

to the



Stories of Healing with Plant Friends

Volume I

Written By

Renée Fidz



Listen to the Plants

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Illustrations By

Maaike Haneveld



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Written by Renée Fidz
Illustrations by Maaike Haneveld
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To my mother Alina, thank you for asking me daily
if I've finished my book yet.

To my father John, thank you for being
my first outdoor guide.

To my sister Anna, thank you for encouraging me
to go to summer writing programs when I was young
and explore storytelling.

And of course, endless thanks to the plants,
for being my greatest inspiration.

How It Unfolds

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 9

Lavender Story 10

Mushroom Story 13

Peat Bog Story 16

Poke Story 20

Gotu Kola Story 24

Cedar Story 27

Your Plant Story 30

About the Author 31



Before You Embark

AN INTRODUCTION

There are a few things you must know about me before we embark upon this journey together, dear reader. The sharing and reading of these tales will be a sort of co-creation between you and I and the plants. They do not unfold in chronological time, but constellate more like a mosaic, with bits and pieces of time refracting like mirrors. These stories are living and breathing symbols and their meaning shifts over time, as we grow and change ourselves.

A journey has already begun to unfold, starting the moment you laid your precious hands on this book. While these stories are from my own life experience, you will likely see yourself in them.

When I was a child, my favorite game to play with friends was pretending to live outdoors in the forest. We would take shelter under trees and make beds from leaves. We'd collect berries, nuts, and other edibles and put them in a big pot over a "fire" for our supper. We'd skip, run, and play games, catch frogs and tadpoles in the streams, build dams, and escape the townspeople who didn't understand our way of life.

Little did I know that this game I played portended a deep longing in me that only expressed itself again when I was older and a little freer of the pressures and conditioning of society. *I was meant to be wild.*

I was also a voracious reader. My favorite books and stories were fables, anything from Grimm's Fairy Tales to the Junior Great Books. I knew even then great wisdom was hiding in those tales, and that books could act as a way to preserve old ways of life and knowledge from beyond this time, kept safe from those who wish to extinguish it.

As the heart of a child knows, wisdom can be found in play, in simplicity, in fairy tales and stories told around a fire, in nature, and in communion with plants. My hope is the following tales may spark in you that same desire to remember your connection to the natural world, how to be in communication with nature in unexpected ways, and perhaps, in a way that you once knew, too.

Lavender Story

A TALE OF REMEMBERING BEAUTY

As an herbalism student in my early thirties, I was often tasked with "plant sits." These were moments of experiential learning, direct experience with the plant, during which I'd introduce myself, say where I had come from, and tell the plant my intention in sitting with it. It was a bit strange at first, but I got the hang of it rather quickly.

My first sit happened to be with Lavender. I always had an affinity for Lavender. Before learning about herbal medicine, it was a a favorite scent of mine. Later, Lavender was one of the first remedies I would reach for in quelling nervous tension or stress. The time had come to thank Lavender for all of its help.

I gingerly sat down next to the Lavender plant, and I almost immediately felt an immense gratitude. A cascade of compliments began to flow from my lips: "You are beautiful. You are so special. You are powerful."

As I was heaping praise onto Lavender, I felt my consciousness begin to shift.

It was similar to what I had experienced in the past with cannabis, but I hadn't taken any mind-altering substances. As my consciousness expanded, and my vision became brighter and more focused, I suddenly got the urge to look down at my own hand.

My gaze was drawn downward to my thumb, specifically my thumbprint. I observed the labyrinth-like pattern of the print, the swirls, the texture, and I became enthralled with the beauty, uniqueness, and complexity of my own body. I marveled at my hand, then my arm, then my entire suit of flesh. In this moment of awe, I heard the Lavender say: "You are beautiful. You are special. You are powerful." For every compliment I sent to Lavender, she sent it back to me.

I left that plant sit with a profound sense of love, one that I had never felt before. It's a love I feel whenever I enter the forest or any other wild place, a feeling of belonging unlike I have ever felt with my human kin.

And it's a love I hold dearly in my heart to this very day.





Mushroom Story

A TALE OF FINDING ONE'S TRUE SELF

My introduction to the magical world of plants as I know it now came in the most difficult of ways. I now understand that what I experienced was an initiation, but at the time, I thought that either I was dying or had lost my mind.

It started with a decision to take psylocibin mushrooms on a whim, on the eve of the new year heading into 2016. My mother had finally recovered from a double lung transplant, and after a year long journey to help her get through it, I had finally returned to my own life in New York City after a year devoted to her caretaking.

It was that night when I entered my dark night of the soul.

While the evening began with carefree fun, it took a dark turn when my companion during the trip led us back to his East Village apartment. Sitting on the couch in the dim and cramped space, I began to feel what seemed like a deep sense of isolation, as if there were a bubble or a thick blanket over me that could not be penetrated. No laughter or joy or happiness could enter there. I watched my friends double over with laughter as they traded jokes around me, but I could not laugh or feel any humor. It was unlike anything I'd ever experienced and I questioned whether it was even my own experience.

I would waver in and out of that state, at times feeling an overwhelming gratitude for coming back to myself momentarily. Yet it was hard to shake entirely. Even being home after the night ended, I found myself restless and unable to sleep.

What followed was a strange few months of trying to understand what had happened to me. It was as if I had stepped through a doorway and couldn't go back to who I was before. Suddenly, I felt all the trauma living in my body. Had it always been there? Had I just been numb to it all this time? I would look in the mirror and not fully recognize myself.

Truthfully, I thought something in me had broken. I didn't know if I'd ever

recover from this mysterious dis-ease, and there were moments when I didn't want to live anymore because of it.



I remember one night driving from New York City back to New Jersey with my two cats after I had decided to go stay with my mother as I recovered. In my pitiful state, I remember looking up longingly at the night sky.

Suddenly, there was a giant spark that came seemingly out of nowhere. I remember seeing a huge comet, or a shooting star, or something, fly across the darkened sky. My jaw dropped as I looked around to the other cars to see if anyone else had noticed it. Yet, in my heart, I knew it was for me. I knew it meant that I was going to be just fine, despite my current, very disturbing state.

It was then that I could fully surrender. I sat with my pain, both physical and emotional. I just let it be there. And this was the most valuable thing I could have done to help myself.

It was only then that I could begin to heal.

Intuitively, I knew my next step had to be to move out of the city to continue getting better, but I had no idea where to go next. I envisioned myself in a place deep in the forest surrounded by rivers and lakes, cleansed and embraced by Nature.

Coincidentally, a friend of mine mentioned that her mother lived in southern Oregon and that she'd be away that summer. And before I knew it, I found myself on a plane to Oregon to spend a summer in her house in the woods.

During that time, I allowed myself to deeply rest, slowly sip tea, read books, take long walks in the woods, wander, and follow my heart's desires as I moved into deeper embodiment to shed the older layers of me.

Did the mushroom take me through an underworld journey to release the pain I had been carrying my whole life without even knowing it? I believe it did. And in the process, I found more of who I really am.

In this life, we can never go back to who we once were. We can only walk through the thesholds of pain and see what's there for us on the other side of it.

But before we move forward, we must acknowledge, accept, honor, and reliquish the past. Suppressed emotions and hurtful experiences can accumulate like sediment at the bottom of a glass over time. They never fully leave us, remaining like ghosts of the past, unless we choose to invite them in and let them speak.

And so, we must face our pain.

Mushrooms are masters of this. They break down and digest waste, even what's seemingly indestructible matter, to make fertile, teeming soil for new growth. Through this process, they can teach us how to digest our own pain, how to transform what is dark into the new life and hope held in a tiny, unfurling sprout.



Peat Bog Story

A TALE OF FINDING STABILITY

When I started using fulvic acid, I didn't realize that it was extracted from a peat bog. What is a peat bog and what organisms live there? I came to the conclusion that this too, is a plant medicine; it came from a plant after all. And this peat bog moss had came with medicine for me.

After soaking my feet in peat bog powder for two nights in a row, my left heel began to hurt. There were strange sensations moving through it, and I wondered if these were symptoms I should be concerned about. But somehow, I understood intuitively that there was some kind of healing or release happening through my feet. After the third day of this, I woke up in the morning, having an urge to take a bath with magnesium salts.

That evening, I relaxed into the bath. I tried to tune into my left foot to see if there were a message for me there.

Strangely, I began to perceive a little person living in my left heel, which reminded me of the character in "There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe". This little person seemed hunkered down in that part of my body behind a trap door, trying to stay safe in what seemed like a bomb shelter. I started to speak to this little person and asked them what they were doing there. After some conversation, I discerned that this little person living in my left foot had often been pulled along into situations (by me!) where they didn't feel totally safe.

Now, to any one who knows me, they may know that I have not always been the most "careful" person. I have often jumped into the deep end without a life raft, just to see how well I would swim. While I fortunately came out of many of these situations alive, they weren't always the most thoughtful risks.

I considered how my right side is dominant, and how my left side, and my left foot, always had to follow my right. And suddenly, the picture began to make sense. I was being asked to consider the feelings of this little person, hiding for fear of their life in my left heel.



I asked the little person what would help them feel safe. I heard their tiny voice: "Put a little more thought into your decisions. Consider me too." I thanked the little person in my foot and let them descend deeper back into their shelter behind the trap door.



An "Achilles' Heel" is often known as a surprising weakness or vulnerability. I had to wonder if my greatest weakness was my own inability to consider my own safety first and foremost.

Since having the conversation with the little person in my left heel, I now have moments of feeling small pangs of pain in my left foot as a reminder to consider all of myself when contemplating an important decision. Am I fully on board with this? Am I considering the feelings of all of me?

I now wait until I can jump with both feet.



Poke Story

A TALE OF CLAIMING PERSONAL POWER

I first learned about Poke, specifically the root, when I worked at an herb shop in Portland, Oregon. In our cabinet of tinctures, it was the one labeled "low-dose." I'd heard warnings that it was considered a poisonous plant, and for that reason, I was always wary yet intrigued by it.

Poke started to pop up in my life persistently: I remember considering using Poke root as support in draining my lymphatic system when I had resurfacing issues of stagnation around my throat; a friend sent me an article about Poke leaves being cooked and eaten in old New Orleans; friends would mention Poke in conversation.

I could feel its call. Poke was beckoning me towards its medicine.

One night, a shaman named Magdalena, appearing as a beautiful, dark-haired, caramel-skinned young woman, visited me in a dream. It wasn't the first time she'd come, and while her visits in the past were warm and amicable, this visit felt different, unsettling.

In the dream, I was in my bedroom, backed into a corner at the head of my bed. Magdalena approached me menacingly with a thick, wooden staff. She took aim at me with the end of it before poking me right at the area between my chest and my stomach. I recoiled in absolute fright, waking up at that moment with a start, feeling shaken by the dream.

A few weeks later, I saw that one of my favorite herbalists created a new line of "trickster" medicines, plant essences specifically, one of which was the essence of Poke. Immediately, I knew that medicine was for me, especially considering it was an opportunity to work with Poke without the fear of imbibing a poisonous plant.

At the time, I was living with my friend and collaborator, another herbalist, who was simultaneously fascinated by Poke. This friend of mine even had Poke visit her in her dreams. I invited my friend to use the Poke essence if she felt inclined, and she did.



We were business partners, friends, and housemates - and although we had a fiery creative synergy together, our relationship could be tumultuous at times.

One day, I found myself very irritated by this friend. I asked her if we could discuss something vulnerable, so I could get some frustration off my chest. I expressed to her a preference and a boundary around how we shared the common space in our house. Something in her shifted, and I could see that she was very upset by what I'd said.

We both, at that moment, had been "poked." I felt like my space had been encroached upon, and she felt unwelcomed, abandoned, and like she had done something wrong. Then, I started shaking uncontrollably. I was painfully cold and couldn't stop shaking until I crawled under several thick blankets in bed.

In the following days, I felt a dull pain in my solar plexus area, along with digestive troubles, to which I tended with Chamomile and Ginger tea. Sometimes, the coldness and the shakiness would return when I thought of interacting with my friend, as we'd been avoiding each other since the incident. I wondered what this was all meant to show me.

As I contemplated, the lesson came into focus: the center of my personal power is defined by the quality of my boundaries. Old wounds of not having my boundaries honored, or many times, not even knowing what they were until crossed, were emerging to be seen and felt. I realized that I had complementary wounding to my friend, and that Poke had orchestrated this situation for both of us - to see and feel our wounds so we could heal them.

After I felt a bit stronger, I sat down with my friend and told her how I felt. And it was then that I shared with her I believed our relationship had run its course.

It is quite natural to outgrow a friendship. Without deeming one or the other "toxic," we acknowledged and honored the time we shared, then mutually moved on from the incompatibility that no longer served either one of us.

It's not lost on me that this lesson came from a plant known to be "toxic." What I know now is that toxicity is subjective. Poison is subjective. One person's poison is another person's medicine. And while one person can be poison to another, they can be medicine to yet another.

The trick is to know the difference.



Gotu Kola Story

A TALE OF CONNECTING TO THE HEART

One summer on a full moon, I made Gotu Kola, Lemon Balm, and Rosemary-infused honey medicine. Gotu Kola recently captured my attention, while Lemon Balm and Rosemary were familiar plant friends. I had no idea the power of what I'd made and wasn't nearly prepared for what happened once I tasted it.

Very quickly, anxiety surged, a familiar sensation of high-intensity energy circuiting through me that pushed many buried fears to the surface. Fears of something being "wrong" with me. Fears of not being able to access my heart.

I immediately sat in meditation and let that energy run through me, noticing an ability to observe my body going through the experience in a way I had not been able to in the past. I had a strange sensation of wanting to cry and not being able to that lasted for what felt like hours.

The grip of this intensity finally broke, after which I connected to a place in my heart that I wasn't fully accessing before, a space of undying devotion and endless acceptance. I cried hard and with such gratitude for being able to feel the depth that I do, reminded of the power of my emotions and the rare love that lives in my heart.



This encounter is another reminder that while plants can be known for specific benefits, it is only through direct experience that we can truly understand the multi-dimensionality of these beings and what gifts they have to offer.

The medicine momentarily allowed me to break through my heart wall and access a deeper love beneath. When I first saw Gotu Kola, I noticed its leaves were shaped like little hearts - very playfully foretelling the wisdom it had to offer me.





Cedar Story

A TALE OF RECLAIMING A LOST PART OF SELF

I remember the first time I smelled Cedar. It bore the scent of stability and safety, endurance and strength. Since I was very young, there hasn't been anything that's felt as safe to me as a tree.

My father liked taking my brother and me camping in upstate New York when we were young to go fishing, boating, and hiking. I first became enchanted with the fragrance of Cedar when my father bought me a jewelry box on one of those trips, hand-carved of Cedar by a local Indigenous craftsperson. I have few such powerful sensory memories associated with scents - and this might have been my first encounter with the medicine of trees.

Later in life, I moved to Portland, Oregon. Very soon after my arrival, a friend took a photo of me with a Cedar tree (*see the "About the Author" section for the photo mentioned here*). Western Red Cedar grows plentifully in the Pacific Northwest, and I encountered it there often. In the photo, the Cedar appeared to be growing out of my spine as if it were a support beam to my bodily frame. Strangely enough, I once had a vision of myself like this long ago, exactly as I appeared in this photo. It was a vision of hope that carried me through a very dark time.

My intentions in coming to the Pacific Northwest were to reconnect to Nature and begin practicing herbalism. Cedar would often make its presence known to me throughout my time there, as a supporter and protector.

During a shamanic journey with a Portland-based ancestral medicine practitioner, I was given a gift from my ancestors: a visualization of a protective suit of armor made of Cedar, with its branches growing upwards from the depths of the Earth and wrapping around each limb of my body. I often call upon this protection when I feel it is needed.

My time in Oregon eventually ended, as I needed to return to the east coast to be closer to my family. On one of my final days there, I got lost in the woods on a walk, trying to follow the sound of music playing in the distance. I caught the tail end of a live performance in a park, and then I set off on a path in a nearby arboretum I hadn't been on before. Somehow, after meandering on and off many trails, I stumbled upon that very place where we had taken the photo of me upon my arrival to Oregon.

It was a full-circle moment. I then understood my time in the Pacific Northwest as part of a soul retrieval journey, guided in part by Cedar. I had come to reclaim her, to grow into her, this woman in the photo: the archetype of the shaman, the wizard, the witch, the alchemist, the herbalist, the human who belongs to Nature and the Otherworld. And I now know that I carry her with me everywhere I go.



Roots of trees run deep into the soil, but their branches soar higher and closer to the heavens than most other living beings. We can learn so much from trees, the forests as the lungs of the Earth, as they absorb carbon dioxide and release the oxygen we then breathe. They can teach us about our own breath, how to be alchemists, transforming what comes in to release something more life-giving on the exhale.

The memory of Cedar reminds me of a question I've asked myself over and over again: How can we transform what we've been born into, stay grounded in ancient and ancestral ways, while reaching towards ideals and visions of a better way of being human upon this Earth?

We can reach up, like the branches of a tree, for a way forward, and down, like roots, for a reminder of where we've come from. While contemplating this ever-present question, I often land back in my childhood memories: The smell of Cedar, the joy of jumping into a crisp lake, and the remembrance of what gives me life.



Your Plant Story

After reading these stories, perhaps you are recalling one of your own. Use the space below to write any memories you have of communicating with plants. It can be as simple as a feeling, an impression, or a thought you had while observing or interacting with a plant. There's no right or wrong. Dig deep and explore!

"Listen to the Plants" is a project and an illustrated collection of stories that recounts communicating and healing with plants. If you want to share an inspiring story of plant communication with the world, we are collecting stories for Volume II. Submit your story or sign up to join the email list for exciting updates on the project at **listentotheplants.com**.

About the Author



Renée Fidz is a writer, designer, and herbalist, greatly inspired by and a student of Mother Nature. She studied herbalism at the School of Evolutionary Herbalism in the Pacific Northwest and spent over two decades devoted to personal growth work and understanding the human healing process. *Learn more about her work at reneefidz.com. Photo by Shayne Berry.*



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