



Juana Alicia, *The Spiral Word, Codex Estanfor* (© 2012. See the full mural online at <https://elcentro.stanford.edu/about-us/our-murals>.)

## An Ode to Life

STACY HASSEN

*A breath breathed in to a symbol with awareness carries the light of consciousness born from the unconscious and that light has the power to change the world.*

In 2012, the year of the Mayan Calendar prophecy of the end of an era and the beginning of a great shift in consciousness, artist Juana Alicia painted *The Spiral Word*, a series of murals on the interior walls of the Xicanx student center at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. (*Xicanx* is a gender-neutral neologism and identity referring to people of Mexican and Latin American descent in the United States.)

The murals symbolically reside at a place of intersection—on land once tended by indigenous Ohlone peoples who honored spirit in every aspect of life, and later, where in a small garage nearby, Apple computer was born, jumpstarting the technological revolution that created Silicon Valley. The existence of these murals in this location honors cultural indigeneity and ancestry rooted richly in symbolic image and earth-based wisdom. The inspired visual narrative contains a quality of sacred presence.

Spirals appear throughout the murals, as shells and breath, in material and spiritual form, echoing the patterns and energy that shape the living cosmos. Arising from a deep connection to the unconscious with *corazón y alma*, heart and soul, the murals alter the atmosphere of the university building, creating a mythic, outside-of-time space that invites contemplation. Passion and potency arrest the senses in a narrative that encompasses Indigenous culture.

I pause to catch my breath when I am with the murals' figures and images. A soulful resonance seeps into my pores and conscious awareness. What emerges is deep compassion, grieving, and honoring. Injustice, indignity, struggle, and sacrifice are visible, experienced as intensely important in a cultural climate that today still echoes countless cries of suppression. Then I am surprised by an underlying thread, an effervescence of joy.



A Mesoamerican deity and a scribe who pens stories on an unfolding codex grace the first panel in the entryway. Breath has its origins in the sculpted stone ancestor/deity who wears the Mesoamerican mask where the invisible breath is made visible. Life-giving essence emerges from the heart of the deity as visible inspiration and circulates into the pen of the scribe, carrying glyphs like seeds.

As blowing on an ember enlivens a fire, bringing the unconscious to conscious awareness reveals its patterns and their meanings. The masked god relates to the archetype of the lungs that sustain life. With the first or primary blow, breath, or wind, creation appears.

In the Yucatan Maya language, *respiracion* is “life, spirit, breath” and “breath” is *múusik*, akin to music in English. Breath animates our being, the languages we speak, and the songs we sing. Breathing contains the essential life force, the Atman and pure spirit that unites the opposites dwelling in all beings. On his journeys into the unconscious, Jung met *Atmavictu*, whose name means “the breath of life.” This animating spirit flows through the large mural’s central figure—a red-robed Mercedes Sosa singing “Gracias a la Vida.” Her song pours forth as an atmospheric river of breath enriched by gratitude for this gift of life: the ordinary and the extraordinary (you can hear her singing “Gracias a la Vida” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cIrGQD84F1g>). This reciprocity contains a humility and wisdom that helps align us with transformative potential and healing.

An instrument in the evolution of consciousness to fulfill the Mayan prophecy, *The Spiral Word* serves as an ode to life. This consciousness, visible in the emerging archetypes represented in the murals, is resonant with indigenous ways of working with the symbolic world. In recognition of the sacredness of the inner world and its power to heal, respect for cultural diversity and unity return. Human beings are instrumental in this process as life conspires to know itself. Our attention and reflective capacity become the conscious breath we give back to life.

The young woman of the future, with love flowing from her own breath, is the integration of spirit and matter. She is at peace and whole in herself while she scribes to her ancestors. Kinetic energy illuminates the air as an awakened consciousness sings the song of its own divine nature and breath flows again in the trees, the mycelial network, and the song lines of the Earth.





Juana Alicia, *The Spiral Word* detail of *Mayan Scribe* (© 2012)





Juana Alicia, *The Spiral Word, Resistance and Revolution* (© 2012)



Juana Alicia, *The Spiral Word, El Futuro* (© 2012)

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In gratitude to Juana Alicia for allowing us to journey with *The Spiral Word*. Visit her website at [www.juanaalicia.com](http://www.juanaalicia.com). To contribute to her Indiegogo campaign to restore Para las Rosas Mural in San Francisco's Mission district go to <https://brava.secure.force.com/donate/?dfId=a0n2M00000vMjwfQAC&>.

**NOTE**

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