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As told to René Kladzyk, 2404 words.

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On going offline and growing your community locally

Herbalist Liz Migliorelli discusses learning through experience, moving offline, and listening to non-human kin

To begin, will you tell me about what you're currently working on and how you like to describe your creative practice?

I wear a few different hats. I'm an herbalist foundationally, and the work with plants then radiates out into all of the other things that I do.

I'm also an educator and run various programs about plant medicine and folk magic and ancestral remembrance. And I work one-on-one with people. With my clients, I have an apothecary and I formulate for individuals based on whatever health or energetic or spiritual reasons they're coming in. And then I also have a product line [where] I sell and make potions. For me, a lot of my creative work is based on being in relationship with plants and our non-human kin.

But I also am a writer and I spend a lot of time reading poetry. And those things also really influence what I do and how I teach.

Since you work in a number of formats that are outside of what typically gets defined as "art," I'm curious if you've ever felt like you've had to grapple with that in how you self-describe? Would you characterize potion-making as an artistic practice?

I feel like my experience of that inquiry changes on a day-to-day basis. I have never really called myself an artist. And I think that comes from a lot of cultural conditioning around, well, "an artist is someone who is writing every day or is painting every day." And I know it's not true. I know that in my body, and I know that through examples of my friends and community and family. But it's not a word that I have felt comfortable using. However, there is an art to herbalism. There's an art to magic, there's an art of poetry, there's an art of storytelling, and all of those are things that I do.

There's something on a deeper level about the history of healing arts and the ways in which the medical profession was created through Renaissance Europe; the ways in which power was taken from mainly women who held these roles as healers and midwives and nurses in a community. And then it became a professionalized thing that only men who had certain levels of education could access. I'm like, those women are artists who are working with the seasons and working with the elements and working with the plants to provide medicine for a community. There's something there, in how we look at who gets to be an actual artist or who gets to be someone who is in a healing profession. It's an old wound—it's something I'm thinking about often.

I would love to talk to you about plant sentience and how you approach communicating with or "collaborating with plants," as you describe it on your website. How did you begin communicating with plants?

There's definitely layers of self-awareness in terms of how it happened. I could sense energy from plants as a kid. I actually think that's something that most kids feel and are in tune with. When I talk about flower essences with kids, they get it immediately. And I had a very strong connection with both apple trees and birch trees. Trees were big for me when I was a kid, and I would just spend time with them and

get these different images from them in my mind, but then also would sense them in my body. Just through being next to a tree, I would notice that with birch, there was this feeling of movement that would sort of ground in my belly and then move up and out of my body. And then over the years, especially as a teenager, that's something that I forgot and didn't pay attention to and didn't value.

Then when I circled back to the plants many years later, part of it came just from being in relationship—just being like, I'm going to actually go sit next to a mugwort plant and see what I feel. And I think that that's actually all it really takes, is showing up season after season. There needs to be a willingness of, I want to become friends with this plant. And then you just ask a question. I mean, it could really be as simple as, "How do I feel you in my body?" Just sitting with the plant and breathing with the plant and seeing where it takes you.

It is so easy actually, and it's extremely intuitive work. I think most people, once they have permission [that] this is something that I can do, it's something that ancestrally we all have done. It's how we learned from the plants, how all of our ancestors learned about the plants: direct communication and spending time with them, being an active listener. We just forget that that's something that we're able to do. I don't think that anyone's necessarily better at it than someone else. We all just receive information in really different ways. And for a lot of us, we've turned off that form of receiving information.

Do you feel like in the process of giving yourself that permission and developing those faculties to be able to listen and be receptive to plants, there's some amount of "de-humaning" you have to do? Is there some amount of "de-humaning" you need to do in order to develop those faculties?

I think if anything, you have to become more human, because it's just foundational humanity. Language is a form of spell-casting. And if we're telling ourselves the story of, "I don't know how to do this," that's the language we're running through our head most days, then yeah, you're not going to feel it. Turning off that voice, the fear of, "I don't know what I'm doing," or "I'm doing it the wrong way." Instead, switching to another very human way of being, which is being in our body, moving from the head and into other places of knowing in our bodies.

For me, I get so much information from my stomach, and I think a lot of people do, but they don't think of that as information. So it's shifting from this very mental, verbal language and moving into experiential. That's very human to be like, "Where am I feeling this in my body?" Plants give us a lot of non-verbal cues, but so do we, that's also how we communicate with one another. It is about coming back to the body and trusting in the body, which is something that a lot of people have a really hard time doing.

You teach many classes related to herbalism and plant divination. How has your approach to teaching evolved?

One of the biggest things that has changed over the years is that I used to feel a real urgency around providing so much information in a class. I wanted people to get their money's worth. I wanted them to feel saturated with how much of this knowledge I could offer and give. What I've moved more into has been about opening opportunities for people to feel, for them to step into the experience of being with the plants.

It's like, yeah, I could tell you 20 different things about what this particular plant does, but what if we just went and felt it together? What if we just went and sat with it and saw what came up? Rather than me telling you what it's going to do and creating some sort of expectation around what you are going to feel or sense or learn, let's go see. When I've been a student, that's the kind of learning that I always want to do. So I keep moving more and more into that realm.

Are you able to support yourself financially through your herbalism work? What has the journey been in terms of financial sustainability with your work?

I'm able to sustain myself with my work, which is a gift, and I feel very, very lucky to do so. But it is the wearing many different hats piece that makes it work. I don't think I could sustain myself just from my individual client practice. I need to also teach. My work is shifting right now, so I feel like it's a really good time to ask me this question. The truth is that I'm entering a big moment of change, and I don't really know what some of it's going to look like. Earlier in the year, I stopped selling my product line. So that stream of income has dropped. I just lost my office space this past spring due to a shitty landlord situation. So I'm currently only seeing clients online, which is very limiting.

I'm also considering opening a school here in the Hudson Valley where I live, and moving a lot of my teaching back offline, because I only really brought it online in 2020. I'm really interested in moving more offline. I just deleted my Instagram last week. I walked away from that. I keep talking about localizing my practice, and I'm going to see what that looks like. I have some money set aside, but I need things to work. There's a lot about it that feels kind of tenuous right now, but I'm also experimenting.

I'm curious to hear more about your attitude toward social media these days.

I've been on Instagram for so long, 10 years. It's a really long time when you think about it. And the app changed so much in the past few years to being so ad-based. That's just not how I work and not how I relate to the world, through short and sweet bits of information. And I felt addicted to the app and addicted to refreshing it and looking at things that I have absolutely no interest in really.

For me, there's been a real reckoning of "How do I really want to be spending my time?" What I really want to do is gather with people in my community. And what I really want to be doing is being a better friend and writing my friends letters, rather than keeping tabs on them on Instagram. The level of communication that I used to feel like was possible on that app has devolved. So it didn't feel in alignment for me anymore, or even interesting. I just felt bad about myself when I was on the app. It's terrifying, because there's a part of me that feels like I need it for my work. I don't really know how that's going to go.

That response makes me wonder about your personal definition of success and how it informs some of these choices you're making and the ways you choose to show up on the world's stage.

Nobody gets into herbalism to become a millionaire. I'm very glad that I've been able to sustain the life that I live from this work. But in terms of what I actually value as success is about having a really rich inner life and a really rich relationship with my friends and community. Cooking food for friends feels like success to me.

I feel like it sounds cheesy, but I'm a pretty simple person in a lot of ways, in terms of what I feel to be successful. If I get to go for a long walk after seeing clients and go jump in a body of water, I'm thrilled. How I want to show up on the world stage is as someone who feels connected to the land, as someone who feels interwoven into the web of life. I want to feel creatively charged by reading poetry. And I just want to read more in general. Things like that to me are what I deem success. Like what's the vitality of my creative practice? And what I have noticed is that being on Instagram hasn't been helping that vitality or even my own just energetic vitality. And so I think for me, that level of success has a lot to do with my mental health and making sure that that feels good. It doesn't always, but the plants help, the plants really do help.

What are some of the bigger challenges that you've faced in pursuing this kind of field of work? Is there any advice you'd like to share for someone trying to build their own sustainable creative practice?

Some of the challenges for me have been that there's really not a set way of being an herbalist in the world, which is both a blessing and a curse. There's a lot of freedom about how you can do your work. And it's also like, "Oh my god. Am I going in the right direction? Does this feel like it's going to be worth it?" There's a lot that just is not guaranteed.

I currently feel really challenged by climate collapse and climate grief—I am looking at this linden tree outside of my window that was just completely devoured this year by this invasive moth species that came. A lot of my livelihood has to do with [my] relationship to the land and being able to grow the things that I want to grow. With so much changing really quickly, that piece feels scary. All of my friends who are farmers feel the same way.

In terms of advice, I mean, it's the most non-business advice that I could ever give, which is if you're a plant person, the best thing that you can do is ask the plants. And that's something that I've consistently done throughout all of the years of working for myself. When I'm in a moment of not knowing or in challenge, I try to ask for help from the plants. That has been a huge wayfinder in my business and has helped me to trust my intuition. To really lean on that which supports your intuitive knowing is the best advice I could give.

Liz Migliorelli recommends:

Getting stung by a nettle in early spring to wake up from winter slumber

Joy of Man's Desiring by Jean Giono

Familiars by Holly Wren Spaulding

Rosemary Olive Oil Cake

Foundations Tea from Layla K Feghali</br>

Name


Liz Migliorelli


Vocation


Herbalist, educator, storyteller

Fact

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