sharing these memories and experiences, as fewer people on the island are seeking their knowledge.

While speaking in the same breath about their medicine plants, they might refer to a malady they were currently experiencing, and their use of some pharmaceuticals from the physician on the island. The granddaughter of the last midwife told us how on San Salvador Island today, a woman has to fly to Nassau during her eighth month of pregnancy, because “it is not safe to birth” on the island anymore.

As a practicing herbalist with over 20 years of experience working with families as well as midwives, what I am witnessing is nothing short of tragic. I know deeply, passionately and experientially, the incredible success and necessity of maintaining as well as strengthening our connection with plant medicine. When a culture loses its relationship with the natural world there usually is a shift in the sense of self. The sense of security that was rooted in the earth as provider is now cut off, and a feeling of isolation soon develops.

With allopathic medicine and its pharmaceutical remedies surrounding us, we are poised on a precipice

where the knowledge of the natural world that Davis refers to above is threatened. The resurgence of interest in natural plant remedies cannot come quickly enough. It truly is a critical time to record the libraries that exist within the elders’ memories before their wisdom fades.

That is what this book is about. The spark that ignited this project came when Jeff McCormack and Patty Wallens attended a bush medicine tour at the Gerace Research Centre, given by San Salvador Island resident Bertram Forbes in the summer of 2007. Jeff had already worked for many years in various areas of genetic preservation, and had founded two different seed companies. Southern Exposure Seed Exchange focused on the rescue of heirloom varieties, including the oral histories associated with the seeds. Garden Medicinals focused on medicinal plants and seeds, including research on seed germination of threatened herbs. Jeff also served for eight years as a member of the Board of Directors of the Seed Savers Exchange, an international organization working for the preservation of genetic diversity, and he has written manuals for the USDA on organic seed production of open-pollinated seed.

Jeff and I worked together forming Virginia Plant Savers, a local group that was a chapter of the nationally known United Plant Savers. UpS was started by internationally known herbalist Rosemary Gladstar in response to the growing interest in and harvesting of native medicines. The survival of these plants was being threatened by over-harvesting and poor management practices. Jeff gave generously of his time and expertise both in the field and in designing our website.

On San Salvador Island, Jeff saw that these people still carry a deep relationship with the plant world within their souls. His skill and tenacity as a researcher brought forth this valuable offering. This is Jeff’s gift back to the people of San Salvador Island. It is given with the hope that it will help preserve the knowledge of bush medicine, the island ecology of the Bahamas, and the cultural heritage that is the Bahamian birthright.

When I traveled with Jeff in 2009 to catch a flight to San Salvador Island to assist in the second stage of interviews, we struck up conversations with the airport personnel. Amazingly, each one of them had a bush medicine story. At least they knew someone who knew someone. The knowledge is distant, and may be fading, but at this juncture it is not lost.

The elders we interviewed were some of the most gracious people I have met. There was a similar energy to

those I studied with in Belize, Chile, Mexico and Costa Rica. On San Salvador Island the residents have an elegance of stature, a dignity that runs deep in their being that is difficult to name.

In searching for their cosmology, and the origins of their medicine practices, so many of them simply responded to our inquiries with “That is what they told us to do” or “That is what my granny would do.” What happened to their African traditions and cosmologies? Did the experience of enslavement all but erase the forces of the spirit world? Did the presence of Christianity redefine their relationship with the plant world? These are questions that linger.

This book is but a small gift to all the generations that had their breath and spirit taken in the name of ignorance.

Time and again, I hear myself telling my students and clients that I will go to my grave in awe of plant medicine. Even after all these years, the power of a plant to have such profound influence upon a dream, an organ or a sense of well-being is nothing short of magic. And what we call magic today is actually the alchemy of the forces that have been accessed for millennia. The articulation of the spirit world by many indigenous groups is as elegant and profound as our greatest scientific achievement. Whether spoken from a research lab or chanted as a medicine song, all languages are necessary for our evolutionary process to move forward successfully and sustainably.

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