Opening Story and Podcast Introduction

This was when I was a student. My mom had, um, amyloid disease. And so it was terminal. My family wouldn't let me give her herbs until the very 11th hour.

And I brought her herbs and she took up, she took that bottle, Heather, and she held it up with two hands and looked up and she said, please God. And I hope I'm not getting emotional, but she said, please God, let these work.

And it was right there, I realized that, did I do it right? It all came back to me, I questioned myself. Did I do it with the very best integrity that I could do it with?

And I think that's what we all should be bringing into making herbal medicine. Some days just don't feel like work and today is one of them. I have the distinct privilege of welcoming you back to the Think Well, Age Well podcast, but also to introduce you to Rick Scalzo.

Today, he is joining us and I am just So excited to dive into his career, his journey with you, he's really shaped the herbal medicine landscape, and way more than I realized before I was doing some research to prepare for this.

Rick began studying herbal and naturopathic traditions back in the 80s, immersing himself in everything from eclectic herbal medicine to Ayurveda to traditional Chinese medicine.

And then he went on to get a master's in herbal medicine. And he has an honorary doctorate in naturopathic medicine for his just incredible contributions to the field.

So after years of clinical practice, he founded Gaia Herbs in 1987. And this is a company that I am very familiar with, with my naturopathic career. I think of Gaia as one of the gold standards in herbal integrity, in potency, in transparency, and in just providing good high quality herbs that work to people.

And after selling Gaia, the company, he didn't even consider retirement, as I understand it. He realized that the herbs worked and he had more in him to give.

So instead, he launched the Institute of Botanical Research in Arizona and Costa Rica Medicinal Farms in Costa Rica, a fully regenerative organic farm that feels like the Garden of Eden, but has a little better soil science.

Rick Scalzo's Spiritual Origin Story

So today Rick is building on his newest adventure, Kokora, an herbal product company rooted in regenerative organic cultivation with a mission to create the finest herbal remedies that promote health and vitality for all.

So for more than four decades, Rick has been a pioneer and a protector of herbal wisdom. And now he's an innovator at the intersection of regenerative agriculture, medicine, and planetary health.

You can see why I'm so excited to welcome Rick today. Rick, I'm so glad you're here. I was thinking, wow, that was great. Thank you so much, Heather. I appreciate it.

I want to just start at the beginning, your origin story. How did the herbs find you? It was a spiritual journey. I was actually not in studying, interested in wellness or in any wellness aspect.

I was in college looking to understand philosophy and I was asking myself a lot of questions about who is God and which is quite interesting for somebody in the early 20s.

And so I wasn't satisfied with what I was learning in college. And one day I decided, one night, I decided I would go out and ask the question, meditate and spend the night under the stars.

And I did. And the only thing that came was that if I want to know God and get closer to God, I need to study plants and get closer to nature. So that was my impetus.

And I'm glad I did. That was a long time ago, though. Well, when you think back to those early days in the early 80s, right? Was there context? You know, was there things happening culturally or personally, I think you explained a little bit of that, that sort of opened this door to this lifelong path?

Were you part of like a counterculture movement or was this very well accepted by your family and people who cared about you or was it different? You know, at the time, I don't recall that my family really embraced what I wanted to do.

I was sort of a self-starter and I kind of moved through life at that time and self-supporting. And it was a journey that I knew I had to do. So, you know, I'm really glad I did it.

I don't regard myself as being counterculture, but I was just fitting into a stream of consciousness that I have for myself and following it. And with that, you know, you had, I guess, this experience under the stars that night, this realization that to get closer to God, you needed to get closer to the plants.

And did you have a vision? Like, was there a concrete vision of what you would create at that point, or has a lot of the journey been unexpected? No, it was basically, I need to go study plants.

I need to go back to the roots. And I left what I was doing at the time. I was doing part-time work in school, after school and in a bank, doing some banking type of work.

And I left that work and I went to work in a natural food store. And that was kind of my impetus to join my colleague there to go off to Utah to study herbs and spend the time in Utah studying herbs.

And I spent the time with one of our colleagues, Dr. Bill Mitchell. and Ed Madison studying plant medicine, naturopathic botanical medicine with them up in Montana and over in Seattle.

So it was quite a journey for me to get started with that tutelage. And then where did Gaia herbs come from? You know, Gaia was, after I went through all my school, I was in practice.

I don't know if that was part of my bio there, but I was in practice for about eight years. I saw about 10,000 patients and it was in a medical clinic with a medical doctor.

Founding Gaia Herbs and Herbal Integrity

lots of acupuncturists and a chiropractor and I was the herbalist and so I was responsible for seeing the patients with their herbal protocols and I needed to go out and gather the medicine, make their medicine and dispense their medicine.

So I handled the whole thing and after so long it just it became so much. And I decided I would reduce my practice by raising my prices. And when I almost doubled my prices, my practice almost doubled.

So, you know, who can explain that? But it is very true. And I decided I would phase out of practice and begin a product line. And I had no aspirations for building the Gaia that became Gaia.

But I just wanted to start a small company, you know, just to support myself. But it became a very big company, as you know. Yeah. You know, Bill Mitchell, you mentioned, and he is the person who sort of introduced me to the concept of Gaia, where I feel really privileged.

He had passed away by the time I got to Bastyr, but part of our curriculum was watching videos of Dr. Mitchell teaching. And one of them was on this deep exploration of Gaia.

So could, would you just explain what that is from your perspective and why you named the company Gaia? Well, it was, you know, it was really my, my journey with Gaia was really based on the writings of James Lovelock.

And at the time, you know, the idea is that we don't live on the earth. We live within it and we live amongst all of the forces and life forms on this planet.

So we're a partnership. And, and so that implies a very holistic process of relationship and connection. and co-evolution, and it all made sense to me.

And I thought, what a perfect term for the company, you know, to use that term. And the company had an ethos, right? Thinking of Gaia herbs, it was, I think of like purity and potency and transparency.

And this was kind of before those were buzzwords on social media and people talking about their pure, you know, latest supplement that they've got for sale on Amazon.

Can you talk about like, how were you guided to do that before it was cool? Well, for me, I just think that if I was going to do it right, I needed to do it right.

And what right meant to me was that A herbal product is only as good as the herb from which it came. And I needed to control the supply chain. So that's why we moved the company shortly after I founded it.

We moved it to North Carolina to establish what is now a 250 acre farm. When I was running it, it was 200 acres. And so that was the foundation for Purity.

Let me grow all these herbs organically. And, you know, I did, I grew. probably 40 to 45 crops at the time, which was a big chunk of our materia medica.

And so it was the foundation of what we would do. And, you know, I just wanted to carry that purity, that concept of purity into the whole upscaling, you know, the herbs into finished extracts.

So that means we needed to extract for purity. We needed to avoid excipients and, you know, harmful excipients. We needed to avoid harmful solvents, which many herbal products at the time, maybe even today, are made from.

And We needed to concentrate honoring nature. We needed the total potential of nature in our products, the wisdom of nature. So that means we represent all that's in the plant.

We don't isolate, we don't purify out, we don't structurally elucidate anything. And that was my, what do you call, my mode of operanda. You know, creating this MO, there is more to running a company than just growing the herbs and putting them in a bottle, right?

There's the leadership and the business acumen. There are all these pieces. And how did you come to have that, to build a large, successful company? What did you use for guidance?

I use my heart, my spirit. I was meditating for quite a long time by that point, so I used my ability to integrate spirituality into my thinking, into my leadership.

Today, it's a little bit different with my new company, Kokora. we actually formed an ethos for leadership called regenerative leadership. And what does regenerative leadership mean?

And you'll be happy to know that it's founded on the six principles of naturopathic medicine. And I've elaborated on them and what they mean in leadership and how they're used in nature and how nature is the ultimate CEO.

Would you mind running through those principles real quick? I will try to remember them. The first one is the Vis Medicatrix Naturae, you know, the healing power of nature and, you know, the acknowledgement and embracing of the reality, the truth that nature heals.

And as long as we don't interfere, you know, we don't step in the way of healing processes, then we have a good opportunity to align with the healing power of nature.

So what is the second one? Doctor as teacher, docere. Yeah, docere actosere and the doctor as a teacher, you know, the leader should not be somebody who tells you what to do in an organization, but it should be somebody who inspires, who teaches, who guides you with the greatest wisdom that can be offered in business.

And that is the wisdom of how nature guides evolution. And so we need to align ourselves with a higher purpose and a higher intention. And, you know, Primum non no cherry, first do no harm.

And the attitude that when you are a leader, you are not there to create problems, but you are there to set up practices and operations that are formative and fundamental in guiding truth and guiding wholeness and guiding evolution of your company and providing support to your people.

Regenerative Leadership and Naturopathic Principles

And in so many ways, CEOs get in the way of people's creativity and people's processes for contribution to a successful company. So, you know, those are a few, and there's three more, two or three more that are relevant.

Treat the cause, treat the whole, and prevent. Totally cause them and totally totem, right? Totally cause them is treat the cause and, you know, in problem solving, you can spin your wheels all day long trying to fix a problem on the level of the problem.

But if you step outside, and I have done this so often in business, step outside and say, you know, is this aligned to our mission, vision, values? And if it isn't, then step away from it.

Because your mission should define the most holistic approach to your business. And tole totem, treat the whole person. You know, I think you have to have respect in business for every employee that is there to grow your company.

So, you know, when you put all of these things together, you realize that, you know, nature is the perfect manager. Nature does this as a way of existence.

And why can't we adopt these principles? I've expounded upon them a lot in our company. and call them the regenerative principles of leadership. And I think they've worked for us.

Is there an herb that stands out to you? Is there one that is a favorite or has been a particularly good teacher? Wow, that's a great question. I don't know.

There's so many. If I were to ask you the same question, do you have that one single herb? Well, glycerides are right now, but I think it's been different over the, over the years.

Like at some stages, like oregano has been my favorite, but there have, at the moment, I think that's part of why I asked because I just, I have some like licorice tea that I'm having right now.

And it, it just feels like the right fit for the moment. And, but I think it's evolved. Um, but I was just curious, like in your journey, is there one that stuck out?

Well, it used to be when I was studying herbs, I used to love marshmallow root. And then I really loved hawthorn when we grew 200 hawthorn trees on the farm here in North Carolina.

Now I'm growing hectares, acres and acres of turmeric in Costa Rica and I'm in love with turmeric. And all of this now is, you know, we never had the vision to grow regeneratively at Gaia when I was there.

And, but, you know, we're growing very regeneratively in Costa Rica and to see a regenerative turmeric growing there, it's just, you know, it's profound and it's an amazing teacher.

A ginger comes up for me now, like thinking about tropical herbs, right? I want to get into the regenerative piece, but first I kind of want to make this transition from more temperate North Carolina.

You're outside of Asheville, right? Is where Gaia is? That's where Gaia is now, yeah. Yeah. And so very different climate than Costa Rica, which is much more tropical.

And so was there a shift in the herbs that you were drawn to or of course that you're cultivating with that shift in climate? Oh yeah, we can't grow what we grew in here in North Carolina.

It's too temperate and these crops would not do well. We have a very distinct rainy season, a very distinct dry season, and during rainy season we'll get 150 inches of rain.

during that season, during a six month period. So, you know, we have to focus on the more tropical crops that we can grow down in Costa Rica. And I would say we're growing about 11 or 12 crops there now that do very, very well and that are appropriate for growing in Costa Rica.

Okay, so the regenerative farming movement, you're a part of that. This is the ethos from which Kokora was born. Talk us through that. What does it mean to be a regenerative farm and what drew you to that in particular?

Many, many things really are part of a regenerative farming practice. We're certified regenerative organic by the regenerative organic alliance agencies.

You know, they granted our farm in Costa Rica, what they call gold status. So the first qualifier is bronze. And to be bronze certified, you do need to have organic practice.

To be silver certified, you need to have organic practice and you need to be fair trade certified. To be gold status, you need to have organic practice, fair trade certification, and you need to apply all of the elements that protect and grow the soil food web.

So being involved in a regenerative certified organic farm that's gold standard, you know, we go well beyond organic. We are fair trade certified, but we include practices like we make our own bio-ferments and we make our own biochar.

our own bamboo vinegar, we produce our own compost, we grow our own worms, we make worm compost tea. We are doing everything that speaks to the soil food web.

We're no till practice on our farm. That means no plowing. So we've taken it to the highest level. It's amazing when you see the quality of the soil aggregates that we have formed on our farm.

When you see in just three years the population of earthworms growing from 25 worms per square meter to 450. When you see in the spring when the first rains come, the whole farm, you know, 100 acres, looks as though it's covered with a blanket of snow.

But what it really is covered with is all these blooming mushrooms. all this fungi that's coming out of the soil as an expression of all the hyphae and mycelia that's already in the soil now coming in and breeding new life.

I just rejoice in that because I know we are feeding the soil You have focused so much in disorders of cognitive dysfunction.

Favorite Herbs and the Move to Costa Rica

And I like to say, in a way, our gut is connected to the soil, which is connected to the brain. So the whole gut-brain axis has got the interface of our soil and the microbiome in the soil that kind of supports both the gut and brain health.

So I focus a lot on soil food web, which is the microbiome. You've been at this for four decades. I'm curious about your understanding of people and the relationship between people and plants and how that's evolved.

I feel like you're kind of getting into that here, but do you have sort of a framework in how you think about the relationship between people and plants?

Well, you've got to honor the wisdom of nature. As any one of us at any point in our life, we're experiencing the tilth of the earth in one shape or form or another.

We're interfacing with the tilth of the earth. Why not do it with respect and reverence and dignity? There's this wisdom, there's knowledge, there's an orchestration of intelligence at play at every moment.

We interface with plants all the time, whether we know it or not, through our diet, through our medicines and so forth. But we don't know how deeply we interface with the soil, where these plants come from.

And that's the responsibility that I've taken on is really try to bridge that connection between people and plants, which is building a robust microbiome in the soil.

Is there something that you wish more patients, more, you know, basically people who are engaging with medicine, people who have health conditions, something that they understood about herbal medicine and what kind of gets missed in some of these clinical settings?

Can you answer that in a little different way? Yeah, I guess I'm imagining a patient walking into a clinic with an ailment. And from my perspective as a naturopath in a conventional clinic, right?

They're coming in with whatever it is and we'll just take my space, right? They're aging. And so they got aches and pains and they're worried about their memory and they don't have as much energy as they used to.

Is there, I guess, what do you wish that they knew walking into there about the potential for herbs? Is that helpful? Yeah. I think the wish I would have is that they knew that herbs represent the healing power of nature.

They have the ability to reshape, reset, redesign, reorganize our physiology back to a state of wholeness. And if we step out of the way, as I said, that these medicatrix naturae implies nature heals when given the opportunity.

And so we have to be a co-creator in this journey in our wellness. And what does stepping out of the way mean? I mean, as a doctor to your patients, it may mean a lot of things.

As somebody who's working on creating the highest quality plant remedies, it may mean another different set of things. I'll give you an example. For me, what it means, Heather, is I'm going to grow regeneratively now and I'm going to do it.

If I'm going to choose to do it, I'm going to do it to the very highest degree. And then after I take these herbs and harvest them, I'm going to treat them with reverence.

I'm not going to extract them with toxic solvents like many companies do. I'm going to use water and organic alcohol to extract them. I'm not going to dry those extracts using a myriad of different excipients that include things like maltodextrin and things like that.

So I'm not going to put impurities into the product artificially. I'm going to concentrate those products to a degree

where I know they can be therapeutic for the patient.

I'm going to do everything I can to understand the delivery system so that I can make this know with the highest opportunity for success when the patient takes it.

So I think of it that way. You probably, I would love to know how you think of it because I'm sure it's very different.

Regenerative Farming at Kokora

Even in my clinical practice, part of the reason I was so excited to talk to you today is every time I learn about herbal medicine, I'm more inspired to use it, both personally and professionally.

And I think I'm almost admitting to you right now, I don't use it enough. I don't use enough herbs. And I think to get over that, I think to start using them, I feel like there's a lot of potential that's missed.

Now, lion's mane, we use quite a bit of. The mushrooms, I feel like are pretty accessible. Tinctures, less so. So things that can be put into capsules feel a little easier for a lot of people rather than the alcohol extracts.

And dealing with the tinctures just can sometimes be a lot for people. But yeah, I mean, I think I'm just, I'm looking to you for the wisdom so that I can then translate that into more benefit for my patients.

Kokora is a really beautiful name. We talked about the origins of Gaia. I'm curious what Kokora means to you and how it sort of represents what you're building in this regenerative movement.

Yeah, well, to take in, you know, the root for that name is Kokoro. which literally translates out of the Japanese culture to mean the connection of spirit or soul, heart and mind and the integration of all of those.

And you know, for me, since we're working so much on the you know, soil to soul kind of concept, it made sense that we use a name that was, you know, addressing, you know, in its meaning.

I happen to feel that Kokoro as a name was too masculine, so I changed it to Kokora and so the, you know, the name would flow a little bit more. and be softer and more approachable to women.

And it felt right. You know, when I say Kokora, it just feels like it's just got more of a softer quality to it. But yeah, it implies this very holistic relationship between soul and heart and mind.

That's beautiful. And then there's this regenerative practice that, yeah, it almost feels Asian or kind of Confucius, right? This like cyclic, like this regenerative picture in my mind is like that, oh.

that you sometimes that very simple drawing that you see in Zen temples or in a spa setting. But the regenerative practices, they also change the quality and the energetics of the medicine, of the herbs themselves.

Can you talk about that? Absolutely. You know, when When you grow regeneratively, I'm going to share with something with you that still, I won't share it all because we're developing IP around it, but something we observed on our farm is when you grow regeneratively, you put your crops the way we do it.

We're putting in bio-ferments. Which, by the way, are made, I mean, I'll explain it very quickly. We go out and harvest some of the forest floor, some of the soil, leaves, twigs, branches, bring it back and we mix it with rice semolina, a little bit of powdered milk.

a little bit of coffee hulls from the coffee processing. We put in a bit of molasses as the feed for the organisms. We add some cinnamon and some cloves.

We take all this, mix it all together into a sticky pasty material, put it in a 50 gallon sack, tie it, put that sack into a 200 gallon tank, let it ferment for two weeks, and the whole tank is then filled with bio-ferments, which are filled with

bacteria and fungal organisms, which can feed the soil biome.

And so we take this as a foundation for making our own fertilizers, our regenerative fertilizers, our regenerative pathogen controls. And so it's always going into our soil, onto our plants, either fully or fed or injected right into the soil.

And what we've noticed is the biome that exists, you know, you've heard in plants, we have to test for the total plate count. you know, when we're testing for purity of our crops, do they contain any microbes, any E.

coli, any coliforms, things like that? Well, these bio-ferments are anti-pathogenic to all of those. And they also enable a beneficial organism called Bacillus subtilis which is a spore forming organism to predominate as almost a protective layer around the roots and around the plants.

So when we're harvesting our regenerative crops, we're not only getting the value of the crop phytochemically and nutritionally, but we're getting a very vast biome or probiotic quality that is a new feature that you haven't gotten before in crops that are grown organically or conventionally.

It's pretty amazing to see when we test and to see when we do speciation on our test to see all of the microbes that exist in the plant sample. It's all bacillus subtilis now.

And so do you think this translates into a improved microbiome for a human who's taking the herbs that you guys are creating, or does it translate into a more balanced immune system or better immune function?

What does this mean from sort of a practical health? Well, a Bacillus subtilis is a very beneficial organism, and it at least gives us a boost to our gut microbiology.

And that is, as you and I know, that is a foundation for healthy immunity, for healthy cognitive function, and so forth. Fascinating. How exciting. Um, I, I'm curious to, I want to shift from sort of the professional to the personal.

You have been at this for 40 years, so you've had, you've had a lifetime to accumulate wisdom and experience. And I'm wondering, like, what are the top things that are helping you to think well and age well?

Well. I do have a routine and aside from eating, you know, really healthy and, you know, a holistic diet. What does that mean? What does that mean to eat healthy for you?

It means eat the foods, choose the vegetables, choose the foods that are supportive to my constitution.

Plants, Soil, and Human Health

Now, I am very deeply involved in TCM medicine. And so when I look at my constitution, I'm usually looking at it these days from a TCM diagnostic. Traditional Chinese medicine.

Yeah, traditional diagnostic approach. I happen to have a bit of dampness in my constitution, and I happen to have, you know, stomach chi deficiency, as we call it, or spleen deficiency, and I need to nurture that.

So I'm choosing foods that help to check dampness, that help to improve my stomach. you know, energetics and, you know, I'm choosing more vegetables that are green and, you know, I'm choosing herbs that tend to promote, dry up some of the dampness and, you know, cool down at the same time since my dampness is more heat related.

So, you know, which is more of a challenge, but I, you know, I kind of know how to deal with it. So that's for me. I, you know, I'm able to really bring together a more customized approach to my diet, to my food intake.

And then I'm able to, because of where I live in Costa Rica, I have a beautiful yoga shala. So my morning practice is You know, after I'm up, I go up to the clean up, go up to the yoga shala and I do a series of yoga postures that

are supported from my back.

And then I do, I sit up in a lotus position and I, well, before I do that, I do a forward bend that stretches my, from my low back all the way, touching my forehead to my toes to stretch my entire spine.

And then I'm doing some core exercises. Then I sit in a full lotus and I do tapping. You know what tapping is? I'm using a tapping tool to tap all over my body, you know, like this, to help clear stagnation.

And, you know, all over, head to toe. And then I do some breathing, Uddiyana Bandha breathing exercises. to help build core strength. Then I do a series of, I guess you can call them restorative meridian massage, about a 15 minute practice to massage along all the meridians and key longevity points in the body to activate the energy flow.

And then after that, I do a series of Qigong exercises. That's all my morning routine. And then that's followed by sauna and infrared sauna and cold plunge.

How long does this all take? Almost two hours. And then in the afternoon I'll get in the pool and do a series of 50 laps, which are more, you know, aerobic type of what I call like aqua jogging laps.

So I'm lifting my legs up, my knees up to my chest as I'm doing this. And what's happening there is I'm actually creating more flexibility in my low spine and so forth.

You know, as many of us age, you know, we start to feel it in our posture, in our spine, in low spine particularly. And, you know, and then we don't get around very much.

We don't stay in motion the way we should. And so I think one of the foundations for aging is movement. We have to keep active and keeping the low spine as supple as possible is very important.

Is there anything else that stands out to you? You talked about movement and meditation and diet. Are there, you also mentioned to me before we started recording that you've had the opportunity to visit many of the blue zones around the world and you live in Costa Rica where there is one.

Are there things, are there people who have taught you, who have been particular mentors or teachers who have taught you about not just the diet and the exercise and the things we all know, but about what it means to age truly well?

Absolutely. You know, because I had been going back to Italy, primarily to the Blue Zones there, and this past summer, it was interesting because I learned something, which I knew, but I heard one of the centenarians say to me that I didn't associate with healthy aging, and that is not to entertain weary or mental anxiety.

And I just thought about that, and I said, wow, is that really something that is really bogging us down? Do we spend a lot of our times worrying in a field of anxiety about, you know, events and circumstances and results of things and how much of our life do we let go and we embrace.

The other thing Heather is, and you can comment on that if you want, but I'll just say one other thing is we need to experience more moments of awe. Everybody knows what a moment of awe is for them.

How many moments of awe do you invite in your life every day?

Herbal Medicine in Clinical Practice

Right. How do you cultivate that? Well, you create an environment that's suitable for evolution, suitable for life, instead of create an environment that's toxic for yourself and be able to change it.

And this implies one of the tenets of regenerative living for these long centenarians is connections. you know, I speak about and you speak about as a naturopathic physician about how important the fascia is for health and well-

being.

Well, the fascia is in a way what connects our cells and organs and tissues. And when we extrapolate that into society, we have to have a similar web that connects us to society in a healthy way so we remain active and present and purposeful in our life, right?

Yeah, I was hoping that you would touch on that community and relationships. They're such an important part of aging well. What does that look like for you?

Well, unfortunately I live on a mountain top alone in Costa Rica, so I am making it this starting at Thanksgiving. I made it a resolution to once a month, spend at least four or five days in community with friends, even if I have to go somewhere and be together.

And so I think I have to do that because I really feel that's when I feel the best. And you know, when I laugh, when I experience partnership, when I experience purposefulness beyond my work.

When I can teach to others and inspire others, you know, that's, you know, in Japanese culture, they say you have to live your Ikigai. And throughout the course, Ikigai means your life purpose.

And I know what my life purpose is. And as I'm aging, it definitely includes teaching and inspiration, inspiring the younger population. If you could pass on just a single message to the next generation of herbalists and healers, what would it be?

It would be, you know, think for a moment of how well we're all connected to nature and, you know, let's not forget source, you know, in our work with herbs.

Let's embrace source. Let's embrace the wisdom of nature that guides us and bring it to the conscious forefront and remain in partnership with it. Beautiful, beautiful.

So I just want to get your feedback. In the mornings, I drink matcha that comes from Japan and I put Lion's mane and theanine and taurine. It's in a little combo thing and some MCT oil and creatine in there.

What else do I put in there? Oh, and some collagen powder. Is there anything I'm missing? What else should I, is there something else I should be adding to my matcha blend?

Are there herbs, especially for brain health, that I might be missing out on personally and for my patients? Well, you know, we did this, I will say bacopa, and we did this interesting study, Heather, at our institute in Arizona at the Sonoran University.

We do RNA gene sequencing there, and so we're looking at the effects in vitro, but still the effects of herbs on genes, whether or not they are upregulating or downregulating genes.

And we found, with memory, we found some fascinating results. with Lion's Mane and Lion's Mane mixed with Bacopa and then Bacopa separately from Lion's Mane.

And then surprisingly with our seven mushroom mocha product with seven unique mushrooms as a drink. And the amount of genes for healthy cognitive function, for memory, the amount of genes that were turned on by Lion's Mane with Bacopa Bacopa separately and the seven mushroom mocha beverage was probably 20 or 30 genes that supported healthy cognitive function.

And the number of genes that were turned off that interfere with healthy cognitive function that contribute to, you know, different brain disorders, probably 15 or 20 genes were turned off by the same herbs.

And this is a product that you can buy? Well, we tested the Kokora products. Got it. Our Lions main product has Bacopa extract that we grow on our farm added to it.

And then we also tested our separate Bacopa and we tested our seven mushroom mocha. So yeah, you can buy all three of those products. And can I add them to my matcha in the morning?

The seven mushroom mocha you can, it's a beverage. The Bacopa and lion's mane with Bacopa you'd have to take as capsules. But yeah, but the seven mushroom mocha drink powder is delicious and it goes great in most beverages.

That's great. Well, you know, you brought up the Institute of Botanical Research and I'm curious, what is, what's the goal there? What are you hoping to, what are the answers that you're trying to, what are the questions?

Kokora, Bioferments, and Microbiome Benefits

Maybe we'll start there. What are the questions you're trying to answer? Well, let's step back. Why did I do it? When I left Gaia, I wanted to make a contribution to the herbal industry.

And I thought I would like to see herbal medicine under the roof of a naturopathic umbrella. And that would make me happy. So I went to Dr. Paul Mittman, whom you know, who was the president at the time, of what was at the time Southwest College of Naturopathic Medicine, now Sonoran University.

of Health Sciences, and we decided that we would contribute to the building out of this institute after I sold Gaia, so we did that. and it became a foundation for doing research beyond just the purity and bioactivity testing.

We wanted to see the mechanisms in which these herbs work. So we did brought in a virologist who did human cell line, bioassay cell line testing on human cell lines and this RNA sequencing type of gene expression work.

In order to give guidance to Yes, it's in vitro, so maybe we can't predict fully how these herbs are going to work based on the in vitro results, but at least it will give us direction on what they may do in the body if we were to experience them clinically or in vivo.

And sure enough, you know, the research is exciting and that's what Kokora does. It uses the Institute for all of its RNA sequencing and bio-essay cell line testing.

for every product. So we have at least a direction, a supportive mechanism on how these herbs are going to work in the body and to help us guide our structure function claims.

Great. Wow. And that integration with a naturopathic school makes a lot of sense because as naturopaths this is we're going to deploy these medicines and practice.

I am curious what role you see herbalists and naturopaths playing in sort of restoring ecological health as well as human health, like bringing it all together.

There's this regenerative farming practice and adding herbs to medicine. And there's this bigger vision, I think, this global ecological perspective that you have.

And I'm curious how you see the practitioners, the professionals in that space contributing to it. Well, you know, in the nature of athletic medicine, we say that, you know, it's important to take foods that are highly nutrient-dense, right?

And, you know, yet we rely on other people to provide those foods for us. So, you know, the interface between regenerative farming, which we have proven, undeniably, we have proven how regenerative farming increases nutrient and phytochemical density of our crops.

And we know through Rodale Institute, who's done so much research on nutrient density of food crops, how this is changing. And we're talking about really activating nutrients and phytochemicals like ergothionine in our foods, particularly in our legumes, ergothionine that helps to really create a foundation for longevity.

So when I think about this interface between the environment, the people who are practicing, the people who are seeking out practice. I still have to come back to where plants, the role that plants play because they represent our food, our medicine.

They come from soil that we're all dependent upon. And more specifically, they come from a soil food web, which has been ignored. And maybe that ignorance of our soul food web is part of what's contributed to the proliferation of disease.

Without a doubt. I'm sure it's a big part. I certainly come to the conclusion. in my, just when I think big picture, like what would make the world a better place?

It starts with regenerative agriculture. You have less disease if you have higher quality food. It just always comes back to that in my opinion. And it sounds like we've drawn the same conclusion.

You've been immersed in this for decades. I'm curious, like what surprised you the most looking back? What surprised me the most? You know, I am such a purist when it comes to making herbal products.

What surprises me the most is why are there not more people embracing a similar attitude to manufacturing of herbal products? Is it not just simply the bottom line?

I don't know if I should answer that. For me, that would be a cop-out, you know, that you're doing it just because you want to make more money. I think we have to look at our ethical responsibility.

I'll share with you something very personal, and this was when I was a student. My mom had amyloid disease, and so it was terminal. My family wouldn't let me give her herbs until the very 11th hour.

And I brought her herbs, and she took up She took that bottle, Heather, and she held it up with two hands and looked up and she said, please God, and I hope I'm not getting emotional, but she said, please God, let these work.

Morning Routine for Thinking and Aging Well

And it was right there, I realized that, did I do it right? It all came back to me, I questioned myself. Did I do it with the very best integrity that I could do it with?

And I think that's what we all should be bringing into making herbal medicine. We don't see 99.9% of the people that take our herbs, but we have a responsibility to their wellness if we're gonna choose to make herbal products for them.

I can relate and certainly resonate with what you just described of the profound interaction between healer and patient and showing up to that every day and having this question of like, did I do it right?

Did I do the best I could? Did I, am I showing up in integrity with whatever your art is, right? Whether you're a healer or an herbalist or a painter or a banker or whatever, or a care partner for someone, this intention, right?

It's living with intentionality. It's so beautiful you use that word, intention, and also confidence and conviction. I found that that's a big part of what makes the herbs work.

Your confidence and your conviction and what you've put into this enlivens the healing potential of these herbs. Do you believe that? Do I believe that?

Absolutely. Yeah. I mean, I've experienced that. Yeah, it's true. I've actually seen it in practice with an M. D. I practice with who is prescribing Chinese medicines by just giving out a little prescription slip to fulfill at the front desk.

And his patients would then come to me and say, well, Dr. Doyle's herbs aren't working. And I said, well, let me go

through and let's talk about each herb and let's have a discussion about why these are recommended.

Then they would take the herb and then they would start getting results. And, you know, just breeding conviction and confidence is a big part of healing.

And some people would say, oh, well, that's just placebo. And yet my response to that is like, it's actually multifactorial, right? It's like you give the herbs and they can do what they can do, but then when you actually infuse potency in them through the intentionality, that is the shift.

I think so. I think it's so true. I love how you use the word intention. It's a beautiful word when you apply it to, you know, the giver and the receiver.

Yeah, to both. You have this opportunity to retire. You sold a large company and you could have kind of just been like, all right, I'm going to kick my feet up and relax, but you seem to be accelerating.

And maybe I, maybe that's just my perception, having read your bio, but like, is that one, is that true? And two, what keeps you inspired to keep building, to keep putting the effort in?

Well, it's just, you know, it's what I said when we talked about the centenarians, you know, we all are born with our ikigai, our purpose. And for me, I'm really, yes, I'm a herbalist and I receive these wonderful accolades for what I've done.

But at the end of the day, I'm a visionary. And I have a purpose, you know, and I want to be sure I leave a legacy that can continue on. That was my next question is, what is your legacy?

If at your, I don't mean to be morbid, but you know, your eulogy, what does it sound like? What is your legacy? Right now, I'm working with the government of El Salvador to transform the country into a regenerative agriculture country, which is big.

And we're working on building a very, very huge project that can set the foundation for a whole new stream of pharmaceuticals, of botanical type drugs that are made with the integrity that we're talking about.

That would be my ultimate legacy is to get a transformation started with an example like we can do in El Salvador. President Bukele is very interested in what we're doing and we're having lots of conversations and it's really inspiring to see how a whole country is starting to embrace regenerative agriculture.

That is exciting.

Blue Zones, Community, and Ikigai

Wow. Rick, you know, this has been a really rich and generous conversation. I'm so grateful to you for coming. I want to make sure people know how to find out more about Kokora, about you.

And if you have other wisdom you're excited to share, I want to give you the floor. Well, that's very kind of you. Well, people can reach, look us up on our website at uw.kokoralife.com.

And that's the way to connect to our website. You can follow us on Instagram or on Facebook at Kokora Life. And, you know, you can also follow me on Instagram through Rick Scalzo.

But, you know, I think the important thing is when we talked about those those principles of naturopathic medicine. And I love, I so love, you know, I've done so many podcasts now and as a naturopathic doctor, I so love chatting with you because of that connection on these principles that we share, but to enliven them here on the show and talk about how they can also be, you know, enlivened in business.

They could be enlivened in our personal life, in our family life, I think that to me is very exciting. I would hope

people would, if anything, really look up the six principles of naturopathic medicine and begin to expound upon their application into all aspects of life rather than just naturopathic medicine.

Beautiful. Rick, it is a true privilege to have you here. I just can't thank you enough. Your life's work is really a reminder that herbal medicine isn't just about the plants, right?

It's about relationships with the land, with the soil, with our bodies, with the communities that we nourish and that they nourish, and then the whole planet, right?

You know, from Gaia to Kokora and from the forests of North America and Asheville to the forests of Costa Rica. I think you've shown over and over again that it's possible to work with integrity, principles, and also be innovative and to respect the earth, to respect the humans and the life forms on the earth.

And you've really, I think you have elevated the herbal industry and you're also this You're a light that shines the way for people to age with vitality and purpose and a sense of this innovation and creativity and acceleration even as you're aging.

And so I really appreciate you for showing up here and for sharing your wisdom and some of your stories and this vision for a future where people and plants and the whole planet can really thrive.

It's really been an honor and a privilege to have you here. Thank you. Thank you, Heather. It's an honor to chat with you, and I hope we can do it again.

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