



Medicine Stories Podcast

Episode 59 with Judith Berger

Herbal Rituals, Rhythms, Remembrance

November 18, 2019

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(Excerpt from today's show by Judith)

Having the information about disease is useful. However, it does not give us a full picture of the rapture that the body is capable of. That, I think, is more immediately accessible when we're working with plants.

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

[Intro]

[0:00:25]

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

I am Amber Magnolia Hill. Today I am sharing my interview with my ultimate hero, Judith Berger; the author of my far-and-away, favorite herb book. I'm really excited to get into all of this with you. You're going to love it.

But first, just a really quick life catch-up:

I said in the intro to the last episode that I've been going through a thing and would be taking a little break, and I did. I'm feeling much better, much stronger. It's been just a lot. There's been so much that's happened in my life in the last couple months, and I feel renewed and rested, and really slowed down. Really slowed down, and so grateful for that.

And moving forward, I will put this podcast out when it flows, when it aligns with my mothering and running the Mythic Medicinals herb shop, and sometimes it might be often, sometimes it might not be. I've got some great guests lined up. I'm so excited about everything, but not holding myself to the every-other-week schedule that I have been for the last six months or more is a really important part of that letting go and slowing down process that is happening in my life that has really shifted some things for me in a very positive way.

I was kind of smiling, reflecting that yeah, six months ago, I believe — I think it was in May; definitely in the springtime — that I was talking about doing the podcast every week, and you know, like, made that announcement on the show even. And here I am making, like, the opposite announcement, but both of those were so aligned with the seasons.

In the springtime I was feeling all that energy and vitality and ability to really, like, bust this show out that I love doing, and it quickly became apparent that I couldn't keep up with it. And so, I said I'll do it every other week, and that's been working. But now, as the earth slows down, and Judith and I actually talk about this toward the end of this episode that that's what's happening at this time of year, of course, and that it's almost always a lesson for all the inhabitants of the earth, to look at what's happening around us and say, "Oh, energetically, my body's feeling the same thing if I tune into it."

And Judith and I also speak about how in the old Celtic calendar this was considered the beginning of the year. The beginning was in the darkness.

And so, I am feeling so aligned with it. I hope you are, too, and thank you for sticking with me however the podcast flows, as I've said since episode 1: I'm a mom. I am so distracted, and busy, and stressed, so many days of my life, and all I can do is do the best I can with this show, and it's very imperfect, and I love that about it, and I love you for being here with me.

[0:03:51]

Amber: So, Judith Berger is the author of the book [Herbal Rituals](#), and okay, I gotta tell you this story. I have to hold the book in my hand while I do this, hold on.

Okay. Probably in 2007 or 2008, my now 13-year-old would've been a toddler, she and I walked down to a local used book shop, here, in Grass Valley, CA. We didn't have a car at the time when her dad was at work, so we walked around town a lot because we lived near there. It's Booktown, if you live here or ever come to visit, a conglomeration of different sellers all selling under the same roof, and there's, you know, different nooks of all the different sellers, and I walked into a new nook that I hadn't been in before, and sitting there on the shelf, calling out to me, was this beautiful book.

I was just so captivated, so captivated by the cover. I'll put a photo of it on the page, you know, the landing page for this at [mythicmedicine.love](#). And then when I picked it up, you guys, it's a textured cover, and when books are textured in a way I like, oh my gosh. It just enhances the experience of the book so much. Oh my God, this book is so special.

Okay, so, I just loved the book from the moment I saw it, from the moment I saw it and then felt it in my hands, and it was priced at like 10 bucks or something. So I bought it, took it home, and was just as blown away by the words I was reading as I was by the cover of the book. Since then, in the 11-12 years since then, I have shared about this book online so many times; the various blogs I've had, social media accounts, I'm always talking about the book, and at some point realized that there had only been one printing of it. It was somewhat rare out there, and it was being... people were charging a lot for it online. I don't know if it was like that when I first found the book. I wasn't aware of it if it was, but that certainly has been the case for the last very many years, and because

I've talked and shared about the book and quoted it often, people often get in touch with me about, like, "Oh my gosh, I just want to buy it!"

So right now I'm looking at the Amazon page for the book: the cheapest you can get it is \$92.43 and the most expensive is \$318.70 cents! And I swear, every time anyone has ever found this book at a thrift store or a used book store, priced cheaply, I've been alerted. I've gotten a few emails and messages over the years of someone being like, "Oh my gosh, Amber, guess what I've found!" And hate it that I'm recommending this book, and I love it so much, and I want everyone to read it, but it's so expensive, right?

I emailed the author, Judith Berger, years ago, and asked her to sign my copy of the book because, as I've talked about, I believe in my interview with Stephen Harrod Buhner, which was number 8, I have this legacy bookshelf thing happening for my daughters, where I have my favorite authors inscribe their books to them. And so that's when Judith and I started writing I don't know how many years ago.

[0:07:45]

Amber: So then, a week or two ago, Jim McDonald, the herbalist, posted on Facebook and tagged me on it, that Judith had released the book as a print on demand book. So you can now order this book and hold it in your hands for less than \$92.43 - \$318.70. I believe it's \$30.

And I do have to say, it's not going to have the beautiful texture that my copy does, but you know, if you're willing to spend the money, you can go to Amazon to get that original printing of the book. But you don't need that texture; you need the words and the wisdom inside this book, and I'm just so, so happy, so, so happy that you can get it now. So of course, the link is in the show notes so you can just head there now or whenever if you want to check the book out.

Truly, this book initiated me onto the plant path, and I talk about that with Judith in the interview; especially the first chapter of the book, which is November, so how amazing is it? I found the book in November, and now recording this in November, and it's just so perfect. You guys, the December chapter is one of my favorites, too. They're all amazing.

Okay, so, the book is laid out — another thing I absolutely love about it is the layout — month-by-month, but it starts in November, again, because in the ancient Celtic calendar, November was the beginning. Samhain was the beginning. The darkness was the beginning. You can think about it like in a day: we consider the beginning of day sunrise, but they consider the beginning of a new cycle, a new 24-hour period, to be nighttime.

The renewal is the beginning.

The rest is the beginning.

So that's how the book begins, and each chapter has some Judith calls them "states", some verbs that go along with the energy of the earth in the Northern Hemisphere at that time, and in line with the plant she's talking about for each month. So each month will also have one or two plants that go along with it.

So you'll hear about November, and, in here, December: "Centering, Illuminating, Giving," and then pine is the herb she talks about. And she just writes so beautifully about these ways of being; these states; these ancient, ancestral states that we so often leave behind when we leave childhood in our modern culture, but that really serve us so well to be in these states.

And then she will write about the herb: the medicine of the herb, the magic of the herb, and then the book's title, Herbal Rituals, came from... she gives recipes and instructions on just what you can do, what you can do with that month's herb.

So let's see: I'm looking. I just turned to June. "June: Wandering, Communing," and the herbs are elder and lavender. Here's elderflower water, elderberry chutney recipe, elderberry syrup, of course, dried elderflower bath instructions, elder and linden foot bath recipe and instructions. So each chapter closes with ideas of how to incorporate the herb or herbs she's talking about that month into your life, into a sweet ritual way.

"January: Resting, Being, Listening," and the herbs are garden sage and thyme.

"April: Growing, Nurturing, Renewing," and the herbs are violet and dandelion.

"August: Harvesting, Blessing," and the herbs are yarrow and rosemary.

And then there's a final thirteenth chapter called "The Thirteenth Month: Pausing," and I absolutely love what she writes in there.

So yeah, I just want to give you an idea of how the book is structured because I find the structure to be just lovely. Just lovely. And even though I've read the book cover-to-cover many times, sometimes I'll just be sitting there, looking at my shelf, and thinking, "Oh, I want to take that book down, and it's March now, so I'm going to read the March chapter," and just, you know, remind myself of what is being shared in the pages of this incredibly wise book.

[0:12:39]

Amber: For the Patreon offering that goes along with this episode, Judith is reading the introduction to her book, which you will be shocked to hear me say, is a very wise and beautiful. So if you want a little taste of the writing in this book, then check that out at patreon.com/medicinstories.

Okay, I am just... I'm just glowing, thinking about the conversation that we had and how much I love this woman, and I'm so excited to finally have connected with her face-to-face. I mean, over Skype, but still, we have plans to hang out in real life someday, hopefully.

There are a couple topics, people, that come up in the conversation that are, you know, kind of surrounded by controversy in the herbal community, and as you will hear, I chose not to dive into the controversial topics, things I've talked about the podcast before, because time is limited, and I really wanted to just soak in Judith's herbal wisdom. So I'm just putting it out there because I can so anticipate someone being, like, emailing me, "Amber, how come you didn't say this? Or go into that? Or..." you know (*Amber laughs*)?

As I've said before on the podcast, I cannot cover every single aspect of every single topic that gets brought up ever, ever, ever, and time is limited with every interview, and I always have a list of things that I want to talk about. So, just in general, please don't ever send me that kind of email. (*Amber laughs*).

Thank you very much.

[0:14:31]

Amber: Okay, so Judith Berger has been studying and practicing herbal medicine since 1986. She is the author of the book *Herbal Rituals* and has written numerous articles on incorporating herbal allies into one's life.

In 2008 she received her licensure as a physician assistant in order to better serve her clients and patients interested in integrative care. She continues to spend much of her free time in the mountains and fields of New York State, receiving and learning more about the gifts of the plant world.

She believes that natural medicine is our birthright and that inviting many herbs in many forms provides vitality and pleasure: the root of all well-being.

Oh man. I wish we had talked more about that. Just even reading those words: vitality and pleasure, the root of all well-being, is really aligned with the slowing down work that I've been doing lately, and it has been work breaking that pattern of being so busy and going and going, but pleasure is a part of that slowing down process.

So thank you, Judith, for everything, and you all are so in for a treat right now with this interview with Judith Berger.

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

[Interview Begins]

[0:15:50]

Amber: Welcome, Judith, to Medicine Stories!

Judith: Aww, thank you for having me on Medicine Stories. I'm so glad that you do this.

Amber: I love doing it, and I am unbelievably honored to have you here.

So I really picked up on this line rereading the intro to *Herbal Rituals*, and it's something that I've talked about a number of times on this show in my intros or when I'm interviewing someone, the idea, you write, "I was remembering, rather than learning, this ancient knowledge."

I'm curious what called you to remember? What called you to want to learn herbalism, which, of course, then you remembered that you were remembering it, not learning it?

Judith: Well, I think it began when I was very young, and I would sit by the radiator in my bedroom because I was really cold, and I would read fairy tales, and I would always take books out of the library that were about magic and witches, and especially with visuals: old woman, deep in the forest, hanging plants, or Baba Yaga and her mortar and pestle flying through the air, and I really believed even then that it was actually true. There was something in me that, even when I read those stories, felt that it was very easy to imagine these things because in some way I did know them.

And so, I think that's part of the remembering, and I think that goes back to the way stories play such an important part in human beings' lives, and the way we used to sit around fires and tell stories to one another, and probably the stories were full of hanging herbs in the forests, mushrooms that you took that you then became somebody else (*Judith laughs*). Things like that.

And so that early experience which, I think things seem a little simple and deep at the same time when you're young, the veracity of something really stands out. It's hard to fool somebody who's five years old or six years old, you know? They know, and I actually think that remembering comes from the same place.

It might be stronger for certain people rather than others, but I know even when I was doing my medical training, when I was on rotation with doctors who came from countries where they still used herbal medicine, almost everyone had a story about their grandmother treating them with an herb from the backyard, and they all took it really seriously. Anybody who had that in their background wasn't completely co-opted by the medical eye that looks at things only in one particular way and thinks it's the center of the universe.

So that... those people also remembered.

[0:19:22]

Judith: But when I started to work with plants by hand: gather them out in the fields; go out with a basket with a knife, there was something in my body that happened. It was a remembering that passed through my entire body. Even the posture of bending over, the feeling the dirt under my fingernails, the smell of the dirt, the look of the root, all of that felt — I guess that's what you call the "felt sense" — and it seems to be beyond past, present, future; just exists in the eternal present in some way.

Amber: It's like in the field, in the morphic field of human ancestral remembrance are those actions, those forms, those senses.

And so you have this experience and this life in herbalism, and then tell me more about your medical training, and, like, what pulled you there? Was a desire to heal motivating both of those areas of study?

[0:20:37]

Judith: Well, when I — I decided to study herbalism because I had a very violating experience in a doctor's office in my early twenties, and I decided after that experience that I was going to take charge of my own health, and I didn't even know what I meant. It was just one of those assertions I made.

I was 21-22, and about a year later I was reading *Women of Power Magazine*, which was this women's spirituality magazine in the 1980s, the mid-eighties, and there was an interview with an herbalist. And the woman who was actually doing the interviewing was in a poetry class that I was taking, and that was what really caught my eye. It was her name, not the name of the herbalist.

Then I read the article, and it happened to be about Susun Weed, and I read about her keeping goats and herbs and witchcraft, and it brought me immediately back to my sitting by the radiator and thinking about herbs, and jars with powders in them that would make me go different places. So I decided that, wow, there were people out there teaching, and that was how I began learning.

And I met an herbalist when I was up at Susun Weed's. I met Robin Bennett. She was teaching in New York City, and so that was how I got my herbal beginnings, studying from that standpoint, and I feel so blessed that it started that way, because we really learned plant-by-plant, and Robin is a tremendous teacher, and we really took time.

You know, it was also pre-internet, pre-digital, so you didn't have those distractions. I feel pained in my heart for all the humans who have been born since there are cellphones. (*Judith laughs*)

Amber: Yeah, same.

[0:22:51]

Judith: Yeah, so that piece lasted, you know, throughout. I've never not been an herbalist since then.

I would say that my learning about medicine, I'm still not sure about it. It was definitely a feeling of going into enemy camp in a way. Not from the people. I felt that many of the doctors I met on my rotations were very compassionate people. It was the system, itself, which is very mechanical.

Mechanical is almost always trauma-producing to the creature in us, and that's something, along with the pharmaceutical aspect, which is very tied into business and pollution in the waters, things like that, are difficult for me to reconcile. I feel very divided about it. Having the information about disease is useful. However, it does not give us the full picture of the rapture that a body is capable of. That, I think, is more immediately accessible when we're working with plants, or yoga, or tai chi, or anything that's not mechanical that is full of aliveness.

Amber: So beautifully put. I love speaking with you after ten years of reading your book, and hearing that you speak as beautifully as you write, it's...

(*both laugh*)

Judith: Well thank you!

[0:24:56]

Amber: Yeah! So, you — and I loved your description of your childhood in the book. You grew up in Brooklyn, and I believe when you were writing the book, were you living in New York City?

Judith: I was living and still live in Manhattan. I have to — I always say to people that I grew up in Brooklyn before it was cool...

(Amber laughs)

... because Brooklyn has become a brand.

Amber: Yeah *(Amber chuckles)*

Judith: It's very funny because all I wanted to do was get out of Brooklyn. *(Judith laughs)*

In a way, it was very provincial, and like most people in their teens, all I wanted to do was get out. You had to get everywhere by bus until I learned how to drive, or the subway, but now I have a much bigger appreciation for all the neighborhoods and the fact that I was exposed through my father, mainly. My mother didn't drive. So if I was with my father, we would go to areas of Brooklyn that were completely different cultures.

And I guess I'll also say that it was really my father who's responsible for my very early exposure to any kind of nature. He was a wonderful gardener, and he really loved bonsai, which I have a lot of trouble with. I ended up, of course, being most interested in wild plants: weeds, plants in the forest; nothing that I tame or bring into looking like some idea of beauty that's perfectionist; but what I remember most, being out with him in the garden, is being in the dirt, and the smell of the dirt, and going with him to the nursery, and just being in the dim light of the nursery with plants and their roots wrapped in burlap, and the way they felt so alive to me, even then.

So that was a part of Brooklyn that, you know, I guess when you're younger, you see everything very close in and close up 'cause you're short, *(Judith laughs)*, and yes.

So otherwise, my family didn't go out anywhere. When I was older I learned that there were families that went into RVs and drove to all the national parks and spent the summers camping. I didn't have any exposure like that. I was a little bit afraid of bugs, and, I mean, I always loved trees, and they felt very profoundly sentient to me, and that has also never changed.

[0:28:10]

Amber: Do you think when you look back on it now, that your father had a similar sense of the vitality and the aliveness in the plants he was working with?

Judith: I think what my father derived the most pleasure out of was working with his hands.

He was a dentist, and he also made model ships. So I think he was a wonderful tender, and he died this year, and when I went to my family's house — you know, when you're Jewish you sit for seven days. It's called shiva — so I was at the house in Brooklyn for the Shiva, and the community comes, and they visit you, and they bring food, and there's always lots of photos out. I felt him the most when I would go out to the back in the garden that he made. He had made a — he had planted a very young Japanese maple, and we had photos of it, and of him planting it, and it's just grown into this beautiful sheltering grandparent in the garden.

So I really felt his presence there because of that regular tending, which is very different from my own way. I really like working with plants, finding them out in the wild, digging them up out there,

and then making the medicine, but I'm not really a gardener. So I really, especially, respected that in my father and his ability to do that.

[0:30:00]

Amber: Yeah, I am just the same.

My husband is an amazing gardener, and I'm always like, "Teach me! I want to learn," but really I'm just drawn to the wild plants. I'm not interested in taming the plants (*both laugh*), but I'm grateful for him.

So New York City, Brooklyn, so many people when they start getting interested in herbalism think, "But I'm a city dweller. There are no plants here. There's no connection. You have to live in the country to do this," but your life and your book are proof that that is not the case.

Judith: No, I mean, we do have a lot of parks in New York City; there are five boroughs, and the parks in the Bronx and Northern Manhattan are very wild. You can forage lots of mushrooms, pick mulberries and lots of other berries, and there's quite a few foragers who teach classes. There's been quite an interest recently in mycology, in particular, and the New York Botanic Gardens Friends Classes and that.

I will say that after I wrote the book my heart was very called to the forest; not in New York City, in the forest and the mountains, and I began spending a lot more time (and still do) outside of New York City, receiving a different kind of medicine; not necessarily going and gathering, just being in the forest.

I have been studying animal tracking since the early 2000s after my book came out because when I would come across certain plants and trees in the forest that I was looking for in the forest, and then I would see the tooth marks, little tears, and signs, and it might sound funny, but I wanted to look up and out. I was always looking down, looking for plants and mushrooms. Although, mushrooms you do have to scan, as well.

So things became very big for me; very, very big. There was that honing in on particular plants; knowing them. Say, I came across skunk cabbage, early in the spring, and I would feel that shiver of delight that it was the beginning of spring just because I was seeing the corn and the little hooded garnet cave, but then I came across bear scat, from bears that were eating skunk cabbage.

And with my teachers, we would pull apart the scat using little calipers, and that would be learning about skunk cabbage in a completely different way. And then, if I talked about skunk cabbage — and I remember Matt Wood talking about skunk cabbage as a bear medicine, something that he learned from one of his teachers — there was something about coming across the scat and it being, literally, this brilliant emerald green on the inside (*Judith laughs*).

So there was this mixture of the presence of the bear and knowing the bear was using the skunk cabbage, and it just made the plant even more precious, because it isn't all about us humans.

So that's something that being in the forest has given me that maybe I would've been a little less aware of **just** doing herbalism in the boroughs, here, in the city.

Amber: Yeah, absolutely. That's wonderful; just this kind of stepping back and widening your lens.

Judith: Yes, that's very much what it feels like. Again, there are aspects of that that are (feel like) remembering. And also, when you're working with plant medicine, when you're working with any of these things, you realize how stunted our senses have become because we don't practice these other things.

So I remember one of my tracking teachers, he calls it "scatter-sensing", and it's really about using our peripheral vision when we are in the woods; being still because you're trying to catch subtle movements 'cause the animals do not want to be seen. Sometimes when I come back from those experiences I feel so wide, so expanded, and then somebody will be walking in front of me, and they'll be on, you know, have their earbuds in and talking on the phone, and they don't even notice that I'm around them, and they start to walk and veer right into where I'm walking, and I'll get a little pissed off. (*Judith laughs*)

It's just one of that other narrowness that I worry about so much from people and cell phones. I worry about it.

[0:35:40]

Judith: We need everything that we're capable of right now to help with turn the tide with the climate change, in particular.

Amber: Right, like, we need to access the full spectrum of our humanity and all of our capabilities that have been handed down to us from our ancestors, you know? On every level: physically, emotionally, spiritually, to, yeah, to address the issues that are facing us.

And when we kinda collapse the possibilities and whittle down our capacities through the numbing of, like, social media and all the things we can do with this technology, we're really doing ourselves a disservice.

Judith: Yeah, and it's a subject that's tackled very beautifully in Richard Powers' [The Overstory](#). I don't know if you've read it. It won the Pulitzer Prize

Amber: Is it fiction?

Judith: Kind of. It's really... the trees are the main part.

Amber: Yeah, I read about it. I read a very long article reviewing that book, and I thought it sounded fascinating.

Judith: Yes, so one of the characters in the book, Patricia Westerford, is basically based on two scientists, one of whom is Suzanne Simard, who's done a lot of work on the communication between trees, and the way there will be a mother tree in the forest that will be able to recognize her baby. And if that baby tree is ailing through the mycelium in the forest, send nutrients and support, or immune signals to that baby.

And so, all of that work is very heartening in Richard Power's book. He also has a character who is confined to a wheelchair, and creates an entire digital universe of plant life and also a digital universe where people can escape the current world.

So he really presents many different points of view. It's a very wise, disturbing, beautiful book.
(Judith laughs)

Amber: Yeah, I remember the review sounded like it was very multi-layered, very complex, really looking at the issues facing us today in a really smart way.

Judith: There's activism in it. There's — I think you really experience the fragility of taking action, of being willing to protect what is important to us in the face of large corporations and all of the things that go along with that.

Amber: Great. Thank you for the recommendation reminding me of that book. I'll put a link in the show notes for everyone.

[0:38:54]

Amber: My oldest daughter's name is Mycelia *(Judith laughs)*, and it's partially because I learned what you just spoke about. When I was pregnant with her, as Paul Stamos calls "mycelium and fungi: nature's neural network, the brain of the forest", and that idea just so captured my imagination.

Judith: Yes, and I agree with him.

And then I also read a short blog post — well, it wasn't that short — by an herbalist, who I don't know personally, Sean O'Donohue. And for him, he was talking about the mycelium as the fascial, and he relates that a lot to the way fascia in the human body holds trauma, and he had this beautiful piece on black cohosh in relation to working with trauma held in the muscles, and he brought it all together in this beautiful way.

So now I'm just thinking about mycelium in both ways.

Amber: Yeah, absolutely, and how the intelligence of the body and the fascia feeds back through the neural network, and everything. Everything's connected. That's beautiful.

Judith: Yes. For example, I find that the mucous membranes in the body all speak to one another in the same way that maybe the mycelium do. So I always feel that if I'm taking an herb or giving an herb to nourish the mucous membranes, it's going to get to where it needs to go because they're all speaking with one another in some way.

I do believe that there is lots of ways of communicating that we don't have any measurement systems for, and because we use our senses in such a limited way, we have a hard time touching them.

[0:41:14]

Amber: Yeah, it reminds me — and I mentioned this briefly earlier — of Rupert Sheldrake's idea of morphic resonance. Like, say, if you take marshmallow for mucous membrane in your vaginal tract,

but you take it in your mouth. For whatever reason, it's almost like you change the tissue state in your mouth, and you can see the other mucous membranes changing their tissue states as well.

Judith: Yes, it's interesting with marshmallow. I have kind of a love affair with marshmallow because it's so gentle and tender, and it's good when we feel inflamed in some way.

And after I was in my early 50s I started to find stinging nettle infusion, which is my main infusion, it started to feel a little bit irritating in my urinary tract. And so, in the springtime, I'll put violets in — the young violets because I find those the most mucilaginous — and they'll help with that stingy-ness. But the rest of the year, I mix a cold infusion of the marshmallow root with my nettles, and it just hits the spot (*Judith laughs*).

It really, no more, not only did it soothe that area of slight irritation but it, without a doubt, strengthened my entire urinary tract. I don't know if that's an on-the-books thing that marshmallow root does, but I certainly felt it in my own body which I think is, it might be anecdotal evidence, but it works for me. (*Judith laughs*)

Amber: That's what we need more of in herbalism. I always say, you know, that we can look at the scientific studies. Those are great, but the anecdotes from other people using herbs consciously and conscientiously and then reporting what happened to them - that's how we build more bodies of evidence of how we can use these to heal ourselves and others.

Judith: Yes, and I actually think that most, many herbalists when we're teaching make use of that and so do meditation teachers. Slow down. Eat the raisin really, really slowly. What's the raisin? What's the texture of the raisin on the tongue?

And it's the same thing when you're tasting wild carrot seed or whatever it is, and then you're feeling into yourself to see where you're connecting that up. I think trusting that is really important, but there's definitely an entire cultural push toward the experts, and everything being scientific, and a mistrust of our subjective, felt, sense of our experience which, I believe, at some point in the past was considered much more important.

Even if you read 19th-century novels, when Jane Austen is talking about emotions or Charlotte Bronte, those emotions are always described in the body.

Amber: Wow.

Judith: So I think that might be very recent: the way we're getting away from the body, and the only time we are connected to our bodies is if we're doing yoga. (*Judith laughs*)

I'm only kidding.

Amber: Yeah, no, but it's true for me. I have to take time out to be like, "Now I will feel my body." You know?

It just goes back again to the cellphones and the technology. It so easily disembodies us.

[0:45:27]

Judith: Yeah, and I think that one of the reasons I wrote *Herbal Rituals*, I wrote it in the format that I wrote it in, which was month-by-month, using herbs that I was either going to be gathering in that month or using in that month, was because it was a way to stay centered and rooted and not spin out, and I think it's even harder now; much, much harder actually, to pull everything in and settle down.

Amber: It is, and reading your book does that for me. That's why I just LOVED it from the first day that I picked it up.

And I found it in November, so the first chapter was **the** first chapter. It was all aligned, and even rereading it to prepare for this interview, your writing just slows me down and grounds me, and I'm so grateful for that.

So yeah, I mean, as you know, this book has just meant everything to me, and I have spent the last ten years sharing it far and wide. And so, now that I've got you here I really want to hear how the book was born, how you conceived of it?

Did you know immediately, "Yes, I will write this book?" How did you decide on the structure? How long did it take, and just the whole story?

Judith: Well, I would say, it's really a wonderful story, and I would say that I'm not sure I believe in fate and destiny, but it's one of the only things in my life that's ever happened that seemed to all be given to me as I walked out into it. And by that, I mean that I had a roommate that worked at this restaurant on Irving Place called "Verbena", and they had a garden in the back, and my friend was a waitperson there. And the chef decided to do a series of classes in the garden, and so they asked me to teach a class on the garden herbs that were there, and it was going to be with a lunch as well.

One thing that they had, which was very important at the time because there was no internet, is they had a press release. So I was in an article in the New York newspaper, *The Daily News*, and a few people came to that garden class, including an editor from *Martha Stewart Living*, who asked me then to write a few articles on herbs for the magazine which was wonderful.

And then an editor saw the picture in *The Daily News* of me holding up a root in Central Park and called the restaurant and asked if she could contact me. And that editor asked me, on the phone, if I was interested in writing a book, and so we made an arrangement to meet. And before I met with her a friend of mine and I were sitting at a Mexican restaurant in the East Village, and when she heard that I was going to this meeting, she said that we needed to write some sort of outline.

So I wrote it on a napkin in the restaurant with her, and it was to give myself an anchor that I divided up, not only into, like, the 13 months but those specific words that were connected to emotional and physical states that I'd come to experience through the plants. And so that was what came first.

When I met with this person, she wanted me to write a book about detoxifying herbs, but I didn't really believe in detoxification. (*Judith laughs*). So I showed her what I had, and she suggested that I write a chapter, and then we'd see.

So I went to the Cornell Medical Library because, as an alumnus, I could use their computer. Then, nobody had computers, then, you had to go somewhere else to use a computer.

And I sat down, and the moment I started to write it was that moment of slipping on the perfect pair of slippers, and the voice was right there, and I knew that I wanted to create a spell; that I wanted, through the writing, for people to go into the state that I was talking about, and it proved to not be very hard to do because of the subject matter.

You know, the plants are so really that way, that it wasn't any huge leap, but that enchantment was deliberate on my part, and it was the way I decided whether, you know, something stayed in or got, you know, didn't make it into the book. Did it put the reader into that state?

[0:51:35]

Judith: So when I gave the first chapter to this person they said that it would be good if I got an agent. I didn't know where I was going to get a literary agent from, and I called my father to tell him the news, that I had been offered an opportunity to write this book. It was just the kind of thing he would've been proud of, and he was going through radiation therapy for cancer. It was when he first got cancer, and I knew it would make him happy, which is why I called him to tell him. I thought that would be good for his cancer actually.

And it turned out that the next patient in his chair asked what he thought about herbs, and then he started to say how his daughter was an herbalist, and she healed her sister of her ovarian cyst, and this woman said — and then he said, “Oh and she just got an offer to write a book” — and the woman said, “Well, then she'll have to talk to my husband. He's an agent.”

And so, I spoke with him the next day, and he read the chapter and decided to help. So it was really, you know, a very unusually fateful, destiny-driven thing, and nothing like that's ever happened in my life before or since. *(Judith laughs)*

Amber: Yeah, I mean, those synchronicities are a huge, welcome hug *(Amber laughs)* from the multiverse, “You're on the right path. Keep going.”

Judith: Yeah, I mean, it hasn't always felt like that as an herbalist, especially in New York City, but at that time certainly the book seemed to be, you know, there seemed to be other forces carrying it forward, and I was really midwifing this thing.

Amber: And was it, like, your full-time thing during the writing of it? How much time were you devoting to it?

Judith: I was devoting about 5 hours a day to the writing and...

(phone rings in background)

— just getting rid of that —

... I was devoting about 5 hours a day to the writing, and then I was going off and teaching yoga in the afternoons, later afternoons and the evening. And of course, I was still always working with the plants.

I got a little mesmerized, I would say. I fell inside the book kind of like Alice (*Judith laughs*), like Alice in Wonderland.

Amber: Yeah, it's interesting. You say you were specifically, intentionally, trying to create this enchantment, and you were, like, enchanting yourself meanwhile.

Judith: And here I was in this library, surrounded by medical students actually, but I had my own at the time. Nobody had their own computer, so I had one of those big boxy computer screens, and I brought like, I would bring my research with me: five or six other books for inspiration, whether it was Thich Nhat Hanh, or Ellen Evert Hoffman, or Maud Grieve, or you know, whoever it was. There were a lot less herbalists than there are now. I mean, it's really exploded since then.

Yeah. So... but it was definitely just a labor of love and a feeling of giving back because I felt that I'd gotten so much from the plants.

Amber: Wow, and what a great state to be creating from, a state of gratitude.

[0:55:48]

Amber: So I love hearing this that you were trying to invoke certain states; the states that the plants invoked in you when you were working with them. So I absolutely love the words. I think they're all verbs that are in the beginning of each chapter.

So the November chapter, the herb is mugwort, but the states, the words are "Visioning, Dreaming, Remembering." I mean seriously remember turning the page to that page and reading those words and being like (*Amber gasps*), so excited to read that chapter.

Words are magic. Words are magic spells, and it's just like you plant these seeds at the beginning of the chapter and then move into it.

Judith: Yeah, and actually, it almost seems more important now because those are all states that are in the right hemisphere of the brain. They're related to connection, human connection, and connecting with one another, connecting with an animal, whatever. And, you know, 77% of our culture is left-shifted into the left hemisphere of the brain.

So it seems even more important to hold on to these ways of using our minds that retain our humanity. Something that Robert McFarland, the British author, has talked about a lot because he was very deeply disturbed — he's written a trilogy on mountains, and his most recent book is actually on caves and below ground — but he was so disturbed when the Oxford-English dictionary for children took out all these words that were related to the natural world, like the word "lark" for example.

And so I actually feel that way about these states of mind that we spend our time in. So even when I hear you say the words, visioning, remembering, dreaming, I feel like I can relax and be human. And part of what it means to be human is to be someone who does *that*.

Amber: Yeah, so it's like as we're losing species and ecosystems on this planet, we're also losing certain states of being from our everyday human lives, and I just loving knowing that part of the intention for your book was to open a doorway for people to re-experience those states of being.

Judith: Yes, and I think even myself it's such an interesting thing to read your own words 20 years later. They don't feel like I'm reading them. Like, if it had somebody else's name as the author of the book I would say, "Oh, wow. They are so wise. Just what they are talking about, I feel that myself." You know?

And I need to be reminded all the time, myself, too. So I really like that I can read a chapter and feel that it changes me or brings me back to myself in some way.

Yeah, I don't want to spin out so far that I lose touch altogether with being able to drop into those states, yet it's very easy. It becomes harder and harder, and having worked in the medical field it's too far away from those states. Very difficult to come back. The transition is not so simple, and it's not instant.

[1:00:15]

Amber: Yeah, it's like the story around healing that modern medicine tells does not lend itself to healing.

Judith: No. I'm not sure it uses the word "healing" very often either.

Amber: Right.

Judith: It's kind of not a "P.C." word if you're scientific. Although Jon Kabat-Zinn uses it, they're a little easier on mindfulness than they are on herbs, I would say.

Yeah, you gotta meet those standardized, randomized, control trials to be valid. So you know it's trickier with a plant because you can't standardize plants unless it's no longer wild.

It's just harder to do.

Amber: Yeah, and that's such a good point, too, that the modern medical system isn't even focused on healing. They're focused on symptom management, and certainly for the pharmaceutical company, and I think for many hospitals that are business based like you're saying, it's the system much more than the individual doctors. You know, a customer (a patient) healed is a customer lost.

So yeah. I mean, I could talk about modern medicine forever, and actually, I do want to ask you one question on that, going back to what you said earlier: that when you were really young, you decided to really empower yourself around your own health, and I made the same decision and it's a huge driving force behind this podcast is trying to spread that power around to as many people as possible. Let them know that it is possible...

Judith: -- Yes. It's radical. It's radical in that root-sense of the word —

Amber: ... Yep.

Judith: Anyway, I interrupted you. What was your question?

Amber: No, absolutely. I gave the etymology of radical in I think the last podcast episode, or maybe two episodes ago, talking about this very thing - that radical doesn't mean it's this crazy and out-of-the-normal. It means you're going back to the root.

So, like, has that been successful for you? Have you really been able to take care of your own health needs, at home, by yourself, outside of the medical system?

Judith: Yes, it has up to this point in my life. You never know what's going to be thrown at you, and there are certainly things that the Western medical model is good at; trauma, being the best, I would say. So, you know, I have no idea, but I do know that I've always had a very sensitive nervous system. I think it's the very thing when we're really in touch with our creaturely selves, we find that we are very sensitive and that there is, there's a vulnerability in sensitivity also with a strength.

But for me, there was such a natural fit. It wasn't even a question. My body and the herbs were meant to be together. (*Judith laughs*). That's how it feels! So, if I'm sick, and I have this or that, then I go into the kitchen, and I look at what I have, and if I don't have it, it will float into my mind, and I trust it a lot, and I feel sheltered by it.

So it feels almost more than power. It feels like wholeness.

Amber: Yes.

[1:04:15]

Amber: Okay, so in the November chapter I learned this from you. I learned this in your book that in the ancient Celtic calendar, Samhain was this transition time, and November is the beginning of the year, and this is so — and I think you write as well — and as well for them, nighttime was the beginning of a new day. Like, a new 24-hour period started at nightfall just like the new year starts at the dark time of the year, and this is so potent and powerful and the opposite of the way our culture envisions beginnings.

Beginnings are bright and loud and sunny and you're charging for it, and you're charging ahead! And, well, I'm just gonna read one of your sentences from this chapter:

I find it important that the beginning time is situated at a moment when nature has ceased any outward signs of growth and has plunged its vitality underground.

Just, thank you for writing that and for the reset. I'm feeling it so strongly in my own life right now. Just all of the energy in my life right now is telling me: root down. Slow down. Lay in the darkness, and stop planning, and doing, and going and being. This is the beginning. This is that fallow, fertile time when what's coming next is on the horizon. You don't see it yet. You don't know it's there, but it's coming, and it can only come to you when you are still.

Judith: Yeah. I mean, there's a kind of hibernation to it, you know? Which the bear knows very well, and I think writers know very well. There's always this incubation time, and it usually happens in

the dark. Right before you're falling asleep at night, you start kind of, like, having ideas about something you want to create into being. Maybe all people who create know that darkness, silence, dreams, are all really important space. Just having space to let things drop in.

I also think people are afraid of things that come up in both darkness and in descent 'cause certainly, there are kinds of descent we're grappling with: grief, despair, loss, and we don't have a lot of support for that in the outward culture

So I think also people are afraid of going in, and going down for good reason because those webs to catch us so it doesn't feel bottomless are somewhat eroded, though there are some people who are working very strongly to recover ritual and space that includes the honoring of loss and trauma and grief and the brokenness that we also all have.

[1:08:01]

Amber: And so the herb that you are tying into these states of being and its magic is aligned with this time of year is mugwort, my dear, my favorite, my love. And thinking back on it, it's because of your book! It's because of your book.

I remember, I read the chapter, and then I went, "Okay, I'm going to walk outside and find a patch of mugwort," and my oldest daughter, who is 13 now was two or three at the time, and I just bundled her up, and we just started walking, and within a few minutes, we found a **huge** patch of mugwort. And I was living in, like, the downtown area of my town. I had no idea if there was any mugwort around. I was just like, "I need to see this plant!" It was so affirming to me to find that plant after setting the intention to do so, and you write in the book:

Like the thirteenth fairy, mugwort never fails to show up uninvited on the doorstep of the herbalist, devoted to using wild common plants for food and medicine.

And, for me, it was one of those synchronicities where it was like, "Okay. I said I was going to find you. Here you are right in front of me. I'm going to keep walking the plant path. I take this as a sign that I am on the right path."

Judith: I'm so glad you did.

Amber: Yeah, me too! *(both laugh)*

Thank you! It's because of you. I mean your description of this plant in this book is unbelievably beautiful, and one of the things you wrote is:

Known to many as an herb of magic, mugwort allows us to live in several worlds at once, expanding and nourishing the habit of drawing our gaze before us to that which is visible, to that which is invisible.

And so have you continued to work with mugwort in the 21 years since this book was written? How is your relationship with this plant? What does it look like?

Judith: Well, in the way that I was talking before, about how difficult it is to transition from the medical time into my herb time, one of the ways I've started to use herbs to facilitate that, and an

herb that (the mugwort) helped me make a very important decision around this as well, is that I started to burn the herbs more often and to use them to cast off, just clear, what I was accumulating during the day because I think one of the hardest things, working in the medical field, is that you're expected to see between 20 and 40 people a day, like, a parade of people whose bodies are awry in one way or another, and also not have enough time to really gather enough about who they are to really make an excellent recommendation that might be more whole, and not just algorithmic.

So in the summertime I would walk through Central Park on my way home from work, and there were a lot of linden trees and oak trees, and just between 76th Street and 60th Street in the summertime I would feel, like, completely rinsed out from the trees. Talk about forest bathing! But starting later in the year, I didn't really want to walk through Central Park in the dark, and so — and also there were sometimes things going on at work that I felt I really needed to clear.

And so I began making my own smudge sticks, and so that's the way that I've used mugwort more recently in combination with juniper and fuschia; mainly because I can find all of those easily, and I just love making smudge sticks, and then burning them.

So that's the way that I've been using mugwort.

And eventually, also what I would say what happened with mugwort a little bit before this was when I first became a physician assistant, I really struggled a lot with feeling like I had betrayed my what's really important to me. Betrayal is a strong word, but it can feel like that. It can really feel like that because there's such a division between the two things at this point in time.

And I remember I was coming out of the forest, and I came across a stand of mugwort; BIG stand of mugwort. It was the Diamond Notch Trail in the Catskills that goes up to Diamond Notch Falls and then West Kill Mountain. And I'd seen bear on that trail and slept out on that trail, and there's lots of partridgeberry and a great number of trees and mushrooms, but there's also on the entrance into the trail and enormous patch of mugwort, and I think part of what had happened at that time was the first job I had was very heavy on giving vaccinations. It was an adolescent population, and I felt really wretched at the end of the day from the medical waste in my wastebasket. I was really heartbroken and heartsick about it.

When I passed that stand of mugwort it said that I needed to use it to help me remember my dreams, and I know that it meant not my dreams at night, but the bigger dream which is of myself as someone who walked the plant healer way 'cause I felt very compromised.

Later on in my, I guess it was my tenth year, being a P.A. when I started to use the mugwort as a smudge, I was able to gather the courage to leave where I was working, and I think the mugwort played a role in that.

[1:15:16]

Amber: Yes, I mean you also write about mugwort as, like, opening (*Amber chuckles*) — (I think I have this memorized) — “Opening chambers of ancient memory within the mind,” you know?

So it totally makes sense that that plant would call you back to yourself in that way, and I absolutely love using smoke medicine with mugwort as well. The *Artemisia douglasiana* that grows

out here in California, as well as the *Artemisia tridentata* which is sagebrush, they both just lend themselves so wonderfully to smoke medicine.

And it really is, as you said, it's a nervous system reset. This is a way to reset your nervous system in 30 seconds: inhale some herbal smoke, you know? (*Amber laughs*)

Judith: Yeah, that scent, you know, I've studied anatomy for many, many years, and the sphenoid bone, which is one of the skull bones has all of these little, teeny little dots in it, which are actually portals for the olfactory nerves to go up into the brain. And so, you know, it's a very ancient way that we experience healing and take in medicine through that aromatic portal.

Amber: Absolutely.

Judith: Yeah, also, recently I learned this fun technique from Forager in Nyack, NY. He calls himself the "Suburban Forager." His name is Paul Tappenden. He kind of gives the mugwort a haircut. SO he takes the bottom ones which are already kind of dry, and he rolls them up into a ball, and then he lights it in the center.

So it looks kind of like a little beehive, and it's right there. He's used it for tinder, as well. And so I did that recently, and while I was — what I really liked — was that I could make up little spells and rhymes while I was rolling it into a ball, and then also, the oils in the *Artemisia*, I could feel them going into my hands and entering my body through my skin. It felt really good.

Amber: Yeah, I love that, so you're taking the in the medicine through the scent and through your skin.

Judith: Yeah, Ryan Drum was very big on that as the seaweed guy from Waldron Island. He's very much about rolling in herbs.

Amber: Oh.... (*Amber chuckles*).

Judith: But I was now rolling *the* herbs. (*both laugh*). I wasn't rolling in the mugwort, although, that could be in my future.

Amber: Yeah, I hope that's in my future.

[1:18:23]

Amber: So the book: it has been out of print.

Why has it been out of print? I just don't understand. Prices are through the roof. People want it. Like, yeah, what happened?

Judith: Well, I'm not exactly sure what happened. I think things would have been very different if the book had come out once the internet had taken off, but it was 1998, pre-September 11. The world was a very different place.

It was a small batch that was published by St. Martin's Press, maybe just 7500 copies, but they didn't really do any kind of press for it, and other than it being translated in German before it was

even published, there was really not much way for me to get it out or know what they were doing to get it out.

So, about — I guess it was just worked into the contract that after 10 years, you know, it went out of print. The rights would revert to me, or something like that.

And I remember I got this letter. My agent got a letter and sent it to me, where they wanted to know how many copies I wanted because they weren't going to print anymore. So I bought, like, a case of the softcover, and I just gave them away at the price that they were, not knowing that, like, five years later I would be getting constant (once I had a website with my email address) I would be getting constant letters, like, "It's \$150 dollars on Amazon!"

Amber: Or more.

Judith: So, first, I republished it as an e-book about four years ago, maybe five years ago now, and I was so surprised at how many people wanted it, and I got a lot of letters.

So I decided to republish it myself as a print-on-demand book, and somehow after my father's death in April, it felt like the time to do it was now. So kind of in the midst of my grieving, coming back to the book in that way was just a real affirmation of what's most important.

So I made it available on Halloween night. (*Amber chuckles*), and Jim McDonald very kindly got the word out ('cause he's really good at getting the word out).

Amber: Yeah, and he tagged me in the post, which is how I found out that this had happened, and you and I had emailed years ago, but then we started emailing again.

Judith: Yes! But I never forgot you. (*Judith laughs*). Another mugwort quality.

Yeah, so now people can get the book, and I've been getting all sorts of emails from people and people are very glad to be able to hold it in their hands.

You know, a bunch of people who had written me for years, I kept everybody's email, and I told them all that I would let them know when it was ready, and it was all the feedback from those people that let me know that there were people out there who wanted it because, you know, I'm not a very — I don't really use all those portals all that much. I don't have Instagram, and I kind of visit Facebook on and off, but I don't really use it that much. I'd rather be in the Catskills in the mountains. So you know, I'm really pleased that it's had a really nice reception in the last three weeks, or however long it's been; two weeks.

And I am working on a new book as well, and so it's really nice to feel people being interested.

[1:22:41]

Amber: Yes, do you want to talk about the new book, or what's next for you? What's on the horizon?

Judith: Yeah, well, a lot of my future is unknown. I'm wanting to move to the Catskills, and that's taking some time. Leaving my last medical position about a year ago to care for my dad in part I feel in a very big transition.

I started writing one book that was not just an herbal, but also a daybook that had a lot to do, has a lot to do, with what I know about animals, mushrooms, and plants; all of it.

But in the past few months, I've actually been wanting to return to a similar format to Herbal Rituals. I think the book will feel different because I'm a different person now, and more knocked about by life, I would say. So hopefully whatever I weave will have both the enchantment, and I think some of that depth that comes from having had descent.

Yeah.

Amber: Yeah. Those are my favorite kinds of books to read.

Okay, of course, I'll have the link to get the book in the show notes. You are at judithbergerherbalist.com

Judith: Yes, and I think there's a contact form on that site if anyone wants to reach me. Yeah, that's the way to do it.

Or you can reach me at judithbergerherbalist@gmail.com. That's probably more direct.

Amber: Awesome. Thank you.

Thank you so much, Judith.

Judith: Thank you so much!

Amber: I mean, I'm not at all surprised, like I said, that you're as deep of a person as your writing is, and I just love where this conversation took us, and I'm so grateful for your presence and your work.

Judith: Aww, thank you, and I'm very grateful for you, as well, and everything you've been doing on behalf of plant, spirit, and soul, and the heart.

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

[*Closing*]

[1:25:26]

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 past episodes, my blog, handmade herbal medicines, and a lot more at MythicMedicine.love. We've got reishi, lion's mane, elderberry, mugwort, yarrow,

redwood, body oils, an amazing sleep medicine, heart medicine, earth essences, so much more. More than I can list there. [MythicMedicine.love](https://www.mythicmedicine.com).

While you're there, check out my quiz "[Which Healing Herb is your Spirit Medicine?](#)" 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 and the medicine that you already carry that you can bring to others.

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And please subscribe in whatever app you use, just click that little subscribe button and review on iTunes. It's so helpful, and if you do that you just may be featured in a listener spotlight in the future.

The music that opens and closes the show is Mariee Sioux. It's from her beautiful song "Wild Eyes." Thank you, Mariee.

And thanks to you all. I look forward to next time!