

Maroochy Botanic Garden

South East Queensland

I have a routine of weekly letter writing with a close friend who is dealing with the challenges of cancer. In the last couple of years, since her diagnosis, we have developed a supportive letter writing regime. Each Monday I eagerly await the arrival of the post, bringing me her latest missive (Sandy doesn't believe that electronic mail has the same personal touch as hand written cards or letters; I send my letters to her by "snail mail", but they're typed and printed via my computer.)

Some years ago Sandy lectured at a college of natural medicine, sharing her skills and knowledge of herbs and healing in a structured programme. Informally, she taught me about plants and natural medicine: how to make nutritious salads from weeds; the best leaves for hot infusions; what plants will soothe itchy skin or ease a sore throat. She continues to encourage me to use complementary medicines wherever possible, and to "think healthy, think natural". Today, in a gesture that expresses both her creativity and her commitment to the earth, Sandy signs her letters to me "with green blessings".

Sadly, and most poignantly, natural remedies have not been able to halt the spread of the cancer, and today Sandy's body is regularly assaulted by injections of extremely unnatural chemicals. I doubt that she had ever read the prayer to the earth goddess in the medieval manuscript MS Harley 1585 until I sent it to her recently, but it could almost have been written for, or by, her. In the latter part of the prayer the devotee invokes the assistance of the earth goddess in the work of healing, in words reminiscent of those Sandy might use: "Those who rightly receive these herbs from me, do thou make them whole, Goddess, I beseech thee."

It is a remarkable prayer, which clearly articulates a framework of belief and ethical practice for the herbalist-healer, acknowledging the multiple roles, and the primacy, of nature in the healing process. The herbalist-healer recognises the earth goddess as the provider of therapeutic herbs for the benefit of humanity, and entreats: "Whatsoever herb thy power dost produce, give, I pray, with goodwill to all nations to save them." And again: "All ye powers and herbs ... whom earth, parent of all, hath produced and given as a medicine of health ... be, I pray you, the greatest help to the human race."

She petitions the earth goddess for assistance in her work: "Come to me with the powers, and howsoever I may use them, may they have good success". When that success is achieved, she offers thanks to the medicinal herbs "in the name of that majesty which ordained your birth". And, finally, a simple acknowledgement from the healer: "To thee all things return".

I am moved by the beauty and the humility of this prayer, and by the relationships which the supplicant articulates so clearly: between earth, herbs, healer, patient, medication and outcome. These connections appear to have been neglected or forgotten in the face of scientific "progress", or in severing the link between collecting herbs and prescribing drugs. While I regret this disjunction, I'm very grateful to modern medicine for the relief and the hope it offers Sandy in treating her cancer.

With all of this in mind, I decided to visit some of the public gardens in our local area which have herb gardens or plants with healing properties. I went first to the

Redcliffe Botanic Garden, where the herbs are laid out in a formal grid pattern with gravelled paths between the beds, and printed name plates identifying each species.

It reminded me of the illustrations of medieval herb gardens in many of the books in my library. From medieval herb gardens it was but a short step in my imagination to medieval herbalists ... healers ... wise women ... midwives ... witches. In the last few decades we have come to understand more clearly the unconscious fears and jealousies that triggered the frenzied witch hunts of the late medieval era. An increasingly regulated male medical profession, threatened by the popularity (and, perhaps, the success) of the female healers, and a climate of suspicion - on the part of both society and church - of unconventional and independent women, produced a collaboration which sought the destruction of women herbalist-healers. Even today many medical practitioners are sceptical about the value of complementary medicines and distrustful of alternative therapists.

I walked through the garden, my senses assailed on all sides: by the sound of the gravel crunching underfoot; by the sight of myriad shades of green - lime, emerald, olive, khaki, jade, viridian, celadon, chartreuse; by the feel of the leaves, some soft and feathery, others smooth and slippery, yet others rough and prickly. I brushed my hand across the lavender bush; its fragrance exploded in a burst of sweetness, a sudden reminder of the lavender oil I use when I am stressed or anxious. Other aromas were more subtle: the delicate scent of the chamomile; the tantalising smell of the mint; the mouth-watering tang of the lemon balm.

So many of the herbs in the Redcliffe Botanic Garden are of European origin, and have been used over the centuries for healing and health benefits. I could very easily picture the healer-herbalist of the Harley Manuscript in this garden, gathering leaves for simples and potions, or roots to crush and soak for poultices. Into her basket she would place sprigs of yellow flowering feverfew, to ease the pain of migraine; sturdy valerian, to soothe jagged nerves; coriander, whose small brown fruit can relieve dyspepsia; thyme, for the antiseptic and antifungal properties of its oil; and a host of other flowers, berries and leaves I could not name. She would gently remind each plant that "She who created you hath herself promised that I may gather you".

This is a charming garden, and I came away with a deep gratitude for the beneficence of the earth in providing this plethora of medicinal plants. But it was not until I visited the Maroochy Botanic Garden on the Sunshine Coast - a native garden in a natural bushland setting - that I truly understood the power of nature and healing. A sign at the entrance to the garden reads: "Gardens offer us something beyond the material world. They provide a spiritual component allowing us to participate in the wonder and mystery of creation." Thus the scene is set for this particular garden, which is a wonderland of earthly beauty and tranquillity.

Informally laid out, each area is perfectly matched to the contours of gully, creek or hill. I would find it hard to name my favourite part of this garden: the Mossy Log Walk with every fallen log carpeted in vivid green and termites hard at work transforming once-mighty trees into mounds of moist compost; the Fern Glade where a stream trickles through an amazing variety of small and large, delicate and robust ferns; the Contemplation Garden with a circle of polished granite rocks on which one can perch (warm in summer, freezing in winter) to observe the spiral centrepiece; the mysteriously-named Ephemeral Wetlands; or the Sculpture Garden where dramatic

marble and sandstone artwork is set amidst the plants and velvety lawns. Each nurtures my spirit.

Clearly, there are many modes of healing: by herbs, by beauty, by nature; of body, of mind and of spirit. In this garden all of these have come together to provide the visitor with a holistic experience of physical and spiritual nurturance.

Not all of the plants are labelled; this is an ongoing task for the dedicated volunteer gardeners who have put so much love and energy into the garden that it is palpable. Paradoxically, where there are no markers their absence frees the visitor to enjoy the garden and its ambience without the distraction of information; to look at the flora rather than at the words; to let the plants tell their own stories. Here the senses are engaged gently, diffidently, unobtrusively. No information overload, just a gentle restful native bushland garden.

It is a garden that invites and requires the visitor to slow down, to quieten the mind, open the senses, and wander at will through the various areas of natural beauty. I accepted the invitation, and set off on a meandering trail around the lake, pausing to watch the antics of kookaburras digging for worms visible only to them, and the remarkably swift ascent of a goanna up the trunk of a tallowwood tree. As I walked unhurriedly I came across familiar plants unexpectedly: clusters of fragile maidenhair in the shadow of tall gum trees; an untidy melaleuca with its papery bark peeling to pink suede softness; a spiky leafed macadamia tree loaded with ripe nuts; a lemon myrtle, sister to the one outside my kitchen window which provides the leaves for my bedtime cup of tea.

With a heightened consciousness of healing plants, I also noticed some of the native medicinal plants: the Cunjevoi Lily, about a metre high, whose broad leaves are so useful for treating bites and stings; the Headache Vine; the beautiful Black Orchid, used to treat dysentery; the small Darling Pea shrub, which can ameliorate bruises and swellings. Here I appreciated the presence of some identifying labels, for I would never have found these plants unaided. Indigenous people have known the curative properties of native plants for thousands of years; modern herbalists - long familiar with European herbs - are slowly coming to appreciate the therapeutic benefits of Australian native plants. Natural therapists of every culture would, like the medieval writer, ask of the herbs they use: "that whatsoe'er is wrought through you may have in all its powers a good and speedy effect".

When I returned home I looked up these plants in my gardening books and recorded their botanic names - this seemed important if I wanted to honour their scientific and medicinal capabilities - *Alocasia macrorrhiza*, *Lematis glycinoides*, *Cymbidium caniculatum*, *Swainsona galegifolia*. I would love to be able to roll these names off my tongue very casually: "Do try this infusion of *Lematis glycinoides* for your headache." But, alas, this is highly unlikely!

Equally, I would love to be able to offer Sandy a cancer cure from this natural pharmacopoeia, but that, too, seems an unattainable dream. I can but pray for her healing, using the words of the medieval herbalist, "Hear, I beseech thee, and be favourable to my prayer."