

“Pero tu no crees en dios”

Negotiating Spirituality, Family, and Community

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Introduction: The Borders between Our Hearts and Minds

I am reminded of one of my most lucid memories of Sunday morning Mass when I was nine or ten years old. I was wearing a blue flowered dress and pale blue tights. As we sang the hymn “Our Father,” I stood tall between my parents and held their hands tight as we raised our arms up high. My voice was loud and clear and I vividly remember feeling absolutely exhilarated, directly connected to the Creator through our singing.

In this short narrative, I write about tensions I have felt with my family and larger community ever since I began to reconnect with my ancestral roots, *ceremonias*, and spiritual traditions. In the last twenty years, the ebbs and flows of these relationships have marked my journey in important ways. This *testimonio* is not about my quest to find answers to complex metaphysical questions or to define my spirituality; instead I focus on how I have related this spiritual journey to my family and community, a process that has been challenging but that has also taught me to fully live a borderland epistemology. I write from a particular position that speaks to who I am today. The process is ever evolving, but as I move toward middle age and understand my multiple identities as a daughter, sibling, aunt, community member, and mother, I have also come to understand the dialectical nature of our relations and ontological musings. Perhaps it is because I have now lived through the tremendous loss of both of my parents; the wound from my mom’s passing is still so fresh that I find it important to note the fluidity of my journey.

Although I grew up in a bilingual, bicultural, Catholic home along the US-Mexican border, as a teenager I found myself isolated in a white working-class neighborhood. Despite the social and cultural differences between others, Catholicism offered me a sense of community with my peers. Yet as a young adult I found Catholicism to be antithetical to my evolving identity as a socially conscious and spiritual woman. Moreover, having ventured into the world of Indigenous ceremony and *danza*, I found myself estranged from my community. Instead of living in the liminal divide, I brought my spiritual experiments “home” with me. This piece will speak to the experience of bringing these practices “home.”

Remembering that day in church, I pretended not to notice the snickering coming from a couple of girls that I had seen behind me. Were they laughing at my blue tights? Because I was singing? Because I was holding my parents’ hands? I felt so spiritually elevated that I tried not to let them bother me. I remember this moment so clearly because it was the first time that I experienced two distinct yet equally important feelings that would come to inform my emotional and intellectual engagement with the spiritual world.

You see, while experiencing a moment of such faith, I was made to feel as if I was doing something wrong. It is precisely this disconnect, marked so vividly at such a young age, that I will speak to in this essay. I never came to know why I was ridiculed from afar by these girls, but I imagine it was their discomfort that caused it, a discomfort that must be similar to the one that my family has felt when I sought a spiritual path that was alien to their own comfort zone. It is appropriate that this chapter be placed in the section of the North, the place of the wind, associated with elders and the energy of maturity. Just as the winds carry messages through the seeds, the pollen, the birds, the monarch butterflies, and the seasons, I hope to bring a message in this chapter that underscores the ways in which spirituality can be understood in our relation to others.

Home

I was born and raised in San Diego, California. At around age nine or ten, my family and I moved from an apartment complex known as “Little TJ” to a house that we rented in an entirely different community.¹ I no longer had friends and family as next-door neighbors to play with. The brownness of my skin was also made apparent in this working-class community; although ethnically diverse, the majority of the families were white American.

I clearly remember dutifully praying daily during this time, hoping that through my prayers I would be bestowed with some friends. I felt completely

isolated and spent a lot of time at the public library across the street from our house, allowing the stories of the many books I read to fill my days. The librarian became my closest friend.

Once I began attending the neighborhood school, the friendships came a little easier, but I still found that I felt detached from many of the kids because of the cultural differences that subtly played themselves out in our daily interactions. I eventually found common ground with the group of girlfriends who became my closest friends through high school because we were all raised Catholic.

As we grew up together, we could relate to one another on issues of sexuality, morality, having “strict” parents, and even the routinization of Catechism and weekend mass. We may have complained about the limitations that the Church and our parents imposed on us but we certainly did not question the doctrine itself; we accepted the principles as is. I, in fact, was steadfast in my beliefs that I was not to have sex before marriage and that I would never deface my body with a tattoo; I feared hell and did what I could to ensure that I would not end up there. I was baptized, had my first Communion, confirmed my faith (twice, I might add—once in Mexico and once in the United States) and came into “womanhood” at my fifteenth birthday mass celebration. In sum, being a “good” Catholic girl was an important part of my identity and, as my family would say, “*Lo único que te falta es casarte por la iglesia.*”²

I find myself now in my late thirties, a single mother to a beautiful daughter, with, yes, tattoos on my body and no plans to ever get married in the Catholic Church. My evolving spiritual beliefs are also closely connected to the politicization of my worldviews and while politics requires constant vigilance through a definitive stance, my spirituality sustains me through personal deep reflection. But it is in these times of personal deliberation that I realize I must also negotiate with the family and community from which I come; otherwise the process seems inauthentic and disconnected from the memories that continue to shape who I am. I am incapable of rupturing from my past and from the obligations that this history carries. Let me explain.

El Camino: “To go on that path, se va descalzo (you walk barefoot)”

When I started college I moved away from home and found myself in an environment where it was possible to be around Chicanas/os or Latinas/os more consistently again, and I was able to take my first Chicana/o studies class.³ To learn about a history that had been denied to me throughout my previous schooling affected me not only intellectually and emotionally, but spiritually

as well. I attended Mass close to campus and when I approached the priest with my queries, my doubts, my rage, the ineptitude of his response set me on a different path.

In many ways, living away from home facilitated the process of inquiry for me, since I did not have to explain why I did not attend weekly mass or why I was reading a religious text other than the Bible. Then my father suddenly passed away and the inability of the Church and its practices to soothe the pain of this loss further fueled my search at this time. That was my first fissure. It took many years to have the confidence to share with my family the critiques I had of the Church and my desire to seek out a different path. It was difficult to express myself as the youngest of my generation, the only one to have moved out of our hometown—and to explain the gendered implications both of these positions present. Eventually though, in my mid-twenties, I decided I could not keep these worldviews separate. By this time, I had become a *danzante* and had participated in various ceremonies (sweatlodges/*temazcallis*, healing circles, and dance ceremonies). So I slowly started talking about my experiences, primarily with my mother and sister, to whom I was closest. I wanted them to understand that these experiences made sense to me. In the beginning, my mother and sister tolerated my ideas because they saw them as a fad that I was going through and would eventually grow out of.

Yet to fully embody my spiritual path, I could not accept a disconnect from my family. Thus, I tried to include them, either by inviting them to ceremonies that I participated in or by just subtly including my viewpoint when there was a group or family prayer before dinner or a celebration. This choice implied interactions and confrontations that risked dismissal at best and ridicule at worst. Yet it was important for me to keep trying. In effect, this was my second fissure.

For example, several years ago, my mother came to visit me when I lived in New York City. The danza group I was a part of held a Mother’s Day celebration that weekend, and I took her to and participated in the ceremony. At one point, she and I were standing in the middle of the danza circle and when I brought the copal towards her, perhaps to make light of her uneasiness, under her breath she said, “*Que . . . me estas sacando el diablo?*”⁴ Despite the very serious nature of my intentions, and my frustrations, I could not help but laugh. This experience was so beyond her own worldview that in order to make sense of it, she had to make fun of it. After my mother’s comment, I did not know how to reengage myself with the ceremony. Although I continued to participate, the experience felt compromised because I felt uncomfortable and frustrated. I had been very excited to celebrate my mother, but the disconnect that I felt with her manifested itself in my dance and in my own engagement with the rest of the ceremony.

Another time, while in graduate school, I was home visiting my family when we received the news that my uncle, my mother's brother, was very ill. As she expressed her distress, she asked me to pray for him but then, almost immediately, she said, "Ay, pero tu no crees en dios,"⁵ implying that I could not pray and could not help the situation in any way. I tried to explain to her that just because I did not attend mass it did not mean I could not offer my prayers. But she dismissed me and walked away from the conversation. As she walked away, I felt frustrated but also sad that my mother saw my practices as vacuous and without faith. I had found substance in our Indigenous practices from our place of origin, Mexico, and I knew that these prayers I was carrying resonated deep within her, but she could not make the bridge between her religion and the memories she also had that connected her to the natural world.

More recently, in preparation for the birth of my daughter, a medicine man that I work with and I organized a welcoming ceremony in the home of my daughter's godparents. I was about seven months pregnant and the ceremony was to take place a week after Christmas. On Christmas Eve, as I approached the door to my sister's house, my brother came out to greet me with a rendition of a very racist and insensitive powwow dance and "Indian" chant while hitting his mouth. The implication of course being that the upcoming ceremony was a practice foreign to his Catholic-Christian ways. I was in shock and all I could muster was a "That is not very nice"; he laughed and said, "Oh, my crazy sister."

Crazy, of course, because I chose to honor my daughter's new life in a markedly different way than his—but also, his internalized colonialism became apparent in his response. Here perhaps was another fissure. Whereas I saw myself as decolonized, he vocalized what he and my other family members thought: that I was crazy. These are but a few of the countless examples that I can speak to. At one time, these negotiations were extremely painful for me, but because both my family and my spiritual journey are important to me, I had to find a way to embrace and feel embraced by both.

Conclusion: Sharing the Path

I know from experience that it is hard to walk a new path. By sharing these stories I am highlighting the real ways in which one's daily life, situated and contextualized within one's reality in spaces where one engages with spiritual paradigms that are much, much different from one's family of origin, can create tensions as well as a sense of confusion about oneself.

I began this essay with my girlhood experience in Mass where I was ridiculed for singing in church too loudly, somehow feeling that I was doing

something wrong as judged by my peers. Despite my subsequent separation from the Catholic Church, that feeling of alienation stayed with me as I sought to connect with the traditions of my ancestors. I write this because I want to acknowledge that it is difficult to disrupt family expectations, even if your new path of choice is about reclaiming practices that are grounded in our own lost histories. If your family of origin has not challenged the ways in which Christianity was brought into our lives through conquest and force, I think it is still important to find ways to bridge these seemingly disparate positions. I am trying to highlight the contradictions that we must negotiate.

To be fair, there were moments in this path where I too have absolutely rejected my family’s religion, where I refused to sit through a Mass that highlighted hypocrisies that seemed apparent only to me, and where I too grumbled under my breath. This is where I believe that a borderlands epistemology, understanding the dialectical nature of not only material reality but also spirituality and family, is useful. A borderlands epistemology conduces to the state of *nepantla*, of crossroads, of coming to a point where I can say that although I may not agree with the church my mom adhered to, I came to respect her relationship to it and her faith in God. But it is also true that I cannot wholeheartedly deny the ways in which my Catholic upbringing informs my own relationship to the Creator and all my relations. The embodiment of syncretism is how I mark this path.

By embracing this kind of thinking, this path of understanding has become much easier. I also believe that my family has begun to see that this life I am setting out for myself is not temporal, that I am committed to engaging in ancestral forms of spirituality and to raising my daughter in this new tradition that she and I will be creating together. Of course, these traditions and *ceremonias* are not actually new, but connect me to the very earth we walk on, here on this continent, indeed providing me with a sense of wholeness that I never felt as a member of the Catholic Church. It is through a stronger sense of self that my family and I can reengage.

In fact, after the birth of my daughter we participated in a water ceremony, a baptism up in the mountains for her and other children, and members of my family were present and supportive. Perhaps they made a few sly comments, but they were there and demonstrated their support and love through their presence. This journey has not been easy but I know that struggling with the tensions and inviting my family in, I have demonstrated a commitment and a desire for mutual understanding. By doing so, I have created the opportunity to walk these tensions together, a practice that will be an important life lesson for my daughter that I hope she will carry for herself and future generations.

Spirituality, in the end, is how we relate to each other as human beings, independent of theology. I feel this now when my daughter and I make altars for our ancestors, in the dances we do in ceremony, and in the prayers we offer to all of our relations. I am reminded of the words of Cherríe Moraga, who said, “To raise an Indian child is the most radical thing I could do.”⁶ Spirituality, for me, is a movement. One that recognizes that going against the grain requires strength but also acceptance. While I do feel there is a great absence in our lives because my parents have passed away, I know we continue to honor their lessons. Just recently, my daughter gathered some sage and an old photo of her “*bia*” and “*bio*” and made an altar in her bedroom because she wanted them close to her. In some ways my entire life has been a series of fissures, but in the end, perhaps through my daughter, and through the honoring of my parents, we come together as a whole. Life becomes our ceremony.

Notes

1. So nicknamed because the majority of the families were of Mexican descent; “TJ” is the abbreviation for the city of Tijuana, Baja California, Mexico, which borders San Diego. Others often use the term pejoratively.

2. “The only thing you have left is to get married by the church.”

3. The section title is a quote by Sylvia Ledesma. Quoted in Roberto Rodriguez (2002, 32–33).

4. “Are you taking the devil out of me?”

5. “Oh, but you do not believe in God.”

6. Said during a speech given in Chicago, Illinois, for the Incite! Women of Color Against Violence national conference in 2002.