



Medicine Stories Podcast

Episode 85 with Sean Padraig O'Donoghue

EMBODIED PLANT MEDICINE & ANCESTRAL HEARTBEATS [REPLAY]

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[Intro]

[0:00:05]

Amber: Hi friends, welcome to the Medicine Stories podcast where we are remembering what it is to be human upon the earth. I am Amber Magnolia Hill. This is episode 85. It is meant to be listened to after listening to Episode 84 — I am releasing them on the same day. That episode is titled “Our Complex Humanity Cannot Be Canceled.”

Some of you do know, and some of you don't know, that my guest today was canceled two or three years ago now. This interview came out a few months before that cancellation, and I took this interview down in the heat of that out of fear for myself, because of all the threats of “if you don't, you're a bad person,” “if you don't cancel this person, then you will be canceled,” because of the witch hunt atmosphere – which I go into more detail in in Episode 84, because there really is a strong connection between the way people behave in actual witch hunts, and the way people behave in cancellation campaigns

So this episode originally came out in April 2018. I've left the original intro in it, you know. It sets the context for the interviewer to follow. So we'll be hearing that in a minute here. I noticed when I was relistening that in that intro, I mentioned three other herbalists who have also had cancel campaigns waged against them in that time. So yeah, this episode mentions canceled herbalists, which, who knows? Who knows how people are gonna react to this?

I think, for sure, people are coming around to see how brutally abusive and inhuman cancel culture is. It seems like people are stepping up and able to think more critically and hold more nuance on these issues. I hope so. I am someone who has gone through my own process here from participating in these cancel campaigns to realizing that it is so out of integrity for me to do that. I would say here that someone who was close to both Sean and his accuser — and I talked more about this in Episode 84 said to me at the time, “Sean is not blameless here, but there are more lies than truths going around in this cancel campaign.”

[0:02:59]

On that note, I am going to quote Clementine Morrigan, who I also quote in Episode 84. She just has a way with words and is saying things better than I can say them. So on her Instagram she posted:

I support the falsely accused, and I support people who have been abusive, and I support survivors. There is no contradiction there.

The caption reads, "Clementine Morgan supports abusers." I've also had this thrown at me, by the way. And then she continues:

I mean, yes, I literally do. I support abusers to transform their lives and take responsibility in ways that are compassionate and respect their human dignity and autonomy. I also support people who are called abusers, who are not abusers, and who are, in fact, being victimized by slander campaigns. And I support survivors with all my fucking heart.

There is no contradiction there. Real life is complicated, but compassion is not."

Fuck yeah. Amen. This is where we need to be going. This is where I have been going. This is where I had been too afraid to go on this podcast, but clearly, I actually pushed Publish on this episode. So I did it. One more post of hers to the people sliding into my DMs to say I'd rather support a liar than an abuser:

If you're supporting someone who was spreading false allegations to up-end a person's life and destroy their relationships, employment, and mental health, you actually are supporting an abuser. That is abusive behavior.

The good news is that we don't need to choose between supporting people who make accusations and those they accuse. We can actually take a more careful approach where both sides are heard and both people are supported and where everyone's humanity and boundaries are respected. That is actually what it means to be responsible community members who oppose abuse.

Preventing and intervening on abuse is more complicated than simply deciding to believe without question anyone who makes an accusation. Doing that obviously creates a situation where people can use accusations to be abusive. Deciding to be more careful does not mean immediately assuming those who make accusations are lying. It is possible to take accusations very seriously, because they are very serious, while also taking seriously the impact those accusations have on the accused life and remaining committed to due process.

Admitting to the reality of abuse means admitting to the reality that people can be dishonest in order to enact abuse. A culture where we unquestioningly believe all accusations and punish and exile the accused is obviously a culture that abusive people can use to their own ends.

So even though I spoke, too, pretty deeply, thoroughly, a person who had been close to this situation, and both the people at the time, I don't know what happened. I don't know for sure the truth of it or the details, and I don't need to. What I need to do and what is in my integrity to do is

have compassion for everyone involved, and realize, as I go into deeper in Episode 84, that shame is not a social justice tool. It's used all the time in social justice spaces, but it doesn't work. And I provide more information on that in that episode. Thank you, Clementine Morrigan, for your work and your words.

[0:06:57]

Over the years since I've deleted this episode, I've had many people reach out to me to ask where it went, either they had heard it at the time or they had been told about it. And specifically, what people speak to is the part of the conversation where Sean talks about neurodivergence. It was so helpful and so healing to so many people. And I had to come back to them and say, "Oh, sorry, I deleted it because I was afraid of the witch hunt turning on me. Sorry, I'm cutting off your access to something that could be super helpful to you, but I'm really scared that I'm going to get cancelled."

And it's just not in my integrity to do that anymore. I can't stay silent anymore. I have been posting about these issues on Instagram for a while and made a statement on Medicine Stories and cancel culture last year, but it's time for me to come out, talk about it more on the podcast, and get this interview back up for the people for whom it is helpful.

I will mention here, as well, that Sean has a new book out. He has added a middle name and is now using O'Donoghue as his last name, which I assume goes back to the traditional Irish roots. The book is called [*The Forest Reminds Us Who We Are: Connecting to the Living Medicine of Wild Plants*](#) and sounds lovely. I love the title. And Sean's hypnotic languaging has always put me under a spell in which I'm porous and capable of learning, in a really sweet way, which I appreciate.

Okay, again, I think you should listen to episode 84, and I ask you to please hold space in your heart and in your mind for the complex humanity of all of us. And now you're about to hear the 20 minute introduction that I had originally recorded back in spring 2018. Of course, you're welcome to skip right by it if you want, but there's some good stuff there, and then we will listen to the interview with Sean Pedraig O'Donoghue.

He does not know that I'm doing this. I haven't run it by anyone other than my husband, who's very supportive, and I don't know. We'll see what's gonna happen. I just had to finally listen to my heart and live in my own integrity and make this interview available again for the folks who need the healing that it provides.

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

[Original Intro to Episode 16 - Spring 2018]

[0:09:47]

We share common ancestors with plants in our biology, our chemistry, even our structure of consciousness are similar. They're sentient beings that share the experience of being embodied on this planet.

When we make medicine with them, we are not working with some inert substance — we are connecting with something alive.

That is a quote from today's guest, Sean Donahue. I read it in the new book [*Herbalist Visions and Visionaries*](#), which I will tell you more about in a minute here.

First, I'm going to tell you what I talk about with Sean Donahue. Sean is an herbalist and, you know, let's just do his whole bio right now.

Sean Donahue is an herbalist, a poet, teacher, and initiated priest of the Blackheart line of the Feri tradition of witchcraft — that's F-E-R-I. I don't know about it, but I'm curious — and a reluctant revolutionary. He is the co-founder with Matthew Wood of the Portland School of Herbal Wisdom and a member of the faculty of The School of Western Herbalism, Pacific Rim College in Victoria BC. He is a columnist for plant healer magazine and a frequent contributor to the Gods and Radicals website.

Sean is just an incredible human in the way he takes in information, both from human and plant teachers, and synthesizes it and then puts it back out in this way, that's just so... It just kind of hits right to the heart, you know. There's not a lot of like, the overmind or the rational mind that gets engaged. You kind of get right into this mythical, poetic, dreamy, mesmerized state when you listen to Sean speak. And I find that I learn much better in that state of mind. So I've really come to value Sean as a teacher.

And I think, you know, if you like this podcast, you are going to love this interview. If you're interested in herbalism, you are going to love this interview. If you're interested in ancestry, magic. I mean, you know, after our conversation was done, I just had the thought that this conversation reminds me a lot of episode nine, of my conversation with Ariella Daly, because like, this is magic.

These experiences that Sean describes are so synchronistic and just unbelievably imbued with magic and you're like how can those things happen in real life? This sounds like a fairy tale. This sounds like a story, just like Ariella's stories that she shared. But these things do happen in real life when we are listening to the call of our soul, when we are following the mythic threads of what fascinates us, what's interesting to us, what we resonate with, what feels like it's ours to go after and to learn from.

[0:12:58]

So in this conversation, Sean and I talk about the daily life of the witch in the hut at the edge of the village — that would be Sean.

- Being neurodivergent, autism, sensory gating channels, nonlinear connections, tryptamine in the brain, and so much more.
- Sean's childhood experiences with asthma, depression, and being misunderstood into young adulthood, of collapsing health, and following the wrong path, and finally into healing, awakening, and journey into herbalism. Sean says, "I knew everything I was saying no to, and nothing I was saying yes to."

We touched on his first psilocybin experience at age 19 and his realization that everything is alive and connected, which really is just a prerequisite for getting to know plant medicine and the natural world — not psilocybin, necessarily, but realizing that everything is alive and connected.

- How plants can shift our experience of our bodies and our sense of ourselves in relation to the world around us.
- Drop doses as an underused form of herbal medicine.
- Sean's deep reverence for and connection with his ancestors, including some truly incredible stories of how magic, myth, and ritual have opened the doors of communication between him and his forebears.

We talk about elecampane, usnea, and hawthorn. They're all mentioned here, but Sean really goes deep into the lore and the medicine of hawthorn at the end. It's really amazing. And I asked about that specifically because, one: I know that he has a really close relationship with it, and two: it is almost May and hawthorns bloom in May. And it's just the most joyful occasion for me every year when I see those little white flowers pop up all around me.

[0:15:03]

So let me tell you a little bit about this book: [Herbalist Visions and Visionaries](#), because it's so incredible. Like, of all the herb books I have, I've come to value this one so much because it's interviews with thirty, I think, thirty herbalists, and they're very deep, intense, complex, long interviews.

They were conducted by Jesse Wolf Hardin, who was the guest on episode 12 of this podcast called [Folk Herbalism and the Wild Self](#). Jesse and Kiva Rose, they are the force behind *Plant Healer* magazine, The Good Medicine Confluence, and they have a lot of books out. And this one — I don't know if I can say it's my favorite — but it might be my favorite.

So there are I think about ten, like, big time herbalists interviewed, you know, like, Matthew Wood and Susun Weed, and just people whose names everyone knows. And then the rest are like small-time newcomers who most people haven't heard of, including me. I was the last person to be interviewed for this book, and it was such an honor. And I'm just, yeah, honored is the word. I really appreciate, as we talked about in that episode, how Wolf and Kiva really try to bring new voices into the herbal community.

So I thought that I would read three of my favorite quotes from that book, and I specifically chose these. There are so many quotes I could read, like almost every single word in the book is just dripping with golden nuggets of herbal and life wisdom. But these three, specifically, kind of address

the burgeoning herbalist, someone new to herbalism, maybe someone who's unsure of their path or how they fit in, and I know that's a lot of people who listen to this show.

So, Kiva Rose says:

You don't need anyone else's permission or approval to offer the medicine that you are to the world.

Paul Bergner says:

When you are in your calling, the universe conspires to help you succeed. And when you are not, the universe conspires to make you miserable.

I'm sure some of you have experienced that. I sure have. I had someone write me yesterday, and say that because of the podcast, she quit the job that she hated and that was sucking her soul dry. And that's maybe the best thing I could hear, one of the best things I could hear.

Okay, and then this quote, I'm going to read it to you first, and then I'm gonna tell you who said it:

I'm one of the most insecure people I know. And whatever self-confidence I've gained over the years will instantly disappear at the mere mention of having to do a keynote speech or even teach a class. I just never let my own insecurities get in the way of service.

So that's Rosemary Gladstar, the so-called, officially designated, fairy godmother of herbalism. And if someone as revered and accomplished. and just amazing as Rosemary Gladstar is, can kind of feel that way, then we can all follow her lead and just never let our own insecurities get in the way of service. I really love that.

[0:18:31]

So I'm going to tell you about a Patreon offering that goes along with this episode. I'm so grateful to Sean for recording this amazing meditation for you.

As I spoke about in the last podcast, episode 15, called [Intuitive Whispers, Deep Memory, and Woven Fate](#), guided meditations are always just so powerful for me. I'm really not a visual or artistic person, and just have a hard time accessing some of those, like, deeper realms of consciousness on my own. But man, guided meditations are just every time like this direct speed train (*Amber laughs*) right into the depths of me and whatever is waiting there to come up. Whatever has guidance for me there will come up when I do a guided meditation, and I absolutely love Sean's. Like I spoke about earlier, he's just has this mesmerizing, hypnotic, deeply soothing voice and manner about him, and so it just kind of drops me right into that state of consciousness that I want to be when I do a meditation.

So this incredible guided meditation is meant to attune you to the echoes of your ancestors heartbeats using a method that Sean extrapolated from Stephen Buhner's work. Buhner was the guest on Episode 8 of this show. And probably, many of you are familiar with him and his work around the heart as an organ of perception. It's really incredible. If you're not, you can listen to that

episode. He's got a book. He's got many books, and he's really inspired a lot of herbalists with all of his work, but really, with this idea of the heart as an organ of perception.

So I just I was blown away when Sean first told me about this practice that he has of aligning and tuning into his ancestor's heartbeats, based on that work. And it's available for you to follow Sean's wonderful voice and drop into that space within yourself over at [patreon.com/medicine stories](https://patreon.com/medicinestories). This, as everything is available to patrons, supporters of this podcast at the two-dollar-a-month level. So there are higher tiers with different rewards, but I try to make all of the best stuff, all the stuff that is directly related to each episode of this podcast, available at the lowest level so that it's really accessible.

[0:21:21]

If you want to connect more around what we're doing here on this show, I have a Facebook group. It's just called Medicine Stories. You can search for it within Facebook. It's pretty active. There's over a thousand members now, and it's just full of people talking about all the things we talk about on this show. Sometimes people are asking for advice. Sometimes they're just sharing one of their own medicine stories, and it's a really nurturing and sweet space.

You can find me at mythicmedicine.love. I have my Mythic Medicinals line of herbal medicines there. We're pretty low on stuff right now, because these are all small batch, handcrafted, wildcrafted — either in the High Sierra, or here on our land — where we kind of have this experimental, half-wild, half-cultivated-stuff-in-between situation going on.

My husband, Owen, is really the plant grower around here, and so it's been amazing. When we moved here two years ago, we were able to buy the house, and it's on an acre. We discovered in that first year over 30 medicinal plants growing on our land, which it's especially incredible because the houses, the lots on either side of us, don't have nearly that many plants growing, and clearly someone lived here before who knew their plants and planted some things. The property was empty for eight years before we got here, though. So anything that survived was just growing wild— the violets and the roses and so much more.

So we are really moving more towards growing our own plants and herbs for medicine, rather than wildcrafting which is what I've been doing for the last 10, 11, 12 years for my own herbal medicines for me and my family, as issues around sustainability become more and more important in the herbalist community. This is something that Wolf asked me about in my interview for the *Herbalist Visions and Visionaries* book — which by the way, you can find at planthealer.org in their bookstore, or on Amazon, I got mine off Amazon because I wanted it right away (*Amber laughs*). It was so exciting to see it in print.

[0:23:46]

This is a really big conversation, and it's kind of coming to my attention especially since that last episode that I put out that was just me talking — or “Amber Rambling,” as I call it — about this flower essence that I made from a flower that grows on my land out here. I had mentioned that it was a rare flower, and I heard from a couple people who were like, “Why would you pick rare flowers? So

irresponsible of you to be talking about that." And I realized that the way I've been sharing about sustainable wildcrafting for years on Instagram and my website and other places, I haven't really talked about it on the podcast. So this is something that I'll probably focus on more in future episodes. But I kind of wanted to touch on it briefly.

Like, so first of all, "rare" doesn't equal "endangered." I did specifically look this up and check on many websites and, you know, try to make sure that I'm right about this before I say it but "rare" means that it grows in a small area. So, you know, plantain is not rare, dandelions are not rare; they will grow anywhere. But we live on this small section of serpentine soil, and there's a few of these in California, but not very many, and we just happen to live on one. We didn't even know when we bought the house.

And we were so thrilled over the course of the first year here, as we saw more and more plants, and we're like, "What's this? What's this?" and slowly realized that most of them are rare, and it's only because serpentine soil is rare. So they're not endangered, no one's harvesting them. There just aren't that many of them. And of course, if they suddenly became, like, the super popular herbs, then they would be endangered. So they're considered at-risk, not because they're endangered, just because they are rare, because there aren't that many patches of them in the world. So I wanted to make that very clear.

Also, the flower, I made the flower essence from, you know, I just picked one flower head, I picked it off my own land, my own property. There were plenty of them around, but I'm not going to make medicine for sale off of endangered plants ever, ever. You know, the medicines we make are from herbs that are abundant. They grow abundantly either here in the wild of the Sierra, where I live, or on our land, or in our path, wild gardens that we're experimenting with.

So how we're doing that is collecting seeds from the wild and then either planting it or broadcasting them over our land, seeing where they like to grow. And then over the years, we will tend to those patches of wild plants more, and keep them coming on our land. So, if you are all new to herbalism, at all interested in wildcrafting, please, please look up "sustainable wildcrafting," read some books, read some articles, listen to some podcasts. There's a ton of information out there.

This is a really big deal. You can't just be out there taking plants that might be endangered, and even if they aren't, they are a part of an ecosystem. They're a part of a bigger ecosystem, and they play a role in that ecosystem. So you need to understand these dynamics before you go into the wild with a consumerist or extractive mindset.

[0:27:11]

So the consumerist mindset is like "I get whatever I want" (*Amber laughs*). I can go on Amazon and buy this book because I want to see it in print, and it's here two days later, like this instant gratification society that we live in. It's so easy, too, to fall into that trap. It really is, and I'm sure I did this in my first years as an herbalist.

I can't really think of a specific moment but you know when you get really excited about a plant, and you might go out into the wild and see it, or maybe you're, like, in the wild, on a plant walk with an herbalist and a group of people, and you meet this plant. You just fall in love with it. Like, you've

never seen it before, or maybe you knew about it before, but this is your first time seeing it in the wild, and you just are, like, resonating with this plant. It's your herbal soulmate, and then you find out it's endangered, but like you love this plant, you know. You need it, you love it, you want to take it home, you want to pick it, you want to make medicine from it, you want it on your altar, you want to make a flower essence, a tincture or an oil, whatever.

And so this is the moment to stop and really think about this consumerist mindset that it's so easy to bring into the wild with us. It is absolutely not okay to pick an endangered plant. You can check out [United Plant Savers](#) to learn more about the status of different plants. If you're not sure, just leave it there, and then go home and check it out.

You know, you can really establish a very deep relationship with a plant just by sitting with it. You don't have to pick, you don't have to ingest it. You don't have to bring it into your body in any way. You can be next to it, attuning your heart space to it, and learn so much about it and really cultivate and deepen a relationship that way.

The extractive mindset refers to this, you know, kind of overarching, cultural way we have of looking at the wild, "How can I benefit from this? Like, what will this thing I can pull out of the earth do for me?" without thinking about reciprocity, without thinking about, again, a larger ecosystem dynamics.

So most herbalists talk about this, any herbalists worth their salt is talking about this. And one resource that I really like is [Wholehearted Wildcrafting](#) from Sophia Rose. I think you can find it at [gardenparty.love](#). Um, you can just look online or look for books. There's a ton of resources out there. Do your due diligence, do your part, and, you know, just have, you're going to have such a deeper connection with the plants and with the earth if this is your approach to herbal medicine, than if you're just pulling up anything that calls your name.

Okay, thank you, you indulge in that ramble (*Amber laughs*). It's really important. It's so important. And yeah, that's it! Let's get into this conversation with Sean Donahue. It's incredible. It's so moving. I'm so excited to share it with you right now. So here we go.

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

[Interview Begins]

[0:30:22]

Amber: Hello, Sean Donahue and welcome to the Medicine Stories podcast.

Sean: Hello, thank you so much for having me.

Amber: It's wonderful to be speaking with you. I've been following your work for a long time through *Plant Healer*, and the work of Kiva Rose and Jesse Wolf Harden, who was the 11th interview on this podcast, and it's lovely to be looking at you right now in your yurt. This is such a nice background for your Skype video.

Why don't you tell our listeners where you live and, like, what your what your day-to-day life looks like?

Sean: Yeah, I live in a little town called Trout Lake, Washington. We're at the foot of Pahto, which is the mountain the colonial cartographers called Mount Adams. And it's a really interesting place to be because if I go downhill, I'm in temperate rainforest, if I go uphill, I'm in high alpine. If I go over the mountain, I'm in the high desert. And here, where we are, it's a combination of elements of all of the above. It's a little town of about 700 people, and probably, substantially more elk than people. And I live in a yurt where I am, I guess, literally the witch in the hut at the edge of the village (*Sean laughs*).

And so life, from day to day, my morning always begins with my magical practice of invoking the elements to bless all the worlds, working on releasing complexes held within me of guilt and shame and fear, and bringing my threefold self that we work with in the Feri tradition — human and wild and divine — into alignment for the day, and then what follows will vary.

Every other day I go into town, down into Hood River, Oregon to hit the gym and get some groceries. Sometimes I go into Portland to teach classes to see clients. I do a fair amount of traveling, but many days I'm just here in the yurt writing or doing distance consultations, or teaching distance courses or reading and integrating. And more often than not, I take my 14 year old husky, walking by the water at sunset and check on what's happening in the woods right now.

Amber: Sounds pretty ideal to me.

Sean: Yeah.

[0:33:19]

Amber: I thought we could start to give listeners a sense of who you are, by you explaining to us this concept that I've only learned about through you and through Kiva in the last few years, and tell us what it means to be “neurodivergent.”

Sean: So, as a culture, we have a very narrowly defined band of ways in which people's perception and expression and experience and cognition of reality tend to be accepted. And really, this has been especially true in our culture over the past 500 years with the advent of capitalism and colonialism that really depend on a mindset in which we see bodies as machines for production and the world as raw material for that production of wealth.

And nobody is well-suited to that particular way of being. But for some of us, the particular neurobiological makeup that we're born with makes it extremely hard for us to assimilate to the dominant culture. And I feel like from an evolutionary standpoint, we would have had a very different life in traditional communities.

So my particular form of neurodivergence is autism, which involves, at a brain level, having neurons that proliferate really rapidly, forming new connections in nonlinear ways. And autism tends to have an association with a brain chemistry that has a higher level of serotonin, which is the compound that makes us form and make new connections between ideas in our world, that makes us create new neural pathways, and which opens up our sensory gating channels, that Steven Buhner speaks about, as filters through which we allow reality in. And we tend to have lower levels of MAO which is the compound that breaks down serotonin.

[0:35:51]

Sean: So serotonin is a tryptamine — just like LSD, or just like psilocybin, or just like dimethyltryptamine. And so in a lot of ways, autistic brain chemistry is kind of like not knowing quite when your brain will have a chemical profile resembling that of someone who has just ingested ayahuasca.

So ayahuasca is a brew that's made up of various plants, varying from region to region, from locality to locality within the rainforest, that contain a tryptamine and a compound that inhibits MAO, the enzyme that breaks down the tryptamine. So if you have a brain that naturally has a higher level of our main internal tryptamine, serotonin, and naturally has a lower level of MAO than other brains, then it will be a pharmacological situation similar to an internal ayahuasca brew, which tends to make us able to perceive patterns in the world that others miss, which tends to make us have a tendency towards complex, nonlinear thinking, which tends to make us be really good at feeling into all of the complexities of a situation, but really bad at knowing the social rules for navigating those complexities.

And so, that makes it easier for us to do things like look at broad patterns across human history, or read patterns in the clouds, or talk with plants, in many cases, but makes it much harder for us to do things like go to the bank and deposit a check, or, you know, we're recording this right around tax day, try imagine doing your taxes without knowing whether or not you're gonna have a sudden onset of ayahuasca in your brain. Some of these things that are very simple for others become challenging for us in the same way, some things that are very challenging for others are very simple for us.

And so my sense is that in a traditional culture, a lot of us would have been the ones at the edge of the village who mediated interactions with the other-than-human world on behalf of the rest of the community, and often would have less human contact and less human interaction, in order to not always be overwhelmed by the sensation and emotion of human actions.

[0:38:57]

Sean: In our contemporary culture, though, where everything is focused on structure and outward production, most of the time we end up being labeled as thinking and seeing and feeling and moving in the “wrong ways,” unless our particular interests and gifts happened to be exploitable.

So for example, if you're really good at recognizing what is out of sync with the flow in thousands of lines of computer code, then somebody can make money off of your skill, and so you will be valued, somewhat, in a company like Microsoft, for example, that has programs to hire more autistic employees, might put you in a sensory environment that would make it easy for you to work with code, and reward you for that ability — although not as much as they reward themselves for using that ability.

But if your gift is more for looking at broad patterns in history, or understanding the ways water flows, or talking with plants, then that may not be valued quite in the same way by the dominant culture nearby. In fact, you might end up having a pretty marginalized experience — and especially in a culture where we tend to really discourage variation beyond very narrow norms. And those very narrow norms, which we call “neurotypicality,” probably don't really reflect anybody's most comfortable “state of being,” but are tolerable for some, totally destructive for others, and completely impossible for some.

[0:41:05]

Sean: So a lot of times when people will talk about autistic people, they'll tend to want to talk about us in terms of hierarchies of functioning. And I always say, if we start talking about function, we need to ask the question: so what is the function of a human being?

And our culture has the implicit answer that the function of a human being is to be involved in the creation of wealth, whether directly as a participant in the wage economy, or the investment economy, or whether as the unpaid labor that makes others labor possible. And if you don't tend to fit into those modes very easily, then you will be defined as not functioning well as a human being.

However, a lot of other cultures have completely different stories about what the purpose of a human being is. Some cultures say our job is to continually sing the world into existence. Some cultures say our purpose is to perceive beauty. Some cultures say our purpose is to be a part of the universe, come into unique consciousness in an embodied way for this particular time. And from all of those perspectives, many of the very same things that would make us define somebody as low-functioning, like the tendency to lie on the ground, staring at clouds for hours, might be defined as the height of functioning. So we create and pose a very, very difficult question, a very difficult category for the culture. And so there is a whole lot of drive to try to eliminate our existence.

At the very same time that people will watch shows on Netflix, where the mutants with the unusual ways of seeing things are the heroes will have the only way to help us find our way out at the maes, they will be giving money to organizations, like Autism Speaks, that try, that exists for the purpose of trying to make it so there are fewer people like me living in the world. So it's an interesting paradox.

[0:43:43]

Sean: I also feel like, in a lot of ways, it's similar to variations in sexuality and variations in gender.

So probably, there is no such thing as somebody who perfectly fits one of the two binary gender roles our society is created, and probably there's no such thing as somebody who is only attracted to people who fit one of those particular gender roles in a really clear and rigid way. But for some people, maintaining that performance of fitting one of those categories is somewhat stressful, but manageable, whereas for others, it is really a fundamental denial of the core of their existence.

I think the same is true in terms of variations in perception, in sensation, and cognition and communication that we call "neurodiversity." Nobody is really neurotypical, but for some of us whose brains are naturally structured quite a bit differently than the majority of the culture, trying to perform those narrow permitted roles is next to impossible.

Amber: I think you're doing the world such a service by speaking about these issues, and I'm really grateful for how you've reframed this for me.

Sean: Thank you. Well, I feel really grateful for the people in my life who've helped me to do that, for the other autistic people who I'm in community with, who have been part of this constant process of talking with each other, and figuring out what it means to be us in the world, of what it means to be us in the world being ourselves.

And in particular, the work of Nick Walker, who is a scholar trained in psychology, really rooted in somatic psychology, and also an aikido teacher who writes a lot about neurodiversity, really turned my life around, and helped me stop seeing myself as just kind of sucking at life, and understand that the things that were challenges for me — and things are my greatest gifts — were deeply interrelated. And that, really, the perspective that we have as neurodivergent people, is necessary for the survival of the world. We need neurodiversity just like we need biodiversity.

There's a saying in Ireland, "God put the blight on the potatoes, but the British put the famine on the Irish." Because it was the enforced policy of creating these huge, potato mono crops in Ireland and not allowing people to grow or access other food crops that made people starve when that one crop got sick. Systems that lack diversity, lack resilience. And as a culture, we are crashing into the places where the very narrow bounds of perception that are, that we've been allowed, have driven us. And it's only through opening the way for other ways of seeing and other ways of being that we can hope to survive as a species.

[0:47:24]

Amber: And curious how this — what you were like as a child and what this whole journey has been like for you of coming into a greater understanding of who you are, and how the herbal world intersected with Sean Donahue, and how you became this eminent herbalist.

Sean: (*Sean laughs*) As a child, I was very confused, and very lost. From a very early age, I identified with stories of beings who found themselves in the wrong world and had to find their way home to the right one. And from a very, very young age, I was really conscious of the background level of pain and grief in this culture, which I think all of us to some degree have an awareness of, even if it's an unconscious awareness.

But I think all of us, to some degree, feel the suffering of other beings and feel how destructive this particular cultural path is, and feel the amount of unnatural death as that is behind this way of life. But many people have the capacity to compartmentalize and put that aside. And one thing about autistic brains is we're not especially good at compartmentalizing.

And so, you know, as a kid growing up in suburban Massachusetts in the eighties, I was really conscious of the threat of nuclear war and really conscious of the vanishing of endangered species and really conscious of global warming, all when I, you know, really starting when I was about four or five years old. And having that as a constant background for me made it very hard to relate to other kids.

I also had a lot of challenges around both fine and gross motor skills, some of which I'm beginning to feel like probably had more, have more to do with trauma than they do with, inherently, with my neurobiology. And that's one thing that's really hard to tell when we're talking about "what does it mean to be an autistic person in this world" is I don't know a single autistic adult who hasn't had a significant degree of relational trauma along the way. And a lot of the things that end up being most challenging for us, in terms of reaching points of sensory overwhelm, and in terms of feeling disconnection, also are symptoms of complex trauma. And so I feel like after the revolution, we'll find out what it really means to be autistic.

But I also grew up without anybody knowing quite what was going on with me. You know, it wasn't until the 1990s, until I was in high school, that Hans Asperger's work was translated from German, and really opened up the whole perspective of what autistic people were, and broadened the definition of that spectrum. Nobody, even among the neurologists and psychologists I was being sent to as a child had enough information to recognize what was going on for me. And so I didn't have a whole lot of framework for understanding what was different.

And I went from as a very young child, having this inherent sense of "the world is alive," of feeling other presences with me in the forest, of feeling a mountain is a living thing, to becoming increasingly dissociated, and increasingly focused only on my thinking, talking mind, because that was the one thing that I had that was somewhat valued as a gift by people around me. And so — and I also struggled with really severe asthma. And you know, breath is a thread that connects us with the world. And I think a lot of that had to do with ambivalence about being a body in this world, and really severe depression pretty much from the age of three onward.

[0:52:27]

Sean: When I reached college, my first experience with psilocybin gave me a little bit of an intuitive sense of what was going on, even though I didn't have a framework for it, where I understood that my consciousness on psilocybin was as different from my ordinary consciousness, was as different

from my ordinary consciousness as my ordinary consciousness was from somebody else's ordinary consciousness. But somebody else on psilocybin was walking through the world in a way similar to the way I did every day. And then when I was on psilocybin, I was doing so more so, and actually felt a little bit more fluid and fluent in the world. But I still, I also really began to reawaken my sense of connection with the world to a degree where I felt the entire mind of the forest spread out beneath and around me, and understood there to be a conversation happening between everything beneath my feet, though I didn't yet know about such things as mycorrhizal networks.

But I also, at that point, sort of threw myself into the full-time, nonviolent, revolution business, and really viewed my body as just something to put in the way of destruction, and my life as just something to be lived in resistance to the system. And I knew everything I was saying no to — and nothing I was saying yes to — and reached a point where everything for me was really collapsing.

My health was horrible, and I had grown up with the story that our family just had bad genes and just had bad health, and so it didn't really matter what we did. But my health was horrible. I was a junk food vegetarian. And because I was working nonprofit jobs, where I didn't have a lot of money and where I would work strange hours, what I ended up eating mostly come from convenience stores. And exercise was that thing that sadistic football coaches had yelled at me about in gym class growing up, and other people's bodies were a blessing, but mine was a curse from my perspective.

[0:55:19]

Sean: And I was at a point in my life where nothing was making sense. And so I leapt at the next opportunity to step outside my framework of reality, and ended up finding myself in Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, in the wake of the military and the police brutally crushing an uprising there that began with a teacher strike.

And while I was there, I struck by several things: one was that I was coming from this position of tremendous relative power and privilege, but I was involved in trying to make very minute changes to things like the rules that the state of Maine used in purchasing uniforms, so we might have an influence on sweatshop conditions. And here are people who had next to nothing but carved out entirely new reality for themselves for a period of six months while standing up against this overwhelming force.

The second piece that I found there was the profound connection people there had with their ancestors, and with the land, and with the corn. And I understood that to be, at a deep level, to be what was missing from my life. But I also understood that I had made a terrible mistake by trying to find that in other people's lives.

And so I came back from there with my heart really broken wide open, and did what every easily overwhelmed introvert should do in that situation and went to a dinner party in Boston. (*both laugh*) And after many excruciating conversations with people who vaguely knew I had been somewhere, and were asking how my vacation was, I found somebody who felt really different. And I noticed she was wearing a white crescent moon necklace around her neck. And she told me that she was an herbalist and that necklace had been given to her by her teacher, Rosemary Gladstar. And we began to speak and this woman, Misha Schuler, began telling me about how she was learning to listen

deeply to the plants and about the ways in which she was working with women around fertility and contraception, to help reclaim control in connection with our own bodies. And suddenly, that was something that struck me as far more radical than any blockade of a weapons plant that I'd ever been part of; it was something that really went at the core logic of the culture.

[0:58:04]

Sean: I left that night, and several weeks later, she called me up, New Year's Eve, and I had gotten really, really sick. Growing up asthmatic, my lungs were my vulnerable place, carrying all the grief of so many people, that I didn't know how to process. I developed bronchitis that was turning into pneumonia.

And after we talked for a while, she hung up, and then she called back and she said, "There's a plant who wants to help you. She has a deep resinous root and a bright yellow flower, and she pulls up what's held deeply in your lungs. And her name is Elecampane." And I went that afternoon and bought my first ounce of elecampane tincture. And when I took the first few drops, I felt something unraveling in my body, where I began to understand that the idea that my body was broken was a lie, and that actually my body knew how to heal.

That afternoon, I went out walking in the forest with my dog in the deep snow. And even though I was sick, I was breathing more deeply than I ever had before and breathing in the scent of spruce and pine. I felt myself open to the world in a new way. And soon that began to make its way into my wanting to move my body as I had access to my breath. I discovered that while I was never going to be a marathon runner, my body actually liked and was good at lifting heavy things, and so weightlifting became part of my life.

And as the plants began to become more and more real entities to me my relationship to food started shifting, and I became irresistibly drawn to salmon at the supermarket one day (*Sean laughs*), and then began integrating local meat into my diet, because the distinction between animal consciousness and plant consciousness and human consciousness no longer seemed quite as strong a distinction. And so my body began shifting in its experience.

And then finally, I found myself that spring in the wake of simultaneously having a breakup, and having the funding ran out for my job, and not knowing what I was going to do next, going into the forest and praying to get lost. And I started following all the places in the woods where the Usnea lichen had fallen on the ground, and going deeper and deeper into the forest until, on familiar trails, I was lost.

And as I stood in the middle of a grove of trees and closed my eyes then I felt the usnea working its way through the tendrils of my heart, working its tendrils through through the cracks in my heart, and making me anew and telling me that I could carry its medicine with me, and that a part of its medicine for me was accepting breath as a thread connecting me to the world, and accepting and embracing my own power; that I had spent a lifetime rejecting my power, because I rejected the way that our culture treated power. But in doing that, I was giving all of my power away to the very culture I was trying to dismantle.

[1:01:49]

Sean: So that summer, I lived on a friend's land in Maine and spent my days wandering the forest and the fields, listening to the plants, and my nights reading. Then I went back for one more attempt to work in the nonprofit world in Boston, where I was working with families who had loved ones in the military, and were opposed to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and having them tell the stories of their suffering. And what I discovered, over time, was that having people repeat their stories of suffering for news cameras, over and over again, actually was making people sicker. And that every time I talked with someone trying to prepare them for an interview, the plants would want to come in and help.

And so I tried to get more herbal education. I first applied for the beginning program at herb school, and they told me I knew too much. So I applied for the intermediate program, and nobody else applied. And I applied for the... and so they invited me to sit in their practitioner circle and hear them talk about cases, while I also began seeing my first few clients.

After a while, everything really began breaking open for me again. So I went into the forest, went into the White Mountains in New Hampshire, and with good friends supporting me, I fasted for four days alone. And on the third day of the fast the Usnea came to me again, and told me that I needed to listen to the call of the plants and deepen my work with healing. And I said, "But how can I do that when there's so much suffering? How can I attend to one person at a time?"

And the Usnea said, "Listen, I grow in the wounded places on the tree, producing medicine that heals that tree's body, and the wound is where the healing comes. Find the wounds, bring the healing that comes, and then each heart will become the alchemical alembic that produces the medicine that can transform the culture. Every wound on every heart you come across is a trace of the violence of this culture. Every scar on every body is a trace of the violence of this culture. Go tend to those places within people and the medicine will arise."

So I quit my job, moved to Maine, I thought I was gonna be moving into a yurt and helping one family out if they had any health care problems. I'd only ever seen three clients before, but suddenly I found myself living in a moldy, old van and running a free clinic at weekly potlucks in a friend's barn and running first-aid operations at a festival; sort of thrown into the deep end with the plants as the only medicine available. And I thought I had made a terrible mistake. And then I went to hear.. I went to spend the weekend with Stephen Buhner who was teaching in Vermont. Some friends had given me money to go study with him for a weekend.

And as he began, he began reciting that passage, *The Secret Teachings of Plants* that so many of us have fallen in love with, about how when we eat the wild, it begins to transform us. But then he goes on to talk about how our hair grows long and ragged, and I was putting my hands on my hair, and then the suit of clothes we wore no longer suits us, that our speech becomes strange and poetic. And then I realized, "Oh, wait a second, this wasn't a metaphor. You bastard, I ate the wild!" (*Sean laughs*) And he recognized what was going on and pulled me aside and let me know I was in exactly the right place and doing the right thing, that if I trusted this calling that I would be deeply supported, and that became true.

A short while later, I met Marquis Flint, who became a mentor and helped me fill in some of the holes in my education. And the rest is a rambling winding story of its own. But that's how I came from being the lonely child wandering on the playground, worried about nuclear weapons to be the herbalists in the hut at the edge of the village.

[1:06:48]

Sean: Oh, and the other interesting thing in that process was coming into relationship with embodiment, which happened in part to the ways that the plants worked with me, bringing me more deeply into my body. But also, with my magical work, working in a tradition that says we need to embrace the fullness of who we are: the wild part of us that is animal, and the divine part of us that is infinite and part of the co-creation of everything, alongside the human part of us. And so coming into a place of more deeply embodied presence, through work with magic, through work with plants, through the wonderful support of some amazing somatic counselors, and coming to find deep joy in embodiment, and discovering the things that I thought were inherently unavailable to me were completely available to me once I showed up here fully.

So, you know, they always say you don't, nobody forgets how to ride a bike. Well, I forgot how to ride a bike because when I was a kid, I was so disembodied, that rather than learning it as a felt sense of muscle movements, I learned it as a remembered series of steps. And so when I tried to ride a bike as an adult I couldn't. And I took that for a while as, "Well, I just have this inherent disconnection from physical reality." But I have lately begun boxing lessons with a personal trainer. And as I've been engaging that new form of movement, I've discovered that, oh, actually, when I bring my awareness into my feet on the ground, I have this whole different relationship with my location in the world and with how my body moves and experiences things; that I can even close my eyes and still hit a punching bag. It's kind of like Jedi training in some ways (*Sean laughs*).

But in coming to that and discovering the ways in which coming into embodiment is also the way that we find our ways out of the webs of the repeated thoughts and feelings and sensations of trauma, I have found a deeper, deeper calling to helping other people discover that possibility as well.

Amber: Yeah, I appreciate that. I am also on a path of deeper embodiment and getting out of my freakin' head. I feel like that's one of the main things that this podcast has done for me, actually. Each guest somehow gives me this piece that helps me step more and more deeply into my body. I know you call yourself a somatic therapist, and I've always gleaned little gems from your work.

[1:10:02]

Amber: Your elecampane story reminds me of a quote of yours. This is something I've heard you say that I had written down for today. And I just want to speak it, because it sort of puts that story in a bigger context for our listeners. You say that, "Some of the most profound healing occurs in the way plant medicines can shift our experience of our bodies and our sense of ourselves in relation to the world around us." That's something I hear a lot of herbalists say, you know, especially with the "take

this for that" approach to herbal medicine, "Oh, take this elecampane for your lungs." But what that did to you was really changed the way that you experienced being in your body and experienced breath.

Sean: Yeah. So it's interesting, there are a lot of people who will proclaim skepticism about the capacity of a single drop of Rose tincture to transform someone's experience. I also find a lot of those people deny that when they want to introduce a class of students to Rose, will have them taste a drop of Rose tincture or a sip of rose tea, and observe everybody have this experience that can't really be pharmacologically explained. And this will happen, if you don't tell the person what the plant is, you will still have people in the room have similar experiences that reflect some of the same core qualities we encounter with the plant, and some experiences that are also different, that reflect the differences in each person's felt sense of reality. But those changes happen long before any molecules would have a chance to make it into the bloodstream from an oral dose. They happen within seconds. The dosage is far lower than we understand pharmacological actions to occur.

And so my sense is what's happening in these instances is that we are undergoing somatic shifts, shifts in what it feels like to be embodied in this moment, that are the result of our sensory encounter with that plant, which does, to some extent, include this chemistry because each of its molecules has a unique electromagnetic signature, which will create a corresponding fluctuation in the electromagnetic field of our heart, which will then create, as Steven buehner explains to us, a change in our emotional, felt sense of presence, at the same time the scent and the taste and the feel of the plant coming into our presence bring shifts in what it feels like to be us embodied in this moment, and all bring this back to this interesting question about what are we doing when we are engaging in healing and transformation.

So if we're working from the framework of the mechanistic culture, we have the idea that a sick or injured body, or sick or injured mind, is broken in a predictable way. And we can do predictable things to fix the broken pieces, or reroute the broken processes, and then get things operating the way we expect them to. But if we are working instead, from the understanding that is the oldest understanding in the world, that our bodies are alive, and so is the world — or the newest understandings, which are that our bodies are complex, self-regulating systems, nested within complex self regulating systems — then we can begin to understand that oh, what systems theory tells us is complex systems will make profound changes in the result of subtle inputs of information that will change the performance of the whole.

And so if we look at our bodies, everything that's happening in our bodies in any given moment, as a result of the signals being carried by our primary signaling systems — our nervous system that is carrying sensation and emotion and information about it, our endocrine system which is carrying some elements of feeling in the watery parts of our body that it flows, but which is also signaling organs to take particular actions in our immune response, which is what is the healthy part of this ecology and what is not? What needs to be eliminated? What needs to be protected? And all of those, it turns out, operate as one fluid, complex multi-valence signaling system. And what the signals are based on is on our perception of what's happening in this particular moment.

And if we are calm and embodied, then we will respond in fluid ways that are coherent with our experience, but if we are stressed or are living with trauma, our bodies will respond in ways that are often out of sync with what's going on and get stuck in a particular response. So I find that changing

the information coming into the body, through very subtle signals can change that whole operation and bring really profound healing that then allows the organism itself to come back into coherence.

[1:16:03]

Sean: Additionally, when we think about it, our nervous systems and endocrine systems didn't evolve in isolation. The plants we interact with have so many compounds that are similar to our neurotransmitters and similar to our hormones, that when we come into our bodies, we recognize as important carriers of information. And even if we get to sub-particle level, the electromagnetic impression they make is one that gives us information about just a different possibility of how to show up embodied in the world in this moment.

And for all of our oldest ancestors, this would have been a constant biochemical conversation with the world as they sweated, as they urinated, as they breathed. Molecules from within their bodies would go out into the world, and plants would breathe them in and change their chemistry, subtly, in ways that are balanced, that which would then be taken in by our bodies in turn, which would put out different chemicals and returned. There'll be this constant conversation.

We co-evolved with the signaling molecules of plants and fungi, being present in every breath and every sip of water, in every bite of food, and every moment that we brushed against the plant. Removed from that place, we have to find ways to recreate that. And one great way is bringing people into the forest, but we can't always bring everyone into the forest all the time. So I find that with bringing in very small amounts of that plant and plant medicine that will bring that subtle sense to the electromagnetic impression, we can bring those kinds of subtle inputs of the forest or the meadow or the desert to the person — wherever they are, in whatever moment they are.

Amber: This is what you call drop doses.

Sean: Yes, which, for me, developed very much in following the work of my friend and mentor, Matthew Wood, who, in turn, drew this method from the eclectic physicians.

[01:18:18]

Amber: So you have this very rich relationship with your ancestry. And there's so many threads to follow here, and I'm open to your answer going wherever it goes. But I just, yeah, I want to hear more about your ancestral connections, the meaning of the name "Donohue," what you know about the people you're descended from, and about the trip you took to visit your ancestral homeland of Ireland for the first time last year.

Sean: So Donahue is an anglicization of "Donnchadh," which means "sons of the brown warrior." And my dad's people trace their history back in the area around Killarney, in County Kerry in the west of Ireland, as far back as memory goes and further back.

So the people who we call, who speak Gaelic, who some call Celts — although, that's a word that can cause all kinds of anthropological fights these days. So I will say the Gaelic-speaking peoples of Ireland and Scotland— had came out of the Galatian region of Spain. It was around between 1700 BC, and it was really the sons of one chieftain, sailing on one boat. And our lineage dates back to those people who, in turn, were descended from people who originated in the valleys between India and China, and then migrated through Siberia and through the Middle East, into Spain, then sailing up to Ireland and Scotland, probably having picked up some North African influence along the way. And so the “brown” is probably a reference to some of the North African and Middle Eastern genetics that would have been carried by those people. Yet, of course, far enough back we all go to the same of the same valleys in, in East Africa.

But there, when those people arrived in Ireland, there were already several groups of people. And among those were the people of Donogh, who were the children of Donogh, who had, we are told, spoken a language that carried the sound of water flowing over stone, and wind flowing through trees, and who could call the storm and call the sun; that knew the ways of plants, and whose music was otherworldly, and whose technologies appeared as magic to those who came from far away and encountered them for the first time.

[1:21:50]

Sean: In my magical lineage, we speak of these people, and they are the ones who, in English, are often called “fairies.” And speaking of their way of being, my teacher’s teacher’s teacher, Francesca de Grande has said two things: she said, “It’s a way that is kinder and less civilized, and that is marked by one law and one law only: Love is repaid with love. Betrayal is repaid with avalanche.”

And so among those first Galatians arriving in Ireland, there were only men, but they all ended up bearing children by women from among the people who were there before. So I trace my lineage to both groups of people. So the story which we can understand on many, many levels, about what happened to those people is that after time, the way of the invaders became too brutal and harsh for them. And Manannán mac Lir, Son of the Sea God, gathered his people at the mouth of the Boyne, and they disappeared beneath the waters, beneath the hollow hills to become the Donnchadcha, the people of the mounds.

Now those mounds that they were the people of, are the ancient ceremonial mounds of the ancient burial mounds of the indigenous Neolithic peoples of Ireland. So there's a sense in which this is the speaking of the ways in which older ways of knowing were driven underground. And there also is a very real presence that exists around those hollow hills of people whose way of being was driven out of the world, but whose way of being is fundamental to the rightness of the world. And for a long time in Ireland, those places have been guarded and protected and respected. And even during the centuries of British occupation, people still maintained their respect for those places.

Now my people came from the West. If you may have heard the expression “beyond the pale” to describe something which is considered culturally unacceptable. Well, the Pale was actually a literal wall that British mercenaries built to try to separate the more easily subdued east of Ireland from the Wild West, where, up until the time of my great grandparents and, in summary, is the region still today where Irish remains the primary language. My great grandmother would have grown up

surrounded by English first among the occupying soldiers and then among the people in Massachusetts, but she spoke only Irish until the day of her death.

My great grandfather came over at the age of 21 with a price on his head, having been part of a generation that felt that to take the risk of taking up arms against the invaders was better than to starve and better than to have your culture stripped away. And he came from people who have a long history of resistance. So Killarney, where our clan settled, which means our "church of the Blackthorn fruit — "kill-" is church, and "-arney" is the fruit of the black thorn — exists on these beautiful lakes. And when the first Viking and the northern invaders began to come, Irish chieftains began building castles, and there was a castle of ours there that I visited. And the last chieftain of ours to rule that castle was one of the last openly pagan chieftains in the west of Ireland.

And Beltane, the festival of ecstasy that's coming up soon, he called together everybody in this realm, and spoke all the truths that they could not bear to hear spoken, and then walked out onto the lake and disappeared, where it said that every seven years at Beltane, on Beltane at dawn, he rises up on a white horse, with a retinue of the faerie court behind him to walk his lands again.

[1:27:04]

Sean: So I had some interesting interactions with that story. Early in my training and the fairy tradition, we were instructed to make relationships with our ancestors by learning at least enough of an ancestral language to be able to make a prayer calling on our ancestors. And when I did, my Irish ancestors began coming in very, very strongly.

During that time, someone very close to me, a dear beloved, had a dream, where she saw me standing at a banquet, speaking all the truth nobody could bear to hear, and she was standing behind me while I stood in front of people just letting the truth roll and letting the anger come flying toward me. And she had never heard that story of my ancestor. And when I told her, when she told me the dream, and I told her that story, we both had chills go up our spines.

All the more so for me, when I showed up at the castle, and first of all, I was mistaken by the number of tourists as part of the tour. And secondly, when I stood in that same banquet hall I remembered he had looked out at the way he remembered walking out through that window onto that lake. So there is this sense of a memory that lives in me, whether it's that I lived in another body in the same lineage and was that person, or whether it's that that person's memory was passed down to me, genetically, or whether there is a difference between the two. It's hard to say.

We know so much about, we're learning so much about DNA and the genetic inheritance of trauma. But I believe if we inherit trauma, we also inherit memories of resilience and memories of resistance and memories of wholeness. And so following Steven Peters work of following heartbeats backward through history, I've done a lot of work with tapping in with those last well ancestors in my lineage. And I later would learn of the work of Daniel for who works with connecting people with their last healthy ancestors, to heal everything that's come in the time between us.

And I find that there are ways in which when I taste plants that were connected with my ancestors, or when I hear the bodhran, the Irish frame drum, or when I hear the Irish language spoken, or

speaking some of the very few words of language that I have, something really awakens and comes alive in me that remembers a different way of being in the world. And when I finally had a chance to make it to Ireland last year, and walk into places where my ancestors walked, I felt that come in in a deeper way; that I felt welcomed by the land in a way that I never felt welcomed before. And I felt, — excuse me (*Sean coughs*) — a way of being that my ancestors had that was born of the forms of that land really come alive for me, and in me and through me in a way I didn't know possible.

[1:30:40]

Sean: So, one thing that happened while I was there, well, a couple of things that happened. One of the first things that happened was that my first tears came when I saw the bilingual road signs. I didn't expect that. But the Irish language was outlawed for centuries. And in fact, I learned a lot about my Irish history from Indigenous people in British Columbia, who were recent survivors of the what's euphemistically called the "residential school system" there, where until 1996 Indigenous children were kidnapped from their families, and taken to schools where they were forced to speak of the English and had their culture stripped away. It's still happening to a large extent. It's just happening now through the foster care system instead of through one single institution. But they told me that the British had developed that system first in Ireland, and then came to and then brought it to Canada, because they found stripping people of a language was an important way of disconnecting them from the land.

And when I learned about that, and then I later learned that until 1600 Ireland was 80% covered with forest, and it was the British drive to colonize Ireland, to cut down the forest to have timber to make slave ships and merchant ships for the invasion of the Americas, that caused that forest to be destroyed, I began to understand in a different way that I was descended from colonized people as well. But when I saw the road signs written in both languages, I came to understand in a way that I hadn't understood before what North American Indigenous friends have told me about the experience of beginning to recover their language. So that brought me to tears immediately.

A short while after being taken to visit a well of Saint Brigid, Goddess of the three fires, and also to St. Bridget— who, the two, there's no real separation between the two in the Irish understanding of the world, and which where people have been bringing offerings for thousands of years. And that morning, I learned for the first time about the history of the destruction of the Irish forest while I was also getting news that the forests in the Columbia River Gorge were on fire back home. And so I went to the well with a really heavy heart that day.

[1:33:50]

Sean: And the wells in Ireland are — so is the wild spring water — so much the heart of tradition. So much so that the late Irish philosopher John Moriarty said that in an Irish animist culture the reason for learning to speak was so that we can say that our river has its source in an otherworld well, and so everything we say about the stars and the hills might be a way of saying the hazel spreads this branches over the river over the well in the other world, where the river has its source. So water, sacred waters flowing from the otherworld are a huge part of Irish tradition connecting people to the living world.

And these wells that are this wild spring water that's been underground for hundreds of years that bubbles up to the surface filtering through peat, that is the fossilized remains of forests and bogs and meadows that lived there before and carrying some of their medicine, and filters up to the surface. And people go there and bring prayers for healing. And they go out to the hawthorn tree that grows behind the well, they tie their prayers there.

So I was there that day with a really big prayer. And I was wearing around my neck a necklace made from the tip of the antler of a stag from the land where I live, that someone I love had given me the first day I moved here. And while I was at that tree praying, praying for the healing of the forest, I felt Bridget's voice calling to me and telling me to leave that necklace. And I pretended not to hear, and I tried to walk away. And then I turned back, I heard the voice again, and then finally, I heard the voice a third time, and I took the necklace off and I hung it from the tree, and I just heard the reply, "Big prayers require big offerings." And I walked down the bottom of the hill and didn't look back, and I was praying then also to know a different way of walking in the world that could bring healing.

[1:36:14]

Sean: So a week later, I was out walking in the forest around the castle where my ancestors had lived, and I walked into an area where the forest was beginning to thin and move towards meadows. And I went and I stood underneath an old oak, and I prayed to be shown a different way of walking in the world and particularly, a different way of walking in the world as a man.

And walking off the road, all of a sudden, this huge stag, a red deer stag, the red deer elk. This is the last wild population of red deer in Ireland, is in that forest. There are reintroduced populations elsewhere. And his antlers were as wide as my arm span. And he looked at me for a moment, as though he was going to charge me, and then he turned and cantered confidently across the field, trying to lead me away. And then when I didn't follow, he circled the herd three times. And when he saw that I wasn't gonna pose a threat, he went and sat in great repose beneath a lone tree in the middle of the meadow, until a doe came toward him and bent her haunches in his direction. And he stood up, and he kicked at the ground, and he rutted at the ground with his antlers, and he let out a bugle. And he chased her for a short time, but it was still not quite mating season, so she went off and he went off and he went back into his repose.

And I realized at that moment that, you know, the deer is associated with the chieftain and the King in the Irish tradition. I used to think that people were going and looking for the most magnificent creature to use as the symbol for their leaders, but I understood that no, actually, the idea within Irish culture of the King or the chieftain, as the one who was wedded to the land and gives their life for the people, was the idea that I learned from watching the way that the stag of the red deer herd and cared for the herd; in watching the ritual in which the red deer adorn themselves with branches and make leafy crowns in autumn, and battle each other ritually for who will be the one who watches over the herd for the next year. And while I looked at that, it modeled their culture, their way of living. After that, I understood something very different in my body. Then when I came back here, I didn't quite know what to do with this new sense of being and whether I could carry that on this land.

And one September day, I was out walking in the woods at dusk, and I began singing the old marching song of the Irish Volunteers of the Republican brotherhood who were part of the great uprising of 1916 (*Sean sings*):

Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile

Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile

Óró, sé do bheatha bhaile

Anois ar theacht an tsamhraidh.

"Hail! We welcome you home, now that summer is coming," it was a song summoning the dead pirate queen, Gráinne Mhaol, to bring ghost warriors to free the land. But as I sang the song, I heard an elk bugle in the distance and reply, and his voice was the same as the stag of the red deer herd. And I understood something about ways of being in the body, and ways of being in a body on the land that are known to all who will listen deeply enough, but which, for those of us who have been separated from those ways of knowing, can often be best accessed through ancestral language and ancestral music and ancestral places.

Amber: Sean (*Amber laughs*), those are such incredible stories! Wow, I'm speechless (*Amber laughs*). Okay, let me shake myself out of my dreamstate now.

[1:40:55]

Amber: To begin to conclude, let's weave this together: the herbalism and your ancestry, and we are approaching Beltane. It's almost May, and the hawthorns are sure going to be blooming.

You have written that "The thorn and the blossom of the hawthorn are equally the emblems of my art and my craft." And I know you have such a deep, embodied relationship with this plant. And so, perhaps you could just bless us with some of your hawthorn magic and medicine.

Sean: Hawthorn is a really, really interesting tree. So it is thorny and formidable. And in Ireland the lone hawthorn growing atop a mountain in the middle of a field is called strength. The strength is understood to be sacred to Donnchadh, for the people of the mounds, and never to be disturbed.

And it's interesting, you know, in this culture, we have a lot of emphasis on belief. Belief is a fairly modern concept that comes about with religions that demand that you think a particular way. But wherever you encounter people who have elements of older culture alive, there's a different relationship with belief.

Like, if you talk with people in the Irish countryside, if they believe in donnchadh, if they believe in the curse who will fall on somebody who hurts a hawthorn, more likely than not somebody might say no. But if you go to cut that hawthorn, everybody will know the story of their grandfather's cousin who cut the hawthorn and woke up with the feeling of thorns in his bed every day for the rest of his life, or the fellow up the road who cut the hawthorn and then saw it bleed. And so, whether or not people believe, they abide by the rules of that other world; those other rules being love is repaid

with love and betrayal with avalanche. And the biggest betrayal we can play, that we can engage into the other world is to defile what's sacred to it.

Hawthorn, being the guardian of the gate atop the hollow hills, the thorns will stop those who come marauding in,- trying to take. But if you put yourself down beneath the hawthorn when it's in bloom and breathe in its scent, something very different will happen for you.

[1:43:42]

Sean: So it's interesting the shift in the scent of the hawthorn in blossom over the course of the season. So when the hawthorn blossom first blooms, it smells like sex. And when the hawthorn blossoms are getting old, they began to smell like rotting bodies — and that's not a mistake.

There is a compound in hawthorn flower, I believe it's in hawthorn flower, called trimethylamine which is contained in human sexual fluids and which is also contained in and also released by our bodies when they die and decay. So there's this deep mystery embedded in the hawthorn flower of sex and of death. And so, early in the season there are all these other aromatic compounds that bring us into a relaxed open place. And then that smell of sexual fluids brings us into an aroused place, and hence, the celebration of the festival of ecstasy at this time.

And I deliberately say "ecstasy" and not "fertility" because the idea of fertility and of sex being tied to biological reproduction is very much a concept of this culture that would have been alien to my ancestors who recognize many different ways of people coming together ecstatically. And my feeling is that the ecstasy that we all raise when we engage erotically and authentically, opens the way for new things to enter into the world, whether those things happen to be human children or not. And I even have this deep felt-sense of our ancestors who would celebrate with great ecstatic rituals together, the energy raised by everybody would be part of opening the gate that allowed the spirits who are coming into the world to be born in the uteruses of some to come through. There would have been a more collective sense of "we're opening the gate to bring the old ones back in in new bodies."

And then, as the hawthorn decays and those other aromatic compounds begin to fall away, it begins to smell more rotten and remind us of death. But you know, sex and death are both places where, when we engage them fully, our ego breaks down and our persona breaks down on the boundaries of self break down. The French call orgasm, *le petit mort*, for good reason, because it is that momentary ego death that comes in any true, wild, ecstatic connection, whether it be one we classify as sexual in our culture or not.

And Beltane exists on the Wheel of the Year, opposite of Samhain, which is the blood harvest, the culling of the herds, and the time when the ancestors and the dead are most present. And my forerunner in my lineage, Cora Anderson, who grew up the child of an Irish herbalist in southern Alabama — or Northern Alabama, rather — said that, "You must never doubt that there was only one gate; that the gate that open at Samhain and at Beltane are one of the same. The gate of death and the gate of sex are one gate."

So sex and death are kind of the currencies and currents that ecology function by. We bring things into our ecological communities, either through ecstatic expression or through surrendering down into rotting back into the soil. So my path is fundamentally a path about helping people come into that deeper embodiment where they can have relation to their own ecstasy, and relation to their own death that allows them to be really present in the world, as part of the world that's alive. And in a culture that seeks to prevent us from entering those places, the thorn is necessary in order to carve out and protect those spaces.

Amber: Wow, thank you for expanding. This is one of the things I appreciate so much about you is you're always bringing the mythic elements into your plant teachings. And I think for me, and for so many others, that really just deepens the root of knowledge inside of us to have the bigger story, not just the plant constituents, not just the alkaloids.

Thank you. I'm so glad I asked that question.

Sean: Thank you.

[1:48:59]

Amber: And yeah, as we tie up, please tell people where they can find you, what offerings you have, if you have any events or anything coming up.

Sean: Yeah, so a couple of things coming up:

One is I will be very excited to see you and a lot of the rest of our beloved community at the Good Medicine Confluence coming up in Colorado in May, which is always a highlight of my year, the coming back together of this gorgeous, authentic, comergent community of people, engaging plants in living ways to transform ourselves and our culture.

I am also. I just finished a beautiful year of co-teaching with my friend Matthew Wood at the Portland School of Herbal Wisdom. He's moving on from that school to some independent projects, and I will be launching a new program or we will be launching a new program this fall at the Portland School of Herbal Medicine, somatic herbalist practitioner training, where we will be welcoming people who already have some experience of plant medicine, some relationship with some plants, and an understanding of medicine making, but who want to deepen their capacity to hold space for people, and to be part of engaging plants and people together for transformation, to learn some deeply intuitive, deeply embodied ways of connecting with plants and people, immersed in a curriculum where we treat the world and the body as fluidly alive.

We'll be having sessions for five days every other month from September to June, where people will delve in-depth in learning how to sit and feel with people and plants, where they'll have an opportunity to both observe and experience consultations being done in a way that really centers somatic experience and where we'll be bringing in three really amazing teachers.

Rae Swersey from North Carolina of Take Care Herbs, who will be bringing in insights about queer in herbalism, as well as insights about what it means to really deeply nourish and care for ourselves

as practitioners. Brad Stickley — brilliant, classical Chinese medicine practitioner in Portland, who will be teaching classical Chinese pulse diagnosis for Western practitioners. We'll have a good bit of Taoist cosmology and magic, no doubt, thrown in. And Kenneth Proefrock, who is a naturopath in Arizona, who has the unique capacity to bring together the physiological and the biochemical and the mystical, and who will be teaching about working with the fascia. So that will be a really beautiful opportunity to go in great depth into this kind of process of somatic herbalism.

For people who want a briefer taste first, I'll be teaching an Introduction to Somatic Herbalism, at Pacific Rim College in Victoria, BC the last weekend in May. And Thomas Easley recorded me teaching at the Eclectic School of Herbal Medicine in North Carolina and has some videos of my teaching on somatic herbalism, which I think really represents some of the best teaching I've done.

Two other things up, briefly. (*Sean laughs*) I realize I have a lot of things going on. Just briefly mention a few others: I do teach an online course called Wild Green Magic, where people receive our recordings and exercises twice a month to engage with, connecting with plants magically. It began at Beltane, but it is a self-paced course, and you can go to my website, seandonahueherbalist.com to get information about signing up for that course and beginning it.

I also do consultations over distance with people by phone or by Skype — there are details about that on my website — and in-person at a naturopathic practice in Beaverton, Oregon, one day a month. So people in my neck of the woods can come for consultations there. And finally, if you go to mountainsongexpeditions.com, you can find information about the community pilgrimage, my friend, Murphy Robinson, who is an amazing teacher of sacred hunting and sacred archery and a Priestess of the reclaiming tradition of witchcraft, and I will be co-leading to southern Galway in June. There are still a number of spaces available for people who might want to travel with us. So that's what I have coming up in a nutshell.

Amber: Wow, that all sounds amazing! Thank you so much. I can't wait to re-listen to this already (*Amber laughs*) and take more of it in, and yeah, to see you in just a few short weeks in Colorado.

Sean: Yeah, thank you so much for doing all you're doing to keep myth and medicine and ancestral connections alive for people.

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

[Closing]

[01:54:55]

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 a lot more at MythicMedicine.love.

While you're there, I invite you to click the black banner to take my quiz, "[Which Magical Herb is your Spirit Plant?](#)" 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 cool rewards there, like exclusive content, free access to my herbal e-book and online course, and the ability to chat with me.

I'm a crazy busy and overwhelmed mom and adding this project into my life has been a questionable move, but I'm also so excited about and just pray that Patreon allows me the financial wiggle room to keep on doing it while giving back to everyone who is listening.

Another way that you can support, if that's not an option, is to head over to iTunes and subscribe and review the podcast. That would be super helpful. Thank you.

And thank you to Mariee Sioux for providing the music that I use. This is from her song "Wild Eyes," one of my favorites. Check out Mariee Sioux's beautiful music.

Thank you and I look forward to next time. Bye.