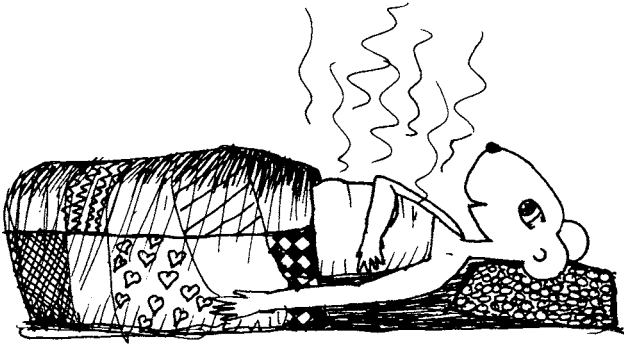


Chapter 11

Poultices, Compresses, and Soaks



Midwinter found us huddled in our eight-sided wooden yurt that was set up in the middle of the fallow, wind-swept garden. We could gaze out the windows at a wide view of Grayback Mountain where it presided over brown fields and treed slopes from under a mantle of heavy snow. We had both our wood cookstove and a wood-fired heating stove set up in the uninsulated structure and had filled the gaping cracks between the wall boards and the roof with raw sheep's wool. We even filled every knothole in every board with a plug of wool, but still the cold seeped through. It was standard practice to put knitted caps on all the kids before bedtime. This particular night, the two older ones had climbed up into the sleeping loft, while Mayche and I bedded down with Sena, our four-year-old blonde-headed wisp, on a futon mat on the floor. I lay awake for a while, entertained by the sound of the wind that dropped down from the mountain and swirled around the yurt. I remember thinking, "If we had shutters, they'd be shakin' now!" Then, wishing we *did* have shutters on the windows, I drifted off.

Somewhere around the middle of the night, Mayche shook me awake. "Sena can't breathe," she said. I could see in

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the bare moon and starlight that the little girl's shoulders lifted with each breath, breaths that came hard and rattled in her throat. It is like that with kids sometimes—upper respiratory infection can flare up in a few hours, and then can disappear almost as quickly under the right care. But this was frightening. Mayche soothed Sena, holding her in her lap and gathering the blankets close around, while I pulled on a pair of pants, lit a candle, and tried to think.

I remembered how my own mother used to hold me in the steam of a kettle to clear my breathing. Then, I thought of something better in the form of an onion poultice. This is a compound poultice made of partially fried onions, cornmeal, and vinegar, and it never fails to break up congestion. I was used to making them because they were the best way to treat Jeb's recurring ear infections. But this was a poor household, and as onions were one of our most popular foods—making savory the typical diet of brown rice, tofu, and kale—we happened to be completely out of them at the moment. In a desperate stretch of recollection, I flashed on the previous day when I had traversed the frozen garden and nearly stepped on an oblong onion, for some reason rejected or forgotten during fall harvest.

Mayche said, "Hurry up and do something." In seconds I was out the door and in the garden. The wan moonlight and the desperate energy of necessity guided my bare feet to the onion. It was half-buried and yielded to my fingers like a partially frozen placental blob, but I squeezed out a core of good onion—just big enough for a small poultice.

There was a gas burner set up in the tiny porch, and I danced around on freezing feet finding the right utensils. I lit the fire, put on an iron skillet, found the cutting board and knife, and finely minced the onion. Then, dribbling a little olive oil in the pan, I put in the onion pieces and stirred them around with the knife. I had to go inside to find the vinegar and the cornmeal. Sena was gulping for air and Mayche was rubbing her chest and back, coaching each breath. She gave me a telling glance that sent me hurrying back out to the porch. The onion was just right, about half-fried, so I poured in a generous cup of vinegar, which bubbled and fumed. Then I threw in a few scant handfuls of cornmeal, and stirred the ingredients to a stiff paste. Draping

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a clean diaper over a plate, I scraped the steaming mush on top, spread it about an inch thick, and made my way back to the bed. We laid Sena back and bared her chest. After ascertaining that it was not too hot, I slid the moist, gooey cloth gently onto her upper chest and throat, tucked the edges of the diaper under her armpits, and covered the poultice first with a plastic bag and then with a towel and a blanket.

We sat back on our heels to watch. The alliaceous and vinegar-laden fumes rose up, making our eyes smart and having a clearing effect even on *our* breathing. Sena also took an easier breath, then swallowed and took several more breaths, each deeper than the last. She never had been fully awake as far as we could tell and, within a few more breaths, she developed a dreamy expression and settled in.

My wife and I exchanged glances while the adrenaline slid out of our systems and our hearts quit thumping. Then in unison, we shrugged our shoulders and cuddled back in on either side of the sleeping child. More sleep was a welcome prospect.

I went up on one elbow and hardly had the strength to blow out the candle. We awoke to full morning light, and I rolled over immediately to check on Sena. Her eyes were open, pretty as bluebells, staring at the rough boards of the ceiling. When she saw me she smiled. "Daddy," she said, "can I have another one of those?"

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Poultices

A poultice is simply vegetable material, whole or mashed, which is layered or spread on the skin. Its primary function is to pull poisonous or infected matter from swollen tissues, wounds, or cysts. The hot poultice increases circulation, while the cold poultice reduces inflammation. Poultices also permeate the injured area with healing substances from the plant. A poultice is the herbal equivalent of "laying on hands," but in this case it is "laying on leaves."

Certainly the simplest technique of poulticing is to chew a leaf and spit it onto the affected part. A more sanitary approach is to wrap the injured area in fresh leaves, a procedure which, if conscientiously and repeatedly performed, can be effective treat-

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ment for afflictions ranging from an infected cut to rampant gangrene. Almost any green leaf from a broadleaf tree or plant will do, as long as one avoids overtly spiny, hairy, poisonous, or acrid plants. I have had good success using blue vervain, chickweed, dandelion, dock, English ivy, figwort, maple, marshmallow, mullein, and plantain for poulticing.

In order for a poultice to do its work, it must be adhered to the skin. Thin, smooth leaves (e.g. dandelion and plantain) may be bruised and moistened with their own juice, placed in layers to the skin, tied in place with strip of cotton cloth, and then left for several hours (or preferably overnight) to do their work. Thicker or fuzzier leaves (e.g. maple, marshmallow, and mullein) need to be lightly steamed until flexible and then applied hot. Apply towels for insulation before wrapping with a long strip of cotton cloth, which is then tied in place.

Example 1: Comfrey Poultice

Procedure dry root:

- 1) Use the dried roots of comfrey, ground up as finely as possible.
- 2) The quantity used is dependent on the area of coverage desired. A midsized poultice will require about 100 g of dried root.
- 3) Moisten the root powder with sufficient hot water to make a stiff paste.
- 4) Spread the paste directly on the injured area to a thickness of approximately 1 inch (2.54 cm).
- 5) Cover the area with a clean cotton cloth.

The poultice is preferably applied last thing before bed, left on all night, then scraped away and washed off in the morning. If the poultice is to be applied during the day, it may be secured with a long strip of cotton cloth. Repeat the procedure several times daily until the affliction is cured. Comfrey poultices are excellent for repairing traumatic damage to bones, tendons, muscles, nerves, or spinal cord. Comfrey causes rapid cell proliferation and markedly speeds healing.

Note: Not for use on deep, infected wounds or puncture wounds.

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Procedure fresh whole plant:

- 1) Dig the fresh roots and very thoroughly scrub them with a scrub brush, to remove the black, slimy cortex.
- 2) Chop up the roots with an equal portion of fresh, green comfrey leaf and combine these in a blender, using only sufficient water to cause the mucilaginous goo to vortex.
- 3) Spread the fresh paste directly on the injured area and cover with a clean cloth. Further directions as per dry root procedure, above.