



A CONVERSATION WITH  
KAREN ROSE

# MEDICINE PATHS



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interview, design, and editing by Heather Wood Buzzard, MA

'I got it from my mama' we boast, proudly showing off whatever positive bits of our heritage float to the top of our genetic pool. Buddying up with our grandmother's maiden name, our great aunt's cheekbones, our uncle's goofy sense of humor - these are some of the only socio-culturally acceptable ways we have of honoring our ancestors. But embracing ancestral trauma, recognizing their pain in our own dysfunction, taking on their gaping wounds as ours, their old scars as our new scars, is not something so readily talked about. Unless you're spiritual herbalist Karen Rose.

A beacon of light and dark, a maven of plant medicine, an empowered woman who walks the walk and talks the talk, urban Brooklyn healer Karen Rose talks about embracing the shadows of her ancestors like it's what she does after breakfast each day. Because it is. Her work is both otherworldly and down to earth, of the spirit realm and totally practical in a out-of-tune world. Karen was a herald of the wisdom of epigenetics long before it gained buzzword status.

This September, I cozied up to my computer for an enlightening and enlivening (virtual) conversation with Karen. Since Karen's work is grand on a totally unearthly plane, we covered no small topics - ancestry, ritual, community, responsibility, resilience - always coming back to the people and the plants that bind them.

## 1. EVERYONE AN HERBALIST

HWB: Where did your path into herbalism begin?

KR: I have always been a plant and tree lover at heart. Growing up in Guyana, I was usually in a tree playing and eating out of my grandmother's garden.

What we call an herbalist here in the US describes everyone in the small village I grew up in.

We all knew what plants help with what ailment. When we immigrated to the US, we lost our connection to plants as we tried to assimilate to this land's culture. We went to doctors instead of healers. When my first baby, my daughter Lauren, was born I decided to use plants to heal her. I had to restore my connection to these energies. Twenty-one years ago I decided to officially begin my journey to study plants that exist here in the West.

My ancestry has informed my work with herbal medicine in every way. My ancestors are from China, Ghana, and India and I bring their indigenous practices forward in my work today. In my Spiritual Herbalism program, I teach from what I know and observed as a youth: tongue reading and healing in a communal framework along with the plants of Ayurveda that we grew in our yards back home.

I am a community herbalist. Growing in Essequibo, Guyana, a small village along the coast of the Atlantic Ocean, we relied on our community to support all our physical and spiritual healing. When something was wrong we visited the healer in the community, and seldom would visit doctors since we would have to travel to the city. I grew up visiting local healers each time my health was challenged. Some of this was done through plants, some through chants and prayers, and some through physical manipulation.

**The means by which wellness was achieved was as varied as the healers themselves.**

The Art and Practice of Spiritual Herbalism anchors spirituality in the practice of plant medicine. Our plant medicine practice is connected to the land, ancestors, and community. We utilize plants in a conscious and sustainable way to heal our spirit and bodies. We value the teachings of our ancestors and give reverence to their work and align ourselves with their traditional healing practices.

My experience of Western Herbalism has lacked reverence and the value of indigenous knowledge. There is widespread appropriation of the knowledge and traditions of people of the global south. There are spaces when as a black herbalist I was not welcomed nor my indigenous knowledge valued. My work over the last 20 years is to create a space where herbalists of color are welcomed and their knowledge valued and honored.

# TO HEAL MULTIDIMENSIONAL BEINGS LIKE OURSELVES, RITUAL IS NECESSARY.

## 2. RITUAL AND RELATIONSHIP

HWB: How is ritual integrated into your work?

KR: Ritual is a word that we often use to describe routine. In the West, we confuse ritual to mean something we do every day. Ritual is the setting of intention and the calling in of a power greater than your own to affect healing, whether emotional, spiritual, or physical. The result of the ritual cannot be predetermined. You have to abandon yourself to the energies present and the according result.

This framework is also how plants work. Plants are an energy that we call in to work with our bodies to heal us. The amount of information that we have on that specific energy does not determine what happens when two energies meet; the energy of the person and that of the plant. We have to surrender ourselves to whatever comes up in order to bring our healing forward. In my practice people will often say, "Why didn't you tell me this would happen?" I am honest and tell them I can only share my experiences with the plant and they will have to discover their own. I encourage them to set the intention towards healing and call in the spirit of the plant and universal Spirit and see what happens next. The healer's role is to provide support through any changes that might be arising. Ritual suspends reality so that actual healing can be achieved in many dimensions.

A relational vision of health is how we relate to our families, communities, environment, earth, and Spirit. There is no healing in a vacuum. We need to be in healthy relationships with all of the above to be whole or healed. The willingness to work on them is what healing takes. Sometimes we can access all that healing in our lifetime and sometimes we cannot. The willingness is what matters.

HWB: What role do you think ritual plays in community health and healing spaces, particularly in a society that de-values ritual?

KR: Ritual brings a community together. In a community ritual, all members have a responsibility. Whether it is to keep the fire, beat the drum, or hold the circle, we are all invested in the outcome for the individual.

Communities are seeking to be once again connected to a common goal: healing. Within our herbalism community here in Brooklyn, we have values to which we hold ourselves accountable, including the way we show up in relationship with our herbal community.

THE HEALTH OF  
THE COMMUNITY IS  
THE HEALTH OF  
THE INDIVIDUAL  
AND VICE-VERSA.



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HWB: How do ancestry and ancestral relationships inform healing in the modern, physical world? Do epigenetics have a role?

KR: When I started this practice 20 years ago, we did not have very much data to show in regards to epigenetics. I would see clients who had traumas Spirit told me were not theirs, but instead the trauma of their mothers. I knew this in my soul but could not show data to demonstrate or prove it. Thankfully, science has caught up with what the ancestors knew. They knew that whatever a mother holds, her child also holds, whatever trauma she feels also determines what her baby will feel. In Chinese medicine, we are taught about Paternal Chi, the health of the mother or father at the time of conception, and how this affects the baby's well-being. These ancestral and indigenous healing practices built frameworks around these truths.

As a descendant of slaves and indentured servants, their traumas exist in my body. To practice medicine and healing without thought to these truths in effect is malpractice. I cannot see a healer who believes that my fibroids are just mine alone without noticing the reflection of my family, and my ancestors in my body. Their history of rape, voicelessness, lack of nurturing, and reckless disregard now becomes manifest in my body. This cannot only be addressed in a physical way but also requires spiritual balance to heal.

### Self-knowledge is power.

True power is derived from an understanding of self. Knowing your self requires knowing where you are from and building a relationship with that land and those that have come before you who walked on that land. Power creates agency, and when you have that knowledge of your history it creates confidence in your voice and you then use that voice to demand what you need. For me, change is to live in a society that values the voices of all its people and meets their needs.

Plants support knowledge of the self because when taking plant medicine, we naturally turn inward to witness ourselves. When taking plants of our ancestors into ourselves, we are reclaiming their resilience and thus fortifying our spirits so we can do healing work, which for black people is often met with resistance. We empower ourselves so that we can navigate this medical industrial complex that was not designed for us or by us. We ask the ancestors to intervene on our behalf and heal broken relationships that may have caused any lack of ease or dis-ease.

### 3. RESILIENCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

HWB: Do our ancestors and the botanical world have anything in common?

KR: Resilience! Plants display incredible resilience through the devastation of their environments. It was the ginkgo and birch trees that appeared first after the nuclear bomb dropped on Hiroshima. So, too, our ancestral healing knowledge and wisdom has survived even the harshest conditions of slavery to reach our ears and hearts today. What is often targeted for extinction and eradication springs up with a lushness that we could not fathom.



## WELLNESS IS A COMMUNITY RESPONSIBILITY.

HWB: Wellness is not held in high esteem in our culture. You discuss envisioning a community that upholds the value of wellness as a responsibility to its people. What is the purpose of re-imagining models of care and how can that transition to reality?

KR: In our communities in the West, we are quick to assign a diagnosis. “He has cancer, she has diabetes.” It is as if we as a community had nothing to do with that individual who now manifests the symptoms of how unwell we are as a community. We know that diabetes is more common in certain communities than others. Why? Many systems of community oppression have been put in place that have proved harmful, including access to care and autonomy over our food and bodies. Generational trauma is also prevalent in certain communities; it’s the result of heartbreak, lack of joy, and purposelessness. It is then the community’s responsibility to care for those who are individually carrying disease as a symptom of our community’s dis-ease.

When I reimagine what this could look like I see community healers again at the forefront of care. Within immigrant communities across Brooklyn there were healers who were the first line of care for recently immigrated individuals, providing spiritual, physical, and tangible care for families and dealing with everything from prescriptions to jobs, divorces to depression, even negative energies in the home. These healers knew all their clients and were invested in their wellness because they lived alongside them. What would it look like to again lift up these places of healing in our communities that can work cooperatively with allopathic care? This is my vision.

# LEARN MORE

With Karen Rose

The Art and Practice of Spiritual Herbalism: Healing with  
Ancestors, Community, Plants, and Ritual

We will explore a broader, relational vision of health, that is rooted in collective relationship with the community and extends beyond human relations, to ancestral relationships and Spirit. We will discuss connection to ancestors, plants, community, and ritual as it creates agency and intervention. We will envision what it would look like when a community informs and holds wellness as its responsibility as we reimagine care.

## WHEN

October 25, 2018 1:30-5:30 PM

## WHERE

Unicoi State Park and Lodge

## HOW

Register at  
[americanherbalistsguild.com](http://americanherbalistsguild.com)

## 29<sup>th</sup> Annual Symposium

# Bioregional Herbalism

Keynote Speaker:  
Phyllis D. Light



October 25-29, 2018 - UNICOI State Park and Lodge - Chattahoochee National Forest of North Georgia

## ABOUT KAREN

Karen Rose, Master Herbalist, is trained in eastern and western herbal medicine and created an outlet for her teachings and healing modalities at Brooklyn-based Sacred Vibes Healing and Apothecary in 2009. Her inspiration began in her childhood home of Guyana, where she learned how African, Caribbean, and Latin American traditions influenced plant medicine and healing.