

# *Brujas and Curanderas*

## *A Lived Spirituality*



Myths are not lies, but rather men's attempt to impose a symbolic order *upon* their universe.

—SARAH B. POMEROY, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity*

**WOMEN'S HISTORY IS ONE OF** religiosity. Men of Western culture may have been the designers of cults over the past two millennia, but it has been the women who have long been relegated the task of preserving those cults, often not as official representatives but with daily rituals of popular culture and by passing faith from generation to generation. A growing trend among those of us who are pursuing nontraditional lifestyles is to return to long lost ways in search of new direction for our lives, and some of us have unearthed the ways of our Mexic Amerindian ancestors preserved by our mestizo and mestiza elders, most often women, in the form of *curanderismo*.

The Chicana feminist, who is of mixed European, Mexic Amerindian, and sometimes African and/or Asian origins, is making attempts at reviving the credos of her ancestors. Many who practice a form of Native American spirituality recognize the aspects of *curanderismo* that will be discussed here, some of which may be traced back to the Nahua people (Aztecs) and certainly to various other Mexic Amerindian peoples, such as the Huichol. They also have similarities with European beliefs. Commonalities are what drive anthropologists all over the world in their attempt to understand humankind—since the further back we go, it seems, the more we can observe cultural universals.

## THE ROAD TO SELF EMPOWERMENT

Many of these things you must experience, before you understand them.

—UN CURANDERO, *Curanderismo: Mexican American Folk Healing*

The history of curanderismo derives from ancient knowledge that spans all five continents. The methods of curanderismo, which apply the use of mental, spiritual, and material expertise, descend from Native American, European, Eastern, and Middle Eastern philosophies and knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

Arab medicine (borrowed from Greek knowledge) was a great contributor to Spain before the Reconquest of Spain's territories. Spaniards brought not only knowledge of the medical sciences with them to the Americas, but their own Judeo-Christian beliefs. Christian symbolism is an integral part of curanderismo. The Arab medical practice of utilizing herbal cures was adapted in the Americas with plants found on these continents and combined with Native American medicine, which also has included steam baths, and other remedies. African beliefs, which came to the Americas with the slave market, also merged with Iberian and Native practices. Most recently, Eastern philosophies are being adapted by Chicanas, in particular, Buddhism, although it may be acknowledged that there are deep parallels between the Native American and the Eastern perception of life.

There is widespread acknowledgment of certain ailments so that various communities of curanderas are able to identify symptoms and treat them without necessarily being healers themselves. For example, when I was fifteen years old, I experienced *susto* as a result of being approached and followed on the street one night after work by a strange man. A good friend of my sister told her mother, who then sent over herbs for me to take as a tea. I suffered from this ailment for approximately two weeks and took the tea just as I would have taken a dose of medicine prescribed by a Western doctor for a bad cough. In Mexican communities, such prescriptions are respected. Based on traditional beliefs, our community, whether urban or rural in the United States, is close knit and gives a sense of tribal affiliations. Therefore, while I had never met the woman, her prognosis was accepted.

*Susto* (literally, scare) is among the most common afflictions from which we may suffer. Among others are *mal de ojo*, *bilis*, and *empacho*.<sup>2</sup> There are very common prescriptions for the ridding of these ailments. The symptoms are physical and psychological in nature. Their causes may be physical and/or magical. In terms of curanderismo, magic is directly related to the supernatural realm of our reality. I use the term *supernatural* loosely because supernatural implies a probable reality beyond natural forces. However, for curanderas the supernatural is a reality based on the natural forces of the universe. Another explanation is that curanderas believe that persons can cause physical and emotional illnesses in others by use of personal power or with the help of noncorporeal beings.

Not all curanderas work actively with spiritual elements. They may specialize in herbal and

massage treatments. Most, however, do recognize to some extent the power of *espiritismo* in the form of presence of spirits. Quite often they attribute their divine power to the Supreme Maker of Christianity or subscribe to a spiritual philosophy that is not necessarily Christian. These curanderas believe that we all are born with souls (a belief of all major religions) and that our corporeal beings are transient. We therefore, can solicit the aid of spirit guides who are no longer in their corporeal bodies. Although many curanderas claim to be Catholic, their beliefs are not doctrine. Catholicism believes in the death of a life as final while the soul awaits Judgment Day.

In any case, curanderas who mostly specialize in spiritual healing adapt Judeo-Christian symbolism in their rituals. We may often see the use of a crucifix. (The cross was also a pre-Hispanic symbol.) Another example: they may find the use of candles essential to a remedy. The material use of objects, such as candles, incense, and oils, are employed for the benefit of the solicitor as a reassurance that something concrete is being performed. Do not mistake this for a placebo. Einstein proved to the scientific world that matter is energy. Through energy that treatment is made effective.

The curandera is a specialized healer, learned in the knowledge of specifically healing the body and is not necessarily a psychic. However, in non-Western thinking, the body is never separate from the spirit or mind and all curative recommendations always consider the ailing person as a whole. Curanderas may also be categorized according to their particular knowledge. There are four principal categories: *sobaderas*, those who give massages; less practiced today is the bone setter; more frequently practicing are the *yerberas* who are expert in herbs; and *parteras*, midwives—who in times past in which doctors were not readily available were also useful. Today, strict laws require midwives to be certified. (There are midwives who considered themselves curanderas, although obviously not all have that cultural connection.) A curandera may be proficient in any combination or all of these healing aspects. She usually demonstrates a gift for healing at a very young age and by the time she is a woman, she is recognized by her community as a curandera.

In the last couple of decades, medical practitioners, particularly Latino and culturally sensitive physicians have recognized that migrants and immigrants are not always open to taking pills, other medications, or following doctors' orders. Consequently, there have been efforts to learn how to treat such patients effectively by being culturally sensitive, respectful of the patients' viewpoint, and to some degree, incorporating old and modern medicine.<sup>3</sup>

As the granddaughter of a curandera, I understood as a child that such developed faculties are not to be exploited. It is a facile argument to defend fees by stating that in these modern times it is considered a service like any other.<sup>4</sup> The medical industry in the United States is notorious for its unpardonable charges. The entire health system and care for the residents in the United States is under debate and scrutiny. It stands to reason that a person receiving information from a medium, astrologer, other kind of psychic or curandera might make an offer or offering of gratitude. In my grandmother's time she might have gladly accepted a pound of flour to make her tortillas or a chicken to feed her family; it doesn't sound outlandish to offer a donation. It is the intention of greed that is objected to here.<sup>5</sup> None of us are separate, matter only changes form, and we may consider reciprocity of some sort a way of maintaining

balance.

Regarding care for our mental well-being, we are all convinced that we are helpless in the face of the unexplainable. Yet, on the contrary, there are no mysteries experienced in life that we cannot unlock from within our own imaginations. However, we must have as our rule of thumb the preservation of natural resources and the well-being of humanity. What this society has come to conceive of as progress threatens the annihilation of humanity. It has already begun with the steady genocide of certain peoples, in addition to international deforestation and the annihilation of the Amazon, certain vegetation, and animals; and contamination of air, earth, and water.

However, control of human and natural resources for the sake of profit notwithstanding, many men and women of all ethnicities and races have discovered a vast void in our daily lives, even when subscribing to a major religion. Some are returning to the religions of their families of origin with the hopes and desires to address the demands placed on our lives today. Unfortunately, in the case of the Catholic Church, the most important demands of Catholic activists, including marriage for priests, allowing contraception, and priesthood for women, are being rejected.

Xicanistas began joining Native American practices notably in the sixties and have continued to do so to the present. There are many ceremonies that are directed exclusively for girls and women. One is an observance when a girl begins her moon time. Mexican and Catholic/Christian cultures do not celebrate such a rite. However, in my own experiences, there remain many gender differences. Unless it is a women's sweat or tepee meeting, for example, it is usually a man who is the "Giver," a man who is the "Firekeeper," male drummers, and men who put the lodge or tepee in place. Women in mixed sessions are asked to wear full-length skirts for the sake of modesty.

Even as we select from our Mexican curandera and Christian traditions, it is only we today who ultimately can define what is needed to give us courage. If we lived in a utopian society where adults were not regularly faced with challenges in all facets of our lives, our personal strength might not be tested. Challenges are not negative. It is how we respond to life's tests that is important.

We must take heed that not all symbols that we have inherited are truly symbolic of the life-sustaining energy we carry within ourselves as women; so even when selectively incorporating what seems indispensable to our religiosity, we must analyze its historical meaning. We might if necessary give it new meaning, so that it validates our instincts to survive on our own terms. Moreover, survival should not be our main objective. Our presence shows our will to survive, to overcome every form of repression. Our goal should be to achieve joy. We move from victim to survivor, and I advocate, to becoming a warrior of one's cause. The cause may be to achieve personal peace of mind or the cause may spur one to become an activist—*una guerrillera* who has taken her personal tragedy to empower herself and help her environment.

A synthesis of belief systems for the Xicanista is her way of coping in a society that does not give her humanity substantial value. It is not a contradiction of irreconcilable ideologies. When we become knowledgeable about plants, for instance, we see proof that the traditional medicine of our ancestors indeed was curative. This knowledge again, was taken from us

throughout recent generations and is still kept from most of us who are integrated in Western society and has been replaced by treatments through synthetic drugs and Western medical practices. My point here is not to make a blanket condemnation of modern medicine and medical technology, but to recognize that its basis lies in very ancient practices, which are not necessarily inaccessible to us.

Society accepts the help of therapists or clergy but the woman developing conscientización may also find herself turning to the tradition of relying on community elders for guidance to interpret our experiences. She may follow suggestions from such community servants to participate in sweat lodges, to meditate, or to undergo some other form of “spiritual cleansing.” By recalling our blood-tie memories to the Americas and relying on the guidance of our dreams and intuitions, we gradually reawaken our female indigenous energies:

WE DO WELL in developing our own ways, our own alchemy for cures, a combination of modern medicine and ancient practices. We take from the West and East even as we do from our grandmothers’ indigenous knowledge.

WE DO WELL in using our imaginations and intuitions and to speak of them to each other.

WE DO WELL by not being afraid to commit the taboo of same-sex touching. Our internalized “homophobia” (gynophobia) often causes us to reject or fear expressing or receiving affection for other females outside of our own children.

WE KNOW WE DO WELL because those of us who are reinventing that which has been passed on to us; or using our ability to learn from books; or our relatively recent independence from the traditional roles of obedient daughter, young matron, and wife to travel on our own, interact with other cultures, and determine what is necessary, know we make ourselves *feel* better, that is, stronger willed and self-confident. We know that the ancient native practice of the sweat lodge, or *temezcal*, is not only physically beneficial but does in fact give our emotional selves a sense of rejuvenation. In other words, we are reclaiming all that which was taken away from us by the masculine-dominant direction civilization took. We will determine for ourselves what makes us feel whole, what brings us tranquility, strength, nerve to face the countless—not for one moment imagined—obstacles in the path on our journey toward being fulfilled human beings.

The *espiritista* who is not necessarily a curandera in the medical sense, that is, she may not prescribe medicinal herbs or give massages, may see her role as a diagnostician of physical ailments with a developed faculty that detects the cause and offer a prognosis that counteracts that cause. This faculty in Spiritism is known as being a medium. While Christianity may object to the medium’s practice, many espiritistas are Christian. They do believe in God. “The Universe is God’s creation. It encompasses all rational and non-rational beings, both animate and inanimate, material and immaterial.”<sup>6</sup> The following discussion regarding the psychic or

espiritista medium, with regards to the Xicanista taking the step from victim to survivor to guerrillera of her cause, I will put in the category of bruja.

In Mexican culture, a brujo is someone to fear and to revere while a bruja is someone to hate to the point of killing. However, I claim this term for women who are in tune with their psyches, allow their lives to be informed by them, and offer their intuitive gifts to their communities without fear of being seen as loathsome or mad. The key is to remember that historically woman, who is fertile and filled with the mysteries of reproduction, was loathed and feared by men for that reason alone. If we dispense with that fear but retain or reinstate our insights and connections with all living things, we have a woman with developed psychic resources, a bruja. Brujas also have their range of categories. By no means are they all associated with espiritismo. If we use the word *bruja* as it is used by feministas who practice their spiritual beliefs on their own terms, a bruja might range from the woman who trusts her instincts to practicing Christianity to also thinking of herself as a curandera, medicine woman, or healer in some fashion in *santería*, as well as any combination listed here and others.

Espiritistas consider that everyone has an inborn faculty to communicate with transcended beings, although not to the same capacity. However, without being aware of one's faculties, one may be vulnerable when exposed inadvertently to negative energies. What I mean by negative here is debilitating, unseen forces that deplete one's self-confidence or *ánimo*. Both curanderismo and espiritismo deem these invisible energies to possibly cause physical ailments too. The belief is that spirit guides may help us and bad spirits may hurt us in real ways.

The espiritista tradition emerged from late-nineteenth-century theories laid out by the Frenchman, Allen Kardec, which he called, Spiritism.<sup>7</sup> It was a period during which there was great interest in spirits in Europe and in the United States. While Kardec referred to his theories as science, today it is considered a New Age practice. Espiritistas are not into black magic, devil worship, or soliciting contact with evil spirits. They do believe in good and evil. Today, espiritistas not only believe in God the Father but also Jesus.

A bruja, in my view, falls under the rubric of a spiritual psychic. Whereas traditionally the word amongst popular culture was interpreted to refer to a bad woman, feministas have appropriated it and endowed it with positive connotations. A bruja is foremost a woman who trusts in her intuition. Brujas may practice the esoteric arts, for example, Tarot readings. The key to remember is their inherent communication with spirits whom they refer to as their guides. Were Xicanistas to have a *séance*, in view of this discussion, we might present the following dictum at the table:

We must address our spirit guides for clarity  
on the fact of abortion as we have been taught to do so with  
regard to conception and birth.

We must address our spirit guides on the needs to learn  
to defend ourselves physically, to protect each other,

to provide for each other's material needs. Our paternal religious teachings served the male gender and a certain class, and left the vast majority of us with a great and inconsolable sense of fallibility.

We must ask to not be afraid of the truth of the extent of our sexual desire and spiritual yearning

We must ask for the gift to communicate our needs, to be eloquent and determined in our public articulation of them.

We must search within ourselves and in each other for the courage to challenge the unjust legislation imposed on us by the lawmakers of the world.

We must, above all, search within ourselves and grapple with the misogynist, racist, and classist that has been planted in our own minds and cast "her" out. She has turned mother against daughter, woman against woman, and woman against herself for too long.

There is no telling how many espiritistas and schools of thought exist in the United States, México, Latin America, and the Caribbean. Espiritismo, while an active movement, is not an institution sanctioned by dominant society. We must always keep in mind that the institutionalization of beliefs is done for the benefit of the few who have invested interests in maintaining the status quo.

A final word of caution. A curandera and a bruja should be seen as a specialized human resource, and she should keep this in mind about herself, too. Modern society approves of people consulting a gynecologist, chiropractor, or psychologist if we have an ailment that they have been trained to attend. However, training does not exempt these individuals from being susceptible to the ailments they know how to help remedy. Brujas, curanderas, or healing women also are just that, trained specialists, but keep in mind that no one is exempt from human frailties, from the potential of committing errors.

So, if a woman decides that she still finds rewards in pursuing the rituals and mandates of

institutionalized religion or simply by “meditating in the temple” of her own room; or if she constructs an altar in her home, perhaps not like the one she knew as a child of a myriad of saints and crosses, but instead of items that have special meaning for her; or if one day, she discards all religious icons and can embrace herself with self-acceptance and calls *that* her spirituality, she is continuously doing one and the same thing: maintaining her well-being.

For this purpose alone, for us who are often regarded with contempt in this society because of our ethnicity, color, gender, sexuality, or lack of means, whose entire people have historically been regarded contemptibly, all and every attempt to maintain peace and health should be seen as valid. We descend from a long line of nonvalued human beings, born to pay homage to a higher order. The glass ceiling has been cracked by a few Latinas—a governor, a Supreme Court justice, secretary of labor (all elected and appointed during the administration of the nation’s first black president); the success of business ventures like *Latina* magazine; and professionals such as physicians, attorneys, educators, entertainers, and entrepreneurs. Nevertheless, a vast majority on both sides of the border fit into the present schema for the sole purpose of continuing that anonymous line of labor. Any act that we commit that does not serve that purpose is an act of insurrection to the system. As Xicanistas in our day-to-day lives and in our work, we make very deliberate and audacious decisions to undermine that system. In this respect too, we must understand that in proclaiming our spirituality it must be to serve our own needs.

The awareness that we have at times in our lives of barely survived the most trying and humiliating conditions is what makes our bodies tremble, our minds flounder, and our emotional states fail in fear of the present and future. When this happens, as it does to many of us, even as we *heroically* fight against it, knowing our responsibilities and our loyalties to our immediate families and our communities at large, we must not accept the long-held premise that it is due to our inherent weaknesses and that it is our own personal failure. When one of us dies of cancer, loses her mind, or commits suicide, we must not blame her for her inability to survive an ongoing political mechanism bent on the destruction of that human being. Sanity remains defined simply by the ability to cope with insane conditions.

Furthermore, our long-range objective in understanding ourselves, integrating our fragmented identities, and truly believing the wisdom of our ancient knowledge should be to bring the rest of humanity to the fold. All too often, we see success in direct correlation with financial gain and assimilation into mainstream culture. Xicanistas grapple with our need to thoroughly understand who we are—gifted human beings—and to believe in our talents, our worthiness, and beauty, while having to survive within the constructs of a world antithetical to our intuition and knowledge regarding life’s meaning. Our vision must encompass sufficient confidence that dominant society will eventually give credence to our ways, if the planets and its inhabitants are to thrive.

Today it is increasingly difficult to deny global warming, for example, or to not associate foods ingested with hormones or preservatives with all manner of illnesses. These are clear instances of how a person living with conscientización is mindful and tries to live a life that does not cause further harm to herself, her family, or her environment. Consciousness is not our exclusive realm but of all who desire to transform this world into a place where the quality of life is the utmost priority; where we are all engaged in a life process that is meaningful from



birth to death; and where death does not come to us in the form of one more violent and unjust act committed against our right to live.

## BRAVE NEW WORLD

We live in a future once believed possible only in the minds of those with sardonic imaginations. Aldous Huxley, in his novel *Brave New World*, predicted a society in which human beings were created out of test tubes. We know today that such a scientific feat is possible and holds the possibilities of equally resultant horrors for humankind as those foretold in *Brave New World*. There were human beings in Huxley's world born only for the purpose of serving those considered genetically *superior* to them. However, we know that this concept was already implemented throughout recorded history, that slavery was based on this belief.

The twentieth century ushered in an age long awaited by male scientists: to have power over life and death in massive proportions. If our history as women has been regulated by men because of our biological ability to reproduce the species, what does it mean that science now begins to think of dispensing with the womb? In fact, in terms of reproduction, it has already eliminated the need for direct male contact through intercourse with the process of artificial insemination (something the Hebrew God already did in both the Old and New Testaments).

In the woman's movement, mostly white and middle class and that began to lose momentum by the late 1980s, the attempt to reappropriate woman's spirituality came via asserting a matriarchal time, said to have preceded recorded history, during which the Great Mother Goddess was worshipped. Theologians, such as Mary Daly, did strenuous research on behalf of these arguments. As feminists of color in the United States became more visible, they disputed the emphasis on the white Mother Goddess. The white feminists' position was understandable in light of their own analysis since it was, to use their vernacular, "a healing process" for them. Audre Lorde stated in a published address on this subject, "An Open Letter to Mary Daly":

So I wondered why doesn't Mary deal with Afrekete as an example? Why are her goddess images only white, western european, judeo-christian? . . . It was obvious that you were dealing with noneuropean women, but only as victims and preyers-upon each other. I began to feel my history and my mythic background distorted by the absence of any images of my foremothers in power. . . . What you excluded from *Gyn/Ecology* dismissed my heritage and the heritage of all other noneuropean women, and denied the real connections that exist between all of us.<sup>8</sup>

If the white feminist first saw her "oppression" in opposition to the dominant status of the white male, we understand that it was her obvious recourse to juxtapose her truths to his. That

is, white man as master of the universe created a white god to justify his superiority over the human race. White woman as his mate, unearthed a white goddess who preceded the creation of the white god and therefore her power superseded that of the master.<sup>9</sup>

But feminists of color responded to the discourse by drawing on the various resources of our own continents for our spirituality. Peoples with strong African affinities have revived and are daily making more active the Yoruba religion (brought to the American shores with slavery and driven underground by white masters), illustrated by such practitioners as Luisah Teish and her book *Jambalaya*.<sup>10</sup> Most nonwhite feminist activists, however, are living fairly innocuous lives and the various ways by which their spirituality is exercised are personal and diverse.

The feminist-activists from the late 1960s to perhaps recent times, who became involved, for example, in rape crisis intervention and fighting domestic violence are themselves very often what is termed “survivors” of incest, child abuse, alcohol abuse, and other atrocities endemic in the social structure in which we all live. They entered into this line of work out of a need to help others as much as the need to “heal” themselves. Gradually and with great effort on the part of activists, policies and programs were made to respond to the needs of women of color, who, because many of them came from traditional cultural backgrounds, required some of the practices discussed here in order to participate.

Ritual may be used as a veritable healing method. Some Xicanistas availed themselves of the folkways of their grandmothers while altering the religious faith of their devout mothers. Creating some distance from the last generation allowed such guerrilleras to adapt a spirituality to their own needs while still operating within their culture. For example, they might remain devoted to certain Catholic saints, giving a woman-focused dimension to their symbolism. The Virgin of Guadalupe is a favorite. She is not only the patron saint of México, a cultural bond for all of us as “Guadalupeanas,” but also is an incarnation of the “brown” goddesses, Tonantzin and Coatlicue. She is an ancient indigenous maternal symbol for us.<sup>11</sup> In much the same way that white feminists sought an affirmation of womanhood through European goddess worship, the mestiza resurrects her own pantheon of indigenous goddesses, primarily Guadalupe/Tonantzin/Coatlicue and Coyaxauqui, the moon goddess.

One way in which Catholic saints are attended to by brujas and curanderas is in the form of inexpensive votive candles with the picture of the saint and a petition painted on the glass. “Aura sweepings,” the cleansing of the spirit, is another practice accomplished sometimes with the use of smoke, such as the burning of sweet grass (Native American), copal (Aztec), or tobacco (Native American/Yoruba).

As psychologists have noted, human beings must have some order in their lives to help them function in society. Ritual may be used to calm oneself and/or to reassure others when chaos seems at hand. This may be accomplished through an aura sweeping (*limpia*), tarot card reading, the construction of altars, or channeling sessions, just to name a few of the alternatives to institutionalized religions women have begun to practice. All methods employed by the spiritually oriented Xicanista in search of psychic transformation are valid when utilized respectfully—that is, acknowledging nonhierarchical connection with all life energies. We may, as has been suggested by feminist-spiritual practitioners, assume the customs passed on to

us through old beliefs or invent our own.

Some feminist activists in the mental health services are using these methods with their Latina clientele, who seem to respond more effectively to this treatment than to the alien mental health practices of the mainstream establishment. This desire to heal our traumatized selves, as I say, is one step. Most important, it is an affirmative move toward the declaration of one's significance in what constitutes society. We may now become whole individuals in the larger picture of humanity. We now have voices. We may now be legitimate contributors to our world.

However, an attempt at obtaining such direction from our past simply by imitating or inventing ritual is not necessarily the clearest path or, rather, does not guarantee an evolved spirituality. Many women have found just as many disturbing contradictions in ancient practices with regard to their womanhood. Therefore, a synthesis of old forms with goals that aim to restore the feminine as a prominent component is required. Above all, our applications must correspond to our contemporary needs and concerns.

The New Age movement became popular during the 1970s and its followers remain mostly white and affluent in the United States. (This is not necessarily the case in México where the practice of curanderismo and brujería have been widely accepted by the rural and mostly lower classes since time immemorial.) However, now there is an overlap among feminists and especially feminists of color seeking a synthesis of world beliefs that speaks to them, which is the reason for the mention of this subject here.

The New Age movement is a free-flowing spiritual movement of believers and practitioners based on the premise that the Age of Aquarius will bring an end to human suffering and the ongoing destruction of the planet. The movement is as fluid and varied as the individuals who subscribe to it. It includes psychology, parapsychology, astrology, Eastern and Western spiritual and metaphysical aspects, Tarot, I-Ching, holistic medicine, and yoga, among other things. While it may be said that there are those among the practitioners who are sincere, the nature with which the New Age philosophy is executed vis-à-vis capitalism does give rise to skepticism.

There are, for example, expensive sessions with channelers, said to communicate with spirits. There are New Age retreats (with high fees). Several high-profile examples come to mind. One is the rise of spiritual "hot" spots in the world such as Bali and Santa Fe, New Mexico, accompanied with all the bells and whistles entrepreneurial endeavors may imagine. Another, the sordid example of self-help guru, best-selling author, and motivational speaker, James Arthur Ray, who used the sacred indigenous practice of the sweat lodge for greed and made one the size of a circus tent, illustrates the extreme abuse of seekers with dispensable income in search of spiritual fulfillment. Ray was convicted of negligent homicide on three counts for the lives lost in his event and given a nominal sentence of two years. Oprah, whose world influence at one time was scarcely rivaled, blessed many such books, among them, *The Secret*, *The Four Agreements*, and of course the work of her friend, Marianne Williamson, which started with her interpretation of the *Course of Miracles* created by the Foundation for Inner Peace.

However, when a practitioner chooses the path to be a healer—whether as a public speaker

or giving private consultations, tradition among curanderas once upheld that such effort must not be used to profit the individual, either through monetary gain nor personal aggrandizement, by exploiting the vulnerability of people. The development of such faculties must always be viewed with a sense of humility, to recognize one's integration and dependency on other life forms on the planet. The object of such a practitioner should always be to reinstate harmony in the environment, which cannot be accomplished through hierarchical privilege. While I have yet to meet a curandera who has had ten *New York Times* best sellers as Ms. Williamson has had, I have met numerous practitioners who had no qualms in charging fees on both sides of the border for their performances disguised as spiritual powers. They preyed on the heartaches of those who came to them and charged as much as they thought they might extract.

A sign of sincerity, if not an indication of true talent, of a curandera or bruja of good intent is that she does not employ her learning to manipulate others. If an espiritista (using channeling) capitalizes on her faculties either monetarily or by communicating to solicitors that her faculties are a personal power that can be used to control them she is serving solely to perpetuate imbalance. Charging a fee for sharing one's spiritual gifts is a privilege granted by the free enterprise system under which we live today and has no direct association with a true gift. While being a curandera or a bruja is not feminist, it is egalitarian in that it sees all humanity, as well as animal and plant life, as respectful of each other. It is an acknowledgement of the energy that exists throughout the universe subatomically generating itself and interconnecting, fusing, and changing.

While subatomic studies may serve as a theoretical basis for social change, on a more pragmatic and immediate level they offer a personal response to the divided state of the individual who desires wholeness. An individual who does not sense herself as helpless to circumstances is more apt to contribute positively to her environment than one who resigns to it with apathy because of her sense of individual insignificance.

## THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY ACTIVISTA

Since the backlash against feminism in the late 1980s, new generations of women of all ilks have come of age as beneficiaries of their mothers' and grandmothers' hard-won battles on the front for gender equality without acknowledging it. As such, they have the privilege to move away from the perhaps marginal spiritual alternatives discussed here. They may subscribe to traditional religions, opt for church weddings replete with male family members giving them away to their grooms, baptize their children in the name of God the Father, and feel at peace without feminine expressions of a Godhead.

The term *Chicana*, too, except for certain locations in the Southwest and perhaps in academic circles, is also presently seen as a label pertaining to past generations. The *activista* with *conscientización* still exists. She may practice a formal religion, but now is also familiar with other forms of spirituality. It is not unusual to find *activistas* of both genders now accepting a combination of spiritual rituals. On the contrary, the push and pull of decades of

discussion about Chicana/Latina identity in the United States among activists has allowed great latitude and tolerance for individual choices. It is my position not to not judge the spiritual practice of another woman. The journey for each of us is our own.

Socially and politically speaking, the activista's personal traumas experienced as a direct result of her femaleness, her brown skin, and her economic hardships are understood as being part of the degenerating system we are obliged to live under. Once the causes for certain obstacles in her life are identified and worked through, she does not flounder about as merely a survivor, such as one who has survived a plane wreck and awaits a rescue team (which may never be forthcoming) but uses the new affirmation, that she has always been part of the intricate network of life on this planet, to strengthen herself and to share her knowledge with others. Ultimately we seek to propel ourselves into a collective state of being, which is so ancient we will consider it new.

In the long run, spirituality will be a state of being that is not defined but lived, as a unified self, and the concept of an inherent struggle between good and evil imposed on us through recorded history will have been relegated to an unfortunate memory for the sake of all humanity.

#### POSTSCRIPT: BAÑOS, A PRESCRIPTION FOR RELIEVING EMOTION AND PHYSICAL ANXIETY

Baños are a remedy for both physical and emotional ills prescribed by curanderas throughout the ages in the Americas. There are also *dulce* baños to increase or maintain a joyful state (such as being in love). The following "recipe" may be used to cleanse the self of negative energies in the environment, to rid one of an unsettling feeling, or regularly, for chronic anxiety.

Baños may be taken on Tuesdays and Fridays. (Sundays are okay, too. Refrain from baños during menstruation.)

1. Several drops of Spirit of Ammonia
2. Several drops of Spirit of Camphor
3. Handful of eucalyptus (fresh is best, substitute in another form, if necessary, okay).
4. Handful of sage (fresh is best, substitute in another form, if necessary, okay).
5. Splash of Agua de la Florida
6. 3, 7, or 9 lemons or limes
7. 3, 7, or 9 garlic cloves (amount to correspond with number of lemons or limes)

Place and pour ingredients directly into one or two large pots and bring to a boil.

Limes/lemons must be cut open crosswise (+), squeezed, and thrown in whole. Cover, simmer. When cool, sift, but retain lemons/limes. Baño may be taken standing up in the shower, or if preferred, in a warm bath. Using a small container, pour baño systematically over yourself, starting with the top of your head, back of the neck, across shoulder blades, etc., always in the shape of the cross of the four directions. You may want to rub the lemons/limes directly on your body, vigorously, before finishing. During the baño, concentrate only on its curative effects; do not let your mind wander. Afterward do not dry yourself off, but patting dry with a towel is okay. Let your hair and skin air dry. Have a clean white or brightly colored garment (like a nightgown) ready to slip on until you're dry. If it is before bedtime, you may sleep in it. This treatment will be much more enhanced if you take time before the baño to prepare yourself with meditation. Use a white candle, incense of your preference, and/or a clear jar of water. It will help you to relax and to concentrate on your baño.