



Medicine Stories Podcast

Episode 40 with Atava Garcia Swiecicki

[ANCIENT MEDICINE & THE LOVE OF THE ANCESTORS](#)

February 28, 2019

[0:00:00]

(Excerpt from Today's Show by Atava Garcia Swiecicki)

This knowledge doesn't go away, it doesn't die, it just kind of goes dormant. But, just given the right conditions and the openness in a person that that medicine will come through, I always like to say, it's recorded in our bones and in our blood and our DNA.

So even if it's been many generations since someone was a practicing herbalist in our family lineage, it's still there.

[0:00:25]

(Intro Music: acoustic guitar folk song "Wild Eyes" by Mariee Sioux)

[0:00:29]

Amber: Hello friends! Welcome to the Medicine Stories podcast, where we are remembering what it is to be human upon the earth.

I'm Amber Magnolia Hill, and this is Episode 40. Today I'm sharing my interview with Atava Garcia Swiecicki. It's incredibly beautiful and I also have a very sweet gift for you at the end of this intro. I hope it lands in your heart the way it landed in mine and super honored and grateful to the people who created it for doing so and for allowing me to share it with you, but we'll get there.

First, I want to tell you about the synchronicity that plays into today's interview. So, I had met Atava ten years ago, and we had done an exchange in which she got this beautiful, embroidered Mexican dress from me. This is back when I was selling vintage clothing online, under the name Violet Folklore. Which feels like a lifetime ago but it was also, you know, directly led me to what I'm doing now. The first herbal medicines I sold were St. John's Wort Oils that I put up in my vintage Etsy shop in 2012.

So, anyway, a few days before the interview I was thinking, I wonder if Atava still has that dress. It's just always stuck with me. You know, SO many pieces of vintage came through my life during those years, but I always thought that one was just really special and beautiful. It had deer on it. And I remember back then Atava saying, "This dress carries ancestral medicine for me. It connects me to my Mexican lineage." So we got on the Skype call, Atava answers, the video pops up, and she's wearing the dress. I was like, "Oh my God!" -- I think I even cut off her hello -- "You're wearing the dress!" And she's like, "Yep, this dress? Yeah!" And I was like, "You got that from me!"

And she was like, “Oh my gosh!” So she hadn’t remembered, which I think makes it so much more special that she was guided to put it on that morning.

And then what I hadn’t remembered was that we had met and done the exchange at the Northern California Women’s Herbal Symposium. I got a mushroom tincture from her, and it was the first I had ever had mushroom as a tincture. So I was super into the idea of mushrooms and mycelium and fungi in general at that time, but I hadn’t taken the medicine into my body, so it felt like a very powerful exchange for both of us, I think.

And about a year later I ran out of the mushroom medicine and looked at the label and went to her website, [Ancestral Apothecary](#), and found out that she was offering these really beautiful ancestral services, working one-on-one with people. That was right when I was feeling the call of my own ancestors and getting interested in connecting deeper. You know, I was doing the genealogy research, but I wanted to go deeper, and I could tell that’s exactly what was going to happen with Atava.

[0:03:25]

Amber: So she helped me to decode what is the most important dream I ever had. And I won’t share it here because I’ve already done that in Episode 7 with Lara Veleda Vesta. So if you want to hear the dream about the scroll in my bones (*Amber laughs*), and how it, how Atava helped me to figure out what it meant to me, you can listen to that. But basically, the message for me was “Write. Write about your ancestors.” And I’ve really taken that seriously ever since then.

I had a blog at that time, based around herbal medicine, and then it kind of segued into vintage, but the whole time I’ve put stories of my ancestors up there and my ancestral wanderings and just done it more and more so as time has gone on, and you know another direct line to what I’m doing here today with the podcast and classes and stuff, so. Thank you, Atava! That really played a big guiding role in my life in that moment in time.

I, oh, and if you would like to see a photo of this dress, I’m going to put it up on the website: [mythicmedicine.love/podcast/atava](#), and it’s a photo -- I don’t do photos to go alongside these episodes anymore. I did for, like, the first few but it’s just another thing to think about and worry about, and I don’t want people to worry about what they look like, and you know, anything like that, but I’ll put a photo up for this one -- So, it’s me modeling the dress back in the day for the Etsy shop. But I wanted to share that one, specifically, because it’s another synchronicity because I, in that photo, I am standing on the land of Mariee Sioux, the woman whose music opens every episode of this podcast.

Mariee is a friend here in Nevada City, and we did a photoshoot back in the day on her parent’s land, the land that she grew up on. Umm, it’s a really beautiful and special piece of property and is really meaningful for Mariee, I know. I’m almost getting emotional just even thinking about that land. Maybe we’ll talk about it when she is on the show in the next couple of months here. So if you’d like to see the dress you can do that there.

And, umm, Atava is generously giving away one of her herbal medicines for the Patreon supporters of this show at the two dollar a month level. Thank you, Atava! Thank you, patrons. You make it possible. I am able to sit here in my room with the rain pounding outside right now,

recording this intro because my friend, Sarah, is hanging out with my two and a half-year-old, Nixie, so that I can work, work, work.

So, the medicine that Atava is offering is called [Heart Mend](#), and it is an herbal and flower essence remedy to soothe heartbreak and grief. Heart Mend is made from herbs traditionally used to support the nervous system and help with emotional balance. The flower and gemstone essences help people going through difficult times of loss, grief, and heartbreak. Heart Mend is like a balm for a broken heart; it helps to ease emotional pain and bring a sense of comfort and support.

The ingredients are hawthorn berry, lemon balm, mimosa flower and bark, red roses, aurelia leaf, cuatecomate, which is, this herb is new to me when reading these ingredients. It looks like it hails from Mexico, and I don't know much about it, and I'm not sure if my pronunciation was right-on or not, but probably not -- essences of bleeding heart, borage (*Amber laughs*) -- I always have the hardest time with that word "borage." I want to say it, because I'm studying French right now, like "Bor-AHj" -- rose and jade. Other ingredients are organic grape, and or cane alcohol, filtered water, and it's gluten-free. So you can check that out. Enter to win the giveaway to win a bottle of this beautiful medicine, at least check out the photo of it at patreon.com/medicinestories. And I will put somewhere in that description when the last today is to enter that giveaway, but it will probably be some time, like, in Mid-March probably.

So thank you, Atava. Thank you, again, to my wonderful, 600+ patrons. You guys are amazing. Thank you thank you. I do this work for you and for the many many many other people aren't able to be patrons, but listen and send their good vibes and their love this way. It really is sustaining. Thank you.

[0:08:15]

Amber: So now I get to tell you about this beautiful gift of a song that I am just, again, honored to be able to bring to you to be a bridge between the song's creators and you all listening right now. So the story of how it came to me was that I was participating earlier this month on my 38th birthday and the two days following in an ancestral lineage healing intensive in Berkeley, California. Umm, this is based on the framework laid out by Dr. Daniel Foor, who was interviewed on Episode 26 and will be my next episode as well, the second interview with him. And you know I've just talked about him in this framework a LOT on this show so you're probably familiar, if you've ever listened before, ancestralmedicine.org. It's just it's a really beautiful organization, really beautiful work, and again framework for bringing healing to our lineages, you know, one at a time and umm, anyway. So the closing ritual of the weekend was so profoundly beautiful. I mean, it was perhaps the best couple hours ever of my life (maybe not the very best but top three experiences). I was just so moved and so open and, oh, it was unbelievable. I really recommend, yeah, participating in one of these intensives. They're all over the world every year.

So that day at lunch, right before this ritual, I had connected with a beautiful soul in the group named Shlomo, and during this closing ritual, Shlomo offered a song. And it just really hit me. Resonated in my bones. I thought it was incredibly beautiful. And luckily, when we had connected at lunch, I had asked for their phone number. And so, about a week or so after the intensive, I texted them and asked them, "Would you mind sharing a recording of yourself singing that song with me? I can't get it out of my head."

And they did, and they shared the person who shared it with them, and then the people who had created this song. And as I was getting ready to release this episode, I just felt like that song is so in line with the things Atava and I talked about, and if it touched me that much, it must touch other people that much.

So with Shlomo's help, I got in touch with the other five people who needed to be asked permission, and they kindly gave me permission to share it with you today. But before we listen to it, I'm going to tell you more of the story behind the song and then, of course, I'll give you Atava's bio and then go into hearing the song and then right into the interview.

[0:11:14]

Amber: So first of all, Shlomo also goes by Solomon, and their last name is Pesach.

I might be pronouncing that last consonant a little too French, but I just want to be really clear with the lineage of how this song came to me and give it that respect.

And Shlomo heard this song from his friend, Kelsie Pombo, and Kelsie, upon emailing, is the one who got me in touch with the creators of that song. Their names are brontë Velez, Jasmine Calderon-Torres, Justine Epstein, and Lila Glickson. Again, hoping I'm getting pronunciations correct here, and trying.

The four of them are students of the [Weaving Earth Immersion](#), a nature-based program for adults that educates for action at the confluence of social, ecological and personal systems change. Sounds super rad. Weaving Earth is based in Sonoma County on the occupied lands of the Southern Pomo and Coast Miwok peoples. And the song was born during the immersion as these folks were creating prayer flags to create their collective transition at the end of the year. And Jasmine had written on their flag:

Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.

Sitting nearby, the rest of them began to put the words to music. And then the second verse which goes, "Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death," came from the teaching of Uncle Paul Rafael, and Odawa peacemaker and mentor, elder and teacher at Weaving Earth for many years, who shares that the work of the human being is to learn to no longer be afraid of dying. So (*Amber laughs*) you know that I love, I love that teaching. It is very much in line with things we've talked about on this show before especially on Episodes 5 and 6. I just think that's so beautiful, and I think that line in the song is so beautiful and ties into the end of me and Atava's conversation here today.

And the final verse, "We are giving our breath back to the earth," had been cut by Jasmine in another context but fit right into the flow as the song was being born. And the harmonies were created by Lila.

Umm, and so, brontë and Jasmine are also on the team of Lead to Life as Creative Director and Event Production Alchemist, respectively. Led to Life is transforming weapons into shovels for tree planting ceremonies at sites that have been impacted by violence or carry spiritual significance across Atlanta, occupied lands of the Cherokee and Creek people, and Oakland, occupied lands of

the Ohlone people. So I will, of course, have links to the [Weaving Earth Immersion](#) and to [Lead to Life](#) in the show notes. They both are incredible programs that deserve your attention.

And I really recommend listening to this episode all the way through. It's definitely a long one, and I just think it gets really powerful at the very end and definitely ties into this song, and is part of the reason why I asked for permission to share this song.

[0:14:37]

Amber: So, Atava. I'm gonna read her bio to you quickly, and then we can get to it.

Atava is inspired by the folk and indigenous healing traditions of her own Polish, Mexican, and Dine ancestors. She is dedicated to remembering and honoring the healing traditions of her ancestors, and also to creating spaces to support others to also build relationships with their ancestral medicine.

Atava is also passionate about connecting people to our common ancestors: the plants. She's been studying and practicing the healing arts for over 25 years and has an undergraduate degree from Stanford University and a graduate degree in Indigenous Mind from Naropa University -- Sorry, I just got distracted by a raven. I can't not watch them fly -- In Oakland, Atava is a professionally-registered clinical herbalist with the American Herbalist Guild and is also certified in both acupressure and Jin Shin Jyutsu. Atava began studying Mexican curanderismo in 1999 with Curanderists, Doña Enriqueta Contreras and Estela Roman, both of whom she continues to learn from today. In the early 2000s as a student in the Indigenous Minds program, she was mentored by Dr. Apela Colorado, the mother of Indigenous Science, as well as other cultural and indigenous elders.

Her time in the iNdigenuous mInd program was a deep-dive into her own Ancestral remembrance, connection, and healing. During this time, she focused on her father's Polish-Slavic ancestry and wrote about this experience in her master's thesis entitled "Journey to my Polish INdigenous Mind." Atava has taught in schools and universities throughout Northern California, including San Francisco State, UC Berkeley, JFK University, and the California Institute of Integral Studies. She has a clinical practice where she helps people of all ages with their physical, emotional, and spiritual health. Her healing work is a unique and powerful combination of curanderismo, herbal medicine, flower essence therapy, therapeutic dreamwork, and energetic bodywork. She also has developed and offers her own style of ancestral healing work which she calls "Deep Genealogy Coaching."

[0:16:48]

Amber: Atava also founded the ANcestral Apothecary School of Herbal, Folk, and INdigenous Medicine, to be a learning place dedicated to ancestral knowledge and healing. She has taught hundreds of students and has recently graduated her first class of clinical herbalists, most of whom were women of color. And speaking of, Atava and I, in this episode, speak about her class, The Ancestral Apothecary School and this amazing 9-month herbal training program called Cecemmana. And she has a fundraiser going right now to help give these students of color who wish to connect with their own ancestral medicine scholarships in order to be able to do that. And so, I'm going to put a link there in the show notes, and I know that there are so many good causes we could give our money and time and attention to. But for me, as someone who does this

podcast, someone who thinks all the time about connecting people with their ancestral medicine, someone who is the descendant of colonizers, it is just -- I love, I love being able to contribute to helping people who have been historically marginalized and denied access to such programs and such teachings, and who have been cut off from their own ancestral medicine and healing ways, to be able to access that again. And atava is just such a beautiful maker of that happening (*Amber laughs*).

Forgive that phrasing.

But, you know, I ask you to just hold the possibility in your heart of contributing to this beautiful GoFundMe. The link is right there, you can check it out, you can watch their sweet video, you can look at the beautiful photograph of the students, and you know, a little bit helps. As Atava says, "Supporting herbalists really supports community health." Herbalists are the grassroots healers in communities. And as more and more people get interested in herbalism, we're going to need more and more training with integrity and depth of rootedness in ancestral traditions like Atava is offering. So for me, this feels like a really good place to put my money, and again, I just ask you to hold the possibility in your heart of contributing.

Check it out.

[0:19:15]

Amber: And so, one last quick thing before we hear the song, is that the very beginning of the song is loud. It's not the song, it's the recording. A few moments before they actually start singing the song there's just some, like, joyful noise-making that's happening. And I wanted to keep it in because it's joyful, and it's beautiful. It's cute and fun and umm, but it is loud. I am someone who gets startled by loud noises so I wanted to give you that warning. And I'm also someone who is sometimes driving with a sleeping toddler listening to a podcast (*Amber laughs*) so I don't want to suddenly be startled by sound that might wake my baby up. There's nothing worse.

So, before we listen to this, which is called by a number of different names by its creators, but one of those names is The Ancestor Song. So I'm just gonna call it "The Ancestor Song." I'm going to countdown. I'm going to countdown 3, 2, 1. When I get to one, then the loud few seconds will start and immediately transition into the gorgeous song.

Oh, and something I forgot to say, too, is that at the end of the interview I'm going to play the other version of the song, the one that Shlomo sings. And so I hope you'll stick around for that, too, because it's also lovely to hear the single vocalist singing the song.

So thank you SO, so much to the four creators of the song, for Kelsie for bringing it to Shlomo, to Shlomo for bringing it to me, to Atava for this amazing interview and to the ancestors for making it all possible for bringing us all here on the earth, together, at this time, to co-create.

[0:20:59]

Amber: Okay. 3. 2. 1.

Speaker 1: (Loud air horn noises) Beep beep beep boo! This is the remix!

(Group laughing)

Speaker 2: What's it called? What's the story?

(Group in background hollers)

Oohhh!

(Group begins singing, acapella style, The Ancestors Song)

*Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.
Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.*

*Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.
Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.*

*We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.*

Back to the earth.

*Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.
Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.*

*Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.
Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.*

*We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.*

Back to the earth.

(Laughing... Group repeats air horn sounds in the background)

[0:23:18]

Amber: Okay. Hi Atava! Welcome to Medicine Stories.

Atava: Hi Amber! It's really good to be here. Thank you.,

Amber: Yeah, I'm really happy to reconnect with you, and I'm looking forward to this opening invocation that you have offered to do for us.

Atava: Yes. Umm. It's the way I've been trained, especially when talking about ancestors, you know, to start with a prayer to make the space sacred. So thanks for being open this way of opening.

Umm, I know the listeners can't see it, but I'm going to light a little cedar here, and thank you for giving me the name of your ancestors that you would like to include in this prayer. And so, a little cedar, there may be a little bit of a crackling sound (*Atava laughs*).

I'm blessing myself and you and all those who are listening. I bring in all the directions. And I also have some tobacco, here, too, that I'm just going to pray with and then at the end of the talk I'll give it to the earth too. I actually wrote a prayer-poem this morning about honoring tobacco and restoring our sacred relationships. It feels good to hold it. Homegrown.

(*Atava exhales*).

Atava: So I want to say good morning to the Creator, Great Spirit, Great Mystery. Say good morning to our beloved Mother Earth and the names of my ancestors, we call you (*Atava names her ancestors*). Good morning to the spirits of the lands. The ancestors of the land and I'd like to ask permission of the land that I'm on and the land that Amber's on and the land that I live, it's three locations today, for permission to welcome in our own ancestors and spirit guides. Honoring the people whose land we are living on.

So I greet the spirits of the land in where I am right now that's called Albuquerque, New Mexico, home to many Pueblo tribes, home to the Navajo and the Dine, asking your permission to speak here. And I greet the ancestors of the place I call "home." Oakland, California, the Ohlone people, the Ohlone territory, a place that's loved me and sheltered me and nurtured me in so many ways for the past 25 years. Always asking permission to be in good relationship with the ancestors there and aligning myself with the current struggles of the Ohlone people to restore their sacred sites, restore their culture and, particularly, preserve the West Berkeley Shellmound.

And I greet the ancestors of the place where Amber lives, the Nisenan, and the Nisenan territory. Thank you for taking care of her and giving her everything she needs to do her life, and asking permission to bring in her ancestors, her work, her hard work to this space.

So I want to greet our beloveds, ancestors, teachers, and elders who we wish to include in the conversation. I'm going to say the name of my most recent ancestor, my father, Michael Edmonds Swiecicki. He has become quite an incredible guide and ally from the other side and whose Polish roots I also carry in my blood. And honoring his parents, Helen and Michael. And I greet the ancestors on my mother's side, Jesus Garcia Delgado, Hilda Judah Garcia, and the ancestors in that lineage who come from New Mexico, Mexico, Hungary, and Romania. I thank you and continue to pray for healing especially in the natural line which showed up really strongly in my own life in these last years.

And I want to greet the ancestors of Amber Magnolia Hill: Janice Marie, Dethel Inez, Jenny Ruth, Gladys May, Maggie Lor -- I can't read my own writing.

Amber: -- Loreen.

Atava: ... And Maggie Loreen. You know put the words in my heart. And also our guides and our teachers I have some really beloved elders who are now in the spirit world who were my teachers. I just want to mention their names: Mr. Hale Makua, Auntie Mahialani Poe Poe and all the others who have been teachers and guides to both of us. And, of course, the living, our teachers and

elders, just honoring them for all that they've shared and supported us in our path of healing, our path of ancestral remembrance.

[0:30:03]

Atava: Particularly want to just give thank for the life and the work for Dr. Apela Colorado, whose vision and prayer really touched my life and then can see that continue through the lives that I touch and students of hers touch. So thank you to all the ancestors, all the guides, to the earth, to the elements, to the Creator for allowing us to have this time to share medicine stories from the heart. May all that we share be medicine, healing, transformative. Help repair and heal this world that is so broken and let people who carry so much trauma from current situations and also ancestral trauma. And also healing for the earth, and all the animals, the plants and all the beings that are affected by the imbalance of humankind right now.

I say thank you. Gracias... (*Atava continues saying Thank You in other languages*).

[0:31:27]

Amber: Thank you Atava.

Atava: You're welcome!

Amber: Umm (*Amber laughs*), I have so much I could ask right now. I just don't even know where to begin, but I'm going to go to something you said during that, which is that your father, who is your most recently passed ancestor, has become an ally for you from the other side, and I would just -- just like to know more about that.

What does that look like for you?

Atava: Yeah, it's been a really beautiful and mystical process. My father was a very mystical being when he was alive, and I often say that you know, if he had been born in another culture and another time, he would've been recognized as a "medicine person" of some sort.

But he was a white male (*Atava laughs*), born in 1943 in Hamtramck, Michigan, a Polish, like, community, and of Polish descendant, so I think growing up with a lot of discrimination and experiencing assimilation. His gifts, as many who are embodied, he didn't have an outlet, so they also manifested in some hard things like mental illness and addiction, you know, but he had a very strong mystical side and would always talk to me about how he got messages from the clouds or the birds, dreams, and I just thought he was weird (*Atava laughs*). You know? He was not a normal father.

But anyways, he was also a really strong believer in me and my path, and the work that I'm doing, I mean, it's becoming a lot more mainstream at least in the Bay Area, in some parts of the country or the world ancestor work or herbal work when I started it was still not very, it was not really a path that you took if you wanted to be, like, successful in a really standard way. But anyways, he was always really, he always believed in me and tell me and write little letters and let me know he had my back. And umm, yeah.

So when he died, of course, there's many layers of grieving. And I did want to say, he died of something called Lewey Body Dementia, which, so not only his death was hard, but the last couple

years of his life were really hard for me and my mom and my sister, especially for my mom cause she was his caretaker.

Amber: That's what Robin Williams had that was so bad it caused him to take his own life.

Atava: Yep. Yeah, I mean it's like dementia with Parkinson's, elements of the physical body is really affected. You know, there's a lot of manifestations which can look like paranoia or anger or aggressions.

But, you know, after he died, you know, it's interesting on this path of following and honoring and remembering ancestors and then suddenly it's like, WHOA, I get to apply all I've learned (*Atava laughs*).

It was hard 'cause, at first, I didn't have a sense of him, but it was interesting. I had several other people in my life, friends, who had dreams of him, and, like, how come you didn't come into any of my dreams? I mean, he has since then in various forms since then, and I think it's kind of about his evolution as a spirit and also me processing the last, you know, years of his life, because the person who I knew changed during that. He became very vulnerable and fragile and all of that.

[0:35:52]

But, so, what started happening, I'd say about a year after he died, really unexpected, miraculous events, you know. Say, I'll say a couple of them, but the first one that happened was the year after he died I started to offer through my school Ancestral Apothecary for the first time in nine months herbal training program and before that my classes were, at the most three weeks long, or thirteen weeks long, so this was a really big growth, growing edge for me and my business. It's holding a lot of space. One of the -- and that became, so because my students were asking for it, and that's a whole other story, so we can finish this story first (*Atava laughs*) --

So I had students. I think the first year I had seventeen students. The teachers, we had everything lined up, but umm, I really didn't have the right space to do a long-term herbal school 'cause I had a classroom/office, and then the only way we could do any herbal medicine making was by making this, like, putting, like, a hotplate on a table and kind of carrying all these supplies around the office, you know, the pots and the pans (*Atava laughs*), and jars and then literally washing the dishes in this tiny little bathroom sink in the hallway. It was just, like, not set up, and I knew that. I was like, "This is just not set up for (*Atava laughs*) herbal school."

So the class was scheduled to start I think around February 15th and I think literally, like a week before that, my partner, my wife, Liz, was at the school because she was helping me a lot, like, get the space ready. She was painting, and my office is in a shared space with other tenants, and it's also what's called a mixed-use space, so there's office suites, our office, you know, there are offices for business and there's also three apartments. And literally that day she saw the property manager put a sign in the door that said, "Apartment for Rent." And it was the apartment right down the hall. And you know, secretly, I had my eye on for a while because I was like, "Oh that would be so great if we had that apartment, like, it has a kitchen and extra space. And like, miraculously it became available, like, a week before the class started and then also, that Liz happened to be there. And she saw the sign.

And, you know, this is Oakland, so, like, getting any rental is, you have to hustle and (*Atava laughs*) just use a lot of your magic to get any commercial or personal rental space.

So she saw the sign and I immediately called our property manager. And since I was already a tenant he was like, "It's yours if you want to see it. If you want it, it's yours." So we saw it, and of course, it was exactly what we needed, has a nice kitchen with all the things you need for an herbal school, like, a sink, a refrigerator, it had more room. It had extra space for the classes so, yeah. So that just miraculously happened, and I was just like, "That's my father."

[0:39:41]

Atava: And he's done that several times since, like, pulled, or you know, created little miracles that just don't make sense in any other way. And it often has to do with, like, you know, helping me in the work, heart path that I'm walking.

And then another thing that happened, I think this was last summer I was seeing this person named Frances the Healer, who's an energy healer who travels around. He lives, he's based in L.A. He's actually Scottish but lives in Los Angeles, travels around the U.S. doing healings. And anyways, I was seeing him, and when I was on the table, you just kind of lay on the table and he just puts his hands either on you or over you and it's very quiet. But I just had this really powerful sense of my dad as this, like, pure white light, like, **pure** white light. I guess, you know, in new-agey terms, you'd say like "angelic realm." And it was just very, very powerful and it was comforting on many levels. One, because I just felt like, "Oh, he's made it. He's in a good place." And also I have access to this. He's working with me. So that happened.

And I think I've talked to you before about triangulation, that one of the basic tenets of Indigenous Science that was taught to me by my mentor Dr. Apela Colorado is triangulation and when you have an experience, an intuition or a dream she would say, you know, how do we ground it into, like, material, like, to know it's really a message from the ancestors and not just, like, a hallucination or a fantasy (*Atava laughs*). Because we could easily be like, "Oh I got this message." So she says wait, for, like, the evidence to repeat itself at least twice more. So then it forms a triangle. So I had that experience of my dad.

[0:42:16]

Atava: A few days later my sister, who didn't know about my experience with my dad because she was on a trip up near Mount Shasta, she just texted me. She's like, "Atava, I just had this incredible experience. I was swimming, and I felt dad as this white light, and it was so filled with love, you know. I just came out of the water, and I just cried and I just felt him so strongly."

So then I'm like, "Okay..." (*Atava laughs*) I was like, "Well, I just happened to feel him as a white light, too." You know, that's my only sister who's his only other child. So my dad just made his white light debut to both of us, like, within days. And so, you know, so that felt very confirming that he's, that he's with us. It's different from communicating with people who are in a body. You just have to really be attuned to the subtle, the subtle signs, to your dreams, to your intuition. And, again, just look for those things that repeat the patterns, or the messages that repeat.

At first, after he passed I think it was at least a year I just didn't necessarily feel him, and I felt sad and I felt like I was failing at my work because how come I couldn't communicate with my own father? Umm. I think it's something that takes practice and time and attention. And I know, really, the more we communicate from this side or make space for them to come through, the more they can come through. That's why we've built ancestral altars or have their pictures up or offer them a

spirit plate of food. You know, all these gestures they seem small, but I think they are really significant.

[0:44:13]

Amber: Thank you. Yeah, my mom died three years ago in a car accident, and so, you know, so sudden and shocking, and we were very close. And I've had some similar, you know, experiences and it's really, like, an ancestral fire that I tend with her and just, like, a true raining of blessings down onto my life since she passed, starting almost immediately. Like it's almost unbelievable, like, how much poorer my life is without her physically present, but also how much richer it is in **every other way** since she left.

So you mention that you started the plant path and the ancestral path a long time ago before it was -- before both things were blessedly popular and well-known as they are now.

How did you become interested in both of those things, and how did you come to understand your own ancestry?

Atava: Yeah. Well, I mean, when I look back now, I think I was really called to both but didn't know it was a calling because it wasn't, you know being an herbalist wasn't an option. I didn't know an herbalist and I didn't know that was a profession (*Atava laughs*).

So, like I mentioned in the prayer, my ancestors come from, actually right now I'm in Albuquerque so the closest on this continent are Taos, but that great-grandfather was Navajo, and my ancestors from Mexico, indigenous Mexican, although I don't know the exact tribe, from what is now called the state of Guanajuato. My father's ancestors are Polish a little German in there just because of the history of colonization in Poland, well, maybe someone truly fell in love (*Atava laughs*). But anyways. And umm, and then on my mother's side is also Romanian and Hungarian.

But anyways, but I like to say one of my ancestral stories all of my grandparents spoke a first language other than English and then by the time my parents were born, both in the 40s, neither of them spoke **any** language except English (*Atava laughs*). And it was, like, Polish was spoken when the grown-ups didn't want the children to know, or the same with Spanish. People just didn't learn the language, and I think that goes with saying the customs and cultures, it was a generation of a lot of assimilation and survival.

So when I was born and in my childhood, I knew my, I guess, cultural identity. I knew I was Polish, and I knew I was Mexican, and I knew I was, you know, I knew I was Navajo and that I was Hungarian. But I didn't have a cultural connection to them except maybe little remnants through food. Or maybe not little remnants. I should say food was the one thing that continued in our household, in particular, it was actually Polish food. We would have pierogies or pancakes, latkes, or Polish sausage; that kind of thing. And, in terms of my mom's ancestry, she's a woman of obvious color with jet black hair and brown skin, so I knew she wasn't white. (*Atava laughs*) I, though, pass as white. So, anyways, very confusing in some ways, too, 'cause when you're mixed race, that's a whole other thing.

But anyways, I didn't grow up connected to these cultural practices and definitely not the healing practices. But I think the ancestral memory from all those lineages because I really believe there are healers from all my lineages as there are in ALL our lineages, I think that that was really strong. IN 1994 I went to the Women's Herbal Symposium, where I met you -- not in '94, but right where

we met years later -- and it just felt like coming home. It was like, WOW. Like, Plants? And medicine making? And you know just that energy there. It holds a certain energy that women are healers in so many cultures around the world, right? And that's been something that's been colonized out of us, burned and tortured out of us for those of us with European ancestry. And, you know, that happened to many healers on many continents, as well and still continues. So there's a reason we've forgotten.

So being at the Women's Herbal Symposium, something just lit up in me, and I met the person who had become my first teacher, Karen Sanders, who's Chocktaw and Jewish. When I met her, I knew I just wanted to study with her, so I became her student. She lived in Oakland at the time, and so, you know I just got to dive deep into the herbal world. And I feel really grateful that she was my first teacher because she taught not just from a perspective of herbs, herbal actions, phytochemicals, and the more scientific way of approaching herbs, but, you know, she has indigenous teachings from her lineage. So I learned how to relate to plants from that perspective. I'm forever grateful for that.

[0:50:52]

Atava: In the years that I studied with her, there was just this question in me and this is just where I feel like it was just guidance or maybe a contract, a soul contract I made with myself before coming in which was well, what did my ancestors do? Where I know, I knew they had traditions with plants and with healings, and I was just really curious, what did my ancestors do?

And, umm, one day I was working in The Scarlet Sage, which is still an herbal store in San Francisco, Valencia Street, and this was in 1999, actually, just wrote about this as well, so everything's really fresh. This woman walked into the store, wearing a Huipil like I am now. They call it a huipil. She had long dark hair, beautiful dark skin, just a presence, like, when she walked in the room everyone's attention would just go to her. And she just kind of walked through this door with her couple other people, and she was pointing out different herbs and talking about them all in Spanish. I was like, "Who is this person?!" (*Atava laughs*) Again, it was like when I met Karen Sanders; I just had this very somatic experience in my body, like I, whoever she is, I just want to be around her (*Atava laughs*). So it turned out her name is Doña Enriqueta Contreras, and she is, or was, and still is a curandera from Oaxaca, of Zapotec lineage. At that point in time, she was traveling really regularly to the Bay Area and throughout the U.S. to teach, to teach about curanderismo. She's also a partera, midwife, so she was teaching many, many midwives in the United States as well as Mexico. She's an herbalist. She's a temazcalera, she runs the sweat lodge. So I saw her. I was, like, that's, you know, "That's my teacher. She's my maestra." My Spanish wasn't great, so I just said, I'm going to go study with her. So that was the beginning of a prayer answered with my Mexican ancestry.

[0:53:43]

Atava: Through her, I met another woman named Estela Roman, who also became my teacher. And the next year I went down to study with both of them, and Estela and Enriqueta took me to this traditional medicine conference where there was curanderos and healers all around Mexico and just got immersed and spent some time living with Doña Enriqueta, which I always say, (*Atava laughs*) She kicked my butt!

I think when I first met her I was very, like, enchanted by curanderismo and, like, saw the glamour, like, I romanticized it. Like, wow, here's the culture that's still intact, that still uses prayer and herbs

for healing, you know, and does all these beautiful rituals with all these scents and colors. But living with Doña Enriqueta I learned it's 90% hard, hard work, really selfless dedication to your community. People were coming to her house day and night, knocking on the door. She worked from before sunrise to after sunset. I saw it because I was living with her, I just saw what, you know, the toll it took on her. So I continued to be in relationship as a student to both of those amazing women and to this day. So it's been almost, actually, it will be 20 years, now that it's 2019

So that was the curanderismo path, umm, oh boy. Life takes its twists and turns and in 2001 I, through -- and this, it's very interesting. You know? I turned 50 last year, so I think I'm old enough to notice this pattern in my life that sometimes when something really difficult happens, I mean, it's difficult and it's hard and heartbreaking, but often it's followed by a really big blessing. So that's what happened in 2001. -- I had a really hard break-up with my teacher, my herbal teacher, and it felt like I was going to be working with her for life, but it ended in a way that was really painful for both of us. And I was free-falling because I didn't, you know, that's what I thought I was doing with my life. Doing a lot of crying and one day, I was living in Oakland, and I got a postcard in the mail that said, "New Program Starting: The Indigenous Mind Training at Naropa University in Oakland." And, I don't know, I just picked up that postcard, and I don't even remember what it said, but my intuition just said, "Make this call. Find out about this program." You know, to be honest, I was also desperate (*Atava laughs*) because the ground had fallen out beneath me in terms of losing this relationship, this important relationship. So I called, and someone answered right away. And I went in, at that point, Naropa University, which is based in Boulder, had a campus in Downtown Oakland on Broadway, and they had joined forces with the University of Creation Spirituality, which is the kind of project or vision of Matthew Fox, who's kind of a radical Christian theologian.

So anyways, they had started, Naropa had started, a branch in Oakland, and the Indigenous Mind Program was in its flagship year, in its very first year. So I called, I talked to this really lovely woman named Aileen, and it was really interesting. No one could really give me a very accurate description of this program because it hadn't happened (*Atava laughs*), but like, "You need to talk to the director. Her name is Apela." And so, I had a full call interview with her. She was very, very stern. She was like, "This is a path. This is serious. This is very spiritual work, ancestral work. You really have to pray and see if you really belong here."

And I was like, "Well, what am I doing?" (*Atava laughs*) "What exactly..." -- you know, they were saying, "remembering your indigenous mind. Remembering your ancestors." Like, it's probably some of the things that were used to describe it. So I talked to Apela, and that night before going to bed I had a really clear dream, like, this is the way to go. So I joined. I signed up, and that was in August, and class started in September.

[0:59:11]

Atava: And so that path is, and that program, you know, I would say was disguised as an academic program, but it was really a spiritual path and initiation. But that path is what really brought me into first, recognizing and then healing and connecting to my Polish ancestors because part of the assignment, the major assignment, was to do work on remembering and reconnecting with one of our ancestral lineages. And we were guided and mentored by many different elders, including who I called in the beginning in the prayer, Mr. Makua and Auntie Mahialani Poe Poe, who were Hawaiian. But Apela brought in cultural elders from many different traditions who were all there to support us to reconnect with our own ancestors.

So, kind of soon in the beginning of the program, she said, 'If you're mixed race or mixed culture, you have to pick one lineage to focus on because there's not enough time to divide attention between like 2 or 3 of your ancestral groups.' So I was like, "Well, I'll do any ancestors but not my Polish ones."

(both laugh)

Atava: That was my, like, *(Atava laughs)*, my arrogance or whatever. And what happened, it's so funny, I kept getting, literally money, like, funding, scholarship, grants from Polish organizations. Like, and to the point where, okay, this is that triangulation again. The Polish ancestors are giving me money. I **need** to pay attention. And the reason I didn't want to connect was that I have a lot of wounding around my father, and you know, as he had a lot of beautiful gifts, he had a hard side, including addiction and we also were pretty estranged from that side of the family. So, yeah, it was the last thing I wanted to do, but it was, of course, the thing that spirit wanted me to do.

So through that process I was able to go to Poland, actually put my feet on the soil and to do what I called in my thesis, "Journey to my Polish Indigenous Mind," to really pray for the memories to come back, to be on the land, to communicate with the spirits there, to meet the people, especially in the rural area where the traditional culture was still alive. I know I'm getting into a little tangent from the original question, but the very unexpected blessing of this whole process with my Polish ancestors was a healing with my father, **really** profound healing.

Because, I think, you know, when you're a person, a child growing up, and your parents are angry or distant or whatever, abusive, all we have -- well, all I had -- was a very narrow context: "He's just mean," or whatever. But by giving time and attention to his family, his lineage, his roots, first of all, I started to understand what made him who he is. You know, like, he lost his father when he was a child. They left the Polish community. And then just learning the story of what happened to Polish people in their homeland in Europe, being colonized and even just erased from the map many times in history, and the story of immigrants coming to this country, not unlike the story of more recent immigrants who are now, most often, people of color, so there's a different kind of discrimination which also involves race, you know. At some point, Polish people could assimilate, right? So some of my relatives, they changed their names so it sounded very *(Atava laughs)* Non-Polish. So anyway, the very unexpected blessing was this healing with my dad, which became extra important as when a few years later he became ill with Lewy Body Dementia and died, I felt like there weren't any loose ends in our relationship. Like, we, I was able to forgive him and love him and actually really see all of the good parts of him, you know, instead of just the parts that were hard, and understand him, and really felt like proud of the lineage that we come from and feel connected to it. And that affected him, too, when he was alive and still able to be cognizant of it. Me connecting to my Polish made him proud and healed some of the wounding he had gone through and discrimination he had experienced.

So, yeah, and the journey continues with this work. It never ends. I'm still very connected to my circle, my cohort of people who went through the Indigenous Mind Program with me, as well as Apela and some of the other elders. We're just continuing to do the work, and it changes over the years with our life experience and our, umm, yeah. It's a very spiral path. So.

[1:05:54]

Amber: Hearing your whole background makes me see how much this has informed your school, the Ancestral Apothecary School. It's a school for herbal, folk, and indigenous medicine. And on the website, you say everyone has ancestral medicine.

And so how do you, now, help people find their ancestral medicine, and especially through plants?

Atava: Yeah. That has unfolded, but I think the first manifestation of that was the class I created called the Curandera's Toolkit Class, which was my intention to create a class that talked about herbalism, and healing but from a perspective of curanderismo, particularly Mexican curanderismo, but not limited to that. And that really came from my own, you know, I was longing for a class like that. A lot of herbal schools, you know, ten, twenty years ago taught from a very Eurocentric perspective, and many still do, but I think it's people at least having consciousness of diversifying.

But anyways, so that was the first manifestation of just creating a class that had that cultural perspective that speaks, attracts many people but, predominantly, Latinas, you know, once in a while a male, but mostly women, kind of, who are in their own processes of reconnecting with their own ancestral medicine.

And so I'm really grateful for that. That class is a space where people's first introduction to plants is informed by their cultural roots and ancestral practices.

I did teach, it was a one or two time thing, I probably will get back to it sometime, but I did teach a class that was really specific for Slavic ancestral remembrance because I feel like even when we talk about people from Europe or European ancestral practices, a lot of times there is, people are mostly thinking about Western Europe, and so I felt like I wanted to give space for all the other (well, not all the other), but the ancestors of mine: the Eastern European and Slavic. That was a while ago, now, that I offered that class. But umm.

So currently, the way that ancestral medicine practices are encouraged is through our Cecemmana Program which is the nine-month training. So, one of the primary assignments of the program is what we call "The Ancestral Medicine Project." So the assignment is that each student research into a practice of their own, a healing practice or tradition of their own ancestors. I mean, it can be herbal, but I don't limit it to that because I really like to allow space for what people are called to come through or what people are remembering to come through. So it could be herbal, but it could be music. It could be food. It could be ritual. It could be birthing rights. But, you know, it has to be of one's own ancestors, one's own lineage, blood lineage, if people know it. I don't think we've had people who have been adopted and didn't know their lineage, but we would work with that as a special case.

[1:10:12]

Atava: So then usually I share a little bit about my experience and share about the tenets of Indigenous Science and just some practices and protocols to help people do this work because when -- it's very different. Like, so many of us, who grow up and educated in the U.S, like, we're used to doing research in a very left-brained way, right? We go to the library. We look at books. We go online. It's very cerebral.

But when you're doing ancestral work from an indigenous science perspective, you learn how to include many other forms of receiving information, like intuition, and dreams, and looking at many different ways for information, not just in printed word, right? It might be through stories or fairy tales or folk tales. So I teach my students some of that, which is what I learned and I've practiced, and then ask them to start with a prayer; like, to go out somewhere in nature and make an offering, and ask their ancestors to guide them, because what I believe is that, you know, this knowledge doesn't go away. It doesn't die. It just kind of goes dormant, but given the right conditions and the openness in a person that that medicine will come through. And I always like to say, it's recorded in our bones and blood and DNA. So even if it's been many generations since someone's been a practicing herbalist in our family lineage, it's still there.

So starting with prayer is important because it expands the network, so to speak, beyond us in this body, in this physical place and time, right? It includes all that's come before us. So they start with a prayer, and they do their research however it is. They may talk to family members. They may -- you know, it's okay to do research, reading books or going on the internet. That's fine, as long as it's kind of in balance with the intuitive research, like, paying attention to your dreams. Kind of midway through the year, we all gather together, and we've been going to a place, the hot springs. And it's this really big beautiful room where people can share their ancestral medicine projects and this last year, 2018, was the third group of students who went through this process, and I continue to be just amazed and also really touched with the depth that they go and also the healing and transformation that happens in the whole community of students, and teachers, you know, we're all the community doing this work.

There's just something about people telling their stories, and sharing it and being witnessed in the way, you know, plants are woven into it. Some people are talking about their ancestral plants, sharing things they've learned about a plant that they're drawn to that they found out their mothers or grandmothers or great grandparents used.

But the thing I've always felt about plants is, the one thing I always start whenever I teach anyone about plants, I always like to say that the plants are our ancestors. Literally, this is very poetic to say "The plants are our ancestors" (*Atava laughs*) but from an evolutionary perspective, we have evolved from plants, and our blood is very similar, our blood cells, our red blood cells are very similar to the chlorophyll, there's just one little segment that's different. SO we evolved from them. They are our ancestors.

[1:14:56]

Atava: And I feel like plants hold this space of, like, the wise, old beings who are able to hold that space of unconditional love and support. Like, they don't carry all the garbage that we do as human beings. (*Atava laughs*) Thank goodness, right?

I feel like I've been able to, for example, share, you know, share some really heavy stuff. We talk about colonization and the impact that has on any and **all** of us, even in terms of the herbal community; in terms of access to land, or plants that have been misappropriated, or plants that have been taken out of their cultural context; or the effects of slavery has on people of African descent and them trying to connect with ancestral knowledge. So we talk about really heavy topics, and we have the plants there to support us. So, you know, we have lots of flower waters in the room for people to spray on themselves (*Atava laughs*), a lot of rose, or burn some cedar, or

whatever, or take some skullcap, you know. It's just nice to know we're going to go to these deep, scary places individually and collectively, but we're not alone. We have our allies.

And I think, as herbalists, connecting with our plant allies is part of remembering our indigenous mind, because plants were the original medicine (maybe also insects and minerals and stuff like that), but plants precede by THOUSANDS of years pharmaceutical drugs. So just working with plants in any way, a conscious way, by learning to communicate to them, to pray to them, to listen to them, also, I think, awakens ancestral medicine. I think the plants want us to be well. (*Atava laughs*) That's my belief, at least. So they're great allies for this work in all the ways that they are and allow us, yeah, give us that kind of cocoon or blanket of love and protection while we do this work. Because, as you know, Amber, you've done a lot of your own ancestor work, it's hard! (*Atava laughs*) It's hard! So learning, "Okay, I may, I'm doing, I'm deep in this work, and I feel very vulnerable because I'm remembering or reliving this certain ancestral trauma. But, like, I could carry yarrow on me, so I have stronger boundaries so I have more of a filter when I go out into the world and business, as usual, down there is going on." Right? Because when we do this ancestral work, we go to different places and spaces than where everyone else is. (*Atava laughs*) So I think, kind of, having those herbs as our supportive allies really make -- at least, for me, I can't imagine doing it without them.

[1:18:47]

Amber: Umm. Yeah, grounding us back to the time and place that we physically are as we're doing that work.

You, so your school really does focus on making space and having accessibility for people of color. Some of the classes you have coming up are "Healing the Symptoms of Capitalism," and there's a number of medicine making and self-care classes specifically for women of color and people of color.

Why does it, why is it important to focus on that and to give people working with those ancestral lineages their own space?

Atava: Yeah, I mean, it's so important because we're all healing from the wounds of colonization and racism, and that plays out -- and this is something I learned from Apela in the Indigenous Mind Program -- it play out in every single aspect of our lives, (*Atava laughs*) including our healing communities.

And, you know, whether it's herbalists or herbal schools that have predominantly white faculty or white student body or curriculum that really comes from just more the Western European perspective of teaching, or if other cultural modalities are taught it might be taught by someone who might not even be of that cultural modality. Like, it might be Ayurveda, but not someone who's South Asian who's teaching.

And I had actually learned a lot from my students about how painful this is. You know? Because everyone has a different perspective. So I think there needs to be spaces for people, especially for people of color, to connect and heal to their ancestral medicine, or just **medicine**, to plant medicine without having to be defending or deflecting any sort of racism, or any sort of micro-aggression. I think it's really essential right now for communities to healing.

I mean, and that kind of relates to my Cecemmana story of why I started that program, 'cause I knew it would be a lot of work. Like, I really love teaching, but I never intended to run a school (*Atava laughs*). And that has really taken a toll on me, but that's another story. But it was all of these, all of my students who had been in many of my other students, all students of color, like, "We want a school. We want a space where we can learn herbalism, but we actually feel, you know, safe being who we are." So I listened to that, and it's like if I can give to the world this training these herbalists of color, I'm actually, I'm feeling really good about my contribution to, you know, transforming the landscape of healing, because it also relates to the service providers.

[1:22:21]

Atava: Another thing that happened, I don't know, maybe four or five years ago as part of an organization called The Healing Clinic Collective that organizes free healing clinics in the Bay, really targeting people who are underserved, especially by, like, well, it gets called "alternative medicine", but sometimes it's ancestral, traditional medicine (*Atava laughs*); like, whether it's acupuncture, or limpias, or herbalism.

So we're organizing these clinics and we're, you know we're reaching out to communities that are, like, predominantly of color, and then I'm trying, my job was to get herbalists to volunteer, and most herbalists I knew in Oakland in, like, 2015, were white. And it's like, how could this be? Like, Oakland is **so** diverse! What is, you know, what is this?

So, I was like, it has to be, it's not just going to happen. We have to create spaces, and we have to listen to communities and people and what do they want and need. And so, that includes creating spaces like these classes which are, those classes are all taught by, now, my students from Cecemmana, women of color, who, you know, they are like, "This is what's wanted. It's what's needed. I want to teach this class, Medicine Making for Women of Color." And I'm like, "Great. Go for it. That's, I'm 100% behind it."

The other part is, a real part is financial. Like, a lot of trainings, whether it's herb school or acupuncture or whatever, are not financially accessible to communities that historically have less access to capital because of racism. So, you know, we could just put together a really great curriculum with a really diverse group of teachers, and I've really tried to include a lot of different kinds of perspectives in the curriculum that we bring in, like, Angela Angel, who teaches Filipino Folk Medicine. We have, you know, someone coming whose roots are from Nigeria, and like, African- American South, to teaching African Diaspora medicine, many practitioners from different cultural perspectives, so that's one part of it.

[1:25:08]

Atava: And then making it financially accessible. So we've also been committed to raising money for scholarship. So we're doing that now. I don't know when this podcast will go live (*Atava laughs*), but it's never too late to donate because I, you know I really feel like it's a community effort. So then we have people, we have Latina herbalists, who can then serve their Latina/Latino community, you know? We have black herbalists, who can serve their African-American community, you know? So we're not repeating that same unhealthy pattern of, like, the white savior going into the community, like, help them. I really feel like it's about teaching the skills in the communities and having people do their own self-determination.

So yeah, I'm very excited because things are shifting. There's more, yeah, there's more spaces for that. There's more spaces for whatever the group is. Like, I have a friend who teaches medicine making just for, I think it's just for queer people of color, you know? Which is all, whatever the group is that wants their space so that it can be safe to do the work and to learn, I'm in support of that.

Amber: Such a beautiful work you're doing. It reminds me of this book Minster Fuller quote: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

Atava: Mmm. That's great!

Amber: It is great because we are -- I've talked about a number of times on this podcast, you know, of course -- just really in this cultural moment right now where this social justice consciousness is getting raised, getting bigger, and there's a lot of good things happening, there's a lot of people just screaming online using their caps lock button and not really doing things. And, of course, not everyone is in a position to really make change. But you **are**, and you're doing it, and you're creating this existing model to make this change that everyone wants to happen, happen. Not everyone, but, you know. You know what I'm saying.

Sometimes I feel frustrated just being like, okay, I see a lot of people want things to change, but how does this actually look in real life, and this is how it looks (which you're doing) is how it looks.

Atava: Yeah. Yeah, that's. Yeah. And we've gotta change, starting with ourselves, too, because I've been alive enough to be part of communities that are all women or all women of color, and just to see that, even within that, we can still be so wounded that we repeat unhealthy patterns with one another (*Atava laughs*). So.

Amber: Right. Yeah, my most recent interview.

(Atava's voice in background slightly garbled)

Yes. Yes. Actually the way I found you, again, and invited you to be on the podcast -- we first connected ten years ago, and, yeah, I'm going to tell that whole story when I record the intro to this -- but I thought about having you on since I first started the podcast, but then I was, recently, I had a guest named Darla Antoine come on, and she talked about ideas for cultural reparations. One of them is contributing money, of course, and anyway, I was like, oh, I would love to contribute money to herbalists of color, wanting to learn herbal medicine and connect with their own ancestral traditions that have been forgotten in the face of colonization.

And I was googling around, and your GoFundMe page came up.

Atava: Oh great!

Amber: And I was like, "Oh my gosh, look what Atava's doing! This is amazing. And oh yeah, I gotta have Atava on."

But it was, like, past. It was done when I first found it a couple of months ago, but before we talked today, I was looking at your website, and it's up again.

Atava: Yeah.

Amber: So that was what you were referring to. Yeah, and I just donated, so please, do tell people. Yeah, how they can donate.

[1:29:20]

Atava: Yes, well you can go, it's a [GoFundMe](#). I think it's called Cecemmana Herbalists of Color...

Amber: -- I'll put it in the show notes, too.

Atava: You can put it in the show notes, yeah.

If you go to our website, [ancestralapothecaryschool.com](#), there's a link, there, in our blog. It's also -- I've been putting it all over our Facebook page because right now we are in a final push because the next Cecemmana class starts March 6th, so then we have ten or twelve students of color who are raising money for it. I mean, I would love to give them all full scholarships. Why not dream big? (*Atava laughs*) But at least it would be great to give them at least 500 dollars each so more like 1000.

We've been doing some other great fundraisings and events and classes, and so this is the way for people all around the world to donate and to really, I say this over and over, investing in an herbalist's education is investing in the health of your community because more than ever, when stuff gets hard and when there's crisis, and -- like, right now a lot of my students and colleagues were in Tijuana supporting the immigrants there at the border, all the hell they're going through. We've supported, like, after the Orlando shooting at the Pulse nightclub made a huge care package and sent it down, and we show up after demonstrations and protests, natural disasters. We did a huge amount after the Sonoma-Santa Rosa fires and then the fires last year around Chico and Paradise -- So, herbalists are the grassroots community healers, as are other people, but we get called on again and again and again because herbalism has this accessibility. Like, I think there's a way it really fits the needs of these times. So yeah.

Supporting your community herbalists, you should. Everybody should do it just because it's a good thing to do (*Atava laughs*), but it's also, it's supporting the health of your community and the resilience because who knows? In five or ten years, it may be more of a primary medicine if systems break down and we don't have access to medicine the way we do.

So, yeah.

Amber: Right.

Atava: So, thank you for the donations in advance.

[1:32:09]

Amber: Yes. yes. I would like to echo that thank you to anyone who does go to donate. And things are, I mean, systems are getting broken. Things are gonna get harder on this planet before they get easier. Investing in herbal education for others, like you say, strengthens that community.

And also, I just really feel that you're going to be a better herbalist, you're going to be a stronger healer, you're just going to be more grounded and true to yourself if you're rooted in your own ancestral traditions.

Atava: Yeah, and that's just our philosophy. It's why we do that project.

And you also, then, respect other people's traditions and there's not this need to steal, take, or appropriate from other cultures. We all work with people who work with plants. That's just fact. (*Atava laughs*)

Amber: Yeah. For the vast majority of human history. 99% of human history, we were hunter-gatherers, working with plants.

Atava: Yes.

Amber: And had no doctors (*Amber laughs*) to call. I mean, doctors are **SO** recent, and we all survived to be alive today in our lineages because our people knew how to take care of themselves and each other.

And umm, so, as we wind down a little bit, I wanted to, I was really struck by something you said to me as we were preparing for this, so you were diagnosed with uterine cancer last year, had a full hysterectomy, and you said that the most powerful element of healing for you through that process was love and support from your community.

Love is something that I like to talk about on this show (*Amber laughs*). I think we kind of give it short shift in our culture, even though we use it all the time in somewhat meaningless ways. I said this in the last episode with Lyla June, but there's... we really can't heal in the absence of love. We really need to be calling in love into everything we're doing in a healing space even when there is all the hard stuff there, too, like cancer, and, like, colonization and all of these traumas and pains in the culture and individually.

[1:34:32]

Amber: So, I would just love to hear you speak a little more on, like, how you let that love in and how you felt it and received it and what you think it did to help you through the process of healing from that hysterectomy and the cancer journey.

Atava: Yeah, thank you. Yeah, I think, kind of just preface that with I feel like it's really easy if you're studying healing or practicing as a healer to get wrapped up in the technique of it all (*Atava laughs*), Like, "Oh I need to learn this, and I need to learn that..."

Amber: -- memorize this list and... yeah.

Atava: ... And um, myself included, right? I also love learning. And there's nothing wrong with learning techniques and modalities to help yourself and others heal. And I think it is one of the

symptoms of, I don't know if it's from colonization directly or capitalism or just patriarchy -- but, just the way love gets taken out of the equation from healing. So, you know, whether it's acupuncture school or herbal, they're not, like, teaching you how to love your clients (*Atava laughs*).

Probably not, I don't know what happens in medical school but anyways. Maybe it's changing because I think more people are realizing that oops, we left something really important out. But without that element, you can have all these great techniques, but it is the basic, fundamental vibration that keeps the universe moving.

Yeah, so for my journey, first of all, it was very scary and shocking and humbling, and, as I told my students, I'm done with the wounded healer.

(both laugh)

But you know, cancer's one of those things that's beyond our control in a lot of ways. So, as part of that experience, some friends just helped set up what's called the Caring Bridge site, so that the support could be organized, because what I realized, I'm somebody who's used to just doing it, doing it all, whatever, taking care of myself, taking care of others, and this situation put me in a place where I **had** to receive. You know? Which is probably a really good lesson in and of itself.

Yeah, just I had so, you know, I think when you're in that spot of illness, I feel like it was similar after my dad died, or of loss, where you're just so open and so vulnerable, and I think you really feel things more profoundly, good and bad, right?

So, I was very vulnerable and fragile and just having people come by with food, or offer healing work, or just sit there and hang out with me, I guess I just really felt like this is it. This is more important than any other thing is just feeling cared for, feeling that someone is, they love you, and they'll hold you when you cry or they'll pray for you. Like, I felt like, because I was so open, it's almost like love became more tangible. And I think, I don't know what a normal kind of recovery time, well, I guess I know a little bit about what the doctor's say from a hysterectomy, but I felt like I recovered really well and really quickly. Not just physically, because I think, for me, and I think this is true for a lot of people, being diagnosed with cancer is also what we call in curanderismo is a big "susto," a big shock, and requires a lot of emotional healing, too, and spiritual deepening because you faced your mortality. And so I feel like, people coming, my vast network of friends and community members showing up in all the ways. I mean, some of the people would just come and pray with me, or pray over me (*Atava laughs*), pray with me and my partner, my wife, who was also really affected. All of that just held us in this way that just felt so graceful and so supportive that I feel like I can say that I do feel recovered from that experience. I don't feel like there's residue of the trauma of having surgery, or what goes on afterward or the diagnosis, you know?

And it also opened me up, I mean, this is more existential, to realize that we're really attached to healing, meaning, that your physical body gets well, but, and I think it's something beyond that. I think people, I -- actually just a week ago had a friend die of cancer who had a really beautiful death, and I feel like that was healing, like, it's the healing is beyond just surviving in this physical body so that that love that we cultivate and that we receive and give in this lifetime, that carries us to the next dimension, and then continues.

It sounds like you're having that experience with your mom, and we're both very, very sorry for your loss, and that I'm really happy that you're feeling that, that continuation of her essence.

Amber: I mean, I -- when we really work to cultivate love in our lives and ourselves as loving beings when we're alive, which, my mom did, she radiated love in her life, then I do think that death is easier or that transition is easier, and then the elevation into being an ancestor goes more smoothly, and there's, I've been thinking about this a lot lately, just love and that transition from life through death into the realm of the ancestors, and how love can be this force that carries us through that.

Atava: Mhmm. Yeah, I totally agree. I totally agree, and it probably helps people in whatever goes on when they get there. (*Atava laughs*) You know? Because, yeah, they have less stuff to work out before they can become that white light or whatever the next level is.

Amber: Exactly, and then it's easier for them to turn around and look back on their living descendants and loved ones and communicate in those ways and intermediate from a place of love, protection, guidance, blessings.

Well, okay, Atava (*Amber laughs*). Thank you! What an incredible conversation! I am so happy to have reconnected with you 10 years later. What a neat full circle.

Atava: Yeah, I'm wearing the right dress. You'll have to say that. I'm wearing the dress that Amber gave me, or we traded for 10 years ago! (*Atava laughs*)

Amber: I can't believe it. And you didn't remember?

Atava: It's really magical.

Amber: It's crazy. I'll tell that story in the intro.

And I found the photo, too, of myself wearing the dress that you are wearing right now as we talk.

[1:43:28]

Amber: Okay, so where can people find you online?

Atava: Since we talked a lot about my school, it's ancestralapothecaryschool.com. We also are Ancestral Apothecary on Facebook and Instagram. At Twitter, I think we're @ancestralapoth, because it, "apothecary" was too long.

My personal website is a little under construction, but it's ancestralapothecary.com, and yeah, I have been taking some time off to deal with my own health, but I am starting to see clients again after some time off.

So both of those ways are good places to find me. And yeah, our school is in Oakland, California. Lots of good classes in person. Lots of people are asking about online that may be the next phase, cause I'm actually going to be moving to New Mexico within this year 'cause my wife now has a job out here. So we're in transition.

Amber: Yeah. I mean, I'm sure everyone who hears this is going to want to take your classes, you know? (*Amber laughs*) So moving online... yeah.

Atava: Just to put it out there that my dream, now, is to turn Ancestral Apothecary School into a worker-owned cooperative, and to get a really diverse group of people who are grounded in their ancestral medicine as the next generation of leaders and owners and visionaries and that I could stay on as an advisor. So that's the next phase. And yeah, it's growing, and I want it to continue and to be able to grow and reach people in whatever ways that is. So.

Amber: It all sounds amazing. Okay, thanks again Atava. So nice to talk to you.

Atava: Yeah, it was so good to talk to you, Amber!

[1:45:30]

(Solo, acapella version of *The Ancestors Song* by Shlomo)

*Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.
Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.*

*Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.
Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.*

*We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.*

Back to the earth.

*Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.
Now I remember that I am a prayer of my ancestor's breath.*

*Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.
Now I am standing and turning around to walk forward into death.*

*We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.
We are giving our breath back.*

Back to the earth.

(Exit Music: acoustic guitar folk song "*Wild Eyes*" by Mariee Sioux)

[1:47:13]

Amber: Thank you for taking these Medicine Stories in. I hope they inspire you to keep walking the mythic path of your own unfolding self. I love sharing information and will always put any relevant links in the show notes. You can find my blog, handmade herbal medicines, and past podcast episodes, and a lot more at MythicMedicine.love.

While you're there, I invite you to click the purple banner to take my quiz "Which Healing Herb is your Plant Familiar?" It's a fun and lighthearted quiz, but the results are really in depth and designed to bring you into closer alignment with the medicine you are in need of.

If you love this show, please consider supporting my work at Patreon.com/MedicineStories. There's some killer rewards there: exclusive content, access to online courses, free, beautiful, downloadable e-books, coupon codes, giveaways, and just amazing gifts provided by past guests of the podcasts. All of that stuff is at the two dollar a month level.

For a little more, you can access my herbal e-book or my small online course, and that's all there as a thank you, a HUGE thank you from me and from my guests for listening, for supporting this work. I love figuring out what I can gift to people on Patreon. It's so fun. And I love that Patreon makes it so that you can contribute for such a small amount each month.

I'm a crazy busy and overwhelmed mom and adding this project into my life has been a questionable move for sure, but I love doing it, and I love the feedback I get from you all. And I just pray that Patreon allows me the financial wiggle room to keep on doing it while giving back to everyone who is listening.

If you're unable to do that, or if you'd like to support further, I would love it if you would subscribe on iTunes or wherever you get your podcasts. And if you would review the podcasts on iTunes, too, it really helps getting it into other ears. It means so much to me when I read those reviews. It's, like, the highlight of my week when I check them and see new ones.

People are amazing. You guys are wonderful. Thank you so much.

The music that opens and closes the show is Mariee Sioux. It's from her song "Wild Eyes." It's one of my favorite songs of all time.

Thank you and I look forward to next time!