

## Chapter 12

### Healing Enchantment: How Does Angel-Healing Work?

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#### Introduction

What we call “alternative therapies” are once again challenging secular therapies. We may thus ask if we are, partly, stepping into a post-secular culture of healing, or if, on the contrary, we ever were very secular in terms of our aspirations and methods of healing after all (Nynäs, Lassander and Utriainen 2012; cf. Latour 1993, 2010; Orsi 2005). Many people in the West today combine therapies with different backgrounds or prefer non-official and not completely secular methods to alleviate at least some forms of their malaise.<sup>1</sup> Alternative or complementary healing takes many forms, one branch of them being energy-healing with its different sub-categories (Utriainen, Hovi and Broo 2012:194).<sup>2</sup> In this chapter my focus will be on one relative newcomer in the Western field of energy-healing, namely, angel-healing as it was present in my ethnographic multi-method study in Finland. I ask: Why do angels appear as contemporary healing aids and figures? What are today’s healing angels like and how do people turn to them? What exactly happens in angel-therapy and how could we approach its claim of efficacy—or its magic? I propose as at least a partial answer that angels provide healing enchantment and highlight hybrid or participatory agency.

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<sup>1</sup> See Verrips (2003) for how the popular imagination not only sees medical doctors as secular scientists but also as magicians that both create and destroy life. The complex question “how magic belongs to modernity” is addressed from various angles in Meyer and Pels (2003).

<sup>2</sup> The classic study on ritual healing in Western society is McGuire (1989); see also Bowmann (1999, 2000), Hovi (2012), Pohjanheimo (2012), McPherson (2008) and Wood (2000). On well-being and healing practices in post-secular society, see Utriainen, Hovi and Broo (2012).

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My research project focuses on contemporary practices with angels and the everyday lives that host these practices.<sup>3</sup> The material on which my reflections are based comes basically from four groups of sources: (1) interviews with approximately 20 Finnish people who work and communicate with angels; (2) participatory observation during an angel-therapy training course and several other angel-related settings; (3) a questionnaire (N 263) distributed at the lecture by the Irish writer and angel-seer Lorna Byrne<sup>4</sup> in Helsinki and (4) diverse media material, literature and other cultural artifacts. Angel spirituality in general and its healing aspects in particular have become increasingly popular in Finland during the last five to ten years. This phenomena has, for instance, received media attention in women's magazines and tabloids, talk shows and, occasionally, also in the news media (Utriainen 2013b). The Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland has also developed an interest in this growing phenomenon, which attracts many church members.<sup>5</sup> Recently, the popularity of angels has also been studied, for instance, in the US, UK, Germany, Norway, Hungary and Estonia (Draper and Barker 2010; Gardella 2007; Walter 2011, 2016; Murken 2009; Gilhus 2012; Kis-Halas 2012; Uibu 2013). Thus we are dealing with a phenomenon not restricted to Finland but that might be called a vivid aspect of contemporary Western folk or vernacular religion (Draper and Barker 2010; Walter 2016).

All the abovementioned studies note that one feature of the present-day popularity of angels is the combination of Christian and esoteric spirituality. For example, in a focus group interview, three women who identified themselves as Lutheran stated that if it was not for angels, they might not have been drawn to alternative spirituality in the first place. What is new in these practices is thus not so much the figure of an angel in itself (be-

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<sup>3</sup> This research is part of the larger project "Post-secular culture and a changing religious landscape in Finland" being conducted at Åbo Akademi University 2010–2014.

<sup>4</sup> Lorna Byrne has become increasingly popular worldwide and also in Finland, where her two autobiographical books, *Angels in my Hair* (2008) and *Stairway to Heaven* (2010), have sold extremely well. She has visited Finland three times. See [www.lornabyrne.com](http://www.lornabyrne.com).

<sup>5</sup> According to the Church Monitor 2007, 46.1 percent of Finns believe in angels; on the growing interest in angels see Kirkon Tutkimuskeskus (2012:40).

ing part of Christian imaginary and chain of memory) but some of the (sometimes “magical”) ways in which angels are communicated with. Attraction to angels and angel-healing can thus be taken as at least a weak signal or indication of what contemporary women in Western societies might desire from healing and therapeutic religion (Utriainen 2014).

In the Christian tradition angels are messengers of God occupying a space between the divine and the human. Sometimes these messengers appear in human form, but they can also take other visual and sensitive appearances—they can, for instance, appear as figures of light. Since in Christian and especially in Lutheran theology angels are relatively loosely defined figures, they can easily be transferred to many kinds of more or less vaguely defined spiritual settings, such as New Age.<sup>6</sup> In art and popular parlance, angels often work as metaphors of God’s mercy, beauty, inspiration and goodness. Today angels have become a vivid figure and element of volatile modern lives, as much in entertainment and commerce as in healing.<sup>7</sup> The French philosopher Michel Serres in his book *La Légende des Anges* uses the figure of an angel to exemplify the overall volatile nature of present-day life.

Traditionally, active angels have appeared to relatively passive humans as receivers of godly grace or punishment—in one word, as powerful. This has been the case in traditional miracle stories reporting angelic interventions, especially in the contexts of accidents, acute illnesses, on a person’s deathbed or in visions of the apocalypse where angels carry God’s fury.<sup>8</sup> We can also find the active angel and the relatively passive woman in the famous motif of the annunciation: the archangel Gabriel delivers the message of the birth of the son of God to the young girl Mary, who either humbly or slightly resentfully accepts the reported miracle. By contrast, today people seem to take a much more active role in their encounters with angels than Mary has been depicted as doing. Instead of

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, according to Ingvild Gilhus (2012), in Norway angels have become intriguing and disturbing border markers between state Lutheranism and New Age. Something similar could be said concerning Finland.

<sup>7</sup> See Draper and Baker (2010) and Gardella (2007) for an overview of North American angel culture. For angels as one effective power in one traditional Hungarian healer’s repertoire, see Kis-Halas (2012).

<sup>8</sup> About fierce angels in the US evangelical imagination, see Gardella (2007:168–199).

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waiting for God to send angels to them, they reach for angels, summon angels and ask them to act with them toward several ends. There are various, overlapping methods for reaching out to angels, such as oracle cards, meditations, talismans and healing.

My research participants—most of them women<sup>9</sup>—report taking angels into their lives to better cope, stay healthy and creative and enjoy or merely support their lives. Their angelic world is a creative collage of biblical, apocryphal, theosophical and New Age elements; these traditions are emphasized differently in the different accounts. The most important categories of angels for them are archangels and personal (guardian) angels—the latter are the best known angelic figures in traditional Lutheran culture. All archangels have their own attributes, particular fields of action and energy, weekdays and colors. For instance, Michael's color is deep blue and his energy is protective, whereas Gabriel's color is white and he is responsible for guidance and insight.<sup>10</sup> Personal (guardian) angels are more idiosyncratic and often in very intimate and reciprocal relations with humans. When needed, they can help connect humans with more powerful angels in the angelic hierarchy. Angels can be understood either as coming from the personal Christian God or from some much more general and abstract source of universal life. It is thus possible to say that the present-day religiosity/spirituality<sup>11</sup> around angels combines theistic and holistic tones and aspirations and this combination may be one factor that makes angels a popular and effective source of healing in today's world and particularly in societies with a strong Christian heritage.

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<sup>9</sup> According to my survey, 94 percent of those who came to listen to Lorna Byrne in Helsinki were women. On the predominance of women in many forms of religion, as well as the sociological explanations given to this phenomenon, see Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2012). For the history and change of women's religion in Finland, see Utriainen and Salmesvuori (2014).

<sup>10</sup> Raphael is often depicted as a green or turquoise healing power; Uriel is purple and his field is forgiveness; Jofiel is yellow and joyful and Samuel is pink and represents and embodies love.

<sup>11</sup> See Utriainen, Hovi, and Broo (2012) for our reasons for using the slash. It basically means that the distinction between religion and spirituality should be taken as an emic rather than etic one.

### **Emotions and Depression**

Some of my research participants are semiprofessional practitioners of angel-therapy and other forms of healing, but many are laypersons who started their “spiritual path” some years earlier. They come mostly from lower and mid-middle classes and have a variety of educational backgrounds: of those who took part in our survey, one-fourth work in commerce and administration, many in teaching and the health and social sectors. Nearly one-fifth has a university degree. The majority (73.8 percent) belongs to the Lutheran Church of Finland,<sup>12</sup> even though only a very few consider themselves active members. The most important thing about the Church for interviewees is its important social work, and they identify themselves as “spiritual individuals” who find their own spirituality mostly outside the Church. Some are also active yoga practitioners, and many have practiced Reiki or other forms of holistic or energy-healing.<sup>13</sup> Since the vast majority of research participants were women, I will focus on them.<sup>14</sup> Let us first consider the women’s reasons for turning to angels. These reasons reveal not only “holistic” distress, but also the fact that depression is not an uncommon experience in today’s life.

The survey (N 263) indicates why women turn to angels and other spiritual practices: to find aid and support in various distressing experiences in life like depression and illness; to seek spiritual growth, development, guidance and better knowledge of oneself and one’s emotions; to support their faith and confidence; to be healed; to release stress; for general well-being and clarity of thought and of one’s life and to find energy, joy and a connection and support for one’s choices. Apart from “faith” and “spir-

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<sup>12</sup> The overall rate in Finland in 2011 is 77.2 percent.

<sup>13</sup> The range of healing activities was pretty much similar to that encountered by Wood (2000:83) during his ethnographic research in Nottinghamshire. See also Bowman (1999).

<sup>14</sup> In the survey there were 248 women and 15 men. Of the 24 interviewees 19 were women. All the women interviewed live or have lived in heterosexual relations, most of them have children, and their ages range from 30 to 70 years. They include a nurse, a yoga teacher, a sales assistant, a singer, a stylist, an artist, and a congregation worker. The men interviewed were a husband to an angel-healer, two friends who had a long history in theosophy as well as two young yoga practitioners who had taken part in an angel meditation week at their yoga school.

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itual growth,” an explicitly religious and particularly Christian vocabulary of sin, guilt, remorse and forgiveness is absent—even though well over 70 percent are members of the Lutheran Church of Finland.

The interviews provide long and often detailed autobiographical accounts of the various ups and downs in their lives. Nearly all the accounts include a period of crises, like illnesses, unemployment and very often clinically diagnosed depression. Many report finding clarity and relief in their own often complex and confused emotional life through angels—so much so that working with angels could, to a large extent, be said to be about emotion work and improvement of self-knowledge (cf. Riis and Woodhead 2010; Utriainen 2014; see also Uibu 2013; Walter 2014).

Four or three . . . years ago I suffered from severe depression and was taken to the hospital. It was in fact very soon after that, that I painted these angels . . . Maybe I got to know myself a little better.

Very, very big challenges, yes, yes. So that perhaps without Reiki and the help of angels I wouldn't ever have been able to bear it. But they gave me some extra strength so that in a way I felt that I always went from one stage to another . . . I have been in very heavy moods and heavy phases of life. I have all the time gone forward, it becomes easier and lighter.

As expressed in the above quotes, the interviewees relate how they use angels to find their way out of difficult and heavy phases of life, to learn to improve self-knowledge and knowledge of their emotions and to obtain a stronger sense that they can make a difference and become agents of their own lives. However, one important feature of these stories of empowerment and healing is the emphasis on not needing to be alone—not needing to carry complex everyday responsibilities without support: angels act as companions and partners in practically all spheres and moments of life (from very practical needs such as finding parking places and lost objects to more spiritual aspirations like protecting one's children and finding one's path and purpose). One of my informants summarizes her experience accordingly: “I do everything with them. It is not like I wouldn't have angels and God present: they are here all the time.”

The survey data also includes the response of one crisis therapist. She reports that she decided to go and listen to the Irish angel-seer Lorna Byrne's lecture on angels precisely because she increasingly meets patients who seek help from angel-related and other spiritual practices and

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wanted to see for herself what it was about; in the questionnaire she states that she was impressed by the “strength of faith” she was able to witness at the event. This individual piece of information indicates that there are interesting and complex negotiations between the spiritual and secular therapeutic fields.<sup>15</sup> If we combine this with insights from the survey and interviews, both angel-healers and their “clients”<sup>16</sup> emphasize that angel-healing, along with other kinds of alternative healing, is often both more subtle and effective than either the churchly pastoral care or the secular social and therapeutic services that are provided today. But what is the economic cost of angel-healing? One of my interviewees reflects on money in the following terms, explaining how the best teachers and healers are often not the most expensive ones:

Well, I could have some other hobbies that would take the same amount of money, and it is pretty expensive also to go to yoga or aerobic . . . For the sake of the children, I can’t take many courses a year. And I try to choose teachers who are authentic [who don’t charge too much].<sup>17</sup>

### **What Happens in Angel-Healing?**

Scholars such as Gillian Bennett and Robert Orsi have emphasized how modern history has systematically over centuries worked toward downplaying the credibility of the belief in the presence of the supernatural (Bennett 1987; Orsi 2005). Read against this background, it is interesting that many of the interviewees voice their joy of an “increasing” tolerance in society toward invisible and extraordinary aspects of life. They feel that the presence of the invisible otherworld and the enchanted sentiments it triggers are gaining more public attention, for instance, in the media.

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<sup>15</sup> In 2008 in Finland there was an attempt to formulate a law restricting alternative and belief-based medicinal practices basically in order to protect vulnerable individuals. While this specific law proposal was dropped, concerns with alternative medicine prevail and attempts to regulate it continue.

<sup>16</sup> The term “client” as opposed to “patient” is preferred by my angel-healer interviewees. This relates to the fact that these therapies are often structured as small entrepreneurial activities.

<sup>17</sup> See Wood’s (2000:85) comparison of the price of a holistic healing session and a night out at the pub.

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But how is the particular enchantment of angel-healing effectuated and in what ways is it understood as healing? By enchantment I am referring to meaning-making and relational practices and operations engaged with forces or entities that are in some sense believed and used to resource, enrich and support mundane or secular lives. My guideline here comes from Jane Bennett: “To be enchanted is to be struck and shaken by the extraordinary that lives amid the familiar and the everyday” (Bennett 2001:5). Bennett also notes that enchantment is not always a spontaneous happening but can be fostered through deliberate action. Enchantment thus engages the bigger or smaller extraordinary (which could sometimes be called alterity or transcendence) either as a surprise or as something desired, summoned and invited (see also Csordas 2004; Luckmann 1990; Utriainen 2013a). The presence of invisible and extraordinary actors is a constitutive aspect of angel-healing, and the felt effect of the healing ritual is related to how this presence is called for and incorporated. In healing enchantment, the embodiment of the healer becomes a combination, or a hybrid, of human and other-than-human elements and “energies.”

What follows is a description of an angel-healing technique in which this kind of enchantment is at play. This description is given from the viewpoint of the healer or, more precisely, the apprentice healer participating in a training course who sometimes also assumes the role of the *healée*.<sup>18</sup> I propose that what takes place is a process of artful and well-structured *enchantment, which somehow becomes healing*. I will in the following draw some comparisons with Tanya Luhrmann’s ethnography on modern urban magic as well as with research on other healing techniques.

The angel-healer course was organized during the winter of 2011–12; it was two weekends, and there was more than a month between the weekends, in which individuals were given homework to complete. The course was held in the home of the female teacher-healer in Helsinki. The participants were familiarized with angel traditions (such as the old Christian angel hierarchies) and with some concrete angel-healing techniques. There were six female participants (including me) between the ages of 30 and 55; three lived a distance from the metropolitan area. Three were planning to start a practice of angel-healing and the other three were al-

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<sup>18</sup> This expression is inspired by Marion Bowman.



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ready engaged in some alternative healing methods which they practiced as entrepreneurs.

We were told about various healing methods, but the following model depicts the one we practiced most both in the role of healer and *healée*. The materials on which my reflections are based are my field notes and the course material given to the students. The most important source is the 60-page workbook written by the teacher and used throughout the course, including for homework; many of my field notes were written on the pages of this book while we studied. It is important to bear in mind that the ethnographic situation was not actual healing but a pedagogical course for healers to be, which means this analysis can be merely heuristic.

*Preparation: The healer lights a candle (and may play some background music). The healer gives the healée water and asks her to sit/lie down. The healer brings her hands together and thanks her personal angel and connects with it. The healer puts her hands on the shoulders of the healée. The healer asks the personal angel of the healée to come along. The healer asks the healée to move (in her mind) into her own sacred place. The healer also moves into her own sacred place (closes her eyes).*

*Invocation of the Angels: The healer (with her hands together) asks the archangel Michael to come and spread his wings as she spreads her arms around the healée (opens her arms); she asks Michael to pour his protective bright blue energy over the healée. After some minutes the healer thanks Michael and lets him go (and closes her arms). This invocation (with the opening and closing of hands) is repeated individually for all seven archangels.*

*Closing: The healer thanks all the archangels, including her own and the healée's personal angels. She asks the healée to leave her sacred place and the healer also leaves her own. She touches the shoulder of the healée (and wakes her up). She offers a glass of water. She asks if the healée feels okay.*

*Interpretation: The healer asks the healée how she felt during the healing. She leads a discussion about the sensations and mental images and their possible meanings.*

Dividing the healing session into four parts is my construction. However, I maintain that these divisions (preparation, invocation, closing and inter-

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pretation) could easily be found by any observer. This angel-healing session usually lasts about 30 minutes and most of it, especially the invocation, happens in silence. However, the healer-trainee is taught to observe in detail her own feelings and sensations during the whole session and to be ready to put them into words afterward. The vocabularies formed (words describing and interpreting sensations) are thus given special epistemic value: they are articulated as referring to the presence of healing angelic energies, that is, to something invisible that is present during the healing session in the physical and “energetic” interspace between the healer and the *healée*. The angel-healer should gradually learn, during the course and subsequent practice, to observe and articulate this bodily, emotional and imaginary space during the session as proof of the touch of the invisible reality. (Apart from a light touch on the shoulders in the preparation and closing sections, the healer does not physically touch the *healée*.)

### **Therapeutic Sensations**

The relatively simple bodily choreography in the invocation (in this case it consists most importantly of the spreading and closing of one’s arms in invocation or mimesis of the wings of the angels) connects it to the middle of the healing rite and divides it into something like symmetrical sub-chapters, each of which is dedicated to one archangel. Any sensation (e.g., the feeling of moving air or pressure in some part of the healer’s body) or mental image (such as colorful vibrations or flashes of light) arising in the healer during the session can be interpreted as a special need or tension in the client that needs healing or as the intensified presence and touch of a particular angel.

Also, Tanya Luhrmann emphasizes the importance of disciplined training and repetition when learning to organize and decipher the meaningful feelings and other details in the magical rite:

Magicians report a gamut of emotional, spiritual and physiological responses in ritual, and they attribute these experiences to the presence of power in the rite. Magicians will “feel” the power flowing, “feel” the current run around the circle. They often assert that they know whether rituals raise any power because they can sense power intuitively during the ritual . . . Magical power is also thought to be the sort of thing that requires training to handle properly, and some of the

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magician's responses are attributed to inadequate training for the experience. [Luhmann 1989:133]

It is possible that silence and speechlessness (especially during the invocation) provide an important space for the detailed differentiations of sensations and mental images. The subsequent act of interpretation provides time and space for the verbal interpretations of the sensations and mental images of both the healer and *healée*. According to the instructions given to our group, the healer should now ask the *healée* whether she felt something (even the smallest sensation) and whether she wishes to talk about it. If she does, the healer listens and helps her to interpret these sensations in terms of an angelic presence; she also brings up some of her own sensations for *comparison* and *reflection*.

This more or less interactive interpretation—which is however led by the healer—should proceed with care, respecting the client's idiosyncrasies toward angels and the otherworld (e.g., in more or less Christian terms). Throughout the course we were reminded of the most important value that the healer must respect absolutely: the free will of every individual and *healée*. (In angel-culture rhetoric, individual free will is something that angels are also said to always respect. Interestingly, free will is a "sacred" value in both Christianity and modern Enlightenment thinking, albeit in somewhat different ways.)

If the healer receives a very powerful sensation during the session, she sometimes talks about it straight away—or it may even spontaneously come out of her mouth. However, since it is understood that everything in the healing, including the words, only comes through her ("is channeled"), we are told that we might not even remember our words later on. It is emphasized that whatever happens is not really considered to be of our making or responsibility. In any case, the healer learns to interpret both her and her client's nuanced sensations and mentalizations as indices of (the need for) the healing power of an angelic presence or energy.

The articulation of the sensations in order to learn about the inner states in many ways resembles mindfulness, yoga and other forms of body-consciousness practices, in which bodily sensations are "read" as messages of mental states. It is also similar to the traditional skill of fortune-tellers and seers in "reading feelings"—both of the specialist and the client—as omens and premonitions (e.g., Bennett 1987:128). Angel-healing

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here also resembles, in some respects, other alternative healing settings; for instance, an important element in the homeopath's appointment in Finland is a careful and time-consuming interpretation of bodily and mental symptoms and personality features (Lindfors 2005). Quite intriguingly, the angel-healing technique also bears some resemblances to the psychoanalyst's method of countertransference, where, by reading her own sensations and emotions, the therapist may gain information about the patient and her problems. Thus, by focusing on sensations as knowledge the method of angel-healing comes close to many body-consciousness techniques, and in its intersubjective interpretation of sensations and emotions it is also reminiscent of such mental techniques as clairvoyance as well as psychotherapy—when it mimics or genuinely shares some of the same premises. Hence there seem to be many common elements (the interactive structures of the ritual techniques, manners and sequences) in many different kinds of healings and therapies along the spectrum modern–secular to traditional–enchanted.<sup>19</sup>

The general idea in healing with energy or spirits is that the healer only mediates cosmic/divine energy to the *healée*. In the end angels are also to be understood as only mediators of this healing energy. That is why the healer is advised to keep herself as pure and clear (of pollution such as negative thoughts) as possible—which is a common idea in energy-healing (cf. McPherson 2008). However, the interviewees may also admit that purity is an ideal that is not always totally achieved. One healer writes down messages she receives in her channeling, because she feels that it helps her to distinguish what the authentic message meant for her from the input of her own ego: “I must write [it down] because from that writing you see at once if it is pure text or if something from yourself has gone into it . . . Because I am not yet so skillful that everything could come through all clear.”

The clarity and purity of the mind and emotions are also important goals of healing, as emphasized for instance in the published material of

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<sup>19</sup> Verrips (2003:234) gives as examples of similar practices both the fortune-teller and biomedical doctors, who use “glassy materials . . . to achieve more knowledge and deeper insights,” that is, the crystal ball, in the first case, and several kinds of lenses and objects, such as the microscope, in the second. Also the homeopath (Lindfors 2005:86), in a similar manner to traditional medical doctors, consults a thick book to verify diagnoses.

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Doreen Virtue, one of the most internationally known angel-therapists, who is also often mentioned by my research participants.<sup>20</sup> The idea is that when the *healée* fully experiences the flow of pure angelic energy coming through the healer, she may learn to become the “channel” for her own healing—and start to heal others too.<sup>21</sup> This also legitimizes the idea that the healer (being merely an empty channel) is not, in the end, responsible or the one to be credited for what happens in the session; the healer is, rather, only one joint or mechanism in the interlinking network of the channels that communicate universal healing energy.

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If the above described and analyzed angel-healing and other angel-practices (such as meditations, card readings, etc.) are viewed as embodied pedagogical practices, their stated aim would be to teach the *healée* to learn to contact angel-energies whenever needed and to use them to enrich quotidian life. They thus aim, at least partly, to enhance self-help and self-healing practices; hence, the hierarchical structure that often differentiates and distances the roles and positions of the healer and the *healée* is relativized. In fact, some healers in my interviews state that it is not advisable to visit an angel-healer too many times, but that they encourage their clients to find their own ways to heal themselves. This blurring of the boundary between the roles and positions of the healer and the *healée* can be regarded as a characteristic feature within alternative healing culture (cf. Woodhead and Sointu 2008). It is also part of the individualist self-help ethos of late modernity.

This easily learnable and portable skill of enchantment is interpreted and valued as an art of life that protects, nurtures, inspires, guides and empowers—and this may be what healing is all about here. I call this healing

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<sup>20</sup> See, for example, her *Angel Therapy Meditations* CD (2008). For more about her methods, see [www.angeltherapy.com](http://www.angeltherapy.com).

<sup>21</sup> Wood (2000) writes about two typical ideal routes to power in healing, the closed and the open route, and notes that for instance in Reiki the therapists move from the closed one (only some people can contact the power) to the open one (power can be contacted by everyone). In angel-healing there seems to be the idea that each person can learn to channel the angelic energy on his or her own.

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by enchantment, or healing enchantment, meaning that it seems to be enchantment (subtle magic and spell, the well-managed touch of the invisible and extraordinary) that heals. What is created and constructed in angel-healing by its body–mind technique is a special form of imaginary–practical-embodied enchantment (visualizations, feelings and sensations, as well as gestures and postures of connecting and being with angels). And it is this enchantment, actively and skillfully cultivated contact with the invisible, protective and transformative otherness, and what is done with it, that is deemed and experienced as healing. In a somewhat similar way, Luhrmann reports on the modern practitioners of magic and how they treat everything available in the ritual as effective and as a source of transformation and knowledge:

In magic, the unconscious is not treated as a random, frightening source of subjectivity. Magicians redefine the apparent randomness of instincts and emotions as a knowledge, a matter of sensing, intuiting, feeling the interconnections of the world. Priestesses gaze into fires and crystal to read the symbols revealed to them there . . . The apparently chaotic irrational does not control us; it itself becomes the means of control, by providing an understanding of the natural world. [Luhrmann 1989:90]

But why is enchantment experienced as healing? One approach might be to elaborate the concepts of the imaginary and fantasy (angels as imaginary others and friends) and their impact on (mental) well-being (see Murken 2009). Another and slightly different elaboration might be Thomas Csordas' phenomenological understanding of alterity (otherness, difference) as a source of many kinds of transformations and dislocations (from what is to what becomes). Following Csordas, alterity is not an (theological) object, but is instead seen as an elementary aspect of the embodied and as a relational open structure of human experience, which is always in a process of transformation and dislocation: our changing bodies, desires and suffering, imagination, other people, orientating toward what is not there in both a big and small<sup>22</sup> or frightening and adventurous sense.

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Luckmann (1990) also writes about big and small transcendences—although Csordas does not refer to him.

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Alterity is neither objective nor absolute. In the sense in which I am using it, alterity is an elementary constituent of subjectivity and intersubjectivity, and this is how it is part of the structure of being in the world. Not only can it be elaborated into the monstrous as well as the divine but it can be transformed into identity, intimacy, or familiarity. [Csordas 2004:164; see also Utriainen 2013a]

What we call “religions” would also evolve from this more general source or kernel of alterity.

The future (in the sense of time not yet to come but becoming) can also be understood as a temporal aspect of alterity, and so would one’s “path” or destiny in life. One of the interviewees highlights how her life with angels’ alterity, as the unknown future, transformed from uncertainty to adventure:

And because nothing is permanent, the only permanent thing is change, that’s for sure . . . we can’t lean on anything, because everything changes all the time and there are new tasks waiting all the time . . . and they [the angels] send me to some unbelievable spots, and that’s the funniest thing here that life becomes so extremely exciting.

Here angels become the needed tint of magic transporting the individual from uncertainty to adventure.

Besides the transformation from uncertainty to adventure (which in itself can be considered a great achievement), there are other important transitions that can be aspired to with the help of angels. One is the transition—and the skill of mastering this transition—between metaphor (imagination) and magic (concretely felt efficacy). The use of imagination was strongly encouraged throughout the angel-healer course as a means of invoking angels if and when one did not straightforwardly believe in them—belief was not considered a requirement for successful contact. It thus seems that angels can be understood as symbols or metaphors of various positive values. But in some ritual practices, like healing, their metaphoricality is, at least in the specific context at hand and for a limited time and purpose, transformed into “magical” executive power that changes things in a way that can be understood and felt as healing (Utriainen in press). In this way angels may be a very potent yet subtle and flexible vehicle of continuous transformation, inspiration and hope, as well as, for the practitioner, a source of the sense of being able to ac-

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tively become a doer and maker of one's life and destiny. However, an individual would not be the sole maker of this transformation.

### **Conclusion: Enchanted Agency with Others**

It is important to note that angel-healing explicitly highlights alterity and relational or participatory agency: agency (e.g., in decision-making situations) which is not reducible to the self alone but is much more open, relational and elastic. The linguistic anthropologist Laura Ahearn provides a short, open and pragmatic definition of agency as a "socioculturally mediated capacity to act" (Ahearn 2001:118). This implies that agency should be taken as a relational and mediated action. As the communication scholar Karlyn Campbell further reminds us, the individual is only one important point of articulation of agency (Campbell 2005).

Angel-healers (i.e., those who have learned how to heal themselves with angels) are understood as working together with angels. A recurring expression in the interviews was "it was not me/I did not make it happen." Thus, angel-healing enhances the sense of individual agency on the one hand ("I use angels to make things happen in my life"); on the other hand, it seems important to attribute agency not only to the self but also to an open and sustaining relationality that includes other possible powers. Enchanted participatory agency would, thus, provide a potentially valuable tool for living within the constraints and possibilities of modernity—in particular to help persons escape from loneliness and, if we take seriously what Alain Ehrenberg writes in *Fatigue d'Être Soi* (2000), possibly to protect the often very solitary subject from depression, which has become a contemporary curse and which was also frequently mentioned in the interviews.

From this perspective, angels as therapists and intimate others appear more and more as a creative healing help for modern individuals who want to keep their lives and futures in their own hands (and who thus continue to appreciate "free will"), who also welcome support, companionship and "miraculous" interventions. One particular further therapeutic feature of angels is that they (and the spirituality as well as the approach to healing that they represent) are completely nonjudgmental. Amy Schindler discusses the ways in which angels became important for



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HIV patients in the US in the 1980s, when institutional religions often judged homosexual behavior negatively (1999). Modern angels don't judge personal failures or weaknesses and they seem to understand the profound complexities of life. Matthew Wood, writing on the basis of his ethnography on energy-healing settings, suggests that in some contemporary spiritual activities "healing is called for in a general way, almost as an element of *sustenance*, rather than as a more acute method to counter a specific prevailing condition" (Wood 2000:84; italics mine). The italics are mine since I want to draw attention to this intriguing idea of *healing as sustenance*, that is, as nourishment, as something that feeds and keeps the subject alive.

Enchanted and agentive relations with others can be felt as empowering and healing in some cases and phases of life. However, in other cases, relations with religious alterity may be felt as painful and disempowering. Alterity—and religion—can go to both ways, and the "power of as if" (if we borrow William James' way of capturing the dynamic, metaphoric nature of religion) is potent but also risky. What I also want to stress, and what my interviews and ethnography make visible, as well as Luhrmann's ethnography of modern urban witches, is that an enchanted and potentially healing and sustaining partnership is created, re-created, scrutinized and maintained in embodied relational practice, and that this includes such things as the active use of the imagination, following rules and committing oneself to exercise and repetition—on an individual basis as well as with many kinds of other persons. This implies that such healing does not happen in just a private world but in many ways a very relational one. Furthermore, the above described practices with angels is circulated and informed, but quite possibly also motivated, by such "secular" processes as the crumbling present state of welfare services in Western societies and the pressing, if ambiguous, ethos of autonomy and individualism that guides people to take responsibility of their own lives. What is also involved and merits more attention than it has received in this article is the growing supply of commercial spiritual culture, with its commodities and methods of enchantment, and how it has become involved in healing practices.

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