

S W E E P I N G t h e E A R T H

W o m e n T a k i n g A c t i o n
f o r a H e a l t h y P l a n e t



Edited by M I R I A M W Y M A N



Chapter 11

LESLIE KORN

The Rhythms of Body and Earth in the Mexican Jungle

I began touching people therapeutically in the Mexican jungle, where I have lived since 1973. There I learned indigenous healing traditions that arose out of the need to heal people from experiences of trauma. I worked first with Mexican-Indian women, whose childbirths I had attended and who, because of the burden of multiple births and relentless work under the sun, often looked more like the mothers of their husbands than their wives. They brought their widely flattened, sore feet and their muscular shoulders, indented by the ironlike bras that cut deep grooves across the top of the trapezius muscle. We shared village gossip, and they were both honoured and amused at my interest in traditional ways of healing. They told me that dried cow dung rubbed on the head cured baldness, then offered to demonstrate on me. They told me stories they had themselves been told about snakes who lived near the *cascadas* (waterfalls) and were known to be so dexterous that they could unzip your dress, get inside your pants and get you pregnant.

As we got to know each other better, these women shared the trauma of their lives, the loss of family members to the hardships of the

jungle and the sea, drownings, tetanus, amoebas exploding the liver, rape and incest. The women brought their little ones to me when they fell off horses and hit their heads, or fell out of hammocks or over the bows of the 40-horse-powered *pangas* as they hit the beach on an off wave, bruising the ever-so-tender bone at the base of the spine. The men came in for treatment accompanied by their wives for the first session, just to make sure nothing untoward would take place. They sought relief for a variety of problems that usually had to do with the occupational hazards of diving and the residual effects of too much nitrogen in the blood. Some of the men did not survive; those who did rarely went diving again.

The Center for Traditional Medicine

My work with the Mexican-Indian women and their families formed the basis for what was soon to become the Center for Traditional Medicine. In 1978, I began to run a series of clinical and educational training programs in the village. The educational programs grew out of the need to support health care for the women and their families. They also provided a safe structure for learning and experiencing life for the visitors and students who had begun to arrive to learn more about traditional healing in Mexico. These newcomers often felt, and behaved, as though they had just landed on Mars. Entering an environment in which almost everything is foreign and experiencing sensory overload from the extraordinary beauty and beat of the rhythms of nature precipitates a personal quest for identity. This questioning often leads to a transformation of personal, professional and global dimensions. I felt that the study of traditional medicine had to take place in context, and I developed the Center for Traditional Medicine so that learning could take place right in the jungle. At the heart, I wanted our coming together to study and learn to be rooted in the indigenous culture — and in the worship of the earth.

Our endeavours could not be merely intellectual exercises or like weekend seminars held in hotels. I wanted to peel back the mask of habitual perceptions and modes of knowing, to safely reveal unexamined belief systems, what experimental psychologist Charles Tart calls our “consensus trance,” so I built the centre right in the village. For the outsiders who come here, immersion in village rhythms — the startling

sounds of procreation, the diverse and abundant smells of defecation — signals the entrance to the path for exploring sensory modes and methods of knowing oneself and other cultures. This includes the locations where students live and study — where they locate their bodies. All of our buildings are thatched *palapas*. *Palapas* get their name from the palm tree fronds that the men cut and measure, *docena por docena*, and then drag down the mountain by burro. They weave and tie the fronds to handcrafted ironwood frames, forming huge straw hats over open spaces. When the wind blows, the roofs sway and lift, breathing and absorbing moisture like nostrils, mediating between the inside and the outside, which often merge in the jungle.

There were women and men in the village from whom I had learned and who I knew had much to teach others. The centre was also a place for them to learn. In addition to contributing to the lives of the people in the village, I wanted to influence the attitudes of those who came about health care delivery in the United States and Canada. Even with the women's health and self-help movement throughout the 1970s and with the contributions of holistic health and complementary medicine throughout the 1980s, I observed how traditional medicine remains marginalized and romanticized. No society lives in a vacuum. I am working in a traditional village that has undergone enormous change as a result of exposure to the techno-industrial world. For example, the introduction and marketing of a plethora of pharmaceutical products worldwide has profoundly altered the power balance — between person and plant and between parasite and gut. As a result, the practice of medicine has changed.

Political and economic issues that affect women's health are central to our studies. With perhaps the exception of the discipline of public health, studies of healing in traditional societies and in the immigrant societies of North America and Europe are generally dissociated from the political causes of illness. Conversely, the discipline of public health is seldom concerned with interpersonal and community healing. Feminist initiatives ranging from community health education to academic research often suffer from this disembodied state. At the Center for Traditional Medicine we try to bridge these fields.

All the programs at the Center for Traditional Medicine presume that the wounded healer is within us all. Everyone comes to healing through his or her own wounds, and I felt that there could be no artificial separation between learning to help others and helping oneself

to become more healthy. This philosophy became the basis for the seminars on traditional medicine, traumatology, energy medicine and women's health and for the more intensive certificate and graduate degree programs. Faculty at the centre have a knowledge of topics ranging from polarity therapy, massage and energy medicine, ethnobotany, prostitution trauma, secondary trauma, endocrine disruptors and reproductive technologies. Food is a central organizing principle through which learning and laughter merge. One of our seminars, entitled "Chocolate, Chilies and Coconuts: A Culinary Journey to the Heart of Mexico," brings together women from diverse cultures to identify, gather and prepare traditional foods as a way to learn about history, medicine, botany and cooking.

All the programs integrate methods to learn and understand First, Second, Third and Fourth World philosophies and methods, while examining them with a critical eye. We emphasize the ability to speak multiple languages and the capacity to translate across disciplinary borders. We also address multiple feminist perspectives, acknowledging the rich diversity among women. There is as much "unlearning" as there is learning. Using the body and mind in nature, we undertake an excavation of the creative process. In honour of diverse styles of learning, we offer diverse teaching methods. Deepening knowledge about one's own cultural roots is an ongoing process that informs learning about others. We link clinical work to a diverse set of healing skills and apply a critical, non-romantic eye to what often passes for "holistic" or "traditional." Community-determined research is taught in order to honour the abundant knowledge that already exists within the community. Questions are derived from within the community, and the community determines the methods by which we seek and express the answers.

Terra Soma

One of the seminars we offer is called Terra Soma. *Terra*, meaning "land," refers to the natural environment and *Soma*, meaning "body," refers to health. The relationship between health and having land — a safe place to put our bodies on earth — is central to the lives of all women. Terra Soma examines the many facets of this relationship. This seminar draws from the wisdom of the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan Book of Days: The person who makes an enemy of the earth makes an enemy

of his or her own body. In Terra Soma, we study the interdependence of human health and the health of other animals with the natural environment in order to understand the meaning traditional peoples attach to such relationships. Like the body, the earth exhibits symptoms of stress and trauma when its flora and fauna are out of balance. We explore modes of thought as functions of both geography and culture to see how these modes influence our thoughts and behaviours somatically and environmentally and to evaluate their relationship to concepts of human domination. Our faculty present issues of biological and cultural diversity, traditional medicines, gender and power, and interventions for resolving the imbalance between human demands and nature's ability to replenish. Our goals are to offer opportunities for people to heal their own dissociations, to engage in somatic as well as intellectual activities during field trips over land and sea and to explore the effects of development and change in a rural fishing village.

In addition to learning traditional healing methods, participants engage in games of diplomacy to explore environmental conflicts that faculty are currently involved in, such as the Convention on Biodiversity and its effects on Indigenous and other peoples. These games offer students the opportunity to analyze so-called progressive and liberal ideas, to compare "left" to "right" and to consider the gains and failures of each way of thinking. Students also address the complex issues surrounding Fourth World Peoples' rights to self-determination and control of their own resources. Local faculty provide instruction in traditions of healing through plants and foods. We thus have the opportunity to observe and discuss the role of development in daily life. Terra Soma challenges us to confront current international policy on Indigenous People's rights and the ownership of intellectual and biological resources. As we pursue our educational and clinical strategies, we are forced to engage in dialogue with family and friends about the ethical dilemmas of protecting, sharing and exploiting knowledge and resources where we live and work.

Night Walking:

Somatic Strategies Toward Indigenous Mind

One of the most exciting opportunities the Center for Traditional Medicine offers participants in their quest to bridge Terra and Soma is

the adventure of night walking. Night walking integrates the function of sight with walking in the dark of night unaided by light, along mountain paths. This experience provides a creative group ritual to bring us to “indigenous” or original mind — mind that emerges from the rhythms of the body and spirit and is one with the earth and natural forces. Night walking describes an activity that includes walking over remote terrain in the dark as a way to develop second sight, also called peripheral vision or in-sight. Night walking provides a uniquely integrative approach to addressing hyper-vigilance and autonomic nervous system arousal as a result of stress and trauma. Even as it decreases hyper-arousal, night walking enhances awareness by integrating the right and left hemispheres of the brain. It is a natural capacity that all of our ancestors had and that many peoples around the world still possess. Yet it is a skill lost to “urban” mind.

People who have been traumatized often find themselves unconsciously scanning their immediate surroundings for hidden dangers. Night walking is one approach to treating military veterans who walked or stood guard at night in unknown and dangerous environments or to treating women who have been assaulted — who “didn’t see it coming.” Night walking also provides an opportunity for others who habitually “scan” the daily environment to channel that focus and to expand its utility. The challenge of trusting one’s perceptions to navigate over night terrain also builds self-trust as it leads to relaxation, which in turn reduces dissociation from body and earth. The narrow focus on vision in techno-industrial societies occludes a more far-reaching peripheral capacity to extend the possible. We ask, and try to answer: “What if this faculty for peripheral vision was returned to the see-ers’ (seers’) authority?”

The Women’s Traditional Medicine Project: Local and Global Approaches

My work with individuals in a small community led to a desire to meet with other women from around the world to share experiences. The Women’s Traditional Medicine Project gathers together women worldwide to review traditional medicine policies that affect the health of women and children. It is an international effort rooted in local experiences communicated between women of remote areas of the four corners of the earth.

The Women's Traditional Medicine Project supports research, education and clinical treatment that draw from the universal knowledge and traditional systems of Indigenous healing as well as from their culture-specific contributions. The project provides a progressive and syncretic approach to health care by honouring empirical traditions, comparative systems and their integrative re-visions within and across cultural borders of healing. The project emphasizes how culture shapes illness as well as informs treatment, and seeks ways to deconstruct the dynamics of dominance as it affects relationships among humans, animals and the natural world, and as it informs research, diagnosis and treatment across social strata. The project links health policy with gender studies, public health, ethics and political analysis.

The project draws from healing practices from the four corners of the world and from diverse academic and clinical disciplines such as ethnomedicine and ethnobotany, medical anthropology, medical humanities, nursing, behavioural medicine, feminist theory, international health, psychology, Fourth World studies and the current integrative approaches of alternative and complementary medicine, including naturopathy and subtle energy medicine, and somatic therapies, such as bodywork, massage and acupuncture.

The Women's Traditional Medicine Project promotes the integration of art and science in healing, in which culture (cult: "worship" / ure: "earth") inheres as the fulcrum for the shifting forces of nature, underlying health and illness in the personal and social domains. The project emphasizes approaches, methods, techniques and philosophies that assist the intrinsic organic potential to regulate psychophysiological and subtle energy processes in concert with psychological requirements for meaning making, purpose and growth throughout the life cycle.

Persephone

A story that gives meaning to the work that I do, is the story of Persephone and her mother, Demeter. This story contains multiple layers and meanings that serve as guideposts in my own work and personal development. The conventional interpretation is that the rape and abduction of Persephone by her uncle Hades, god of the underworld, led to the subsequent withholding of the harvest by her grief-stricken mother, Demeter, the goddess of the harvest. Not until

Demeter prevailed upon Zeus, the ruler of the heavens, with an argument bolstered by barren lands, was her daughter returned to her. Yet for only two-thirds of the year would Persephone be reunited with her mother. The remaining months were to be spent as the bride of her uncle in the netherworld. This layer tells the story of the death and rebirth of nature and of the yearly cycles of vegetation and the harvest bounty.

At its most literal, the story of Persephone and Demeter is the story of a young woman's abduction and rape by her uncle, and of the devastation and fury felt by her mother. Thus, where women are mistreated, nature dies. In spite of Demeter's success at finding her daughter, mother and daughter nonetheless lost their innocent, primal connection. In a deal mediated by the male gods, Persephone would remain in the underworld for part of the year, and in exchange Demeter had to tell her bountiful secrets to the male gods at Olympus. This illuminates yet another layer to this story, a layer that presages the power struggles between women and men and our relationship to the earth. If we follow this path historically, we can locate the time and place where the relationship between women and the ancient mysteries of nature worship moved underground in Europe. For by the year 380, the Roman emperor Theodosius I had outlawed women's wisdom and earth practices, and the rituals celebrated at Eleusis in honour of Demeter were seized.

The story of Persephone and Demeter is emblematic to me. It has revealed its greater depths as I have changed and developed, and in turn I use the story to guide my healing work with people. This story links the intimate connections between health and the traumas we experience, with the gifts of the earth that rise out of our relationships with our mothers, daughters and other women. It also contains guidance for the path of healing. Healing is a return to balance and the reestablishing of rhythms. The act of reestablishing rhythms of the body/mind that were taken away or lost involves learning to gain some control over the body/mind and consciously using these natural forces to achieve magic.

Through the story of Persephone and Demeter our understanding of the relationship to the earth changes. No longer naïve, we mature, become stronger, more assertive and demanding. Through Demeter we express our power. Having seen the underbelly, the underworld of power abused, we become, perforce, more adept, like Demeter, at regulating our own rhythms in nature.

Thoughts on Traditional Medicine

Nature provides the means of restoring a person's equilibrium. Life is pulsation, rhythm and oscillation, attuned to and entrained by the earth's geomagnetic pulse. The natural rhythms of the body/mind vibrate in concert with nature. The ancients considered gaining control over the nervous system integral to health. Their nervous systems, tuned acutely, were transformed by trance to receive spirit medicine. Like Hermes the messenger, who was granted invisibility by Hades in exchange for his agreement to transport the souls of the dead to the underworld, the medicine person mediates between the seen and unseen realms. The essence of traditional medicine, across all cultures, is found in the dictum that nature cures. Humans are gifted with the capacity to heal themselves, and other animals and nature provide the ways. This is part of the order of nature.

The body in pain and illness tells a complex story. Healers learn to listen and interpret. In a world becoming increasingly virtual, where only the disembodied mind speaks, the body demands its own voice and must be heard.

In the 25 years I have lived in the jungle (with periodic forays into urban jungles), I have experienced how nature's rhythms entrain my own rhythms and those of my patients and students. Entrainment is a psycho-bio-physiological process that underlies, for example, the concurrent menstrual patterns of women who live together. Entrainment is mediated through the currents of a person's nervous system — leading to synchronized beats of the heart and breath, as in two people who cross their legs at the same moment or sigh together while sharing silence. Entrainment underlies what I call somatic empathy, a component of healing through touch.

Entrainment occurs across species as well. My canine companion, Bodhi, is a boon to my clinical work because his slow, steady, relaxed breathing and sighs as he sleeps on his bed underneath the treatment table entrain the breathing of my clients and help them relax. The creation and entrainment of "group mind" through altered states of consciousness are at the root of traditional systems of healing that utilize rituals of music, dance and ecstatic exercises. In the years I have lived in the village and during the travels I have made throughout the territories of Indigenous Peoples, I have witnessed how so-called development destroys nature's gifts, disrupts energetic fields of force and traumatizes

land and sea. There are multiple ways the heart of earth and sky can break and in so doing disrupt whole communities and their capacity to find balance and to heal themselves.

When I first lived in the village, the flowering plant arnica, nature's gift to heal bruises and muscle aches, grew abundantly along the paths. We can no longer find this plant in the village. This is a recent current in an ongoing process of development and loss. Stories are told how the ancient Celts in Ireland celebrated and entrained their rhythms to the universe with the fungus *Amanita muscaria*. This sacred mushroom is no longer found on the moist forest floors that were long ago cut and cleared by the English. How did the loss of this culinary chemistry alter the visions of people searching for the gates of gods in this northern clime? Could the loss of this sacred plant have contributed to the decline of magic among the Irish? We can find many examples of lost medicines around the globe.

People lose the ability to entrain to nature because they can no longer feel or sense their rhythms or those of the natural world. I have observed this growing social dissociation in people wherever I have travelled. Dissociation from the body — a result of personal trauma — leads to dissociation from the earth. And conversely, dissociation from the earth, which began even before the Age of Reason, reinforces the transmission of trauma between generations.

My friend and colleague in the village, Alisia Rodriguez Arraisa, is both a teacher and a student, and together we learn from each other. This past year we began to travel into the mountains to visit and provide health care for relatives of many people in the village. There we treat families and friends and are likewise treated to a wonderful array of seasonal fruits and herbs traditionally gathered and prepared. Alisia's idea was to bring donated clothing as a gift for the women and as a way of saying thank you for their time and knowledge. We have discussed that we do not want to introduce an exchange of money for sharing information where there has been none previously. Yet we want to express our appreciation with something that is useful and shows our regard. Occasionally we will take a visiting student or two with us, but we are conscious of not introducing great numbers of visitors or outsiders — mindful of both the obvious and unseen complications that can arise.

One of the women Alisia introduced me to is Jovita, the mother of another friend in the village, Ramona. At age 73, Jovita had an arthritic

knee that made walking difficult and washing squat in the river nearly impossible. After a successful first treatment on her porch, overlooking the fruiting plum trees, I invited her to visit us at the clinic. It is a long trip and not an easy one. To my surprise she arrived a few weeks later, eager to begin her healing sojourn. Her husband was sceptical, reluctant to leave her — not that he revealed it easily. He asked me, "*Quantos?*" ("How much?"). I replied, "*Como puede*" ("Whatever you can"). He repeated, "*No, no, dime*" ("Tell me"). I again said, "*Obbh, como puede.*" Back and forth we danced. In the end he gave me 100 pesos — nearly two days' wages — and went home to the mountains to tend his crops and cows.

Not that any of us voiced it, but Alisia, Ramona and I all felt that Jovita's visit was as much about some "time off" from chores and tending to her husband as climbing onto my table three times weekly. After six treatments, her pain was gone and her range of motion improved. I used polarity therapy and cranial therapy, and I taught her knee exercises to strengthen her quadricep muscles. Alisia prepared and applied a herbal salve to rub on her knee. As we worked, Jovita revealed an additional chronic pain in her upper abdomen, which I suspected was her gallbladder and for which I treated her by doing a manual "gallbladder drain." She was thoroughly delighted to receive such care and to be touched in a way that helped her relax deeply and feel pleasure in her body. When she fell asleep on the table, I let her sleep for hours. A deep need to be "not needed" was nourished. Watching her sleep, I felt drawn into a timeless sweep of ritual performed among women across time and culture. I am able to give to these elders something they have not had in a long time — perhaps ages — and they in turn do the same for me.

Over the years in the jungle, I began to feel and understand the betrayal of the body as a microcosm of the betrayal of the earth — and the rape of the earth as reinforcing dissociation and disconnection from the body. As I practised ancient methods of healing — using the hands to draw rhythms from the land and its waters — I grew in my experience of the nervous system and learned more about how the earth is cultivar and keeper of the currents of health and healing. Sometimes I become self-conscious and wonder why it is I get so much satisfaction touching the wide, dried feet of women when I could be earning good sums in the chrome-and-glass offices for which my culture, class and education prepared me. Perhaps it goes back to my great-grandmother, herself a healer who placed hot cups on the ailing gallbladders of women in the

Carpathian Mountains in Central Europe. And perhaps she would tell me that before her great-grandmother, there was a woman who remembered that her great-grandmother heard stories from an elder. She told of a young girl, Persephone, who was taken while smelling fragrant blooms and was searched for and found by her mother, lest the earth stand still forever.