

Preface

My memoir began as a collection of stories loosely written to recount some of my life challenges and joys. I started to unravel some of the emotions underlying those stories and to gain insights into my past, my behavior, and that of my family members. I did not realize that the final volume would evolve into so much more.

This journey led to some deep places, places that I had locked in a box in my psyche. With the encouragement of my psychotherapist, and later from teachers, friends, and mentors in two writing groups, I was able to unlock that box and share my darkest stories. My professional discipline, toxicology, provided a perfect resource for viewing some toxic experiences as assaults by real poisons, chosen carefully to accurately reflect those experiences as metaphors. Similarly, my spiritual search dictated that there could also be antidotes to mitigate those sinister struggles, to negate their power, and to add more meaning to my life. Thus, the poisons and antidotes became metaphors for my life experiences.

The manchineel tree, *Hippomane mancinella*, native to Central and South American areas, offers the perfect allegory for my most toxic experiences. This flowering tree is one of the most poisonous trees in the world. In fact, it is so deadly that it requires a warning sign, such as a Red-X, skull and cross bones, or a red band, in Curaçao and the French Antilles. The fruit of the tree looks like small greenish apples. Its Spanish name, *manzanilla de la muerte*, means "little apple of death."^{1, 2}

The tree and its parts contain many powerful toxins—for example, it has an irritating, milky-white sap that produces strong allergic dermatitis. Standing beneath the tree during rain, even a drop of water containing the sap will cause severe blistering. Exposure of eyes to the

smoke from burning the tree can cause blindness. The Carib Indians used the manchineel's sap to poison their arrow tips. The Spanish explorer Juan Ponce de León was killed by such a weapon in battle with the Calusa tribe in Florida.

Though known to the natives, the tree was not described until the voyages of Christopher Columbus. He and his crew discovered the poisonous nature of the tree on their second voyage to the Caribbean Islands in 1493. Dr. Diego Chanca, a physician accompanying the explorer, noted that crew members developed severe inflammation when touching the tree or tasting its fruit.³ During psychotherapy in midlife, I learned that my family tree was a *poison tree*, imbued with “toxins” emotionally damaging to a young girl. I would have to find powerful tools to uproot that tree.

Those who know me professionally or casually would never suspect that beneath the successful exterior of an accomplished scientist lies a woman who had to confront her childhood traumas. After years of labor and a search for the right antidotes, my efforts were rewarded. This book seeks to unearth the answers to those early challenges, and to later ones, faced as a female scientist in the male-dominated academic and corporate worlds. In writing my story, I have come to realize that writing itself has been a powerful tool. It is often said that writing a memoir can be healing and cathartic, and at the end of this process, I have found this to be true. Writing this book was an antidote to my painful past; sharing it with readers is another.

From *Uprooting the Poison Tree*.