

DISCUSSION: ALTRUISM, SPIRITUALLY MERGING WITH A FELLOW HUMAN BEING'S SUFFERING

by *Edith L. B. Turner*

Abstract. This discussion focuses on the details of the wellsprings of altruism. The preceding articles in this section portray how spirit figures in various cultural guises appear in human lives with the gift of altruism, in a kind of seeding of the willing healer with the spirit's presence and its accompanying power of love, altruism, and healing. The word *altruism* is related to the French *autre* and *autrui*, "other," with a special meaning here implying a relationship of identification.

Keywords: altruism; healing; pain; spiritual transformation; work of spirits.

It is instructive to note, first, that the articles in this section are part of an extraordinary increase in publications on spiritual transformation, healing, religious initiation experiences, shamanism, and the possible shape of an appropriate religion for our day. Clearly both academia and the public are interested. At least 62 percent of people report having had spiritual experiences, and those who have experienced full spiritual transformation say it was a turning point in their life. Such turning points came in the lives of four of the presenters at the symposium on spiritual transformation at the November 2005 American Anthropological Association national meetings. It is a fairly common phenomenon.

Second, let us disconnect the word *altruism* from *truism*, because the two words are not in the least related. Webster tells us that *altruism* is derived from the French *autrui*, "other people." Altruism, then, is making a bridge to other people; it is a deeply caring attitude of fellow-feeling and giving without thought of self and is therefore close to the sense of empathy. Anthropologist Bonnie Glass-Coffin (2006) says that altruism is in its

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very nature the defining characteristic of spiritual healing, its central basic component. We all recognize altruism in a general way as the goodness in motherhood and morality, neither of which seems necessarily connected with spirituality—but religions often claim that these terms are so connected. *Agape* is another term that can be recognized as altruism, and yet another obvious term is *love*.

As to the inner processes of the link of altruism to biology—to altruism's biological birth, as it were—biologist Solomon Katz at the 2005 symposium uncovered an interesting flow-process of transformation that takes in biology as well as social factors, confirming the legitimacy of including spiritual matters in the natural world and vice versa. It goes like this: Many Asian Buddhists have a consciousness of the presence of Quan Yin, their goddess and Bodhisattva. She is the touch of love that never toils or tires; she will use the slightest hint of love in a sick person and grow it into healing. Quan Yin, then, is healing's spirit source, from whom healers receive the gift. She just gives. The process as I see it is curiously circular: (1) Among humans, biological love exists as with the animals, which (2) results in physical changes in hormones, which (3) result in love that is conscious of the social environment and can see its place in it and dwell in it, which (4) results in the possibility of the "opening" event of spiritual transformation—an opening to Quan Yin with her healing, which (5) results in the often expressed sense "It changed my life."

The biological stage of the process may be traced in the study of the hormone oxytocin, which stimulates breast milk production and starts the marvelous altruistic process of giving one's body to a child. One must bear in mind the origin of the process, the goddess Quan Yin. She just gives. The strong sense that we get that this is true is the sense of apodicticity; it is knowing by direct perception.

How wide does this empathy reach? Does it cover the whole of humanity, or is it just a one-on-one emotion? Katz (2005) mentioned what he called the "mazeway *re-synthesis*" that might occur in a revitalization movement. This is an altruism process that can start with a single person's transformation involving his or her deepest values and become a revitalization movement that has an impact on an entire society. This kind of change starts with a call, then the spiritual transformation, then the liminality of a whole era. One sees this in the story of John Wesley, in his spiritual transformation on May 24, 1738, and his work in England's cities at a time of great change. What he said inevitably leapt from person to person. I myself have seen how an Ndembu spirit in Zambia leapt from person to person around a circle. The spark is anything but isolated. Wesley gave back personal experience, the soul, to Christianity, creating a profound liminality experience betwixt and between the structures of everyday life. *Methodism* may sound like a poor term for it; but *method*, significantly, is derived from *meta*, change, and *hodos*, way. The religious transformation

of the era is marvelously depicted in *Mary Barton* ([1848] 1998), Mrs. Gaskell's novel about the realities of poverty and the exigencies of people's lives in a northern industrial city. Transformation on a social scale is also seen in the Old Testament, beginning with Moses' vision of God, a transformation resulting in the escape of the Hebrews from Egypt and continuing with them, enabling them to survive in the desert for the legendary forty years. There is a distinct survival trait in these transformations. I cite the "mazeway resynthesis" trait as fundamental to our discussion, which would otherwise concern just the gifts of an individual healer. The matter has a wide, even unlimited, provenance.

Glass-Coffin in her article "A Mother's Love: Gender, Altruism, and Spiritual Transformation" (2006) shows the maternal source of altruism in her own intensive fieldwork. Both she and I are bothered by the word *transcendence*. Etymologically it means "climbing over," and we would best use it that way, not as it is so often used, giving a picture of a saintly figure sailing far up into heaven, away from this world of sin. Glass-Coffin prefers *coessence* to transcendence. Coessence also may have the sense of climbing over the barriers between us and others into altruism—"being there for others," "in" others, in their need. Glass-Coffin, who embedded herself in a truly engaged type of fieldwork, finds that altruism is the key to the maternal care of the Peruvian women healers she has come to know and that motherhood, not sainthood, is the fundamental part—a truly physical part—of altruism, the biological part of which, Katz reminded us, is stimulated by the hormone oxytocin.

The fact that Glass-Coffin's work with the Peruvian healer Ysabel includes her own spiritual journey is in keeping with much of today's anthropology, notably concerned with Native American peoples, as in the case of Tenibac Harvey. Harvey wrote recently (2006a) of how when he was first in Guatemala he believed that in anthropology one's duty was to learn *about* Maya healing, in detachment, but, when it came to his own spiritual experience, he needed to change course dramatically and learn to *do* Maya healing directly. In the Peruvian case, Glass-Coffin was a learner under her teacher, Ysabel—who actually complained of her pupil and called her "obstinate." Both of these cases reverse the direction of authority with a vengeance, putting the horse back in front of the cart, and we can see who are the teachers: not the professors here. Glass-Coffin witnessed "seeing" in action (as indeed I have, seeing the spirit cause of an illness, which is also often sensed as the jealous action of a sorcerer). She knew of the healer-patient "umbilical cord" or spiritual connection to another being. She experienced the surrender of self in the transformation process, in the service of something both mysterious and greater than the individual. This "something" may not always appear as Quan Yin, but the subject knows there is something. Her story is proudly anecdotal (as all anthropology should be in part) and teaches by means of a human story in a way that the parading around of scientific facts does not.

Regarding Joan Koss-Chioino's article "Spiritual Transformation, Ritual Healing, and Altruism" (2006), we need to digest it well. We are dealing here with one of the few exact coverages of the spiritual *process*, a piece that shows step by step how ritual healing works. Looking at the process from its beginning, Koss-Chioino explains how in Puerto Rican Spiritism the embodiment of spirit is first experienced as a sense of deep connection to all people and all things, past and present. This sounds to me like the occasion of an "opening," as in many such transformations. In another sense (aspects of which I have been recently researching myself) this sense of deep connection, altruism, can be seen as *communitas*, born in the liminal circumstance when the spirit calls upon and initiates a new healer. At this point (witnesses do stress the actual time), *communitas* springs up, recognized by the group in its own terms as a *sui generis* phenomenon. In Koss-Chioino's case of Spiritism, the healer finds herself in the presence of one or more spirits with whom she possesses a special relationship. This spirit communion, this spiritual transformation, is the birthing place of the healer's capacity for empathy. Thus, in Koss-Chioino's search for the origin of altruism—literally, identification with "other people"—she too has located it in these initial stages of spiritual transformation.

Koss-Chioino terms the sense *radical empathy*, following the radical empiricism of William James, in that she acknowledges visions that go right off the map of the social sciences into a deep dimension that has its own characteristics. Radical empathy is a gift with interesting powers at its command. Before working with a sufferer the Spiritist healer will meditate and relax. Koss-Chioino describes an "intersubjective space" (2006, 882), a field of experience shared between healer and sufferer.¹ The shared moment is the one that radical empathy opens up. The healer *knows* that moment, in the Native American sense. Koss-Chioino points out that there is no authority-and-obedience profiling in Puerto Rican Spiritist healing; there are no class distinctions. Then, following the Spiritist healing process, the healer in her capacity as medium calls on her spirits to help her with the work. (I have seen this also in Zambia.) Contact is made with these beings, then unity with them. The spirits are naturally endowed with second sight and know what is wrong with the patient, even though the patient does not know, and they will tell the patient, through the healer's voice. The healer then takes the patient's trouble entirely into her own body, along with sensations of distress like those of the patient—a sense something like an electric current. Somehow, when the healer shares this with the patient and explains what is happening, the patient feels all the stress vanish. Here is the culmination of true radical empathy and act of altruism.

Not infrequently the healer is faced with a patient who has a vivid sense of impending death. The patient may feel she is in her coffin and having an out-of-body experience. At the climax there appears a healing spirit

who smiles. The practicing healer will know that such a woman is destined to be a healer herself. Thus, a cure may be tailored into the birth into society of a new healer—a phenomenon appearing in many cultures (see Turner 2005, 44–45, 117–20, 129–37).

Writing the process down in this way, in a story line, the point of my discussion comes clear. Using examples, we become familiar with the characteristics of the spiritual process, which manifests itself with many variations all over the world, and it gradually becomes recognizable, like the way the objects in a print from a Polaroid camera gradually become visible. We finally recognize that spiritual power does good, and we realize how it happens.

Harvey's article speaks with authority on the possibility and the actual event of two selves merging, as seen in Koss-Chioino's ethnography, and gives an even closer-up view of what happens. He saw the merging in a dispensary in Guatemala, his anthropological research area, when a healer was feeling the bad back of a sufferer. He heard and tape-recorded the sound of agony when the healer "got" the pain of the sufferer. (Indeed, my own students come to feel through their fingers something like the pain and feelings of a hurting person.) Healer and sufferer are "entangled" with one another, as the Guatemalans see it (Harvey 2006a), and it is this relationship in Maya eyes that manifests the fullest application of the word *community*.

So, the self (*ipse*, the "I") can merge with another self (*ipse*) by means of the healer's gift of being able to "tap" the altruistic, to "be there for another," as people sometimes put it. The healer's self unites with the other (*autrui*), the sufferer, and has her pain and selfhood come into *her*. The healer is the active one in this. *Ipse* and *ipse* converge in one aware being. The healer's own self is no longer there but is gone, substituted for by the pain of the *autrui*. She is inside the pain and the being of the other. They have converged by virtue of the power and courage of the healer, whose strength is given to her by her healer spirit.

I have heard this described as "to be Eucharist" for a needy person, an act performed with one's whole self, giving oneself like the body and blood of Jesus—and I disregard complaints about this being Christian. We do not taboo the Maya and Puerto Rico religions; why should we taboo a Jewish-derived religion that is at its heart as valid as any?

Ken Wilber (1979, 134) also talks about "no-boundary" transpersonal and therapeutic experiences that clearly involve a kind of spiritual transformation of the *communitas* kind. Here the healer "jumps over" the ego barrier in the process of helping people, not because it is morally good to do so but because those others "*are us*."

Harvey, in his article in this issue, "Ipseity, Alterity, and Community: The Tri-unity of Maya Therapeutic Healing" (2006b), probes deeply into the question of Western ideas of what is impossible and what is not. He

mentions our psychologists' habit of calling the loss of self "schizophrenic" but looks instead at how the loss of self is indeed possible and how it can become a marvelous tool of therapy. He has discovered a fascinating method of putting this on paper—his "polyphonic score," which conveys the true timing of utterances in a healing session. He records the speech of several people, just as composers write the music for different instruments in an orchestra—on a score. This discovery alone is revolutionary. We can be in the middle of a living event, even in a printed book. Moreover, his conclusions about spiritual healing overturn the Western dictum of its impossibility and the dictum that pain is unsharable. In effect, he reminds us that if the therapy works, it works. (I love this simplicity.)

Can such material as we find here be codified and handled according to the methods of qualitative research? This is attempted in the essay by Cassandra Vieten and her colleagues, "I to We: The Role of Consciousness Transformation in Compassion and Altruism" (2006), which is based on the statements of forty-seven persons well qualified in the topics of this section. Using qualitative methodology, Vieten gathered together categories of the known elements and features of spiritual transformation and tested them on the forty-seven persons. The statements of the respondents quoted by Vieten fill us readers with sympathy and stir in us that deeper radical empathy that the essays in this section themselves generate, because we have been loosened up to respond emotionally, physically (we may get "goose bumps"), and spiritually. I am reminded of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* ([1933] 1997) and how readers of this work had wonderful colorful dreams because we grasped so much of his meaning. We wonder whether the painstaking study undertaken by Vieten and her team could continue in the further field of spiritual transformation, exploring more thoroughly the *agency* involved in the process, what in fact causes transformation and triggers it; the location of the conception point, as it were, like the beginning moment of an embryo. This event does not happen from the mere need of it and does not come about from wishful thinking. There is a call involved that reaches into one's inmost self. The reader may see where we are going with this—and it is here that we encounter in our discipline the inevitable taboo against claiming the reality of spirits or the existence of creative energy in all things. Nevertheless, we who have experienced spiritual transformation ourselves—four of the six involved in the panel at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 2005—do indeed talk about the reality of spirits and of that energy.

The section's hero, altruism, stands firm to the challenge, making us proud to be humans in a world we are not very proud of. It is not America's financial brilliance or great power that will save the world. Of this we are sure, because we know that idea to be an illusion if anything is. Far more solid and lasting is what keeps coming into people, the seed of the desire to heal, the irrational anti-ego yen to get out and help others, the *autrui*—

those who draw our compassion and love—whether that seed comes from Quan Yin, Koss-Chioino's Puerto Rican spirits, Glass-Coffin's Peruvian God, or the electricity that conveys the sense of pain from the sufferer to the healer among the Maya of Guatemala.

NOTES

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.

1. I myself have felt this field when attempting Iñupiat healing. Both healer and sufferer sigh simultaneously, which is something more than coincidental.

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