

Seeking healing transnationally: Australians, John of God and Brazilian Spiritism

Cristina Rocha

Centre for Cultural Research, University of Western Sydney

João de Deus (John of God) is a Brazilian faith healer who has become increasingly well-known outside Brazil. In 2006 alone he was invited to conduct healing events in Germany, the United States of America and New Zealand. He returned to the United States of America and New Zealand in 2007, and in 2008 was once again in the United States of America. There are plans for him to come to Australia in the near future. This article is based on ethnographic research conducted in Brazil, New Zealand and Australia and on interviews with Australians in Sydney. Here, I explore the stories of Australian followers of John of God and their reasons for seeking his healing system. I argue that Western New Age and alternative medicine concepts of healing produce a disposition (Bourdieu 1972) towards 'traditional' healing from exotic lands. I show that the reinstatement of a connection between healing and religion, the construction of context that gives meaning to illness, and empowerment through surrendering to a higher power are three important factors that help to explain why people shun Western medicine in favour of alternative practices.

INTRODUCTION

In *Body/Meaning/Healing* Csordas called for anthropologists to look at people's experiences of transformation rather than healers' practices, which has been their usual focus. According to him,

What we need at this stage in the development of a theory of healing is specification of *how* therapeutic process effects transformation in existential states. An approach grounded in participants' own experience and perceptions of change may arrive at a more pragmatic conceptualisation of healing as a cultural process...a balanced anthropological account must also take into account precise features of the cultural setting in which healing takes place. (Csordas 2002: 54)

Rather than focusing on John of God's mediumship and healing powers, in this article, I seek to understand why so many Westerners, and Australians in particular are attracted to Brazilian spiritual healing. I endeavour to respond to Csordas' exhortation by presenting life narratives of two Australians, focusing on their experiences with Western medicine, and the ways in which their experiences at the

Casa de Dom Inácio have informed and changed their understanding of healing and illness. Although two narratives is evidently a very small sample, I believe they encapsulate the many stories I heard in interviews. I argue that New Age and alternative medicine concepts of healing produce a disposition (Bourdieu 1972) towards 'traditional' healing from exotic lands. In other words, I contend that Westerners' attraction to John of God's healing system is due to their own habitus being inflected by a New Age world view.¹

It is difficult to define the New Age movement, as it is a loose grouping of diverse beliefs, techniques and practices, with no single central authority or doctrine that can indicate whether an individual belongs to it. Having said this, there is a core of common beliefs which we can call New Age, such as 'the evolution of the soul through successive incarnations, monism, karma, the basic goodness of human nature, the power of the mind to transform reality and so on' (Lewis 2004: 12). According to York, the movement has its origins in the occult traditions of the nineteenth century, particularly in the theosophical tradition and comprises a 'blend of pagan religions, Eastern philosophies and occult-psychic phenomena' (York 2004: 371–372). As we will see later in this article, these are the same occult traditions and beliefs that gave origin to Spiritism, the religion John of God adheres to.

In Australia, the expansion of the New Age movement has translated into a rise of alternative spiritualities (Bouma 2006: 61–63). Although census figures always lack the refinement of in-depth research, they can give us a general idea of the field. Spiritualism, the category which is closest to the religious practices of John of God, expanded from 8141 to 9279 people (fourteen per cent of the population) between the 1996 and the 2001 censuses. In the 2006 census, 9848 Australians identified with Spiritualism. The numbers identifying with nature religions have also increased. In 1996, they were 10,000 (0.05 per cent of the population); in 2001 this number rose to 23,000 (0.12 per cent of the population); and in 2006 to 29,396 (0.15 per cent). Bouma argues that 'the rise of Pagan and New Age spiritualities is largely attributable to changes in religious identity in response to the globalisation of ideas about religion' (Bouma 2003: 55).

It is not only the arrival of new spiritualities, but also the rise in the number of people choosing their own spirituality as opposed to maintaining their religion of birth (Tacey 2003), that has contributed to this rise in New Age spiritualities. Two other developments contribute to this spiritual renewal. First, there has been a decline in mainstream Protestant groups (for instance, Anglicans are now down to 18.5 per cent of the population, when they comprised forty per cent in 1947). Second, there is an increase in the number of Australians who tick 'no religion' in the census—from 15.5 per cent in 2001 to 18.7 per cent in 2006. Given these three developments—an increase in spiritualities of choice, a decline in institutionalised religion, and an increase of 'no religion'—it is highly likely that Australians are migrating from institutionalised religions to a more fluid spirituality. Indeed, Bouma has called attention to the fact that the number of people whose religion was 'inadequately described' has increased 552 per cent between the 1996 and 2001

censuses (nearly two per cent of the population). When he accessed people's written responses, he found that the 'word spiritual was the most frequent choice' (Bouma 2003: 65).

In conjunction with a spiritual quest, another important factor for the appeal of John of God's healing practices is the rise of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)² in Australia in the past decades (ABS 2008). Studies have shown that Australians choose alternative therapies for several reasons: their disillusionment with Western medicine's ability to deal with illness, particularly chronic illness, a search for a more egalitarian relationship between doctors and patients (i.e., the empowerment of patients), a search for meaning and context for their illness, a feeling that alternative therapies can offer a better medical model for and a different understanding of their illness, and the emergence of 'postmodern values', such as a decline in faith in the ability of science and technology to solve society and the individual's problems (Lloyd *et al.* 1993; Siahpush 1998; Bensoussan 1999; Lewith 2000; Coulter and Willis 2004). Later in the article, we will see how these reasons resonate with people's motives to seek healing at the Casa de Dom Inácio.

Before I move on to the next section, I would like to add a note on methodology. I have been researching the John of God movement since 2004, when I first went to the Casa de Dom Inácio in Brazil. Since then, I have been to the Casa three times (I lived there in the first half of 2007) and to the two healing events he conducted in New Zealand (2006, 2007). Since 2004, I have also been doing participant observation in John of God events in Australia.

SPIRITISM IN BRAZIL

John of God's healing methods have their origins in French Spiritism, first introduced in Brazil in the late nineteenth century. Following an aspiration towards modernity, Brazilian elites were quick to embrace the latest French fashion. Spiritism was a synthesis of many religious practices such as Catholicism, Protestantism and occult philosophies that flourished in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe such as Swedenborgianism, Mesmerism, Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry and Theosophy. Influenced by the positivism of Auguste Comte (1789–1857) and Spiritualist ideas arriving from the United States and the United Kingdom,³ its founder Allan Kardec thought of life and death in terms of a progressive spiritual evolution. According to Kardec, the spirit, created by God, would go through several incarnations until it achieved perfection. Karma, the law of cause and effect, would determine reincarnation. If one's actions in a past life were negative, one would reincarnate into a life of suffering (through poverty, disease and unhappiness). By contrast, if one practised charity in a past life, one would reincarnate into a life of happiness (Cavalcanti 1990: 147–155; Hess 1991, 1994). Moreover, according to Kardec, communication between the physical and spiritual worlds is possible through mediums who channel or 'incorporate' disincarnated spirits. Mediums are then able to perform good deeds such as healing and exorcism. Spirits are

willing to help because it assists in their own evolution. Given that the communication with spirits was considered an empirical and observable phenomenon, Kardec regarded his doctrine as a combination of science, philosophy and Catholic morality.

By deploying a scientific discourse affirming its tenets, Spiritism in Brazil has drawn followers from white, educated elites. Indeed, Brazilian sociologist Lísias Nogueira Negrão noted: 'Spiritism is a literate religion. More than a religion, Spiritism claims to be science, philosophy. Because of its high powers of persuasion in deploying logic, it is adopted by higher educated social classes' (cited in Varella 2000: 80). Currently, Spiritism is so widespread in the country that according to anthropologist José Jorge de Carvalho, 'In many aspects, the Spiritist world view became part of the national ethos, as much as Catholicism, and more recently Protestantism' (Carvalho 1994: 74). The latest census data shows that Spiritism is still expanding: while it had 1.6 million followers in 1991, by 2000 the number had increased to 2.3 million in a country of 170 million inhabitants.

JOÃO DE DEUS/JOHN OF GOD

The religious calling of João de Deus developed early in his teenage years, when he first uttered prophecy and began to channel entities through which he performed healing. The first such entity was King Solomon; at present, the number of entities he channels is thirty-three. He was introduced to the Spiritist doctrine when he first channelled entities. Following the instruction of his spiritual guides, he settled in a small building near the highway in Abadiânia, a village 100 km southwest of Brasília (Cumming and Leffler 2007: 1–5; Pellegrino-Estrich 2002: 42–43; Póvoa 1994: 45–47). João de Deus asserts that he is the medium of the spirits of deceased doctors, surgeons, healers, saints and people who were remarkable in their lifetimes. He says he takes on these entities in a trance and does not remember his acts when he becomes conscious again. John of God is part of a small but significant group of medium healers who use kitchen knives, scissors, and scalpels to operate on people while in trance.⁴

In the past decade, the healer has become known as 'John of God', as he has been attracting a large number of followers overseas. In 2006 alone he was invited to conduct healing events in Germany, the United States of America and New Zealand. He returned to the United States of America and New Zealand in 2007, and in 2008 was once again in the United States of America. In 2009 he was to visit Australia, but the economic downturn has made organisers postpone the event. A large number of people attended these events, and many more have been to his healing centre in Abadiânia, central Brazil. They are guides, healers and the ill, who wish either to improve their healing powers or to obtain treatment. Several of them are building homes and establishing businesses (guest houses, restaurants and internet cafes) around the centre. DVDs, websites and books show John of God operating on people and explaining his miraculous cures.

HEALING AT THE CASA DE DOM INÁCIO

Casa de Dom Inácio, the healing centre located in Abadiânia, opens only three days a week. There are two healing sessions a day. When I was there in 2004, 2007 and again in 2008, there were around 250–300 people in each session; those who have been scheduled by the entity for operation wait for their queue to be called. According to a booklet published in English by the Casa, operations are conducted ‘to resolve a current physical ailment...to resolve a future health problem or...to clear some spiritual issue that is affecting your life and your mission’ (Casa Guide for English Speaking Visitors, 2006: 18).

When the operation queue is called, people to be operated on go through a room called ‘the current room’ or ‘mediums room’ where people are sitting in chairs meditating. This room functions like an antechamber linking the mundane world with the sacred world. People then go through to a second current room, called ‘entities room’. Mediums and other people meditating here have been invited by the entities or are *filho(a) da Casa* (son or daughter of the Casa)⁵ and are there to provide energy for the healing and to be healed themselves. People to be operated on are directed to sit down in a room adjacent to the entities room. They are given a prescription of herbs⁶ (written beforehand by John of God in trance) and told to close their eyes. Instructions are given in Portuguese and subsequently in English. John of God comes to the room to ask who wants to have a visible (with cut) operation.⁷ Those who stay silent have invisible operations. They are told to close their eyes and place their hands on the sick part of the body (or the heart if there are too many ailments or the person is seeking spiritual healing). A volunteer from the Casa prays aloud, while other mediums sit in meditation as they would in the entities room. Operations are concluded when John of God comes to the room and announces: ‘In the name of God you are all operated on’. People are then divided into two groups—English and Portuguese speakers. Each group gathers outside, on the Casa grounds, to receive instructions on how to proceed. They are told to purchase blessed water and the herbs prescribed, and to have blessed soup. They are then asked to go back to the *pousadas* (guest houses) and rest for twenty-four hours before they can return to the Casa.

Those who have visible operations may have their skin cut with a scalpel, have their eyes scraped with a kitchen knife or have surgical scissors inserted into their nostrils. An operation in one area of the body may be for another area. There is no asepsis or anaesthetic, but people say they do not experience pain or develop infections.

After visible and invisible operations, there are several prohibitions. For a period of forty days for first-timers and eight days for those undergoing subsequent operations, people must refrain from having sex (or raising sexual energy in any way), drinking alcohol, eating pork and spicy foods. It is said that the patient’s chakras are open and vulnerable to external energies. Having sex may hinder healing because it may mix the patient’s energy with that of another person, while eating

pork and spicy food diverts the body's strength for healing towards processes of digestion. It is believed that drinking alcohol may attract lower spirits who would take advantage of the vulnerability of the person's body and mind. Finally, on the seventh night after the surgery, entities come to people to remove the stitches while they are sleeping.

John of God tells his followers that one entity is working through his body, but that there are many others in the current room (and all over the Casa complex, for that matter) working and helping. However, not all operations take place on the Casa grounds. Many people I talked to, told me of operations in their *pousadas* (guest houses) and even while chatting with friends in the juice bar near the Casa.

If people cannot come to the Casa, they can send their picture through a friend or the guides. A recent development is that pictures are sent as email attachments to be printed in one of the several internet cafes around the Casa. The pictures are then shown to John of God 'in entity'. If he draws a cross on the picture, the person will need to come to the Casa eventually for an operation. Everyone who sends pictures is prescribed herbs, which are then taken back by their friend or guide. This practice generates quite a transit of pictures in one direction and herbs in the other. A related practice that has developed is the watching of DVDs on John of God conducting operations. It is believed that while watching DVDs they connect with the Casa and thus may receive operations on the spot. An Australian man observed: 'I've been watching [DVDs] as much as possible. The...reason I like to watch them is that quite often...I feel healing taking place on me. I feel energy work on my body' (Personal communication, Sydney 2006).

Another means of keeping the transnational connection is through crystal beds. These consist of a plastic stand with seven 'fingers' at the top. At the end of each 'finger', there is a coloured light bulb and a crystal quartz. Each 'finger' is to be placed over a chakra while the patient is lying in bed. Until recently, crystal beds were only found at the Casa. But in the last four years, the Casa has started selling them to foreigners. Having a crystal bed, many people told me, is a way of always being connected to the Casa entities and hence continuing the healing process.

STORIES OF ILLNESS AND HEALING: WESTERN MEDICINE, SPIRITISM AND NEW AGE

The belief that crystals can heal, the belief in the Indian chakra and the belief that 'the body is energetically connected to...the larger spiritual and energetic universe resonates strongly with New Age beliefs' (Dubisch 2005: 227). In this section, I explore the stories of two Australian followers shunning Western medicine and analyse them in light of New Age and Spiritist beliefs of body, illness and health. I focus in particular on how their disappointment with Western medicine has led them to what they see as a path into the spiritual world. Healing for them is not only about the elimination of disease but about a transformation of the self. I attribute the possibility of efficacy of religious healing in a cross-cultural setting to a

New Age habitus disseminated in Western countries. According to Bourdieu (1972), habitus is the ‘internalised, embodied dispositions that generate meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions’. In this case, the New Age world view disseminated in popular culture creates a base for Westerners to relate to Spiritist beliefs. As Hanegraaff noted, ‘the proliferation of what may loosely be called “alternative therapies” undoubtedly represents one of the most visible aspects of the New Age movement’ (Hanegraaff 1998: 42).

MARK’S STORY

Mark is fifty years old. When he was in his early twenties, doctors suspected he had Hodgkin’s disease because his lymph nodes were swollen. He went through many tests, including the injection of contrast medium into the lymphatic system. Mark says he was not told the test results and felt that doctors used him ‘as a guinea pig’. Doctors then decided to remove, in his own words, ‘my perfectly good spleen’. After that, they put him on an extensive treatment of radiotherapy from his chin to his hips on each side of his body. He identified this treatment as the beginning of his health problems. Later on, when he developed heart murmurs, another doctor told him that two of his heart valves, his thyroid, and salivary glands were damaged because of excessive exposure to radiation. The doctor went on to tell him he would have to have valve replacement surgery in his fifties.

Mark says he was annoyed and went away disgusted. He says he never went back to the doctor who prescribed the radiation treatment ‘because I would not have been able to maintain my civility’. As time passed, he says, other organs started failing as a result of the radiotherapy. His digestive and immune systems were also damaged. In 1998, he says he contracted a cold which made him cough blood. The same cardiologist who predicted he would have surgery in his fifties told him the pulmonary oedema was a result of heart failure. Now was the time to undergo heart surgery. The doctor told him: ‘You’ve got some decisions to make. You’ve got to decide whether you want to go with metal valves or pig valves. At your age, because you’re pretty young, I suggest you go with the metal because they’ll never wear out. Pig valves will wear out, so that’s my recommendation’. At that point, Mark decided he ‘did not want to know anything about operations and heart surgery and all that stuff. All I could think of was getting out of there. I just wanted to run away from the hospital and just get away’.

In the following days, he first heard the name John of God while watching television; it was mentioned in some of the viewers’ letters to the *60 Minutes* program. One of them had been written by someone that Mark knew of from work. He made some phone calls and eventually contacted Robert and Caterina, Australian tour guides to the Casa, with whom he booked a trip to Brazil. Meanwhile, ‘because [he] was so rebellious towards anything Western-medical oriented’, he was not taking his diuretics. This caused a massive fluid buildup and he ended up in hospital again, where his cardiologist urged him to have an operation. This time Mark told

him he would come back in a week as he had business to finish off. He left for Abadiânia the next day.

Mark says he was hoping John of God would give him a physical operation. He explains his willingness to be cut by someone he had barely met, without anaesthetics or asepsis, by saying,

I had a gut feel—and particularly when I saw him do physicals on stage, doing the type of things that are so hard to fathom and believe and comprehend—[that] if he gave me a physical he would probably accelerate whatever effect would be there. It just would have been good for me, just spiritually and mentally and psychologically and all the rest.

By contrast, he says of Western medicine:

I was so disgusted with the medical system that I didn't want to know about the ones that were well-meaning. I guess I went all the way to the other extreme and I thought I don't have any faith in the system any more, and even if the system works, unfortunately along the way you will get incompetents in the system, and I don't want to come across any incompetents.

As it turned out, John of God only gave him an invisible operation. (Mark asked for a visible one, but because of his previous radiotherapy, John of God 'in entity' refused to operate on him visibly.) He returned to Australia feeling a bit better but still not well. He continued to seek alternative therapies, but nothing helped much. He says he does not remember what therapists he consulted, 'it was a blur. It was just a series of trying one thing after another and seeing different practitioners in the hope that they could help me keep going until I could find some solution. That's how desperate I was'. With time he became so sick that he finally agreed to be operated on by his cardiologist. When asked if he was disappointed that John of God did not heal him, Mark says he was not disappointed with him, but with the process that he had to go through, indicating that he envisioned healing as a process.

That he continued to have faith in John of God's healing explains why, four years later when another heart valve had to be replaced, Mark decided to go to Brazil again. This time, things were different. He says that while John of God was scraping someone's eye, he looked at Mark. He recounts:

The second time he looked at me, that was it. My legs started weakening, my chest started tightening, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't stand, I couldn't maintain consciousness...I was battling to stand, and I felt like collapsing, and I thought there was something wrong with me. I didn't realise what was going on. They said, 'You better come to the recovery room'. I went there, they laid me down. Caterina [the guide] came over to me and she said, 'You've just had a very big operation'. I felt that there was a lot going on with my body, energy sensations and activity going on. I knew that there was stuff happening.

On the night after this operation, Mark had a dream of John of God which he interpreted as a message that he would be cured. He told me that in a matter of

days he felt revitalised, with energy he did not have before. He says he never lost faith in John of God because:

It's not a simple case of: you've got a problem, you go there, he either fixes you or he doesn't. If there's healing to be done, it will be done. The process is different for every individual, and I figured, well, I don't like the idea of suffering but if suffering is what I have to go through, then so be it. That's the way I can explain it. I guess it was, you know, part of my package. I had to go through suffering...there's karmic debt to be repaid.

He says he continued the healing process by going to crystal bed sessions in Sydney. He told me that every time he goes to a session, he feels the entities working on him. In 2006, he went to New Zealand and, soon after, to Brazil for two weeks for the third time. He returned with a crystal bed of his own and he feels that the entities are continuously working on him. In 2008, he went back to the Casa for two weeks because John of God marked a cross on his picture. Looking back at all he went through, Mark concludes that now he feels more himself, physically, emotionally and spiritually. He explains that it was all part of his 'package', 'because while you are on the earth's plane, you get a chance to progress. You get a chance to evolve into a better version of yourself, and grow into something better'. He ends the interview by saying: 'Everybody needs healing, and healing is not a one-off. It's a process. It's part of growth, it's part of development...along the way, healing is part of the package that people need'.

BEATRICE'S STORY

Beatrice is twenty-seven years old. In 2001, she was diagnosed with a fibrous dysplasia in her femur, which meant that she had tumours growing in the marrow threatening to split the bone. Beatrice underwent surgery to remove the tumour, and the recovery period was very difficult as she felt very sick. But she thought that she would be fine as the doctors told her so. Beatrice laughed when she said she 'trusted the doctors because they seemed to know what they were talking about'. However, in 2002 doctors had to remove the metal that they had put in Beatrice's spine because it was causing her too much pain. Six months later she fractured her hip, but it took a long time before anyone believed there was something wrong with her. She told me:

I just started to get really tired, and I was thinking, 'Something's not right', and I told my doctor and she said, 'Well, your movement's fine', and I told my physio and they're like, 'You're good'. I said, 'Something's not right. I know I'm not feeling right. I'm tired all the time', and everyone's like, 'Oh, you're malingering. You're lazy. You just don't want to work'. Then one day I was crossing the road and my leg just stuck and I couldn't move, and the cars were coming towards me and I'm thinking, 'I really don't think this is right!' So I went down to Emergency and they x-rayed my leg and they said to me, 'Your bone doesn't look quite right, but you've had two operations

and we're not quite sure...' It was a Saturday, and they said, 'Well, we've made an appointment for you to come into the clinic on Monday, and bring the x-rays along so we can compare your x-rays'. So I walked back to the train station...So the next day I went to Emergency and I kind of said to them, 'I'm checking in!' And fortunately there was someone with a brain on the—the registrar or whatever, and he said, 'Get her off her feet. She's got a fractured hip'.

In 2004, Beatrice began making plans to travel to Brazil to see John of God. She had heard of him through an article in a Perth newspaper in 1998 and had kept him in mind. Although illness interrupted her plans, she signed up for the monthly newsletter on the Friends of the Casa website⁸ and, through them, learned that there were crystal beds in Melbourne, where she lives. She started frequenting a place where there were also meditation sessions. In these sessions, they 'tuned into the Casa' by getting together at the same time healing sessions were taking place at the Casa and using the Casa prayer book. This group provided the support Beatrice did not have from family, friends or doctors. According to her,

I was young and I looked fine and people just looked at me like, 'You look radiant and healthy'. And I had this rare thing which conventional medicine can't help, and nobody kind of bought that. They just said: 'You have to stop being dramatic, because you don't look sick, and you're too young, and how can you have this thing which doctors just can't help you with?' It just didn't seem to fit in with most people's ideas of reality, because we're so technologically advanced in medical science.

In 2006, when she found out John of God was going to New Zealand, she says she didn't know whether she would go because it was such an expensive trip. One night, before going to sleep, she asked what she should do. That night she dreamed that she should go to New Zealand and somehow she would go to Brazil in the same year, which ended up happening. In New Zealand, Beatrice was amazed she could sit in the current room all morning and afternoon, when normally she was not able to sit through a two-hour movie session. One day, in the afternoon, John of God 'in entity' decided to give invisible operations to everyone sitting in current. Beatrice describes her operation with these words:

He was standing in front of me and he said, 'I will help you heal', and he grabbed my head and shook my head, then massaged my sore leg, then he held my hand and I felt like I was going to pass out. I just felt this strong energy going through me, and it was kind of like, 'Woah!' I felt more energised than I had in years. So it was very powerful...I've been so moved and I felt that there was hope, and I felt that I was deserving of love and joy and a bigger life than I'd been living. And I kind of felt that I was more than...this illness, and even though, in a way, one of the reasons I was there was because of my leg, I kind of realised, okay, I've had this experience and it's led me down a different path.

For Beatrice, the illness was a gateway into a transformative experience. It made her ponder God and spirituality. She notes:

[G]oing to New Zealand was also about integrating a part of myself which I haven't integrated. I've always been very spiritual, and I guess I had visions and stuff as a kid, but it was always this part of my life which I had but I didn't know why I had it, it didn't make sense to my family...so when I got sick there was this big question of, 'How do I feel about God? What's my faith?' Or, 'Are these things very important to me?' Or, 'Are these other things [like] living a life that's more of social status, or power, or money, or career? Are these things more important to me?' So I guess going to New Zealand reminded me of, I guess, wanting to step into my life and claim it.

Indeed, Beatrice feels that a new path opened from the time she got sick, a path of growth and transformation. In this context, illness becomes a blessing:

When I first got diagnosed, I was told, 'We'll chop it out and in six weeks your life will go back to normal', and for so long I was wanting for my life to go back to what 'normal' was, or the way it was, and it took me a long time to let go of having to have life go back to the way it was, and to accept that I've evolved and I'm changing, and this is not a bad thing...I sat in current and I remember thinking, 'Isn't my leg a blessing? I would not be sitting here in current having this experience, meeting these amazing people, talking to you here now, if I hadn't had this experience with my leg'. It's kind of opened my life up to different things.

After her New Zealand experience, Beatrice travelled to Abadiânia for two months in the latter half of 2006. When she arrived back in Australia she told me that she had enjoyed her experience so much, she was going back in three weeks for a longer period. She had had several invisible operations on her leg; even at the juice bar and at the pousada the entities were working on her. But most importantly, she said, she 'felt seen and heard' by John of God. In 2008, she left the Casa after living there for about one and a half years. She told me she feels healthy again, and sees the occasional pain as way to gauge whether she is pushing her body too much. She has since been to other alternative healing retreats and workshops in the United States because she feels that her learning at the Casa is finished.

UNDERSTANDING THESE STORIES

Frustration with biomedicine

Many themes arise from these interviews. The first is a frustration with biomedicine and the unequal power relations it entails. Both narratives brought up the belief that Western medicine attends only to the physical body, while the illness's origin may be emotional, mental or spiritual. Arthur Kleinman's distinction between the concepts of disease and illness are helpful to this discussion. For him, illness 'refers to how the sick person and the members of the family or wider social network perceive, live with, and respond to symptoms and disability' (Kleinman 1988: 3). Disease, on the other hand, 'is the problem from the practitioner's perspective. In the narrow biological terms of the biomedical model, this means

that disease is reconfigured *only* as an alteration in biological structure or functioning' (Kleinman 1988: 5–6, italics in the original). Thus, biomedicine focuses on the physical body while the experiences of, for instance, discomfort, depression, frustration and anger of living with disease (particularly chronic disease), do not enter into the equation of biomedicine's diagnosis and course of treatment. According to Kleinman, 'They [medical doctors] have been taught to regard with suspicion patients' illness narratives and causal beliefs. [Therefore] illness experience is not legitimated by the biomedical specialist' (Kleinman 1988: 17). However, Frank (1995) identifies a transformation in the way illness has been perceived in the last twenty years. According to him, in modern times the medical narrative trumps all other stories of illness. 'The story told by the physician becomes the one against which others are ultimately judged true or false' (Frank 1995: 5). In recent times, or 'postmodern times' as Frank calls them, people reclaim their voices, their authority to tell their own stories of illness (Frank 1995: 6–7). He adds that one indicator of this shift to postmodern times is the rise in alternative healing therapies (Frank 1995: 34).

Indeed, Furnham and Forey (1994) found that most people who used alternative medicine believed that practitioners of Western medicine did not listen to their patients. In his study of the reasons why Australians turn to alternative therapies, Siahpush observed that,

People tend to favour alternatives because they think doctors have little respect for them, do not give them enough time, do not listen to them, act too authoritatively, and do not give them a chance to actively participate in the process of healing. In short, the quality of doctor–patient interaction and the power differential in the medical encounter is part of the reason for the popularity of alternative medicine. (Siahpush 1998: 68)

Both Mark's and Beatrice's narratives evince these reasons for seeking healing from John of God. Mark felt that his doctors did not share with him the results of exams, did not consult with him as to the line of treatment to follow, and they did not have enough respect for him (he felt that that doctors used him 'as a guinea pig'). When, after becoming ill as a result of wrong diagnosis and treatment, and after the doctor offered him only two possibilities: 'metal or pig valves', and by this refused to recognise the extent of his illness (his suffering and anger) and that his was an iatrogenic disease, he just despaired and ran away. The same is true for Beatrice, who felt that not only her doctors, but family and friends, did not listen to her. Her repeated claim—'something's not right'—went unheard. Her anger and frustration at not being believed (and thus having to frequently assert that although the pain could not be seen, it was real), made her turn to John of God. By telling her: 'I will help you heal', he legitimated her suffering. Indeed, once John of God acknowledged her suffering, she recovered hope: 'I've been so moved and I felt that there was hope, and I felt that I was deserving of love and joy and a bigger life than I'd been living'.

Spirituality and illness

A second theme is that a connection with spirituality gives meaning to illness, something Mark and Beatrice did not find in biomedicine. As Kleinman observed,

The modern medical bureaucracy...[is] oriented to treat suffering as a problem of mechanical breakdown requiring a technical fix. They arrange for therapeutical manipulation of disease problems in place of meaningful moral (and spiritual) response to illness problems. (Kleinman 1988: 28)

John of God, the entities, and Spiritism offer this meaningful response to illness. Illness is perceived as karma resulting from past lives' actions—hence, Mark's assertion that, 'I had to go through suffering...there's karmic debt to be repaid'. Another reason for illness, which is popular in Spiritism but not so common in the New Age movement, is spiritual attachments, that is, obsession by lower spirits when one is vulnerable (depressed, drunk, or not aware).⁹ Importantly, and similarly to New Age thinking, Spiritists believe that people have chosen their present life to learn lessons. Illness is part of this choice, as it gives them opportunities to learn and grow spiritually, a world view Hanegraaff (1998: 267–269) terms 'New Age evolutionism'. The way of addressing illness is through a 'transformation of the self', which in Spiritism involves charity work, and love and compassion towards the self and others. It can also be facilitated by enlightened/higher spirits or spiritual entities, such as those who 'work' with John of God. The belief in entities, or spirits of light, who are channelled by mediums and who assist us in learning the lessons for 'the spiritual progress of humanity', is common both in Spiritism and the New Age movement (see Hanegraaff 1998: 23–29, 197–201).

In *The Wounded Storyteller*, Arthur Frank argues that people use illness narratives 'to repair the damage that illness has done to the ill person's sense of where she is in life, and where she maybe going' (Frank 1995: 53). He identifies three kinds of narratives—restitution, chaos, and quest—which usually overlap when the person is actually telling her story. Succinctly, the restitution narrative is in accord with modernist medicine, as the underlying subtext is that the patient has a disease but will recover and lead a normal life—illness is transitory (Frank 1995: 77–96). By contrast, chaos stories are about the lack of control, impotence, incoherence, life never getting better. 'In these stories, the modernist bulwark of remedy, progress, and professionalism cracks to reveal vulnerability, futility, and impotence' (Frank 1995: 97). Finally, in the quest narrative, 'illness is the occasion of a journey that becomes a quest' (Frank 1995: 115). The ill person has an active role in it, as s/he finds a sense of purpose in the illness, and uses it to undergo transformation.

All the people I interviewed saw their illness as a journey/quest, a process one has to go through to grow spiritually. Mark's and Beatrice's narratives demonstrate how illness can transform people and propel them to a closer connection with their spirituality. Beatrice believes her illness is a blessing because of this transformation. Mark sees his illness as a 'package' he was given and which he cannot escape. But this package is necessary for him to progress, 'to grow into something better'. As I

mentioned before, this fits well with the New Age world view that challenges the individual to find a deeper meaning in illness, and to 'use it as an instrument for learning and inner growth' (Hanegraaff 1998: 54).

However, both narratives start as a restitution story. Beatrice says doctors told her that they would 'chop the tumour out and in six weeks your life will go back to normal' and she trusts them. When her life descends into chaos (she is in constant pain to which medicine has no explanation for, causing doctors, family and friends to doubt her), she still tries to recover the 'normality' promised. Only when she 'let[s] go of having to have life go back to the way it was, and to accept that I've evolved and I'm changing, and this is not a bad thing', that is, only when her narrative of chaos becomes one of quest, can she find purpose and validation for her pain. The narrative of quest continues even after her health improves, and she feels that she has no longer any lessons to learn at the Casa. She continues the journey by moving on to other healing practices in the United States of America.

As for Mark, his restitution narrative is quite short—the period between the diagnosis and treatment for Hodgkin's disease. When he develops heart murmurs, his narrative becomes one of chaos—there is a high possibility of heart surgery but he does not trust biomedicine and the doctors, his body starts to collapse, he madly searches for alternative solutions to his trouble ('it was a blur'), and he feels angry and desperate. Chaos starts to recede once he undergoes an operation at the Casa, feels revitalised, and dreams he will be cured. From this point onwards, his narrative is one of quest, one in which he finds purpose in his illness (paying his 'karmic debt'). He now has more control of his body and his life through crystal bed sessions and a myriad of other alternative treatments he undergoes; there is a certain 'order' in the chaos of living with chronic illness.

Empowerment and surrender

A third theme related to these narratives is the paradox of empowerment and surrender. In *Body, Self and Cosmos in 'New Age' Energy Healing*, Jill Dubisch examines how the body is conceptualised and experienced in energy healing systems that fall into the general category of New Age. Dubisch finds that for people involved in energy healing there are not one but four bodies: physical, mental, spiritual and emotional. When Mark says that now, after all his ordeals, he 'feels more himself, physically, emotionally, spiritually', he is acknowledging that these other bodies have entered the equation for his healing too. Dubisch argues that the body in energy healing is:

a locus of resistance to dominant...medical practices associated with it. At the same time, paradoxically, this resistance is realised and manifested through surrender to higher or greater powers, which in turn, in a further seeming paradox, lead to empowerment through providing a form of control over the body independent of external forces, including those of biomedicine. (Dubisch 2005: 222)

Followers of John of God surrender to the power of the entities and, by doing so, paradoxically feel more in control of their bodies. John of God asserts that it is

not him who heals, but God. He says that he is just a tool in the hands of God. This statement, constantly used by guides in their talks, posters, pamphlets and books about John of God, undoubtedly gives people comfort in feeling that they are placing themselves in the hands of God. This balance between surrender to a higher power and taking charge of one's healing is, as we saw, what makes the alternative approach attractive. Importantly, Hanegraaff has observed that:

In their implicit criticism of official western medicine, New Age healing practices not surprisingly evince a close affinity to those of traditional cultures which western medicine has sought to replace...Neither traditional healers, nor their New Age counterparts accept a rigid dichotomy between physical and mental illness. (Hanegraaff 1998: 23)

To be sure, Spiritism cannot be easily placed in the 'traditional medicine' box. As mentioned earlier, Spiritism was created as a synthesis of occultist doctrines of nineteenth-century Europe, which can be regarded as precursors of the New Age movement. It acquired a Brazilian 'flavour' during its 140-year history in the country, but its fundamental tenets still derive from its European origins. In this light, its European origins and the fact that in the eyes of the people I interviewed John of God was clearly a 'Brazilian product' (i.e. practising Brazilian traditional medicine) eased the way for him and his healing practices to be accepted.

CONCLUSION

Following Csordas' suggestion that researchers focus on peoples' stories of healing rather than the healer's practices, this article presents the illness narratives of two Australians. It does so to enquire why Westerners, particularly Australians, are attracted to John of God's healing practices. I showed that the New Age world view disseminated in popular culture inflects the habitus of a significant number of Australians, which in turn produces a disposition towards alternative and traditional healing from far away lands. John of God's healing practices fit into these categories. Indeed, his appeal lies in several interrelated factors. First, there has been a rise in alternative spiritualities and spiritualities of choice in the past twenty years in Australia (Carey 1996; Bouma 2003, 2006; Tacey 2003). The New Age movement—a loose network of alternative beliefs, practices and therapies—has been an integral part of this growth. Given that French-Brazilian Spiritism has its origins in the same occultist doctrines that gave birth to the New Age movement, it is not difficult to understand why both approaches overlap, paving the way for an easy transit of people between the two.

Deeply related to the rise of alternative spiritualities is the rise of CAM in the West, including Australia. As we saw in this article, there are several reasons for this shift to CAM, and they all have a bearing on people's attraction to John of God's healing practices. The first obvious one is a disenchantment with, and even suspicion of, biomedicine. The two narratives of illness I conveyed in this article demonstrated that medical errors and situations where Western medicine offered no

cure for individuals' diseases drove them to seek alternative healing systems or miracles, respectively, both of which John of God is famous for. A second reason for the rise in CAM is a search for a more egalitarian relationship between doctors and patients. I suggested that, for John of God followers, such empowerment means also surrender to the ability of the entities to heal them. A third reason is a search for meaning and context for people's illness. Spiritism and John of God's healing practices give meaning to illness by affirming that illness is due to karma, obsession by low spirits or choices made before one comes to this present life. Similarly to New Age spirituality, this life, then, becomes an opportunity for learning lessons. In this sense, healing involves a quest for a deeper transformation and spiritual growth. Ultimately, Spiritism establishes a close connection between religion and healing, something that has been discarded by Western medicine. My interviewees told me that precisely this connection was an important factor in their adherence to John of God's healing practices.

Finally, I showed that what is unique in the phenomenon studied here is that this is not a simple case of Westerners choosing a traditional healing system over biomedicine. Although my interviewees perceive John of God's healing system through this lens, in fact they are attracted to something which is similar to their own New Age/alternative healing disposition, albeit one that is inflected by a clear 'Brazilian flavour'. In this sense, Westerners' attraction to John's healing practices resembles Narcissus falling for the image on the pool, not realising it was his own.

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NOTES

- 1 Here, I am interested not so much in whether people see themselves as 'New Agers', but in the dissemination of the movement's ideas in popular culture.
- 2 There is no single definition for CAM. Generally, they are defined as health practices that fall outside conventional medicine. Coulter and Willis have grouped them into five domains: 'alternative medical systems; mind-body interventions; biologically-based treatments; manipulative and body-based methods; and energy therapies' (Coulter and Willis 2004: 587). John of God's healing practices could be classified as being both an alternative medical system and energy therapy.
- 3 Although the origins of French Spiritism are in the Anglo-Saxon Spiritualist movement of the 1800s, the two movements differ in that the concept of multiple incarnations is the central tenet of Spiritism belief but it is not emphasised in Spiritualism, in which most adherents believe in a 'single embodiment of the soul' (Warren 1968: 395).
- 4 For an analysis of other healers, see Sydney Greenfield (1991: 20–25, 1992: 23–51).

- 5 According to the Casa booklet, in bestowing this title, John of God and the entities he incorporates 'recognise that there is a spiritual connection' between the person and the Casa de Dom Inácio (Casa Guide for English Speaking Visitors 2006: 25). Sons and Daughters of the Casa are found amongst volunteers, staff, guides, and foreigners closely attached to the Casa.
- 6 Although the same herbs are prescribed for everyone—powdered leaves and flowers of the passion fruit plant in a capsule—they are said to work in different ways according to people's needs. They are believed to be vehicles for the healing energy of the Casa.
- 7 For more on visible and invisible operations at the Casa, see Yves Marton (2002).
- 8 See <http://www.friendsofthecasa.org/>. This English site, maintained by foreigners who live in Abadiânia or are in close contact with the Casa, contains a wealth of information on the Casa procedures, latest news, travel tips, testimonials, message board and photo gallery.
- 9 This can be attributed to the fact that 'in the New Age context, we hear little or nothing about demons, but far more about angelic beings' (Hanegraaff 1998: 197). In her film *I Do Not Heal, God is the One Who Heals: A Tribute to John of God* (2006) Emma Bragdon, an American guide to the Casa, notes that few foreigners who go to the Casa know that it is the largest centre for spirit disobsession in Latin America (Bragdon 2006). I suggest that this is so because the belief in bad/low spirits is not part of the New Age movement, and thus does not overlap with the matrix of knowledge Westerners have which assists them in understanding healing at the Casa.

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