

Biographical Profile of Eliot Cowan

Eliot Cowan was born in Chicago in 1946. He was raised in Winnipeg and San Francisco. As he explains it, he had an “ordinary life.” An urban dweller, he felt no particular kinship with nature, and his ever-present allergies led him to view plants as the enemy. Today Cowan has made peace with plants, and is he is now the presenter of an ancient method of healing through the spirits of plants.

Cowan graduated from Pomona College in southern California with a degree in anthropology. In 1969, while doing post-graduate studies in ethnographic documentary filmmaking at UCLA, he realized that he had no understanding or connection with the earth, so he packed up his life and moved to northern Vermont to learn about farming.

His introduction into herbalism came via a cranky old goat named Eloise. Eloise had an eye infection that the local veterinarian diagnosed as incurable and fatal. Nonetheless he sent Cowan home with a prescription, which Cowan promptly tossed in favor of a book of veterinary herbalism. Using herbs from the farm, Cowan dosed the goat according to instruction. Within a few days Eloise was her normal self again. The disease had completely disappeared and Cowan had found a passion for natural healing.

After a few more herbal successes, Cowan decided to make a career switch and sought out a teacher. He began studying the Chinese medical tradition of the Five Elements with J.R. Worsley at the College of Traditional Acupuncture in Leamington Spa, England. Here he would receive his Licentiate, Bachelor and Master of Acupuncture degrees, and serve on the faculty from 1979-80.

In addition to Chinese medicine, Worsley also taught Cowan about the ways of the spirit and he explained that anything that could be done with needles, could also be done with herbs. Worsley stressed the need to always use local herbs.

Upon his return to the United States, Cowan determined to revive the use of local plants to heal the spirit. With no teachers available to teach him the lore of the land, Cowan resolved to find out for himself what was available and how to work with the plants. An auspicious meeting with the Huichol Indian shaman, Don José Ríos of Mexico made a profound impression on Cowan, convincing him that shamanic training would empower him to discover the properties of the herbs in his area. Anthropologist Michael Harner became Cowan’s first mentor in shamanism, enabling Cowan to rediscover the ancient shamanic practice of plant spirit medicine.

Of his first magical meeting with plant spirits, Cowan recalls “I hoped that I would meet someone who could teach me. I was not disappointed. The spirit gave me detailed instructions about its magic, how I could use it, and who could benefit from it. The plant assured me it would help me heal many people. In fact, it said it had been waiting nearly 200 years for someone to ask for this kind of help once again.”

Currently Eliot Cowan has completed a traditional apprenticeship with, and become the successor to Don Gualalupe González Ríos, an elder Huichol Indian shaman and plant spirit healer. Along with the plant spirit medicine community, Cowan has opened a healing center in upstate New York — The Blue Deer Center where classes, and healings are held. At the current time he also has over 35 apprentices going through their 12-year shamanic training.

Cowan lives with his wife and four children in Santa Barbara and devotes his time to teaching plant spirit medicine throughout the United States and abroad.