Woman Who Glows in the Dark

A Curandera Reveals Traditional Aztec Secrets of Physical and Spiritual Health

A Book Review by Kathleen S. Tajeu, Ph.D., CHES
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SRDC Health SERA 19 Meeting - September 11, 2007
About

- Her/memoir
- Complementary medicine/curanderismo ‘manual’
- Accounts of healing (and not)
- Learning and conveying through apprenticeships
- Tapestry
- Us
A Journey with/through

- Eleana Avila
  - RN, MSN in psychiatric nursing
  - Academic
  - Poet
  - Cultural explorer
  - Alma buscando su casa/Soul finding (her) place
  - Llorona/weeper
  - Advocate
  - Celebrator
  - Tejenda (?)/weaver
Voice

• Cultural – assimilation’s gains and losses
• Spiritual
• Personal – the me, not ‘the other’
• AUTHENTIC – humble, original, from inside
• More than a ‘categorization’
• Hers creating space for us to explore Ours
Curanderismo

• What it IS
  – Wonder
  – Knowledge
  – Practice
  – Skill
  – Calling upon divine energy

• What it is NOT
  – Magic
  – Witchcraft
  – Charlatans
  – Miraculous
  – Without flaws, imitators
  – A specific spiritual system
  – A ‘back-up’ medicine for poor people w/out insurance
Health

- Balance
- Fluidity – energies and cosmic forces
- Harmony
- Proportionality
  - physical,
  - freedom/creativity/emotion,
  - wisdom/mental,
  - spirit/conscience
Sickness/Illness

- **Physical**
  - Bilis
  - Empacho
  - Mal Aire

- **Emotional/Psychological**
  - Mal ojo (illness caused by staring)
  - Mal suerte
  - Community...one person’s imbalance affects others

- **Spiritual**
  - Susto .... A soul off balance
  - Espanto ... A soul separated long and far
  - Weeping soul
Cultural Translations

• Mal ojo .... Happens when too much attention is paid to a very young baby
  – Overstimulation leads to distress, restlessness, crankiness, trouble sleeping
  – Energy flows... staring can impose the `intense and integrated energy fields of adults onto a child/baby whose energy fields are still more vulnerable
• Mal suerte
  – Energies and expectations that we put into life have a direct effect on us; e.g. becoming entangled in low self-esteem, worry, and feelings of helplessness we can become enmeshed in a vicious cycle of ‘bad luck’
  – Sometimes when we are ill or vulnerable we take on energies that do not belong to us
Cultural Translations

• **Susto** = loss of our essence when our spirit isn’t strong enough to protect it,
  - e.g. maybe from childhood there has been a trauma such as child abuse that we carry through our lives without healing
  - E.g. we have holes or blocks in our energy body that leaves us vulnerable to everyday trials
  - E.g. when a part of us wants to stay behind in a place where we have been very happy
Curanderismo/Healing

- Art and science
- Elements: heart, instincts, wisdom, compassion
- “Every illness has its story and the job of the healer is to uncover that story”, p. 19
Practitioners

- Consejera/Counselor (Placticas/conversations)
- Hierbero/Herbalist
- Sobadora/Masseuse (healing and diagnosis)
- Partera/Midwife (giving child a deep sense of place and belonging; moms a sense of being spiritually and emotionally cared for)
- Espiritualista – a trance medium
- Husero – chiropractor
- Curandero Total – education, bodywork, medicine, sacred tools
Ac'vomol o Hierbero. “Para curar a las gentes corto en el monte las plantas medicinales, ya sean hierbas o árboles. Utilizo distintas clases de plantas según las enfermedades: frías o calientes, débiles o sólidas, de niños y mujeres, de viejos y de todo tiempo...

Sé cuando utilizar una sola planta o una parte de ella. Hay plantas que se hierven o se machacan crudas, otras que se calientan en el comal o sólo se limpia a la persona con las plantas frescas. También distingo cuando una planta es venenosa y no se le debe tomar. Yo, como hierbero, tengo en mi cabeza todos los secretos de las plantas.”

Tzak'bak o Huesero. “Trato las enfermedades de los huesos, corrijo las zafaduras, las fracturas y todos los males del esqueleto. Sé tentar el lugar lastimado para encontrar la enfermedad y curarla con silbidos, yerbas, vendas y rezos.”
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disease</th>
<th>Spanish Name</th>
<th>Available Product</th>
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<tr>
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<td>Hongo</td>
<td>Tincture</td>
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<tr>
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<td>No puede huir transente</td>
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<td>Diabetes Juvenil</td>
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<tr>
<td>Viral Infections</td>
<td>Infecciones</td>
<td>Available Tincture</td>
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**Plant Of Available Products:**
- Tonadora
- Artesa
- Oregano de Barro, Cola de Caballo
- Available Cream
- Available Tincture
- Available Syrup
- Available Cream
- Coriander of Enorme, Sosa
Common ‘Tools’

• Altars
• Saints and candles
• Limpias
• Platicas
• Massage
• Soul retrievals
Common ‘Tools’

• Ceremony of the 5 directions
  east reminds us we made it thru dark night,
  west is a place of farewells and letting go,
  north is pulling us to our elders and energy of
  hope, south is where we find the little children
  inside of us who were hurt and lost, fifth is
  community – and the universe - as we have
  completed the circle
Tools

- Eagle feathers (to sweep away negative energy)
- Eggs (generative symbols to help discern problems/diagnose, pull out problems)
Act(s) of ‘healing’

- Practical and spiritual
- Curandera “steps into” the divine
- Is always a co-creation
- Fluid boundary between symbol and reality
Commonalities

• Health care *should* encompass interaction, questions, prevention, emotional health focus

• Illness can be a result of our own choices .... And we do have the power to affect, or be the architects, of our own health
Commonalities

- WHO definition – mental, physical, spiritual well-being
- New foci in western medical research and medical training curricula on role of spiritual beliefs and healing
- Faith-based approach to health
Commonalities (Spiritual)

• For faith to have ‘timbre and strength’ we need to live it out, we need to enter into life through it
• Psychology before Jung; collective unconscious
• Mystery
• Symbolism
• Humans/we as ‘vessels’; divine energy working through us
Juxtapositions

• Individualizes treatments; acknowledges same disease in 2 different people may need to be treated in 2 different ways

• Addresses ‘soul’ sickness
  – E.g. ‘shaking sickness’ happens when we interact only with the outer world and we experience a lack of passion, a lack of meaningful animation
Juxtapositions

- Exterior and interior
- Active, responsive, creative
- Symbolic, e.g. to avoid ‘mal ojo’ or perception of .... Touch baby with left hand ... which is the hand nearest the heart and that gives energy
- Circular, community affecting & involving
- Connected across time/life and death
Juxtapositions

- Two months to get an HMO appointment for 15 minutes with doctor vs. ‘loving care that focuses not on time but on listening to your tears, touching in a sacred way, and developing personalized ceremonies’
- ‘Conquering’ vs. releasing
- Dualism vs. fluidity
Action/Acting

• “Compassionate action” towards the world
  – is connected to the earth and heavens
  – is a tender journeying with/bringing along others at a time when we face enormous disparities
Weaving

- Deeply ‘old world’ (indigenous) and gaily ‘new world’ (post colonial)
- Incorporates different conceptions of God/the divine/universal energy
- Indigenous and Catolico
- Aztec/Indigenous, African, and Spanish medicine
- Human and the divine
Health Promotion Campaigns in Oaxaca, Mexico
Health Care Services in Southern Mexico
Implications

- CHAs as ‘animateurs’
- Perceptions of quality of care
- Re-tooling our providers, our medical training
- Ecological Footprints, i.e. Earth-friendliness, earth-respecting