

Curanderismo

Roberto Danise • December 8, 2004

Curanderismo is the name that the Spanish gave to the traditional healing practices of the Indians of Mexico.

Curanderismo is to modern medicine what philosophy is to science. It is its origin and still its constant companion. In the other hand, the dichotomy between modern medicine and ancestral medicine is beginning to disappear even among mainstream populations of industrialized nations.

Growing numbers of patients are becoming more interested in traditional healing practices. This interest is not a fortuitous one. For all of the undeniable contributions of modern medicine, we are becoming aware of the negative effects the pharmacological revolution is causing in our patients. We are finding diseases caused by medications. In more than one way we have come full circle: The cure is becoming the disease.

Curanderismo has been here long before us, and it continues to be here. While its survival has been partially conditioned by people's lack of access to modern health care, there are stronger reasons for this practice to continue in our communities. The first one is **tradition**. The other reason – and perhaps the strongest one – is based on pragmatism: Curanderismo is still around because it works.

This brings us to Curanderismo as it has been practiced on the American continent.

Because this knowledge was not European-based, it was considered unscientific by the dominant culture. Nevertheless, traditional healing continued to be one of the healing practices not only of the indigenous groups but also of the new mixed-blood populations.

Western systems of healing had little or no classifications for healing properties of the herbs of the American continent, but the indigenous populations did. And part of this knowledge was preserved by popular traditions that went unnoticed by mainstream medicine. As time went by plants were given new names, but remained in use for the same healing purposes. Herbology is a system of healing integrated into the conceptual frame of Curanderismo, but not the only one. Let's keep in perspective that

for the ancient healers, the human soul covered the domains of the body, the heart and the mind, each one of these areas being approachable with a wide variety of healing practices, the essential one being the healer's ability to search and assess the patient's soul.

The Cartesian dichotomy between body-mind, did not apply to the ancient healers, who viewed health as a continuum of energy in the human body.

According to some of these models the body was conditioned by the liver, which would either give us "good" or "bad blood." the concept of blood had to do with our basic attitude as we faced the challenges of life, which would either keep our blood clean (if we were to radiate good medicine), or would turn our blood heavy with toxic emotions, in which case our energy would become bad medicine.

Accordingly, if we had good blood, we would produce good air around us. People would feel comfortable, and uplifted with us around. On the other hand, if we had bad blood, those around us would feel uncomfortable, and defensive when we were around.

There were specific procedures to "clean the air" of a given person, place or situation. Sounds, touch, positions, movements, light, warmth, unguents, heat and aromas could dissipate the bad air.

There are some types of diseases that have to do with people losing their purpose in life. Life begins to abandon them while they are still in the body. They are like a tree that is still **alive**, but whose roots have been removed from the earth. Their personal heart is no longer in unity with the heart of life. In isolation, the Quetzal, the sacred bird that lives in the human heart, stops moving its wings, stops singing, begins to die.

It is this bird that speaks through the voice of the poet and the healer. It is this active living bird that encourages the bird of his fellow humans to rise and sing.

The ancestral healers stated that the pains of the heart could be stronger than the ones of the body.

Broken hearts of today continue to validate this ancestral paradigm. Now we have heart specialists talking to us not only of our diets and cholesterol levels, but also of the quality of our relations as the main determinant of

our heart's condition, for they too have learned through scientific observations what Curanderos have known all along: That relations can heal or kill us.

We owe to the ancestral healers the awareness that the emotional life and the physical life don't necessarily experience time and space in the same way. While it is in the nature of the physical body to be only in the present, that is, in one place and moment at a time, the emotional body, can be in several places and moments at once. That is why it was represented as a sacred bird whose wings would allow him to go beyond the boundaries of time and space. This defiance of physical limitations can also be done by our awareness-body, for we can go from our individual consciousness, to the collective and universal consciousness, these last ones being experienced as "visions" and "prophecies" and other forms of enhanced perception.

If it was the one of the body, then ordinary remedies would be used in the healing process. These healing practices relied heavily in local herbs, places (such as natural sanctuaries), animal products, the use of cold and hot water, massages and sweat lodges.

However, if the affliction of the soul was at the level of the heart, or of the awareness-body, then extraordinary psycho-spiritual procedures were set in motion.

The purpose of Curanderismo is to heal the wound at all its levels, to facilitate the process of integration of the patient's soul to its essential unity within itself and with the universal-soul which the Aztec healers called "ometeotl," literally "the one who is close and near."

Wholeness within the individual, and wholeness with nature and relations, is the essential paradigm of Curanderismo.

The wound of the soul has to do with the "shadow" or double, the part of our mind that is affected by our ordinary experiences, such as physical or emotional experiences. Often times, it is this shadow that is trapped in the world of the mind, creating confusions and distortions (wounds) in our soul. The challenge of the Curandero is then two-fold. First, the task is to find the shadow of the afflicted individual. The second is to integrate this shadow to the soul who needs it as long as the soul is going to be encapsulated in the body.

The soul from the perspective of Curanderismo has physical, emotional, mental and spiritual dimensions. As such, it can reach lower and higher states of consciousness. The first ones are identified as the underworlds, and there are nine of them, each one of them with their own particular forces and characteristics. There are also specific emotional energies that fluctuate in each one of these domains. The Curandero, with his heart (who has been to every domain), can determine the location of the soul in anyone of these worlds. And there are also 13 over-worlds, that can become harmful to the soul if the person does not learn how to descend from them and re-engage the ordinary world, an illness known as “quedarse arriba”, “to get lost in the world of above.”

At another level, the Curandero has realized that he is one with his natural environment, and protects sacred places from the wounds of the unnatural ways of existence. The Curanderos are the caretakers of the Earth for the life of future generations. They go, today, to those sacred places. They fast, maintain silence and absorb the healing energy of those places. Then they bring such feeling and share it with their brothers who have plans to “develop” those places. The Curanderos protect the Earth from the wounds of civilization.

Curanderismo, addresses behavior and consciousness as part of a larger paradigm, the one of the soul and the one of the community. As such, its domain is not limited to the areas of biology, health and illness, or even life, for Curanderos work within a paradigm of eternity and spirit. It is, by design, a system of wholeness. It works with the paradoxical predicament of human life (its mortality and eternity) and its energetic exchange with cosmic forces.

Curanderismo remains the oldest and most widely used health system of the Americas as well as the least understood by the academic world.

Curanderos practice a therapist-centered healing, one where the healer takes responsibility for the energy, skills and processes that he or she brings to the healing encounter.

A multicultural world is giving us now the opportunity to see how experiences are greatly determined by the way they are viewed and treated; that a psychological crisis may be enhanced or managed by the way we approach it, and that experiences that have been void of meaning in one cultural context, can become significant and meaningful in another one. Cross-cultural experiences can provide us with a wide variety of tools to illuminate the inner life and come to its aid in times of need. And we can

learn them by living and learning from each other, with respect. Our different ways can be an asset for us all. Perhaps it is now time to pause and to learn from each other. After all, while our past has been different, we all share the same future.

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Comments

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