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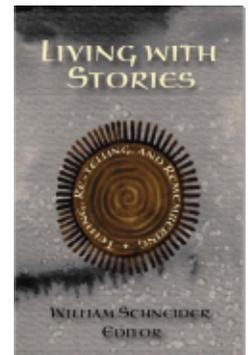
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The Weight of Faith

Generative Metaphors in the Stories of Eva Castellanoz

Joanne B. Mulcahy

Joanne B. Mulcahy teaches at the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis and Clark College in Portland, Oregon. Her degrees are in folklore, anthropology, and comparative literature. In this essay she describes how Eva Castellanoz, a Mexican artist and *curandera* (traditional healer) living in Oregon, uses metaphors to generate stories that instruct and inspire diverse audiences. Mulcahy describes the settings where Eva Castellanoz employs the properties of trees as a way to talk about healing, faith, and models for living. This central metaphor, which connects to the Mexican Tree of Life symbol, has cultural and personal resonance for Castellanoz and provides a means for sharing her understandings with others.

As a child in Mexico, and later growing up in Pharr, Texas, Eva Castellanoz loved poetry. As an adult, she mastered its central tool: metaphor. Of faith, Eva says, “How do you measure it? Can you say, ‘Today I have ten pounds?’” Contrasted with faith’s immeasurability, Catholicism is rigid: a “dress that doesn’t fit anymore.” The “root and bark” of her Mexican heritage, Eva says, are being “stripped and bitten away” by life in America. These and other metaphors created from social life and the natural world are the hooks

on which Eva's stories hang. They emerge from her life as a teacher, *curandera*, folk artist, mother, and grandmother. Eva's stories range over a variety of topics, but the same interlocking metaphors recur. Discussions of faith intersect with the parallel "branch" metaphor of a tree, its roots and bark. These are part of a larger conceptual system Eva draws on to talk about the meaning of her life and work in a culturally specific way.¹

Much of the research on retellings focuses on repetition of the same story in multiple contexts and the relationship between oral and written versions.² In this essay, I explore instead the constancy of metaphors that generate different stories about faith in four different contexts. In each setting, the metaphor prompts a story from Eva's repertoire, revealing her verbal artistry in responding to the needs of an audience.³ The recurrence of the tree metaphor is significant. First, the tree of life is a central symbol in Mexican folk art, integrating indigenous traditions of the Maya, Mixtec, and Aztec with images from European Catholicism.⁴ Trees are also a widespread metaphor of "vitality and self-regenerative power" and provide potent symbols of collective identity (Rival 1998:1-3). Eva's stories spurred by tree metaphors reproduce and reshape her family's history and heritage for subsequent generations.

Stories about faith cover varied topics: traditions passed down by Eva's parents; her family's life in Mexico, Texas, and Oregon; pride in her Mexican heritage, arts, and healing practices; and stories about Nyssa's young gang members. In each case, her individual stories point to broader social issues, while traditional tales encompass personal dimensions. Contexts vary from our tape-recorded conversations to talks for community groups. Settings discussed here include my initial interviews with Eva in her home (1992); further conversations in a hotel in Portland (1998); a community gathering at an arts center in Enterprise, a town in northeastern Oregon (2002); and a meeting at the trailer that houses her youth program in Nyssa (2004).

Stories about faith also place Eva in a cross-cultural world of storytellers who offer spiritual and practical instruction through narrative (Lawless 1993; Narayan 1989; McCarthy Brown 1991). Some of Eva's teachings educate outsiders about Mexican and Mexican American life; others suggest "key scenarios" for the Latino community, "clear-cut modes of action appropriate to correct and successful living" (Ortner 1973:1341).



Photo copyright Jan Boles

Eva holding a bouquet of her handmade wax and paper flowers. These might be used for an upcoming wedding or another rite of passage. She uses the same wax and paper flowers to make *coronas*, the floral crowns central to weddings, and *quinceañeras*, young women's fifteenth-birthday celebrations.

Background: A Mexican Healer in Oregon

I've known Eva since 1989: as a co-worker in documenting Latino folk arts in Oregon, as a friend, and as a collaborator in recording her life story. When we met, I was director of the Oregon Folk Arts Program, and she had just received a National Heritage Award for her *coronas* (wax and paper floral crowns used for young women's fifteenth-birthday *quinceañera*). When I discovered that Eva had cancer and was not expected to live, I began recording her stories in 1992. Fourteen years and many interviews later, Eva has not only survived but has thrived as a nationally recognized folk artist and

teacher. She is widely acknowledged as well for *curanderismo*, a complex system that incorporates aspects of Spanish-Arabic traditions and indigenous Mexican medicine (Trotter and Chavira 1997). Television documentaries and National Public Radio programs have chronicled her life. She has received numerous awards, and for four years she was a member of the Oregon Arts Commission. Now, Eva frequently speaks at conferences and events concerning Latinos in Oregon and Idaho.

Our friendship has changed over sixteen years, yet it still brims with the contradictions and complexities, the shared understandings and differences, of cross-cultural relationships. We share status as women of Catholic heritage committed to Oregon, yet our differences are substantial. Eva recounts hardships I cannot imagine: poverty, illness, the loss of five siblings and a son, the murder of a granddaughter, and many years of migration and dislocation. In the mix of similarities and differences a hybrid world emerges, one important to feminist ethnographers willing to explore the emotional connections forged in fieldwork.⁵ Raised within but disillusioned with the institutional church, I find solace in Eva's evocation of faith outside formal doctrine. From our first meeting, I wanted to understand Eva's belief in the world's possibilities. How had her faith, inscribed in both religious and secular terms, remained so constant in a life assaulted by hardship? How had her artful metaphors, crafted to express such belief, taken shape over a lifetime?

Eva was born in Valle de Santiago, Guanajuato, Mexico. When she was two years old, her family moved to Pharr, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley after the death from disease of her five older siblings. Her father had already worked in different parts of Oregon for many years as part of the *bracero* program that brought Mexican workers north during World War II (Gamboa 1995). The family traveled back and forth from Texas to Oregon as migrant workers before finally settling in Nyssa, a predominantly Latino agricultural community on the Oregon-Idaho state line. In 1957 when Eva arrived, she was a young wife pregnant with the first of her nine children. There were few Latino families permanently settled in Oregon then. But as the Hispanic population has grown, Eva and her family have played increasingly important roles in the community. All her children started out picking sugar beets and onions. Most have now moved to employment in banks, government services, and the Amalgamated Sugar Company where the beets are processed. Her son Diego, a foreman in the factory, was also the

first Latino mayor of Nyssa. Despite their growing strength in numbers and political power, Latinos in the valley still encounter racism, as Eva frequently recounts. Still, Eva asserts her family's sense of place in eastern Oregon as "the realization of my daddy's dream" and describes Nyssa as "my piece of the puzzle."

Can Faith Be Measured? Four Contexts

Nyssa, Oregon, July 2, 1992

I have to live faith. I cannot weigh faith, I cannot measure it.

We're sitting on Eva's patio, cool even on this steamy July day when the temperature has soared past one hundred degrees. I have come east from Portland, as I have for the three years since we met. In between visits, we keep in touch by phone and mail. This time, with a grant from the Oregon Humanities Council, I will stay for a month to record her stories, hoping to learn enough to communicate to outside audiences. Eva and I are alone, so there isn't a literal audience. But Eva knows that I will write about our discussion. An implied audience hovers, a third party of potential readers shaping the storytelling context.

Eva brushes back her permed black hair, gray just touching the edges of her temples. Her smooth amber skin is barely lined. In white jeans and a Mexican embroidered top, she could easily pass for far younger than her fifty-three years. Beyond the house is the small *casita* surrounded by rows of zinnias, sunflowers, zucchinis, and tomatoes that stretch back to the edge of the nearby Snake River. Here, Eva heals people and makes her *coronas*. In the future, I will spend many more hours at Eva's house—in the kitchen eating homemade tortillas or sleeping in the Guadalupe Room crammed with religious icons and family photographs. But perhaps no setting will be as central as this patio next to a huge locust tree that Eva now points to, saying,

This tree that does not talk taught me the biggest lesson of my life. It was sick and dying; it had no leaves. . . . An old Mexican man told my husband to drill a hole in its trunk and soak a stake with a special recipe and drive it through that hole. So he did. In about a month the tree started to heal [from the solution that had dripped down to the roots]. I learned that when the root is ruined, the limbs are sick, like our heritage that has been stripped and bitten away.



The cross and koi pond in Eva's yard rest near the *casita* where she makes *coronas* and helps those who come for healing.

This is the first time I hear Eva describe the tree with healthy roots as an extended metaphor for the importance of heritage. She frequently invokes the tree in speaking with local farm workers who learn to abandon their traditional practices in the U.S. Eva tells them the story of her family's move out of Mexico, when her father said that no one could ever "take Mexico out of them." Further, since Eva's heritage is Otomí and Nahua (Aztec), she feels particular affinity with the many migrant workers from indigenous groups.⁶ She tells them:

Be yourself. This is who you are. Never leave the root. Because once you do, you start to die to yourself. Otherwise, God would have made us all the same. He wanted me to be a Mexicana and to look how I look. . . . No matter what happens in my life, I know who I am and I'm happy at my root and that helps me.

Part of Eva's "roots" is an indigenous faith outside institutional religion. "Because we were wetbacks, we didn't go to church," Eva says of her childhood in Texas. "We didn't go anywhere. My parents had their little rituals at home. But they were very believing people, which I am very thankful for. They taught me because they believed, truly."

In these first interviews, Eva lays out the pivotal elements of her worldview around the framework of faith: knowing one's roots and

attending to the rituals, history, and culture of one's people. Still, since I don't initially understand the depth or shape of Eva's stories, I look for tools. Feminist scholars have offered ways to read women's stories, revealing pattern in seemingly redundant refrains (McCarthy Brown 1991), uncovering the "unsaid" through "intratextual" interpretation of key metaphors (Lawless 1993), and linking stories and material culture as dual articulations of self and society (Babcock 1993). Briggs points out that when discourse lacks "textuality," certain signs become critical to interpretation (1988:91). In Eva's stories, these signs are her repeated metaphors that signal the listener to pay attention. Slowly, I begin to understand how Eva's tree metaphor communicates her message through its component symbols: the roots of the tree, though invisible, are the foundation; the trunk and its bark are symbols of potential transformation; the leaves are the most visible, renewable manifestation of culture. These components of the tree will emerge repeatedly in Eva's stories as she urges listeners toward understanding and potential change. For one of the possibilities of metaphor is the creation of new meaning, the "intersection of what has been and what can be" (Becker 1997:60). Eva's stories of faith pivot on metaphors that evoke the powerful aspects of tradition but also urge new cultural meaning.

Portland, Oregon, November 13, 1998

Faith—who can measure it? Can we take a ruler and say, "I have two feet today. Or I have one pound or ten. Or it tastes of what—raspberries?" Can Catholicism do it? Or Methodist or Baptist? I think faith can only be lived.

In the Hilton Hotel on a blustery autumn day, Eva returns to the theme of faith, this time integrating family stories, her mother's folklore about healing, and a critique of Catholicism. We're meeting at an arts-in-education conference where teachers from throughout the Northwest have gathered to watch Eva make *coronas*, the wax and paper floral crowns for which she is now well known. Later in the hotel room, we discuss an essay I'm writing about her life for *Legacy of Hope*, a book on Catholics and social change in Oregon. When I ask for her thoughts about Catholicism, Eva contrasts the Church with her parents' faith.

My parents were very, very Catholic. They were not only Catholic by name, but they are a people of very pure faith, believers in God. . . . They had so much faith by their deeds, not only their words.

“Not only their words” refers to Eva’s ongoing critique of the institutional church and the failure of clergy and others to address poverty, illness, and the material needs of the faithful. In contrast, Eva turns to stories about her mother’s faith, exemplified by healing with the mesquite bark, extending the “root of tradition” metaphor:

She [Eva’s mother] said, “God will give me the strength. God will give me the way.” People would come to her for healing. Sometimes, she didn’t have time to do this or gather that. She would say, “Go get me some bark from the mesquite.” And I would. By that time, I knew that this was not right for the ailment of that person. But they would be healed. “Mama, you shouldn’t have given her that mesquite bark because that was not her problem.” “Mi’ja, I didn’t have anything else. And by faith. . . .”

Then she would tell me this story. One time there was this man who was a drunk and he wanted money to drink. So he went around telling people that if they gave him some money, he would go to Jerusalem where our Lord was crucified and bring them a little bark of the cross. So people would give him money. He would go off and drink it. One day, he came back and someone said, “Hey, it’s been a long time and you never brought us our bark from Jerusalem.” So he goes to this mesquite, you know, and gets all this bark and gives it to the people. And this man was supposed to be dying and the devil was about to take him. This is the story. And the man took out his little bark and showed it to the devil and the devil laughed and said, “Your faith is what kills me, not your bark.”

This woman [Eva’s mother] raised people out of beds where doctors said, “No more.” At least three that I truly saw and know of because of faith, the faith that she infused to people because she had it. And not only words, you know.

Eva embeds this traditional tale—“one time there was”—between two accounts about her mother. The tale is handed down from her parents to Eva as witness, and now to us, her audience. In both sets of stories, Eva explores the symbol of the bark as the malleable, available aspect of culture. It can be broken off, used, even deceptively traded. But the deeper, enduring “root” of faith cannot. The tree/bark metaphor generates stories that can be interpreted differently. Eva knows that at least some of the readers of this book on social change will be Oregon’s Hispanic Catholics. Religious listeners will connect to biblical aspects of this tale, including the raising of the sick from their beds. Yet others may bring secular meaning to the story. My own interpretation bridges the two, poised between the shared symbols of Catholicism and my attempts to interpret Eva’s stories as cultural narratives.

The connection of faith to healing locates Eva's stories in a larger world of narrative. Metaphors of illness and healing animate accounts from numerous cultures. Where the "sickness" of local cultures has been used to justify political control, the metaphor of healing is a counterargument that has become perhaps "the most frequent and most effectively deployed weapon against colonial discourse" (Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2001:xx). Other studies reveal how healing is an often-invoked metaphor for resistance to colonialism (cf. Napoleon 1991; Mulcahy 2000). Such stories are healing in part because they harness a usable past in the service of the present, choosing to emphasize particular threads of complex histories.

Further, Eva's stories reach for coherence in a life that has been consistently disrupted by moving, tragedy, and economic uncertainty. The use of metaphor helps form a coherent vision of a life and may inspire a changed perspective on "cultural phenomenon that impedes resolution of disruption" (Becker 1997:60). In Eva's case, this includes reforming her personal faith in the context of failures of the Catholic church to meet community need.

Enterprise, Oregon, October 18, 2002

I'm going to share with you first what to me is healing. Healing starts with yourself. Does anybody know how much faith weighs? Have you weighed it, anyone? Can you say, "Yesterday, I had ten pounds. Today I only have one"? Can anybody measure it—I had this much, but now I have this much? Can anybody taste it, like we're tasting food today?

We can only give it. My people and I live it day by day. We may plan; I may have a calendar and say—even through the year, I'm amazed to see people planning through the year—but Mexicanas, mañana. No time. I hardly ever carry a watch, just rely totally on trust. I walk, maybe the next step I will fall. But I trust I won't. To me, that's healing.

Eva holds an audience of about forty people in thrall at the Fishtrap House in Enterprise, a town in northeast Oregon's Willowa Mountains. Gathered here are farmers and ranchers; artists who work for Fishtrap, a local literary organization with a national reach; and a growing group of artists drawn to this region of lustrous lakes and snowcapped mountains. I've come with Eva to hear her talk about Day of the Dead traditions and her healing practices. We arrived in town separately, Eva's ever-problematic car dying just as she got here. But she spontaneously weaves the car story as an occasion for faith into her narrative, followed by a traditional tale about "miracles":

My car's in a mess. She [Joanne] says, "Don't worry." Some people say "Eva is dumb" because I trust. To me, that's the first thing I ever learned. It has been very, very helpful in my life. Trust. Things happen for a reason.

Stories help me a lot. I grew up with stories, with my three siblings and our parents telling us stories about where we came from.

One story that I want to share this morning is that there was this very rich person that had all this land. One day, a person who was called the master walked into that land without knowing it. To that master, there were no boundaries. He had this child with him who was following the master to see what he did and what he could learn. They met the owner of the place who said, "What are you doing here? This is my land. . . . Well, I have heard a lot about the miracles that you have made."

"Oh, I didn't know that," the master said.

The owner said to the master, "Well, I have been walking for a while and I am very thirsty. Make water! Since you can make miracles, make water. I am the owner, you're on my land, and I'm thirsty."

The master says, "Did you see the sun rise this morning?"

"Yes, what does that have to do with me needing water?"

They kept on walking, almost the whole day. The landowner was hungry, he was thirsty, he was tired, and he wanted to see these miracles. And the master didn't make miracles. The man got tired and left.

The master continues to walk with the child and he finds a rabbit lying on the ground. He picks him up, blows on him, and the rabbit starts running. The child says, "Wow!" The master finds a bird that's sick. He catches the bird, kisses the bird, puts him out, and he flies. They were hungry and thirsty, so they sat down. He tapped on the trunk of a tree, and there's water. The child says, "Why didn't you do this when the man was asking you?" He says, "If you don't believe in the sunrise, you can't believe in miracles, so what's the use?"

That story taught me to believe in the sunrise, and you are looking at a miracle right now. I look into miracles in my own close and extended family. We know, and I say "we" meaning my people. I was speaking to herbs and seeing miracles since I was in my mother's womb. Both my parents were healers. I saw my father pray to the trees and to the plants and ask them permission to take just what he needed. I saw my mother run to the tree because she didn't have what that person needed that day. I would even tell her, "He had a tummy ache; why did you give him mesquite bark?" "That's all I had," she would whisper.

In stories about the tree, the bark, and faith, Eva links her "inner being" to historical narratives about "where we came from."⁷ For this Day of the Dead celebration, Eva's emphasis on faith and family reinforces the importance of Mexican beliefs and rituals. Through



Eva creates altars for each room of her home and in other places such as the “Youth on the Move” Center where this altar is displayed. Under the lace Virgin of Guadalupe is a ring of Eva’s wax and paper flowers.

the metaphor of faith, she asserts the rights and regional identity of Mexican Americans. From the nineteenth-century *vaqueros*, miners, and mule-packers to the early twentieth-century railroad men to today’s growing group of agricultural workers, Mexicans have been central to eastern Oregon’s history. They know the land intimately, even if ownership rests with the “master.” The healer in the traditional tale can perform miracles, but so too can ordinary family members. The miracles invoked here may be viewed as religious. However, the story of the master also invites secular interpretation, including a respect for nature and its bounty in the depiction of her father praying to the trees and taking just what he needed. Her father’s actions reinforce the tree as embodiment of spiritual power, a belief rooted in numerous indigenous cultures (cf. Mauzé 1998).

Here in a local arts center, Eva’s verbal artistry is most evident. In narrating stories within stories, she startles us into seeing an unexpected connection between healing, faith, and being Mexican.



Eva pointing to masks made by local young people who come to her “Youth on the Move” program housed in a trailer on the edge of Nyssa.

Nyssa, Oregon, September 2004

”How do you measure faith? How do you measure the child’s first words after silence, the coming back?” Eva asks me in a trailer at the edge of Nyssa, directly across from the Amalgamated Sugar Factory where many of her family members work. This is the home of “Youth on the Move,” a program for at-risk Latino youth, some of whom are gang members. At the trailer, Eva is everyone’s *Ipa*—grandmother—teaching traditional Mexican arts such as her *coronas*, masks, and Day of the Dead altars.

Eva points to one chair and says, “There was a young woman, fifteen years old, who sat in that chair for weeks, saying nothing. Then, one day, a whisper: ‘My daddy does things to me at night.’ It was so hard for her to say. But she could come here day after day,

just to have that chair to sit on, to wait. And you must wait with them. How do you know when a child will come to life?"

Eva grows frustrated with arts agencies that want measurements and statistics; her work is aimed at broader, unquantifiable transformation. I bear this in mind as we sit with a scrapbook of photos taken over the many years she has worked with local youth. Based on our conversation, I will write a report to an agency that has supported Eva's work. Her goal is two-fold: to change young people's behavior and to change outsiders' perception of gang members and other troubled young people.

Eva tells me story after story of how learning Mexican arts and culture helps these young people "heal the root." Many times, the gang members have turned away from a fight, saying, "Our *Ipa* is with us." She trusts these adolescents, sometimes sending them to the store with her wallet, which is returned with her cash intact. Eva states, "I have never, ever, and this is from the bottom of my heart and knowledge of my life, I have never seen the people that the school describes or the police. I have never seen it. And I have had them together here, the blues and the reds [different gangs]." She aims to overturn a "public narrative" about young Latinos as dangerous and socially marginal, offering new, inverted interpretations of contemporary Latino life (Davis 2002:23). "Healing the root" reaches to the past as a resource for action and social change, but it is ultimately a script for the future.

Eva ends with the story emblematic of her Mexican heritage—healing with the mesquite bark—the legacy that can save these teenagers. The roots of culture may not be immediately visible, but using what is at hand—the bark—can begin the process of instilling faith. Eva returns to her mother's legacy:

This is the way her daughter remembers her. I can remember thinking she was working miracles. How come with the little bark of mesquite tree that she sent me out to get? I'd say, "Mama, why did you give her mesquite bark?" "Because that's all I had." And the person was healed! So you see how far back it comes that it is in your heart what happens to you, too.

Not only illness can overpower you. It is also yourself and your faith and whatever you know. Because the people had faith in her and she had faith in herself and in the bark. And she gave it and they were healed.

Eva's stories of faith evoke indigenous practices and arts as healing the psychic and social dislocation from one's "roots." Her

family stories connect to broader political, historical, and cultural narratives. Though Eva is not a member of an organized group, her narratives are “social acts” linked to the Chicano movement (Davis 2002). Faith in tradition is more than mere nostalgia; rather, Eva’s stories suggest a creative use of history to meet the demands of contemporary Latino life, especially for marginalized groups. Stories can be healing, but we enact faith through deeds, not by words alone. Metaphor is powerful in part because “we act according to the way we conceive of things” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980:5).

Conclusion

Every day, Eva faces something that would shake the faith of someone with less resolve—the pain and illness of those who come for healing, ongoing financial instability, the violent murder of a granddaughter, and most recently the loss of her possessions when her house burned down. The metaphors that surround immeasurable faith—the tree, its root, and bark—form the skeletal structure for her beliefs and teachings. Each story that branches from them is critical to her “equipment for living,” sustaining narratives that she tells herself as well as others (Cruikshank 1998).

Metaphor helps us understand one domain of experience in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). Faith is ephemeral, an abstraction that seeks concrete enactment through rituals and symbols. That Eva has maintained her faith through multiple hardships stands contrary to reason, but metaphor is the perfect vehicle for expressing such contradiction. Metaphor invites us to “turn our backs on reason” because “logically, two things can never be the same thing and still remain two things” (Frye 1964:32). The tree, its roots, and the healing bark form a series of interconnecting associations that make faith seem both logical and real for Eva’s listeners. She also evokes faith through contrasts—its vastness implied by the inverse notions of measurement and weight, its malleability and adaptability set against the rigid, “too-tight dress” of institutional religion. Further, Eva uses metaphor to creatively improvise on a repertoire of stories that ground her personal experience in the context of Mexican culture and history. She shows us how personal stories are shaped by narrative conventions and how an individual storyteller reforms traditional tales. Similarly, her stories and practice as a *curandera* have a social dimension, revealing healing as a cultural response to oppression and a “reclaiming of memory as the remedy for rootlessness” (cf. Fernandez Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert 2001:xxi).

For Eva, an historical and cultural legacy is a source of power but not a confining straightjacket. As Briggs points out, “the past rather stands as a communicative resource, providing a setting and an expressive pattern for discussions that transform both past and present” (1988:99). Like other elements of stories, metaphors frame our understanding of a particular situation but also invite application to other contexts. This flexibility allows an audience multiple paths for interpretation, both secular and religious. Literary devices are far more than flourishes on Eva’s narrative message, for “aesthetics is not merely ornament and appreciation; it is a form of knowledge” (Portelli 2001:x). Further, knowledge of the past may motivate action in the present. Eva’s root metaphors can “catalyze thought” in listeners, while at the same time pointing toward key scenarios of “overt action in the public world” (Ortner 1973:1342).

Over time, Eva and I have moved from more formal interviews to ongoing conversations; my goal is a more collaborative and reciprocal ethnography (Lassiter 2005; Lawless 1993). Yet that reciprocity isn’t always straightforward. When I asked Eva which of her teachings I should include in writing about her, she responded to the issue of teaching. “It wasn’t like teaching. My mother didn’t say, ‘Sit down. I’m gonna teach you. . . . I watched!’” Eva was telling me, it seemed, that I must learn by attention, observation, and trust. What is important cannot be directly related—the implicit invitation to metaphor. When I asked again what I should write, Eva said, “You decide, Jo. I trust you to know. I have faith.”

Such dialogue cracks a window onto the relationship between ethnographers and our hosts and the ways we communicate (Cruikshank 1998:25). But as dialogue develops, so do potential challenges. Erika Friedl argues that the longer we work with someone, the greater our potential for developing “period eye,” an art historical concept she adapts from Clifford Geertz. The sharper one’s period eye, the more readily one can uncover layers of meaning. What follows is the fear “that the next story, the next event, will rattle one’s hard-won understanding” (Friedl 2004:8).

As Eva’s stories shift and expand in different contexts, my understanding often founders. The constancy of metaphors such as the tree and the root hearten me, offering a tool for interpreting Eva’s narratives as well as the embedded lessons about faith and how to live. I suspect that metaphor functions similarly for Eva—a stable structure for generating new combinations of oral tradition and personal narrative, each responsive to different audiences.

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Notes

1. Lakoff and Johnson (1980:25) differentiate between ontological metaphors that help us to view “events, activities, emotions, ideas, etc. as entities and substances.” Faith is evoked as beyond measure in contrast to the metaphor of the yardstick and the scale. It is, in this sense, a sort of “anti-entity” metaphor. In contrast, orientational metaphors such as the tree organize a system of concepts in relation to one another. The roots, bark, and trunk of the tree all evoke different aspects of culture.
2. For an overview of stories in interview contexts, see Narayan and George 2002. For an exploration of the relationship of oral and written versions of stories, see Morrow and Schneider 1995; for a focus on specific oral retellings, see Cruikshank 1998.
3. I am following the work of Hymes (1981) and Bauman (1977) in describing Eva’s use of metaphor as artistic: that is, as part of a performative event in which language carries more than referential meaning, indicating to the listener to interpret what is said “in some special sense” (Bauman 1977:9).
4. The tree of life gained importance after the Mexican revolution when the government actively encouraged production of folk arts, spurring a century of collecting. Many collections included tree of life ceramics and candelabras. In the 1970s, fifty-two trees were placed in Mexican embassies throughout the world, marking the tree of life as a dominant symbol of Mexican culture. For a fuller discussion of the tree of life in Mexican art, see Lenore Hoag Mulryan 2004. For more on the symbolism of trees, see Porteous 2002 and Rival 1998.
5. Feminist scholars have chronicled the need for explicit attention to intersubjectivity, power relations, and issues of ethics and representation. (See Babcock 2005; Behar and Gordon 1995; Gluck and Patai 1991; Personal Narratives Group 1989). For an overview of major trends in feminist ethnography and its connections to postmodern approaches, see Lassiter (2005:48–75).
6. The number of indigenous people of Mexican descent living in Oregon is difficult to calculate; however, the Mexican Consulate confirms that groups include Mixtecs and Zapotecs from Oaxaca, Otomís from Hidalgo, Purépechas from Michoacán, and Nahuas from Hidalgo and Veracruz.
7. Rival points out that trees are “perfect natural models for genealogical connections” (1998:11).

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