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Philosophy

How can a woman reinvent herself when she's no longer in one piece?

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# Re-membering ourselves

The year she turned 60, Gloria Anzaldúa published a theory of "re-membering", a story of a self putting itself back together after having been shattered.



How can a woman reinvent herself when she's no longer in one piece? At 50 years old, the "chicana dyke-feminist, *tejana patlache* poet, writer, and cultural theorist" Gloria Anzaldúa found herself dismembered by the news that she would die of type-1 diabetes. She'd already paid her dues to pain, or so she had thought. A rare health condition started her menses at three months old and caused her to grow breasts and pubic hair at six. Gloria felt freakish, dirty, ashamed. At 14, her father died. Pile on four near-death experiences, two muggings, a hysterectomy, and a life riddled with depression, and it's no wonder that Anzaldúa thought she'd devoted enough time to pain. She was prepared neither for her diagnosis nor for the neuropathy,

dizziness, headaches, and difficulty seeing she would live with for the rest of her life.

Over the next decade of her life, Anzaldúa ached and wrote, sometimes together. The year she turned 60 she published a theory of "re-membering". It is the story of a self putting itself back together after having been shattered. Those of us who have been ripped apart by COVID-19 - we whose precious ones died alone in the hospital, whose anxiety has kept us awake all night, who lost jobs or missed doctor's appointments that could have detected the cancer in an earlier stage, who now live with the debilitating symptoms of long COVID - can see how Anzaldúa re-membered herself. We're going to have to do it sometime or other - no



one gets through life with their first body - and many of us woke up today in pieces.

Anzaldúa called her theory the “Seven Stages of Conocimiento.” *Conocimiento* is a way of knowing that we learn not from books but from tragedy. The stages are not always linear; sometimes they repeat or double back or happen out of order, but the beginning and ending are always the same: At first there is an earthquake and at last there is knowledge.

Many of us have been through the first stage already, some quite recently. It's the *arrebato*, the earthquake. Anzaldúa moved from South Texas to San Francisco, where she experienced physical earthquakes. A metaphysical *arrebato* happens when we become spiritually, emotionally, and/or psychologically upended, jostled from a stable place - marriage, job, family. We might have lost a loved one or been arrested or received a bad medical prognosis like Anzaldúa. In this stage, the story we've memorised about ourselves had been devastated beyond recognition. In the *arrebato* we don't just loosen our old beliefs or identities, we come untied.

In the second stage of *conocimiento*, Anzaldúa says we're still reeling from the earthquake. The ground has stopped shaking, yes, but we're lying in the rubble, “torn between ways”. We don't yet know who we will become, but we're definitely not who we were before. We're no longer that spouse, that upright citizen, or that woman with a clean bill of health. We're mortal and fragile and vulnerable. Some of us are weepy and others are angry, but we're all unrecognisable. The story Anzaldúa had told up until then - of a fully capable human who was finally poised to do good work - got *tachado*, crossed out. It wouldn't be her story anymore, and in its place was

only a blank paper. In Taylor Swift's words, in a song that captures the slow process of regeneration, “I haven't met the new me yet”. Anzaldúa warns us that in this stage, despite all evidence of its impossibility, we might try to return. We'd written our story in blood, after all, so it would be natural to insist that our spouse still loves us, that we're going back to work on Monday, that we're not dying. But we always outlast our denial, and this dissonance forces us down into the third stage.

“The Coatlicue State” is rock bottom, but it's still far from the end. Coatlicue is the Aztec mother goddess, both creator and destroyer, who Anzaldúa believed would periodically steal her away and hold her hostage until she was ready to change her mind. Coatlicue makes her appearance after the *arrebato*, when we're in pieces, at the very moment that we recognise the damage is irreversible. In this stage, perhaps out of shame, Anzaldúa cut herself off from friends and family. But privacy didn't help: she was “unable to function”. Before any new story could be told, Anzaldúa had to admit that her diabetes was real, she couldn't broccoli her way out of it, and it would likely cut short all of her meaningful projects. She realised that, contrary to popular belief, we don't control our bodies. As Canadian author Kate Bowler put it in her bestselling cancer memoir, “there's no cure for being human”. Eventually, Anzaldúa came to reckon with the idea that diabetes would kill her, but she nevertheless feared the “slow suicide” of depression. Even in the arms of Coatlicue, though, Anzaldúa also had the feeling of “incubating” knowledge. A new self was growing inside the immobile Gloria lying on the floor. Like many of us do, Anzaldúa eventually found herself alive, “in a fetal curl clutching the fragmented pieces and bits” of herself.

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In the fourth stage of *conocimiento*, a “call to action” pulls us out of Coatlicue’s arms: “You break free from your habitual coping strategies of escaping from realities you’re reluctant to face, reconnect with spirit, and undergo a conversion.” At this point we’ve dropped all naïveté. We’ve let go of what no longer serves us. All of this unlearning plunges us into the fifth stage: “putting Coyolxauhqui together”.

Coyolxauhqui is the Moon, sister to the Sun God Huitzilopochtli, who tore off his sister’s head in a rage and threw it into the sky. It wasn’t just her head that he abused, though. Huitzilopochtli assaulted her body, too, scattering her limbs across the earth. When we recognise that those pieces still belong to us, the only thing we can do is put them back. Try as we might, though, we’ll find that the pieces don’t go where they used to. Eventually then, we emerge as new-old selves, Frankensteined selves, re-membered selves.

In stage six - “the blow up” - Anzaldúa used what little strength she gained from re-membering herself to be social

again. Likewise, when we come out of isolation, COVID-related or otherwise, we’ll need friends. Sometimes new ones. If we’re lucky, we’ll also reconnect with loved ones who sat in the hallway waiting for us to open the door.

Finally, in the seventh stage, she says we experiment with “shifting realities”. We explore and express our newfound *conocimiento* “via creative acts - writing, art making, dancing, healing, teaching meditation, and spiritual activism”. We’ll reflect on the *arrebato*, the dismemberment, the time with Coatlicue, the unlearning, and the re-membering, and we’ll find new ways to get acquainted with our new selves.

Each time Anzaldúa re-membered herself, she also remembered the connection between earthquakes and knowledge: humans can let go of shattered identities and create new ones. She shows us that we don’t have to be the same self to be a whole self. And even if the adage is false that whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, re-membered selves are just as valuable and dignified as first-selves.