

## **CURANDERISMO: THE HANDS OF GUADALUPE**

**By  
Stephanie Mines, Ph.D.**

*"Las curanderas have challenged the normal female role within their culture and have assumed the authority and leadership traditionally reserved for men. Even as youngsters, the healers never accepted the submissiveness and passivity that is the fate of nearly all traditional females in their societies. Most curanderas knew they were different. They broke the rules in their own ways."*

--Perrone, Stockel and Krueger, *Medicine Women, Curanderas and Women Doctors*

*"Intention provides the vision by which the patient finds his way out of the dream of the illness."*

--Eliot Cowan, *Plant Spirit Medicine*

*"We revere the rational, analytical method of learning, honed and polished since the days of the ancient Greeks. We do not realize that the shamans of our species have honed and polished another method, one that is neither rational nor analytical, but that works extremely well."*

--Eliot Cowan, *Plant Spirit Medicine*

*"In cases where people cannot recover easily from things that happened to them as children it is because it is difficult for them to fulfill a special gift they have and it drives them crazy because there is no one to orient them and nothing to help them fulfill the gift they have."*

--Don Martin

*"La curandera, her traditional healing methods, and her cultural pharmacology, is itself truly becoming an endangered species."*

--James Jaramillo, MD

*"Ultimately, true healing begins when we discover within ourselves that place where we are linked with the larger forces of the universe."*

--Deepak Chopra

*"Only when our actions originate from a space of generosity, creativity and inner wholeness can true healing begin."*

--Ian Baker, *The Tibetan Art of Healing*

*"Health is not a matter of merely personal interest, but a universal concern for which we all share some responsibility."*

--The Dalai Lama

*"As a curandera, I believe that I have a responsibility to educate and empower people. We may have no control over those who wish us ill, but we do have control over our own souls and spirits. People can die from suggestion, if they get frightened enough, but they can also learn how to have strong souls and spirits and protect themselves. I teach my clients to call upon divine guidance, saints that are meaningful to them, and the protective spirits of their ancestors."*

--Elena Avila, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*

*"Curanderismo has given me the freedom and sacred space to honor my path as a healer and to put all of my experiences to good use, and it has given me the freedom to honor each of my clients as a highly creative, emotional, spiritual, and unique soul. When we give our wounds to God, we find the spiritual strength to live our lives and accept our destiny. When we realize that our souls and spirits need as much attention as our bodies, minds, and feelings, we experience supreme equilibrium. We are whole again. I have learned to honor my own soul by not denying who I am. I was born to be a curandera and a nurse. I am now a partera, a midwife, to many souls who have lost their way."*

--Elena Avila, *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*

## **INTRODUCTION**

I am a gringa and a great admirer, even a lover, of Mexico, the Mexican people and curanderismo, the healing practice of their sacred land. I cannot aspire to any expertise on curanderismo whatsoever since I am not Mexican. However, I am a psychologist who trains therapists and bodyworkers in the treatment of shock and trauma and I am deeply invested in understanding, communicating and embodying authentic healing. My life and my quest (which are one and the same) have, gratefully, brought me to Mexico. This has connected me with Mexican people from all classes of society, and to curanderismo.

The scientific materialism of our times longs for the heart and honed wisdom of sacred cultures that regenerate us from the spiritual core of our beings. A convergence of the traditional and the contemporary is sorely needed so that those suffering with pain and illness can receive the benefits of both modern science and ancient, holistic wisdom. Massage therapists and somatic therapists of all kinds can encourage such a creative integration by educating themselves about these ethnotherapies. In addition, we can find opportunities to bridge the two worlds and respectfully and appropriately bring them

together in our practices. In this way we ignite the masterful potency inherent in the massage and bodywork profession.

Curanderismo cannot be separated from the people, the soil and the spirit of Mexico. Guadalupe, Mexico's adored saint, rises up from the earth and her hands form the touch, her face the eyes, and her heart the mind of curanderismo. The curandera is humbled and guided by nature and by Spirit, and this a model that no healer should ignore.

Like the other great ethnotherapies, the teachings of curanderismo are endangered. As more and more Mexicans choose a modern Westernized life over the life of the little villages, authentic curanderismo is dying out. The apprentices are not there to learn and the stories of the elders about the practices are not recorded. To protect and transmit the treasures of curanderismo, a broader dissemination and education is needed that goes beyond Mexico to the places where the teachings will be valued.

The exciting future for curanderismo lies in its evolution. This will only happen if the traditional art itself is acknowledged for the potent and through application that it is. Then, blended with contemporary awareness and even with other systems, it becomes a vital new resource. Pioneers like Leopoldina Rendon in Mexico, and Elena Avila and Eliot Cowan in the United States, are leaders in this development.

In this article Leopoldina, the curandera who has personally shared her healing with me, speaks for herself. I will also relay my own experiences of curanderismo. I am a strong proponent of readily accessible, non-hierarchical tools for wellness and curanderismo is one of the best there is. In fact, of all the ethnotherapies I have explored, curanderismo is the most egalitarian and the most unpretentious. I have been thoroughly impressed with how the resources of curanderismo can be used to resolve deep-rooted shock and trauma, which is the central focus of my own work.

Like most ethnotherapies, curanderismo allows for mystery in the healing process. It honors the role of the spiritual dimension in health and illness. In fact, curanderismo looks as much to the spiritual world as to the physical for its healing solutions. It has resources for the material level of health, and it also has resources for the afflictions of the soul. In any healthcare intervention, this is true, essential balance.

### **THE LIMPIA (THE CLEANSING)**

I had been teaching in Cuernavaca for nine consecutive days without a break. It was a joyous experience and I felt a sense of celebration and completion. Nevertheless, when the last student departed, I was suddenly struck by a horrible, searing headache.

Leopoldina, my dear friend, and her exquisite daughter Atzin took me to their home on a quiet side street in the town. I lay down on the bed in Atzin's room. I felt safe and welcome. Leo came into the room and we had an easy conversation to explore what could have caused my headache and what could be done about it. Meanwhile, the pain

increased by the minute, making my eyes burn and ache unbearably. Finally, Leopoldina declared, "You need a limpia!"

She sent her son Huitzi to the store for an egg. She gathered ruda (rue) and rosemary from her garden. She brought rubbing alcohol from the bathroom. Then she sat by my side, on the floor, and prayed. Through the throbbing pain of my headache I could feel her intention becoming focused and clarified. I closed my eyes as she rolled the egg, wrapped in herbs, over my body, whispering her prayers, aligning herself with nature. When the limpia was complete, Leo cracked the egg into a bowl. She saw a circle of people. Unconsciously I was still connected to my students. But the limpia released me. The headache was gone.

I asked Leopoldina, the woman with the merciful hands of Guadalupe, about this miraculous healing and how she knew what to do.

Here is her answer:

"I have always known how to heal in this way. My grandmothers were dedicated to healing. They were strong, loving and healthy women who rarely got sick. We lived on a little ranch located on the western Sierra Madre in the state of Guerrero, south of Mexico City. The southern states are the poorest of the country. My village is Santa Lucia and it is about four hours by horse to the nearest town. It consists of about twenty houses and about that many families. The local farmers grow coffee, corn and beans. We don't have electricity. We drink the water from the rivers. Currency does not circulate. We use exchange. The whole town is like a big family. There is respect for the elders. We live according to the cycles of nature and the wisdom of healing is passed on orally. I think we just have it in our blood. We practice a profound connection with nature's wisdom."

"When someone in the village became ill, the main intention was to reestablish balance. My grandmothers taught me how to do this. Perhaps the sick person had broken a natural or supernatural law, or perhaps it was due to the forces of hot and cold in certain foods, or perhaps it came out doing certain activities or having certain interactions with others? That is why we have to talk first. This is called the platicar, the time of dialogue, and during the platicar it can become clear what the cause of the illness is. Though I didn't know about the circle of people you were holding in your energy, I could tell that the cause was supernatural and that I needed a supernatural remedy, like the limpia, which is an energetic cleansing."

## **MAYAN MASSAGE**

Soft breezes, sweetly scented by the burning sugar cane, permeate the Mexican night. Through the open window come the sounds of birds and frogs, and the whisperings of the wind.

"The curandera must have a good relationship with the wind," Leopoldina says, her face both ancient and child-like. She sits on her short naked legs, her hands on her knees. She

wears a lemon yellow huipil (blouse) that highlights the gold in her skin, while I lie on the floor, with Leo kneeling beside me.

The floor is like the earth of Mexico, hard and beautiful, and the night is above me, vast and passionate. This night is Mexico: deep darkness, illuminated by brilliant light and full of mystery. I can feel my own skin, both its tensions and its softness. I can feel the tingling in my right arm and the aching in my right shoulder, and I wonder how these pains originated. I am concerned because of the limitation in my dominant side. I am a healer. I must have my arms, my shoulder, and my hand!

"You are a star," Leo says, bending over me to listen to the pulse in my umbilicus. "Your legs and your arms are four points of the star, and the fifth is here, in your center, in your umbilicus, where everything begins. The body is a star and the sobradora (masseuse) must make the star shine."

As Leo prays and moves her hands over my limbs and muscles, I forget how small she is. Her hands feel huge and I relax into their massive competence. I find myself reviewing many things, like when my right arm started hurting, where I was and who was with me. I see the face of a man I know, someone for whom I have great sympathy, and I realize how much he and I are alike. He was there when my arm started to feel strange. He was telling me a story about his life that pulled me into it so suddenly and strongly, it was as if I physically entered his past.

The wind picks up outside, bringing the sounds of other people's conversations, men's voices weaving with women's voices, and the voice of the wind itself, the voice that whispers between the other voices, the voice that carries the spirits through the night time air.

I am spread now in all directions. My arms and my legs are stretched out and Leo is reading the pulse of the fifth point in the star, the umbilicus, again. It is on the basis of this reading that she knows what I need. She decides to massage the back of my head and my scalp.

The smell of the ruda infused oil adds its pungency to the sweet nighttime scents. Leo burns juniper and sage. From outside I detect the relaxing fragrance of warm tortillas mingling with the smell of roasted meat.

The pulse in my umbilicus tells Leo that there is still some obstruction in my body. She begins to make sounds, and these sounds resemble the sounds of the wind outside until the two completely merge and become one ongoing sound -- flags flapping and whistling in a strong breeze. Then Leo pulls the sheet off the bed and brings it to where I am lying on the floor. She holds it high and the white sheet drifts across my form until it touches me, like a parachute landing on the earth. I feel pure; a baby in a blanket. The white sheet on my skin is a tender veil of protection.

My response to this experience of Mayan massage is very similar to my response to the limpia. I am refreshed, relieved, as if a burden has been taken off of me and I have been lightened from the inside out. I feel young, and looking in the mirror, I see that my eyes are sparkling. I am ready to dance; to answer the pungent welcome of the night, and my body is free of any restriction.

The treatments I received from Leopldina with curanderismo gave me both the feeling and the appearance of glowing from the inside out. Just writing about them makes me long for them again. The gift of curanderismo is that it attunes us to our true nature, freeing us of the outside influences and internal constriction that living in the world imposes. By restoring us to our place in the natural order of things, curanderismo awakens a raw, earthy vitality so that we can live blessed by our own inner smile.

Once again I ask Leo how she knew what to do, what guided and directed her and what she found reading the pulse at my center.

"My intention is to be a hollow bone and to flow with the power of the Grand Mystery and to give guidance from the forces of nature. This way I can connect with the power of the person so that they can be free and live a better life. This allows me to awaken consciousness."

"I learned from my family that the practice of curanderismo is compassion and love for people combined with profound contact with nature. This has been modeled for me ever since I was a little girl. My family professed strong spiritual and service values, but they did not insist on a particular religion. Their religion was only a belief in God, in the Virgin of Guadalupe, the forces of nature, and compassion for the common person. Even now they guide me in all the healing I do."

"I call on all these forces constantly. They are the ones telling me what I should do, what the pulse says, and most importantly, what is best for the person, what will enhance their life, and what they need, not just in the moment, but most deeply, most profoundly."

"This Mayan massage that I have been doing with you is used primarily to remove obstructions, usually from the stomach. But in this case the obstruction was more complicated, involving other forces that were obstructing your power. You have to learn to protect yourself because when you don't, you are very receptive to the wandering energies of other people. You must learn to recognize these energies and let them go, without blame, and to release them to the earth. You must incorporate a way of doing this into your life."

## **GUADALUPE: THE INTENTION BEHIND CURANDERISMO**

Who is Guadalupe? Guadalupe is the merciful Indian woman saint, who appeared on a hill in what is now Mexico City to the humble Juan Diego. The miracle of this vision in 15th century Mexico ultimately created a dramatic fusion between the rich culture of the Nahuatl people and the Spanish who colonized Mexico. Guadalupe's appearance was not

her only miracle. She manifested several physical cures, including the complete recovery of Juan Diego's uncle who was on his deathbed.

Guadalupe is the Mexican embodiment of compassion and mercy, like Tara in the Buddhist teachings and Kuan Yin in the Chinese tradition. She is adored because she reaches out to the people as one of them, and this is a fundamental characteristic of curanderismo. The curandera's healing awareness comes from living with the people, feeling their pains, knowing their illnesses and experiencing their suffering. The curandera brings miraculous healing, but she never pretends to be other than one of the people.

"The curandera cures with her mind. She cures with her experience. But most of all, she cures with her love for the people," says the great sobradora from Santa Fe, New Mexico, Gregorita Rodriguez, articulating the way in which curanderismo is inspired by Guadalupe.

The loving kindness of Guadalupe is generated in the prayers, the intention, and the aspiration and surrender that is the hallmark of curanderismo. It is this humility that is so often lacking in a purely technical or technological treatment of illness and physical pain. A deeply personal faith is an essential part of the curandera's gift. This is the simple but potent center of all miraculous healing.

"Spirit medicine comes from spirituality; we don't control or even understand it. Humility is the way. If spirit asks you to do something to help someone, do it. If you do, a miracle will happen. If you don't, you will spend the rest of your life wondering 'Am I making this up?'" (Eliot Cowan, author of *Plant Spirit Medicine*).

Humility combined with the powerful force of spirituality allows the curandera to be a unique, grounded, effective instrument of health. The curandera waits for the opportunity to heal, just as Guadalupe waited for the moment when Juan Diego walked by to appear. Juan Diego knew Guadalupe for the saint she was immediately. He had no doubts, no second thoughts. The curandera believes that she will similarly be seen and recognized by those who need her. If healing is her purpose, the opportunities will present themselves. "I don't tell anybody that I am a curandera," Leo says. "I only use curanderismo when someone asks me. I learned long ago in my village that you don't say who you are."

In curanderismo there is a belief that the curandera is chosen, perhaps even before she is born. "Legend has it that if a child cries in the womb, she will become a curandera," says James Jaramillo, MD, a doctor who believes in the integration of curanderismo and Western medicine in his New Mexico practice. Curandero Don Martin of Ojinaga, in the San Carlos region of Mexico, confirms this. "I cried and I spoke in the womb," he says, "and my mother told me that this is because I was going to have a special gift, the gift of curing, to help all of humanity who need my services, by the grace of God."

For a curandera this link with Guadalupe, with compassion, is not learned, it is innate. This is what Western healers can learn from curanderas: to awaken and affirm the power

of compassion in our vocation. The traditional prayer to Guadalupe is relevant here: "Through her peace and justice may we come to accept all men and women as our brothers and our sisters."

## **THE NEW CURANDERISMO**

Leopoldina Rendon represents the new curanderismo. At a very young age, Leo left her village so that she could receive the kind of education she craved to supplement what she had learned about curanderismo. She felt guided to do this. Her quest resulted in not only discovering new forms of healing, but also in having personal experiences in her own life that demanded she learn other ways to heal herself.

For many years, Leopoldina's compassion directed her to social work, and specifically working for women survivors of domestic violence. After many years of this kind of service, she was drawn back to the hands-on healing she had been instructed in as a child. She began to combine the new tools she had acquired with the traditional ones, and soon she discovered the true curandera within herself.

In this way she is giving birth to the new curanderismo. The new curanderismo takes traditional training and integrates it with valuable new therapies. Leo combines curanderismo with her growing understanding of the treatment of shock and trauma and the use of subtle energy medicine. Specifically she has become certified in the TARA Approach for the Resolution of Shock and Trauma and in Holographic Repatterning, a multi-modality healing system. She has been using this combination with great success for almost five years. Most importantly, she has combined these systems in her self-care and is thus resolving her individual history of shock and trauma. She emanates the radiance of this beneficial integration.

"I now realize that I have many powerful tools and my mission in life is to heal myself and to make my gifts available to others. I can now identify the ways in which shock and trauma are being sustained and activated. As I become aware of this, I call upon my ancestors to assist me in releasing this person from these patterns of shock and trauma. I use whichever tools I have that are the most appropriate, including the new tools of the TARA Approach and Holographic Repatterning. My job is to awaken the consciousness of the person that is being treated so that that person can take charge of their own illness, take ownership and responsibility and thereby transform the problem. I also invite them to study the same tools I have learned, to strengthen their own self-healing."

Leopoldina's distinctive addition to curanderismo is her insistence on empowering her clients to heal themselves. She rejects the dependency on the curandera and is intent on instilling consciousness and awareness in those she treats, to awaken the curandera within them.

Like Leopoldina, Elena Avila and Eliot Cowan are integrating the traditional healing forms of curanderismo with other forms and finding the marriage a success. Leopoldina and Elena Avila are Mexicans watering the roots of curanderismo, but Eliot Cowan is a

gringo, like me. Nevertheless, he has become a potent channel to transmit a traditional Huichol shamanic form of healing with the spirits of plants.

Trained as an acupuncturist and herbalist, Dr. Cowan found plant spirit medicine because of his genuine commitment to true compassionate healing. A writer and teacher, he has completed a traditional apprenticeship with Don Guadalupe Rios, an elder Huichol Indian shaman and plant spirit healer. He has married plant spirit medicine to five-element acupuncture, and the union is thriving!

Elena Avila is a registered nurse with a master's degree in psychiatric nursing and the author of *Woman Who Glows in the Dark*, a book that describes her path to reclaim curanderismo. *Woman Who Glows in the Dark* also provides an excellent history and overview of curanderismo, including its African roots, revealing that curanderismo has survived because of its willingness to blend many healing wisdoms.

"The ways that cultures were forced together has also forced change," Leopoldina reminds me. "There has been a blending of words and concepts, an incorporation of prayers and an evolving cosmic vision. We survive by growing, changing, and incorporating. We maintain the old traditions but we do not defend them against change."

Kay Brittain, an anthropology graduate student in Texas, has been exploring the use of curanderismo in the treatment of psychological disorders including anxiety. She is particularly focused on one form of curanderismo: the Fidencista Movement that originated in Espinazo, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. The founder of this movement, Jose Fidencio Sintura Constantino, died in Espinazo in 1938. Since then, he is believed to have manifested through curanderos known as materias. Many of these materias have initiated cures of serious mental disturbances, including those resulting from incest and sexual abuse.

Kay sees a relationship between the quality of touch used in this form of curanderismo and subtle energy medicine. The similarity is in the reorganization of energy engendered by spiritually focused and gifted touch. From the standpoint of science, this touch must be investigated for its value. From the standpoint of the curandera, the quality of contact really comes down to one thing. One materia articulated it succinctly: "It all starts with being able to touch the person's soul."

Through this attuned, precise and highly sensitized touch, curanderos are able, in just a few sessions, to relieve the profound distress that comes from horrendous violation. Without the use of drugs or chemicals, people are freed from years of haunting distress and restored to their true selves. Kay concludes that for those willing to openly consider these events "an ethnocentric Western medical model is becoming acquainted with what traditional practices of healing have known for millennia: there is more to life than the Cartesian mind/body split."

Kay, like me, posits a new dimension, a new chapter in healing, that artfully and respectfully fuses the traditional with the contemporary. Perhaps this is the only way to meet the demands of this curious age we live in.

I don't think anyone has yet admitted how much healing we need and how much we will continue to need. Now when we know so much and have simultaneously lost so much, now is when a collaboration of wisdoms is required, a greater alertness to human suffering, and even more importantly, a greater attunement to unique, individual experiences of suffering. It is no longer possible to slip into a fantasy of the past, but it is also impossible to go forward as healers without a rooted knowledge of the past. From my perspective as an energy medicine healer-theoretician, those of us who care must look at this time of increased violence as a mandate to investigate what great healers from the past have found serves humanity.

I asked Leopoldina what she would like to say to massage therapists and body workers who would read this article. "I want to encourage them," she said, "to recover their power to create true human contact. I want to encourage the awareness that we are all one community, living with our plant and animal brothers and sisters. We must all remember our roots. We must generate the unique awareness of who we are and use this to confront whatever is difficult. This love and compassion is for all of us. We should give the gift of love to ourselves and we should offer this power to others."

I recently had the great pleasure of re-reading Rudolfo Anaya's autobiographical tale of the relationship between the curandera total (complete curandera) Ultima and a young boy, told in the award winning book Bless Me, Ultima. In his description of Ultima we learn that the curandera is, at one and the same time, the simplest and the most advanced healer.

"Ultima knows that the tragic consequences of life can be overcome with the magical strength that resides in the human heart. Ultima has sympathy for the people, and this sympathy is so complete that with it she can touch their souls and cure them. That is her magic. Ay, and no greater magic can exist."

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## **HOW MASSAGE THERAPISTS AND BODYWORKERS CAN USE THE TOOLS OF CURANDERISMO IN THEIR PRACTICES**

- \*Explore the massage traditions of curanderismo. Study, if you can, with a true sobradora.
- \*Learn how to attune to your client rather than only seeing them from a somatic, medical or physiological perspective. Let yourself see your client with "soft eyes." Bring your intuition into your assessment.
- \*See the role of community and environment in the healing process. Acknowledge the relationship between family, community and somatic symptoms.
- \*Use the platicar. This easy conversation between therapist and recipient takes the veil off the symptoms and reveals the influential conditions surrounding them. The platicar is not an intake but an attunement.
- \*Maintain your own ongoing spiritual practices and direct them specifically towards your healing work. Make a specific link between your spiritual focus and your healing focus.
- \*Call upon your ancestral roots, the ones that link you with the healing vocation. Draw from them, consciously.
- \*Always clarify your intention in your treatments, and link that intentionality with your spiritual practice and with your ancestral roots.
- \*Invite nature into your healing practice. Let nature help you and guide you through plants, animals and the elements.
- \*Expand your awareness to include all aspects of the environment into your healing practice. You can explore your own personal connection with the natural world and consider acknowledging this relationship with gratitude.

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