

GHOST PIPE: A LITTLE KNOWN NERVINE

Delicate and ethereal, Ghost Pipe (*Monotropa uniflora*) emerges from the forest floor.

Around it, trees reach down through the musty layers of decaying leaves, into rich, dark soil, where their roots intertwine with mycelial networks whose fruiting mushroom bodies spread spores, expanding the web. The fungi pull water and minerals from the soil, feeding them into the trees' roots, and the trees pull them up into through their bodies which branch out and form leaves that use the sun's energy to make sugars that feed the tree and flow back through the roots into the mycelium, feeding the fungus.

Ghost Pipe taps its roots into the place where the mycelium meets the rhizome, drawing off nutrients from mushroom and tree alike, and sends up a slender stalk that blossoms into a bell shape flower that first faces upward toward a sky whose sunlight it does not need and then nods down toward the ground that gives it life.

Tapped into these nodes in the mycorrhizal network, Ghost Pipe is tapped into two very different systems for processing information – essentially two very different forms of consciousness.

Mycelial consciousness is horizontal and diffuse – information is carried across vast networks of nerve-like filaments. Information moves rapidly and multi-directionally. But the web has no center where information can be concentrated and processed.

In contrast, trees concentrate information over time in one place. The rings of their trunks holding the memory of rain and drought and fire.

Plants and fungi exchange nutrients across their shared mycorrhizal networks. And in the process they also exchange information in the form of chemical and signals¹

In siphoning off nutrients from these mycorrhizal networks, Ghost Pipe is also tapping into the information they carry.

The plant needs to have a mechanism for filtering that tremendous input. And therein lies the nature of its medicine. Resembling a spine and a brainstem, Ghost Pipe is a unique ally in helping humans modulate sensory input.

GHOST PIPE AND PHYSICAL PAIN

Harvey Wickes Felter and John Uri Lloyd wrote in King's American Dispensatory that the powdered root of Ghost Pipe could be used "as a substitute for opium, without any deleterious influences."² Whiles this is true, it doesn't fully capture the way this medicine works with pain.

I was first introduced to Ghost Pipe by Tommy Priester, who told me that he used the tincture of the whole plant for people in intense physical pain. He said it didn't make the pain go away, but

it put the person beside her pain where she could see it and deal with it without being overwhelmed by it.

Along similar lines, David Winston, whose use of Ghost Pipe is informed by the experience of the Eclectics, his own Cherokee tradition, and his personal clinical experience, writes:

“When I started using it 35 years ago I noticed quickly that it is not your normal analgesic. In fact I often say that it seemed more like getting Nitrous Oxide at the dentist than an analgesic, you know that it hurts, but simply don’t care. The term that is used for this is antinociceptive, which means something that reduces sensitivity to painful stimuli. So Monotropa is primarily an antinociceptive, it raises the pain threshold.”³

Unlike Nitrous Oxide, however, I find that Ghost Pipe often makes people feel more grounded and present in the moment when their overwhelming pain has been dominating their experience of their bodies and the world.

Winston notes that he often combines Monotropa with other, more directly anodyne herbs, a strategy I generally employ as well. (Though I use a fresh plant tincture made from only the aerial parts of Ghost Pipe while Winston uses a fresh plant tincture made from the roots or from the whole plant.)

In one case, a client came to me with severe nerve pain from Lyme disease. For a while she had been managing her pain successfully with a Cannabis tincture she had made for herself, but Cannabis alone was no longer keeping the pain at bay. At my suggestion, she began to combine Monotropa with Cannabis 50/50, and was able to bring her pain to a manageable.

In another case, I helped a Veteran of the first Gulf War find relief from migraine-like headaches caused by a traumatic brain injury (the spine-brain stem signature here again) with a combination of Ghost Pipe, Wood Betony (*Stachys betonica*), and Clematis. The formula was the first thing he had experienced that was able to touch his pain.

In a pinch, however, I have used Monotropa as a simple for people in extreme pain. Recently, someone I know chopped off the tip of his finger while working in a kitchen on a Sunday night and called in excruciating pain. Ghost Pipe was the only relevant herb I had in my cabinet at home, and the local herb shops and health food stores were all closed, so I had someone rush out to bring him an ounce of Ghost Pipe tincture. After taking two 1 ml doses his pain was at a manageable level.

GHOST PIPE AND EMOTIONAL PAIN

Shortly after I began working with Ghost Pipe, I discovered that physical pain is not the only kind of suffering the plant could help people deal with.

The night that I made my first Ghost Pipe tincture, a group of friends came over for dinner and I told them about the plant. One of them, “Samantha,” found a lot of Ghost Pipe growing on the

land where she was living a few days later, and decided to tincture some herself to have on hand for emergencies.

A short while after that, our mutual friend, “Chuck”, was staying with Samantha, and she came home to find Chuck doubled over and rocking back and forth. When she asked him what was wrong, all he could say was “the pain!” So she gave him a dropper of Ghost Pipe tincture, and he calmed down and soon explained that he had just received horrendous news and had been paralyzed by the emotional pain.

Samantha brought Chuck to see me the next day, and he told me that when he took the medicine, it was as though everything he was upset about was taken out and put beside him where he could see it and work with it. I told him that he had described exactly the way Ghost Pipe works with physical pain, and suggested that he keep working with the medicine as long as he needed it. After all, we humans don’t have separate mechanisms for dealing with physical and emotional pain.

Chuck took Ghost Pipe tincture at the onset of feelings of panic and overwhelm every day for the next two months or so. Then, one morning, he reached for the tincture, and saw an image of the plant in his mind and heard the plant telling him that he didn’t need to take the tincture anymore. So he put the bottle down and focused on calling up the memory of what happened in his mind and his body when he took the medicine. Sure enough, he was able to shift in relation to the sources of his anxiety, examining them from the outside.

Since then I have given Ghost Pipe to a number of other clients for acute anxiety and panic attacks marked by emotional or sensory overload. When given to a person who feels overwhelmed by external stimuli, Ghost Pipe seems to provide a degree of separation from those stimuli, as described above. In these cases it will often combine nicely with the various potently nervine *Anemone* spp. (unless contraindicated by a forceful pulse and flushed complexion.) But when given to a person who is having difficulty feeling anchored in the present time and place due to intense emotions welling up from within in response to the triggering of implicit memory, Ghost Pipe can provide grounding and centering. Here I often combine *Monotropa* with *Stachys betonica* and *Acorus calamus*. In either kind of situation I will often also give an aromatic herb to help disperse the intense emotions coming up. Holy Basil is a favourite in this regard.

GHOST PIPE AND ENTHEOGENS

For two years I helped to run the first aid tent at a series of music festivals on a farm in western Maine. I spent a lot of time there caring for people who were having overwhelming experiences after taking LSD or DMT or various and sundry entheogenic mushrooms. In most cases, I would help people calm down with a gentle nervine like Skullcap, usually with great results. But sometimes people just wanted to come down from their trips. And inevitably there would be a few disruptive people brought to me by security because they were a danger to themselves or were frightening other people. For these cases, I needed an herb that would act more quickly and dramatically.

When I first started researching Ghost Pipe, I came across Ryan Drum's account of using the medicine to help sedate a man who was having a psychotic episode that seemed to be either brought on by or exacerbated by an intense drug experience.⁴ Based on this account, and on my experiences using Ghost Pipe for acute anxiety, I decided to try giving the medicine to the frightened and agitated psychonauts who wound up in my care.

In almost every case, the effects were quick and dramatic. Within a few minutes of giving 1-3 1ml doses of the tincture of the aerial parts, pupil dilation and responses to external stimuli would return to normal, and the person would begin to settle down. With 15-30 minutes the person would fall asleep and wake up hours later, calm and coherent.

In dozens of instance of treating fear and agitation brought on by entheogenic drugs, I have only seen four cases where Ghost Pipe did not successfully calm and sedate the person I was caring for, and all four cases fit the same pattern. Young men in their late teens or early twenties who were taking stimulants prescribed for Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder took LSD for the first time and became verbally abusive and, in three of the four cases, physically violent. They would scream the same phrases over and over again in a loop, and in every case the words and the tone suggested triggered memories of childhood sexual abuse. When I gave them Ghost Pipe, their pupil dilation changed, but their behaviour remained the same. My working hypothesis is that their Post Traumatic Stress Disorder caused them to act in ways that led them to be misdiagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. LSD made them more susceptible to having their repressed memories triggered, and the stimulation of Adderall coupled with the sensory overload of the LSD experience pushed them into a fearful and violent state, with Norepinephrine and Adrenaline upregulated to a dramatic degree.

INDICATIONS

from my own practice:

- Overwhelming physical pain – combine with anodyne herbs.
- Migraine-like headaches associated with traumatic brain injury
- Anxiety and panic associated with emotional or sensory overload
- Triggering of emotional memories that make someone feel “beside herself”
- Unpleasantly intense mind altering experiences, especially with tryptamine-bearing plants, fungi, and drugs

from *King's American Dispensatory* by Harvey Wickes Felter and John Uri Lloyd, 1898:

- Periodic fevers
- Childhood seizures (likely referring to febrile seizures)
- Epileptic seizures
- Ophthalmological inflammation (juice of the fresh plant with Rose water)
- Bladder inflammation

HARVESTING AND PREPARATION

Great care and discernment is required in harvesting this plant, which is abundant in some locales and scarce in others and extremely difficult to propagate.

Most modern sources suggest digging and tincturing the root only. Several practitioners tincture the whole plant. I have worked for several years now with a tincture of the aerial parts only, made with the folk method in 100 proof vodka, and have found it identical in its action to preparations made from the whole plant and from the root only. And I have seen new plants grow the following season in places where I harvested only the aerial parts of only a few individuals from each colony. To me this seems the most sustainable approach. The plant needs to be tinctured fresh and the resulting tincture will be purple.

The dried stalks make a mildly sedative tea or smoke.

DOSAGE

Tommy Priester told me to start with three drops of the tincture, but to jump up to 1ml if the person doesn't respond to a 3 drop dose. In some cases of severe panic/agitation I have given several 1ml drop doses at 5 minute intervals before seeing the desired effect

¹ Zdenka Babikova, Lucy Gilbert, Toby J. A. Bruce, Michael Birkett, John C. Caulfield, Christine Woodcock, John A. Pickett, David Johnson. “Underground signals carried through common mycelial networks warn neighbouring plants of aphid attack.” *Ecology Letters* (2013) 16: 835–843. Abstract accessed via <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/>

² Harvey Wickes Felter and John Uri Lloyd. King’s American Dispensatory. 1898. Accessed via <http://www.henlettesherbal.com/eclectic/kings/monotropa.html>

³ David Winston. Facebook post. February 24, 2012.

⁴ Ryan Drum. “Three Herbs: Yarrow, Queen Anne’s Lace, and Indian Pipe.” Accessed via <http://www.ryandrum.com/threeherbs.htm>