

Deep discernment: A conversation between John Cussans and Joe Walsh

John Cussans and Joe Walsh

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Herb meditations

John Cussans: Can you tell us about your herb meditation works? How did they come about? What was your inspiration? What is the process?

Joe Walsh: I attended a herbal medicine course at Walworth Gardens in London and I was struck by an exercise we did where we had to get to know a herb by drawing it and then drinking it as a tea and making notes. I was struck by sharing observations with a diverse group of people. We were all talking about something subtle, but palpable – similar feelings described in different ways – someone’s bodily feeling alongside someone’s inherited knowledge of the plant. To me the herb was a shared substance where its properties got everyone in the same state, then articulated differently among the group.

To describe the basics of the process, it begins with some kind of meditation, settling into observing the same herb, first by drawing and writing any observations, and then by drinking it as a tea, noting any effects on the body.

When I run it as a workshop I have tried various ways of preparing people, such as Japanese Tea Ceremony techniques or specific meditations. I encourage people to drop any classifications they know of the plant, to ‘misuse’ language and to write anything that immediately comes to mind. We then share our observations. Looking up information in books is left to the end.

Deep discernment

JC: A distinctive characteristic of fine art education and practice are prolonged periods of self-reflection during which an artist simultaneously explores a particular medium, a way of working and their emotional, psychological and physical reactions to that process. Fine Arts education has historically been understood as an education of the senses, an ethos often overshadowed by the spectacular brashness of much high-profile contemporary art. The prolonged periods of reflective awareness in a making process prepare a person for a slow and immersive engagement with the world and other beings. It seems to me that in your herb meditations you are slowly opening yourself up to a deep interaction with a specific plant, and by extension to an immersive engagement with the world. This process requires cultivating a state of subtle receptivity to the sensual properties and bodily effects of a particular herb. Can you say something about your relationship to herbs and the ways artists work more generally?

JW: When I do close observation of herbs, when I am sitting there and letting in the herb, I can get clues from its form, design, touch, smell and taste. These are experiential observations but I can't help but make analogous connections.

I think as artists we are free to discern from this, and not necessarily go to botanical terminology, or require science to affirm the findings. Many artists think analogously, and so you could say the outcome of an artwork is the fine tuning of feelings, observations and experiences.

So from this description of the artist it could be said that this way of experiencing the world gives something apt for making thinkable our coexistence with nature, of becoming ecological. It is a more murky area that doesn't rely on facts. I am describing the artist as Animist here.

Just to give a recent example, in observing the Marshmallow plant I experienced a feeling of ease and relaxation, which I connected to the way it creates mucilage in the body – which made me think of fluidity as necessary physically as well as emotionally. This goes deeply into physics and psychology.

I like what you are saying that the artist's sensitivity can be overshadowed by brash contemporary art. There is a suggestion here of artists focusing on the exploring rather than producing a brash art work.

Scrolling to infinity

JC: In our discussions we often return to problems associated with the increasing presence of digital communication in our social and professional lives. This is very evident in the generation now known as iGen (or Digital Natives) who have never known a world without iPhones and the internet. In a culture in which images are generated and circulated at an unprecedented scale and speed, methods of making that are modest, thoughtful, slow and delicate offer an antidote to the unthinking quality of contemporary image production. Can you say something about how your herb meditations project is partly a response to the loss of direct connection with physical, sensual living things, other beings and nature?

JW: I would say here a term I have been using for activities such as looking at herbs: 'offline non-units of experiential knowledge'. Interpret the term as you will. There is encountering something and slowly observing it (e.g. drawing it) and then the stark contrast of simply taking a picture of it on a mobile phone and uploading that to Instagram. I have found myself intuitively moving away from internet and social media. For me, it all piles up; I get overwhelmed. I feel it keeps presenting a consumerist me back to myself, a tight loop of 'me stuff', and tools to self-administrate.

If becoming ecological requires ways of making thinkable how we coexist with nature, we need to let in what's not-me, or to be informed by it. I can't get that at the moment with online habits. I would say certain neurotypes cannot cope with online overload.

'Scrolling to Infinity' suggests that you can scroll forever and the algorithm will supply feedback. It describes well an instance of negotiating an infinite sea of information that is a new mental health problem to negotiate; it is having to order something immeasurable, and that creates an anxiety for many people.

Going to plants is to visit a kind of truth. They are about thriving, moving towards a fullness most of the time, an abundance, and one can be reminded of this. It is a way to get away from the proximity of the controlled destitution of consumer narratives. I see it as putting myself in proximity to something favourable that I want to rub off on me, rather than something toxic that I may end up replicating. It is not easy to shift from the endorphin hits of the screen to a more open and relaxed state; hence some infrastructure or ceremony like meditation is necessary. For people trying – yeah, it's a feeling of being lost, of being away from where the attention is at. But it isn't being lost, it's transitioning – to be open.

I would prefer to be coming from the space of nature, reporting back to the others from nature. This abundance of nature, in turn, informs my relations with people.

Making art and being well

JC: We speak a lot about the importance of art making for wellbeing in your practice. Can you say more about how you understand the herb meditations in relation to the wider sense of ecological awareness and the therapeutic value of having a sensitive, open and exploratory relationship to the plants and herbs we eat?

JW: Doing the herb meditations, and also running workshops, creates a space for giving attention to something not you, in this case, a plant. It requires a shift in oneself from habituated thinking, to pick up on something subtle. I am letting its presence into my life by attention and intention. This incrementally and tangibly makes thinkable we are entangled, not just in theory, but in a felt way. *That* is being ecological.

Through these observations I consider the herbal properties as health benefits in what we eat. For example, Spring Tonic: apple cider vinegar infused with spring growth of Dandelion, Chickweed, Plantain and Cleavers. It captures

the spring growth and that energy. I have recognized this through observing and eating. One of my favourite cooking herbs is thyme, I observe it creates a heat that can be beneficial in different ways.

What's the beef with Bonnington?

JC: Last year you made a film about Bonnington Café, the co-operative vegetarian café in London where you have been working for many years (<http://bonningtoncafe.co.uk/>). Can you say something about how your interest in herbs is related to the philosophy and ethos of Bonnington?

JW: Bonnington Cafe is a collective of cooks and there is a different cook each day. It evolved from the 1980s when the area was squatted. Its ethos is to have no manager, and decisions are made collectively. My way of describing this collective is people being attracted to this way of working, people with learning difficulties, hidden neurodiversity issues, who have difficulty finding employment. There is a certain independence, intuiting out work relations that is the same as how one listens to plants by being open and discerning.

We have developed two planters with herbs: one culinary, the other medicinal. We see it as a source for cooking, for the local community to pick and for doing herb drawing. We are trying to see how community relations can include the non-human nature of herbs, what that is.

Neurodiversity and deepening of subtle relations

JC: You are currently mentoring a young person with learning difficulties at Bonnington as part of a programme known as Roots and Shoots (<https://www.rootsandshoots.org.uk/>). There is an increased awareness of neurodiversity in the wider society and its implications for learning and education. Arts education, which as we have discussed requires students to reflect deeply and critically on their own motivations, emotions and perceptions, has been more accommodating of neurodivergence and differing learning styles than some other educational pathways, particularly those dependent on writing and numeracy. Do you recognize a relationship between neurodiversity and the deepening of inter-personal and inter-species communication and sensitivity?

JW: When I was training a student from Roots and Shoots with learning difficulties, it was not immediately apparent to me what her issues were or how she was neurodiverse. But gradually I did. I was able to relate this to my own neurodiversity. I think artists can be very good at seeing the complexity of neurodiversity, as artists are all pretty much on the autism spectrum. An idea here: listen out for another human's neurodiversity, as you would a plant, another species.

Let's take a particular trait of someone who is neurodiverse. A highly sensitive person (I am thinking of Elaine Aron's use of the term here) in an environment with lots of different stimuli may find it difficult to filter out the stimuli to concentrate on a specific activity; they get over-stimulated. The

flipside to this is that being highly sensitive is apt for interspecies and interpersonal communication, having the sensitivity to discern subtlety and nuance.

Roots and Shoots in Kennington has a garden growing crops as part of their study. So there is an opportunity here to compare food freshly harvested, to food from a supermarket. This taps into a major issue of diet and reconnecting that back to food growing.

Inner explorations

JC: There is a strong sense that through your herb meditations you are going on a kind of inner journey with the plant. As a viewer of your watercolours, my own imagination conjures pastoral and sublime landscapes. For instance, I may see a forest on the edge of a lake illuminated by sunlight during a storm. There's something quite hallucinatory about the images that speaks to the psychedelic experience of psychoactive plants. Can you say something about the psychonautical aspects of your herb meditations?

JW: The expression 'psychonaut' suggests being wrapped up in the self, not aware of anything outside of oneself or 'off with the fairies'. But as I have been describing the herb meditations, there is an ongoing dialogue between one's idea of a singular contained self and letting in a plant which keeps redefining this notion of self into something that's intermingling with other matter. This is genuinely psychonautical: letting in a plant as part of a constellation of the self.

Let me just give an example. I had a headache and I took Feverfew as a tea as I had heard it helps. What it did wasn't to kill the pain, but replaced it with a warmth, and I was being held by that warmth. So rather than the eradication of the headache by a painkiller, Feverfew shifted me to another state. There is a complex orchestration here. This 'state' is somewhat the plant, and somewhat 'me'. The plant gives another angle on my idea of states which don't wholly belong to me.

Psychonautical is the ever-shifting space of the self, discerning with its environment, becoming, fine-tuning.



Joe's artworks

Examples of these appear on the pages that follow.









