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Understanding the place of Herbalism in the history of Science and Healing:

I am a Herbalist and herbalists come in all shapes and sizes. I am an older, conservative, male version of the modern herbalist, more of a Warlock really, than a Witch.

The problem with all natural therapists is that they come with their own philosophical understanding of their particular craft which they ram down your throat, whether you ask for it or not. It is this desire, which has prompted this little article on the difficulties Science faces, when trying to deal with health and healing.

I come from a scientific and engineering background. The first half of my working life was spent working in the mining industry around the world, firstly for multinational companies and then for the World Bank. My speciality was in the evaluation, financing and development of multi-million dollar mineral projects in the developing nations especially South America and Asia. I therefore can claim that I do in a sense, have my feet firmly on the ground.

It is true that to design and construct a building for example, you need science and you need engineers or the buildings will fall down. However, if we look at certain periods in history like the renaissance or even quite recently, we can see that you need artists to be involved to produce aesthetically pleasing and healthy buildings. During the 1950's in Australia we went through a period when much of the building design was left in the hands of the engineers alone. It was during that same period that many of our best heritage buildings were demolished and many of our worst, ugliest and most unhealthy buildings were constructed.

The problem with science is that it is extraordinarily arrogant.

Science assumes that, if you can't measure something or describe it in totally rational terms, it not important and can safely be ignored. In the case of buildings, you need the science to make them stand up but you also need the aesthetics and the art to make them beautiful and to make them healthy.

In the case of healing, if you leave out all the stuff you can't measure you are left with a crippled monster.

What we see in scientific medicine nowadays are ever more expensive diagnostic machines, research and techniques trying to define and diagnose, predict and categorise our ever growing health problems. We also see a huge multinational industry marketing drugs, none of which make any pretence of understanding the genesis of ill health or of supporting the body's own healing abilities.

My own view is that a major reason scientific medicine works at all is that the body is actually programmed to heal itself and can often do so, in spite of the medicine.

Also that:

Medical practitioners (not the machines however) actually care (which you can't measure) and they hopefully come with experience (which is difficult to evaluate)

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also compassion and understanding (which is impossible to measure or even to teach) and they often also know instinctively what are the underlying issues (don't even talk about instincts). They then administer practical advice and encouragement (as well as drugs).

The overwhelming upsurge in popular demand for alternative therapies, which we have seen over the past 20 years in the western world, is simply a reaction to the limits of scientific medicine. People do know when they are not well and when they are not being treated effectively and in the end they vote with their feet.

It is not the first time herbalists have risen from the ashes following a rise in expensive, impersonal and, I dare to say exploitative, 'modern' medicine. It has happened six or seven times since the early middle ages.

The response each time from the entrenched commercial and professional groups has been the same each time. Firstly; to deny the value of the natural approach, secondly; to try to burn or ban the witches and when all this fails; to reabsorb traditional knowledge into the mainstream practice of medicine, and claim it all as a breakthrough.

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