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By Susan Casey

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In a remote corner of Brazil, the man known as John of God is changing people's lives in astonishing ways. Can belief cure illness? Can energy heal? Susan Casey took the journey to find out.

Down the dusty main street of Abadiânia, a scrap of a town in central Brazil, come hundreds of people dressed in white. They're wearing white button-down shirts and embroidered white skirts and rumpled white sweaters, flowing white dresses and tight white leotards. White caftans, white shawls, white golf shorts. Shiny white tracksuits. Kicky white capri

pants. Crisp white jeans with bejeweled white sandals. Many white scarves. Some people sit in wheelchairs; some hobble on crutches or walking sticks or leg braces. They're young and they're old. They come from a block away and from the other side of the world and from every place in between. They are all here for one reason: to see João Teixeira de Faria, a 68-year-old man widely known as John of God.

Here at the end of the Avenida Francisca Teixeira Damas, just before the pavement turns to rich red dirt and the road dips down into a valley of mango and avocado trees, in an immaculate compound of open-air buildings called the Casa de Dom Inácio de Loyola—John of God has attended millions of people, including many who have heard their doctors say these chilling words: "There is nothing more we can do." And somehow, after visits to the Casa and audiences with this man, after following the spiritual prescriptions they received here, some of these people managed to do the unexpected: They lived. Fully healed.

For 52 years and counting, miracles of this sort have been happening around this unassuming Brazilian, who takes no credit for them. "I have never healed anybody. It is God who heals," he often says. Born poor in the state of Goiás, often hungry in his youth, João attended school only briefly and never learned to read or write, setting to work as a tailor at an early age. The first big glimpse of his gift occurred at age 9, when, as the story goes, he predicted that a sudden, savage storm would destroy houses in Nova Ponte, a nearby village. It was a lovely day at the time, and people dismissed his prophecy. When 50 houses were damaged by tornado-force winds, no one had a logical explanation. The extent of his ability became even more apparent at age 16 when João, tired, famished, and looking for a place to wash up, had an overwhelming vision of a beautiful woman down by a river. She gave him the address of a spiritual center and told him to go there. He went, and promptly fainted. When he awoke, several hours later, an astonished crowd had gathered. They told João he had performed healings all afternoon. He came to believe that the woman who'd guided him was Saint Rita of Cascia, and that while he was unconscious, the spirit of King Solomon had taken up residence in his body and done the healing work.

Brazil has deep roots in the traditions of shamanism and spiritism, both of which feature the notion that individuals can—and do—cross the boundaries between this worldly existence and the afterlife. In this lexicon, it's perfectly understandable that King Solomon and other powerful spirits (known as the Entities) would swing by to offer help, incorporating in João's body (the Medium). Even so, when that help involved a man who was not a doctor cutting into a person's thorax with an unsterilized kitchen knife, the legal, medical, and religious establishments balked. (In most cases the healings he performs are deemed "invisible surgeries" that don't even involve touch, but there are occasional procedures that include actual incisions.)

For John of God—or as he is known in Abadiânia, Medium João—the realization of his gift was accompanied by years of persecution and lawsuits for practicing medicine without a license. That didn't stop him from his mission—to aid anyone who requested it, free of charge—and as time passed and he managed to help such high-profile politicians as the president of Peru and the mayors of assorted Brazilian towns, he was accepted and even protected, treated as a national treasure.

The question of how a malignant tumor disappears from someone's body, how a blind person ends up seeing again, how the lame suddenly walk—how darkness turns to light, in other words—is not a small one. Our rational minds search for analytical handholds, evidence. In Abadiânia, the currency is more ephemeral: To show up here to see John of God is an act of faith.

"I've been waiting for you!" Edwene Gaines stood in the aisle of the airplane so I could slide past her into the window seat. She was 71, with short, platinum blonde hair and the prettiest Southern accent I'd ever heard, straight from Valley Head, Alabama. Her pantsuit was vividly floral and accented with sparkling pink jewelry. "Are you on business or pleasure?" she asked, her entire face a smile.

For a moment I didn't know what to say. *I'm going to see a Brazilian spiritual healer* was more than I was willing to give up to a stranger, especially one I'd be sitting with for the next eight hours. "Pleasure, I hope," I said. "How about you?"

"Oh, I'm going to see John of God."

And with that we were off, the 757 lofting from Atlanta to Brasilia. Over a good Chilean red, Edwene, an ordained minister, motivational speaker, and author of *The Four Spiritual Laws of Prosperity*, recounted the story of her brain aneurysm, deemed inoperable by five neurosurgeons. "Get your affairs in order," she remembers being told. "And try not to sneeze. That's how fragile I was," she said. "So I did it. I went out and got my living will, my durable power of attorney. But then I realized, *I'm not ready to go just yet.*" She laughed at the memory—that is all it is now. After her dire diagnosis, at the urging of her prayer group (all of whom said they received the same vision of John of God curing her), Edwene had traveled to the Casa. "I was nervous and I was skeptical," she said. "But what did I have to lose?"

Almost immediately the Entity performed invisible surgery on her, a 40-minute process that involved sitting in a group meditation with her right hand over her heart. Nobody touched her, but, Edwene remembers: "I could feel things moving around in my head. It didn't hurt, but it was...different." Afterward she collapsed in exhaustion for 24 hours. Eight days later, she was told by her guide, the "stitches" would be removed. "That night I could feel *ping! ping! ping!*—like stitches being pulled out." Eventually, a CT scan revealed the truth: Her aneurysm was gone. "I'm so grateful," she said, nodding toward the heavens. Since then she'd been back to the Casa once, at Christmas, and now she was headed down there for a third time, bringing a group of 20 people who also sought healing.

My reason for visiting John of God was less harrowing. Nonetheless, it was life-threatening. As I sat on the plane, it was two years to the day since my father had died suddenly of a heart attack. We were very close; he

was only 70, and fit. Until that moment I'd been almost ridiculously sheltered from tragedy, and I was unprepared for the tsunami of grief that swept over everything I knew. We all have our dark encounters with heartbreak, but this kind of sadness was something unknown to me. It scoured everything, leaving my nerves and emotions exposed and raw; it was an actual physical weight that I dragged along. I wore grim-colored glasses, looking out and seeing nothing but gray days, angry at the universe for taking away my father. The sunny days had vanished—and I needed them back. When someone mentioned John of God in conversation, the name stuck to me. I'd never heard of the man, but for some reason I was compelled to find out more.

Despite widespread skepticism, evidence shows that energy healing not only exists but can be deeply powerful. Traditional Eastern treatments like [acupuncture](#) and Reiki act to strengthen the body's life force, known as chi or prana. Prayer as a conduit for healing is a long-held religious ritual, along with the laying on of hands. Though belief in the effectiveness of prayer is as old as civilization, the results are tough to pin down. Bernard Grad, PhD, a Canadian biologist from McGill University, worked with a spiritual healer named Oskar Estebany conducting controlled studies in the late 1950s and '60s. Using mice that had been uniformly wounded, Estebany would place his hands upon the wire covers on certain cages, willing those animals to heal. The results were dramatic: In one experiment, the wounds on Estebany's treated mice were "very significantly smaller" after two weeks than those of mice that had been left to heal on their own. The team also discovered that plant seeds exposed to energy healing grew at a faster rate. There was a force here, they agreed, and it appeared to be doing something beneficial. What that force was, however, no one could say for sure.

One physician I knew to be interested in John of God's work was [Mehmet Oz](#). As a cardiac surgeon his training had been rigorously scientific, but he wondered about what Western medicine didn't yet know. "I think the next big frontier is unlocking the doors to energy medicine," Oz told me. "It dramatically broadens our vista of opportunities to heal. The challenge we have is that energy is not as easily quantified as the surgeon's scalpel."

Oz is right: A heart transplant, for instance, is an undeniable event—and without that kind of tangible proof we tend not to believe. But the stories coming out of Abadiânia challenged that stance. Five years ago, Oz had participated in a *Primetime Live* segment focusing on John of God. He'd examined hours of film footage from the Entities' healings; he'd looked at scans and biopsy reports, and there were results he couldn't explain—the shrinkage of an aggressive cancer, for instance. "This guy had a glioblastoma, which is a very deadly brain tumor," Oz recalled. "It was a grade IV. They biopsied it and proved it." As an added credential the biopsy was done at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center, a prominent hospital. "I took those films down to my radiologist, along with a new set of films the patient had [taken after his visit to John of God], which showed that the tumor had calcified and essentially died."

"Impossible," the radiologist had said. There was no medical explanation for it. "If we can understand what role he's playing in reversing illness," Oz said, "we should be doing that here."

When you consider the countless unseen things that have undeniable power—sound waves, microwaves, radio waves; emotions like anger or envy; wind; and of course the awesome, universal power of love—it seems silly to rely on the naked eye for proof of anything. Yet that is what we do. Numbers on charts and graphs, X-rays, those we believe in. But belief without documentation, something we perceive with one of our five senses, is considered blind faith. Sweet, but we don't really trust it.

I was thinking about this and gazing out the plane's window as it streaked south through the night. What did I believe? I wasn't sure. Stories like Edwene's were intriguing, but I wasn't buying it wholesale (that would require before-and-after CT scans). I wondered if the additional proof I was seeking would be found in Brazil. I wondered if John of God could patch up the hole inside me and help me love my life again, a life that did not contain my father. "No physical or psychic illness is beyond the possibility of cure," Casa's literature said. "Healing may be physical or spiritual." Below us great cumulus clouds heaped like fantastic castles and lost kingdoms, gleaming in the moonlight. It was impossible to see this majesty and not wonder about miracles, mysteries, and the powers

that created such grand beauty.

The hotel Rei Davi is a modest, two-story stucco building painted a soft jade green. Eight times a year, Heather Cumming houses about 15 visitors in its rooms, guiding them through the process of seeing John of God. Born in Brazil to Scottish parents, raised in the cattle ranching interior of the country, Heather speaks perfect Portuguese as well as Spanish, French, and a melodically accented English. She is tall and has a gentle manner. When my taxi pulled up on Sunday morning, she greeted me with a hug. A group who'd arrived the previous week was there, she explained, but I might not see them all because several were recovering from invisible surgery, sleeping around the clock.

In Abadiânia the week is divided into two parts: Saturday through Tuesday, when the Casa is sparsely attended because Medium João is not in residence; and Wednesday through Friday, when he drives his Ford 250 pickup from his farm outside the nearby town of Anápolis, leaving behind his wife, Ana Keyla Teixeira Lorenço, and sees hundreds of people from dawn to dusk.

Heather's connection to the Casa is a close one. A student of Reiki and shamanism, she had come to Abadiânia ten years ago as a spiritual seeker. During her visit, when the Entity invited her onstage to observe a physical surgery, she passed out cold. "I suddenly felt this surge of energy, very pleasant but very strong," she recalled. "And then I woke up on a stretcher." On another occasion she was moved to tears. "I was crying, and Medium João asked me why. I told him I had experienced unconditional love for the first time."

Now Abadiânia is Heather's home. (She has also literally written the book on John of God, coauthoring the volume *John of God: The Brazilian Healer Who's Touched the Lives of Millions*.) As I hefted my luggage up to the second floor, a small sign on the wall caught my attention. DON'T BELIEVE EVERYTHING YOU THINK, it advised.

My room was spare and clean, with an aura of peacefulness that made me immediately lie down and sleep for five hours. I woke at dusk, feeling disoriented. Gold evening light poured through my windows. The place was still, no one around. I let myself out the front gate and walked along the road to the Casa, a half mile away. The sky was tinted lush orange and red, birds were still singing, and a happy-looking yellow dog picked itself up from the road and trotted along beside me. I walked by little stores selling jewelry and acai drinks, houses ringed by flowering trees, a pizzeria. Several businesses had displays of white clothing—the Casa requests that only white be worn; this makes it easier, apparently, for a person's aura to be seen. There were a number of vividly painted small hotels, lined up side by side: lilac purple, canary yellow, lime green. One of them, a coral-colored one-story building, opened up to the street, and inside I could see a John of God video playing on a large screen. An audience of about 20 people sat in straight-backed chairs watching him cut into a man's chest with what looked like a rusty paring knife. The man's eyes were closed, and he was peaceful and still as rivulets of blood ran down his white shirt.

If you spend time in Abadiânia, you will hear the phrase "the Entities" over and over again, sometimes plural and sometimes singular, and you will come to use it yourself, as if it were a completely ordinary thing to say. What it actually means, however, is so extraordinary that it defies our sense of what is logical or even possible in this world: "The healing Entities who work through John of God are the spirits of deceased doctors, surgeons, masters, and saints," Heather's Web site explains matter-of-factly. They use Medium João's body, channeling their power through him. Sometimes the spirits show up anonymously, but there are also several who make regular appearances. They include Dr. Augusto de Almeida, a surgeon and army man with a serious and efficient manner; Dr. Oswaldo Cruz, whose specialties were infectious diseases and bacteriology; Saint Francis Xavier,

cofounder of the Jesuit Order, along with the Casa's patron, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, a priest and nobleman from the 16th century. Despite the presence of saints, Medium João (born a Catholic) makes it clear that the Casa is not a church but rather a spiritual hospital. "My mission has nothing to do with religion," he has said. Heather emphasized this: "To connect to the power of God, you don't have to visualize a big man with a gray beard."

In essence, it's the Entities who do the heavy lifting, who lop off the growths or reverse the scoliosis or clear away the cataracts. They are the fixers of kidneys and the soothers of arthritis, the menders of shattered psyches and broken hearts. If you show up on Heather's doorstep you are probably predisposed to believe this, although that is not required. At the Casa, skeptics are as welcome as believers. I'd already noticed that skeptics didn't tend to stay that way: Many harrumphing, empirical scientists had become impassioned John of God advocates after visiting and witnessing him in action.

At 62 Medium João is solidly built. But for all his obvious strength, the act of letting other spirits borrow his body is a demanding one. When the process begins, I read in an interview, he feels a kind of radiant heat that makes him a little dizzy. That is accompanied by, in his words, "an intense spiritual peace and an indestructible happiness." What happens at that point is easy to report but difficult to process: A couple of seconds later the ordinary man is gone, replaced by one of the Entities.

To help energetically fuel this process (and to aid their own healing), people are invited to "sit in the Current," as it is known at the Casa. The practice involves taking a seat in the rows of benches surrounding John of God's chair and meditating—hard—for hours at a stretch. In the same way the electricity that courses into a building's wiring forms a current, so does the river of benevolence coming from this concerted group. On any given day, maybe 400 people form the Current—spelunking so deeply into their interior realms that they might well be asleep or anesthetized—and while doing so they refrain from opening their eyes or crossing their arms or legs: These things, they are told, cut off the flow of energy as surely as would kinking a hose.

The casa grounds are filled with flowers and fruit trees, dotted with big wooden benches where people can sit in meditation, and laid out with long, low buildings painted sky blue and white. There is a pharmacy where people can get their spiritual prescriptions of passiflora herbs filled; a gift shop selling crystals, books, and John of God—blessed bottles of water (financial proceeds from which support a local soup kitchen and other charitable works). A coffee shop dispenses espresso, coconut water, and passion fruit custard. Behind it is a sort of museum, two rooms of discarded crutches, wheelchairs, canes, eyeglasses. The back room also features a glass-fronted cabinet filled with pint- and quart-size jars. The jars contain pinkish and yellowish viscera floating in murky maroon liquids; tumors, growths, and other obtrusions that were not doing their former owners any good, so they'd been removed by the Entities.

Early Wednesday morning the grounds began to fill with people walking in from the street and pouring out of buses that had motored through the night from other corners of Brazil. I joined the crowd as it streamed toward the main hall, a partially open-air pavilion with a small stage up front. In the center of the stage a wooden triangle hung on the wall. Its frame was stuffed with photos and slips of paper containing names and addresses of loved ones, along with a brief description of the problems that plagued them. A crumpled sheet I found on the floor listed one man's concerns:

- Sistema sanguineo* ("circulatory system")
- Pequeno cancer prostato* ("a little prostate cancer")
- Sistema nervosa* ("nervous system")
- Obrigado obrigado obrigado* ("thank you thank you thank you")

These petitions would be gathered and taken to John of God, too, though the recipients of his help might be thousands of miles away. When it came to divine intercession, I had learned, distance wasn't an issue. The paint and stucco in the center of the triangle had worn away, leaving a burned-looking patch where countless people had pressed their foreheads against the wall to pray.

The day was brisk and bright, the kind of weather that makes bad moods impossible. After three days here, I could already sense something lifting in my mind, clouds parting. It was hard to feel anything but gratitude in the presence of so many obvious troubles; the woman with a half-shaved head, her skull cleaved by a thick scar, or the young boy whose father tended him carefully as he slumped in his wheelchair. I heard hymns being chanted in Portuguese as I entered the hall, moving up near the stage and squeezing in beside an elderly woman with her silver hair pulled smartly into a knot. She wore round wire glasses and a white crocheted sweater, and her vibe was a wise, contented one. Through a translator I learned that her name was Lucia and that she had once suffered from cancer and gastroenteritis, but after several visits to the Casa she was now fine. She had traveled from Rio Grande do Sul, a 37-hour bus ride. "I like to be here," she told me. "We have to put ourselves in God's hands. We can't think that we are going to fix ourselves."

I saw Heather make her way through the crowd and onto the stage. On days like this she was a constant presence, translating requests into Portuguese and guiding people to the proper lines. There were lines for first-time visitors, second-time visitors, those scheduled for invisible surgery, people in wheelchairs. The hall had the bustle of an airport terminal and the crushed, expectant energy of a rock concert.

Thirty minutes later, the crowd pressed forward as Medium João appeared on the little stage. He stood barefoot with a neutral look on his face, but his eyes scanned the hall with laser focus. People crossed themselves, bowed their heads, held hands. The murmur of prayer grew louder as three women in white dresses emerged from a doorway, lining up against the wall with their eyes shut. All three looked young, in their 20s or 30s. A thin orderly pushed three wheelchairs onto the stage. The chairs were rickety and had a frankly spooky look. Medium João turned to a cluster of people behind him and spoke some rapid-fire Portuguese. A woman stepped forward with a tray of metal implements. I watched as he passed his hand across his face, appearing to swoon for a moment.

From my vantage point only ten feet away, the change in his body and demeanor was easily visible. Now his eyes were more intense, and they flashed noticeably darker. His gait became stiffer, his movements more deliberate. He turned to the three women standing against the wall, took the one closest to him by the hand and gently sat her in a wheelchair. Her eyes fluttered white as she meditated. Reaching to the tray, he selected a short knife with a wooden handle, a cheap-looking type that you might use to pare an apple, and he held it up to the room, making sure that everyone saw its sharp blade. He tipped her head backward, running his hand across her face, and he opened her left eye, holding the eyelid wide. And then he began to scrape the knife across her eyeball, back and forth, with visible pressure. Unbelievably, the woman sat absolutely still, without flinching or recoiling. I had a hard time watching this, believing as I do that the words *knife* and *eyeball* should never appear in the same sentence. After what seemed like an eternity, devoid of trauma, he put down the knife. The orderly took the wheelchair and steered it into the infirmary. As she had the entire time, the woman appeared to be napping. How on Earth could a knife across your eyeball not hurt? (Later I would interview another recipient of this treatment, Connie Price, 62, from Jackson, Michigan. "There was no pain whatsoever," she said of the five-minute scraping. "I could feel the energy coming through him—I remember the heat pouring through that man's body." Price found the treatment beneficial: "I can see a lot better now.")

John of God then turned to the second woman. He held up a six-inch Kelly clamp, a metal implement that looked a lot like scissors. Moving swiftly, he tilted her head back, and then he shoved the Kelly clamp up her right nostril. I could see the force that went into it—the kind of effort you might use on someone's nose if you were cornered in an alley. "It is inconceivable she won't gush blood," I thought, watching as he finished with a hard twist of the wrist. But instead of the expected fountain of red, there was nothing but quiet. Not a drop of blood, and the woman hadn't moved a muscle. She, too, was wheeled off in relaxed silence.

The last woman had long blonde hair and wore a full-length white dress that gave her a bridal air. John of God

stood beside her and addressed the audience. "If there are any doctors in the room, could they please come forward," Heather translated through the public address system; the Entity encourages traditional healers to look closely at his work. Four men elbowed through the throngs and onto the stage. John of God spoke to them privately for several minutes, explaining (I learned later) that this woman had advanced breast cancer. He turned to pick up a scalpel, and then he carefully lifted her left breast from her dress. As the crowd and the MDs looked on he cut a vertical incision, touching it with his hand. Blood streamed from her chest, staining her dress, but she stood motionless with her beautiful hair cascading around her shoulders and it was as though she weren't even there. This surgery lasted longer than the others. After he had worked on her for 15 minutes, he laid down the scalpel and picked up a needle, stitching the wound closed. She was taken from the stage and John of God followed, heading into the room where he would see everyone else.

There are countless DVDs that document the Entities performing surgeries like the three I had just witnessed, but somehow they didn't capture the inexplicable aura of calm that permeated the scene. Web pundits often criticize these procedures as the equivalent of parlor tricks—noting that the nasal cavity extends farther than one might imagine; or that scraping a person's eyeball is really no big deal unless you touch the cornea—but nothing anybody could write explained to me how it was that none of the women had so much as flinched. Or how, after their encounters with the Entities, so many people feel better. After watching tape of similar events, Mehmet Oz had his own theory: "Those actions can stimulate aggressive immune responses. It may be that what he's doing is tapping into a long-lost healing tool that could be effective in treating other conditions."

Now the crowd surged forward expectantly, moving to the entrance of the Entity's room. Near the front, a girl fainted with a soft thump. I saw her little body being lifted above a sea of heads, a limp figure in a lacy white dress. The crowd surged forward expectantly, and I caught Heather's eye. She beckoned me into the line.

I wish I could tell you I felt something magical when I saw him; that when I kneeled down on the pillow at his feet, holding the photo of my father, with Heather translating and the Current-sitters in white all around me, a dazzling bolt of lightning shot down and cleared up my every last sorrow. Instead, I felt nervous. And the Entity seemed detached. Rattling off some instructions in Portuguese, he waved me away quickly. "He said he wants you to take a blessing and then come back later," Heather said, putting an arm around my shoulders. "Don't worry. This is completely normal."

The blessing, which consisted of a group prayer and took place in an anteroom, was over in three minutes. I felt stunned and somewhat disappointed by the brevity of the experience, but Heather was upbeat. "That's like a spiritual washing machine," she said. "And he says he will help you."

The more people you talk to at the Casa, the more astonishing stories you hear. On my first day there, Heather had introduced me to Luiz Carlos Nunes, a former accountant whose tumorous growths I'd already seen bobbing in some of the jars. Luiz was smallish and portly, with glasses and an outdoorsy tan. In 1996, he told me (with Heather translating), the Entity had healed him of intestinal cancer. Despite this great news, however, Luiz didn't get much of a chance to celebrate: In 1997 he was diagnosed with terminal brain cancer. Doctors gave him three months to live, his case considered so hopeless that chemotherapy wasn't even offered. He left his home in the south of Brazil and made his way back to the Casa. "I will help you, my son," the Entity told him. "You will be healed." But though it didn't kill him, the cancer persisted. For three years Luiz came to Abadiânia every other month, and each time: "I would say, 'Father, there's this problem....'"

"I am taking care of you, don't worry," the Entity always replied.

Finally, on October 12, 2000, Luiz was summoned to the stage, where his upper body was wrapped in a white

sheet. First the Entity shaved part of his head. Then he made a large incision where a growth protruded. "And then he began to squeeze the wound where he cut," Luiz said. "Enormous matter came out, yellow and white, a lot of it. Then he got the medical tweezers and pulled out a lot more. He removed a kind of sac and he showed it to me. It didn't hurt at all." Afterward the Entity cleaned the wound with holy water. Stitches were not required. Gesturing at me to look closer, Luis pointed to a tiny scar on his right temple. It was barely visible. He was cancer-free now, he said.

I met Janete Lodia, a 40-year-old blonde woman from the south of Brazil, who had battled with recurring cancer. It had begun 17 years ago in her knee and migrated so thoroughly into her bones that no treatment was possible. She, too, arrived in Abadiânia with one last hope. "Come back 21 times," the Entity said. "And you will be healed."

This was a pretty tall order, considering that Janete's commute required a 40-hour bus ride that left her racked with nausea. "I was very weak," she told me, of that time. But she did as he said. Eventually, she began to feel well again. Three years later, however, the cancer returned with a vengeance, this time in her uterus. She went back to the Casa, disappointed and upset. "Don't be unhappy," the Entity told her. "I'm going to give you the present you hope for." Once again, Janete followed his instructions. Six years later she became pregnant, and on April 26, 2000, her daughter Evelin was born. This would be a miraculous event for any woman who'd been that sick. But the bar was even higher: In a calm and measured tone, Janete told me that she had given birth despite having previously undergone a complete hysterectomy. "Janete had no tubes, no uterus," Heather would elaborate for me. "The doctors said it had to be a psychological pregnancy, but then they did an ultrasound. She was already five months along."

It was hard to know what to think about this story: Janete had clearly been sick and now she was well, standing in a sunny garden telling me about the impossible journey she had taken, and nothing about her seemed even remotely exaggerated or duplicitous. And yet I was being asked to believe what science would flatly deny: that a pregnancy could occur in the absence of an egg. But there was Evelin, a long-legged sprite of a girl with wavy, brown hair, hugging her mother's waist as Janete recounted her story.

Then there was Zsolt Pap de Pestény, an Austrian physician in his 60s with a skier's ruddy glow and a thick shock of reddish blond hair. "I got colon cancer when I was 44," he told me. "It metastasized in my bones, my liver, and my bladder." The situation was so severe, he underwent a 20-hour operation at Yale–New Haven Hospital. "They took out my buttocks, both of them," Zsolt said, "then 75 percent of my colon, 85 percent of my sacrum, parts of my liver, and a bit of my bladder." He laughed wryly. "I think that was all." After some initial optimism about the operation's success, it became clear that Zsolt's cancer was just too advanced. "I had given up," he recalled. "It was April 2008. I had my last chemotherapy and I was suffering at home, lying on the sofa watching the Discovery Channel." The show that happened to be on was about John of God. Despite a career grounded in hard science and Western medicine; despite having zero propensity toward spirituality, staring at the screen, Zsolt said, "I felt Medium João looked at me as if to call me. So I said to my wife, Nina: 'We're going there.'" In September 2008 they made the 6,000-mile trip to Abadiânia. "From the beginning he said, 'I will help you,'" Zsolt recalled. It took several visits, but on March 2, 2010, the Entity told him, "You can go home now a healed person. If everybody had so much faith as you then they would be healed." Now, Zsolt says, he is in full remission.

The Entity's statement brings up a difficult truth. Despite awe-inspiring stories like Zsolt's and Janete's and Luiz's, not everyone does walk away healed. For many ill people who make this pilgrimage, the perfect, happy ending is elusive. Heather stressed that healing takes different forms; that sometimes the soul makes great strides but the body isn't able to keep pace. It is human nature to hope for the quick reversal, the sudden recovery, but the path might be twistier and longer than expected.

When it comes to transcending deep-seated problems, Heather said, one of the keys is the willingness to change

even your most entrenched habits—your less-than-healthy behaviors, your unhappy job, your impossible schedule—to let go of anything that is holding you back. Far from being a relief, such radical change is almost always scary.

"The Entities like spiritual obedience," Heather said. In the past, the Entities had made many colorful requests, all of them intended to facilitate an individual's well-being. They'd told people to write books, get their pilot's license, stop smoking—in particular, quit it with the pot. "The Entities hate marijuana," Heather told me. "They say the people who smoke it have dense, red auras. It takes about a year for their systems to heal." Visitors are often requested to return to the Casa multiple times. One man was told to remain in Abadiânia "indefinitely." He did.

"When they operate on you in Western medicine, they might take out some organ, but they don't take out the reason why you got sick," Zsolt said. "What happens here is that you get a whole transformation." This doesn't happen, however, with the wave of a magic wand. Daily meditation, changing habits, improving diets, upgrading mind-sets: All are required. "The Entity does maybe 60 percent," he added. "But the rest you have to do yourself."

On Friday at 6 a.m., Heather knocked on my door. Another sunny day was unfurling, the apricot dawn turning rich blue at the edges. The trees outside my window shook themselves slightly in the breeze. Two owls that lived in a vacant lot across the road hooted softly. I dressed quickly, pulling on my only white dress that hadn't yet been tinted red with Abadiânia's dust.

Today was a big day, a festival to celebrate Saint Ignatius's birthday. Tradition held that the Saint himself would attend, emanating such a force field of kindness that people would be moved to tears. The Casa buildings were wrapped in yellow bows and strung with rafts of yellow balloons, decorated with white roses and daisies. Flower petals an inch thick covered the stage inside the hall.

By 7 a.m., when I entered with Heather, the place was already packed. "Here," she said, handing me a wad of Kleenex. "Just let yourself cry. Let the grief come out. This is probably the deepest healing you'll have here." I looked at her. "You want to think about releasing your father, like a big balloon you're holding down," she added. "Just let go. Let him soar."

Two hours passed, then Medium João came out and greeted the crowd. Once again, he passed his hand across his face and then he strode forward, speaking in a voice that was about three octaves deeper. It was as though he'd grown even taller as the oration boomed out of his chest. His eyes looked almost black. Even his hair seemed to stand up a little straighter. It was eerie how decisively he changed. This was Saint Ignatius of Loyola, and he blessed the large baskets of bread that had been placed at his feet, and then retired to the Entity's room. Two thousand people would file past him today.

As I stood in line once again with Heather, I hoped that this time I'd feel something special. After all, this was my last chance to ask for the Entity's help. Although I had been moved by my week at the Casa, I'd only heard about other people's miracles. I couldn't say I'd experienced one myself.

He sat in his chair, beside a four-foot-high crystal that glowed with gold and white light. His clothes were simple: a white, short-sleeved dress shirt and white cotton slacks. He looked at me briefly, while Heather poured out a torrent of Portuguese on my behalf. "Always look him in the eye," she'd advised, noting that would allow him to work on me all the more intensely. He reached out and took the photo of my father, examining it before handing it back to Heather, delivering a few quick sentences and then gesturing to the next person in line.

"What did he say?" I whispered.

"He wants you to sit in his Current and represent your father," Heather said. "He said he is taking care of things for you and your family. He is working on you." She led me to a bench beneath a skylight. Rays of sun slanted through the ceiling. I sat down, placed my hands in my lap, and closed my eyes.

Immediately I found myself floating in the lake at my family's summer cottage in Canada. It was a familiar place; since I was about 14, every night I was there my father would accompany me on an early evening swim, driving his boat slowly beside me, making sure I didn't run into trouble or another boat's propeller. In the middle of the lake I would often stop swimming for a moment and tread water as the sun dipped low, turning the water to bronze and washing the clouds with jewel colors. I would see my father, with his golden retriever, Bear, next to him, looking out at the lake, a place he loved more than anywhere else.

It was dreamy and beautiful, and instead of sobbing, as I'd expected, I reveled in moments and conversations I'd had with my father. I felt as though I was literally reliving them. Three hours later, when a round of prayers marked the Entity's exit and the end of the day, it seemed as if no time had passed. When I stood up, I felt shaky and woozy and mellow.

What is it we're hoping for when we ask to be healed? To lose an attitude that's holding us back? To lay down a psychic burden? Is it, simply, the ability to be happy at all times? "To learn to love ourselves," Heather had said earlier in the week, "that's the lifelong work." Whatever was going on in this town, it was in service of that goal. Maybe we couldn't fully understand the process yet, but that didn't make it less real. "It's like this," Zsolt told me. "A hundred years ago if someone showed you an iPhone, you wouldn't have believed it. Everything is always progressing. We know so little and our senses are limited, so limited." If you aren't open to the mystery, in other words, you'll never glimpse it. In Abadiânia that veil between the seen and the unseen is a tissue-thin paper full of rips. It is a place not only where miracles happen, but where no one thinks that is unusual.

Only weeks after I returned from the Casa would I fully realize how powerful my time there had been—how, in fact, the grief weighing me down had simply disappeared, replaced by peace. People would remark that I looked lighter; some claimed the difference was startling. I would hear myself laugh again. And before I left Abadiânia I would have the chance to speak to Medium João privately while he rested after a long afternoon, his face looking tired but content, and he would tell me: "I am the happiest man in the world because I believe in eternal life."

But for now there was this moment, in the Current. As I sat on the hard-backed bench, I was in that blissful place where I now knew my father was. He stood in the boat and I floated beside him in the water. And I felt light and warm, as though suspended in a golden liquid. He was smiling, and as he looked at me I felt an amazing wave of love, so intense that I leaned back against the bench. It was so strong and it came so quickly that for a moment I felt scared. But then I heard his voice, loud and clear, yet gentle: "I'm here," he said, looking directly at me. "I'm with you. And that love is me. I am here. I will always be here."

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