

THE POLITICS OF TRADITION: FOLK HEALING ON TWO CONTINENTS, PART II

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Abstract: The practice of folk healing seems implausible in today's world, especially as we rely increasingly on new medicines and technologies to cure us from afflictions. Yet even within a modern, Westernized setting, traditional healing rituals do persist, sustained by personal testimonials, and passed from person to person. As they continue, these rituals maintain an important role in their communities.

This article continues an investigation of healing traditions in collaboration with Marlene Hugoson, of Uppsala, Sweden. My fieldwork, in rural Illinois, USA, draws on interviews with Pat Rhoads, the owner of a local restaurant. In her spare time, Pat uses a prayer and a ritual that she learned from her grandfather, Ernest Marvin, to heal afflicted children at the base of a large oak, known as "the asthma tree". She also has applied the same prayer to cure warts, and she tells how similar rituals can mitigate the pain of contact with fire or intense heat, a process known as "blowing out a burn". Despite the fact that such cures are uncommon, Pat continues to practice them. Furthermore, she is strengthened by her success, which she sees as a validation of her Christian faith.

Keywords: folk healing, traditional healing, curing warts, healing burns, folk medicine, ritual cures

Acknowledgments: For last year's Ritual Year presentation, Marlene Hugoson and I offered comparative data on the topic of healing trees. Marlene focused on traditions practiced in Sweden, and I offered data collected from ethnographic research with a contemporary healer, Pat Rhoads, in America. Pat lives not far from my former home, just beyond the border between the states of Indiana and Illinois. The healing tree, where she takes children who are suffering from asthma, is in Illinois. After interviewing Pat, I wrote up my findings in the paper that I delivered in Bulgaria. As is customary for folklorists who use fieldwork as data for their presentations, I showed the paper to Pat, to make sure that my observations were correct. Pat made a remark that caught my attention. "What you said about the tree was fine," she told me. "But you didn't talk about how I could heal warts!" This comment made me realize that the world of the folk healer is seldom focused on only one cure or ailment. In Pat's case, her reference to other folk cures has expanded my range of inquiry as well as Marlene's. We are grateful for Pat Rhoads' continued cooperation with this research project.

In 1946 the author Wheaton Phillips Webb published an article in the *New York Folklore Quarterly* entitled "The Wart". It is an account of his investigation of wart cures among German-American settlers in rural Schenectady Valley, New York. The impetus for his research was that he had developed a large wart on his own hand, which made his subsequent inquiries about folk medicine more personal

and urgent than they might have been otherwise. The wart was unsightly and annoying, and he wanted to be rid of it. After talking to people who referred to magic words and rituals, such as drawing a circle around the wart and reciting passages in German; seeking out a man with special powers, who claimed to be the seventh son of a seventh son (and who tried to blow off the wart with his breath); and trying applications of various substances to the wart, Wheaton Webb was discouraged. The wart was still there—and it was growing. Just when he was ready to abandon his quest for a cure, a neighboring preacher who had heard of his affliction knocked on the door. “Tie a ribbon to the affected hand”, the preacher said. “Tie a knot in the ribbon for each wart, and drop the ribbon on the highway. Whoever picks it up and unties the knots will get the wart”. Webb was skeptical; he was clearly exasperated. “Let’s see that wart”, the neighbor said at last. Webb stretched out his arm and looked into the palm of his hand with amazement. The wart was gone. “It had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as it had come”, he concluded.¹

Mr. Webb’s experiences are not unlike those of many people who are confronted with a troubling ailment, whether it is their own or that of a relative, and who turn to folk medicine for a cure. In some cases, their quest follows a number of unsuccessful attempts to find relief through conventional medical procedures. According to David Hufford, professor emeritus of medical humanities, folk medicine is regarded as a health system that is “at variance with modern medicine”. He notes that many scholars still conceive of a layered model to explain this variance, with folk medicine lying “somewhere between official, scientific medicine (the top layer) and primitive medicine (the bottom layer)”. He continues:

In part this scheme reflects the nineteenth-century view of cultural evolution, in which medicine, like the rest of culture, is seen as having developed from its crudest, most primitive form into its modern, Western, highly sophisticated state...This notion is summed up in the German term *Gesunkenes Kulturgut* [“sunken cultural materials”].²

This model, Hufford notes, remains influential to this day. Many modern, highly sophisticated people are reluctant to acknowledge folk medicine, regarding it as old-fashioned and backward, at a lower level than official medicine. As we rely increasingly on specialized medicines and technologies to cure us from afflictions, the practice of folk healing seems implausible. And yet, even within a modern, westernized setting, traditional healing rituals do persist, and in some cases maintain a vibrant presence among those who embrace them and pass them on.

In my ongoing investigation of the persistence of folk medicine in the modern world, I will begin by reviewing specific healing traditions in rural Illinois, USA, through interviews with Pat Rhoads, the manager of Millcreek, a local restaurant near the small town of Clarksville. In her spare time, Pat uses a prayer and

1 WEBB 1946. 105-106.

2 HUFFORD 1988. 228-229. See also HULTKRANZ 1960. 1958-1959.

a ritual that she learned from her grandfather, Ernest Marvin, to heal children at the base of a large oak, which local people refer to as “the asthma tree”. She has applied the same prayer—and her intensity of belief—to cure warts, and she has witnessed firsthand the practice of mitigating the pain of contact with fire or intense heat, known informally as “blowing out burns”. Even though she knows that some people may regard healing rituals of this type as irrational, Pat continues to practice them and believe in them.

In an interview, Pat shared the following account of curing warts:

I came across a brother and sister who had warts all over their hands and arms. I had an uncle who could take warts off. I never knew how he did it. He never taught that to me. He probably taught it to somebody else. But I felt so sorry for those children. I thought, “Why can’t I use this same concept and do those warts?” So I did. And I did the same thing he did. I took a bean—a great northern bean—and rubbed it across the warts. Then I took the bean outdoors and I hid it, so they didn’t know where it was at. My uncle did that. And when the bean sprouted, the wart went away. So I did that. I took several beans and rubbed them across the warts, and hid the beans in separate places. I hid them to where they could actually sprout.

I didn’t ever know if it worked [at the time]. But two years later, the brother and sister came back to the restaurant, and they told me that the warts went away. I bet you that they—the two of them—had fifty warts on their hands and arms. I used the same prayer that my grandfather had taught me. But, like I say, it’s all in God’s hands...I guess I just knew what grandpa taught me, and I used that.

Somebody might say, “Why didn’t you tell me that you could do that?” Well, that’s boasting. That’s not what God would want us to do.

Pat also mentioned the rituals of blowing out burns and of bloodstopping, both often regarded as a sign of special powers. In this case, she offered a personal experience narrative of how her husband Bill was cured after suffering severe burns in an accident.

My brother-in-law’s dad could blow out burns. He could even do it over the phone. His name was George Farris. My husband got burned one time. The corn sheller [a machine that separates kernels of corn from the cob] blew up when he was on it, and he got burned so bad. And I knew that George could help. So I called my sister and said, “Can you check to see if he’s home? I’ll run Bill [Bill Rhoads, Pat’s husband] over there. And before Bill got to his house, it quit burning. When he got there, George said, “I’ve already taken care of it”. Before we even got to his house, Bill quit burning. George could do that. What he did I have no idea, but he didn’t even have to see Bill.

I know there's people who can stop blood as well, keep you from bleeding. I believe that God gives us all of those different gifts.³

Pat's understanding is that gifts of curing asthma, or getting rid of warts, blowing out burns, or bloodstopping come from a divine power outside of the healer. She does not question it, even in the case of George Farris, a healer who can cure a person without even having to see him. Pat notes in her narrative that she had no idea of how the healing was accomplished, but she believed in it nonetheless. It *happened*. The importance of faith—for the healer, for the healed person, and for members of the community surrounding them cannot be underestimated. Pat's story and similar narratives or testimonials that surround the ritual of folk healing—before, during, and after its completion—help sustain what might be described as oral prominence; each time the story of healing is transmitted, the belief in healing is confirmed.

Pat also alludes to another aspect of folk belief about healing—that the verbal charm or prayer that accompanies a healing ritual must be passed from a male to a female to a male. Pat believes that her grandfather [Ernest Marvin, who taught her the ritual] learned it from his grandmother. “She passed it to him, and he passed it on to me, and I have to pass it on to a male”, she said. Another important aspect of Pat's healing tradition is that she does not “boast” about healing powers to other people, and she certainly will not take credit for them. Even though the power of the healing is confirmed through oral, informal stories that emphasize the importance of the cure, the healer does not encourage personal attention—or monetary payment for having accomplished it. As Pat notes, she doesn't actually *do* the healing. It comes from a higher source.⁴

Although the healing rituals that Pat describes are still practiced in modern times, there is nothing modern about them. For example, charmers (folk healers who rely on verbal prayers or sayings as a part of their ritual cures) have been recognized for centuries as important transmitters of folk medicine. Documented accounts of charmers in eighteenth-century England suggest that they kept their knowledge of specific charms a secret, fearing that random or untimely disclosure of the charm would cause it to lose its efficacy. In some cases, the charm was best revealed at the time of death, and always contra-sexually.⁵ Further emphasis was placed on the importance of sustaining the power of the charms exclusively through oral transmission. In 1870 a Cornish charmer was asked to write down some of his charms. He responded that if he did so, “their virtue would be utterly destroyed...by their being put into ink”.⁶

Another key ritual that is imbedded in Pat's folk healing practices is the enactment of transference. In the case of the healing tree, the disease is transferred from the asthmatic child to the living tree. A lock of hair from the suffering child

3 RHOADS, Interview, April 7, 2012.

4 RHOADS, Interview, April 7, 2012.

5 DAVIES 1998. 42-43.

6 HAWKER 1870. 173.

is plugged into a hole in the tree at a place that matches the height of the child. Once the child grows to a height above the level of the hole, the asthma will be cured. The act of transference is accomplished through the law of contact or “contagious magic”: despite physical separation, the child and the tree remain connected.⁷ In the case of curing warts, Pat’s example also involves a shift of energy from the wart to the bean. The wart’s essence is transferred to the bean, and again, although they are separated, they continue to act on each other. As soon as the bean sprouts, the warts will disappear. In the examples of the asthmatic child and the sprouting bean, a change must occur, and in both cases, it will involve growth or development. The child progresses towards adulthood and the bean starts the first stage of becoming a plant. It is not so much that a disease is transferred in these cases; instead, a necessary transformation in one realm results in a necessary reaction, or in this case the end of affliction, in another.

Of all the traditional folk cures that have been documented in journals, diaries, archives, encyclopedias, and compendiums, cures for warts are among the most prevalent. My review of several hundred of them resulted in a number of obvious trends or categories of healing: 1. Passing the wart to another person; 2. Passing the wart to a plant or a fruit; 3. Passing the wart to an animal; 4. Relying on magical powers to remove the wart; 5. Relying on religious faith/prayer to remove the wart; 6. Relying on deception/secretcy without transference to remove the wart.

According to Texas folklorist John Anderson, coins are a favorite device for transferring warts to another person. He cites the following: “To remove a wart, rub it three times with a penny, then give the penny to someone that you want to receive the wart”. Even more widely known, writes Anderson, is the practice of transferring warts to an unspecified person through an intermediate agent, such as: “Peas, beans, pebbles, straws, or string, which is rubbed on the wart and left in a public place for an unsuspecting victim to touch”.

Rags, handkerchiefs, and other kinds of cloth also may be rubbed on the wart and then discarded, eventually to be picked up by an innocent person who becomes the recipient of the wart. Folklorist Wayland Hand comments that “...a dishrag, preferably a stolen one, is one of the best known agents for the disposal of warts”. He also cites a Spanish example from New Mexico, in which a rag is knotted (one knot for each wart), and then discarded.⁸ More common remedies are to tie knots in a string or a piece of yarn—a knot for each wart—and then burying it or burning it or throwing it away.⁹

A Tennessee researcher documented a secretive cure for warts in 1938: “Steal a dish rag from somebody that is not any kin [not related] to you and hide it without anyone seeing you and your warts will disappear”.¹⁰ Several decades later, an informant in El Paso, Texas, spoke of rubbing a pea on a wart. The pea is

7 FRAZER [1922] 1996. 13-15. See also FRAZER in DUNDES 1999. 109-118; ANDERSON 1968. 198-99.

8 HAND 1980. 22-23. See also BAKER 1982. 102.

9 HYATT 1965. #6917-6943. See also BAKER 1982. 101; CAVENDER 2003. 106; HAND 1980. 22.

10 REDFIELD. 20-21.

put in a box, which is given away. "Whoever opens the box will get the wart". In another case the wart is rubbed with sand. The sand is put in a box, wrapped like a present, and left at a crossroad. "The person who picks up the attractive package will get the wart".¹¹ Hand reports a similar case from Switzerland:

A tempting package is reported from the French-speaking parts of Switzerland, where as many hairs and as many peas as the person has warts are placed in a parcel with an address on it, and left in the road for an inquisitive person to pick up, and thus contract the warts.¹²

In his 1883 publication *Folk-Medicine*, William George Black documented folk cures throughout his native England. He writes the following description of passing the wart to a plant:

In Cheshire the absolute transference of warts is worth noting. Steal a piece of bacon and rub the warts with it, then cut a slit in the bark of an ash tree, and slip in the bacon under a piece of the bark. Speedily the warts will disappear from the hand, but will make their appearance on the bark of the tree as rough excrescences [ugly outgrowths]. The success of this remedy has been vouched for.¹³

Other examples of passing the disease to a piece of a once-living plant or animal involve rubbing a slice of apple or potato, a bean, a kernel of corn, or a piece of bacon on the wart and then burying the "contaminated" object. According to Frazer's principle of contagious magic, the wart and the apple, potato, bean, corn kernel, or piece of bacon continue to act on each other despite the physical separation of burial. Similarly, according to imitative magic ("like resembles like"), when these organic materials rot (and vanish), the wart also will disappear.¹⁴ In a few cases, the item that is rubbed on the wart does not have to be buried, but it must be put out of sight. Harry Hyatt shares this account:

My uncle came to see me one day. I had some warts on my hands. He said, "Do you want to lose your warts?" I said, "Sure I do". He said, "Well, give me a grain of corn for each wart". I had five warts. I went and got five grains of corn and gave them to him. He rubbed each grain of corn over my warts, and put the corn in his pocket, saying, "Your warts will soon be gone". And they were.¹⁵

11 ANDERSON 1968. 192-93.

12 HAND 1980. 21.

13 BLACK. 38.

14 FRAZER [1922] 1996. 13-15. See also HYATT 1965. #6341-6352 (apple); #6353-6374 (bacon); #6379-6448 (bean); #6509-6565 (corn); #6822-6857 (potato).

15 HYATT 1965. #6529.9

In examples collected by Hyatt, the kernels of corn were thrown to the chickens or to a hog and were eaten. This presumably had the same result.¹⁶

The magical aspect of healing is a recurring motif in wart cures. Webb, for example, notes that some healers are blessed with special powers. He cites a case where a seventh son of a seventh son can “blow off a wart”.¹⁷ Harry Hyatt’s collection of folklore from Adams County, Illinois, contains this account: “A woman living near Clayton said that a house painter took her son’s warts off merely by looking at them. This, she heard, was a special gift accorded to most members of that trade”.¹⁸ Reliance on the magical aspects of healing also may be accompanied by reluctance on the part of the healer to reveal the “secret” for removing the warts, especially if the secret includes a special ritual or a prayer. The general belief is that the healer will lose his or her power if the secret is revealed.¹⁹

Another important motif in many narratives about folk cures is that of faith. Pat Rhoads is not alone among folk healers who have emphasized the importance of faith in conducting ritual healing. Furthermore, after personally experiencing a wart cure, Webb emphasized the importance of faith to the person who is healed as well as to the healer. “You have to believe in the charm”, he writes, “or the healer can’t help you”.²⁰

Imagine for a moment the range of human behavior represented in these examples. There is a prank-like mischief in the act of passing the wart to an innocent person, and more benign behavior in transferring it to a plant or a fruit. Passing the wart to an animal projects an attitude of human superiority. Using secrecy without transference puts more emphasis on deception. Relying on magical powers to remove the wart suggests a worldview large enough to accept non-logical thinking, and relying on religious faith or prayer to remove the wart suggests a personal commitment to a larger, all-knowing force. Indeed, a rich and psychologically intriguing mix of attitudes can be found in the large number of folk cures for this familiar ailment.

How does Pat Rhoads’ treatment of warts compare with the cures I have described? Her remedy, borrowed in part from her uncle and enhanced by the prayer that she learned from her grandfather, combines religious, magical, and practical elements. The wart is transferred to a bean, but the bean is not an agent for passing the affliction to another person. Instead, the bean must change its basic structure; it must sprout. Once a sprout forms on the bean, the wart will vanish. In this case, sympathetic or imitative magic is not involved, as it is with the examples of rotting fruits, vegetables, rags, or bits of string that imitate the deterioration of the wart. It is just the opposite: the wart disappears when the bean creates new life.

16 HYATT. #6545; #6548-6552; #6556.

17 WEBB. 103.

18 HYATT 1965. #6336.

19 HYATT 1965. #6339. “If a healer reveals his secret for removing warts, the power will disappear.”

20 WEBB 1946. 99.

Inherent in Pat's practice, as with many belief-based cures, is an acceptance of the mystery of folk medicine. After conducting a wart-removal ritual Pat assumes, for example, that the children's warts have gone away, but her assumption is not confirmed until two years later. She is in no hurry to validate her actions. She simply performs the cure and goes on with her life. She contributes what she can, taking pity on those who are afflicted and delivering what she hopes will be an end to their affliction. Although her remedy is not an "official" medical solution, she is not regarded as subversive or contradictory. She is known as a leader in her community, so her actions are both accepted and admired.

This article has offered both historical and contemporary examples of curing practices. The Swedish examples of cures for warts and burns, provided by Marlene Hugoson in Part I, have supplied an important international dimension to the study. She also has alluded to the larger concept of using folk cures to restore order to everyday life through a balance of cleanliness and pollution—or of good and evil. All of these are significant aspects of folk healing: The power of belief, the prominence of oral tradition—in the use of traditional prayers, in spoken testimonials, and in taboos regarding writing the prayers—and the necessity of passing the prayer alternately from man to woman to man. Furthermore, extensive interviews with a knowledgeable informant, such as Pat Rhoads, can reveal important psychological and philosophical aspects of the healer's worldview. Within this larger context, folk medicine can be examined as a creative and positive force. Its practitioners are aware of and respectful of tradition; they are connected to and respected by their local communities; and, without fanfare or self-congratulation, they are accepting of the unknown.

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Fig. 1. Ernest Marvin and his wife Lilly Belle



Fig. 2. Pat in front of one of her paintings