



HEALTHCARE AS PEACEMAKING

BY NICK ROUTLEDGE
FOR THE
EUGENE-SPRINGFIELD
PERMACULTURE GUILDS

MAY 2005

Recently, I was reading Steven Foster's account of an herbal apprentice in India, whose final test involved an instruction to go to the hills and gather plants without medicinal qualities. After several days of roaming the surrounding landscape, the apprentice returned with head hung low. "Master, the apprentice lamented, "I was unable to fulfill the task. I found no plants without medicinal qualities." The teacher roared with laughter & announced, "You have passed the test."

There is much about this tale which resonates deeply with my unfolding experiences around the garden just now - in particular, around my fast-evolving relationship with plants commonly referred to as 'weeds.' Goodness, how loaded is that word, eh? ("Weeds are bad. Everybody says so, therefore it must be true.") I'm reminded of Paula Jones' astute observation: "It's a curious fact that wild plants or herbs are gladly admired by the human race - even protected, if need be, against possible extinction. But let them be called weeds, however erroneously, & even kind, gentle souls turn to violence... I would like to see the word 'weed' abolished altogether for being one of the most intolerant, negative words in the English language."

What Pamela understands very well, is that our (in)ability to perceive the true nature of things is largely conditioned by the language we use to describe them. Put simply, when we call something by a name, we give that thing an identity - and it then responds to us according to the tone of its name. The danger of course, is that when we name things in a small way, we cripple them - and ourselves. More often than not, we embrace such 'word-prisons' of reduced identity without ever noticing. These 'negative baptisms' blind us to

the possibilities and potentials of life. We lock ourselves in a 'thought-cage.' Our growth is arrested.

The good news, though, is the flipside. As Confucius put it, "When you get stuck, re-name things." Put another way, fundamentally shifting our understanding of life can be as simple an act as rebaptizing a word cage (and all the consequential baggage that goes with it) with a name that is more worthy & spacious. This shift in perspective can be lightning fast - an ah-hah! moment. It needs be said that such shifts can be disturbing as well as liberating. Disturbing because they prompt us to surrender habitual, comfortable 'certainties', false as they were, and to look with fresh eyes at, eek, old challenges: and liberating because to liberate the truth is to liberate oneself.

For my part, what I am discovering as I move deeply into a prima facie, wordless, native experience of plants that wear the label 'weed' is that the 'weed-word' (& all the commonly-held associations that go with it - pesky, ugly, difficult, useless, worthy of antagonism) is telling me more about the subtle, invisible negative conditioning of my own assumptions & that of the culture of which I am a part, than it does about the rightful place in my world of any plant. As Emerson noted, a weed is simply "a plant whose virtues have not yet been discovered."

My experience around *Taraxacum officinale*, the humble dandelion, has been particularly revealing in this regard. Dandelion may well be the most reviled plant of modern times. Many, many millions of dollars support the incentive to control and eradicate this, the quintessential weed. Gardening and warring have become one. But just how sound is the basis for such antagonism?

