

Treating Alienation and Depression with Alternative Medicine:

Marilyn Krysl's "Curandera" and Jeanette Brown's "How to Visit a Healer"

Faizan Malik

Empathetic healing, the perception of wellness, and the contextualization of the source of disease and illness should be cornerstones of good medical care of any type. As revealed in Marilyn Krysl's "Curandera" and Jeanette Brown's "How to Visit a Healer," empathy can have great effects on those suffering from all kinds of illnesses, whether it be suicidal ideations, such as in Krysl's poem, or a simple cough like the narrator has in "How to Visit a Healer."

"How to Visit a Healer" is a well-crafted short story, which on the surface describes the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of western medicine and the stronger points of alternative medicine. The story is told by a female narrator who has a persistent cough and who, being unsatisfied with a regular doctor, decides to visit an alternative medicine healer. The woman is skeptical about the clinical competency of the healer, but she is soon pleasantly surprised by the perception, knowledge and skills of the man. The healer predicts her state of health and life perfectly by just observing her skin, personality, and eyes. From his inferences, the reader learns that the woman lives a frantic, stressful life, and that her cough may actually be the lesser of her problems. The healer prescribes all sorts of remedies, some spiritual and some medicinal, to treat her physical and mental ailments. Later in the story, the narrator realizes that she hasn't coughed once since she arrived, and during a massage she feels as if her esophagus is blocked. She sits up, coughs and sees something coming out of her mouth resembling a white feather. The healer asks her to cough once more, and when she is unable to do so he declares that she is cured. The author knows that the healer has helped her in more ways than one, and the narrator is obviously shaken as she leaves. She struggles to count the healer's fifty dollars and ultimately decides to pay more, leaving a generous tip behind.

"Curandera" is a poem, which like Brown's short story displays the healing power of alternative and folk medicine. In this poem, a supposedly "*Muy macho*" man approaches a Spanish healer for help, and we soon learn that beneath his dark sunglasses and tattoos, the man is miserable and wishes to die. The curandera instantly recognizes the man's depression and dissatisfaction with life just by looking into his eyes, and notes that he appears oblivious to the nature and community surrounding him. Here again, the theme of empathy is repeated

over and over. The healer uses the power of the community to bring about a change in the young man's perception of life. She stages the funeral of the patient complete with a coffin, flowers, mourners, and a priest. When the young man's family and friends gather around him, they say hurtful things about him and the way he lived his life, describing him as weak, but they end up weeping all the same. The family and friends leave as the "funeral" ends, but the experience stirs something in the man's soul, and he begins to weep, and in doing so eases his mental tensions and lets go of the façade he has been hiding behind. The healer uses this emotional state to demand that the man become more involved with his community, and deliver gifts to those who came to his funeral and performing errands for the town. She then opens the patient's eyes and makes him understand that when we help and empathize with others, it helps us to become more fulfilled and happier in life.

It is amply argued through the two texts that alternative medicine may possess the power to heal both the mind and the body. It is imperative to keep in mind that the methods used to bring this about are gentle, in harmony with nature, and seek to eradicate the problem of emotional atrophy and alienation from its roots. Western medicine has become grossly concerned with taking pills for every physical ailment without understanding that often the mental distress or loneliness of an individual is the chief underlying reason for physical ill health. Alternative healing takes into account the connection between a healthy mind and a healthy body and also the impact of the environment, relationships and quality of life on issues such as stress and depression. Krysl's "Curandera" and Brown's "How to Visit a Healer" emphasize the importance of empathy in the healer and the positive effect it has on the patient. Through these texts it is easy to observe that the mind has tremendous power over every aspect of our lives, and harnessing this power to heal our bodies is a profoundly appealing idea. It also highlights the fact that alternative healing systems are individualized and foster respect for the unique human soul. Finally, holistic methods such as those described in the stories are gentle on patients in all ways, and place an emphasis on faith and cooperation, which are useful traits in any medical setting. Krysl and Brown show that alternative healing systems are a powerful tool in treating certain problems, such as alienation and emotional disconnection, which are all too common in today's fast-paced society.

Works Cited

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Nominating faculty: Professor Kate Falvey, English 3404, Department of English, School of Arts & Sciences, New York City College of Technology, CUNY.

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