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Interviewed by Karen Menehan, Editor
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In Touch With Valerie Cooksley

Valerie Cooksley, RN, 43 is a Holistic Health educator, Integrative Aromatherapist and Nursing Director and founder of the Institute of Integrative Aromatherapy in Seattle, Washington and has been practicing and writing about essential oil therapy and natural health for the last 15 years. She lives in Sammamish, Washington with her husband Bill and twin sons, Kristopher and Ryan ages 16. She has authored several natural health books including her newest called *Healing Home Spa* to be published by Penguin Putnam in September. She has a selective aromatherapy practice specializing in natural cancer support and spiritual energetic blending, and is president of Flora Medica, a therapeutic essential oil company. The Institute, based in Washington, offers health practitioners, such as massage therapists and nurses, professional training and CEU accreditation (325 CEU's) through an intensive certification diploma program. Presently, Valerie has a group of 8 students studying at a clinic in Trinidad, as well as students in the United States.

What initially got you interested in aromatherapy?

I began my nursing career as an Infectious Disease/Isolation nurse and went on to specialize in Medical Oncology, becoming one of the first nurses in the U.S. to be nationally certified in Oncology Nursing through the Oncology Nursing Society in the eighties. I gave birth to my twin sons in 1986 and made the decision to leave my nursing career at that time and stay home full time and raise them. With the impetus of caring for my babies the best way possible, I began to study natural holistic medicine. I came to the realization that it made more sense to work with nature, rather than against it, to create health. I became seriously interested in nutrition, herbalism and environmental medicine. I studied botanical medicine at Bastyr Naturopathic College and soon after discovered my passion in aromatherapy. I have a cousin that is a medical doctor in France, and learned of the medical applications of essential oil therapy as it is practiced in that country. I studied with Dr. Daniel Penoel, a renowned French medical doctor, and with a German chemist as well, since it was important for me to understand the scientific foundation for this complimentary therapy. I went on to study other therapies including homeopathy, Ayurveda and other holistic therapies that I could integrate with aromatherapy. The term Integrative aromatherapy was coined by myself and a colleague of mine, when we founded the Institute of Integrative Aromatherapy in 1998.

Who, or what, inspires you most?

There are two naturopathic physicians who are truly pioneers in their field that greatly inspire me through their personal teachings and tutelage: Dr. Joseph Puleo, energetic researcher and author; and Dr. Bruce Berkowsky, homeopath and natural health scientist. I personally find it a most exciting time to be part of the integrative movement into the clinical setting as a holistic nurse. I am also inspired by my students and clients whose gratitude and personal health are my greatest reward for teaching and doing this work.

What is your greatest strength?

One of my strengths is to be able to transform highly scientific and complicated information into practical terms and make it more easily understood for the lay person. I find that because of my nursing background, people connect with me as a credible, empowering facilitator and teacher. However, I firmly believe that people heal themselves; I am merely in a position of influence.

What is your greatest weakness?

My greatest weakness may be to practice what I preach sometimes. I just spent a great deal of time writing at the computer and editing the final version (galleys) of my most recent book and I had to remind myself to practice good self care and put to use what I wrote about. I have a home office and that makes it all the more challenging because work is always there. Finding balance is key for me.

What brings you the most joy?

I am just in awe of nature, but I must say that helping others find their truth, health and changing their life for the better in natural ways brings me immense joy. I get a tremendous fulfilling feeling when I have assisted someone else in making the personal connection in taking responsibility for their own health. It is very rewarding to empower someone in a way that can change them forever and for their highest good. I have come so far from my days of high end nursing and giving experimental chemotherapeutic agents and caring for out-patient radiation therapy patients.

What is your personal philosophy?

Everything we need to heal ourselves and the planet is available to us and is God given or inspired. Nothing is incurable and everything is possible. I also strongly affirm the naturopathic oath of first do no harm and believe that the immense power of the mind is awesome.

What is your business philosophy?

To do good, give honestly and with the highest intentions and it will come back to you. It was also a difficult lesson to learn first hand, that as someone in the healing profession, we must take money for our services. This was very hard for me in the beginning, however I have learned that money is a form of energy and it must be in continual flow. Give back, donate a portion, re-invest into your business, help others with scholarships, support other teachers, healers and cottage industries by recommending their products and services. There is room for everyone, and quite frankly, I believe all healers are needed right now.

When are you most at peace?

I am most at peace when there is harmony and balance within myself and family. The flow of energy ripples out to all I come in contact with. I love to sit outside at dusk and burn a bon fire in our fire pit. I use frankincense and myrrh resin and juniper berries, sage and other herbs to make it more meaningful. I look into the night sky and at the stars and enjoy the quiet time. Mornings are also another time I treasure when the sun is rising and I realize I have been given a new day – to be fruitful, productive and to work towards fulfilling my mission. I love the ocean and nature. One of my favorite hobbies is macro-photography, taking really close-up photos of botanicals, even inside their center, specifically the flowering species.

Who has been your greatest influence?

My father has been my greatest influence in my life, although he passed 5 years ago. I dedicated one of my books to him which was about nature. It was called “Comforting Scents” and was an aromatherapy journal full of aromatic poetry, biblical verses and plant descriptions. He loved poetry, nature and gardening. He encouraged me to always do my best, and to be a good student. I have a great desire to learn which I am confident I got from his strong paternal influence. I have a deep appreciation of nature and gardening as he did. He is the one who encouraged me to become a nurse because he saw how good I was caring for our farm animals when they were sick. He was 100% Italian decent, and very much from an “old world” culture. He did not believe in hospitals but home health care. He often “doctored” us, made his own soap, farmed the land, raised animals and was very resourceful.

Where will you be 10 years from now?

Hopefully I will have my naturopathic degree, although I have twin sons getting ready to head for college themselves. I have an insatiable and inquisitive mind, and love of reading and studying vibrational therapies and natural healing methods, although my future could lead me in a few different directions. I see myself teaching internationally and part of a holistic healing center with other like-minded healers and teachers.

If you could give an aromatherapy session to any historical figure, who would you pick, and why?

I would like to do an intensive consultation for the President Bush. I would love to make a spiritual phytoessence or soul blend for him as I think it would be an awesome experience to be able to positively affect someone who is in an influential position as he and it could very well have an impact on many others. Nothing replaces personal experience.

What is the role of aromatherapy in the health care system?

Presently, more and more nurses and massage therapists, as well as pastoral caregivers, social workers, and natural healers are learning essential oil therapy. Lay persons are wanting the education to better care for themselves and their family in natural ways. With the advancement of CAM within the mainstream allopathic setting, I am observing many nurses and some physicians trying to catch-up to the wealth of information and effective healing tools available to assist with health and wellbeing. I first personally saw aromatherapy enter mainstream via pleasure and stress relief in the early 80's; now it is entering long-term care, hospice, cancer care, psychology, etc. In the future I see aromatherapy being of primary importance for prevention and treatment of antibiotic resistant bacterial infections (intensive aromatic medicine), given homeopathically and for psycho-spiritual growth.

What's the best result you've ever witnessed from aromatherapy?

Honestly, this is difficult to narrow down to one case...

I have had the privilege of working with a mother whose only way of communicating with her dieing 5 year old son who could not hear, see or talk, using aromatherapy. He had a rare brain degeneration (neuronal ceroid lipofuscinoses) which impaired all but his sense of smell near the end of his life. It was a very humbling and honoring experience to assist the family in communicating with him in a positive and meaningful way using aromatherapy. I have seen aromatherapy have extremely phenomenal effects on wound healing when all else had failed. Also end of life care in helping the dieing transition to the other side, peacefully, as the olfactory sense is often the last sense to go. But then again, I cannot discount the day to day successes I see in preventing illness in my own family and clients who are rarely sick, and children who have never had an ear infection, allergy or flu necessitating over the counter pharmaceuticals.

What is the greatest challenge facing the field of complementary therapies?

The greatest challenge I see facing the field of complimentary therapies is the balance between gaining recognition as an effective therapy, while not taking the therapy out of the hands of the lay person which may prevent the common people from treating

themselves with natural, God-given plants and other healing therapies. However, having said that, I also believe there should be some standards set for those who wish to practice these healing modalities as health professionals. The new ABC codes and insurance coverage for integrative therapies is a step in the right direction.

Ultimately the responsibility for personal health is not in a magic pill or potion, or even the doctor or healer. The next generation, as this one is finding, will be in total control of their health. Bioenergetic healing will be irrefutable and measurable; vibrational medicine having the greatest challenge in this regard.

Where do you see aromatherapy 10 years from now?

I was part of a two year steering committee that developed the framework for the Aromatherapy Registration Council (ARC) and I presently sit as an advisory board member. The goal for this council, and also where I see aromatherapy in the next 10 years, is developing standards of practice for the clinical application of essential oil therapy and licensing, with insurance coverage under botanical medicine. However I hope it never leaves the hands of the lay person for a natural means of self care. More and more medicinals will be delivered via the olfactory and respiratory system, and since essential oils are preventative, therapeutic, pleasurable to use and are able to cross the blood-brain barrier to affect the neuro-hormonal balance of the brain, I think there is great promise for aromatherapy and all its many and varied applications for our future.