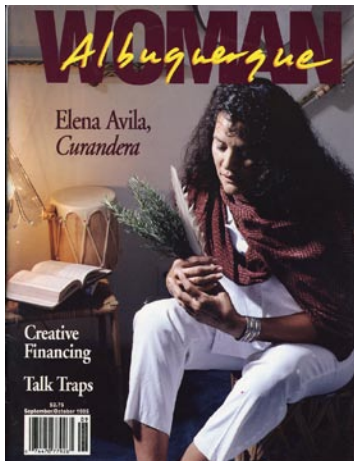


## Elena Avila, Curandera: Balancing the Old and the New



We have become dissatisfied with Western medicine—it is too technical, too secular, it's lost its "sacred" character. Oh, we like aspects of it, if it'll save our lives, maybe. But, we are becoming much more interested in the quality of life. We are refusing treatment, signing living wills—we are questioning the edict to save life, at any cost. The god-like image of Western medicine is tarnished. It's big business, it's high tech, it can be miraculous—but it is often inhuman. Sometimes, the cure is worse than the disease. We have begun looking for alternative methods. Looking for healing, for comfort, for caring. Looking back at the ways things were done in the past. Looking to other cultures—Chinese, Indian, Native American. Listening to our own bodies.

Elena Avila is one woman who is blending the old ways with the new. She is a curandera, and she has a masters degree in Nursing in Mental Health (major: Psychiatric Nurse Specialist) from the University of Texas at El Paso.

"At UCLA I was head of a clinic at the Neuropsychiatric Institute. I've been the Director of Maternal Child Nursing and I learned that the focus of psychiatric nursing was shock treatment, medicines, an emphasis on biology, and it wasn't working," Avila says. "Compared to Western medicine, curanderismo is healing done in sacred, spiritual, ways."

Curanderismo. Medicine of the people. Incorporating body, mind, and emotions, but also soul and spirit. "Soul is different from spirit," Avila says. "Soul pertains more to the individual person... who we are born to be, our temperament, personality, energy."

"My people are Chicanos, and there are diseases in my culture that pertain to soul loss—sexual abuse, abusive parents, dysfunctional families. Our individuality is taken away. Our creativity, our energy. These parts of ourselves are no longer available to us."

Curanderismo comes out of the Mexican rural, agrarian tradition, where communities were close-knit and often isolated in both time and distance from more formal medical care. It started when there were no doctors. Many of the healing rituals came out of familiarity with the cultures surrounding a person and of knowing that person, their personality, the family dynamic.

Avila is half Indian, Mestiza, mostly Mayan. Both parents are from Mexico, her mother from Yucatan, her father a Mestizo from northern Mexico, Durango. They brought their medicine with them, passed down through time. "I am a first generation Chicana born and raised in the barrios of El Paso, Texas," Avila says. "My first language was Spanish and my family's health care included curanderismo as well as Western medicine."

Her mother had a "gift"—she knew remedies, but was not called a curandera. There were always healers

and the tradition of healers in the neighborhoods. "People might call them that [curanderas]," says Avila, "but it was presumptuous to call yourself that."

While Avila grew up with curanderismo, she rejected it and went to nursing school. With her recognition that Western medicine wasn't delivering satisfactorily, she returned and became interested in it again. "I'm always learning," Avila says. "Curanderismo is always evolving." She has studied curanderismo in El Paso and Juarez, and as she gained knowledge and experience, she pursued apprenticeships with healers in the interior of Mexico and Peru.

"A lot of traditional curanderismo has died out with our need to assimilate," says Avila. "Other medicine has higher value. [This knowledge] is not being passed on. For example—, assume a woman who has a gift for massage can massage the stomach, and work with blockages. When handed down it can be very sophisticated. If passed down through seven generations, it's subtle. There's a lot of richness in the healing."

But, things are changing. "There is new energy with curanderismo—it is coming back. The Western medical system is not delivering—I have a medical degree and am continuing the old ways, too," Avila says. "I encourage health professionals to do the same. It's like the Chinese—they go to medical school, but they also go to herbal school. It's truly a balance."

Avila herself is in the process of passing on her experience and her knowledge—she smiles when asked if she has an apprentice. "Yes," she says emphatically. "My niece. It's important to pass this on."

Curanderas have specialties—A woman on 4th street has a drugstore—knows herbs and herb lore. And there are others—in Los Lunas and Bernalillo. Avila's specialty is more on the spiritual level, with diseases that pertain to soul and spirit. As she says, "Aspects of self, the higher dimensions within all of us. The one that meets the divine. The connection to higher aspect to yourself and your god, the longing to rise above ourselves."

"While others might specialize in herbs, or delivering babies, or massage—whatever your gift is is the 'don'—and all curanderas have this 'don.' If you have the gift to be a healer, take the gift. Don't make it your whole life; you have to heal yourself, too. Know who you are. It's very important."

*With her lectures and conferences and her training in both traditional and Western medicine, she is in a unique place to de-mystify the old ways.*

The key question for Avila becomes: What is the right medicine for the people you serve? She uses whatever works. One session might be psychotherapy, one might be a ceremony, a spiritual cleansing. Some might need education about what, exactly, sexual abuse is. And when appropriate, she will refer people back to Western medicine. "This work is intuitive. It's hard sometimes to keep straight what is you and what is the other," Avila says. "I'm very glad I got a masters in psychiatric nursing. I value it very much."

"I love to go back to the ancient ones—calling on Coyolxauhqui, the Cosmic Mother or Coatlique, Earth Mother. Curanderas and curanderos all have different beliefs. I very much practice my Indian heritage. It is similar to shamanism, medicine man/woman. I do shamanic work. Shamanism works at more levels, has more dimensions of healing. I work at esoteric levels, involving the soul, the spirit. I've done healing with Native Americans. Studied with Mexican Indians—the Aztecs and the Mayans had very sophisticated medicine. [Curanderismo] is an evolving medicine, and there's always more and more to learn."

How religious is this?



“There’s a lot of misunderstanding about that,” Avila says.

She emphasizes it is spiritual, but it is not a religion. She might use Our Lady of Guadeloupe, the baby Jesus, a fertility goddess in her rituals and she has them all on the altar along with religious candles. “There is always an altar. The work is done from that source. I was Catholic. For me, personally, it’s not so much a religion, but I very much believe in God.”

Avila works with a wide variety of people from virtually all cultures. She has worked with people from the pueblos—often when there is no medicine man. She does not restrict her practice to Hispanics. She once worked with a man from West Africa, who wanted a spiritual cleansing (*limpia*)—and he was surprised at the similarities with his own culture. Anyone can, indeed, take advantage of *curanderismo*—as long as the person is open to it, and its possibilities. Avila lectures to health professionals all over the nation. And her clientele is not just local—people travel great distances for special healings, sometimes for a week or two. Her practice is eclectic. And within *curanderismo*, there is no contradiction with paradoxes.

Elena Avila lives in Rio Rancho. “I fell in love with New Mexico thirteen years ago. My roots are in El Paso, but my soul is here. If I’d stayed in El Paso, I’d be working in the neighborhood.”

She is in Rio Rancho because it’s cheaper than Albuquerque and she wanted to have a space in her house. “I finally had the courage to start my own practice [8 years ago]. It’s traditional to have a space in the house. Here, the earth is close, the mountain right here, and the desert is at the end of the road.” The Sandias are magnificent from the door in her room. It is quiet and still.

She had says if she’d stayed in El Paso she would be working the neighborhood. Her neighborhood today is the larger world—with her lectures and conferences and her training in both traditional and Western medicine, she is in a unique place to de-mystify the old ways. “There are misunderstandings. It is not witchcraft—*curanderismo* is not really mystical or magical—it is natural, practical medicine.”

In addition to her healing work, Avila is a published poet, an actress, a playwright and a grandmother. She is writing a book on her experiences as a *curandera* and a nurse. She is going to China for a conference for health providers about women’s health issues.

What does the future hold for *Curanderismo*? And Elena Avila? She believes *curanderismo* will continue to evolve and sees the revival of interest in the old ways as a good thing. She would not like to see regulation of the old ways, even though there may be some quacks. “That’s part of what’s killed it off up to now.”

Avila wants to write more. About *curanderismo*. She can reach more people than she can now one-on-one or even in workshops. “I want to help others, and while some tradition is oral, I wouldn’t print any rituals or medicines that do not need to be in print. For example, certain prayers need to be passed on orally—but there are lots of things that can be written about.”

What is interesting in all the discussions about medicine and health care and traditional ways is the shifting of focus to a polytheism—not one god, Western Medicine, nor just a substitute for one god—but the development of a smorgasbord. The use of particular aspects of a method, whether it ‘s Western, Chinese, or from the tradition of *curanderismo*—the mixing up, the blending, of methods and traditions in search for what works. It’s a search for something better, something more human. Or as Avila says, “Something more soulful.”

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