



# **Curanderismo: Holistic Healing**

Goals 2000 - Partnerships for  
Educating Colorado Students

In Partnership with the **Denver Public Schools**  
and the **Metropolitan State College of Denver**

El Alma de la Raza Project



# Curanderismo: Holistic Healing

By Lu Liñan

Grades 9-12

Implementation Time  
for Unit of Study: 6 weeks

Goals 2000 - Partnerships for  
Educating Colorado Students  
El Alma de la Raza Curriculum  
and Teacher Training Project

Loyola A. Martinez, Project Director

# Curanderismo: Holistic Healing

## Unit Concepts

- History of curanderismo
- Function of curanderos and curanderas in the community
- Curanderismo and modern medicine
- Curanderismo, religion, and belief

## Standards Addressed by This Unit

### Reading and Writing

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

## Introduction

Curanderismo has been influenced by Greek humoral medicine and was revived during the Spanish Renaissance by consulting Latin translations of Galen and Hippocrates on the art of healing. Other beliefs and practices that have influenced curanderismo have been medieval and European witchcraft, early Arabic medicine and health practices, Judeo-Christian religious beliefs (symbols and rituals), Native American herbal lore and health practices, modern beliefs about spiritualism and psychic phenomena, scientific medicine, and the Bible.

The verb *curar* means to heal. Curanderismo can be called “holistic” or “folk” healing and is executed by a curandero (male healer) or a curandera (female healer). There are three levels of curanderismo: the material, the spiritual, and the mental. The material emphasizes objects such as candles, oils, and herbs. The spiritual embraces a medium through which the healing takes place. The mental focuses on psychic healing. All three levels require rituals that are formulaic or patterned in different ways to treat various illnesses.

Part of curanderismo is the belief that the curandero(a) has been bestowed as a gift (*don*) to heal others. However, most healers learn through apprenticeship to an older curandero and must go through a developmental period known as a *desarrollo*. There are several types of curandero(a)s, such as the *Yerbero* (herbalist), who works with herbs alone and treats patients with natural remedies (*remedios*). A *Sobador/Sobadora* (folk chiropractor) specializes in muscle and bone manipulation, acupressure, and massage therapy, healing with hands and supplementing the treatment with herbal medications when appropriate. A *Partera* is a midwife who utilizes herbs during the course of prenatal care and during delivery. For most curandero(a)s, healing is their livelihood; however, many do not charge but accept donations.

## Instructional Materials and Resources

The following books and articles are required for implementing this unit as written.

*Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya

*Hispanic American Literature* by Ishmael Reed

*Witches and Other Things* by Marjorie Agosin

“Healing Spirits” by Mary Jane Garza, *Hispanic Magazine*, June 1998

*The Folk Healer* by Eliseo Torres

*Curanderismo* by Robert T. Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira

*Mexican-American Folklore* by John O. West  
Many Mexicos by Lesley Byrd Simpson  
guest speaker: curandero(a)

Internet Access

Library Access

## Contents of Unit

- Lesson 1      The Concept of Curanderismo  
Awareness of the Hispanic folk healing tradition of curanderismo practiced in communities throughout the Southwest and Mexico.
- Lesson 2      The History and Function of Curandero(a)s in the Community  
Understanding of the role of the holistic healer within the Hispanic community and culture.
- Lesson 3      Curanderismo and Modern Medicine  
Researching the relationship between curanderismo and modern medicine, including the use of plants in modern-day medical prescriptions.
- Lesson 4      Religion and Belief in Curanderismo  
Researching the role that religion and belief play in curanderismo. Creating a collage about curanderismo and a chart organizing information.
- Lesson 5      Curandero(a)s  
Evaluating what has been learned about curandero(a)s. Taking a written quiz on *Bless Me, Ultima*. Inviting a curandero(a) to speak to the class.

# Lesson 1: The Concept of Curanderismo

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students read and understand a variety of materials. (RW1)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students use comprehension strategies.

Students make connections between prior knowledge and what they need to know about a topic before reading about it.

Students demonstrate correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will develop an awareness of the Hispanic folk healing tradition of curanderismo practiced throughout the Southwest and Mexico.

Students will develop and implement a questionnaire.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Questioning

KWL chart

Reading for comprehension

Literature log

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Teacher should read “Curandera” by Pat Mora and “The Curing Woman” by Alejandro Morales in *Hispanic and American Literature* and “Witch They Call Me” in *Witches and Other Things* by Marjorie Agosin.

### ACTIVITIES

Fill in the “K” section of the KWL chart, indicating what you already know about curanderismo. Share your knowledge with the class. Next, fill out the “W” section, indicating what you would like to know. As a class, develop a questionnaire on curanderismo and other holistic medicinal approaches. Use the questionnaire with your parents, grandparents, relatives, and other community members. Share results with the class and fill out the “L” section of the KWL chart.

Begin reading *Bless Me, Ultima* and start a literature log. (A literature log is a spiral notebook kept in class in which students write entries as they read the novel.) Continue reading throughout the unit.

## Lesson 1 (cont.)

### VOCABULARY

curandero, curandera Folk healer (male or female)

curanderismo Art of folk healing

holistic healing Treatment of the whole organism

*don* A gift from God

rituals Traditional methods of conducting and performing an act of healing or worship

herbal medicine Use of plants for medicinal purposes e.g.; mint, oregano, wild celery root, etc.

### RESOURCE/MATERIALS

*Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya

*Hispanic American Literature* by Ishmael Reed

*Witches and Other Things* by Marjorie Agosin

Curanderismo KWL Chart

### ASSESSMENT

Assess literature logs for correct grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, etc. Assess KWL charts.





## Lesson 2: History and Function of Curandero(a)s in the Community

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students write and speak for a variety of purposes and audiences. (RW2)

Students write and speak using formal grammar, usage, sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. (RW3)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students write and speak to peers, teachers, and the community.

Students demonstrate correct punctuation, capitalization, and spelling.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will synthesize reading, write summaries, and share information with class.

Students will select and define meaningful vocabulary relating to curanderismo.

Students will develop a chronology of the history of curanderismo.

#### SPECIFICS

Folk medicine and folk remedies have been a viable part of Mexican-American culture throughout many centuries. Curanderismo and the knowledge of using herbs and natural medicine derives from traditional fifteenth- and sixteenth-century European medicinal practices.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Jigsaw reading

Summarizing

Expository writing

Gathering information

#### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Select a written piece on the history of curanderismo, such as “Healing Spirits,” by Mary Jane Garza, in *Hispanic Magazine* (June, 1988).

#### ACTIVITIES

Divide students into groups of four or five. Assign each group to read a section of the selected text. Each group will appoint a recorder and a reporter—one student to write a synopsis of reading and another to report to the entire class their summation. After this activity, the groups will complete the Curanderismo Vocabulary and Curanderismo Chronology worksheets.

## Lesson 2 (cont.)

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Selected reading on the history of curanderismo, such as “Healing Spirits” by Mary Jane Garza, *Hispanic Magazine*, June 1998

History of Curanderismo worksheet

Curanderismo Vocabulary worksheet

Curanderismo Chronology worksheet

### ASSESSMENT

Assess cooperative learning group dynamics and worksheets. Evaluation of worksheets will be based on grammar, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling. Also assess accuracy of information.







## Lessons 3: Curanderismo and Modern Medicine

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing. (RW4)  
Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students use reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing to gather data, define the problem, and apply problem-solving skills.

Students paraphrase, summarize, organize, evaluate, and synthesize information.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

The students will apply critical thinking skills in researching the relationship between curanderismo and modern medicine.

Students will write an informative report following a standard procedure.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Investigate and evaluate

Summarize

Writing reports

#### ACTIVITIES

Work in pairs to research through books, articles, and the Internet the relationship between curanderismo and modern medicine. Include a discussion of the use of plants in modern-day medical prescriptions. Analyze the information obtained and prepare an informative report to share with the class. Use the following procedure:

1. Select a specific topic.
2. Make an outline of your report.
3. Write a thesis statement.
4. Complete a first draft.
5. Conference with another pair of students.
6. Conference with the teacher.
7. Edit and print final paper.

#### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

Internet access

Library access

#### ASSESSMENT

Peer or teacher evaluation of research reports with regard to content and presentation.

## Lesson 4: Religion and Belief in Curanderismo

### What will students be learning?

#### STANDARD(S)

Students read to locate, select, and make use of relevant information from a variety of media, reference, and technological sources. (RW5)

Students read and recognize literature as a record of human experience. (RW6)

#### BENCHMARK(S)

Students paraphrase, summarize, organize, evaluate, and synthesize information.

Students read literature that reflects the uniqueness, diversity, and integrity of the American experience.

#### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will demonstrate an understanding of the religion and beliefs involved in curanderismo through a collage.

Students will condense information from various sources into a chart.

### What will be done to help students learn this?

#### INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Guided reading

Cause and effect

Analytical strategies

Use of the LMC and/or Public Library for research purposes

#### ACTIVITIES

Research, through books, articles, and the Internet, the role that religion and belief play in curanderismo. The teacher will read excerpts from *Mexican-American Folklore*, *Many Mexicos*, *Curanderismo*, and articles such as "Healing Spirits." As a class, discuss unfamiliar words and their meanings and summarize the information found in the readings. Create a collage about curanderismo and religious beliefs and develop a chart containing the information you have compiled on this topic.

## Lesson 4 (cont.)

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

*Mexican-American Folklore* by John O. West

*Many Mexicos* by Lesley Byrd Simpson

*Curanderismo* by Robert Trotter II and Juan Antonio Chavira

“Healing Spirits,” *Hispanic Magazine*, June 1998

magazines for cutting

construction paper

glue

scissors

Religious Beliefs Associated with Curanderismo chart

Internet Access

Library Access

### ASSESSMENT

Quiz students on vocabulary words found in readings. Assess collages with regard to completeness and relevance. Assess chart on religious beliefs for completeness and understanding.



# Lesson 5: Curandero(a)s

## What will students be learning?

### STANDARD(S)

Students apply thinking skills to their reading, writing, listening, and viewing.

### BENCHMARK(S)

Students make predictions, analyze, draw conclusions, and discriminate between fact and opinion in reading, writing, speaking, listening, and viewing.

Students use reading, speaking, listening, and viewing to gather data, define the problem, and apply problem-solving skills.

### OBJECTIVE(S)

Students will demonstrate their knowledge of the literary text, *Bless Me, Ultima*.

Students will develop a questionnaire to expand their knowledge of curanderismo.

## What will be done to help students learn this?

### INSTRUCTIONAL ACTIVITIES

Discussion

Questionnaires

Written quiz

### PRELIMINARY LESSON PREPARATION

Invite a curandero(a) to speak to the class about their role in the community and the practice and value of curanderismo/holistic healing.

### ACTIVITIES

Discuss what you have learned about curanderismo. Is there more you want to know? In small groups, develop questions to ask a curandero(a) during their presentation to your class. Finish your literature logs and take a quiz on *Bless Me, Ultima*.

### RESOURCES/MATERIALS

quiz on *Bless Me, Ultima*

guest speaker

### ASSESSMENT

Assess literature logs and quiz.

## Quiz on *Bless Me, Ultima*

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

1. Ultima is a holistic healer who is traditionally known as \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) a bruja                      b) a doctor                      c) a curandera
2. Antonio's father was named \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Leandro                      b) Gabriel                      c) Narciso
3. Sheriff Chavez was killed by \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Reynaldo                      b) Lupito                      c) Lucas
4. Antonio's mother wanted him to become a \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) farmer                      b) priest                      c) professor
5. What is Purgatory? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Name one of the chores Antonio had to do every day. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. The name of the boy who could outrun any of his friends is \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Cico                      b) Bones                      c) Vitamin Kid
8. The kid who had bad breath was \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Florence                      b) Bones                      c) Horse
9. What could the yerba del manso cure? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What is the origin of the name "Marez"?
11. What is the origin of the name "Luna"? \_\_\_\_\_
12. Describe the *presence* of the river. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. What did Antonio's family do every autumn? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
14. Antonio's favorite uncle was \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Lucas                      b) Ricardo                      c) Pedro

### Quiz on *Bless Me, Ultima* (cont.)

15. Antonio was baptized at \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Guadalupe      b) El Puerto      c) Las Pasturas
16. Antonio's grandfather's name is \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) Prudencio      b) Patricio      c) Presciliano
17. Name two products that were harvested at El Puerto:  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
18. What was the name of Antonio's first teacher? \_\_\_\_\_
19. What are the names of the two brothers that left for the big city?  
\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.
20. What was Rosie's place? \_\_\_\_\_
21. Who told Antonio the story of the Golden Carp? \_\_\_\_\_
22. The three evil witches who put a curse on Lucas were \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) The Temptations    b) The Tamaulipas    c) The Tremontinas
23. Antonio had to go with Ultima to cure Lucas because he was \_\_\_\_\_.  
a) an Angel      b) a Juan      c) a Luna
24. How much money did Antonio's grandfather give Ultima for curing Lucas? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
25. What did Ultima have to do before she could begin to take the curse off Lucas?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Use a separate sheet of paper to answer the following essay questions.

26. Describe the school play.
27. Describe the drowning scene.
28. Describe the confrontation between Tenorio and Antonio's uncle.
29. Describe the bond between Ultima and the Owl.
30. Describe the bond between Ultima and Antonio.

# Unit Assessment

## PERFORMANCE TASK

Write a book report about *Bless Me, Ultima*, including the following:

1. Title of Book
2. Author
3. Copyright Date
4. Protagonist(s)—name(s) and one paragraph description of character(s).
5. Setting—one-paragraph description
6. Summary—two-page synopsis

Edit and proofread; type final report on word processor.

## SCORING RUBRIC

4. All required information is provided. The book report is accurate, complete, and writing is without grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors.
3. All required information is provided. The book report is generally accurate and complete and writing has few grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors.
2. Most of the required information is provided. The book report has significant errors and omissions. There are numerous grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors.
1. Very little of the required information is provided. The book report is not intelligible because of errors, incompleteness, and grammatical, punctuation, and spelling mistakes.

## Bibliography

Agosin, Marjorie. *Brujas y algo mas—Witches and Other Things*. Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1984.

Bilingual poetry written about three women's feelings and sentiments about a variety of topics, including life, death, happiness, neurosis, abortion. The writing communicates a universality of experience even when experienced in different cultures.

Anaya, Rudolfo A. *Bless Me, Ultima*. Berkeley, CA: Tonatiuh-Quinto Sol International, 1972.

Novel about a curandera who comes to live with the Marez family in New Mexico. She befriends a young boy named Antonio who is struggling with his spiritual self; through the friendship, he comes to understand life and nature and how these two go hand in hand.

*English Profiles Handbook*. Brewster, NY: TASA, 1991.

Excellent handbook that helps teachers and parents to monitor and improve the language learning of students through profiles and assessments in reading and writing.

Fletcher, Ralph. *What a Writer Needs*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.

A book about writing which includes examples of students writing, sharing, revising, and publishing their work. This text speaks to the task of extending students' writing. It also focuses on literacy techniques through writing.

Garza, Mary Jane. "Healing Spirits." *Hispanic Magazine*, June 1998.

Article about the Latin American folk healing tradition known as curanderismo. The author writes about legendary curanderos who practice their skills in the Southwest and northern Mexico.

Kanellos, Nicolas. *Hispanic American Literature*. New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1995.

Anthology that includes autobiographies, fiction, poetry, and drama written by several Hispanic authors. Two readings from this book that relate to the unit are "The Curing Woman" by Alejandro Morales and "Curandera" by Pat Mora.

Kiev, Ari. *Curanderismo: Mexican-American Folk Psychiatry*. New York: The Free Press 1968.

Book about the different aspects of curanderismo, including psychiatric and psychological topics. Addresses the therapeutic value of curanderismo and offers views of how curanderismo alleviates or enhances the medicinal practice of the holistic healer and the patient.

Navarro-Richardson, Dr. Julian. *Cura Natural de Las Enfermedades*. Editorial Posada, S.A., Mexico, D.F.: Editorial Posada, S.A., 1983.

This book written in Spanish explains the natural state of health and how to prevent an unnatural state of health. This book also covers medicinal practices by defining the sickness and prescribing holistic remedies to combat the illness.

Pedretti, Dr. Marzio. *Curacion con las Hierbas*. Spain: Editorial De Vecchi, S.A., GERSA, Industria Grafica, 1984.

This book is a small encyclopedia-type reference about plants and herbs and how they can be utilized for medicinal purposes. It also includes the time of the month and the time of day to collect these plants.

## Bibliography (cont.)

Torres, Eliseo. *The Folk Healer: The Mexican-American Tradition of Curanderismo*. Kingsville, TX: Nieves Press.

Short book about the beliefs and practices of curanderismo. Also, short synopses of famous curanderos(as) such as Don Pedrito, Nino Fidencio, Teresita, and Jewel Babb.

Definition and treatments for some ailments that are commonly used by curanderos(as).

Trotter, Robert T., II and Juan Antonio Chavira. *Curanderismo*. Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1981.

This book is an ethnography of the healing theories and practices of curanderos, brought about as a part of a grant given to acquaint health care professionals in the Lower Rio Grande Valley of Texas with Mexican-Americans and the practices of curanderismo. This book discusses history, cultural context of illness, theories of healing, the different levels of curanderismo, and the future of this practice.

*Remedios Caseros. The Doctor's Book of Home Remedies* (1990) Traducccion: Monica Stajnsznadje, Rodale Press, Inc., Grupo Editorial Ceac, S.A., Peru, Barcelona

This book, written in Spanish, contains simple remedies gathered from many doctors to alleviate more than 130 medical problems. This book prescribes home treatment for acne, cholesterol, cuts, dandruff, bad breath, impotency, and many other common ailments.

Simpson, Lesley Byrd. *Many Mexicos*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1941.

This book covers the history and culture of Mexico from its inception to the political and economic welfare state right after the Mexican Revolution. This book contains a brief history of curanderos and their effect on the religious beliefs of the early Spaniards and the pre-Columbian population.

West, John O. *Mexican-American Folklore*. Little Rock, AR: August House, 1988.

Excellent reference book for anyone interested in Mexican-American culture. Has many insights into the customs and traditions of the Southwest. Good information on curanderismo and curanderos(as).

Wood, Karen D., Diane Lapp, and James Flood. *Guiding Readers Through Text: A Review of Study Guides*. Newark, DE: International Reading Association, 1992.

A publication that provides teachers with useful study guides that are instructionally effective. Good resource book.

## About the Author

Lu Liñan is a Colorado native, born and raised in the San Luis Valley. She grew up and went to school in Conejos County, graduating from Antonito High School before moving to Denver. In 1969 she founded a dance company known as The Ballet Folklórico (Fiesta Alegre) de Denver which she directed for twenty-five years.

In 1984, she realized that she wasn't reaching enough of the student population through her cultural performances; increasingly aware of the high dropout rate of Latino students, she enrolled at Metropolitan State College and obtained her B.A. in Secondary Education in 1990. She began her career as a certified teacher at Denver's largest inner-city school—West High School. She also taught one year at a middle school, two years at an alternative high school and is currently teaching again at West High School. She obtained a masters degree in May, 1997. She is Department Chair of the Bilingual Core at West High and sponsor for La Unidad Latinoamericana (a group of senior students); she also directs the West High Folklórico Dancers. With her husband and daughter, she runs a Mexican eatery in Denver.