Podcast Series, Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 8: Andrea and Matthias Reisen

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Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this podcast series: At the Garden's Gate presents:

The Holistic Nature of Us

My intent is to take us, you and I, into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties directly to the holistic nature of the world around us. How can we connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us?

I will be featuring authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth helps us create bridges. We'll see what's trending, what's relevant to our world today not just for land use but to connect the dots between ourselves and nature. It's time for practical action and profound inner change so our natural world is valued once again.

Today I am delighted to introduce you to Andrea and Matthias Reisen. They are the owners of Healing Spirits Herb Farm. Hi Andrea and Matthias, welcome!

Andrea/Matthias: Hello Judith, thank you. Good morning.

Judith: I have to tell my listeners that I studied with Matthias many years ago in my beginning journey with herbalism. He was a teacher with Rosemary Gladstar and it was a profound learning experience because it didn't just include facts. It included working with nature, being responsive to nature, understanding how nature speaks to us. And this is why I'm delighted to have you folks here today because I know you're so connected to the natural world with all that you do and all that you share.

Could you tell us, tell my listeners about your experience in the herbal field?

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Matthias: Well, we have been growing medicinal plants for about 25 years now, a little over 25 years, and before that we were connected as far as working with the earth as dairy farmers. So, not too many people know that. Then we transitioned into growing medicinal herbs. So it's been a very interesting journey. We've met a lot of interesting people. You know you talked about connecting the dots; I think one of the best ways of connecting the dots of getting us more connected to the earth is getting your hands in the earth, your hands in the soil.

Judith: Getting dirty, right?

Matthias: Yeah, yeah.

Judith: Playing with the dirt, I agree.

Andrea: We used to do a class here called Dirty Fingernails. It was a 3-day class for people to come and learn how to do what we do; harvest herbs, plant herbs, dry herbs, some of the techniques that we'd come up with.

Matthias: And that was basically the idea, of getting your fingernails dirty and making that connection with the plants.

Judith: Well we could romance the use of herbalism, right? But the reality is you've got to get dirty. You've got to get out there. You sweat. You've got to harvest. It's hot. The bees are out. You know? Maybe the mosquitoes are out. You've got to get out there and do it to understand how the plants work, right?

Andrea: Absolutely. And a good example of that I think is Japanese knotweed. Do you want to talk about it or should I?

Matthias: Well you know I think we're being presented with a lot of different invasives in our society today as far as the plants too, but they have their message that they want to bring us and it's learning what that message is.

Andrea: And one of the things Japanese knotweed is used a lot in Lyme's Disease and Lyme's disease has a way of burying itself in the body. But look at how Japanese knotweed grows, it has a big knot and then from that little rootlets or average sized rootlets come out and then you have a tap root

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that goes down further and then you have another big knot and then you have the same thing, all these fingers coming out again, all the roots. And then it goes down again. And this can go down 10-12 feet.

Judith: Wow.

Matthias: What does that plant want to teach us about the particular illness that we're working with. I think knotweed is a good example of saying the spirochetes bury themselves very deeply within our body but the maze of roots that are created by Japanese knotweed confuse the spirochetes and allow then a person to heal. It's looking at all these different avenues of how the plants can heal you.

Judith: Do you have personal experience using knotweed, or anyone in your family or your classes?

Andrea: Not us personally because we haven't gotten it, thank goodness. But a lot of people around us have.

Matthias: Yeah we harvest probably 500-600 pounds of dried knotweed a year.

Judith: Wow, and it doesn't invade your farm? You have it managed somehow?

Matthias: No, it's one of the advantages of living in this rural area, before we were dairy farmers. I worked for a cooperative extension and I know most of the farmers and I know how the land has been managed in various areas. We've been here for 40 years. And there are stands of knotweed that have been here for 40 years and have not been touched by anybody. We don't actually plant it on our farm. We actually wild-craft it in other areas, within about a 2 mile area of our farm. We don't really per say bring any invasives but they're there for our use.

Judith: I agree with you. I think there's a lot fear that's been generated about our invasives. I met someone years ago in the Brewster, NY area on the 684 corridor. There's a beautiful stream in that part of 684. This man been monitoring loosestrife and he felt that it had a different timing to its lifecycle versus what we're used to. He felt maybe loosestrife has to be there for 27 years instead of 7 to really help clean up the waterway, because that

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was one of its jobs. As a plant, that's grows next to our waterways, it helps clean up the pollution. Have you found that to be true?

Andrea: Yes. We have found that to be true. And it's interesting because in this area purple loosestrife has been around a long time. We're finding it leaving certain areas because its job is done.

Judith: Right, right. Well if we get back to knotweed then, what I'm hearing in your story and use of it is that you're doing responsible, sustainable wild-crafting and that's something I would stress to my students to: what's the difference between wild-crafting and organically growing. And in this situation, you're going into the wild. Matthias, from the way you taught, I know you don't strip an area. You're very mindful of the plants and the habitat that you seek your plants from. There's sustainability with the wild-crafting that's going on. Am I correct?

Matthias: Yeah definitely. We have to look at; I mean if we can grow the crops organically and do that job well. But there are certain crops that are invasives. We still have to look at them as a management type thing. Some we can, I don't know as we could ever eliminate Japanese knotweed. It's very, very, hard because is roots goes so deep into the soil. But we've been harvesting in the same area for about 10 years now and it's still very sustainable; and this is a large area. It's probably a 4-5-acre area. We harvest just a small section each year and by the time we get back to the first section it's replenished itself. So, it's looking at it that way and it's looking at our other plants that are not invasives that we really have to look at managing sustainably. Just for example highbush cranberry, or cranberry bush is one that has to be looked at if we're going to use it, it takes probably 7-8 years before we can actually harvest it. We have to be constantly thinking about how do we replenish that supply?

Judith: I agree with you but that's where we get into sustainability, you know? And that's where we get into respect for the environment, paying attention. What's there? What's not there? How long is it lasting? Making the observation that a plant has moved out of an area perhaps as Andrea mentioned, its job is done. We don't seem to have that awareness yet. We don't seem to connect the dot there yet. I'm really grateful that you can reinforce it from your vast experience. You've been around the world. You've seen plant species in various farms and gardens and I think that's a wonderful point to make.

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You also say that you are growers. You've been growing medicinal plants for a long time. What do you see is the most pressing issue or a pressing issue in the field of herbalism?

Andrea: I think it's regulation.

Judith: In what way?

Andrea: We see plants are really really helpful to the human body. Let's take comfrey, for an example. It's been used for thousands and thousands of years and all of a sudden now we're being told not to use it internally. The majority of people don't use it because they're afraid of it. And yet it's a plant that has been used for so long and it's so nutritive and healing to the body. I guess it bothers me that people who don't know anything about herbs, haven't studied herbs are making these decisions on what we can and cannot use. For ourselves and other herbalists it doesn't make any difference because we know the plants. And we know that they're safe to take and how to use them. But other people are afraid of them and I find that sad.

Matthias: One of the other things, a good friend of ours, Conrad Richter of Richter's Herbs, he gave a talk (last year we were at a conference). His title was "Plants have Rights Too".

Judith: Oh, that's a great title!

Matthias: And what he's talking about is we have all these different regulatory agencies. They eliminate the transport of herbs from one area to the other. He was talking about was Salvia divinorum which is considered sometimes a phytotrophic or psychotrophic drug, but you know, as we eliminate the use of certain herbs, we're also eliminating our whole connection with the knowledge of that plant that can not be shared. All through the world, people are eliminating or saying this herb is not good. This herb is not good. Pretty soon we've eliminated a fair majority of our medicinal herbs. We look at Kava; we look at Valerian, Chaparral. You know in Iceland you can't use Valerian, why? Just different laws in different countries so we need to have a food freedom act or an act that allows us as herbalist and as human beings to have the choice to our own medicine.

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Judith: I agree with you. I just came across a school, a new school in Bali that's environmentally based. They have children totally in outside environments for their different classes and the kids love it. They just absolutely love it. Children go there from all over the world. But one of the founders said, kids will fall down. Kids will get hurt. They need to do that in order to learn. I feel that's the same principle that you're bringing out to us with the world of plants. Yes, some plants may have some untoward effects but there are people in your community who know how to use them, so find them. Why aren't we more proactive in our communities for learning how to use them or what to do, instead of having to have it regulated? And I agree with you. The regulation is simply based on fear. It's not based on knowledge, experience and the use of the plants in a healthy and correct manner.

Do you see any trends going on in the herbal world?

Andrea: I think there are always trends. There's always somebody that's talking about some herb and it's going to be up for a year or two and then somebody else talks about another herb. And that's good and it's bad. But it's just what it is. But what I think is really important is, when a trend comes along. It's nice because a lot of times you can get more information. But to really have your roots firmly planted in the plants that you know, the plants that you use every day, and maybe not be so quick to just jump on a bandwagon until you have played with that herb. The herb has come into your body, has talked to you, and you really have a good understanding of that herb and how it works.

Matthias: I think one of the examples happened a number of years ago, maybe 15, maybe 20. We came across this new herb called Ashwagandha. We started using it a little bit and starting growing it. It took us about 3-4 years before we really had a connection with that plant because it's something that wasn't grown in this part of the world. And I think now it's a well-established herb here and a lot of people do grow it. It's a great analog for American ginseng and a lot easier to grow.

Judith: That's interesting. What I see or tend to find in the media is that they'll pick up on an herb and they'll say it's bad. But, when we look at the way the herb was originally used, (you know some of the herbs that come from Asia) have always been used in a formula. They're not really given

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singly like we do in Western herbs. I think we have to understand the traditional use too before we start jumping to conclusions whether it's good or it's not good. Have you found that to be so?

Andrea: Absolutely, absolutely, yes. And don't you think too that part of it is our Western way or the way in the United States also something has to be good or bad. We don't want it to be complicated. We don't want to look at all the individual things going on and I think sometimes it's like a movie star. We have a movie star that we like. And that movie star, maybe if they're lucky, has a 5-year run before somebody else comes in and that person, there has to be something bad about them because they're no longer popular. And I see that happening in the herbal world a lot. And, like you said, they have to be. Herbs, a lot of times are like people, they need to be mixed together. And I think the Orient understood this a lot better than we do and that's why so many of their herbs were used in formulas, because they balanced one another out.

Judith: I agree. That's what I appreciate about that system is the fact that they're balanced. The other part of the trends, you talked about getting more information, I find that a lot of it is planned information and does that impact your business in any way? You know, the powers that be, these big companies; they decide to make X plant, the plant de jour of the year and then everybody's scrambling for it. Have you seen things like that happen in your business?

Andrea: Absolutely. And it's really hard to plan for that.

Judith: It is.

Andrea: It won't give you any warning. It's just there. What that does do though for us, when people call up and they want that herb and if we don't have it or we have a limited supply of it. Well, we can talk to them about how that herb works and what other herbs there are that might work just as well.

Judith: That's great.

Andrea: Or maybe that particular herb isn't right for their body type. It does give us a place to communicate.

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Judith: Yeah, I agree.

Matthias: A lot of times people will come in with a pre-set idea of what herb they're going to use because they read about it in one particular article or another, when it may not actually be, like Andrea said, it may not actually be the right herb for their body, for their particular illness or what is going on overall in their health field. So that's where I think communicating with a good herbalist comes in and also taking the time to communicate with the plant. To have an awareness of what does that plant even look like that I'm putting in my body? You know? A lot of people want a quick fix. They want the pill. They want to encapsulate it and they don't take the time to make a cup of tea, see what the herbs actually look like going into that tea and how it tastes. How their taste buds accept it. How their stomach accepts it as opposed to just throwing a pill in and hitting the stomach and exploding down there. And getting out in nature and making that connection. I'm taking pine pollen. What time of year do I collect it? How do I collect it? And how is it made. And maybe they don't have to know all of these things but at least have some concept of awareness of plants in its own natural habitat.

Judith: I agree with you. You offer many spiritually based programs in working with nature. And one of the things that I loved when I worked with you and Rosemary in the herbal school was giving thanks. That simple, simple action of giving thanks for what we're ingesting. That could be an easy practice to incorporate in our every day life. Just simply giving thanks to that plant whether we know anything about it or not. I worked in the health food industry for over 14-15 years and people would come looking for herbs or supplements with the same mentality that they brought into the pharmacy. What do you have that's going to work now because I'm stressed out, I've got a cold, I've got to get to work, I've go to do this and I need something now, you know? So, that's kind of part of our culture that we're still working with in terms of changing. And I think it is happening. It's happening on a grassroots level little by little, here and there. You folks certainly contribute to that.

Tell us about your, I don't know how to word it, but your spiritually based programs. What makes your heart sing when you work with nature and your connection with nature?

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Matthias: Well I think one of the biggest things that lightens my heart is when I can take people out on a herb walk and just introduce them to so many different plants and make them have a consciousness of what is it that we are surrounded by? There are many different medicines that we sometimes walk on in the lawn and we weed out of our gardens. The medicines on our lawns that we walk on that we're not even conscious of.

Andrea: I'm going to interrupt you. But talk about the tobacco for the plants and things like that.

Matthias: Oh, I mean before we harvest, I mean, we always give an offering and that can be as simple as a prayer or a tobacco offering, or you know singing a song. So it's just honoring the plants for the medicine that they give us each and every day.

Andrea: And we also do ceremony before we start to greenhouse in the wintertime. We'll usually do, for us, it's usually, a pipe ceremony. And one time we had a friend come over that has a beautiful gong that's very deep. We did that (used the gong) and it awakened the plants. It awakened the seeds. Just anything to help connect in so that you're connected to that seed, that plant. And it's aware that you're not just taking (but giving back). That you realize it's a life. That it has its own role. It has its own feelings and there's a mutual respect.

Judith: Yes and that's a dot I really, really want to connect with this work is the idea that if we approach nature from a place of respect; it could be as simple as saying thank you or as elaborate as a ceremony, the plants respond. That nature responds to us and the kids know this. I think children know this innately but we kind of work it out of them because we keep them inside. It was very exciting to see this school with this exuberance of children eager to learn in this beautiful outdoor environment that they're creating and they're hoping to have more schools like that around the world. But the kids are with the plants. They're with the trees, you know? How best to know a tree by climbing it? You climb up it. You feel the bark. You know? You see the bugs that hang out there. You know what I'm saying? We can do all those things to create a bridge on that level. And that also tells me; and I would like our listeners to really understand, that when you do a ceremony, as you mentioned for the seeds, your herbs probably have a different vibrational quality to them and that's the part we can't easily measure,

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Andrea: I don't think you can measure it all on a scientific level. I don't know, maybe you can. I don't know about it. But what you can measure it on is people call us or write us all the time and say, "I got your herbs and I can't believe I could feel the vibration as I was taking them out of the package. I could smell the herb. I can taste the herb." And they also tell us, (like people that don't have or say are ordering from us for the first time), they don't know us personally, someone told them to get an herb from us and they'll say I could feel the love and I never experienced that before. I think that's where, maybe it's not the scientific way but it certainly is the human way.

Judith: Yes. And I don't feel that should be discounted, you know? Science has its purpose and our technology is allowing us to do many different kinds of testing, which is great. But it seems ironic to me that the science is proving what our ancestors knew for thousands of years prior to the scientific test, you know?

I understand that you do a lot of classes. Do you have anything coming up?

Matthias: Well let's see, what do we have? Actually, we're doing a class out in Fallon Nevada at the food hub and we are just discussing what we do here on the farm and trying to obviously educate but also there's an interest out there of people making evaluated products. And so we're going to focus on that a little bit but just talk about some of the herbs that are out there and what they might be able to do with that and the products that they might be able to make.

Andrea: I'm going to interrupt here. One of the things that we really like is when we can go and help people that are interested. They want to work with the plants. They would like to be able to make some money, make a living, and quit the job that they have but they don't like. But, they're not quite sure how to do it. And because we've done it for so long we can go in and say this is how we've done it. It doesn't mean that you can't do it differently but this is how we've done it and it's easy and you can do it too.

Judith: Well I can only say this. They're in for a treat because you two are a wealth of experience and I know I love learning from you and all that you've done over the years with your farm and the wild-crafting and harvesting

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you've done of plants. Because they're beautiful and you give the respect that's, like we said, is missing in some of our agricultural practices.

I remember years ago David Winston said, when he and the Cherokee people would use ginseng, it would be a 7 day ceremony. You'd have to go out there in the woods, harvest it yourself for your own product, plus a ceremony, you'd sweat, you'd have to build a fire, etc. for the 7 days. I would say to my students, compare that to walking into a pharmacy and just picking something up off the shelf that's been mass-produced. And while there is some life force there I don't believe it's the maximum life force of that plant. We're actually missing out.

Andrea: Yes, absolutely. It's interesting. One time, years ago, we did a class with M Sang who is an herbalist from California. He was talking about ginseng and in China it was the same thing. They did it (a ritual) once a year. It was a weeklong ceremony and he fasted ahead of time. There was this whole ritual that went with it. And we need to get back more into ritual. And we can have a ritual just by having a cup of tea. There's no ritual around the pell but if you make a cup of tea you can make a lovely ritual out of it and really connect to that plant.

Judith: I agree, and you have that experience. I know I have that experience and it's something we want to share with others to get back into that, again, respect for the natural world.

Matthias: I think one of the things that's kind of lacking in the teachings around various conferences is that we always talk about; well this does this for our body. This herb does this. This is a good antiseptic. It's a good diuretic. It's a good diaphoretic. But we don't actually ask our students or the people in our classes how does that plant make us feel? Write down, put your thoughts down, do some poems, poetry, whatever. Just put down your feelings of what that plant actually means to you. It stands in the field. It's beauty. It's elegance. Maybe how it feels in your body. Does it enliven you? Does it make you happy? All of these emotions that we sometimes forget about because that's another part of us. We're all connected and we all have these connections of emotions between one another. And until we figure this out, that connection that we are all connected and the emotions that we have are connected, we have a journey before us.

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Judith: Oh, that's beautiful. I love that. I think again in the Eastern traditions there is value in poetry and artwork and the mindfulness practices of just being. If we want to just be, as you said Andrea, with a cup of tea and it inspires us to do poetry in that moment, well, why not? That's all part of the connection. That's lovely.

Well folks, our time is winding down here. I'm so grateful to the both of you. Please tell our listeners all your contact information. And Matthias if you do a class on the emotions and plants let me know because I will put it out there. I think that would be a great topic for connecting with the plants.

Matthias: Okay. Well Judith, thank you for inviting us on for this interview. It's been wonderful. Our contact is, we're on the web at http://www.healingspiritsherbfarm.com/ and all our information is on there as far as phone number and e-mail. Our phone number is 607-566-2701 and we're located in Western New York.

Andrea: In the beautiful Finger Lakes Region.

Judith: You have a great mail order business so folks can call and get some advice and purchase the plants, which is wonderful.

What a great morning. I want to say thank you to everyone for joining us today at The Holistic Nature of Us. I hope you feel as inspired as I do by Andrea and Matthias Reisen, they're practical advice. I know I do. And I'm so grateful they could be here today.

This is Judith Dreyer, author of At the Garden's Gate book and blog. For more information go to my website, https://www.judithdreyer.com/ You will find information for this podcast and the transcript of the podcast will also be available as well as my book, blog and class schedules.

And I like to end with a quote on Healing Spirit Farm's website, a wonderful woman by the name of Kimberly wrote a great article on her connection to the burdock plant and how she learned about her anger and worked through her anger, because she had to harvest for the Reisens, I think for a day or so, with the burdock. She says, "Plants are excellent teachers because they don't interrupt the internal work being done. They are a conscious presence holding space with us."

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It’s a beautiful way to end. I want to thank you again and enjoy your day everyone. I’m signing off. This is Judith.

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