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On music, healing, and taking a moment to reset

Musician and healer Johanna Warren on what she's learned from being forced to take a break from touring, why you should always create with positive intentions, and why plants are the ultimate role models for how to be in the world.

You were in the midst of a tour when the coronavirus basically brought everything to a halt. How are you doing right now?

It's been wild, yet a really amazing time for me personally. I didn't even know how badly I needed this course correction. It feels like exactly where I'm supposed to be and exactly what I'm supposed to be doing and it's all exactly the opposite of what I had planned.

I know you are in Wales right now. Is that just where you happened to be when this all went down?

No. I was in America. I was in the middle of a West Coast tour when everything started really kicking off. My sweetheart lives here in Wales and the plan was for us to both be on tour right now in Europe. If none of this had happened, I would have flown over here and we would have gotten in a van and then been on the road for the foreseeable future. But as the travel ban started kicking in and everything, it seemed less and less likely that I could get over here if I waited that long. So I just changed my flight and came over sooner just to make sure that we wouldn't be locked out of each other's countries and we could at least be together.

You have multiple practices in addition to being a musician—plant medicines, reiki healing, the tarot. How do all of those things inform your creative practice as a musician?

To me there's never really been clear delineations, and I think I suffered when I tried to fit myself into those convenient little boxes that society wants us to conform to. I think I just always identified as an artist but practiced many mediums within that broad umbrella. And then even beyond that, just thinking of life as an art form and a creative act—every day is practicing some kind of art, like cooking and farming and painting.

Everything is in everything. To me it's all about just finding harmony and balance and creating beauty. The healing practice came in later in life as a central focus that I have incorporated into my art practice. The main intention of anything that I do is about healing. Finding harmony and balance, helping others guide their consciousness and their systems into a state of greater harmony and balance—that's what I think great art can do. Sometimes that includes being a provocateur and agitating things and stirring the pot and mixing things up so that healing can happen, because stagnation is always the ultimate enemy.

I think it's interesting to think about healing or intentionality as a driving force behind creative work. To ask yourself whenever you make something: Who is this for? And what is this for?

That framework has really helped me feel like my artistic practice is in keeping with my larger core values, that it has the same integrity. I think when I was younger, I spun around in this self-defeating thought loop always asking myself, "Is this just masturbatory? Am I just being narcissistic? Do I just want to be famous?" It's such a mind fuck, all of it. The culture of celebrity that has formed around art and artists is a lot to contend with and make sense of. Just stepping to the side of all that a little bit and finding my own moral compass was important. It felt better to think of my intention as creating

medicine in some way for the ailing collective consciousness... and also just for myself.

That has been the ultimate compass—just listening to my body and recognizing when I’m having a reaction, either positive or negative, to an opportunity that comes up or an individual person or just a general trajectory. It’s like, “How am I feeling? What is my body telling me? Am I really stressed? Do I feel joyful? Am I getting headaches? Is my skin breaking out in some weird rash?” We get so much information given to us all the time, but if we can slow it down and listen, we can learn so much. It is so interesting just how much that’s coming up loud and clear right now for everybody. Despite how terrible it is, right now is this huge opportunity to pause and listen and reflect and hopefully redirect some of our collective energies in more positive ways.

I think that is what has made this moment so painful for so many people. Aside from the financial chaos and loss of life, I think it’s hard for us to sit still—to be alone and quiet with our own thoughts—and being forced to stay put and really take stock of things has really been hard for people. We’re so accustomed to always being distracted from that kind of thinking.

Yeah. It’s so hard, but ultimately it can be a kind of gift. As it turns out, so many of the things that we do to distract ourselves from ever having to sit still and be quiet are *also* all the things that are destroying the planet. Especially with travel. I’ve been thinking a lot about that because honestly it’s weighed on me for quite some time as a touring musician, living with the hypocrisy of identifying as a healer and telling myself that I’m on this mission to be of service to nature and the world, but then on some basic plane of reality I’m traveling vast distances everyday burning fossil fuels and flying around the world peddling little pieces of plastic. For a long time that’s really not sat well with me. So right now I’ve been trying to think about other ways to do what I love and share my music and be of service that don’t involve still doing that.

Honestly, it took this pandemic for me to actually stop and step back and realize, “Whoa. I actually don’t have to do that.” The constant touring was actually making me really sick and tired and sad and lonely and my body was having one of those reactions that I was talking about earlier. On my last tour I was having low-grade panic attacks every day and constant headaches. I just felt so tired and I was already kind of resigned to it, like “Fuck. I’m about to be doing this nonstop for the foreseeable future.” There was no real end in sight to my infinite tour. And then this happened and, like everyone else, I had to stop. I didn’t even realize how much relief I would feel when I didn’t have to do that anymore.

So yes... this has been wild. But I think no matter what you’re doing in the world, there are these massive systems that we’re all complicit in and have grown so accustomed to and dependent on that we think we need them and that we need to keep feeding into them. So for me, this is such an amazing moment to stop and think, “Oh, what if actually we could just stop and do something else?”

I know it’s different for everyone and that not everyone has the luxury of simply stopping what they do or what they need to do in order to make a living, but as a musician, how do you think you’ll do things differently after this?

I don’t know yet. I think the touring thing is definitely insane and my body was giving me pretty clear signs that it was not going to work for me for very much longer anyway. It’s really just a capitalistic trap because you’re not making any money from album sales or streaming if you don’t tour, so if you want to be a full-time professional musician and not have a day job, then you *have* to be on the road a lot.

It’s ultimately pretty thankless because you tour your ass off just to basically break even. You make enough to live and then come home and have *maybe* gotten out of debt to your label at the end of a brutal year, or maybe not even that. So, I don’t know. I think maybe for me what I’m looking at is settling down, building out a nice little modest home studio, and just having more time to write and record more and release things more quickly and on my own terms and have the modest streaming royalties coming in be enough to cover my minimal living expenses. But even then, I don’t know that it would be enough.

I love farming and gardening and working with plants and that’s been something that I have known about myself for a long time. That is when I’m happiest and feel the most sane and healthy and balanced—when I have my hands in the dirt and I’m growing my own food and just working really closely with the seasons. I didn’t even realize consciously how far I have strayed from that, how long it had been since I’ve been in a setting where I could do that.

I’ve been living in Los Angeles for almost a year working on a movie and I’d gotten sucked in pretty deep into the matrix of chasing fame and increasingly superficial concerns. Right now I’m feeling really good about where I’m at, looking at a homesteading path of just having a low overhead and not needing to make a lot of money because I’m mostly being self-sufficient. This also means playing music because it brings me joy, but not being a slave to my own art as I feel I have been, not punishing myself in order to do the thing that I allegedly love because then that makes me *not* love it. It makes me resent it and not want to do it and just feel like I have this fucking chain around my neck, which is just the opposite of how I want to feel about it.

I think for anybody who tries to make a living off of their art, that’s something that you have to figure out—what your stance is going to be about selling your work and how much you allow that to change your relationship with it.

Yeah. It just all reduces down to this industrial, assembly-line mentality that we’ve all grown up with where we’re not encouraged to be fully rounded holistic beings. We’re supposed to specialize really early,

get really good at one thing, and just do it into the ground for the rest of our lives. And that's not healthy. We see it in agriculture, when you're just planting the same GMO crop season after season in the same place, eventually you deplete the soil. You've got to rotate the crops and restore the soil and give it a rest and live with the seasons.

You've got to know when it's time to plant and when it's time to harvest and when it's time to chill. And we just haven't given ourselves the opportunity to live that way. It's just a world lit by electric lights and we're supposed to be incessantly productive with no breaks.

This seems to be a moment when a lot of people are thinking about getting healthy and changing their habits. For people who maybe don't know anything at all about plant healing or Reiki, what kind of advice do you have? Where is a good place to start?

Well, I think plants are my allies and they always have been. I love encouraging people to look back to who they were as children and how they inherently knew how to interact with the world, to think about what excited them and what magic felt like. I think of plants as a very powerful kingdom of natural living things that we have co-evolved with and, over time, have forgotten how to have a rapport with.

You can say the same thing about rocks. I know a lot of people who are really into crystals and crystal healing, but for some reason I don't feel like I speak that language as fluently. I can appreciate it, but it's not my chosen language. And some people really enjoy astrology and some people are really into Tarot. Basically there are all kinds of entry points to a deepened understanding of the matrix of interdimensional consciousness that we're all swimming in. I think it's just a matter of finding what excites you and what feels really juicy and magnetic and thrilling and magical. Herbalism just happens to be my main field of knowledge.

I suggest to people the method of selecting one plant ally that feels like someone you want to get to know or maybe a small handful of plants because there's so many plants. This can be said of anything. If someone wanted to get into listening to music for the first time, well, there's a ton of bands, so just pick one that you like and listen to their records and get familiar with their sound. Same goes with plants. You could spend your whole life learning about herbalism and never run out of things to learn. I say just pick a few plants and go really deep with them—and not just reading about them in books, but actually growing a live plant in your window sill, so you get to sit and smell the leaves and be in their energetic fields and get to know exactly what they look like at different growing stages and what they smell like and what they taste like. You can learn so much.

I know things are a little bit limited right now in terms of accessibility and even ordering things online is hard, but I'd say just work with what you've got even if you have an essential oil in your cabinet, making a meditation out of that could be really nice. Or if you have some dried rosemary in your cabinet. I'm sure that everyone has some bit of plant matter around, or even a house plant that's not edible or necessarily medicinal, so just meditating with a plant and touching its leaves, just hanging out and really listening in a meditative state, just sitting with a plant and just looking carefully, looking at how it grows, can be a healthy, healing thing.

I think one of the biggest things that I get out of hanging out with plants is that they are these metaphorical, symbolic reminders of how to be. They're older than us and they're so adapted to life on earth and they are so benevolent to us. They create oxygen. They have all these amazing properties that can bring our bodies into greater states of balance. So, if we can spend time just observing them and smelling them and inviting them into our awareness, that's a really good starting place to being healthy.

You've just released your fifth solo record. Do you find that your process, or what music-making means to you, has shifted radically over the years?

For sure. Yeah. I've got five solo albums and then two albums before that with a band where I was actually the songwriter, too. So it's been a long journey. Looking back to that early work, I feel like a completely different person. And I think because of the healing journey that I've been on, and really with spending so much time with plant consciousness, it has totally exploded my brain. I feel music in such a different way—just experiencing it as energy and light and color and healing. I think everything can be reduced to vibration and music is such a potent way to affect matter that way.

Now music is also about feeling that vibration in my body, spending time in nature or in meditation, and just experimenting with moving the tone of my voice through different parts of my body and feeling how it resonates with the different things going on inside me. When I have a headache now it's an opportunity to practice this. If I have a migraine, I'll get in a bath and cover my ears with water and just sing a note and move the pitch around until I feel it resonate with the pain in my head. It's like the way opera singers can shatter glass with their voices. I'm thinking of the migraine as the pane of glass and I'm dialing in the pitch of my voice until I feel like I can break up that cluster.

So yeah, that's where my mind has gone with music. Healing has emerged as my highest creative excitement. I know I'm doing music right when it feels like a healing practice. And that's not to say that I'm always there. I can still get really easily sucked into more ego-centric pursuits with it and I get performance anxiety and get very nervous about how I'm being perceived and if I'm doing it right, but I know how I want to feel with it, which is that it is a personal healing practice. And when I'm really living that and embodying it, then sharing it with others is also a healing offering.

That's a beautiful way to think about creative work.

I was taking a walk earlier today and just thinking about what angle I could offer you, because I knew I wanted to talk about plant medicine and I was just thinking, "What do I want to say about that broadly?" And I just had this really funny thought that I hadn't really considered before.

Two years ago I went on this massive tour all around the US. I played like 75 shows or something stupid like that in three months. I called it the plant medicine tour because everywhere I went I was lining up with local farmers and herbalists to be at the shows selling their medicines and talking to their communities about what they were doing, which was beautiful. But the irony was that I had called it the "plant medicine tour." and I ended up getting really sick on it. I came down with a really brutal case of strep throat that triggered a gnarly case of Epstein-Barr, which is a virus. It completely took me out. I was passing out in public and just so exhausted. I somehow pushed my way through it and I made it to the end of the tour. I was driving myself from show to show and I pushed just beyond, beyond, beyond what I should have. At the end of it, I had to basically quit life for three months and just do nothing but sleep and drink tea and recover.

So today I was just thinking, "Wow. It's so beautiful that on that healing tour I made myself so sick that it ultimately led to my deepened understanding of healing." Today, standing here in Wales, it kind of feels like that again—a virus has forced me to radically change my plans and rethink everything. And both times the message has been, "Slow down. Just stop trying so hard. Stop forcing it. Life doesn't have to be an exhausting crusade."

Johanna Warren Recommends:

The first book that comes to mind is called Braiding Sweetgrass by Robin Wall Kimmerer. It's a beautiful poetic book about healing our relationship to nature and specifically the plant world. The author is a Native American scientist and botanist, who is weaving together traditional indigenous wisdom for people with this very scientific knowledge of botany. It's gorgeous. I recommend it to everyone.

A tincture that is really one of my all-time strongest allies is a plant called ashwagandha. It's one of the premier herbs in the Ayurvedic tradition and it's well suited to all constitutions. It's tridoshaic, well suited to all people and it's an adaptogen. So it will really meet you wherever you're at and bring your system into greater harmony and balance. It's amazing for anxiety, which I'm sure everyone is experiencing at some significant level of it right now. It's also just really grounding. It's made of the root of this very pungent earthy plant, so the taste of it is like just a fist full of really rich soil. It's just a reminder to feel your feet on the ground.

To me it feels immediately calming and it's amazing for insomnia. If you take two or three droppers right before bed, it will really help you fall and stay asleep. My favorite source to get that is called the Portland Ashwagandha Farm. It's a really beautiful farm that I used to work at in Portland, Oregon, which is amazing because most ashwagandha that you can find is shipped from Southeast Asia. So this is really potent and relatively local to anyone in America and it is farmed and produced with a lot of integrity and love.

And as far as recommending live plants, I guess it depends on where you live and what you're working with in terms of light and temperature, but any kind of herbs can be pretty hardy—like sage and rosemary. Those two are nice because you can also use them in cooking. So that's one way to interact with plants on a daily basis. I know the food supply is so fucked right now, but doing your best to source locally and support the local farmers who are doing good work in your area is so important.

Beyond that, if you can grow even just one herb that you can use culinarily, it's really good for you. Just making a practice of just harvesting a couple little leaves for your meal and saying thank you to the plant and enjoying that experience. I feel like that's really fulfilling. Rosemary and sage also both have medicinal properties as well. Rosemary can be used for dreaming. It repels nightmares and is an amazing psychic protection plant. So you can have a couple sprigs of rosemary by your bed to keep you safe in the astro-realm and then sage and can obviously be burned to clear the energy of your space. So I always suggest those two plants, which are relatively hardy and easy to grow.

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Musician, Artist, Healer

Fact

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