

Ways of knowing, ways of seeing
Story from Alaska

"It could help you", he said, "This is a very powerful plant. You could use it." I felt Bob Sam was offering me a gift as he showed me how to gather medicine in the Alaskan woods. He cut long stems of Devil's Club in early spring before new growth made it more difficult and the renewing energy of the plant transformed into foliage. Scraping off the rough outer brown bark he showed me the pale green inner bark. This was its medicine. The shavings he placed carefully in a paper bag.

Bob Sam spoke about preparing himself to gather medicine, how he puts all bad thoughts out of his mind. "That way you can only do good with what the plant offers you," he told me, "You have to ask the plant if it can be taken. Speak to it, ask for help. Tell it that someone is sick, that you need to make medicine. His ancestors used to fast before entering the forest. I understood that when I was ready, the plant would reveal itself to me. Looking hard and deep, I walked through the forest searching for Devil's Club. Wanting so much to make my medicine. It was all around me, I knew. But where?

The next day, I returned to look again. This time I stood quietly within myself, inhaling the mushroomy scent of decay and new growth, of last year's memories intermingled with those of tomorrow. I practiced not looking. And I waited. Still as stone from the forest's edge, Devil's Club showed itself to me for the first time. Perhaps I had dreamed of it last night while the forest waited for me to awaken. Now it is a plant I work with often - wherever I am.

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