

# A MOTHER'S LOVE: GENDER, ALTRUISM, AND SPIRITUAL TRANSFORMATION

by *Bonnie Glass-Coffin*

*Abstract.* This article explores the concepts of altruism, spiritual connection, and shamanic healing as practiced by female *curanderas* in northern Peru. It suggests how coessence rather than transcendence is at the heart of the shamanic journey that both healers and patients embark upon in order to transform suffering. Using ethnographic and case-study research, it describes how the metaphors of maternal care, shared suffering, and compassionate love are used by female healers in this region to shape their patients' understandings of illness and health as well as to construct their own understandings of the shaman's role in their healing process. The healers studied adopt attitudes of acceptance, empathy, spiritual connection, and altruism as integral to their work and encourage their patients to do the same in order to regain a sense of mastery over their own suffering. Parallels are presented between the model of spiritual connection and healing described here and that described by both scholars of feminist theology and feminist spirituality such as Rosemary Radford Ruether and popular lecturers/authors such as Marianne Williamson.

*Keywords:* altruism; gender; motherhood; Peru; Rosemary Radford Ruether; shamanism; spiritual transformation; Marianne Williamson.

---

"I want you to learn something very well," Ysabel told me. It was the first night that I had participated in the all-night healing ritual that she and other *curanderos* (shamanic healers) in northern Peru refer to as a mesa. "Whenever you help another person here [at] my mesa, whenever you contribute, you are living. You are experiencing, and that is the way you enter into the movie of life."

Bonnie Glass-Coffin is Professor of Anthropology at Utah State University, Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology, Old Main Hill 0730, Logan, UT 84322-0730; e-mail [glasscob@cc.usu.edu](mailto:glasscob@cc.usu.edu).

[*Zygon*, vol. 41, no. 4 (December 2006).]

© 2006 by the Joint Publication Board of *Zygon*. ISSN 0591-2385

It was 1988, and I was conducting research with five female shamans in northern Peru in order to understand what role, if any, gender plays in the way that spiritually caused illness is conceptualized and therapy is constructed. What I learned over the course of almost eighteen months working with Ysabel and the other four healers is that altruistic connection, engagement, and relationship was *the* key to healing, personal transformation, and spiritual growth for at least three of these five women. Whether defined as compassionate love, sacrifice for others, or just a shift of perspective from one that privileges the self alone to one that emphasizes self in relation, altruism was at the core of their healing philosophies.

Altruism also seems essential to healing in our society—at least according to the books, tapes, magazine articles, and weekend seminars that become increasingly popular for millions of American spiritual “seekers” with each passing year. It may, in fact, be *the* defining characteristic of spiritual transformation, and one that goes beyond the constructs of any given culture. How does this shift in focus, from the primacy of self to that of Being in relation, occur? Are there life experiences that lend themselves to this transformation and that therefore come to be associated with a spiritual awakening?

I believe that motherhood is one such experience that warrants exploration. I am certainly not the first to make such a claim, but I want to frame the discussion in terms of how the metaphor as well as the experience of motherhood has played out for me over the last eighteen years of personal struggle with spiritual transformation. For, as Ysabel told me during that first mesa in which I participated, “you are more in need of healing than any of my other patients here!”

The story of altruism and spiritual transformation that I tell here is multilayered and emergent. In addition to being a story about how these women healers in Peru understand illness and healing, it is autoethnographic in that it recounts things about my own spiritual journey. Its real significance, however, lies in the fact that this focus on engagement and connection to the social, political, and cognitive worlds in which we live also has something important to say about the nature of our discipline.

#### BACKGROUND

From 1987 to 1989, my research with Ysabel and the other four shamanic healers in Peru focused on the ways in which male and female shamans diverge in both their understanding of the causes of illness and the strategies they employ for restoring health (Glass-Coffin 1996; 1998; 1999). One theme that emerged during my research was their insistence that healing comes through both acceptance of and surrender to all that this life brings rather than transcendence of the everyday world. Rather than claiming to be victims of suffering, they admonished their patients (including me) to

change their attitudes about the causes of and solutions to misfortune. Instead of casting blame on others and wishing for a perfect world, patients were admonished to accept all aspects of their lives as sacred, regardless of the imperfections. And, rather than engage with the forces of the universe to heal their patients, these healers insisted that healing would come only when their patients embraced the power of transformation that they embodied within themselves.

This awakening to the power of perspective was termed *conciencia* (consciousness) by Yolanda, a 41-year-old *curandera* from Cajamarca, and *gracia* (God's grace) by Ysabel, 40, who lived on the outskirts of Chiclayo. Flormira, 44, who also lived near Chiclayo, viewed this shift as simply the willingness to accept God's will for her life (Glass-Coffin 1998, 194). As Ysabel put it, "When patients are able to connect with their life experience instead of feeling victimized by it, they become filled with the spirit of the divine. . . . [Healing] requires coming back into God's grace, accepting Being, accepting suffering, and accommodating imperfection rather than lamenting or disdaining it" (Glass-Coffin 2006, 73).

Surrender to the fact that one is "in the world" is not the same as being passively resigned or having no options. Rather, as I show below, this stance can provide a platform for resistance as well as the necessary tools for effecting enormous change. It is a perspective that has been shared by some of the most powerful spiritual leaders throughout history and one that emphasizes being "in the world but not of it."

In the book that resulted from my research (Glass-Coffin 1998), I claimed that this orientation to healing as spiritual transformation was gendered, more likely to be expressed by women than by men. Later, I found these convictions echoed by others who emphasized that feminist visions of spirituality are those that celebrate the process of "coming into a relationship with [lived] reality" (Ochs 1983, 10–11). Rosemary Radford Ruether asserted, "feminist theology . . . emphasizes that [spiritual development] must be rooted in the foundations of being and body, rather than . . . [being] an antithesis of nature and spirit" (1993, 67). By this logic, the Divine is within, as well as between ourselves and every aspect of our experience on Earth, rather than somewhere outside our worlds. Spirit is both experienced and expressed relationally—in coessent terms. The basis of spiritual growth is found in paradox rather than renunciation. It is a paradox that embodies spirit and matter, the divine and the human, individual suffering and communal pardon. This approach to spirituality as embodiment and relation—as shared experience, shared pain, and shared love—is also found in the analogy of motherhood. (For a more detailed discussion of these assertions see Glass-Coffin 2006.)

In the years since my ethnographic work in Peru, I have become increasingly interested in how spiritual transformation is written about in U.S. contexts. As I have become more familiar with this literature, and

since I have become a mother myself, the fit between motherhood, altruism, and spiritual growth resonates for me even more strongly than before. As a result of thinking about these relationships as expressed by the Peruvian healers, in my own experience as a mother, and in the transformation literature I have read, I explore altruism here as (1) sacrifice, (2) empathy, (3) discipline and right action, (4) forgiveness, and (5) surrender/letting go.

#### ALTRUISM AS SACRIFICE FOR THE GOOD OF ANOTHER

One of the most common definitions of altruistic action involves sacrificing one's own well-being for the good of another. In evolutionary terms, the result and reason for altruistic behavior is nothing less than that of promoting the survival of species. In terms of maternal reasoning, altruistic behavior makes sense as the means by which a child's chances for survival to adulthood are enhanced.

I saw Ysabel's orientation to altruistic behavior on many occasions, but the point was especially driven home to me one day in 1988. About two months into my work with her, I asked for permission to photograph her healing altar in the daylight so that I could better document its objects. Normally, Peruvian shamanic healers are careful not to let the sun's rays touch their altars, so I was surprised when she assented. In the process of setting the altar up against a wall in the patio where I would photograph it, a small vial broke. Neither she nor her assistant said anything about it, but seven months later I learned just how central that vial was to her healing project. She told me that the vial had been blessed by God himself, and holy water drunk from it would cure any patient of any ailment in an act of holy communion. Then she told me that her life had been shortened by one-third the day I had caused the vial to be broken. When I asked if there was any way that I could make amends and right the wrong that had caused her such grave consequence, she simply said, "The only thing I want is for you to make something of yourself, to live your life fully, to act upon what you have learned here today and not waste the time you have." It was a powerful message of transformation through sacrifice.

#### ALTRUISM AS EMPATHY/COMPASSION

At its etymological core, empathy as compassionate love is about "shared suffering," which requires stepping outside of oneself and blurring the boundaries between self and other. As an integral component of shamanic healing, Joan Koss-Chioino has recently developed this concept, suggesting that

this blurring of self/other boundaries allows for the patient to be enfolded into the healer's own communion with the spirit-world. As Koss-Chioino suggests, when individual boundaries between shamanic healer, patient, and what might be glossed as the divine are transcended through this mutuality of shared suffer-

ing and shared caring, intersubjective spaces are created that facilitate the spiritual transformation and healing. (Glass-Coffin 2006, 64)

In my work with Peruvian healers, patients were made aware of this empathic relation in a number of ways. Both Ysabel and Yolanda claimed to personally experience the suffering of their patients as a preliminary part of the healing process. For Ysabel this shared suffering involved physical incorporation of the patient's pain as part of the healing ceremony. On numerous occasions I saw Ysabel, deep in shamanic trance, double up in pain or complain of extreme fever or cold as she relived the moment of the victim's bewitching. She would sometimes ask who of those present at the mesa was feeling nauseous, or cold, or stabbing pain, and one of those present would invariably recognize the suffering as her own. At these moments, the mutuality of suffering between healer and patient was painfully apparent to all present. For Yolanda, the patient's pain was experienced in more spiritual than physical terms. When describing how she suffered for her victims, she told me that the pain she felt was like that of Jesus being crucified. In one post-session interview, she told me that some patients had even been able to see the holes in her hands oozing blood like those of Jesus at Calvary.

In addition to sharing in the suffering of their patients, these women emphasized the need for patients to empathically engage with suffering in another sense. In order to be healed, patients were admonished to accept and embrace a basic connectedness with every aspect of their lived realities—cosmic, social, political, economic, and material—and thereby come into right relationship with the worlds in which they lived.

Ysabel used the metaphor of the umbilical cord to describe this patient-world connection. As a conduit between human and spirit worlds that nourishes and sustains all living things, this *cordón umbilical*, as Ysabel called it, is the path “the spirits take to return to the source of life, to rest and regenerate.” As she explained it, one end is always connected to human patients so that their relationship with the spirit world is at all times present. Maternal at its core, this view of divine power is expressed in feminist theology as well: “[Although] traditional spirituality offers us a model of the individual self in a solitary struggle for salvation, woman's experience of mothering places value in the process . . . in knowing through being . . . [and the] image of the mother suggests that true worship is not to give thanks but to do thanks—to pass on the gift” (Carol Ochs, quoted in Glass-Coffin 1998, 202–3).

#### ALTRUISM AS DISCIPLINE AND RIGHT ACTION

In almost any self-help manual whose topic is improving intimate relationships, a common theme is to stop playing the blame game and instead realize that *you* are the only one who can realistically be the focus of your goals for change.

In *The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for a Radically New Life*, Marianne Williamson writes,

Trying to fix the world is like trying to change a movie by manipulating the movie screen. The world as we know it is simply a screen onto which we project our thoughts. Until we change those thoughts, the movie stays the same. . . . We pay a high price for refusing to accept the part we play in causing our problems; [for] if I don't see I caused it, then I can't see I can change it! But once I'm willing to take total responsibility for my own experience, I can see the value of inviting the Holy Spirit to enter my mind and fill me with His spirit. (2004, 85–87)

This willingness to take responsibility requires the shift in perspective discussed above. But an altered outcome in terms of personal relationships requires sustained focus on these principles, which, with discipline and time, tends to be expressed altruistically as right action toward others.

In my relationships with Ysabel, Yolanda, and Flormira, taking responsibility not just for the state of our relationships but for the illness that follows when we are out of balance with our worlds was brought home to me over and over again. All three of these healers believe that those who fall victim to sorcery and the stealing of their souls are at least partially responsible for their own suffering. As a logical outgrowth of accepting rather than rejecting all that life has to offer us, atonement and penance for the ways in which we have been unworthy as vessels for the Divine are important steps on the path toward healing and transformation. Yolanda described it well when she said that “one could not become healed without undergoing a spiritual rehabilitation. Only by becoming morally straight, and by becoming conscious of God's will, can one begin to be healed” (Glass-Coffin 1998, 196).

Ysabel also emphasized the need to take responsibility for our suffering. Her advice to a couple who had sought her services illustrates this point. During the ceremony, it became apparent that the wife resented and blamed her husband for not standing up to his domineering mother. Instead of giving the wife permission to play the victim, Ysabel told her,

Here, let's be clear, nobody is the victim of anybody else. . . . She brought him up to be served, and you, as his wife, can't change that. Do you understand? He may be your husband, but he's his mother's son. . . . And that is to be respected. . . . You were born to be his wife. Love him, respect him, because you won't find another like him. . . . You are mistress of the household, you are mistress of your husband, but don't abuse [that role.] Never abuse it. . . . Whatever was doesn't matter. It is what will be that matters . . . and the two of you must tighten your belts [and accept your respective roles.] All right? Okay, you're both cured. (Glass-Coffin 1998, 182)

Penance and atonement for personal failings can not occur until we first own them, but when we do, and as we accept the burden of discipline that is the altruistic work of atonement, we are but one step away from transformation.

## ALTRUISM AS FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness has never been my long suit. Instead, impatience with imperfection and the tendency to judge as a first response has been my personal bane for as long as I can remember. But when I had children, I noticed that *they* were easy to forgive. As their mother, I presume their inherent innocence of character, while others who don't meet my expectations are usually presumed guilty because they should know better. In part the slack I cut my children when they err is because I recognize their mistakes as my own failure to teach them; the more obvious reason for my patience with their mistakes is the compassionate way I love them.

In our society, it seems that many people share this obsession with blaming others (and themselves) for every imperfection instead of easily forgiving mistakes. But spiritual transformation requires us to be forgiving above all else, because "unforgiveness is a poison to the soul" (Williamson 2004, 134). A focus on the innocence of others rather than their guilt makes the work of forgiveness bearable. It also provides us with the power to transform the world in which we live. According to Williamson, Martin Luther King Jr. once suggested that it is impossible for our actions to have morally persuasive power if those we seek to influence perceive our contempt, but when we are able to enfold them in love instead of blame, we can move mountains (2004, 137).

This conviction of the innocence of others comes most naturally to me when those others are my children. What is noteworthy for the present discussion, however, is that both Ysabel and Yolanda relate to all their patients in exactly this way (Glass-Coffin 1998, 198–99). While both women emphasize that healing comes only as their patients accept their divine nature, engage and connect with all aspects of their lived realities, atone for their sins, and truly forgive their offenders, they also work tirelessly to lead their patients to this understanding. As Yolanda told me once, "It makes me very happy when a patient does what I tell him to, what I counsel him to do, because what I want to do is to give him the hand that takes him out of the abyss" (Glass-Coffin 1998, 198). And Ysabel's unwavering maternal commitment to my spiritual development and her seemingly endless forgiveness of my foibles has spanned almost twenty years. It became apparent to me again a few years ago in the following exchange. A friend and former patient who had caused her considerable suffering was coming to visit the next day, yet she showed no annoyance at all when discussing his imminent arrival. "Why in the world do you put up with him, in spite of all that he has done to you?" I asked in amazement. Her answer was simple and spoken with a smile: "I put up with him for the same reason I put up with you!"

ALTRUISM AS SURRENDER AND LETTING GO OF OUR NEED  
TO BE IN CONTROL

As mothers with grown children often comment, the most difficult part of motherhood is letting go. Even though my children are still young, I am quite familiar with the “power trips” and clash of wills that often signal my need to relinquish control and let them choose. Now, I can only imagine the pain of standing by while they make what I perceive to be a wrong decision that has heartrending consequences, but I know that moment won’t be long in coming. And, if forgiveness has never been my forte, I am a *master* of forgiveness when compared to my ability to surrender the controls of my life to any outside forces. Yet, altruism, as seen through a maternal gaze, is perhaps more about surrender than any of the other characteristics I have described. The power of surrender is that love is sent into the world in a way that transforms both the one who leaves and the one who stays behind. Altruism, when viewed through this lens, is ultimately a win-win situation.

At the end of 1989, during my last mesa with Ysabel until 1996, she told me she was glad to see me go. Over the course of our time together I had shifted focus and could see the world—its challenges and possibilities—in a way that was congruent with her philosophy of healing. As I suggested in my account of that last meeting,

Ysabel had imparted this gift of self-worth, self-knowledge, and self love to me and our engagement with one another had also made her stronger. . . . She had become stronger, wiser, and more content through the part that she had played in awakening me to myself. By her action she had extended the path of creation, and her own soul had been nourished by the experience as well. (Glass-Coffin 1998, 207)

To continue with the metaphor of motherhood, it has been said that “when a woman gives birth, two are born: a baby is born from the womb of its mother, and a woman is born from the womb of her former existence” (Williamson 2004, 235). Thus, surrender is relational, and it is generative in ways that are beyond individual control. This letting go of individual boundaries to enter a divine space of mystery is emphasized in most religious traditions. It is an act that brings us into intimate relationship with *wholeness*—which is the origin of the term “to heal.”

In spite of my using the metaphor of motherhood to describe what I have learned about spiritual transformation and healing, it matters little whether we give birth in a biological sense. What matters is that we participate in the flow: accepting, relating, working, forgiving, and surrendering to coessence and relation. When we do, what began as individual effort emerges as an intersubjective co-creation.

In my case, what started as a research project on the role of gender in constructing paradigms of illness and healing in Peru evolved into some-



thing much more frightening—or exhilarating, depending upon how comfortable I am with the implications of this surrender. My commitment to personal connection (with both my research and my readers) has often thrown me beyond the margins of scientific legitimacy. My writings about this topic have been much more engaged than is often considered acceptable in anthropology. But the world in which we live needs scholars who are willing to speak from the heart rather than just the head. Regardless of whether spiritual transformation can be measured, predicted, or charted through evidence-based research or double-blind studies; regardless of whether it can be compared and generalized, or scientifically explained (although these are laudable goals), we need to share what we have learned. The anecdotal is just as persuasive as the scientifically valid to the vast majority of those seeking to understand how spiritual transformation happens. And the diverse paradigms by which we come to understand this process *all* need to be respected if we are to live up to our discipline's touchstones of cultural relativism, participant observation, and holism.

Lamentably, as anthropologists, we tend to celebrate diversity except when it comes to reporting on spirituality as is practiced by ourselves, as participating subjects within our own traditions. Yet, in the world today, there are both continued need for study and an urgent need for sharing what we already know. As Margaret Mead is said to have commented, “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has.” If there is any doubt that Mead was exhorting us to share both what we know and who we are with our peers, with our students, and with popular audiences as well, a quote for which she is almost as famous should help convince us: “I must admit that I personally measure success in terms of the contributions an individual makes to her or his fellow human beings” (Mead n.d.).

#### NOTE

A version of this essay was originally presented in the symposium “Spiritual Transformation and Altruism” at the annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C., 4 December 2005.

#### REFERENCES

- Glass-Coffin, Bonnie. 1996. “Male and Female Healing in Northern Peru: Metaphors, Models and Manifestations of Difference.” *Journal of Ritual Studies* 10 (1): 63–91.
- . 1998. *The Gift of Life: Female Spirituality and Healing in Northern Peru*. Albuquerque: Univ. of New Mexico Press.
- . 1999. “Engendering Peruvian Shamanism through Time: Insights from Ethnohistory and Ethnography.” *Ethnohistory* 46 (2): 205–38.
- . 2006. “Radical Empathy, Gender and Shamanic Healing: Examples from Peru.” In *Spiritual Transformation and Healing: Anthropological, Theological, Neuroscientific, and Clinical Perspectives*, ed. Joan D. Koss-Chioino and Philip Hefner, 62–77. Lanham, Md.: AltaMira.

- Mead, Margaret. n.d. Women's History: Margaret Mead Quotes. [http://womenshistory.about.com/cs/quotes/a/qu\\_margaretmead.htm](http://womenshistory.about.com/cs/quotes/a/qu_margaretmead.htm).
- Ochs, Carol. 1983. *Women and Spirituality*. Totwa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1993. "Spirit and Matter, Public and Private: The Challenge of Feminism to Traditional Dualisms." In *Embodied Love: Sensuality and Relationship as Feminist Values*, ed. Paula M. Cooley, Sharon A. Farmer, and Mary Ellen Ross, 65-76. San Francisco: Harper and Row.
- Williamson, Marianne. 2004. *The Gift of Change: Spiritual Guidance for a Radically New Life*. San Francisco: Harper.