

Power, Hair, & Nepantla

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Scriptures: Popol Vuh / Pre-Columbian Literatures & Judges 16:1-22

From the Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the ancient Quiché Maya

translation from Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico

[...]

*Then the Heart of Heaven [whose name is God]
threw a vapor over the eyes of the men,
their eyes were clouded
as when one breathes on a mirror.
Their eyes were covered
so they could only see what was near,
only that was clear to them.*

*Thus their wisdom was destroyed
and all the knowledge of the [first] four men,
the origin and beginning of the Quichés.*

I am Christian, but not really. I'm also Indigenous, an enrolled tribal member of the Maya-Lenca Nation of Managuara in the land of the sacred macaw, so some might say I'm a pagan... I guess, but that's not really an accurate interpretation (at least from my experience) and well I'm not really that either. The best idea to describe where my faith lies is Nepantla. Nepantla is a philosophical concept from the Mexica—you might have heard of them as the Aztecs, or maybe Chicanos, or let's just assume we're on the same page with Mexican—from a great big ancient tribal area across the US and Mexico before there were false borders. See there isn't really a translation in English so the best way I can describe Nepantla is the 'In-between' space. It's not specific to theology or religion at all. It's that liminal space in-between one and another, like the horizon at dawn or dusk, where the sun is disappearing. Nepantla would be that light between night and day, the line between black and white. You know like to put it in political terms, it would be the enigma of Libertarians, or Independents, or any party member left or right who's a true moderate. Nepantla is somewhere in the middle, in a messy, hazy space where things aren't crystal clear and it all swirls together. Like if you were reading the Word of God on your computer screen, black letters on a white screen, and you zoomed way in, all the way in, Nepantla would be the gradient of pixels around the text in all kinds of shades of grey. Like the moment of colonization of my indigenous ancestors by the Spanish friars, but *before* the moment of surrender, still in resistance. That's where my faith lies and where I talk to God. There are lots of writings about Nepantla like queer Chicana feminist Gloria Anzaldua, the godmother of Nepantla, but to be honest, I've never read any of it. This is just my understanding from my own spiritual experience.

I grew up a PK. For those of you who don't know PK is shorthand for Pastor's Kid. And I was a PK many times over; from my mom who ministered Central American refugees in New York, and my dad who was the only white man in an all black church in Brooklyn who now pastors in rural Iowa, and my biological dad who wanted to be a priest but witnessed and fled El Salvador after the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero. My grandpa was a pastor and a VA chaplain, grandma a church secretary, my other grandma a leader in her respected Catholic sect, and I hear my cousin is now in seminary. So I guess you could call it the family business. And even though I knew many different denominations, and styles, and biblical interpretations, it wasn't always clear that it was the right business, to me. In my teens, I had my first crisis of faith, the night before my high school confirmation. It was a huge disappointment for my family who saw it as an exercise of rebellion. But as a young biracial girl grappling with identity politics and wondering about injustice and suffering in the world, I had truly lost God. Or rather lost my way. What I didn't know then that I know now was that my ancestors were calling me. I didn't have the language to define it, or a religion, or even a community to tell me where I came from so it was a long winding road home.

There was once a Native man who told me in a ceremony that you can't walk two roads. (Traditional Indigenous spirituality is sometimes called the Red Road, *el Camino Rojo*.) And since you can't *physically* walk on two paths, well, that was my 2nd crisis of faith. Even though I couldn't stand the history of the church, the hypocrisy, and the oppression of my ancestors, and continued neocolonialism of evangelical missionary capitalism, which are basically pat-on-the-back vacations in exchange for cultural decimation... Even though all of that, I still *like* Lutheran choir songs, and I find peace praying silently among a bunch of strangers and then awkwardly having coffee and donuts. Or maybe it's just what I know best. Because the other side is pretty much the same way but just outside more often and with more dancing.

So, then I grew a garden and I grew my hair out and I prayed alone, no dancing, no donuts. *Curanderismo* is traditional medicine, but with a lot of prayer, the kind that felt familiar and somewhere in the middle, and literally means 'Healing'. My home altar had all the regular elements, earth, air, fire, water, candles, but also my Lutheran hymnal with my name on it, my grandpa's sparkling sacramental baptism bowl, a chacmool for burning copal incense, bundles and jars of herbs, Guadalupe and her flowers, indigenous poetry, and the UN declaration of children's rights with article 8 starred. *That every child has a right to her cultural identity and if any child is denied her identity that State Parties have an obligation to create reparations to restore it.*

See what my 2nd crisis of faith was about was that the man said I had to choose. Same as the time before with my confirmation mentor. And I understood why the Native elder said that—to have a fighting chance to battle assimilation—but *I* was screaming from the inside, what about all the mixed-raced people in the world? How could we possibly choose between families, between legacies, between our ancestors who gave us life? We automatically walk two roads. We straddle great divides and are natural navigators because we have no choice but to navigate multiple worlds. We even have complex languages of code-switching, using one way of communicating, dressing, acting, talking, or styling our hair with one world, and others for other worlds. Because we all live inside of white

supremacy. Even the church. Whether we like it or not. Whether we claim it or not. Well I had enough. I was just going to walk in two worlds¹ whether it was the right way or the wrong way. Because all human beings have a right to God's love in whatever way we find it. And if we do find it, we are the lucky ones.

So that's why I call myself a Nepantlera, because I walk in two worlds. And don't we all? Aren't we all just straddling the divide between peace and enlightenment and political disaster and impending doom?

In the passage about Samson and Delilah², regardless of whatever else Samson does or doesn't do, he's not a good guy here. In fact he's a 'bad *hombre*'. Delilah is the hero who takes his power by cutting his braids of hair. This passage brought up for me so many Indigenous stories about the Power of the Holy Spirit in our hair. Like, that our hair is like an antenna to God, the same way feathers are used, like an aura. With auras sort of how that Sumo wrestling game with suits is played, and we all just walk around all day bumping into each other with our Holy Spirit bubbles. Like a cell phone tower to God. That's why I grew out my own hair, to reach out, to hold onto my power, and my ancestors.

It made me think of a recent story. A woman I know, who by the way, is a certain breed of walking contradiction nepantlera herself as a Christian mennonite and wiccan water witcher, who communicates with the dead. Well she had a vision of my great aunt, the woman who raised my dad in El Salvador, who's name was Maria laying her long hair, probably the length of mine, across my dad's body like a blanket of protection. In real life she never showed anyone her hair except her husband and it was always kept in a bun or a braid tightly wrapped around her head, or covered like Pentecostals and Muslim women do. My dad says that dream was the closest he ever got to the power of her hair. The indigenous anecdotes about power in the hair are real. Sometimes it takes a while for science to catch up to validate the folk tales. Our hair carries all kinds of protein and our DNA, our legacy, our entire family tree, a map of evolution of our survival and our unique God-given individual fingerprint. But our hair also carries our sadness too, our happiness, trauma and memories, and all our experience. Like rings on a tree, doctors can see when we were in times of suffering and ailment. Have you ever felt lighter after a haircut? That tingling sensation? A haircut can be the letting go of excess energy, *too much* power. Good or bad, too much power is not good for one person. It can be freeing, like starting over, feeling vulnerable, naked, unprotected. That's why in Danza Azteca, haircuts are a ceremonial part of letting go and moving on. And big haircuts are reserved for the major stages of life, transitioning from toddler to child, to teen, to adult, to teacher, to elder. Or in mourning after the death of a loved one. Like a shock to the nervous system to start anew. And even family and friends can cut their hair together in recognition of that transformation. In solidarity, kind of like with family members of those battling cancer, together.

¹ Nepantla is not a *smorgasbord* of faith traditions, which in my opinion is very dangerous. Instead it is the true balance of two distinct, well understood, and intentional things.

² Judges 16:1-22

Delilah makes me think of another tradition in the North where women collect their hair and burn it together with the light of the full moon. And that the soul needs to collect all its hair in the world before passing on. Can you imagine all the shower drains, hotels, and hairbrushes to return to? Like you finally get to Jesus at Heaven's Gate and he looks down and says, "Ooh, sorry there's a motel on old Route 66 with a few hairs in the plumbing. You're going to have to go get the rest of that Holy Spirit first."

Delilah makes me think of a girl I knew in the Mixteco highlands of Oaxaca whose hair touched the ground when she walked. She cut her hair in a great offering to be made into a wig for the Guadalupe statue in the village chapel. It is a great honor. That's why braids are so often a sign of health, vitality, power, respect, and a reflection of spiritual discipline for indigenous people. It's also why someone getting their ponytail cut off is one of the biggest offenses on the street by everyone from teenage girls to grown adults. Not too long ago an elder and a prominent ceremonial leader was jumped by a group of angry barbers who in a very public display of intentional disrespect cut off his long grey braid. It was a political act. Probably justified, although it was a jury outside of the courtroom. It was a taking of the Power, unseating of the Throne. Like a modern day scalping. Oh, how I wish I could shave Trump's head, and I know I'm not the only one. Even Trump knows his power is in his hair, although for him it's more of the marketing kind of power.

But Delilah, as this warrior woman, also makes me think of all the ways people of color have used the natural hair movement to reclaim beauty, spirit, and identity in the face of white supremacy. It's not a coincidence, that the comeback of afros went hand-in-hand with Black Power and a fist in the air. Because the power of hair also lives inside of white supremacy; and has been used for centuries as a way of shaming and controlling others. Controlling hair. Straightening, perming. Coloring. Diminishing and conforming to the status quo. Black and Brown girls everywhere know this pain deeply. We all have a story of trying to cut bangs and unruly curls having their own idea. Mine happened in 7th grade. My stepdaughter, who is Xicana and Black, in the 3rd grade. And the almost universal pain is because white supremacy has taken the power of our hair without even cutting it. But the natural hair movement is making a comeback again as a political *and* spiritual act. Like the Black Panthers before and the Aimsters of the American Indian Movement at Wounded Knee who started braiding their hair again as a political act after generations of boarding school haircuts. It was an act of reclamation, of defiance, and even of Holy War. Of course the FBI had some thoughts about all that power. Ooh! Watch out for that dangerous ethnic hair. It might upset systemic racism, apartheid, and injustice. It might incite an untamable savage rebellion, or worse, a revolt that could take money out of your pocket and unseat the golden throne.

When Sampson arrogantly thinks, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." The scripture says, But he did not know that the Lord had left him. It is this phrase, *But he did not know that the Lord had already left him*, that describes what I know in my theological double road. It is this, the holy spirit, force, creator, aura, goosebumps, energy by-any-name that lives among us in the earthly plane and gives us strength. I teach my little girls as others have before, that our hair is like our feathers, each strand an antennae to God, radiating outward to capture the sun's energy. To make us 'big and strong' I tell them. And

that if all our auras or antennae were allowed to stretch big enough we would feel each other just by sensing in a 12 foot bubble of protection around ourselves. Bubbles of God's love. Like a cat's whiskers in the dark.

I carefully shave around my husband Balam's long mohawk every few days. We both know it's just a haircut, but there are lopped braids quietly kept in boxes awaiting the Creator and the Underworld of Xibalba, the Mayan place where we travel to after death. So it's also a quiet ceremony of trust between two people; to only take some power and leave the rest for others.

The Mayan Popol Vuh story³ of the first ancestors, says we were created so perfectly that humans didn't need to talk. We just sensed each other with our God bubble auras and knew all there was to know. That's why Creator clouded our vision. When I think back to my two crises of faith (and there were more), I realize my judgment was small, clouded over like the Mayan story of the first ancestors, to think God wouldn't be with me on *whichever* road I walk. Every PK pastor's kid knows that Jesus' Footprints thing—if you don't know it—it's usually some kind of wood or ceramic chatchky that makes the perfect pastor's gift with a story on it that goes something like "Jesus, I look back on my life and there were 2 sets of footprints where God walked with me, but in times of suffering there were only 1 set of footprints because it was you God who carried me". As a 2 pastor household, at any given point growing up we had at least 2 new versions of this gift coming into the house and it was a running joke. But it's true—my human thinking was small-minded to think that God couldn't also walk in multiple worlds along with me or in the muddy middle Nepantla. Even though they have different names and different sacred books, the Heart of Heaven, that energy in contemplative prayer, and the one that walks with us is the same.

And, even though our human consciousness is fogged over, what we do have is a Free Will to reclaim our own Power and an unending source of Love just waiting to be tapped on the other side. The last line of the text also says *the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved*. And in the next chapter Sampson clearly regains his power as the giant strongman filled by the Holy Spirit with his hair all grown back. Our strength always returns and with it the protection of the Creator.

And my hair grows. There's a film about Wounded Knee called *It's a Good Day to Die*, a film about people from this very community in Little Earth Minneapolis, on Netflix I think. 'A Good Day to Die' has become a battlecry of resistance, but it's really about transformation of injustice. Like any of the sacraments of transformation such as baptism, confirmation, or marriage,... sacramental haircutting is a ceremony to transform, to shape-shift as my ancestors would call it, to let out the stagnant old power and let in the new and good. For a better day, and a brighter tomorrow. With my mom moving shortly to Guatemala and in her own Nepantla journey of navigating Indigenous and Christian haziness, across borders and faith traditions. Today is a good day to let go, a good day for transformation. I don't think I need the protection anymore because the sadness in it weighs me down.

³ Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the ancient Quiché Maya, Indigenous people of present-day Guatemala. Translation from Pre-Columbian Literatures of Mexico.

Judges 16 *New International Version (NIV)* Samson and Delilah

16 One day Samson went to Gaza, where he saw a prostitute. He went in to spend the night with her. **2** The people of Gaza were told, "Samson is here!" So they surrounded the place and lay in wait for him all night at the city gate. They made no move during the night, saying, "At dawn we'll kill him." **3** But Samson lay there only until the middle of the night. Then he got up and took hold of the doors of the city gate, together with the two posts, and tore them loose, bar and all. He lifted them to his shoulders and carried them to the top of the hill that faces Hebron.

4 Some time later, he fell in love with a woman in the Valley of Sorek whose name was Delilah. **5** The rulers of the Philistines went to her and said, "See if you can lure him into showing you the secret of his great strength and how we can overpower him so we may tie him up and subdue him. Each one of us will give you eleven hundred shekels^[a] of silver." **6** So Delilah said to Samson, "Tell me the secret of your great strength and how you can be tied up and subdued." **7** Samson answered her, "If anyone ties me with seven fresh bowstrings that have not been dried, I'll become as weak as any other man." **8** Then the rulers of the Philistines brought her seven fresh bowstrings that had not been dried, and she tied him with them. **9** With men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the bowstrings as easily as a piece of string snaps when it comes close to a flame. So the secret of his strength was not discovered. **10** Then Delilah said to Samson, "You have made a fool of me; you lied to me. Come now, tell me how you can be tied." **11** He said, "If anyone ties me securely with new ropes that have never been used, I'll become as weak as any other man." **12** So Delilah took new ropes and tied him with them. Then, with men hidden in the room, she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" But he snapped the ropes off his arms as if they were threads. **13** Delilah then said to Samson, "All this time you have been making a fool of me and lying to me. Tell me how you can be tied." He replied, "If you weave the seven braids of my head into the fabric on the loom and tighten it with the pin, I'll become as weak as any other man." So while he was sleeping, Delilah took the seven braids of his head, wove them into the fabric **14** and^[b] tightened it with the pin. Again she called to him, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and pulled up the pin and the loom, with the fabric. **15** Then she said to him, "How can you say, 'I love you,' when you won't confide in me? This is the third time you have made a fool of me and haven't told me the secret of your great strength." **16** With such nagging she prodded him day after day until he was sick to death of it. **17** So he told her everything. "No razor has ever been used on my head," he said, "because I have been a Nazirite dedicated to God from my mother's womb. **If my head were shaved, my strength would leave me, and I would become as weak as any other man.**"

18 When Delilah saw that he had told her everything, she sent word to the rulers of the Philistines, "Come back once more; he has told me everything." So the rulers of the Philistines returned with the silver in their hands. **19** After putting him to sleep on her lap, she called for someone to shave off the seven braids of his hair, and so began to subdue him.^[c] And his strength left him. **20** Then she called, "Samson, the Philistines are upon you!" He awoke from his sleep and thought, "I'll go out as before and shake myself free." **But he did not know that the Lord had left him.**

21 Then the Philistines seized him, gouged out his eyes and took him down to Gaza. Binding him with bronze shackles, they set him to grinding grain in the prison. **22 But the hair on his head began to grow again after it had been shaved.**