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Issue 27 Nov-Feb 2004/05
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What Is Enlightenment? is dedicated to a revolution in human consciousness and human culture. Guided by the always-evolving vision of founder Andrew Cohen, whose tireless passion for spiritual inquiry continues to push the edge of contemporary thinking, we are in search of a radical new moral and philosophical architecture for twenty-first-century society. We believe that finding this framework for transformation—rooted in the timeless revelation of enlightenment, reaching toward a truly coherent ethics for the postmodern world—is imperative, not only for the evolution of our species, but for our very survival. By asking the hard questions of the new science and the ancient traditions, of art and culture, of business and politics, *What Is Enlightenment?* seeks to create a dynamic context for conscious engagement with the greatest challenges of our times, a groundwork for the ongoing liberation of human potential.

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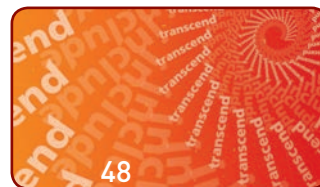
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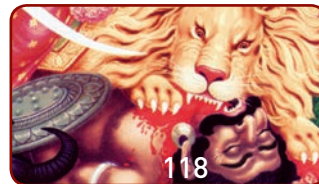
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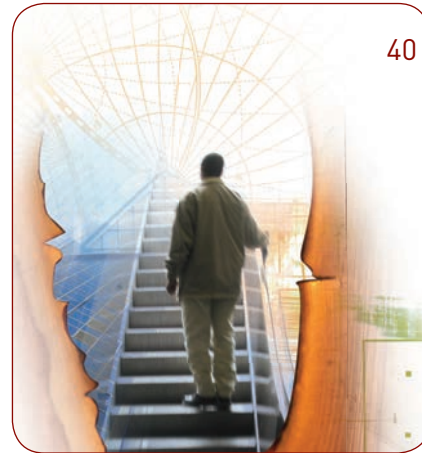


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Issue 26
August-October 2004

Send your letters to
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OUR INTERNAL SPIRITUAL WAR

Your latest edition ["Is God a Pacifist?" Aug-Oct 2004] "struck" (or perhaps that word might be considered, like "force," to be politically incorrect) a real note with me. As the daughter, wife, sister-in-law, and aunt in a military family, I admit—as one on a very serious spiritual path—to being a bit more conflicted by this very topic than many might have reason to be. And yet, I still believe there are times when we *are* called to action. There *is* such a thing as a righteous war. Evil *does* exist and we are *not* meant to turn our heads away, wish it away, march it away, even (dare I say it) pray it away.

That said, I also believe that what is in our minds, our hearts, and our consciousness at these times *IS* the critical issue. Is war entered into with malice, with hatred, with power, with reward, with retribution in mind? If so, we have definitely stepped away from God Consciousness. Those I loved, and who served honorably, admirably, and definitely unselfishly did so because they accepted a sense of responsibility

for family/community/country. Today's world asks us to look at a global community. As long as there is hatred in our hearts, or a strong attachment to being "right" in our individual minds, we cannot succeed in creating the peaceful, loving world so many of our often verbally violent pacifists cry out for. God's ultimate challenge to each of us is to individually wage our internal spiritual war, leading ultimately to the cessation of war entirely.

Elaine Bitterman

Bloomfield Hills, MI

HEY OSAMA, LET'S TALK

Is God a Pacifist? What a ridiculous question! It is true that all through our long history, humans have stumbled into physical violence because they had no skills in conflict resolution. But times change. Conflict resolution has now reached such an advanced stage that *any* quarrel can be defused and settled without hitting each other over the head. Our latest example comes with bin Laden. Angry people are not "evil," and anyone watching the tapes of bin Laden must see that he is not a raving lunatic. Had efforts been made to send one of our own religious leaders or a *WIE* rep to talk with him (the businessmen who run this country are totally inept for such a task) together with a conflict resolution expert, 9/11 need not have happened! We humans go on fumbling into violence, while God waits patiently for us to grow up.

William Duff, PhD

Los Angeles, CA

KILL OR BE KILLED

Those who cite the Sixth Commandment—"Thou shalt not kill"—as the basis for their objection to war and capital punishment need to know that the King James Bible translation is inaccurate. It has misled people to conclude that the commandment prohibits all killing. Actually, the Bible prohibits

taking an innocent human life.

Biblical scholarship shows clearly that the accurate translation is "Thou shalt not commit murder." There is a significant difference. In Hebraic law of Old Testamental times, murder was defined as unlawfully taking a life—i.e., causing the death of an innocent person. There were various degrees of homicide recognized, ranging from accidental and unintended cases of death to the worst form of homicide—premeditated murder. The penalty prescribed for premeditated murder was capital punishment. (See the entry for "murder" in *Harper's Bible Dictionary*.) So conscientious objectors who argue that the Bible prohibits all killing are misinformed, as are opponents of capital punishment who base their position on the Sixth Commandment.

Chaplains and other religious authorities should explain to military people that the Sixth Commandment does not say "Thou shalt not kill" and that not all killing is wrong. "Thou shalt not commit murder" does not apply to warriors engaged in combat, where it is kill or be killed and everyone understands that. It is legitimate to kill an enemy in war. Someone shooting at you is not an innocent person and there is no reason to feel guilty about shooting back in deadly fashion. Feeling regret, yes, because life is sacred and nations should be able to settle their differences without war and killing. But feeling guilt, no.

John White

via email

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORCE AND VIOLENCE

Issue 26 was very interesting, especially the interviews with John McCarthy and Robert Wright. John McCarthy's attitude toward his captivity and his captors is an overwhelming example of what Wright demands: that people try

to understand what it feels like to be in other people's shoes.

There is one thing I don't understand. Why—in the Cohen/Wilber dialogue as well as in “Is God a Pacifist?”—are the differences between force and violence blurred? Police force and police violence for example are very different things, police force being something necessary to protect society from wrongdoers, police violence threatening constitutional rights. During wars, there are a lot of people killed who have done nothing wrong—they only happen to live in the wrong country.

Why don't you consider more thoroughly the opinion of General Douglas MacArthur, who certainly knows a lot more about modern war than the legendary Krishna does? Having a regard for one's duty helps only when you are on the right side. That which St. Thomas Aquinas requires for a war to be just (authority of a sovereign, a just cause, a rightful intention) can always

be found by those who want to go to war, and it has always been found even by dictators. A sense of duty can always be abused. So a moral directive must come from somewhere else because sometimes, only afterwards is it possible for everyone to see which one is the side with the just cause.

Karin Maack

Remseck, Germany

A GOD'S EYE VIEW

Regarding the article “Is God a Pacifist?” in the summer issue, although I am very much in sympathy with the conclusions, I have some reservations about the methodology. The article is not researching God's stand on the matter but rather that of religious authorities and scripture. Is God doctrinaire, is he a moralist, does he take fixed positions on the affairs of man? I don't think so! If God is the pure consciousness that reality is made of, it seems elementary that, like life itself,

he can evolve into innumerable forms, as the situation demands.

It also seems elementary that the only way to settle this debate is to go directly to the source. Since no one can document that they talk to God, although some make that claim, it seems that the only solution is to be God and then see how you feel about the matter. Is this possible? Is this not ultimately what enlightenment is about? Or should the name of the magazine be changed to “What Does Religion Teach Us?”

Dr. Jeff Eisen

via email

SLEEPING WITH GURUS:

A MAN'S PERSPECTIVE

Having just read about ten women's experiences in Jessica Roemischer's article (“Women Who Sleep with Their Gurus,” Aug-Oct 2004), I want to share my thoughts as a man who has been on the other side. A few years ago, when I was about 50, I reached a place where

inward | outward

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—Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche

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I felt complete and powerful as a man. Suddenly I was attractive to women. A small group of young people gathered around me and sat at my feet as I proclaimed about life, love, etc. Of course, one always shared my bed. I became a mini guru.

Fortunately, I eventually stopped and took a good look at myself, and at these women who were so eager to share my bed. My ego had done a wonderful job of convincing me that I had moved beyond my ego! It also encouraged me to believe that I was actually benefiting these women by introducing them to tantric sex. But now I feel that I possibly even stole part of their normal progression through life's sexual stages from them. I had misinterpreted these young women's wide openness as advanced spirituality instead of what it really was. Without exception, every one of these women had been abused in some way, or abandoned, by their fathers. Because of abuse by men, some of them did

not know how to set boundaries or say "No"—especially to an older, supposedly wise man.

I know that every one of my partners wanted to be with me, to some extent. They were all theoretically mature women able to decide for themselves whose bed they wanted to sleep in. But surely the role of a "teacher" of either sex is to transcend their own problems, needs, and desires, and totally serve the other who has come to them for assistance. The question for me would be: Does this really serve the follower's best long-term interests, or is it just short-term ego gratification?

River Howe

Golden Bay, New Zealand

THE MYTH OF WOMAN AS VICTIM

Your article, "Women Who Sleep with Their Gurus," had a deep impact on the way I look at sexual relationships. Having recently found my guru, I can see

how the ecstatic feelings associated with that relationship can be confused with how one feels when one falls in love. It was eye-opening how you dispelled the myth of woman as victim. It is important that we, as women, assume our share of the responsibility in these types of relationships. Your article also seemed to point to the need for women to come together. The honesty between the women in the article highlighted a need to build trust with each other—that in order to feel secure in our relationships with men, we must first be secure in our relationships with each other. You pulled me toward the bigger question: Who am I without a man?

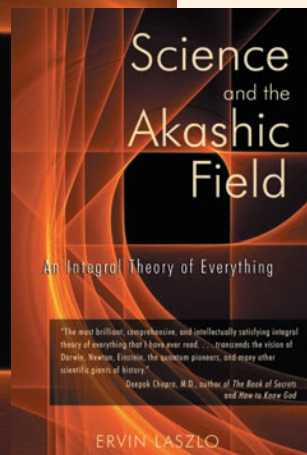
Kate Francomacaro

New York, New York

COMING OUT OF THE CLOSET

I was one of the women interviewed in Jessica Roemischer's excellent article about women who have love affairs with

continued on page 149



Science and the Akashic Field

An Integral Theory of Everything
ERVIN LASZLO

Mystics and sages have long maintained that there exists an interconnecting cosmic field at the roots of reality that conserves and conveys information, a field known as the Akashic record. This field holds the record of all that ever happened in life, on Earth, and in the cosmos and relates it to all that is yet to happen. Scientist and philosopher Ervin Laszlo lends credence to our deepest intuitions of the oneness of life and the whole of creation.

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Andrew Cohen

What Is Enlightenment?

Founder and Editor-in-Chief

I FOUND MYSELF IN AN AMUSING POSITION WHILE I was working closely with the youngest member of our editorial team during the research and writing of her feature on the Kabbalah Centre. Maura O'Connor is a bright, twenty-two-year-old Irish-American woman, and after several months of intensive study, she spent many hours patiently enlightening me, a forty-nine-year-old Jewish man, about the extraordinary history and cosmology of Kabbalah, the mystical or "secret" teachings of Judaism. Brought up in New York City as a secular Jew, I couldn't help but marvel at the hilarious irony of the scene. A young *goy*, a girl, of all people, educating me about a teaching traditionally reserved for Jewish men over forty!

I also worked extensively with another of our young editors, Ross Robertson, a twenty-nine-year-old recent graduate of the writing program at Naropa University, who wrote our feature on the *Celestine Prophecy* movie. Ross got to spend three days on the set in Florida with the cast and crew during the making of the film, soaking up the generosity of James Redfield and his colleagues. After his return, he and I spent a lot of time together discussing his research into the fascinating history of nontraditional spirituality and the New Age, in preparation for the writing of his piece. Both Maura and Ross are young and inexperienced, so I knew that I would have to devote a significant amount of time to helping them grapple with the enormous challenge of writing a feature article that not only conveys relevant information, but also expresses a depth of perspective that will compel the reader to think in new ways.

Predictably, both of my young colleagues hit a wall in themselves when faced with having to stretch beyond their previous achievements in order to meet my demands for depth in their writing. What was most interesting and incredibly ironic about their predicament was that while they were both trying to address the lack of depth in secular American culture and the search for it in popular forms of spirituality, they were themselves confronted with their own tendencies to be glib and superficial. As Ross himself describes so candidly in his piece, "we are hungry for depth at the same time that we relentlessly avoid it." Indeed, I had to struggle with these two young Americans to get them to dig deep enough in themselves to find access to some real authenticity.

And this is, I believe, our great challenge as a culture—to liberate our hearts and minds from the two-dimensional, homogenized, superficial picture of the human experience that we are not only embedded in but deeply attached to. With this magazine, we are trying, in our own small way, to help penetrate our collective malaise and awaken a passion for depth, authenticity, and *meaning*. There is no greater pleasure in life than to meet another beyond the layers of falsehood and pretense, where our *raison d'être* is no longer something we have to search for, but is suddenly the very ground we are standing on.

Andrew Cohen



Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa with H.H. the Dalai Lama

reaching toward synthesis

A gathering of visionary-activists looks for the next step

"We must be quite a sight," I thought to myself as I took my place in the line of beaming faces stretching out from the retreat center's front door. Pakistani diplomat, Chinese nun, Indian doctor, Native American shaman, American biologist, Austrian monk. And across from us, another line, parallel with ours, making a near perfect aisle out to the curb: African-American minister, Sri Lankan activist, Thai social critic, Chilean economist, Brazilian guru.

If any of the locals had been able to see us through the driveway's house-high iron gates, they could only have thought one thing. We must have been

waiting to greet the Pope. A few blocks from the pontiff's seasonal residence in Castelgandolfo, on the rim of an ancient volcano overlooking the breathtaking Lago di Albano, the spacious retreat center had been built for the express purpose of hosting his summer audiences. But as the gates parted and the police-led procession of cars rushed to a stop, it was to be a different spiritual leader who would soon hold our collective attention in thrall. A wave of joy rippled through the crowd as the Dalai Lama climbed out, looking surprisingly bright after his long flight from India (on one of only two

planes allowed in Italian airspace that day, the other being Air Force One), and exchanged a low bow with the group.

From the outside, it might have looked like the beginning of just another day of speechmaking and handshaking for the exiled Tibetan leader. But this was no ordinary audience. As world-renowned Thai social activist Sulak Sivaraksa stepped forward from the crowd and bent to touch the smiling monk's feet, His Holiness reciprocated the gesture, making it clear that in his own eyes, he was among peers.

It was the kind of gathering that most new-paradigm pundits would die

In a time when more and more people are recognizing the need to harness our collective wisdom for the sake of the future, this superpowered spiritual/social think tank would seem to be just what the doctor ordered.

for. Forty luminaries called together from the corners of the globe for a week of dialogues on “The Courage of Evolutionary Leadership.” On hand were renowned social activists like South Africa’s Ela Gandhi (yes, his granddaughter) and Sri Lanka’s A.T. Ariyaratne, founder of the Sarvodaya movement (widely hailed as the most successful grassroots social change effort in the world); religious luminaries like Brother David Steindl-Rast, Rabbi Marc Gafni, and Dhyani Ywahoo; a handful of scholars, scientists, thought leaders, and philanthropists; and at the helm, a cadre of progressive ministers who make up the Association for Global New Thought (AGNT) leadership council.

The brainchild of conversations between the Dalai Lama, his longtime friend Brother Wayne Teasdale, and AGNT executive director Barbara

Bernstein, the gathering, known as “The Synthesis Dialogues,” was first convened in 1999 as an attempt to cultivate a group of “visionary-activists” who “can help restore global sanity by reuniting the inner and outer, heaven and earth, in an earnest endeavor toward synthesis.” Aiming far beyond conventional modes of discourse, the Dialogues’ stated goal is nothing less than the establishment of a “meta-mind,” or group intelligence, from which to tackle the challenges facing our planet. In a time when more and more people are recognizing the need to harness our collective wisdom for the sake of the future, this superpowered spiritual/social think tank—now in its third incarnation—would seem to be just what the doctor ordered.

We had begun our adventure a few days before His Holiness’s arrival with an entire day of formal introductory speeches—a daunting prospect in any other circumstance, but in this company it was riveting. Jawdat Said, a Syrian Sufi activist, gripped the room with his passionate declaration that only a commitment to truth can transform the world. Ela Gandhi spoke about her desperation over her inability to impact the declining state of the poor in her country. Investment banker Azim Khamisa told of the crisis he faced when his nineteen-year-old son was killed by a gang member, and the redemption he found in enlisting the murderer’s grandfather in a nationwide campaign



against gang violence—a campaign that will soon be joined by his son’s killer himself, upon his release from prison. By the end of the first day, after listening to one impassioned heart after another give voice to their deepest concerns and highest ideals, there was a tangible sense that we were indeed becoming one body, unified in a field of respect and admiration for each other and for the universal aspiration that had called us together.

On this foundation, we would proceed over the coming days to grapple with a series of questions on our designated topic, under the facilitation of the AGNT leadership team. Each session was carefully orchestrated, beginning with a serenade or singalong led by New Thought Gospel diva Rickie Byars Beckwith, a period of prayer or meditation, and a seed question or dialogical exercise to guide our inquiry. Cutting a swath between the theoretical and the practical, the personal and the political, the dialogues were at times lively, at times sober, and at times even poignant—like when the Dalai Lama spoke of a conversation with one of his monks who, upon recounting harrowing tales of oppression under the Chinese, confessed that his greatest fear was that he would lose his compassion for his oppressors.

As anyone who has attempted interreligious dialogue knows, however, it can be a tricky business—particularly when those in the circle are leaders



Synthesis Director Barbara Bernstein and Rev. Michael Beckwith



H.H. the Dalai Lama and Syrian Sufi activist Jawdat Said

whose participation in groups usually takes the form of inspiring and guiding others. And as the microphone passed from one set of hands to the next, we soon realized we were by no means the exception to the rule. At times, we had trouble following a thread of conversation. Nearly all of us found it easier to make passionate speeches than to respond simply and directly to what another had said. And when the Dalai Lama joined us midway, almost everyone had a hard time knowing how to meet him on the level ground he offered. (With perhaps a few notable exceptions—such as when Sulak Sivaraksa boldly, if lightheartedly, suggested that perhaps the next Dalai Lama should be a woman.) But I think it was our collective response to these difficulties that, more than anything, produced the magic that would leave such a deep impression on all of us. Seeing the humility and generosity of spirit expressed by all in the face of these simple human challenges, and the genuine desire to be together that kept shining through, had the effect

of fusing us at the level of the heart, however difficult it seemed to attain the “meta-mind.”

In the midst of all this, I don’t know whether we managed to get any clearer about “The Courage of Evolutionary Leadership,” but Synthesis director Barbara Bernstein had explained to me at the beginning of the week that her own goals for the Dialogues were ultimately more relational than topical. She felt that if we could get such a high-level group of people to connect in a meaningful way, what would come out of that would be its own kind of success. And beyond simply creating this cohesive group, Bernstein also wanted to foster a commitment to working together over the months and years ahead. So it was no surprise when, at her prompting, a host of ideas for potential ongoing collaborative projects began to emerge in our closing sessions—among them an internationally publicized interfaith Middle-East pilgrimage, uniting thousands of Muslims, Christians, and Jews in retracing “The Footsteps of Abraham.” In the midst of this brain-

storm, the recognition dawned in the group that if we were all to unite behind a single cause, with our combined spheres of influence we could reach tens if not hundreds of millions of people worldwide with one message. And in this light, the true significance of the bond that had formed between us began to reveal itself.

After breakfast on our last morning, amid the sea of warm good-byes, I went for a last walk with my newfound friend Rabbi Marc Gafni in the retreat center’s well-groomed gardens. “How did this measure up to other interfaith meetings you’ve attended?” I asked as we traversed the stone paths. “I don’t usually come to these sorts of gatherings,” replied the Rabbi, who presides over a large spiritual community in Israel. “I went to one in my early twenties, but it was a kind of superficial love-fest in which there was no real engagement with ideas. The message was, ‘We’re all the same. We all love each other.’ But that sameness actually isn’t real love. Real love comes from differentiation,



Alfredo Sfeir-Younis of the World Bank and Brother David Steindl-Rast

the gospel according to pop culture

Buffy, Neo, and Dr. Seuss bring Christian morals to the mainstream



Recently the book *What Would Buffy Do? The Vampire Slayer as Spiritual Guide* turned up at the offices of WIE asking politely to be reviewed. For those who missed the fun, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* was a tremendously popular TV series that aired from 1997 to 2003 and starred Sarah Michelle Gellar as a teenager whose life revolved around homework, hanging out, and combating the gruesome undead. But running beneath all the comedy and action was a strong moral and spiritual undercurrent, as Buffy confronted questions of love and hate, and life and death, and also took frequent metaphysical sojourns into matters of life *after* death. So perhaps it was inevitable that a theologian (author Jana Riess) would write a book highlighting its spiritual significance. After all, illuminating the religious themes hidden in popular entertainment has been a favorite activity among many of the theologically inclined for at least four decades.

It began in 1964 with the publication of Robert L. Short's classic treatise *The Gospel According to Peanuts*, which introduced millions to the Christian parables hidden within a popular, and seemingly secular, comic strip. Forty years later, this genre is more prevalent than ever, with "The Gospel According to . . ." titles spanning the worlds of Tolkien, Harry Potter, the Simpsons, and Dr. Seuss. There's even *The Gospel Reloaded: Exploring Spirituality and Faith in the Matrix*, which contains such passages as: "Our own introduction to a life of faith, like that of Neo, revolves

around seeing ourselves in a new way: redeemed, transformed. Once we grasp our new identity, we become ready to walk the path of faith."

As I read through these books, it became clear that religious messages might potentially be found pervading *all* of pop culture, if one simply had the eyes to glean the spiritual truths from the secular dross. But then I began to wonder: Is this spiritualization of popular movies and literature actually revealing a spiritual depth *inherent* within them? Or is it simply using pop culture's voice to help elevate traditional religious principles in the eyes of millions of disaffected Gen-Y and -Xers, for whom pop culture is indeed the new religion of choice? Somehow, as with many mysteries of the postmodern age, it seems to be a strange blend of both—with actual moral themes shining through as they would with any good story, but the story's parallels to a particular religious tradition often being drawn through bizarre leaps of imagination.

"The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel reminds me of Sam-I-am," writes former Methodist pastor James W. Kemp in *The Gospel According to Dr. Seuss*. "He is handed a plate of green eggs and ham in the form of a scroll 'with words of lamentation and mourning and woe' (Ezekiel 2:10). The scroll symbolizes the entrée—the message—that Ezekiel is to offer to the children of Israel. . . . Yet it is not surprising that the children of Israel might not agree with his tastes in cuisine."

The moral of this story? Sunday school ain't what it used to be.

Tom Huston

profound engagement with ideas, even conflict, and then the transcending of conflict to realize our deep, common, profound oneness. I think here we were closer to that. At the beginning I think we were in sameness, which was very sweet, very nice. But by the last day, we got to a real level of oneness. And that was good. I'm really glad I came."

As I boarded my bus for the airport, I wondered to myself when I would possibly have a chance to spend time with such an extraordinary group of people again. As fate would have it, I didn't have to wait long. Returning to the office, I learned that plans were already underway for our journey to the next interfaith gathering, the Parliament of the World's Religions [see story, p. 102], where, as it turned out, in just three weeks' time I'd have an opportunity to see many of my new friends again.

Craig Hamilton

pulpit

the actualization of divinity

by Audrey Kitagawa



Audrey Kitagawa is the advisor at the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for Children and Armed Conflict. She is also the spiritual leader of a worldwide community based in Honolulu. The following remarks were made at a panel presentation on global consciousness at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona, Spain, in July 2004.



I believe that in each of us, there is the voice of advocacy and there is the voice of inspiration. The voice of advocacy helps us to be aware of what exactly is going on in the global landscape, because we cannot live in this modern world ignorant of the suffering of our brothers and sisters. We must do what it takes to raise the awareness all over the world that suffering has a human face and that we cannot live independently of each other but must be fully engaged in all of the issues that concern our human family. Ultimately, we do belong to one human family, and we do live in one home, and that home is the Earth. So we must fully understand that we do not live separate lives; that we are all intertwined and interconnected; and that your suffering is my suffering, your joy is my joy, the upliftment of one person is the upliftment of all persons, and the degradation of one human being is the degradation of all of us.

I'd like to call attention to the fact that between 1986 and 1996 alone, we had well over three hundred thousand children involuntarily conscripted to fight in adult wars. If ever you want to decimate a people and a culture, what you will do is decimate its children. Using our children as commodities of war is reprehensible, and we must do our best to protect and save them, because they are our treasures and the progenitors of our future. If we want to see how civilized any culture is, we must study how it is treating its children. And when we understand that half of the refugees in the world are children, we have to seriously examine how we, as so-called civilized people, are allowing such situations to occur.

At the same time, the voice of advocacy must ultimately be rooted in the voice of inspiration. And the voice

of inspiration finds as its source and its wellspring our intimate individual and collective connection to the divine source. We must come to understand that the realization of that divinity is not somewhere far away in the heavens but right here within the sacred chamber of our own hearts. And the actualization of the divine in daily life comes from our ability to love and live love in our own lives, as a daily discipline in our thoughts, in our speech, and in our actions. We need to turn the searchlight inward and undertake a ceaseless, fearless self-examination to see how we must change. We have to be able to expunge all arrogance and egoism, to come to that humble state of "not I but Thou," "not my will but Thy will." We must be in that state of surrender where we will receive wisdom from the still, small voice of God that is already within our heart and is speaking to us every moment that we live. And when we talk about realizing God, we must realize that God is in the magnificence of the ordinariness of daily life. God is in how we share our love, heart to heart, with our brothers and sisters, in our own families, within our own communities. Are our thoughts kind and loving? Is our speech kind and loving? Are our actions kind and loving? For we cannot talk about all that is going on in the global landscape, we cannot talk about love as a philosophy, and not be able to bring that love into how we are living our daily lives.

So for all of us, this speaks to a profound personal responsibility. Each of us has value, each of our lives counts, and what we do in the world has an impact upon the collective. Therefore, we must never abdicate our personal responsibility to do our best to live rightly, to be in union with the divine, to actualize the divinity in our daily lives, by living love. □

democracy gets a 21st-century makeover

An internet initiative is making plans for a post-UN global government

How does the Declaration of Independence go? "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that the world can be made a better place through the evolution of consciousness and culture . . ." Oops, that's not Jefferson. That's integralworldgovernment.org—the brainchild of Steve McIntosh, a Colorado businessman with a passion for transforming politics as we know it into politics as we have never known it but only imagine it could be. Indeed, picture an integral world federation focused not only on economic and political development but on the development of the actual consciousness of any given society. "Every problem in the world is a problem of consciousness," explains McIntosh, "and every answer involves the evolution of consciousness."

Contrary to many contemporary visions of one world government, McIntosh doesn't associate himself with left-wing ideals, and he is skeptical that the UN system could ever evolve into the next-stage global governing institution needed to handle the complexity of the

twenty-first century. A world federation, he explains, has to be developed by those who are awakening to an integral, evolutionary view of human life—a view inspired in the early part of the century by such visionaries as Sri Aurobindo and Alfred North Whitehead, and further developed in our own time by philosophers like Clare Graves, Ken Wilber, and David Ray Griffin. And just like in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when, as he puts it, "democracy brought people into modernist consciousness," McIntosh hopes that a compelling new vision of global governance can help inspire people and pull them into a deeper and higher integral view of human life. Sound exciting? Well then, this is your chance to be one of the signatories of a *new* Declaration of Independence, courtesy of web technology. McIntosh may not be today's Jefferson, but he is trying to get the ball rolling with a conversation about our global future that is way past due.

Carter Phipps



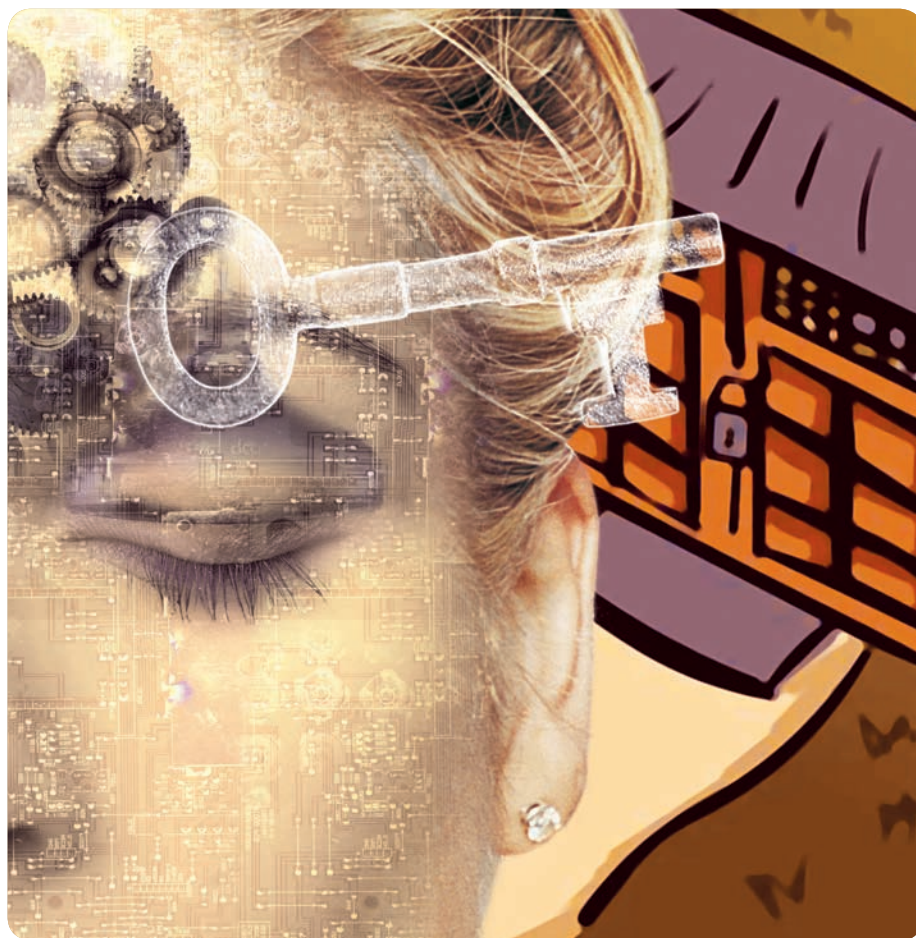
stranger than science fiction

The World Future Society's annual conference takes a brave look at the culture of tomorrow

In a time when most of us are barely keeping up with the present, trying to predict the future might seem like a pastime best left to sci-fi writers. But for the more than nine hundred would-be seers who gathered in Washington, DC, for the World Future Society's July 2004 conference, *Creating the Future Now*, gazing into our collective crystal ball is serious business. Now in its thirty-fourth year, the annual weekend conference has become a kind of reunion and cross-pollination point for that emerging breed of visionaries, "social architects," "whole systems thinkers," "global change-makers," and good ol' fashioned futurists who have dedicated themselves to helping humanity chart its course into an increasingly unpredictable tomorrow. And to quote Ray Kurzweil quoting Aldous Huxley in the opening plenary, it will indeed be a "brave new world." With animal-free "meat factories" (growing cloned muscle tissue) already in the early planning stages, silicon chips to boost brain power just around the corner, and the promise of eternal (physical) life only decades away, it seems that reality may soon be stranger than even science fiction.

Are human beings ready for that much change? Do we have the moral and ethical foundation to deal with the coming biotech, nanotech, and artificial intelligence revolutions that will rapidly transform the very definition of what it means to be human? Although such questions were not quite given their due that muggy July weekend, one thing Kurzweil and others did make clear is that hitting our technological brakes is probably not an option, as the very technologies we fear the most are also those from which we have the most to gain. Which leaves the imperative squarely on us to make sure that the values guiding the implementation of those technologies are those born of the better angels of our nature. Now, more than ever, the future is indeed in our hands.

Craig Hamilton



where the ghost in the machine comes to play

Test your psychic skills online with Dean Radin's Psi Arcade

Interested in investigating what could be the internet's most entertaining paranormal phenomenon? If so, then pay a visit to the Psi Arcade (www.psiarcade.com), where you'll find a series of ESP (or "psi") tests in the form of quasi-adventure games created by Dean Radin, renowned parapsychologist and senior scientist at the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS). The first of these games is called "The Garden of Dreams" and features six different activities designed to assess—and potentially to help develop—players' psychic abilities. Want to test your intuition? From a selection of five different keys, try sensing the correct one that will unlock the gate to the game's

Japanese garden. How about your precognition skills? While gazing into a reflecting pool, try to predict the future by choosing three words that best describe the picture that is going to *randomly* appear in the pool *after* you've finished describing it. And if your psychokinesis is in good shape, you can leave your hands at home and use your mental powers alone to help a small butterfly land in a tree—while a random series of wind gusts belabors your efforts by trying to blow the poor creature away.

Players receive immediate statistical feedback after each attempted puzzle, and a Hall of Fame gallery lets each player see how his or her abilities fare against those of other gamers. These

stats, however, are more than mere entertainment. The IONS Research Department is collecting the data from registered users of the Psi Arcade to analyze psychic capacities among the general population, with a view toward understanding how these abilities vary between cultures. Radin recently told *WIE* that his previous online psi project, still hosted by the Boundary Institute at www.gotpsi.org, has recorded nearly forty million trials so far from people all over the world, and in its first year it recorded more data than *sixty years'* worth of experiments conducted by the famed parapsychologist J.B. Rhine. Radin notes in his statistical analysis of the Boundary Institute experiment that the benefits of online testing have not gone unnoticed by other, more mundane behavioral researchers, with results suggesting that "certain types of web-based psychology studies are at least as valid as laboratory tests, if not more so."

A new addition to the Psi Arcade, a series of games called "The Halls of Healing," will "test the roles of intention, attention, and intuition in intentional healing," enabling players both to guess the ailments of animated characters and also to mentally "heal" them. Fans of *The Wild Divine* will want to take notice, too, as the serene biofeedback adventure game (see *WIE* Feb-April 2004) teams up with IONS to create the next generation of interactive spirituality: an expansion pack of new *Wild Divine* adventures utilizing the best of both worlds—biofeedback controls *and* psi powers. Due for release by the end of this year, it will no doubt continue charting the evolution of video games into territory that Sony and Nintendo apparently haven't yet foreseen.

Tom Huston

a not-so-trivial pursuit

ENLIGHTEN: a new board game puts your faith to the test

Enlighten is a board game with a higher purpose: besides its pure entertainment value, it seeks to help promote religious tolerance following 9/11. "People are waking up to the impact of faith traditions on politics, economics, and world peace," says Christa Reynolds, the inspired San Francisco yoga instructor who created the game (with the aid of California Institute of Integral Studies PhD candidate Charles Flores). "We simply need to know more so that we judge less."

Modeled after Trivial Pursuit, the game requires players to put their wisdom to the test as they maneuver through comparative religion Q&A along the path to enlightenment. But



it also adds a dramatic physical twist. Upon landing in a penalty zone, players must get up from their chairs to perform "embodying rituals" from each of the major world religions—including Buddhist prostrations, Christian genuflections, and Islamic dervish dancing. This is Enlighten's most entertaining component by far, and it adds an

experiential dimension to interfaith understanding that couldn't come from mere intellectual appreciation alone. So if you've been wondering what Hinduism is about and don't mind chanting "Om" three times to find out, visit www.enlightengamesinc.com to get in on the spiritual fun.

Tom Huston

The Powers of the Universe

with Brian Swimme

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— Andrew Cohen, Founder of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine

igniting a spark of power

The politics of women's liberation in North Africa

An interview with Donna Zajonc

The higher the educational attainment of a nation's women, the greater is that nation's overall prosperity. Remarkably, according to UN reports, for each year that girls go to school beyond fourth grade, family size drops twenty percent, child mortality drops ten percent, and income rises twenty percent. In recognition of this, from across a wide-ranging global political spectrum, nations are encouraging girls and women to learn in ways that were literally unthinkable within their societies a few short decades ago. In fact, between 1995 and 2002, the World Bank has lent approximately 5.3 billion dollars for girls' education to countries where women may typically have few rights to self-determination. However, at the same time, little is being done to influence the traditional belief structures that form the very fabric of these societies.

What will happen to these women whose minds are beginning to reach far beyond the four walls of the homes that shelter their families? Providing them with education, and sometimes even the trappings of democratic representation, all while they're still living within extremely traditional contexts where custom may forbid them from going out of the house alone—it may prove a volatile mix. This is an experiment in the acceleration of cultural evolution at an unprecedented scale.

Donna Zajonc, former Oregon state representative, author, and political leadership coach, had an opportunity to glimpse the potential of this evolutionary experiment. Invited by the U.S. State Department to colead a seminar in Tunisia, "Partners in Participation: Women's Campaign Initiative," she had the privilege of teaching basic political campaign techniques to sixty Muslim women from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia—respectively, a fragmented republic, a constitutional monarchy, and



a republic that has become a progressive dictatorship, if that isn't too much of a contradiction in terms. But, as Zajonc discovered, the real learning had little to do with politics. Not only did "all hell break loose" when the women came together, but something was unleashed that holds a radical promise for the future. *WIE* spoke to Zajonc immediately upon her return from North Africa.

WHAT IS ENLIGHTENMENT: *I'm very curious about the cultural context in Tunisia within which the Women's Campaign Initiative was operating. There seems to be an acknowledgment, at least theoretically, of the importance of a democratic society, but the inherent structures that are in place don't embrace it.*

DONNA ZAJONC: Yes, the women call this "the mindset"—and that word was known by every woman there. It means, "Yes, we've been given opportunities; we're able to vote, we're able to hold office, we're able to have an education, we're able to work in the workplace. However, the mindset really hasn't

changed." It was a new kind of suppression that I hadn't even thought of before.

It's important to note that this is Northern Africa, which is a more liberal Muslim region, more influenced by Europe. But in these countries, even though both women and men are working, the men don't do anything at home. The men, because of their mindset, do not help with the house or with the kids. One of the few things that Islamic men in Northern Africa are starting to do is help with the shopping, because the men can go out to the market more freely than the women can. So there's a new level of tension between the men and women, as women become more involved in society and are also experiencing a deathly exhaustion from overwork.

WIE: *Can you explain a little bit about what you were teaching them?*

ZAJONC: The Initiative is based on the belief that the best way to help women get involved is to have them more visible in elected office. To do that, they have to understand how to run



campaigns, how to speak, how to concisely get a message out. So we taught traditional campaign kinds of things. For example, I taught a coalition-building session—how do you learn to work together to further a combined cause? This is important for them because in Algeria and Morocco, respectively, they have twenty-six and forty political parties. And these are parties that are geared around one very powerful individual who has just surfaced and created a party and a two- or three- or four-year movement—they don't even tend to stand *for* anything particular. Or to take another example, we taught them to create text messages on cell phones. They don't have regular phones because there are no landlines, but almost everybody has a cell phone. So they're learning how to campaign based upon the infrastructure of their community.

Those were the kinds of skills we worked on. But as I got to the end of the week, I actually started realizing that the real goals of the Initiative had nothing to do with what was being taught. The staff were really much more interested in the women gathering. They understood how important it is for women simply to gather in a protected environment so they can cross-pollinate, so they can nurture and excite one another about being women together. Usually, because they're not allowed to gather, even in the more liberal areas in Northern Africa, these women just don't share together. That's the mindset again.

WIE: *What did you observe between the women? This was an opportunity for*

them actually to be together without—what? Without a man present?

ZAJONC: Without Islamic men in the room. They seemed to be fine with Western men. You see, not only do they not gather that much because Islamic men are suspicious of women gathering, they just don't have the opportunity. And gathering across country lines was really unusual, truly a first. These were heads of NGOs, women active in political parties, two or three mayors of rural towns who were all saying that it was just so fantastic to meet, to be together. So what I saw was an exchange of commitment to stay in touch. Even though there was some pontificating from one country to the other, and they would get upset at each other, they'd end their sentence with, "And we're so glad you're here and we're learning." Having the experience of meeting women from neighboring countries was very valuable to them.

WIE: *So what was it like to have all these women meet? What was the palpable feeling in the room?*

ZAJONC: Some of the women were very strident and very angry and they would get up and make speeches that might turn off some other women, but in the end they all understood their common struggle. Even though there were some sparks, when we said good-bye to each other after the last session, they didn't clear the room. Suddenly people who had been yelling at each other were exchanging addresses, saying, "Oh, let's keep in touch." I felt I was back in the women's movement of the sixties.

Although we as trainers may have given them one or two new ideas, the power of the week together came from the women listening to each other's

stories, giving hope to each other. I think most all of them went home feeling like something's beginning.

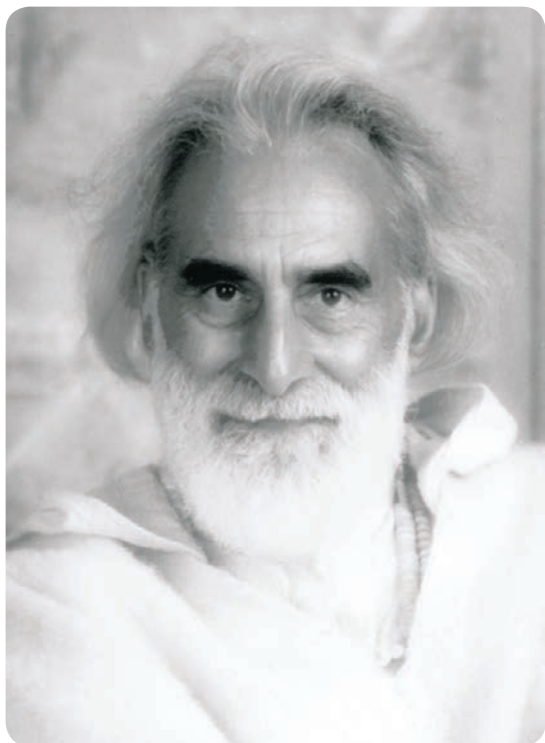
There was this sense of igniting a spark of power, because these women are on the threshold. And it could explode—I don't know in what

The real goals of the Initiative were much more about the women gathering in a protected environment so they can nurture and excite one another about being women together.

way. They had a taste of freedom and they just want more and more. They want to be free, to be who they are, to express who they are, to love in the way they want to love, to create in the way they want to create. There was a suppressed anger, and yet a joyfulness that was definitely palpable. Gratitude—a gratefulness to be there—there really was that. They spoke about that all the time: "Thank you, thank you," they'd say, and then immediately they might challenge us, "And why are you doing that?" It was the oddest combination. But the expressiveness of the Islamic world, the expressiveness of the women—including their dance and their music—is fantastic.

We have to hold the paradox that this situation is both very complex and very simple. On the one hand, what is going on with each of the women, each country, and each culture is very complex. But on the other hand, the one-on-one contact of women coming together is simplicity itself. We have to begin with that simple idea and trust that their desires and yearnings for the feminine energy to come forward will manifest themselves in all forms.

*Jessica Roemischer and
Elizabeth Debolt*



IN MEMORIAM

Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan

June 19, 1916 – June 17, 2004

“The culmination of the soul’s journey of awakening is not just returning to its original state. Instead, it is how the soul has evolved through its passage on earth . . . and the unique way each soul’s unfoldment has contributed to the evolution of the Universe itself.”

Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan

Over the course of his eighty-eight years of life, the great Sufi mystic and teacher Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan wove the timeless essence of Sufism into the unfolding expressions of contemporary culture and consciousness. A senior statesman of the world spiritual community, Pir Vilayat stood out as one who saw spiritual awakening as not separate from intellectual learning and creativity, or from full engagement with the latest developments in philosophy, psychology, science, culture, and the arts. He spoke five languages, studied philosophy at Oxford, and was an accomplished cellist. As Pir Zia, his son and spiritual heir, reflected: “Spurning the temptation to succumb to the inertia of routinization, impelled by a string of discoveries—spiritual openings alternating with deep readings of science and scripture—Pir Vilayat blazed a trail toward the spirituality of the future.”

Pir Vilayat was born in London in 1916 and became the spiritual successor to his own father, the revered Hazrat Inayat Khan, who had brought Sufism to the West. It was Pir Hazrat who not only established Sufi practice

beyond its indigenous territory of the Middle East and India, but laid the ground for an expression of his tradition that would meet the contemporary context of his time, a spiritual perspective embraced by his son Pir Vilayat. “As a tradition-sanctioned lineage bearer,” explained Pir Zia, “Pir Hazrat was not an apologist for a particular ideology, but a mystic responding to the unprecedented challenges and prospects of a rapidly changing world with a message of inter-religious reconciliation and spiritual renewal. It was in these footsteps that my father, Pir Vilayat, followed.”

Pir Vilayat began teaching in the 1950s through the Sufi Order in the West (now called Sufi Order International), which had been established by his father and gave rise to more than one hundred local centers for the study of Sufism in America, Europe, and other countries around the world. Beginning in 1965, he assembled a Congress of Religions in France every spring, where representatives of various traditions met to discuss and understand each other’s viewpoints. This year he was posthumously awarded the Hollister Prize for creat-

ing interfaith understanding. In 1975 he founded the Abode of the Message, the main spiritual center for the Sufi Order International, and in 1977, with his longtime student Elizabeth Lesser, he cofounded the Omega Institute, which has since become the largest U.S. holistic learning center. Lesser recalled that, in founding Omega, Pir Vilayat “wanted to resurrect the ancient libraries and schools of Alexandria. He felt that’s where the concept of holism was born, the idea that all thought is related. He wanted to create a place in modern culture where all religions and disciplines could be taught as related to each other. The name Omega comes from the French Jesuit priest and paleontologist Teilhard de Chardin, one of Pir Vilayat’s heroes, and refers to that point where all thought converges.”

Pir Vilayat put forward an evolutionary spirituality, based on a recognition that our role as humans is to participate fully in the process by which the intelligence of the universe is awakening over time *through us*. In his view, the knowledge and insight generated from the expansion of consciousness have

the potential to influence the course of evolution itself. And Pir Vilayat believed that while we are already the expression of an evolved and complex civilization, through our dynamic creativity and engagement humanity can ultimately rise to new and higher orders of existence. "The further you advance," he said, "the further the horizon recedes, so the secret treasure keeps on moving further and further away. It's a very curious thing, but we're creating the secret. It's not there. It's like the future—we create it."

As a revered spiritual master, Pir Vilayat was adept at leading his students through the constructs of their own minds toward Self-awareness. Pir Zia described how "he would guide seekers in meditation through the multiple fields of perception and identity, culminating in 'stereoscopic consciousness,' the art of toggling between the temporal and the eternal, between the immediate interactions of everyday life and the most exalted intimation of God's being. His concern was not to promote a system of thought but, through the transformative power of prayer and meditation, to induce an anamnesia and dismantle the cognitive glitches that obstruct the soul's natural self-realization." Pir Zia then recollected a particularly powerful moment with his father: "It was two years ago at a meditation camp in the Swiss Alps. My father had guided seekers through the advanced stages of meditation and he emerged from the tent, radiating ecstasy. He called me to walk with him. Midway along the path he stopped, and with tears glistening in his eyes, he said, 'I want you to know, you do not have to do things as I've done them.' Then he paused and smiled and said, 'In fact, *you must not do things as I've done them!*' It was a moment that epitomized his freedom of spirit and faith in the future—a moment I will never forget."

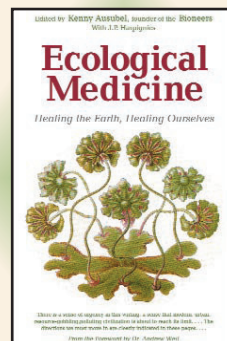
Jessica Roemischer

ECOLOGICAL MEDICINE

HEALING THE EARTH, HEALING OURSELVES

EDITED BY KENNY AUSUBEL, BIONEERS FOUNDER, WITH J. P. HARPIGNIES

FOREWORD BY DR. ANDREW WEIL

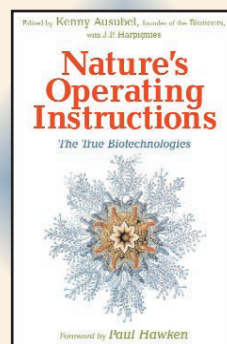


NATURE'S OPERATING INSTRUCTIONS

THE TRUE BIOTECHNOLOGIES

EDITED BY KENNY AUSUBEL, BIONEERS FOUNDER, WITH J. P. HARPIGNIES

FOREWORD BY PAUL HAWKEN



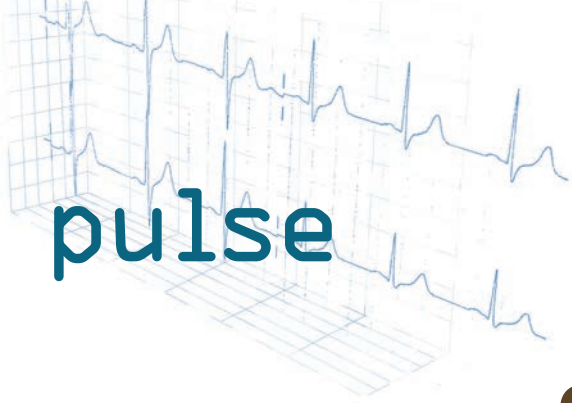
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Founded in 1990, Bioneers/Collective Heritage Institute is a nonprofit organization that promotes practical environmental solutions and innovative social strategies for restoring the Earth and communities.



Ken Wilber isn't exactly a man in need of endorsements and support these days.

As the leading light in an integral movement whose influence, power, and reach seem to be growing daily, words of praise and pats on the back are probably not worth making a big deal about in the halls of his **Integral Institute**. Unless, of course, those words of praise are coming from someone really special, someone like . . .

well, how about the former President of the United States? Yes, our favorite former President, **Bill Clinton**, is rumored to be quite the fan of our favorite integral philosopher. And the word on the street is that the two might meet up sometime soon to talk shop about the



problems of the world. Indeed, at a recent book signing in London, Clinton, who has read a number of Wilber's books, apparently expressed interest in having some face time with the grand theorist of everything. Of course, ever the consummate politician, Clinton net-

works better than most people breathe, so we'll see what happens. But what an impressive duo that could be—one man lit up by a new vision of a world that could be and another with the influence and unmatched expertise to help turn that vision into a world that is . . .



Imagine you're a young man growing up in Tehran, Iran. One day, as you're browsing through a local bookstore, a face on a book cover catches your eye. It's the image of a well-known personality, and the book, published in Farsi, speaks to yearnings and passions that many young men in your Islamic society hold dear. You purchase the book, determined to discipline yourself, and implement the author's radical prescriptions for human life. This scene is played out many times over in Iran these days, but the identity of the protagonist on that cover might surprise you. No, it isn't Ayatollah Khomeini, or popular reformer President Mohammed Khatami. It isn't Osama bin Laden, and you probably already guessed you're not holding a biography of George W. Bush. No, try master motivator **Anthony Robbins**. That's right. Business gurus take heed: Robbins' self-help phenomenon is taking the Persian mind by storm. His books are flying off the shelves these days in **Iran**, and his success has sparked a growing interest in self-help books all over the country. Somehow, the whole phenomenon has escaped concern or crackdown from Iran's ruling clerics, but perhaps they don't yet understand the inherent threat to their political status quo. I mean, just imagine: one million highly motivated, vital, inspired, passionate, peak-performing, results-oriented Iranians taking "massive action" on the streets of Tehran. The mullahs wouldn't stand a chance. In fact, maybe we could slip a few books into North Korea as well . . .



Good news for those who are watching the tea leaves, concerned about the possibility of some kind of upcoming world war or global cataclysm. No, **2012** has not been removed from the calendar, and we are still facing, as a society, seemingly countless political, ecological, social, and economic crises, any of which could potentially spell bad news for Planet Earth. But the Indian saint **Mata Amritanandamayi**, whose alleged prediction of a world cataclysm in 2005 was mentioned in Issue 24 of *WIE*, seems recently to have changed her tune—or at least moderated it. According to some of her American students, Amma, as she is often called, was asked repeatedly about the prediction at the Rhode Island venue of her latest tour. And this wildly popular guru, whom so many revere as a living incarnation of the divine mother, replied that while once the clouds covered the sun, now the clouds are beginning to part. You'll have to draw your own conclusions, but many who were there understood her to be saying that the predicted calamity will not be as bad as was once envisioned. Let's hope they're correct, but whatever it means or doesn't mean, let's also take it as further inspiration to do whatever we can, in whatever way we can, to create a much improved twenty-first-century world . . .

If you can't win the culture wars, maybe the best thing to do is just create your own culture. That seems to be the new trend these days for spiritually inclined individuals of all persuasions. For example, do you believe in creation rather than evolution? Are you convinced the earth is six thousand years old? Then don't take your kids to the natural history museum—they'll keep getting the facts wrong. Instead, visit the new "creationism" theme park where, believe it or not, the displays actually tell you that the dinosaurs were all created on Day 6. Or would you like a really good workout without the sexualized ambiance of most modern gyms? Then work out with Jesus at the **Lord's Gym** ("His pain, your gain" is on the T-shirts), a Christian-themed chain of fitness clubs. Want to dance the night away but avoid the seamier side of life after dark in the big city? Well, take your date to **Spirit nightclub** in New York (see *WIE* Feb-

Apr 2004), where there is less emphasis on alcohol and drugs and more on smart drinks, yoga, and veggie food. Or if you're looking for a different sort of vacation and Mickey Mouse just doesn't quite satisfy your longing for meaning, there is findthedivine.com, a unique website that has exactly the information you need to locate that perfect spa, ranch, or retreat center to suit your particular spiritual sensibilities.

Some see the first waves of a new future in all of these outside-the-mainstream initiatives, and some talk about a post-9/11 resurgence of concern for religious and spiritual values. Others merely lament the further fragmentation of an already divided society. But however it plays out, one thing is certain: there is a deep and widespread dissatisfaction with our secular culture. And that may mean that more and more people are going to do their own thing, with their own group, in their own way, over the coming years . . .



pulse continued

Over half a century ago, as the cold war was heating up, a small, private military think tank was founded with a big mission: "to provide information to military decision makers that would sharpen their judgment and provide the basis for more informed choices." Of course, now the influential history of the legendary RAND Corporation is well documented, and the cold war is long over. But today we are faced with another kind of war, and even more complicated challenges to the future of modern civilization. So where are the new high-powered research groups that are thinking ahead of the curve, mapping the emerging currents of our global culture, analyzing the danger zones and points of opportunity for Western governments that desperately need help in understanding a world that seems more complex by the day?

Enter **Dr. Don Beck, John Petersen,** and **Teddy Larsen**, who are in the early stages of forming a new think tank for the twenty-first century—the **Copenhagen Center for Human Emergence**. The work of the center will be based on **Spiral Dynamics**, the revolutionary psycho-social-political theory of integral human development that has been turning heads recently both in Washington and on Wall Street. Dr. Beck, who has played a significant role in developing Spiral Dynamics, will be calling on the business savvy of Larsen, managing director of the Denmark branch of pharmaceutical giant Eli Lilly,

and the high-tech smarts of Petersen, who will offer technology developed out of his own forward-looking think tank, the Arlington Institute. The project is in the formative stages, and there are serious practical hurdles to overcome, not the least of which is to attract the kind of funding that could really establish the center as a major player in the Western political landscape. Of course, no one knows what kind of global policies a think tank based on Spiral Dynamics might develop. But memo to all the bright young minds out there who want to change the world—Copenhagen is a beautiful place to live . . .



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real men have broken hearts

If thousands of Christian men keep their promises, can they change the world?

"Welcome home, men," boomed the speaker on the stage, the warmth of his words magnified by huge video screens that relayed his beaming image to the sea of faces held in rapt attention around the large indoor arena. Thousands of people were staring up at the screens—some standing, some sitting, some crying, some laughing, some swaying to the music that filled the auditorium—all of them touched by a shared communion, all of them brought together by a common aspiration, and every last one of them a man.

It was a warm summer evening in Albany, NY, and Promise Keepers had come to town.

A Christian men's organization founded in 1990 by former Colorado University football coach Bill McCartney, Promise Keepers has become famous over the last decade for its stadium-sized events in which thousands of men come together to give their souls to Jesus and uphold seven "promises," or principles, designed to build a life of



personal integrity and faith. The organization itself has had its ups and downs over the years, but tonight in New York the focus was single-minded—to bring the nine thousand gathered men of all ages together in what was billed as "a revolution of a man's soul."

"Jesus loves broken hearts," the speaker continued. "When you have a humble, broken heart, it pleases God." As I walked through the venue and listened to the passions and prayers of the faithful, I took a close look at

some of the faces of these thousands of close-quartered men. It wasn't hard to imagine that some of them had been living hard lives. No doubt there were some rough-and-tumble stories in that auditorium—stories of crime, abuse, and shattered homes. But there was nothing downtrodden in their demeanor. In fact, there was a kind of hope in the air—the freshness of possibility and promise, the feeling you get when it seems that the future can be unburdened by the weight of the past. Call it redemption, conversion, liberation, or salvation; attribute it to psychology, spirituality, theology, or the suffering savior on the oversized crucifix at the front of the arena. But it was clear to me in the bright faces and soft eyes of so many I passed by during the course of those few hours that some higher power was indeed reaching into their hearts.

Promise Keepers was primarily formed to save wayward Christian souls, but it was also created to address the growing recognition that in the numerous liberation movements of the twentieth century, somehow men were one group that had been left noticeably unaddressed. In that sizable void had grown the moral fragmentation of the family unit and the decay of inner-city life in America, and the repercussions on our society have been and continue to be profound. So even as Robert Bly and Sam Keen wrote *Iron John* and *Fire in the Belly*, attempting to



instill some warrior spirit into sensitive New Age guys, Promise Keepers was taking another approach to men's liberation. It set out to inculcate a spiritual maturity in those men whose moral center had been deconstructed by our postmodern culture, putting great emphasis on the cultivation of "personal integrity." Both men's movements have been successful, and both have been controversial. Keen and Bly's vision was often ridiculed in the mainstream press but was seen as relatively harmless. Promise Keepers, on the other hand, has drawn some heavy-hitting critics. Founder Bill McCartney is said to be as far right as right-wing Christians come and has been known to headline anti-abortion crusades at Operation Rescue rallies. Social stances such as this, coupled with Promise Keepers' tendency to promote other arch-conservative political causes, have drawn the ire of organizations like NOW (National Organization for Women), which sometimes pickets their gatherings. In fact, NOW has devoted a whole website to warning of the dangers of "feel-good male supremacy." They see in the Promise Keepers movement not the liberation of men but a desire to return to a patriarchal order of dominant men and submissive women. While much of this criticism and concern is legitimate, the critics may also be missing the point. After all, the main emphasis of Promise Keepers, as



Hundreds of thousands of men gather on the Washington Mall for a Promise Keepers rally, 1997

far as I could tell, was neither social nor political. It was personal.

"Ever notice how most people keep making the same mistakes over and over? I mean, most of us don't even *sin* creatively. Even our sin is in a rut." The speaker now was Erwin Raphael McManus, a minister from California whose book *Uprising: A Revolution of the Soul* was the inspiration for the evening's theme. He spoke a couple of times during the course of what turned out to be a carefully arranged sequence of talks, skits, videos, and music—an impressive multimedia presentation all designed for one purpose: to penetrate to the emotional core of the male psyche and force the male ego to come to its knees before its Maker. In that respect, the evening was, as one speaker put it, "not a Promise Keeper

thing. It's a Jesus thing." But Jesus didn't have access to state-of-the-art film studios and electric guitar solos. Promise Keepers does and is not afraid to exploit these recent additions to the Creator's earthly box of potential promotional tools. In this respect, Promise Keepers is a strange mix of the deeply traditional (it was hard to escape the feeling that I was at an updated version of a Pentecostal revival event) and the firmly contemporary (the message was multicultural and nondenominational, the medium was high-tech, and the messengers were all refreshingly undogmatic and down to earth). There were no stodgy creeds or uptight doctrines—just a Christian call for radical, personal, unmediated transformation in the presence of Jesus, who could, we were told, help to create "men of

humility" and "men of servitude."

There was even a recognition that a conversion experience does not equate to lasting transformation, and that individuals have to play an active, courageous role if they are going to lift themselves out of bondage to their own self-destructive tendencies. "It will all remain an experience, a theory," McManus almost shouted to the audience at one point, "unless you *respond*."

It was an impressive presentation, whatever your religious inclinations. Yes, many of us would prefer our spiritual transformation to come dosed with social enlightenment, and Promise Keepers may not exactly be leading the way on that front. But sometimes the destructive demands of personal demons have to be exorcised before we can even begin to effectively address the many lingering ills of the larger culture. And there is a certain kind of personal transformation that Promise Keepers understands quite well. "Integrity is formed in the gauntlet of coming to the realization that you are not God," declared McManus toward the end of the evening. That's not something you're likely to hear at the latest enlightenment intensive or self-help workshop. But it is a powerful insight into integrity that may be just what the doctor ordered for many in a society that has grown increasingly unmoored from the religious ethics of traditional culture.

Whatever the case, Promise Keepers is a fascinating mix of working-class Christian ethos and authentic inspirational passion. These men might not be voting on the progressive side of the ballot anytime soon, and it may not be their calling to help heal the many social inequities of our troubled society. But if they keep their promises, to themselves and to their Lord, in the end, we might all be living in a more enlightened world.

Carter Phipps



awakening the double wisdom of civilization

by Duane Elgin

ALTHOUGH MANY RECOGNIZE that an individual can be conscious of him- or herself, we seldom consider whether a whole society can be conscious of itself. Certainly at moments of great tragedy or great triumph there seems to be a capacity for millions of autonomous individuals to be conscious of themselves as a singular collective. For example, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated, virtually an entire nation went into mourning. For a period of several days, a whole country paused and, together, people acknowledged the passing of their leader. Another moment of shared knowing occurred with the first lunar landing. For a few hours, much of the world paused to watch the first humans walk on the moon. In recent times, the terrorist strike on the World Trade Towers in New York City shocked a nation's consciousness into a time of collective attention.

The power of each of these events was not only in the sense of tragedy or triumph experienced by each person, but also in the awareness that this personal experience was being shared simultaneously by millions, even billions, of other people. Clearly, a civilization can be conscious of itself and, as in the example of the moon landing, nearly the entire species was aware that it was passing through a historic moment in its evolution.

Not only *can* we be collectively aware, but I believe the awakening of our collective consciousness at the scale of community, nation, and the planet is vital if we are to choose a positive future. An emerging whole-system crisis threatens humanity's future with powerful





trends ranging from global climate change and unsustainable economic growth to diminished agricultural productivity, the depletion of cheap oil, a growing chasm between rich and poor, the extinction of species, and growing terrorism. Within the next several decades, we citizens of developed nations will be pressed to awaken to the world and make profound changes in our manner of living, consuming, and working if we are to build a sustainable future.

To realize this pattern shift toward a life-affirming future in a voluntary manner, hundreds of millions of people will be called to act in conscious cooperation with one another. Can we accomplish this leap to a new level and capacity in our collective consciousness? In my estimation, absolutely Yes! I believe that our core evolutionary potential lies, largely unnoticed, in the scientific name that we have given to ourselves as a species. Technically, our name is not simply *Homo sapiens* or “wise humans”; instead, we are called *Homo sapiens sapiens* or “doubly wise humans.” In other words, where animals have the capacity “to know,” humans have the capacity “to know that we know.”

Personal reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of consciousness and observing the unfolding of our lives. By analogy, social reflection refers to seeing ourselves in the mirror of collective consciousness by using tools such as television and the internet. Once there is authentic social reflection, we can achieve a shared understanding and a working consensus regarding actions for a sustainable future. With a shared understanding, actions can come quickly and voluntarily, and we can each contribute our unique talents to the creation of a life-affirming future.

How are we to accomplish this awakening of our collective consciousness? It is important to recall that it was television that enabled people to share in the large-scale collective experiences described earlier. We were all looking through the window of television at the assassination of JFK, the landing on the moon, and the collapse of the World Trade Towers. The bot-

tom line is this: I believe that if we are to take practical steps to awaken our society, then citizens must make their voices heard in creating a more reflective and responsive television environment. Although many in the “consciousness community” have turned away from television in disgust, the reality is that both in the U.S. and around the planet, the overwhelming majority of people get most of their news about the world from this single source. At this pivotal time in human history, we cannot afford to turn away from the primary technology that supports expression of our collective consciousness. Instead, now is the time for: authentic reality shows that dramatize a future of climate change and species extinction; situation comedies that show the humorous side of life in an “eco-village” of fifty or so people; national interactive dialogues with sustained inquiry about our energy future; or genuine survivor shows that take us inside life in poorer nations.



The world is now several decades into the communications era, and it is time for a mainstream social movement and politics concerned with media consciousness. Our evolving use of these powerful technologies is not keeping pace with our deteriorating planetary conditions. We are losing the race between awakening and catastrophe. I believe the core challenge of this generation is to mobilize our extraordinary tools of local-to-global connection to consciously communicate our way into a sustainable and meaningful future. It is time for citizens to take back the public airwaves for purposes of mature dialogue about our common future and to create a politics of consciousness that mobilizes our capacity for collective reflection and conversation. It is time to awaken the double wisdom of civilizations. ■

Duane Elgin is an author, speaker, educator, and activist for media accountability. His personal website is www.awakeningearth.org and contains his writings as well as information about his upcoming talks, telecourses, and workshops. Duane is also the cofounder of the nonprofit organization Our Media Voice; see: www.ourmediavoice.org



coming out as a moral cosmopolitan

What It Means to Be a Human Being in the New Millennium

by Jason D. Hill

THIS IS A SOMEWHAT OLD-FASHIONED CALL to those who I suspect might be living as closeted moral cosmopolitans. It is addressed to the best within you and the ethos that lies buried beneath the racialized, ethnicized, and nationalized self that your culture has given to you. It is an appeal to the best within you that precariously exists as a possibility but has yet to be realized. It is the continued process of moral becoming in you that I seek to address.

Many of us have been living as closeted cosmopolitans. That is, we have been living under the aegis of racism, racialism, nationalism, and excessive and bloated patriotism. Rigid tribal arrangements that even in their informal stances still dominate our conscious lives have acted as formal mores that regulate our civic alliances. Many of us, sometimes for inexplicable reasons, have felt a deep dissatisfaction in our souls and have sensed the existence of a deeper and more fulfilling way of being and living in the world. We have sensed that the excesses associated with the bloated tribalisms that have regulated our ethical lives have missed the mark entirely and have failed to satisfy our craving for an ideal that we sense we can achieve but for which we lack the requisite social moral goods.

Many of us have longed to live postethnic, postracial, and postnational lives, but fear of losing the security that accompanies group solidarity (delayed weaning) prevents the willed weaning that is a prerequisite for that type of “lifestyle.” Whether we know it or not, our lives have been mandated according to a *cosmophobic* ethos; that is, an ethos that organizes much of civic and social life around racial, ethnic, and national tribal lines. We have lived morally dichotomized lives. We have sensed an inner reality to which the outer and formally legislated world is unsympathetic.

To come out as a moral cosmopolitan is first of all to declare the mental pathologies on which racial and ethnic tribalism is founded. It is to declare such pathologies as nonconductive to moral health. Coming out, therefore, is not just a way of morally building a self that is radically different from the environmental self crafted by one’s local and parochial milieu; it is also

a declaration that the presuppositions, values, and qualifying methodologies of one’s environment are spurious and deeply morally flawed. The attendant self then, the cosmophobic self that has been created, is genuinely not one’s own. To come out as a moral cosmopolitan means that one has no truck with this milieu. One may need to continue living in it and grafting one’s immediate life plans onto its surface structure but one in no way treats its value premises, presuppositions, and so-called objective view of people and the world as valid and beyond modification.

To come out as a moral cosmopolitan, then, means that one ceases to be complicitous in the perpetuation of such pathologies. To come out in this context is to see that *moral* rehabilitation requires a total moral and conceptual break with the world of one’s past. It is to face a paradox and yet remain undaunted by it. The paradox lies in the fact that to reject the familiar and

Many of us have felt a deep dissatisfaction in our souls and have sensed the existence of a deeper and more fulfilling way of being and living in the world.

embrace the distant and the unknown is an act of faith that nevertheless requires that one act with a kind of certainty. There is no moral universe at large that would be hospitable to such an ethos. Yet one must dare to consciously craft a new type of self and reject the old culturally determined self. To change the self is also to change the world. Despite the fact that there might be no political, legislative, and procedural mechanism to sanction such a change, one self that dares to effect such a change leaves the world, in the deepest existential sense, radically altered. It is not the same. A solitary effrontery does leave the world changed.

In this call, an aristocracy of the soul is being summoned. To come out is to point the way to a possibility that is unfathom-

able to perhaps the majority of persons. Dedication to that which is right is infectious. Many are struggling to repress or forestall their heroism. They do this not from a sense of cynicism or moral agnosticism but because they fear that there is no world hospitable to their deepest moral sensibilities. The aristocrat, in the noblest sense of the term, is one whose regal bearing and nobility of character have never depended on the recognition and sanction of those less than he, nor has he required that his values and integrity conform to current trends. The soul aristocracy of you, the moral cosmopolitan, resides in the fact that the moral vision that guides your life paves the way for the moral rehabilitation of others and of your society and culture at large. Rather than waiting for others to create a world that you yearn for, a world that must be in place for your so-called true self to emerge, you imbue the world with the noblest of values wrought from the depths of a dissatisfied spirit whose hunger only you can sate. Moral creativity satisfies this hunger, and in the process it provides the world with a new model, a new paradigm of existing and of dealing with your fellow human beings. In your efforts, you are in effect forging the honorable traditions of tomorrow. On examining your struggles and the values spawned by your moral consciousness, old men and women reflecting on their lives in the middle of the first century of the new millennium will say that at last our moral abilities and dispositions have caught up with our scientific and technological achievements. No longer will this dichotomy exist within the human soul: the chasm between the stupendous accomplishments of humankind's intellect and the stodgy, slothful, and primitive advance of its moral conscience. The dilemma has always lain in the fact that humankind for so long has been able to manipulate the universe, to ward off the threats of nature, to battle plagues, and to protect itself from invaders.

The greatest battle, however, the battle that is waged within the soul of each person and that has been responsible for the majority of atrocities that continue to plague us today, remains unwon. The battle I am referring to, of course, is the battle

against tribalism. Let those who doubt the truth of this read the history of the world very judiciously. Tribal conflicts have been, and still are, the source of most of the world's carnage. To come out as a moral cosmopolitan is in effect to say, "No more. The time has come. Civilization requires that we annihilate entirely the problematic features of our natures that prevent our moral progress as a species." Those who do not believe that moral progress is a possibility do not matter in this issue. Their very survival and their capacity to provide a future for their children depend on this notion. Civilization requires this capacity on

our part. Morality provides us with the means for doing so. History (along with current reality) demonstrates that we have yet to find an effective way of dealing with our tribal impulses. It is quite obvious that all of the moral configurations that we have devised and inherited have proved unsuccessful in vanquishing tribalism. It is obvious that our moral configurations have not been demanding enough of us. They have given us the capacity

Rather than waiting for others to create a world that you yearn for, a world that must be in place for your so-called true self to emerge, you imbue the world with the noblest of values.

to have our cake and eat it too. That honorable and heroic Trappist monk Thomas Merton writes: “Human nature has a way of making very specious arguments to suit its own cowardice and lack of generosity.”

To come out as a radical cosmopolitan is to align oneself once and for all with the will that follows the moral intellect that knows the good. It means refusing to have your conception of the good tarnished by the false beliefs of tribal morality: the belief that our chances for a good life (which includes a morally and spiritually healthy life) ought to be determined by morally irrelevant features such as one’s racial, ethnic, and national designations. But because a morally constructed self is also a self that has been radically realigned—one that is positioned differently in the world and is a self with new interests, new values, and new moral and political dispositions—it could find its past associations an affront to what one either has now become or is in the process of becoming.

To come out as a moral cosmopolitan might mean breaking with those with whom you were close while you lived either as a rabid tribalist or as a closeted moral cosmopolitan. Deciding which of your past associations to break and which to keep is up to you. The determining factors are personal and individual. Some breaks will have to be made since there are alignments with your past that make it all but impossible to be a moral cosmopolitan. But the extent to which you might be able to still align yourself with those merely problematic features of your past that make the transition difficult but not impossible is left to your discretion. Moral evolution is above all a volun-

tary undertaking. The edification of your consciousness has to be your decision, one in whose execution you are a direct and constant participant.

To come out is to halt the habituated practice of capitulating to the arbitrary, glib, and specious ends of the labelers and categorizers—vanguards of our sociocultural and sociopolitical culture. Your interior life ought not be regulated anymore by such practices. To come out is to cease pretending that your moral inferiors who have the political and cultural means of constructing your identities hold a moral good over your head; a good you cannot fully comprehend, a good that fails to satisfy your highest moral callings but that you will one day, if you just try hard enough, come to grasp and accept. It will never happen. The edification of your interior moral consciousness has been hijacked by tribalism. The eyes of the tribalist remain too focused on the ground, like the foraging animal that, guided by scent and keen eyesight, never lifts its eyes to the sky for the possibility of glimpsing in the heavens another sense, another model of radically existing in the world. It cannot and will never happen. The tribalist is to behave so. But your constitution is an upright one. It is a constitution that permits you all sorts of creative ontological leverages from which to devise limitless possibilities outside the world of your immediate senses. You have not exhausted the ranges of moral progress. recommence the journey of our moral evolution and realize that we have only barely begun. History has not come to an end.

Remember, a single solitary effrontery does leave the world changed. ■

Excerpted from *Becoming a Cosmopolitan: What It Means to Be a Human Being in the New Millennium* by Jason D. Hill. Reprinted with permission from Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

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music stirs more masses than you think

by Howard Bloom

NEUROBIOLOGICAL RESEARCH SUGGESTS that there is no music center in the brain, no dominant brain structure that is activated solely during music cognition.

Could this be because music is a universal coordinator of mass movements? The compression waves that resonated through the plasma of particles spewed forth by the Big Bang rang in a way physicists regard as acoustic. Physicists also compare the post-Big Bang pressure waves to the ringing of a gong—a distinctly musical phenomenon. These waves regimented the movement of mega masses of neutron-proton bunches, first bringing them together, then moving them apart, choreographing their crowd behavior.

The pulsations of cAMP* in a slime mold colony also regiment the mass movement of individual amoebas, operating the way work songs do for us, helping autonomous members of the community move together, creating the undulations of the superorganismic fruiting body—the slippery slug that the congealed citizens of slime mold society make when they rhythmically congregate. The individual members of that cell colony called the brain also cohere as work teams laboring on a single perception by pulsing to a common beat. Once again, music makes a coherent mass out of a mob of individuals. Perhaps we can't find a music center in the brain because music is a brain-knitter, a coordinator that seduces the rowdy segments of the brain into cooperative harmony. Or, to borrow an image from John Skoyles, music may be a conductor transforming the brain's cacophonous tune-ups into a unified symphony. But that conductor is NOT inside the brain but out—yet another of the many extracranial projections the brain uses to talk to (and occasionally to tame) itself.

Music is like the smell of madelaine—it's used to reconnect to old moods, specifically moods of bonding. Bonding to a lover with “our song.” Bonding to a social group that expressed its identity through its taste in music. Moments in which we found our own identity through a bond with the musicians—people we never or seldom had the chance to meet but who entered our interior pantheon, our internal adopted family of significant others. I recently visited with a musician who had turned part of

his home into a studio. On the wall is his “hall of greats,” photos of the musicians who helped mold his life. Opposite that wall is an enormous collection of CDs. They, too, shaped him—so much so that he told me that if the apartment ever caught fire, it wouldn't be women and children first, it would be “Save the CDs.”

Identity, self, is a mesh of the bonds we've made, flavored with the spice of our variation on our internal tribe's themes. It's a matter of the moments in which those bonds formed. Music helps us revisit those moments and, in some cases, to reinvent them, using our past to build our future.

Like the ethologist Niko Tinbergen's herring gulls automatically rolling runaway eggs back into the nest with the undersides of their beaks, we humans are preloaded with programs that arouse our deep emotion and drive us into action of an automatic kind. Our cues are social—the wordless sounds of laughing, sobbing, shouting angrily. Our cues are the hidden music of language known technically as prosody. And like the herring gull, who can be driven to a frenzy of egg-rolling by an artificial egg with exaggerated instinct-releasers, “supercues,” we too can be activated by supernormal stimuli. These are the exaggerated voice cues distilled by Tchaikovsky's roaring tympani, Beethoven's chorusing joy, Berlioz's orchestral sighs, the pleading cries of Mozart's violins, the chuckle of brass and bass in Dixieland. The chorus of the human race distilled to essence and driving our passions in inexorable automaticity. The cues which kindle and consume very souls. The hyperstimuli which throw the switches in the deepest programs of everything we feel. ■

*cyclic adenosine monophosphate

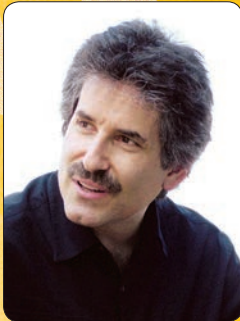
Howard Bloom, a recent visiting scholar at the Graduate Psychology Department at New York University and a Core Faculty Member at The Graduate Institute, is the author of two books: *The Lucifer Principle: A Scientific Expedition into the Forces of History* and *Global Brain: The Evolution of Mass Mind from the Big Bang to the 21st Century*.





the Guru & the Pandit

ANDREW COHEN & KEN WILBER IN DIALOGUE



ANDREW COHEN: GURU. *Evolutionary thinker and spiritual pathfinder. Self-described "idealist with revolutionary inclinations."* Cohen, founder of *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine, is a spiritual teacher and author widely recognized as a defining voice in the emerging field of evolutionary spirituality. Over the last decade in the pages of *WIE*, Cohen has brought together leading thinkers from East and West—mystics and materialists, philosophers and psychologists—to explore the significance of a new spirituality for the new millennium. His books include *Embracing Heaven & Earth* and *Living Enlightenment*.



KEN WILBER: PANDIT. *A scholar who is deeply proficient and immersed in spiritual wisdom. Self-described "defender of the dharma; intellectual samurai."* Hailed as "the Einstein of consciousness," Wilber is one of the most highly regarded philosophers alive today, and his work offers a comprehensive and original synthesis of the world's great psychological, philosophical, and spiritual traditions. Author of numerous books, including *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality* and *A Brief History of Everything*, Wilber is the founder of Integral Institute and a regular contributor to *WIE*.

TRANSCEND & INCLUDE

dialogue VII

How does significant change occur? Must the old and familiar be completely rejected for a new possibility to be born? In their seventh dialogue, Wilber and Cohen explore what it means to actualize our far-reaching human potential while embracing the multidimensional complexity of the evolutionary process itself.

ANDREW COHEN: I just got back from the Parliament of the World's Religions in Barcelona where I had a really wonderful experience. It was a transformative event for me personally. I met many spiritual teachers, religious leaders, social activists, and university professors—inspired, passionate, caring, open-hearted individuals—from just about every different background you could imagine. The feeling of goodwill was infectious and it created an atmosphere that was quite uplifting. At the airport in Boston, on our way there, I met a woman who described her experience at the previous Parliament in Cape Town six years ago as “my first experience of heaven.” While I wouldn’t go quite that far, the fact that so many different people from so many different backgrounds, cultures, faiths, beliefs, and even, dare I say, levels of development could come together in such a spirit of sharing and inquiry is remarkable.

The most enlightening conversation I had there was with Dirk Ficca, the

THE EVOLUTIONARY IMPULSE CARES NOT FOR THE PAST BUT IS ONLY INTERESTED IN CREATING THE UNKNOWN FUTURE RIGHT NOW AND IN EVERY MOMENT.

ANDREW COHEN

executive director of the Parliament. When we were speaking about the gathering there and what it was that he was trying to accomplish, he stated unequivocally that his principal interest in creating the Parliament was to influence “the mainstream.” He divided the spiritual/religious world into three categories: fundamentalists, mainstream, and progressives. He said that the fundamentalists, no matter what tradition they come from, are never going to be interested in either coming together with others or moving forward. Then he said that the progressives—people like us, who are in the minority—are already doing both those things but that we, relatively speaking, exist in our own bubble. He made clear that it is only in reaching the mainstream—those in the traditions who are neither fundamentalists nor progressives—that significant change in the world religious body could occur. That made a big impression on me because, as you know, in my own work, I have mainly been focused on pushing the very edge of our spiritual potential. I have always been convinced that pushing the edge will, in its own way, affect the whole in the long run. And while that may be true, the fact is, as Dirk made clear, that unless that middle group begins to move forward, no matter how much progress a few of us pushing into the frontiers may make, we are *all* going to go down with the ship!

KEN WILBER: Definitely. And you can look at it in a very straightforward way. That is, once you introduce a developmental context to our understanding,

it's both very encouraging and very pessimistic at the same time. Because seventy percent of the world's population is at an ethnocentric level of development or lower. And that means what Spiral Dynamics would call the blue meme, or magic and mythic, or lower. And that's where the fundamentalists and the traditionalists basically are. So that's number one. What he means by “mainstream” tends to be very similar actually to the orange meme, or rational-scientific. Because what the mainstream often represents is an attempt to take the fundamentalist magic and mythic dogmas and modernize them—put them into a modern framework. And the modern mainstream churches tend to be an expression of that.

COHEN: And if we can get the mainstream moving, it doesn't matter how slowly, as long as they're moving forward, it means that as a whole we can move forward together in the most important way.

WILBER: And Dirk is quite right, I think, that the mainstream is an extremely pivotal factor and faction in getting that ethnocentric, preconventional, scary kind of fundamentalist religion to move into the modern and postmodern world. Now, the progressives are pluralistic or integral or higher, but that's less than two or three percent of the world population. But if we can't get to the mainstream in religion, then there's about seventy percent of the world that's going to continue to be a real problem. And I think that's why things like the Parliament of the World's Religions are very important. But at best, that is a

pluralistic, postmodern, green-meme organization. So in terms of where the mainstream action is, I think he is pretty accurate. But it is not integral. I would say that it is mainstream indeed, but integral is the leading edge, that cutting two or three percent.

COHEN: Certainly. But you know, while I was there, in spite of how bad things so often seem these days, the sense of camaraderie and brotherhood fueled a kind of passionate excitement about what's possible—and that's mainly what my attention was drawn to. In any case, all we can do is everything that we honestly *can* do—and if we're doing the right thing, we'll experience the ecstatic glory underlying the entire process, no matter what happens in the end.

WILBER: Definitely!

COHEN: As I said before, most of my own attention has been devoted to pushing the edge of consciousness development, focused mainly on that two or three percent that you are referring to (which in my own work is probably a lot less than a half percent!). And I've not really been all that engaged with those dimensions that didn't directly relate to that edge. This is why going to the Parliament was such a transformative event for me. I rediscovered, in a deeper way, that we're all part of a vast developmental process that is inherently whole. And it's become obvious to me that any avoidance or denial of that wholeness inevitably and profoundly inhibits our ability to see clearly and therefore to respond in the most beneficial way possible.

AT ANY STAGE OF GROWTH, YOU HAVE TO DIE TO YOUR ATTACHMENT TO THE PREVIOUS STAGE. IF YOU DON'T DIE TO A STAGE, THEN YOU REMAIN FIXATED TO IT, AND THAT'S CALLED PATHOLOGY.

KEN WILBER

In your own work as an integral philosopher, you've always emphasized that, as we evolve and develop from one level to another, it's necessary to transcend and also to include what has come before. And in my work as a spiritual teacher, I have very clearly made a distinction between your statement—"transcend and include"—and my own version, which is that, as we evolve and develop from one level to another, we must "transcend and *exclude*" what has come before so that we will be free to reconfigure ourselves at a higher level. I'm still convinced that's true, but as a result of my recent experience, I must admit that my view on this is changing and maturing. I realize that it's possible to embrace a wide variety of worldviews, opinions, and spiritual perspectives without compromising one's own evolving edge.

WILBER: Yes, they're really not mutually exclusive at all.

COHEN: Indeed, and the living significance of what "transcend and include" is all about became part of my ongoing experience at the Parliament. I met so many wonderful, big-hearted, compassionate people who care so deeply about the evolution and development of our world and of our consciousness. That awakened me to the fact that being focused *only* on the edge of human potential itself is an approach that is less than whole. I had never met so many *different* kinds of people who I felt I was able to relate to with the best part of my own humanity, at a real heart level and also at the level of mind. I think it was a maturing experience for

me because, as I said, I realized I didn't in any way have to compromise my own position in the process of engaging with and learning from so many others who were also trying to uplift the consciousness of this same world.

WILBER: That's great. I think that's profound. It's a process of maturing. Richness always continues to unfold.

COHEN: And at the same time, as we aspire to evolve to higher and higher levels of development, we go through this continuous process of dissolution and reintegration. In this process of evolution and transcendence, we constantly need to be willing to let go of, or *exclude*, old ways of seeing and thinking: our fixed philosophical positions, worldviews, self-concepts, etc. And in my own work with people, it's one of *the* most challenging aspects of actual development because it's the ultimate threat to the ego. The only thing that actually enables real evolutionary, which means *vertical*, development is that courageous willingness to let go at the deepest level of our sense of who we are.

WILBER: It's always called a death. Every tradition calls it a death and it's *not* a metaphor.

COHEN: That's the absolutely terrifying, completely exhilarating truth of evolution at the level of consciousness in real time!

NEGATE AND PRESERVE

COHEN: I'm sure we both agree that we're talking about the same thing

when we refer to your "transcend and include" and my "transcend and exclude." But it might be helpful for us to clarify the distinction between the two because they're two parts of the evolutionary equation. And in the context of evolutionary development, when we say transcend and *include*, it emphasizes one side of the equation, and when we say transcend and *exclude*, it emphasizes the other side of the equation. Obviously the *whole* equation includes both.

WILBER: It's true. We are very close in terms of embracing both including *and* excluding. And as I mentioned in our last dialogue, there's a wonderful phrase from Hegel that everybody quotes: "To supersede"—and for us that might mean to transform—"to supersede is to negate and to preserve." And that's what I call "transcend and include." But transcend *can* mean negate. In other words, when you transcend something, you're leaving something behind; you're excluding something in a certain sense. And you're *also* including, and so the question is, What are you including and what are you excluding?

COHEN: Exactly.

WILBER: This has been a central preoccupation of mine theoretically for at least two decades, and I actually wrote a paper called "Two Patterns of Transcendence." And the two patterns were inclusion and exclusion. In other words, "What is included in development and what's excluded?" The briefest way to explain it is to use the seven



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KEN WILBER

chakras as an example. Let's just say the seven chakras are seven stages of development and they represent levels of energy and levels of consciousness.

One of the things that happens in development is that you're going through these seven stages—and again, it's not linear; there are all sorts of ups and downs, but for now we want the simplest explanation possible. When you're at stage one, you're identified with the energy at stage one. So if you're identified with the first chakra, it's the first month of life, and you're all mouth. The world is all food. It's the material level. You're identified with matter. When you move to stage two, you move up to the second chakra and you identify with the emotional, sexual energies that start there, and then you disidentify with an exclusive attachment to material or food. So you're no longer at the oral stage. In other words, you're no longer identified merely with food, but you still have to eat. So you include chakra one, but you exclude an exclusive identity with chakra one.

So now you're at chakra two and you're exclusively identified with chakra two. You're in a libidinal self. You're all emotional, sexual vitality and energy, and you're actually identified with that. When you move to chakra three, you don't get rid of sex and breath and élan vital but you get rid of an exclusive identity with them. You get rid of an exclusive worldview that comes merely from having a second chakra. That worldview is magical, very similar to the purple

meme in Spiral Dynamics terms, for example. And then you move to chakra three, whose worldview is like the red meme; it's now a kind of magic/mythic worldview, which is starting to get very powerful and egocentric. And that's the classic third chakra power.

When you move to the fourth chakra, you move beyond an exclusive identity with chakra three, but you don't get rid of chakra three energy. You still have a third chakra. You still have intentionality. You still have will-power, etc. But now you're exclusively identified with the heart chakra, which means you begin to extend love from yourself. The first three chakras are egocentric, but in the fourth, you extend love from yourself to your family or your tribe or your group. So it's *ethnocentric*. It's a step up. Now you're identified with your group, and "my country, right or wrong," etc. But it's the beginning of an expansion of love.

When you move to the fifth chakra, you disidentify with the *exclusive* attachment of the fourth chakra, but you don't get rid of the fourth chakra. So you start to see the point?

COHEN: Yes. What you're describing is human/cultural development in relationship to the chakra system.

WILBER: I'm using that as an example of any developmental scale that has stages or levels.

COHEN: And how would this example illustrate the problems and challenges that often accompany evolutionary development?

WILBER: If you have an attachment to the first chakra, then you have an oral

attachment. You're a compulsive eater; you haven't died to the first chakra, you haven't died to your exclusive attachment to it. If you are attached to the second chakra, then you have symptoms of sexual attachment or obsession that you haven't let go of. If you haven't let go of chakra three, then you remain egocentric, you're power crazed; you haven't *died* to your exclusive identity with chakra three, and so on.

So what you're wrestling with as a teacher, as a master, as a guru in this sense is that you are trying to get people to die to their *attachment* to any of the chakras while letting them use the *functional* energy of the chakras. Does that make sense?

COHEN: Definitely.

WILBER: What happens in development is that certain basic functions emerge with each new stage. And when they first emerge, you're exclusively identified with them.

COHEN: Yes. At first you're exclusively identified with each level, and then as you evolve, your identification—as you would say, your "center of gravity"—

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IS COURSING THROUGH
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ALWAYS TOO MUCH—
AS YOU SAID, RUTHLESS.**

ANDREW COHEN

IT'S POSSIBLE TO EMBRACE A WIDE VARIETY OF WORLDVIEWS, OPINIONS, AND SPIRITUAL PERSPECTIVES WITHOUT COMPROMISING ONE'S OWN EVOLVING EDGE.

ANDREW COHEN

moves to the next level and yet *includes* all the preceding levels.

WILBER: Exactly. You keep the basic energy, the basic competence, the basic structures—those remain in awareness and those remain functioning. But you lose, you die to, your *attachment* to those structures. So even a Buddha who is, let's say, in the seventh chakra, can still have sex, still has a second chakra, still has to eat, still breathes, etc. Do you see what I mean?

COHEN: Are you *sure*? (laughs) I know some Buddhists who might disagree with you!

WILBER: Well, it doesn't change in any way even if you have attained a rainbow body and can travel through space. The same principles will still apply. But we're talking about just standard normal development for most normal Buddhists, even enlightened Buddhists. I've yet to meet a Buddha who wasn't eating—and often—Big Macs when nobody was looking! (laughter) So what happens in development is that we have to negate and to preserve. What are preserved are the basic functions, the capacities, the energies, the competencies that each stage brings into being. And what is negated is your egoic attachment to them.

And so you want people to be stable at some of the higher stages. But at any stage of growth, you have to die to your attachment at the previous stage. All of the seven levels of growth are seven deaths. Each death has to be suffered consciously. And if you don't die to a stage, then you remain fixated to it and that's called pathology.

TRANSCEND AND EXCLUDE

COHEN: Even though, as we agreed before, the complete picture of evolutionary development includes both transcending and including *and* transcending and excluding—*including* is going to have a slightly different emphasis than *excluding*. For example, when Jesus said, "Let the dead bury the dead," that to me was a clear expression of "transcend and exclude" that was passionate, ferocious, uncompromising—an unrestrained expression of the evolutionary impulse that cares not for the past but is only interested in creating the unknown future right now and in every moment.

WILBER: Yes, to me it's like saying, let this old worldview die; let ethnocentric die. It's *supposed* to die. The *exclusivity* is supposed to die.

COHEN: And it's significant that for many of us twenty-first-century, postmodern, extreme narcissists, our ego—or our highly developed sensitive self-sense—is far more threatened by the notion of exclusion than it would be by the notion of inclusion.

WILBER: Yes, I agree.

COHEN: Because it implies that we have to be ready and willing to die *now* for the future to be born in all its glory.

WILBER: Indeed, and it also implies that there are things that in a strong sense are *not* to be included. And the things that are *not* to be included are those things that exclude in the bad sense of restricting and attaching. That's sort of the paradox. When you're exclusively identified with chakra one, then

you're really at moral stage one, which is "what's right is what I feel, so f--- you." That's supposed to die when you move to moral stage two. *That's* what's excluded. That's what's supposed to be negated and let *that* dead bury that dead. Because you can't get more *inclusive* structures without excluding *less* inclusive structures.

COHEN: Exactly.

WILBER: The postmodern sensitive self does have trouble with the fact that a lot of those things have to be let go of. And so egocentric and ethnocentric very much have to die.

COHEN: The big challenge is that the liberated passion behind the statement, "let the dead bury the dead," is very—

WILBER:—ruthless.

COHEN: Yes, ruthless and uncompromising.

WILBER: Any of us who are growing are being ruthless with our lesser selves. And if we're not, then we're not really loving our higher self. *They go together.*

COHEN: Yes. And we have to be ruthless with ourselves so we can reconfigure all of our old and familiar ways of relating to the lower chakras and everything that they represent. It's *recontextualizing* how we relate to everything that's come before in order to become a living manifestation of a really new stage of development. It's a Herculean task.

WILBER: It is Herculean. And given where the mass of human consciousness is today, it's really staggering we've come this far. But there's obviously still quite a ways to go.

TOUGH LOVE IS A PURE EXPRESSION OF A LOVE THAT HAS TO NEGATE THE LESSER IN ORDER FOR THE GREATER TO SHINE. AND I THINK THAT THAT SORT OF LOVE CAN BE MISUNDERSTOOD.

KEN WILBER

COHEN: I always feel like we're just getting started.

WILBER: I know! You know that politically incorrect joke that I use, which is, "The pioneer is the guy with all the arrows in his back."

COHEN: That phrase is more than familiar to me! (laughter)

WILBER: It's true for all of us though. It's true for human beings for the last fifty thousand years. We all have arrows in our back if we're pushing at all against the envelope.

COHEN: That's right.

WILBER: And we counterbalance that with the Great Perfection, as you well know. Everything is radically perfect in its own condition as it's arising moment to moment—but that's on the nirvana side. On the samsara side, it's a f---ing mess. So I'm sometimes amazed that we're moving as far as we are.

COHEN: But as we've agreed in the past, we want to balance the nirvana side with the evolutionary impulse that is always striving to manifest that Great Perfection in the manifest realm . . . at higher and higher levels of development.

WILBER: Exactly. And the great Plotinus was very much aware of the two different types of development we've been speaking about—the include and exclude, or the preserve and the negate. So therefore when I'm fully awakened, my first chakra is functioning in the material world but is not egocentrically contracted; my emotional, sexual energies are functioning but they're not egocentrically contracted; my intentionality and my heart and my

throat and my brain are all functioning, still present, but they're not egocentrically contracted and they're not a vehicle for my egoic aggrandizement.

COHEN: That's the ultimate challenge.

WILBER: The ultimate challenge. And so what we're trying to do is to remain functional at *all* of our levels, with all those basic capacities, but *not* egoically contracted. And that's where ruthless tough love has to come in because we have to die to those attachments.

TOUGH LOVE

WILBER: Another way of understanding tough love is to negate and to preserve: to negate means to get tough; to preserve means to still love. In other words, as we've been saying, it's a ruthless kind of love that holds on to the crucial components of consciousness—all the seven chakras are included. *But the self that's identified exclusively with them is ruthlessly killed. It's slain. That's the job of the teacher or the higher self in yourself. It's the ultimate ruthless love.*

COHEN: Yes, that higher self is what I call the *authentic* self. The authentic self is the awakened evolutionary impulse, and it cares only for the evolution of consciousness itself—it literally does not recognize the fears and desires of the ego. It's the heart of the guru, the awakened mind of the true teacher, and the fearless passion of our own already liberated Self. And as we identify less and less with the ego, we are able to experience the living glory of it, the liberated passion of

the authentic self coursing through our very own veins. And its nature is always too much—as you said, *ruthless*.

WILBER: Sometimes people can really misunderstand the ruthless part of the tough love.

COHEN: Right, and they often do.

WILBER: But it's a pure expression of a love that *has* to negate the lesser in order for the greater to shine. And I think that that sort of tough love can be misunderstood.

COHEN: And often is.

WILBER: And even though none of us is perfect, I think at good moments in your teaching, at good moments in my own writing, at good moments in Mike Murphy's work, and that of any of the integral people, there's a kind of ruthlessness that, when it's done well, is really a sort of lovingkindness.

COHEN: When it's authentic, it's speaking directly from a revelation or a clear seeing of a higher level and it's imploring . . . it's imploring *everybody* to come.

WILBER: That's a good way to put it. It is imploring.

COHEN: Yes, literally.

WILBER: There's always a very strong footnote that says, "Check it out yourself and see." We're not trying to impose this on anybody. But there is a bigger space. And it's calling us to have a look from this bigger space because there's so much more room—

COHEN: Oh, yes. And that's where the glorious future lies. ■



feature section

The American Dream

Spiritualized

The Celestine Prophecy has sold twelve million copies and is now being made into a feature film. The Kabbalah Centre has attracted over 3.9 million people to its doors, not to mention countless celebrities. Popular spirituality is changing the face of American culture—some say for better, some say for worse. From the backwoods of Florida to the ancient hills of Palestine, two articles take you behind the scenes to investigate this exploding phenomenon.

PART I

A Chance Encounter

The Introduction

PART II

Synchronicity Goes To Hollywood

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Searching for a postmodern religion on the set of *The Celestine Prophecy: The Movie*

PART III

A People's Revolution of Enlightenment

p.80

Ancient mysticism hits the bigtime at the Kabbalah Centre



PART I

A Chance Encounter

The Introduction

"I'll have a Grande Caramel Macchiato, please."

"Excuse me. I see you're reading *The Celestine Prophecy*. How do you like it?"

"Oh, I'm really enjoying it. Have you read it too?"

"No, but one of my friends at the Kabbalah Centre was telling me about it the other day."

"That's quite a coincidence! The first insight in the book is that everything happens for a reason. Maybe there's a message for us to give each other."

"Grande Caramel Macchiato?"

"Oh, that's mine. Do you want to sit down?"

"I'd love to."

"The Kabbalah Centre . . . isn't that where Madonna goes?"

"Yeah. That's how most people have heard about it, but there's a lot more to it than celebrities and red strings. Kabbalah dates back to Adam and Eve. Even Jesus was a kabbalist."

"Really?"

"Oh, definitely. Everyone thinks Kabbalah's



Jewish, but actually, it isn't really about Judaism or religion at all. Anyone with real spiritual interests can learn from it."

"It's the same with *The Celestine Prophecy*! It revolves around an ancient Mayan manuscript that reveals truths that are universal. In the book, the Church is actually against it."

"That's so interesting, because religious leaders were always against Kabbalah too! It empowered people by imparting divine wisdom directly, making religion obsolete."

"Wow. I never knew that. So if Kabbalah isn't based on the Old Testament, does it have a sacred text?"

"Yeah, it's called the Zohar. Some scholars say it was only written eight hundred years ago, but it's really from the second century—it's written in Aramaic and everything."

"Oh my god! The manuscript in *The Celestine Prophecy* is written in Aramaic too! That's what James Redfield calls *synchronicity*."

"That's so strange."

"I know. Synchronicity can take some getting used to. But it's really a stepping-stone to all the other insights."



"What are those?"

"Well, the basic message has to do with giving energy to other people rather than stealing it from each other like we normally do."

"I know what you mean. That's one of the reasons I love the Kabbalah Centre so much. They're actually trying to help us not be selfish people anymore and start giving to others. It's all about destroying your ego."

"That's the Sixth Insight! About how we try to control and manipulate each other to boost our egos. That's great that the Kabbalah Centre's working on that too—we need a lot less ego in the world."

"Well, you know I think things are really starting to change. Look at what's happening now with you and me—who would have thought there would be so many similarities between our spiritual paths?"

"I know."

"I mean, it seems like 9/11 was a huge shift. After that, a ton of my friends started coming to the Kabbalah Centre."

"Yeah, I know a lot of people too who are starting to think about things differently and getting interested in spirituality. Actually, *The Celestine Prophecy* says that sometime soon we're going to reach a critical mass."

"Does the book say when?"

"Not exactly, but I think it's soon. Have you heard about how the ancient Mayan civilization just disappeared without a trace? And nobody knows what happened to them? Well, the manuscript says they hit that same critical mass, and they all turned into light!"

"Light? Do they mean that literally? The Kabbalah Centre talks about light too, but it's more like the Light of the Creator. When enough people connect to the Light, we're finally going to be able to change the course of history!"

"Wow, that's inspiring. I think that must be what *The Celestine Prophecy* means, too. God, I've never had so many synchronicities in one day!"

"I never even knew about synchronicity until today! It's really nice to talk to someone who understands these things. Can you imagine what would happen if people would just talk the way we're talking all the time? . . . Oh, there's my cell phone."

"I should probably go anyway."

"It was so wonderful to meet you."

"Wait . . . I never got your name."

"Marjorie."

"You're kidding, right?"

"No. Why?"

"Well, it's just that that's the name of the girl in *The Celestine Prophecy*."

"Seriously?"

"No joke. This *has* to mean something."

"I think it must mean something too. In Kabbalah, they say everyone has a soulmate."

"Uh . . . do you come to this Starbucks often?"

"Yeah, this one—and the one on 49th and 3rd, right next to the Kabbalah Centre."

"Well then, I'm sure we're going to see each other again!" ■



feature

Part II

synchronicity goes to



HOLLYWOOD

Searching for a postmodern religion on the set of The Celestine Prophecy: The Movie

by Ross Robertson

THE IRONIES AND COMPLEXITIES of spiritual life in America are with me as I snack on pretzel sticks and reread *The Celestine Prophecy* during a flight from Albany to Orlando. I'm on my way to a central Florida film set to meet James Redfield, author of the popular spiritual fable that first swept the nation a decade ago. Following years of pursuit by the film studios, he's finally making *The Celestine Prophecy* into a movie, and he invited us to come down to watch the action unfold. After





a month of preparation for the trip, I've grown to like the book's characters: the rugged adventurer Wil; Marjorie, the scientist you always wish would be more of a coquette; the quiet, sturdy Father Sanchez. But more than that, I'm intrigued by the book's status as a cultural phenomenon, whose striking immensity can only be compared to, say, the Peruvian Andes.

Perhaps more than any other New Age franchise in recent memory, *The Celestine Prophecy* is known for provoking extreme responses. That is, people either love it or love to hate it. As Tom Butler-Bowdon, author of *50 Self-Help Classics*, puts it, "The two most common reactions to it are 'It changed my life,' and 'This is utter trash.'" Admittedly, I once found myself in the second camp, though my position was based on ignorance rather than considered opinion—my grandmother gave me the book soon after it came out, but I never read it. I was an arrogant college student; I thought the New Age heralded the failure of Western civilization.

At the time, I assumed the unparalleled success of Redfield's novel signified another giant step down for spirituality on the slippery slope of pop culture. (I am a Gen-X'er, after all. I exhibit a tendency toward inflated criticism of the hypnotized American consumer while remaining blissfully undisturbed by my own participation in said consumption.) But now, whether or not it was a step down for spirituality, I wonder if it wasn't also a giant step *up* for pop culture. Never before had a spiritual book penetrated so deeply into the contemporary secular mainstream; never before had spirituality been so *popular*. The New Age was in its heyday, and the collected wisdom of the ages—from Buddha to Rumi to Redfield—was on display at just about any bookstore. I myself depended on this; I, too, followed the path of my own spiritual interest primarily via the spirituality section.



Now I'm the beneficiary of an opportunity millions of *Celestine* fans would envy—a rare firsthand peek at the next episode of this modern-day spiritual history-in-the-making. And if there's one thing I'm sure of, it's that whatever I've heard so far, there must be a whole lot more to the story.

FROM PUBLISHING SENSATION TO THE SUNSET STRIP

Originally self-published in trade paperback in 1993 (Redfield distributed his first copies by hand, from the trunk of his car), within six months *The Celestine Prophecy* topped one hundred thousand in print, and soon Warner Books' hardcover edition would climb onto the *New York Times* bestseller list, there to stay for over *three years*. All told, nearly twelve million copies are in print worldwide, in more than forty languages, and combined sales of Redfield's books (including two sequels and a handful of others) add up to an extraordinary twenty million. What's more, the book sparked a nationwide proliferation of church discussion groups, classes in metaphysical bookstores, experiential seminars, "Your Celestine Journey" adventure treasure hunts—the list goes on. Now, it's continuing on its seemingly destined journey to a theater near you.

For *Celestine Prophecy* buffs everywhere, you'd be hard pressed to find a better piece of news. Yet the larger significance of its long-awaited leap to the silver screen has to do with the fact that this film represents more than itself—represents, in fact, an entire movement of pop spirituality that is rapidly becoming a social and cultural force in contemporary American life. It's a simple adventure story, really—the tale of an everyman (nameless in the book, dubbed "John Woodsor" in the movie) who travels to Peru in search of an ancient manuscript containing nine insights into a new enlightened awareness, insights Redfield



If there's one thing we can infer from just six authors selling over 150 million books worldwide, it's that the spiritual impulse in the human being refuses to be constrained or flattened.

predicts humankind will progressively grasp "as we move from where we are now to a completely spiritual culture on Earth." Along the way, Woodson has a series of serendipitous encounters with both friend and foe (seekers, scientists, and rebel priests determined to bring the teachings of the ancient scrolls to light; churchmen, government officials, and an international cartel hell-bent on destroying every last one of their potentially liberating pages) as he makes his way toward Machu Picchu and the climactic discovery of the Ninth Insight.

It's also a spiritual parable tracking the hero's inner journey—in this case, his discovery of a guiding intuition that manifests itself through synchronicities, or meaningful coincidences (two or more events that occur without either one having caused the other but whose relationship is significant beyond the possibilities of mere chance). "What I like about the story," says actor Matthew Settle, who plays John Woodson in the film, "is the restoration of wonder to this person's life. John is kind of walking through life with a blasé, meaningless existence, just doesn't feel like he has a sense of purpose. And when he starts recognizing coincidences and trusting his uncertainty, he finds a new certainty in trusting a lack of certainty, you know? He finds confidence in life, confidence in a God-force, and gives himself over to this thing that would otherwise be scary territory. It's a walk in faith."

Against the backdrop of our postmodern restlessness and the proverbial loss of meaning, this story of Woodson's walk in faith can be read as the story of a broad popular movement whose reach extends far beyond even the sizable *Celestine* domain. Take, for example, the inimitable Deepak Chopra (whose thirty-five books have also sold twenty million copies worldwide) and his recently released *The Spontaneous Fulfillment of Desire: Harnessing the Infinite Power of Coincidence*. Or self-empowerment guru Wayne Dyer's *The Power of Intention: Learning to Co-create Your World Your Way*, hot off the presses for 2004 (Dyer's count is twenty-one titles, thirty million sold). Then there's Paulo Coelho's classic, *The Alchemist* (1988),

which stands in at a staggering twenty-seven million copies in fifty-six languages, and has the distinction of being Madonna's favorite book. Hovering on the fringes of this territory are dozens if not hundreds of authors—prominent among them Neale Donald Walsch and Richard Bach. Walsch is the author of the *Conversations with God* series (seven books, seven million copies), the first volume of which spent two and a half years on the *New York Times* bestseller list. And Bach's *Illusions* (1977), having sold fifteen million copies in twenty-seven years, is still going so strong that Hampton Roads Publishing just released a companion volume, the *Messiah's Handbook*, in August.

These are the megastars of a publishing trend that shows no signs of letting up. And, while the messages they're bearing to what must be at least fifty million seekers around the world are remarkably consistent, that's not the only thing they have in common. That's right, *The Celestine Prophecy* isn't the only secular spiritual parable headed for Tinseltown. In fact, *Celestine* producer Barnet Bain is taking on *Illusions* next, and Laurence Fishburne is currently working on the screenplay for *The Alchemist*, in which he will also star, along with Jeremy Irons and (you guessed it) Madonna. But *The Celestine Prophecy* will be the first to arrive, ushering in what very well might be a new era of New Age filmmaking in Hollywood.

"In the aftermath of a success like Mel Gibson's *The Passion*," Bain says, "there's a newfound respect for the business potentials of an audience that cherishes religious or spiritual values. And when you have a preestablished brand that has as much equity in the culture as *The Celestine Prophecy*, that adds up to something greater than the sum of its parts. *Illusions* and *The Alchemist* would certainly be in a similar category. If you look back over the history of the New Age—about twenty or twenty-five years—there are only three, maybe four, novels that stand as credible fiction, and they're the ones we're talking about here. They're in the vanguard of exploring an emergent personal spiritual philosophy. These things are Rorschach tests."

If *The Celestine Prophecy: The Movie* turns out to be anywhere

When he was twenty years old, Redfield sat deep in meditation somewhere in Alabama. Suddenly, a powerful intuitive vision materialized in his consciousness.

near as successful as some in the industry predict, its spiritual themes will reach unprecedented flocks of cinemagoers—perhaps the biggest step yet toward attaining the critical mass Redfield and many others believe is necessary to trigger an evolutionary shift in the culture at large. (And you can bet that along with *Illusions* and *The Alchemist*, if all goes well, Redfield's sequels *The Tenth Insight* and *The Secret of Shambhala* won't be far behind.) Whether such a prospect inclines one more toward exhilaration or more toward uneasiness, it's enough to make us all pause to ask: Can pop spirituality save us?

ONE SYNCHRONISTIC JOURNEY

"If there's one thing that's really deep in James Redfield, it's synchronicity. Prakasha, in Sanskrit—to be able to see through the world as if it's a diaphanous gown. To see that an event is beckoning you, telling you what to do."

Michael Murphy

As I come over the crest of a wooded ridge, bumping down dirt roads into an old limestone quarry just outside the town of Ocala, I can't see any giant temple replicas or mock Machu Picchus, but I know they're there somewhere. Curious to find out more about synchronicity, little do I know that I'm about to hear more tales of meaningful coincidence in a single weekend than I've heard in my entire life up until now. When the driver lets me out and points me on my way, I walk through a nest of flatbeds and trailers buzzing with technicians and engineers, coming around a corner to see a blasted-out church up on a hill, roof blackened, cross hewn through. There must be a hundred and fifty people working here; among them a small group sits in animated conversation, directors and producers. At my approach, a tall man with a short-cropped beard stands to greet me, and I introduce myself to James Redfield.

When he was twenty years old, Redfield sat deep in meditation somewhere in Alabama. Suddenly, a powerful intuitive vision materialized in his consciousness and he watched spellbound as his life unfolded before his inner eye. He saw himself becoming a writer. He saw himself writing a book that would go on to international acclaim. He saw the colossal impact he would eventually have on millions of people. As the years went by, he wrote this off as a pipe dream . . . that is, until it started coming true.

From the first, Redfield treats me like a guest in his own house. In a way, I suppose this is his house—built on his dreams, by his metaphorical hands—and as I'll soon discover, he takes care of everyone here with a kind of attentiveness one might reserve for intimate collaborators in the fulfillment of a life's passion. For the moment, he excuses himself from the meeting and leads me past the church where they're filming, down a loose slope, and out onto a circle of flagstones at the heart of the *Celestine* ruins, where much of the action takes place.

"They're larger than Machu Picchu," he says proudly as we climb up a wide stone staircase to a platform overlooking the old quarry lake. (He's added a few floating pillars covered with vines to conjure up a certain Atlantean feel, and a computer-animated waterfall is on the way.) "The making of the movie has just been one synchronistic journey," he goes on. "Even when things weren't working, they were working, you know. We didn't decide to make this movie until January, and we're here in April, about to complete principal photography. Anybody in the industry will tell you that's fast."



The old quarry lake.

Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung sat in his office listening to a patient recount her dream of a golden scarab beetle. The woman's therapy had been hampered by her extreme rationalism, but Jung knew the scarab was an ancient Egyptian symbol of rebirth, and he wondered to himself whether

the dream was a subconscious clue to a coming breakthrough. About to give her his interpretation, Jung heard a faint tapping at his window and turned around to see an actual gold-green scarabaeid beetle



flapping there. He opened the window and it flew into the room, so shocking the woman that her resistance was penetrated. This got him thinking about meaningful coincidences, and in a 1935 lecture at London's Tavistock Clinic, he coined the term "synchronicity."

"A lot of people who were skeptical back in the nineties are now more open to the idea that there are higher abilities that we have that are really spiritual abilities," Redfield says. "You know, intuition, a sense of coincidence as meaningful, a discovery of synchronistic signs and suggestions in our lives. I want to help people realize that there's *that* much mystery in the world on an ongoing basis. Living the spiritual life is not just about meditating ascetically. The Western piece of spirituality has to be included in that, and that's action and doing and participating in a kind of ongoing evolution that's happening. Once you start to open up to the mystery of how we're helped with that, very cryptically at times, your life begins to unfold in a way that's beyond chance, revealing a kind of calling or recognition that you're here to do something meaningful for the world, *in* the world. There's a flow you get into that's very inspiring, and I think that's the next step in human evolution."

A week before cameras were slated to roll, Redfield and Co. had yet to fill the role of Julia, one of their female leads. While actress Annabeth Gish was on a flight from Miami back home to L.A., they called her manager to offer her the part, but of course Gish didn't know this yet. "There were three weird synchronistic things," she remembers. "One, when I was in Miami, someone told me 'you should really go see St. Augustine. It's a nice area of Florida.' Two,

when I was on the plane, I sat next to this guy who said that he'd just met the girl of his dreams, and her name was Julia. And the third one was that while I was writing on the plane in my little daybook—I have no idea why—I wrote down 'something magical will always happen.' It wasn't so much a prediction . . . I was just sort of expressing my faith in the world." Naturally, when she got off the plane, her manager called with news of the offer—"A perfect fit," Gish says, "because I had specifically formed the intention to be part of a project that had some spiritual content and context. So it was bizarre how I put that out there and then it was answered." The next day, she was on her way back to Florida to start filming . . . in St. Augustine.

Listening to the enthusiasm in Redfield's voice, taking in the energy and activity of the set, I can sense a palpable feeling of ease and positivity in the air that seems to be affecting everyone. The way they're working together with little anxiety or tension is unusual for any work environment, but it's especially surprising to see on the set of a feature film production—an often "brutally autocratic" atmosphere, according to Barnet Bain, with "legendary stories of the egos and tempers that flare." "This crew is rolling with the punches like I've never seen a crew roll," Matthew Settle tells me, sitting on the tailgate of a pickup between scenes. "We're doing a three-month movie in the span of a month. Everyone's adapted to it. And at times when things have gone south, the energy is trickling all the way down from James. I think the act of love is an energy that alters your perception so you're no longer thinking only about yourself; you're thinking about a group dynamic."



The synchronicity stories I hear tend to fall into two categories: 1) astonishing and 2) debatable. Redfield's first-category best is about a crew member who saved a whole crowd of people, including his wife, Salle, from near disaster: "This huge crane just *fell over*, and it could have been catastrophic. Except Tommy, just on a hunch, said all of a sudden, 'Listen, I want everybody to get out of here right now. I want you to move, *everybody!*'" No sooner than the group was out from under the crane, it toppled; none of the veterans had ever seen such a thing. In category two, the talk of the set this weekend has been of a noteworthy bird sighting during a gunfight scene. Wandering through the canyon where this took place yesterday, marveling at the exploded Peruvian tourist bus lying there, engine block peeled open, ground strewn with charred blankets and burst watermelons and .50 caliber shells, I overhear a woman describing what transpired: "In the frame, above his head, a white dove flew over. A white dove! It gave me goose bumps . . ."

As intrigued as I am by some of these synchronistic happenings, I'm reluctant to draw too many momentous conclusions every time a bird flies over or a stranger makes lingering eye contact. (They're keeping a coincidence log for an upcoming synchronicity-on-location book.) Taken in light of our decidedly individualistic age, the popular notion that there's



Father Sanchez (Joaquim de Almeida) advises hero John Woodson (Matthew Settle, on motorcycle).

no such thing as an accident—that everything that happens to you happens for a reason—seems like it could all too easily become a perfect formula for a kind of self-referential, superstitious spiritual narcissism. But for millions of readers loyal

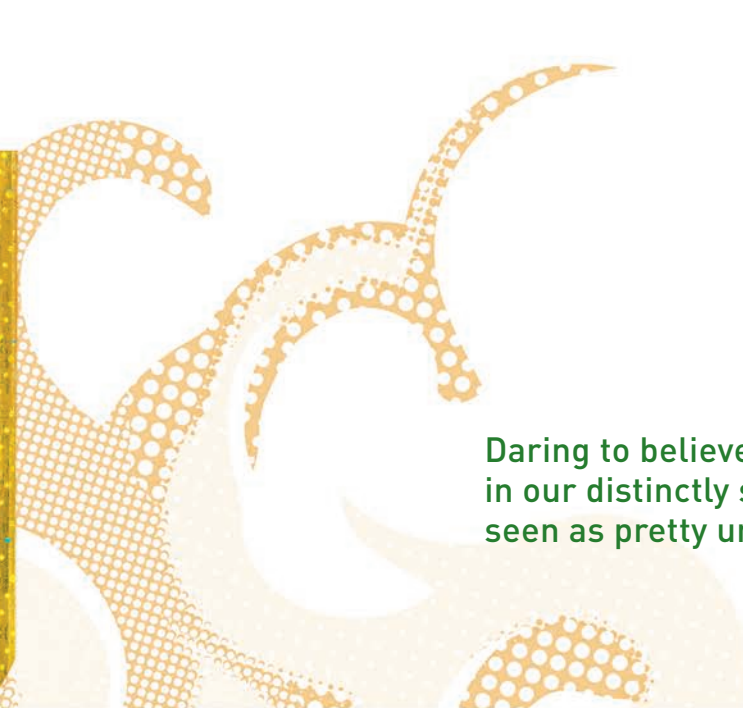
to Chopra, Dyer, Coelho, et al., synchronicity is more than just an odd, unexplainable occurrence here and there—it's a way of life. "This is not a fantasy adventure," Redfield whispers, intensity rising in his voice. (We have to be quiet because they're filming now over by the church, using blue screens as backdrops for later special-effects work.) "Our operating principle here is that it's real, that this story is a real alternative to the way people typically run their lives. You know, there are a lot of people who believe that cynicism and suspicion and pursuing just one's

own self-interest is the only way you can survive. And hopefully, we've got an antidote to that point of view."

FAITH FOR THE POSTMODERN AGE

Our collective feet are barely wet in the still unfamiliar waters of the twenty-first century, and already, faith, trust, and optimism have fallen on hard times. The threats of war, terrorism, and environmental suicide loom over us. For many, the old cultural and religious stories that gave us meaning and helped us find our way in the world are becoming progressively less relevant and immediate. And though science has given us many things, it still hasn't given us God. Indeed, daring to believe in anything holy at all in our distinctly secular age is usually seen

*In an irony of spiritual filmmaking, Mel Gibson's *The Passion* had its own share of miraculous occurrences, of the Catholic variety: visitors to his set in Rome were reportedly healed of blindness, disease, hearing loss, and epilepsy; people were converting left and right; lead actor Jim Caviezel was even struck by lightning, as was assistant director Jan Michellini—twice.



Daring to believe in anything holy at all in our distinctly secular age is usually seen as pretty uncool.

as pretty uncool. If there were a postmodern survival guide, the first chapter might be an intro to wariness, an overview of irony and skepticism—especially when it comes to any expression of confidence in matters of soul and spirit.

To its great credit, pop spirituality races to make spirituality just that—popular again—to close the gap between the sacred dimension of life and a world that, in many ways, has left that dimension behind as an outmoded relic of history. For so many of us, the grand orienting narratives of the great religions no longer suffice as they once did (the image of the ruined church on the hill is apropos). We can't go back to a God with a white beard, sitting in judgment on high, etching his decrees onto cold stone tablets. Enter a more democratic and egalitarian notion of divinity, open to each individual's interpretation and based directly on his or her own personal experience. For more and more of us, the materialistic explanations of science—the religion of modern times—are also insufficiently complete. There's a growing sense that we can't remain mired in the clockwork universe we've inherited from Newton and Descartes, alienated from ourselves, at a loss to understand the intangible stirrings inside us. Enter a contemporary outlet for mystery and meaning.

If there's one thing we can infer from just six authors selling over 150 million books worldwide, it's that the spiritual impulse in the human being refuses to be constrained or flattened, that something within us is still desperate to be nourished. And like it or not, we live in an environment increasingly defined by mainstream consumer culture. That culture provides the context for much of our lives, and its cafeterias and food courts serve spiritual food, too, to all those who are hungry for it. Sure, pop culture is the realm of the superficial, the artificial, and the nonessential. Yet it's also the ultimate postmodern common ground. By pulling spirituality free of religion, we've taken it into

our own hands; we're free to be ecumenical and eclectic, to pick and choose. And now, more than at any other time in history, mysteries that used to be veiled and esoteric have entered the democratic marketplace of ideas. As these authors claim, there's only one perennial truth at the heart of all religions anyway.

"What we want in this time period is the real experience of spirituality, not ideologies or abstract descriptions of it," Redfield says. "You can come from any religious tradition and ride this wave of experience in *The Celestine Prophecy* because it's the unity of the experience that pulls us together. It's the common experience among all the traditions that pulls us together." By emphasizing experience and practice over doctrine and ideology, he aims to make the path of inner transformation more widely accessible than ever before. It's no wonder that the number one-enemy of Redfield's *Nine Insights* is the Catholic Church, whose Cardinal Sebastian rages in the book: "This Manuscript is a curse. It would undermine our basic structure of spiritual authority. It would entice people to think they are in control of their spiritual destiny." Indeed, that's exactly what this populist groundswell is trying to accomplish. And with Hollywood climbing on board, its impact on our culture at large is only going to increase.

COFFEE AND A POOL PARTY

It's Sunday morning—the production's day off—and I'm sitting at the lone Starbucks in Ocala, Florida, where the scorching parking lots of strip malls meet the wide green fields of world-class horse farms. Little do the families walking by pushing toddlers in strollers or the teenagers out in front of the multiplex drinking Jamba Juice know that just a few miles up the road, a burgeoning postmodern religion's inaugural foray into the world of movies is taking shape. The old rock quarry is hidden in the forest across

“Pop mysticism—the idea that you could become a Sufi in eight weeks, or have access to deeper understandings without sacrificing anything—seems very counterintuitive.”

Sarah Wayne Callies

from the county fair, whose ferris wheel and demolition derbies are in their final week. Filming on *The Celestine Prophecy* wraps this week as well. This afternoon, cast and crew are planning to celebrate with a pool party at the Ramada Inn, and I’m hoping to catch them all with some downtime.

Sitting there drinking my coffee, I hear the sound of a familiar voice and turn to see Barnet Bain with director Armand Mastroianni, coming through the door. Wondering whether or not I’m being swept into some kind of synchronicity-enhancing energy field emanating from the nearby quarry, I walk over to say hello and invite them to sit down. “It’s funny,” I tell Mastroianni, whom I’ve yet to interview, “I was *hoping* for a chance to talk with you today.”

“We all have intuitions,” he laughs. “We all say, ‘Oh, wow, I was just thinking about that.’ And you know, James’s message is that these things are there for a reason.”

“I wanted to ask about what drew you to this film as a director. What would you say distinguishes this script from others you’ve worked on in the past?”

“You know, the book and the script spoke to me about a much higher consciousness than what you normally deal with in films,” Mastroianni replies. “I saw this as a love story about a man who falls in love with a philosophy, and there’s so much within that philosophy that is applicable to everyday life. I’m sure there are going to be people who will disagree, who will criticize it as just a lot of nonsense, as a quick fix kind of thing. I mean, everyone picks on these guys, whether it’s Deepak Chopra or John Gray, who wrote *Men Are from Mars, Women Are from Venus*, or Don Miguel Ruiz and *The Four Agreements*. But I think these books, if nothing else, do give someone a chance and do give someone hope. And just for that they’re good, to me, rather than something that’s very superficial. Anything that gets you to think about yourself and the way you behave and treat others is good in my mind.”

“Do you think that all the blockbuster thrills—you know, the Indiana Jones plotline, the psychedelic energy effects—will distract audiences from this philosophy that’s meant to be taken seriously as a means for personal reflection?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Bain jumps in. “This is not about

creating gee-whiz moments. It’s not going to be the kind of thing where you gasp, because it’s meant to do something else. Film is a modeling medium, not a processing medium the way prose is, and it works at a more visceral, energetic level. I think it’s safe to say that the behaviors of most people—certainly most young people—in America and Western Europe today, are strongly influenced by film and television. Their thoughts, beliefs, and values are all modeled there in very persuasive ways. It’s hard enough to remain open to exploring new ideas, but when you have something as potent and powerful as the media presenting a full-fledged reality experience, it can entice

you to forget that you have any choices at all. The media is not so much a reflection of drives within a culture—it really *defines* the culture. And that makes it a great gift when you can model responses to life that make *new* choices apparent, that are not the tried and true but are not so out of range that they enter into the realm of fantasy.”

By the time I get to the pool for the cast party, the festivities are in full swing—water volleyball, house band on the patio, Armand Mastroianni’s new parrot Petey (the honorary *Celestine* mascot) hanging out with cast and crew by the bar.

Intrigued by my conversation with Bain and Mastroianni this morning, I’m curious to find out what the cast members have to say about this increasing convergence of spirituality and pop culture. Grabbing a gin and tonic, I spend a while chatting with lead actress Sarah Wayne Callies (Marjorie) and eventually ask her for her thoughts on the subject.

“I think that culturally, we’re at an interesting point right now,” Callies says. “For instance, I see all these people studying Kabbalah. Which is strange, knowing that it used to be reserved for people who were over forty, because it was thought that anyone younger would go mad. And they were people who were, for starters, Jewish, but also people with a long history and education and relationship to, and passion for, simpler spiritual principles. Now, there’s this sort of pop mysticism—the idea that you could become a Sufi in eight weeks, or have access to these deeper understandings without sacrificing anything, and do it in twenty minutes a day—that seems to me very counterintuitive, and very different from my own experiences of profound spirituality. I mean, spirituality



The production team watching a take on the monitors.

is something some people dedicate every minute of their lives to, and then die and do it again for another fifteen lives.”


As we sip our drinks, the sun drops down behind the roofs of the neighborhood. “Super-size it,” Petey squawks from a crew member’s shoulder.

HISTORY ON PARADE

The popular spiritual surge heading for cineplexes across the country is definitely not your grandmother’s religion—or then again, maybe it was. In fact, this recent postmodern movement has a long and illustrious history that can be traced all the way back to ancient times. Known to scholars as “Western esotericism”—an umbrella term for a vast spectrum of religious phenomena with their earliest roots in Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian scriptural traditions—its modern version first developed in the academies of the Renaissance. Over the centuries, Western esotericism flowed and flowered through many forms, yet some things stayed the same: a vision of nature as a living system permeated by divinity; a focus on the mystical purification of the individual; a principle of correspondences between things visible and invisible. “The entire universe is a huge theater of mirrors,” writes historian Antoine Faivre, “an ensemble of hieroglyphs to be decoded. Everything is a sign; everything conceals and exudes mystery; every object hides a secret.”

Indeed, Renaissance scholars cooked up quite a soup Florentine for coming generations. Here’s the recipe: Take two quarts neoplatonism (metaphysical theories derived from Plato) and add two quarts hermetic philosophy (attributed to the mythical Hermes Trismegistus, major source for the idea of a primordial wisdom tradition or perennial philosophy). Chop up one cup each of various occult sciences (magic, astrology, alchemy), throw them in the mix, and bring to a boil. Finally, drop in a few handfuls of Kabbalah, cover, and simmer for a few hundred years.

As these esoteric philosophies were propagated throughout the Western world, they were shaped and molded by key individuals of remarkable genius. Emanuel Swedenborg—an accomplished eighteenth-century scientist, mystic seer, and revolutionary Christian



The Nine Insights

1. A Critical Mass

A silent spiritual awakening is occurring in human culture, brought about by the realization that mysterious coincidences are occurring in our lives, trying to lead us forward.

2. The Longer Now

To maintain this awareness, we must transcend the usual materialistic worldview that reduces life to the banal and ordinary and begin to see life as mysterious again.

3. A Matter of Energy

Released from our preconceptions, we can perceive the universe as a dynamic and super-beautiful place consisting of divine energy—an energy from which modern humans have felt cut off.

4. The Struggle for Power

But without a conscious connection to this larger source, we are stuck trying to win or to force others to give us their energy in a battle of domination—the hidden agenda behind all conflict.

5. The Message of the Mystics

The solution is to regain this connection—immensely difficult, but only to the degree that we deny that it is possible. Once achieved, we are filled with buoyancy, intuition, and clarity about life’s true purpose.

6. Clearing the Past

We are here to clear our styles of controlling and to discover a higher calling, a spiritual mission. It is toward the accomplishment of this mission that the coincidences are leading us.

7. Engaging the Flow

If we follow intuitive images of what we should do and say, and always interpret every occurrence positively, the coincidences increase and we enter a flow of synchronicity.

8. The Interpersonal Ethic

Key to staying in this flow is the giving of energy. As we give, the energy fills us up first and then moves out to others, everyone lifting each other up to ever higher levels.

9. The Emerging Culture

In this way, human evolution is accelerated until we break through to the most beautiful of dimensions, the afterlife itself, ending the cycle of birth and death, and completing the goal of history.

“Most of the beliefs which characterize the New Age were already present by the end of the nineteenth century . . . one may legitimately wonder whether the New Age brings anything new at all.”

Historian Wouter Hanegraaff

theologian—reinterpreted biblical scripture as an allegory of individual liberation, proclaiming the advent of a New Jerusalem on earth marked by increasing personal freedom and a distinctly practical spirituality. Franz Anton Mesmer, best known as the forefather of modern hypnosis (hence “mesmerize”), was an eighteenth-century physician whose pioneering subtle-energy therapies (which he called animal magnetism) inspired a fervent and sustained interest in the exploration and development of the unknown healing powers of the mind.

“The most remarkable step in the religious history of recent ages is that made by the genius of Swedenborg,” Ralph Waldo Emerson said once. And while he and his nineteenth-century romantic compatriots, the Transcendentalists, took Swedenborg’s influence forward, that’s not all they did. They were some of the first Western synthesizers of Hindu scriptures—trailblazers, of sorts, on the early frontiers of East-meets-West spirituality. According to scholar Martin Bickman, they ushered in a new American metaphysics that emphasized “the role of the mind itself in actively shaping experience.” And Emerson himself (followed by flamboyant Russian psychic Madame H.P. Blavatsky) was perhaps the first thinker to blend the emerging science of evolution with the Eastern doctrine of karma, yielding a seminal Western spirituality stressing the autonomy and accountability of the individual in the soul’s progress from life to life.

Speaking of Blavatsky, her Theosophical Society (founded in 1875) was equally pivotal in assimilating Eastern religious concepts into the Western esoteric framework, and was instrumental in the resurgence of popular interest in occultism and perennial philosophy. Around the same time, followers of Mesmer and Swedenborg were planting the seeds of the “create your own reality” school—New Thought. Founded on an innovative interpretation of Mesmer’s animal magnetism credited to Dr. Phineas Quimby of Portland, Maine, New Thought

shifted emphasis from Mesmer’s subtle energies to the healing power of patients’ own beliefs and expectations. And over the decades to come, a whole religious psychology of positive thinking and prosperity consciousness would develop, influencing multiple Christian denominations, Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, industrialist magnates Henry Ford and Andrew Carnegie, and renowned success gurus Napoleon Hill and Norman Vincent Peale.

“Most of the beliefs which characterize the New Age were already present by the end of the nineteenth century,” writes historian Wouter Hanegraaff, “even to such an extent that one may legitimately wonder whether the New Age brings anything new at all.” Still, there was some cooking left to be done—and where the Renaissance Italians used a soup kettle, twentieth-century Americans got out a high-speed blender. At an unprecedented rate of mixing, many eminent modernizers worked with three main ingredients. To start, they added Eastern sacred traditions to Western esotericism, but not just from translated texts—soon, real sages from Asia would land on U.S. shores. First to arrive was Swami Vivekananda, who wowed the Parliament of the World’s Religions in Chicago in 1893, becoming India’s de facto spiritual ambas-

sador to the United States. Zen monk Soyen Shaku also attended the Parliament, and his students D.T. Suzuki and Nyogen Senzaki would soon follow to plant the earliest Buddhist seeds in American soil. Legendary meditation master Paramahansa Yogananda arrived in 1920, and his *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946) sold over a million copies and inspired thousands of Western seekers. And by 1965, with the repeal of barriers to Asian immigration that had been in place since 1917, a flood of Hindu, Buddhist, Sufi, and other gurus came West to infuse the growing counterculture with fresh spiritual vitality.

The second revolutionary development was a synthesis of psychology and religion undreamed of anywhere else in the world. Back near the turn of the century, multidisciplinary scientist William James (son of Swedenborgian theologian Henry James, Sr.) was probing toward an innovative psycho-



Lead actress Sarah Wayne Callies (*Marjorie*).



logical understanding of spiritual experience. “The greatest discovery of my generation,” James said, echoing his New Thought contemporaries, “is that human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind.” Over in Switzerland, influenced by German and Chinese philosophy, Carl Jung was working as both empirical theorist and shaman of the unconscious. His own particular fusion of psychology and religion would later sweep into fashion in America. Finally, in the 1960s, humanistic psychology developed as a popular movement at California’s Esalen Institute, led by Abraham Maslow, Carl Rogers, and Rollo May. It, too, was revolutionary, in that it steered away from the dominant schools in psychology—behaviorism and Freudian psychoanalysis—pointing toward a new emphasis on human values, the drive toward self-actualization, and peak mystical experiences.

But science-religion overlaps were not limited to the domain of psychology. Running alongside these other streams from early in the twentieth century, the fledgling theories of quantum mechanics began fueling endless speculation about hidden symmetries between matter and consciousness. One

such theory was in fact Jung’s synchronicity principle, which he developed in collaboration with Nobel Prize-winning quantum physicist Wolfgang Pauli. By the time the seventies rolled around, and Fritjof Capra’s *The Tao of Physics* (1975) hit the stands, interest in the parallels between ancient Eastern mysticism and modern experimental physics had become a pop phenomenon.

The postmodern tapestry of world religion and innovative science woven by these many pioneers and popularizers set the stage for the flowering of the New Age in the eighties and nineties. But there’s one last piece of the puzzle: the human potential movement. Starting at Esalen in the 1960s and mushrooming through hundreds of personal growth centers all across America, it broke crucial new ground by combining wildly eclectic teachings and techniques from different countries and time periods outside their original contexts—East and West, yoga and psychotherapy. Before long, all this creative mixing and matching reached a crescendo, and what once had been the province of the bohemian counterculture went mainstream. From the old Greek mysteries to the new



sciences of the inner world, from ancient Vedanta to modern neopaganism, tai chi to tarot, astrology to positivity, Walden Pond to hot springs and hot tubs, a modern synthetic religion was born.

Nowadays, it takes a discerning palate to distinguish the original ingredients from the whole smoothie. Indeed, this is one of two main reasons that, for a while, historians kept clear of the New Age altogether. The other? They thought it was a fad that would go away. But they've been proven wrong by hundreds of celebrated authors—soon to be joined by a few Hollywood pathfinders.

THIS LIFE'S A BLANK SLATE

It's a big day today on the set—they're filming the climax of the movie, the final confrontation between heroic everyman and diabolical übevillain. The production crew is going full tilt, pulling up trees and bushes and digging new holes to put them in, molding the landscape for the morning's sequence, the lead-up to the big clash to come this afternoon. Opposite Matthew Settle's protagonist John Woodson, actor Jürgen Prochnow plays Jensen, a minor character in the book who's been ramped up to prime-time nemesis here (head of a mysterious international cartel trying to thwart the spread of the Manuscript by blowing up the *Celestine* ruins). We're up on a hill where the scene takes place, overlooking Jensen's military camp: the crew is gearing up the jeeps; the extras in the army are going through a final rehearsal.

"And . . . *action*," Mastroianni says when everything's in place. Woodson and his ally, Father Sanchez (Joaquim de Almeida),

emerge at the edge of the forest, crouching down to remain hidden, and peer through the leaves to scout out their options. The army below is mobilizing; Jensen, dressed in black fatigues, stands in the open surveying the operation, giving orders to his lieutenants. There isn't much time left to save the ancient scrolls destined to change human consciousness.

"There are heroes out there who have transcended everything, every possible thing, and they have to be our models," Redfield says as we watch the action unfold. "If you always expect the positive, guess what happens? That intention starts to move you past the karmic stuff, and suddenly you're in a world where fewer so-called negative things happen to you, because you're always assuming that your life's going to be an inspired journey rather than a victimhood of any kind. This life's a blank slate—if we expect the positive, we're going to get it. If we expect the negative, we're going to get that too. That's how powerful we are."

The idea that our thoughts literally create our reality is a central New Age belief that goes all the way back to the beginnings of New Thought. Indeed, in one form or another, a conviction in the life-transforming potential of positive thinking shows up

Before long, all this creative mixing and matching reached a crescendo, and what once had been the province of the bohemian counterculture went mainstream.

across the entire breadth of this movement. “Believe you know all answers, and you know all answers. Believe you’re a master, and you are,” Richard Bach writes in *Illusions*. “You are the creator of your reality,” God tells Neale Donald Walsch in one of their many conversations, “and life can show up no other way for you than that way in which you *think* it will.” Not surprisingly, there are many people here on the set voicing similar convictions in the miraculous power of thought. And there are others who have questions.

“Where I get stuck,” Annabeth Gish had told me earlier, “is the whole New Age idea that you can create your destiny by positive thinking. What do you say to a woman who has cancer or a handicapped kid? Did she create *that* by negative thinking? It’s taking away science; it’s taking away matter, you know? Metaphysics can only exist because of physics, and that’s where this whole ‘art of deliberate creation’ troubles me. You can’t take away the fact that sometimes chromosomes get screwed up.”

I’ve been wondering the same thing. “Do you really think it’s possible to control everything that happens to us simply by controlling our thoughts?” I ask Redfield, reminded of the predictions in his books—that in the future, synchronistically advanced humans will have minds free of aggravation (“soon, negative images will almost never happen”) and lives free of danger (“everything bad that happens to us occurs because we missed some synchronistic opportunity to avoid it”).

“Oh, yeah,” he replies. “But I wouldn’t use the word ‘control.’ We’re not really controlling our lives as much as we’re sensing the correct flow for our lives from somewhere beyond ourselves, and the only thing that kills that flow is to make a negative interpretation of something that happens to you. We don’t create what happens—people die, people get sick. What we do create is how we *react* to what happens, and what we make that’s positive out of the conditions that we face.

Anything you may think is negative always has a learning component, always has a silver lining, with the potential to move you in an even more fulfilling direction.”

This faith in our ability to generate our own good fortune is a cornerstone of this philosophy, and it’s also quintessentially American. The American dream is the dream of prosperity and abundance, and pop spirituality is the American dream spiritualized, fueled by an almost mythic, entrepreneurial optimism. As journalist John L. O’Sullivan, originator of the phrase “Manifest Destiny,” wrote in 1839: “We are the nation of human progress, and who will, what can, set limits to our onward march? Providence is with us, and no earthly power can.”

Woodson and Father Sanchez are still concealed in the woods, spying on Jensen’s camp, conferring quietly about what to do next. At one point during the long string of takes, Mastroianni needs more foliage in the foreground for them to hide behind, so Settle picks up a branch and just holds it up in front of his face. It’s a close-up, and his hand is off-camera. “This is *mine* to do,” Woodson says with deadly serious intent, meeting his friend’s eyes. Then he leaps down the hill alone, disappearing into the trees to meet his fate.



Woodson confronts the evil Jensen (Jürgen Prochnow)

FINDING HEAVEN NOW

When afternoon comes, a captured John Woodson is brought into camp by Jensen’s guards. Things definitely don’t look good: he’s all alone, your average social worker swept up in events beyond his control, events that depend on how he responds to them. Jensen steps from the shadows, peeling an apple with a bowie knife. The timer on the bomb is ticking down, and the final secret of the Ninth Insight has yet to be found. That’s the situation, and

our hero’s only hope is to appeal to the buried humanity of a man who has sold his soul to the demons of profit and domination. Mastroianni’s having this scene filmed with the mobile Steadicam, and as the dialogue escalates, the cameraman orbits around them—two men, two worldviews locked in a duel while



everything else is spinning. Jensen hasn't put the knife down yet. "The way of the world," he says, "is power."

This is Hollywood entertainment. But it's also a statement to be taken seriously. "James always meant this to be a spiritual adventure," says producer Beverly Camhe. "But I think that it will provoke some thought, some serious thought, about why the world is what it is today and what we have to do to change things." Indeed, at a time when more and more of us are searching for faith, with conflict all around us and restlessness within, turning the ultimate secular entertainment—the movies—toward the domain of the religious starts to look like something of a coup.

"Years ago, there were a lot of movies made about Christ," Mastroianni says. "And then they stopped making them because they felt no one wanted to see these sword-and-sandal films anymore. But now, we're living in times where people are once again seeking the sense of the spiritual. And certainly after *The Passion*, films like this will be accepted more than they were before." Mel Gibson had both the means and the clout

to draw Hollywood into this territory; so does James Redfield. "While we applaud what Mel has done, because he broke some ice, we hope that with this film, we can say we have the rest of the story," Redfield tells me as they reset props and extras for another take. "And that's our offering to people: we don't have to wait until the end; we don't have to wait until some afterlife reward. The world is designed so that we can find a heaven here now, if we work at it together."

For this growing worldwide movement of popular authors, arriving at a heaven on earth—through personal spiritual evolution and heartfelt engagement in the world—is the most thrilling prospect of all. "Things often appear as though we're going backwards, not toward that higher, more evolved vision," Redfield says. "But you don't know how many steps are necessary to get us all there. Do we have to suffer some sort of gigantic economic collapse before we learn to make our technology compatible with natural systems? I don't know. I think that we can avoid it, but will we? I don't know. But I have full faith that we'll get to that place eventually."

“This life’s a blank slate—if we expect the positive, we’re going to get it. If we expect the negative, we’re going to get that too. That’s how powerful we are.”

James Redfield

And yet, taking stock of our situation, our continued survival—let alone our spiritual evolution—seems far from assured. As alarming as it is to admit, we don’t know how short a time we have left. Fragile planetary ecosystems are already beginning to fail; ethnic and religious conflict shows no sign of abating; our political and civic discourse increasingly appeals to the worst of our fears and suspicions. So much depends on whether we’re willing to embrace rather than shy away from this challenging reality. But even despite these mounting crises, so many of us at the threshold of an uncertain new millennium continue to spend most of our time and attention distracted with the runaway materialism of a never-ending American dream.

If the fundamental hurdle of our historical moment is the task of reaching beyond purposelessness and alienation, then we first need to find a way to leap over our cultural obsession with artificiality and endless surfaces. We’re hungry for depth at the same time that we relentlessly avoid it, adrift in a world untethered from the traditional religious structures that in earlier times oriented us toward higher purpose and meaning. This is the price we’ve paid for the free reign of individuality and self-determination. But perhaps the biggest irony of our irony-laden age is that, despite the secular conversion we’ve struggled so diligently to accomplish, the spiritual impulse seems to be rising nonetheless. Amid the triviality of postmodern life, our yearning for soul and substance is taking new forms and paths—now, strangely enough, even trickling out from the screens and the malls and the popular paperbacks.

How much this new secular spiritual movement is going to help us find our bearings in the stormy seas of the twenty-first century remains to be seen. The richness of its complex history, now bursting loose into the midst of the American mainstream, is a study in the ironic tension between inspired innovation and the commodification of sentiment in contemporary pop culture. By translating timeless mystical truths into digestible popular languages, these

many prominent authors have opened up an otherwise off-limits spiritual territory to a population segment disaffected with conventional religious faith. Millions have found new beginnings there, in the experiential recognition of a part of themselves longing for fuller expression. Yet this newfound accessibility has also come at a price. For in the race to make the esoteric secrets of the ages available to an ever-widening

popular spiritual marketplace, this movement tends to oversimplify and romanticize the reality of our human predicament. And in doing so, it underplays the increasing complexity of the challenges facing us.

In the *Ninth Insight*, Redfield asserts that in the future, all people will have the luxury of living “in the most powerful and beautiful places on the Earth.” “Our needs will be completely met without the exchange of any currency,” he writes, “yet also without any overindulgence or laziness.” And a new spiritual

economy will revolve around “getting paid for evolving freely and offering our unique truth to others.” Although if I had a gun to my head, I wouldn’t insist that the sort of utopia Redfield envisions could *never* come to pass, it’s hard to believe that, as Redfield claims, he really has “the rest of the story.”

They’re still filming when I say my good-byes. On my way to the airport, I stop for a snack at the grocery store, and *The Celestine Prophecy* is for sale right there on the rack. There’s something strangely reassuring about seeing it next to Danielle Steel and the Snapple fridge. It’s a part of our vernacular now, mingled into this novel secular fusion of spiritual and commercial, mysticism and merchandise. What a curious place we find ourselves in, I think to myself, standing in line at the checkout counter. Anticipating the next step in the dawning spiritualization of Hollywood, coming to theaters as early as next spring, I open up my bag of sunflower seeds and walk through the automatic door just in time to see a white dove flying across the sky, the glint of its wings flickering in the hot Florida sun. ■



Woodson contemplates his next move. “This is mine to do.”

ONLINE EXTRAS: For media and web resources, including audio/video interviews from “The American Dream Spiritualized,” visit www.wie.org/unbound

Part III

A PEOPLE'S REVOLUTION OF





ENLIGHTENMENT:

KABBALAH

**Ancient mysticism hits the bigtime
at the Kabbalah Centre**

by Maura R. O'Connor

I PUT THE PHONE BACK ON THE RECEIVER

and turn off the tape recorder. A sickening emotion begins to flood over me. "So, this is what utter defeat and humiliation is like," I think to myself, almost marveling at how excruciating the feeling is. I have just conducted what was, unarguably, the worst interview of my entire, albeit rather short, journalistic career. In and of itself, this may seem rather un-noteworthy, but this interview happened to be with, by all accounts, one of the holiest sages alive in the world today: the great Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz.

This is the man that *Time* magazine called a "once-in-a-millennium scholar," the man



Rabbi Adin Steinsaltz, 1987

who is the Duchovny Ravin—"spiritual leader"—of the entire Russian Jewry, the man who has published thirty-seven volumes of translations and commentary on the Babylonian Talmud and still has more to go—a task that, when completed, will have taken nearly the entire span of his life. Rabbi Steinsaltz's understanding of the spiritual principles of Kabbalah is almost preternatural, and I had just sabotaged, with shallow question followed by shallower question, the honor of speaking with him.

During the interview, as my seeming incapability to engage in an intelligent dialogue with him was becoming uncomfortably apparent, I began to realize that it was not my lack of research into this ancient spiritual tradition that was the problem. After all, I had just spent the last three months eating, sleeping, and even dreaming of nothing but Kabbalah. I had soaked up every book I could get my hands on and fallen in love with the wonderful and compelling revelations they spoke of.

No, the problem was far worse. Face-to-face with the living embodiment

of ancient wisdom itself, I found myself confronting, for the first time in my life, my own inherent lack of depth. This lack of depth didn't stem from any one thing. On the contrary, it seemed to be the product of a number of conspiring elements: my generation, my youth, my education, my birth at this particular "postmodern" moment in history, my very "American-ness" itself. And beyond these circumstances that some might argue I have little control over, I realized something else that was rather appalling: this insidious shallowness has been nourished by my own endless attraction to it, by a lifetime of intoxication with surface and sensationalism.

As I spoke with Rabbi Steinsaltz, all of this became exposed and vividly highlighted. Reaching for words, for a vocabulary, for a way to respond to the timeless spiritual and intellectual stature of this venerable man, I came back with thin air again and again. Try as I might, I couldn't even conjure the kind of fraudulent depth that had gotten me through college, that so many of my friends and I use as common currency to get through life itself, and that I now see—with the shock of true recognition—permeates the culture I live in. As I returned to my office and stared at the unfinished article on the computer screen, a strange mixture of shame and irony began to overwhelm me.





Guy Ritchie, Madonna, and Yehuda Berg, Codirector of the Kabbalah Centre, at the book launch for *The 72 Names of God*.

DAVENING WITH MADONNA

There is a Dutch turn of phrase, “*joodse kerk*.” When something is circus-like, messy, and unorganized, they say, “This is like a *joodse kerk*!” A “Jewish church.” For those of us who are uninitiated into the Jewish Sabbath, this is hard to imagine. But when you finally experience it, you understand perfectly.

In my case, it was Saturday morning at the Kabbalah Centre in New York City. People strolled in and out and polyphonic ring tones begged to be answered. Women bounced babies on their laps as they animatedly whispered to one another. Meanwhile, sixty or so men sat separately from us, to my left. Dressed from head to toe in white, many had turned their prayer shawls into hoods that covered their heads and yarmulkes. At times, they put their arms around each other in an embrace that allowed them to lean further in over a single book that they shared, the crowns of their heads nearly touching.

The synchronal ebb and flow of prayer and incantation occurring between these men and the seven or eight rabbis standing at the front of the room was captivating and almost magical. As the rabbis, including Philip S. Berg, the founder of the Kabbalah Centre, and his two sons, Michael and Yehuda, read from an enormous ornate scroll of the Torah, the men’s voices rose in pitch one moment only to fade into a profound quiet the next.

It was a religious waltz whose steps I didn’t know, and there were momentary episodes of confusion on my part, when the tenuous strings of ritual order that seemed to prevent havoc from setting in seemed stretched beyond the breaking point. And yet even when a raucous child started tugging on the rabbi’s prayer shawl, and eventually fell asleep on the ground at their feet, no one seemed to notice or mind very much.

Considering that this was my very first Shabbat, you may feel that I’m unqualified to say much about it, but even my untrained eye could pick out some highly unusual things about this scene. For instance, the Japanese man to my left donning a yarmulke and prayer shawl didn’t look very Jewish. In fact, there were a *lot* of people there who didn’t look very Jewish—like the girl sporting a twelve-inch architectonic afro on my right. Also, everyone was holding a bottle of “Kabbalah water.” Blessed by Rabbi Philip Berg, the water, they said, promotes cleansing and healing. Every twenty minutes or so, a rabbi up front would say to us excitedly, “Now, drink some Kabbalah water before we pray together. It will help you to better connect to the Light! Everybody drink!” And everybody did.

But the defining moment for me was when the dashing movie director Guy Ritchie, wearing a dapper white cap in



Students attending "The Power of Kabbalah" class at the New York Kabbalah Centre, 2004.

place of a yarmulke, strolled in and took a seat with the rest of the men, followed by his very small wife, Madonna. She sat with us women, frequently holding her hands palm up to the Torah in order to receive its invisible energy. "My God," I said to myself, "I'm davening¹ with Madonna."

Now, you're probably saying to yourself, "Oh, I've heard about that place, the Kabbalah Centre!" and that's because you may have glanced at some "tabloidish" magazines recently, or been watching some *Entertainment Tonight*. In recent years, the center has been receiving an onslaught of media attention as a

"Kabbalah will rock your world—you'll completely change the way you look at and live life. You'll find understanding like you never knew before."

Jay-Z

result of the inordinate number of celebrities who have begun to choose Kabbalah as a spiritual path.² It's rather surprising that the paparazzi haven't just set up base camps outside the Kabbalah Centre's doors.

One of the most enigmatic mystical traditions in the world, Kabbalah's mysteries were believed to have been given to Adam by the angel Raziel and its secret laws carefully encoded within the Torah. As a result, only the most highly spiritually devel-

oped rabbis and mystics (men only) could learn them, often within small tight-knit brotherhoods or between a teacher and a carefully selected student.

I myself don't fulfill a single traditional requirement, upheld by kabbalists for hundreds of years, that would allow me to have access to such secrets. Unmarried and underage (not to mention uncircumcised), I'm also not Jewish. But in spite of what would have been, in all probability, impassable barriers just twenty-five years ago, all this young goy had to do was place a single phone call in order to attend Shabbat at the Kabbalah Centre, and presumably taste Kabbalah's ancient wisdom. My presence at the center that Saturday is a true testament to how explosively popular, and accessible, Kabbalah has become.

But how did it happen? How did a mystical tradition that was, in many ways, on the fringes of even Jewish culture, become a mainstream spiritual path, as well as the stuff of national tabloid gossip and cable television? It's obvious that the celebrities are partial protagonists in this process, but it's the work of the Kabbalah Centre that has miraculously managed to remove centuries of concealment, revealing and creating a postmodern spiritual path that has resonated with thousands of people. Dare I say, they have done *more* than simply make Kabbalah popular—they've made being "spiritual" come with the coveted badge of "cool." This is truly unprecedented. Even the rap star Jay-Z endorsed a recently published Kabbalah Centre book, saying, "Kabbalah will rock your world—you'll completely change the way you look at and live life. You'll find understanding like you never knew before." Or take Ashton Kutcher, the host of MTV's *Punk'd* and star of *That 70s Show*. He unabashedly told an interviewer recently, "I would say that I'm an extremely spiritual person. My first Shabbat was incredible."

¹ Yiddish for praying.

² I could list them all, but it would simply take up too much space. Britney Spears, Roseanne Barr, Barbra Streisand, Mick Jagger, Ashton Kutcher, Sandra Bernhard, Demi Moore, Victoria and David Beckham, Naomi Campbell, Elizabeth Taylor, Courtney Love, Brittany Murphy, Marla Maples, and Hugh Jackman are some of the attendees of the Kabbalah Centre. And, of course, Guy Ritchie and Madonna.



It's a story that takes us back to 1962, when a man named Philip Berg traveled to the Holy Land and met his spiritual teacher, the Hasidic Rabbi Yehudah Zvi Brandwein. But if you really want to understand how this all started, we'll need to go on a journey of sorts—a tour of history that reaches far into the past. I'll take you to the early 1900s, when the brilliant Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag tirelessly translated the kabbalistic canon, the Zohar, into modern Hebrew; two hundred years before that, when the magnetic Baal Shem Tov traveled through the forests of Eastern Europe spreading his ecstatic love of God to every Jewish community; before the hill town of Safed in Galilee became the home of a holy brotherhood and their radical mystical revelations; before Moses stood alone in the heat of the burning bush with six hundred thousand of his people awaiting his guidance; before Abraham the Patriarch and Adam and Eve, to when the first rumbling vibrations of divine speech gave birth to cosmic space in a single flash. And believe it or not, this story takes us back before even that.

A CELESTIAL VISITATION (OR HOW I LEARNED KABBALAH THE OLD-SCHOOL WAY)

Attempting to penetrate Kabbalah is like entering a labyrinth. Its essence is elusive and carefully hidden by high conceptual walls and false doorways to understanding. It seems especially difficult for us twenty-first-century philistines not to get lost. Night after night, week after week, I had the strange feeling that the more I read, the less I understood about this ancient tradition. However, one night, just as my frustration was slipping into a sinking desperation, something miraculous happened. The rain was pounding at my windows, and weighty Kabbalah books leaned at tottering angles on my desk. My eyes were beginning to waver, tempted by a sweet and irresistible sleep. As the infrastructures of my consciousness slowly collapsed around me, a strange vision began to take shape. As if emerging from a murky fog, I saw the figure of a man moving closer. His willowy body was wearied with age, and a yellowed beard framed his patrician features. It was a dream like no other.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked in a deep and resonant voice.

Confused, I sputtered, "*Should* I know who you are?"

He stared down at me with radiant eyes. "Dear child, my name is Moses de Leon."

"Moses de Leon the kabbalist?" I exclaimed incredulously. "That's rather impossible. You've been dead for nearly eight hundred years."

A smirk spread beneath his mammoth beard. "Well, I see all your study was not completely useless after all. In any case, I don't expect you to understand how it is I have appeared before

you. It is not something mortals tend to grasp very easily." I gasped in disbelief at the overwhelming dignity of this ethereal figure before me.

"My child, for thousands of years men have struggled to understand the ineffable Cause of Causes. But the universe is a sacred mystery that is beyond the comprehension of most men, try as they may to solve it. Do you know what Kabbalah *really* is?"

"No, but I *want* to know," I said, looking up at his wizened face.

"Kabbalah is the collected wisdom, harvested over the course of history, of those men who have solved the mystery, who have seen the face of God and lived to tell the tale. This is the reason I am here: to help you understand the greatest story history has to offer—the story of Kabbalah." Bewildered, I only nodded in response.

"If you listen closely, you will understand. The kabbalists of old tell us that in the beginning, the universe unfolded from an abyss of pure and fathomless emptiness. The only way you could possibly comprehend this emptiness would be to negate every single concept in your mind until they were all extinguished, and even then its total mystery would elude you. Emptiness, what the kabbalists called *ayin*, exists far beyond concepts or language. It is like a pure ether that can never be grasped by the mind. The kabbalists say emptiness is the annihilation of all thoughts."

"But didn't the kabbalists believe that God created the universe?" I asked him.

"You make the mistake, my child, of assuming that emptiness was devoid of God. This is not true: the kabbalists understood that this vast emptiness boiled and churned with a latent divinity. In fact, emptiness is the ultimate mystery, the *secret* of the Cause of Causes, and it brought everything into being."

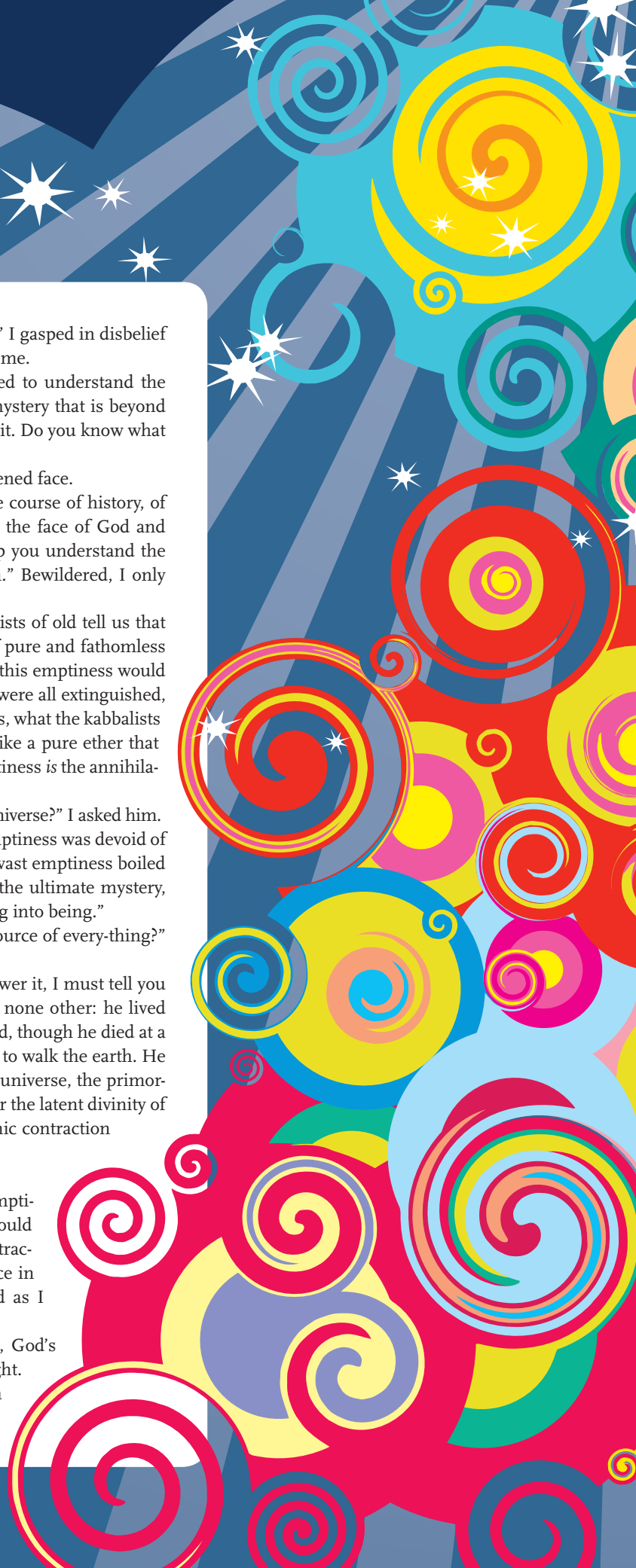
"But," I persisted, "how could no-thing *really* be the source of every-thing?" As I spoke, de Leon's face lit up with a fervent excitement.

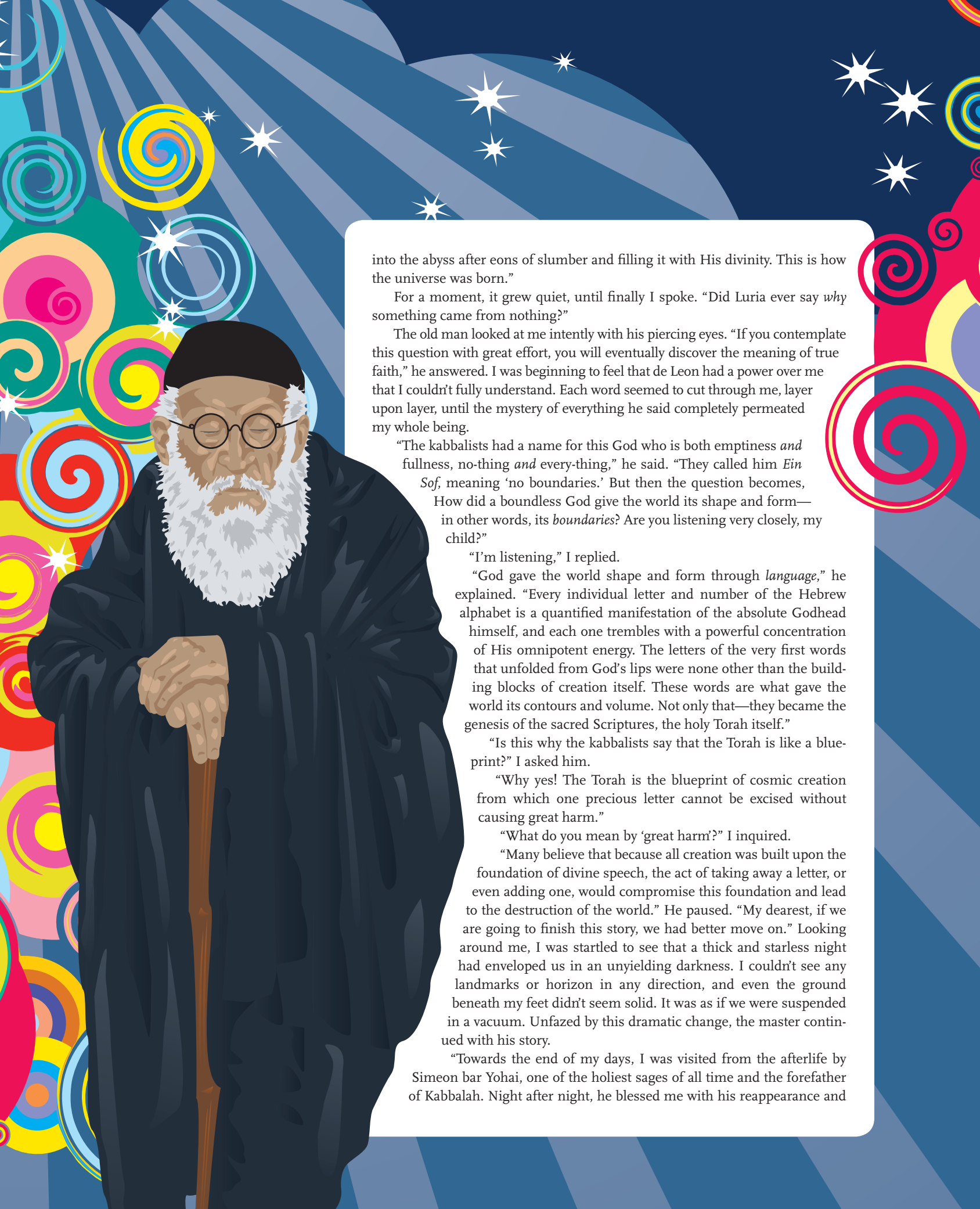
"This question is of great significance! In order to answer it, I must tell you of the great rabbi, Isaac Luria. Luria was a visionary like none other: he lived during the fifteenth century in the holy town of Galilee and, though he died at a young age, he was one of the most exalted kabbalists ever to walk the earth. He spent his life ceaselessly contemplating the source of the universe, the primordial emptiness we call *ayin*. He recognized that in order for the latent divinity of *ayin* to manifest its glorious potential for life, a cataclysmic contraction had to take place."

"A *contraction*?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"Luria understood that the absolute nature of this emptiness meant that it was so pervasive, nothing else *but* it could exist. In order for life to become manifest, a seismic contraction of emptiness *in on itself* had to occur, creating a space in which divine emanation was possible." My mind reeled as I struggled to grasp what de Leon said.

He continued: "Following this immense contraction, God's first cosmic act was the emission of a single perfect ray of light. This beam pierced through the void and then expanded in all directions. Think of it as God's first breath exhaling





into the abyss after eons of slumber and filling it with His divinity. This is how the universe was born.”

For a moment, it grew quiet, until finally I spoke. “Did Luria ever say *why* something came from nothing?”

The old man looked at me intently with his piercing eyes. “If you contemplate this question with great effort, you will eventually discover the meaning of true faith,” he answered. I was beginning to feel that de Leon had a power over me that I couldn’t fully understand. Each word seemed to cut through me, layer upon layer, until the mystery of everything he said completely permeated my whole being.

“The kabbalists had a name for this God who is both emptiness *and* fullness, no-thing *and* every-thing,” he said. “They called him *Ein Sof*, meaning ‘no boundaries.’ But then the question becomes, How did a boundless God give the world its shape and form—in other words, its *boundaries*? Are you listening very closely, my child?”

“I’m listening,” I replied.

“God gave the world shape and form through *language*,” he explained. “Every individual letter and number of the Hebrew alphabet is a quantified manifestation of the absolute Godhead himself, and each one trembles with a powerful concentration of His omnipotent energy. The letters of the very first words that unfolded from God’s lips were none other than the building blocks of creation itself. These words are what gave the world its contours and volume. Not only that—they became the genesis of the sacred Scriptures, the holy Torah itself.”


“Is this why the kabbalists say that the Torah is like a blueprint?” I asked him.

“Why yes! The Torah is the blueprint of cosmic creation from which one precious letter cannot be excised without causing great harm.”

“What do you mean by ‘great harm’?” I inquired.

“Many believe that because all creation was built upon the foundation of divine speech, the act of taking away a letter, or even adding one, would compromise this foundation and lead to the destruction of the world.” He paused. “My dearest, if we are going to finish this story, we had better move on.” Looking around me, I was startled to see that a thick and starless night had enveloped us in an unyielding darkness. I couldn’t see any landmarks or horizon in any direction, and even the ground beneath my feet didn’t seem solid. It was as if we were suspended in a vacuum. Unfazed by this dramatic change, the master continued with his story.

“Towards the end of my days, I was visited from the afterlife by Simeon bar Yohai, one of the holiest sages of all time and the forefather of Kabbalah. Night after night, he blessed me with his reappearance and



told me the story of his life. Yohai was exiled by the heathen Romans in the second century for his criticisms of the Roman government, and for thirteen years he was forced to live in a cave with his dear son Eleazar. Every day Elijah the Prophet would descend from heaven and bestow the sacred secrets of the universe upon them.” De Leon paused, and I realized I did not want him to stop speaking. With every intonation and flutter of his craggy hands, he had managed to draw me deeper into his mystical web.

“Yohai the sage whispered to me, ever so softly, these secrets of the universe. Every time he spoke, I transcribed his words onto parchment, and so it continued in that way for many years. By the end of his visits, I had amassed nearly two thousand pages of secret knowledge. I gathered these writings together and called them the Zohar, ‘the Book of Splendor.’”

“I’ve heard about the Zohar,” I said. “But I thought it was called the Book of Enlightenment.”

“The Zohar is sometimes referred to as the Book of Enlightenment. The mysteries it contains have the potential to forever illuminate the hearts and minds of those who read it. This is because the Zohar penetrates the *sod*—the very soul of the holy Torah. Did you know that there are four different ways to interpret the Scriptures?” I shook my head.

“The highest level of interpretation is called *sod*, which means the ‘secret’ or soul level. Kabbalah is the soul of the Torah,” he said emphatically. “And just as there can be no perfection of the body without the soul, there is no perfection of Torah without Kabbalah.” The ancient one stared into the inky void surrounding us before continuing.

“So great is the Zohar’s supernal wisdom that, throughout history, printers have at times bathed their presses in holy water in order to purify them before coming into contact with it.” He paused before speaking again. “Now, I have a question for you. My child, have you ever truly *craved* to know God in your heart of hearts?” I realized that I had never asked myself such a question before.

“I, like my kabbalist brethren, wanted nothing else in my lifetime. But how can we know an infinite, ineffable God? The kabbalists knew that this was only possible through the attributes of God, which are known as the ten *sefirot*. All together, the *sefirot* make up a kind of metaphysical ladder that the Divine has extended to man from heaven. Do you know how the kabbalist climbs this ladder?”

“No, I don’t,” I said.

“Through years of prayer, selfless study, and silent meditation on each attribute of God, we can ascend the ladder until we reach the top, where we will be able to drink from the fathomless well of emptiness, and in so doing, return to the Cause of Causes, the Root of Roots, the Source of all Life itself.

This, my daughter, is how we begin to know God. The greatest of the kabbalists reached these mystical heights I am describing to you and received a vision of the Divine, an image that was so good and pure it filled and expanded their hearts forever. With

hearts overflowing, these great men would then descend the ladder and spread God's holiness on earth." Moses de Leon's voice trembled with a new passion, and I found myself leaning closer to him, pressing him to continue. "Indeed, this is the kabbalist's sacred task in life, his Great Work: to adorn the earth in our Creator's image, ceaselessly, until true perfection is attained."

"How does one perfect the world though?" I asked him.

"The kabbalists believe that we can attain perfection on earth through the repeated observance of the 613 commandments, the Jewish *mitzvot*. Every commandment that is enacted with pure motivation and true intention contributes to the reparation or correction of the imperfect state of our world. Every righteous act is like a sacred gift to the Divine. Its power and energy ascend through the *sefirotic* ladder to the celestial realms, strengthening the relationship between heaven and earth and ensuring that the flow of life between man and God continues."

"So what happens if man commits a sin?" I asked de Leon.

"Such an act is the ultimate betrayal of God, my dearest. When man commits an act of immorality, its energy descends to the lower worlds where it causes the arousal of evil itself. It is crucial that you understand this," he said with gravity in his voice. "Evil has no independent existence outside of man. Rather, it is awakened by our sins. Once awakened, evil festers in man's soul and eventually seeks out the evil in others. In this way, it gathers momentum and power, and becomes a malicious force in the universe." De Leon let the weight of his words linger, until finally they dissipated into the silent ether.

Finally, he spoke again. "If you only remember one thing I tell you tonight, my daughter, remember this: the story of Kabbalah reveals to us what our true purpose in God's Universe is. We are not here only to reap the fruits of knowledge. Rather, we are here to *act* on that knowledge! Remember that the God of the righteous, *our* God, depends on *us* to create heaven on earth. Kabbalah tells us that our highest calling is the one that begs us to become living incarnations of holiness. And the highest embodiment of the Divine is a *tzaddik*, a righteous one."

I could feel my heart pounding with de Leon's words, and I was about to urge him to continue when suddenly he declared, "I must go now."

"But," I protested, "what about the rest of the story? It doesn't end there!"

"No, you're right. The story *doesn't* end there." I tried to implore him to stay but my reverie was fading and I couldn't vocalize the words fast enough. De Leon was becoming blurred, swallowed up by my increasing wakefulness. Like a flash, the dream disintegrated, and I found myself once again surrounded by skyscrapers of books. The rain pounded at my windows, every bead a lingering mystery in my mind.

Kabbalah tells us that our highest calling is the one that begs us to become living incarnations of holiness. And the highest embodiment of the Divine is a *tzaddik*, a righteous one.

THE KABBALISTS OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

I awoke the morning following my revelatory dream and immediately sought out a copy of the Zohar at my library. As I flipped through its pages in awe, I remembered that Moses de Leon had completed the Zohar in the year 1287 and died eighteen years later at the age of fifty-five. During his lifetime, he laid down the foundation of Kabbalah as it would exist for hundreds of years into the future. Its secrets were exchanged within reclusive conclaves throughout Europe—some consisting of as many as twelve men, but more commonly as little as three. Although there were slight variations on this theme—sudden bursts of innovation throughout history—Kabbalah was a rigidly esoteric spiritual tradition that remained foreign even to the majority of Jewish people.

Then in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Hasidic movement spread like a joyful wildfire among the Jewish communities of Eastern Europe. The founder of Hasidism, the Baal Shem Tov, and his successors, aimed to bring their ecstatic love of God to the Jewish people by sharing the direct experience of Kabbalah's truths. Within a period of fifty years, Kabbalah became a way of life for thousands of Jews rather than just the property of highly educated and reclusive mystics.

Both traditional Kabbalah and Hasidism still thrive today, but Kabbalah's study and practice in the twenty-first century have been pluralized, diversified, and modified, crossing boundaries that Moses de Leon or the Hasids of the past may never have believed possible. Among all of the variations, four primary categories of modern-era kabbalists can be delineated: the "traditionalists," the "academics," the "progressives," and finally, the "popularizers" of Kabbalah.

Members of the first of these categories, the "traditionalists," mainly exist within kabbalistic yeshivas (Jewish seminaries). Although there are numerous yeshivas operating today, especially in Israel and America, don't be surprised if you never see or hear of one. Their leaders emphasize privacy and secrecy like their medieval forefathers, maintaining the traditional requirements and restrictions associated with learning Kabbalah. These yeshivas and the communities around them

are "closed systems" and remain dedicated to a fundamentalist interpretation and practice of Kabbalah.

The patriarch of the "academics," the second category, is the famously brilliant scholar Gershom Scholem, who died in 1982. Scholem singlehandedly enabled Kabbalah to become an established academic discipline through his pioneering work translating and commenting on obscure kabbalistic texts in the early twentieth century. Today, only fifty to sixty scholars around the world are dedicated to the study of traditional Kabbalah. This tight-knit group remains cloistered within the walls of academic institutions, and their goings-on are kept mostly to themselves. The conservative leanings of these "academic" kabbalists mean that they share a lot in common with the "traditionalists."

The third category of kabbalists is perhaps the most nebulous. It comprises a group of progressive individuals who stand apart from the traditionalists and academics in that they are both rigorous scholars *and* passionate practitioners. This group is less concerned with maintaining conventional norms than they are with honoring Kabbalah's mystical principles and actualizing them in the world. These individuals are attempting both to preserve the essence and depth of the tradition and to evolve its relevance, all at the same time.

The fourth category is the "popularizers." This group consists of those authors, teachers, and organizations that are attempting to bring Kabbalah into the world on a massive scale. To this end, they promote a distinctly exoteric form of Kabbalah that can appeal to a large number of people. Just peruse the spirituality section of any bookstore and you'll find Kabbalah books of all kinds, each catering to a modern twenty-first-century reader, New Age sensibilities and all. Lately, it has even become possible to attend weekly Kabbalah classes at many liberal synagogues across the country, something that was relatively unheard of just fifteen years ago. The Kabbalah Centre belongs to this fourth category but it's also fair to say that it exists in a league of its own—when it comes to popularizing Kabbalah, no one does it bigger or better than the Kabbalah Centre.



THE BIRTH OF POP KABBALAH

It's hard to believe, but it took nearly seven hundred years for a complete translation of the kabbalistic canon, the Zohar, to be published. Finally, in the early 1900s, the socialist Hasidic rabbi Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag took the radical step of translating the Zohar from ancient Hebrew and Aramaic into modern Hebrew. During his life, Ashlag had become increasingly convinced that Kabbalah must be taken out of the ivory tower, where it had been kept under lock and key for hundreds of years, and disseminated among the Jewish people.

The religious scholar Boaz Huss writes, "In difference from most traditional kabbalistic movements, Ashlag did not regard the Kabbalah as an esoteric doctrine. He claimed that a new era, in which the revelation of Kabbalistic secrets was allowed, began in his days, and attempted to disperse the Kabbalah to the contemporary Jewish secular public." Ashlag's translation of the Zohar enabled it to be read for the very first time in history by people other than the kabbalists themselves, and a minority of academics and philosophers.

It took nearly another hundred years for a second complete translation of the Zohar to be published; in 2003, the Kabbalah Centre produced an edition in English. This correlation between Ashlag and the Kabbalah Centre is certainly no coin-

cidence—Ashlag's successor, Rabbi Yehudah Zvi Brandwein, was the spiritual teacher of Philip S. Berg, the founder of the Kabbalah Centre.

Philip Berg met Brandwein in 1964 after leaving Brooklyn, New York, his job as an insurance salesman, and a wife and eight children, to travel to Israel. Although raised in a religious household and trained as a rabbi, he was "profoundly disillusioned" by Judaism and what he perceived as a lack of depth in its religious institutions. Despite this, Berg writes, he became so inspired by Brandwein's teachings that he quickly became his committed student and spent the next six years, until Brandwein's death, at his side.

During his lifetime, Brandwein had borne witness to both World War I and World War II. When the Holocaust finally ended, leaving six million of his people dead, he felt that Ashlag's beliefs had been proven—that the world in the twentieth century, with all its horrors and darkness, needed the "Light" of Kabbalah more than at any other time in history.

When Brandwein died in 1969, Berg staked claim to his legacy, and to the directorship of the Yeshiva Kol Yehuda, which he eventually renamed "The Kabbalah Centre." Within a couple of years, he extended the crucial tenet of Brandwein's teachings—



Rabbi Yehuda Ashlag, the first scholar to translate the entire Zohar into Hebrew from Aramaic and the founder of Yeshiva Kol Yehuda in the early 1900s.

that Kabbalah should be brought to all Jews—proclaiming that Kabbalah should be made available even to non-Jews. Thus, the propagation of Kabbalah in the world became Berg's creed and life purpose.

Brandwein's own son Avraham Brandwein has repeatedly denounced Berg as usurping the legacy of both his father and Yehuda Ashlag. Indeed, Avraham claims to be running the real Yeshiva Kol Yehuda in Jerusalem. A spokesman for the school recently told a reporter, "This is not his [Berg's] place, and he has nothing to do with us, and furthermore we do not want any connection to this man. Our yeshiva is unique in its modesty. We do not seek publicity. We do things the way the Torah commanded us—secretly, privately."

This ongoing feud between Berg and Avraham symbolizes a massive ideological divide that didn't just start in 1969 but is literally hundreds of years old. As Gershom Scholem writes, "From the very beginning two opposing tendencies appear among the kabbalists, the first seeking to limit Kabbalah to closed circles as a definitely esoteric system, and the second wishing to spread its influence among the people³ at large. Throughout the history of Kabbalah right down to recent times these two tendencies have been in conflict."

I discovered numberless cautionary caveats in traditional kabbalistic texts warning against spreading Kabbalah to those who aren't worthy of its wisdom. Moses de Leon himself warned in the Zohar that "whoever discloses secrets improperly strengthens the power of *sitra ahra* ('the other side') and other evil spirits."

But many of the warnings I read concerned a student's preparedness to receive the awesome grandeur of the mystical

revelation itself, an experience that the kabbalists claimed was rife with danger. The kabbalist Ezra of Gerona warned in the thirteenth century, "Thought cannot ascend higher than its source. . . . Whoever dares to contemplate that to which thought cannot extend or ascend will suffer one of two consequences: either he will confuse his mind and destroy his body or, because of his mental obsession to grasp what he cannot, his soul will ascend and be severed . . . and return to her root."

In order to ensure that he would not become lost in the kabbalistic labyrinth and cause the corruption of his own soul, or just plain die, the kabbalist had to observe everything that is written in the Torah and follow all of the laws and statutes given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. In other words, he had to become morally infallible. It is for this reason that learning Kabbalah had so many requirements, including that of being married, being of a certain age (sometimes as old as forty or fifty years), as well as being male and circumcised. And then there was the necessity of being Jewish.

None of this is true anymore. This is the twenty-first century, and if you want to learn about Kabbalah, all you have to do is go to www.kabbalah.com and sign up for an *online class*. (You would be one of 30,000 people who do just that every month.) If you need to talk to a kabbalist personally, just call 1-800-KABBALAH, where a rabbi waits to answer whatever questions you may have about

³ In this instance, "the people" refers to the Jewish people only. The idea that Kabbalah could be taught to non-Jews was rarely entertained, even by Yehuda Ashlag.

the secrets of the universe, twenty-four hours a day. (The rabbi won't ask whether you've read the Torah lately.)

Philip Berg, with the help of his second wife Karen and his sons Michael and Yehuda, has managed to build nothing short of a Kabbalah empire. Its territory spans from Moscow to Santiago, in the form of over fifty Kabbalah Centres. They even have a satellite center in Rwanda, and their 4.5-million-dollar Tel Aviv center provides services for thousands of people. According to the Kabbalah Centre, 3.9 *million* people have walked through their doors in search of spiritual guidance.

This astonishing growth was made possible by debunking the very restrictions that kabbalists had enforced for hundreds of years. Philip Berg did this by proclaiming that Kabbalah predates all religions and that it was therefore never meant to be Jewish. He writes in his book *Kabbalistic Astrology*, "Kabbalah is the world's most ancient tradition of secret knowledge. From the very first days of Creation, it was passed directly from God to



Philip Berg, who founded the Kabbalah Centre in the early 1970s and is its present-day patriarch.

If you need to talk to a kabbalist personally, just call 1-800-KABBALAH, where a rabbi waits to answer whatever questions you may have about the secrets of the universe, twenty-four hours a day.

Adam, Abraham, Sarah, Rachel, Moses and other biblical patriarchs and matriarchs. Kabbalah predates any religion or secular organization. It is the heritage and birthright of all humanity."

Like other New Age spiritual movements that make claims to have access to spiritual truths that are as fundamental to the universe as, say, the law of gravity, the Kabbalah Centre also claims to be offering a perennial spirituality. And because the spiritual truths they offer to their students are prehistorical, they have nothing in common with, and are therefore uncorrupted by, organized religion. This claim has enabled the Bergs to do what was previously unthought-of: not only have they attracted thousands of secular Jews who were estranged from their faith, but a large number—some say as much as forty percent—of their students aren't even Jewish. The Bergs have created a Kabbalah for everyone that draws no social, racial, or



Kabbalah students in class, 2004.



religious distinctions at all. It is, they say, a true “people’s revolution of enlightenment.”

Perhaps fittingly, this revolution has been largely played out in the pages of popular magazines like *W*, *Vanity Fair*, and *People*. Pictures of celebrities donning the red string around their wrists—a medieval Jewish practice that protects the wearer from “the evil eye”—sell a lot of magazines. In fact, the red string has become one of the most coveted fashion items of 2004. Target just starting stocking them, so now you can walk into any one of their neon-lit megastores in, say, Alabama or Ohio and buy one. Madonna recently strapped on *tefillin*⁴ in her music video *Die Another Day*, and her Reinvention tour has book tables that sell Kabbalah Centre literature after the music ends. In turn, the Kabbalah Centre has been known to use Eminem lyrics in their books to illustrate particular kabbalistic principles. The barrier between bona fide New Age spiritual path and pop culture phenomenon has been dissolved, and the result is one of the most interesting cultural hybrids of the postmodern era—pop Kabbalah.

The pop Kabbalah phenomenon owes much of its success to the exceptional marketing techniques of the Berg family. Each center offers products like Kabbalah face cream, Kabbalah water, T-shirts,⁵ key chains, incense, candles, and diamond-encrusted, Hebrew-lettered necklaces. For every book (and

there are dozens of them), there is an assortment of companion videos, DVDs, and tapes.⁶ Although the Kabbalah Centre refused to verify the figure, some media sources have reported that the L.A. center alone had an annual revenue in 2003 of twenty-six million dollars.

The Bergs’ popularized, commodified, and therefore marketable form of Kabbalah (and its success on the world stage) has provoked a roar of fury from academics, rabbis, cult watchers, and the media alike. “The Kabbalah Centre gets hit by everybody,” one eminent rabbi told me from his kabbalistic community in Israel. “They hit them with scandals, with every rumor, with every attack you can be hit with in the world.”

These critics often like to call pop Kabbalah “McMysticism,” or “Dolce and Kabbalah.” “It’s just a new Hollywood fad that calls itself Kabbalah,” said author and educator Rabbi Jeremy Rosen, “when in fact it is to the real thing as Superman comics are to Milton or Tolstoy.” Rabbi David Wolpe of L.A.’s Conservative Sinai Temple recently said about the Kabbalah Centre’s practices, “To the extent that deep spiritual truths are put in a blender and served as superficial pablum, it’s a disservice to a great tradition, and it is no better than spiritual snake oil.”

Many believe that what the Kabbalah Centre teaches is nothing short of sacrilege. Rabbi Immanuel Schochet, a prolific scholar and teacher of Kabbalah, has said, “What they teach is heresy. Their approach is manipulating religion so that God becomes a tool in your hand and if you know what buttons to press, you can get whatever you need.” If these critics’ accusations are correct, there is no worse transgression in all of Judaism—since time immemorial religious Jews have implored, “Never use the Torah as your shovel!”

⁴ “Two leather boxes containing passages from the Torah written on parchment. They are bound by black leather straps on the left arm and on the head, and are prescribed for men to wear during weekday morning prayer.” (taken from Daniel C. Matt, *The Zohar*, pp. 433-44)

⁵ One marketing blurb reads, “Available in white or black, long sleeve, short sleeve or tank, the Lamed Aleph Vav T-shirt plays on the ultimate paradox: It helps you destroy your ego while its fitted styling flatters you.” (*The 72 Names of God*, p. 210)

⁶ These DVDs and videos relay a calculated hipness that is evidently targeted toward a younger audience, and it definitely seems to attract them. Every time I visited the Kabbalah Centre, people in their twenties abounded, held rapt by whatever activity was taking place before them.



THE NOT-SO-SECRET SECRET TEACHINGS OF THE KABBALAH CENTRE

Although the Kabbalah Centre doesn't always make it explicit, their core philosophy is directly rooted in Yehuda HaLevi Ashlag's teachings, the author of the first translation of the Zohar and Philip Berg's spiritual forefather. Identifying two primal forces at work in the universe—the desire to share and the desire to receive—Ashlag's earliest writings were extraordinarily pioneering. Religious scholar Boaz Huss writes of Ashlag, “The central notion of his new Kabbalistic system is that the Creator, who is defined as the infinite ‘will to bestow’ created through a complex and dialectical process of emanation a ‘will to receive’ the benefits bestowed by Him. Human beings stand at the end of the emanation process as such pure egoistic will to receive. Yet, recognizing their situation (and being ashamed of it), human beings are able to change their nature, and try and transform their egoistic ‘will to receive,’ into a divine-like ‘will to bestow.’”

These concepts are presented in more simplified form by Philip Berg's son Michael in *The Secret: Unlocking the Source of Joy and Fulfillment* (2002). “The only way to achieve true joy and fulfillment is by becoming a being of sharing. Now that you've read *The Secret*, you may wonder, Can the essence of life really be this simple?”

For the Kabbalah Centre, it can and it is. The crux of spiritual transformation is the moment we make the choice to share rather than take, to live for the benefit of others instead of for ourselves. And as Michael Berg writes in his book *The Way*, “True fulfillment, Kabbalah tells us, comes with *transformation*: that is, from connection with the Light of the Creator, from making our nature and His nature of sharing and giving one and the same.” Later he goes on to say, “The ultimate goal of

any action is the transformation of our nature—and as we transform our nature, we transform the world.”

The Kabbalah Centre presents a teaching that emphasizes breaking the back of our individual egos. For them, ego is literally anything that keeps us from connecting with the Light of the Creator, and therefore from our personal sense of fulfillment. “There is no limit to what you can achieve—love, money, health, happiness—when your ego is out of the way.” If this sounds like many of the self-help books clogging the shelves of

“Kabbalah predates any religion or secular organization. It is the heritage and birthright of all humanity.”

Rabbi Philip Berg

your local Barnes and Noble Booksellers, not to worry: Michael Berg writes, “Kabbalah is much more than a personal self-help methodology.” And in many ways, he's right.

Not unlike traditional Kabbalah, the Kabbalah Centre places tremendous emphasis on the ethical dimension of life, something that stands in stark contrast to the materialistic and self-serving culture we live in today. “True self understanding inevitably leads to a very specific conclusion,” Michael Berg writes. “We realize that we must take full responsibility both for who we are as



human beings and where we are on life's pathway." When asked during an online question-and-answer session about the core values of Kabbalah, Yehuda Berg said that there are only two. The first is: "Take responsibility. If you're in a situation, there's a reason even if it's not our choice. The point is what we can do about it." The second: "Never blame others or external events for what happens in your life."

Even Madonna poignantly said recently, "I found answers when I began to study Kabbalah. I realized that there was, and continues to be, a reaction in the world to all of my words and my actions, good and bad. I felt the implication of personal and global karma." There is something undoubtedly significant about the fact that Madonna is reaching hundreds of thousands

"The Messiah is what we call a critical mass of people who are enlightened. That's what we're trying to create at the Kabbalah Centre: a critical mass of positivity and enlightenment that will transform the universe."

Rabbi Yehuda Berg

of people with this message and that many of them are nodding their heads in agreement. If anything, it makes it harder to ignore the growing thirst for moral and spiritual purpose in our culture right now.

Of course, traditional Kabbalah has always maintained that human beings actualize their moral and spiritual purpose through the Jewish commandments, or *mitzvot*. In contrast, the Kabbalah Centre almost never mentions the *mitzvot*. Similar

to other New Age movements, they endorse specific practices and tools in place of rules or doctrines. This emphasis leads to a distinct "if you do this, you'll get that" mentality at their centers.

One such practice is "scanning," in which students will scan the pages of the Zohar with their eyes and fingers instead of actually reading them. In other words, students don't need to read Hebrew or Aramaic in order to receive the wisdom and power of the Zohar's text. As the Kabbalah Centre's website says, "First and foremost, the Zohar is a spiritual tool. . . . The more you bring the Zohar into your life, your connection to the Light becomes stronger. The Kabbalists tell us that by just being in the presence of the volumes creates an impenetrable shield of spiritual protection against the forces of chaos and negativity in the world."

Another practice at the center is utilizing the "72 Names of God," a kabbalistic tradition that was first documented as early as the fourth century. In his book *The 72 Names of God: Technology for the Soul*, Yehuda Berg writes, "When you harness these three power sources—the three letters of each name of God—and correctly bring them together, you acquire the capability to control and positively transform your entire world." Teachers at the center often refer to each of these names of God as "nanorobots" and to their transformative effect on your soul as a form of "nanotechnology."

For detractors of the Kabbalah Centre, it is practices like these that are most contentious. Critics point out that not only do they require very little serious commitment ("anyone can buy a Zohar"), but they trivialize their original kabbalistic sources. Indeed, other practices, such as wearing the red string around one's wrist in order to ward off the evil eye, appear, at least to the uninitiated, to be hopelessly naïve. And of course they would:



wearing the red string is a practice that arose out of a culture of superstition and magic in medieval times, when evil demons and supernatural spirits were literally believed to roam the earth.

But there is another side to this issue that the critics are quick to overlook: these practices appear to work. The act of wearing the red string or meditating on a name of God seems to strengthen the intention and resolution of Kabbalah Centre students and to have real transformative results. I spoke with the Kabbalah scholar and author Daniel C. Matt about this observation. “It’s really a startling thing,” he agreed. “There may be a shady side to it all, but the people who’ve come through [the Kabbalah Centre]—many of them have been transformed. So there’s a whole spectrum, but the positive side of the spectrum is phenomenal.”

The Kabbalah Centre appears to be engendering positive change in thousands of their students but, interestingly enough, they insist that’s not the final goal. “Ultimately, when a sufficiently large number of people have achieved fulfillment through the tools of Kabbalah, *a collective transformation will come about, bringing an end to the chaos and pain that have been humanity’s lot since the sin of Adam*” (italics mine). This kind of utopian or messianic idea runs throughout much of the Kabbalah Centre’s literature. “Inevitably, world peace will arrive. That is our destiny. How we arrive at that ultimate destination is totally up to us,” they write.

One aspect of our future utopia, Philip Berg tells us, will be the complete eradication of death. In his book *Immortality* he writes, “In Kabbalistic doctrine, the End of Days, which is our current era, will include a final deathblow to the negative energy of the physical body, thus bringing about the demise of the Angel of Death himself. This event can be realized through spiritual

development on an individual basis, and also globally, when a critical mass of spiritual transformation and enlightenment is achieved among the earth’s inhabitants.”

Historically, Kabbalah has had what could be described as an on-again, off-again affair with Judaism’s concept of a future messiah. The Sabbatianism movement of the late seventeenth century was incited by claims that the Messiah, a kabbalist by the name of Sabbatei Zevi, had arrived on earth. It ended in disaster after only one year when Zevi converted to Islam. Partly as a result of this fiasco, messianic ideas were often toned down in kabbalistic schools and texts. Not so with the Kabbalah Centre.

In *Education of a Kabbalist* Philip Berg writes, “Only Kabbalah can bring the Messiah, and only Kabbalah can bring peace.” I asked Yehuda Berg during an interview at the New York center, “Is the Kabbalah Centre’s conception of the Messiah based on the traditional idea that an individual redeemer will save us in the future?” “No, not at all,” he said. “The Messiah is what we call a critical mass of people who are enlightened. That’s what we’re trying to create at the Kabbalah Centre: a critical mass of positivity and enlightenment that will transform the universe. If two people are enlightened—not a big shift happens. But what if there’s a *billion* people who are enlightened?” He let the question linger between us before continuing. “When a billion people are enlightened, *then* there’s going to be a big shift. Then there’s going to be a shift in world consciousness.”

Philip Berg credits this conception of the Messiah to his spiritual teacher, Yehudah Zvi Brandwein. “According to Rabbi Brandwein,” he writes, “the difference between this generation and all the ones that have come before is that now everyone—not only the privileged or special—will help to bring the Messiah.”

THIS REVOLUTION WILL BE TELEvised

I admit it. I called 1-800-KABBALAH to talk to a kabbalist. *Twice*. The first time, I was connected to an Israeli man named Jonathan. During our conversation, Jonathan explained to me that the Kabbalah Centre's practices have nothing to do with religion. He said avidly, "It's all about *energy* and the consciousness behind whatever you are doing. You know, unfortunately, religion is the number one enemy of spirituality."

During my time at the Kabbalah Centre, I discovered that this is a common refrain among its students and teachers. Yehuda Berg himself had told me, "We see religion as being ego-consciousness because it separates people. Nothing has killed more people than religion in this world. It's all this sense of, 'This is my religion, this is my God, my God is better than your God.' But any spiritual system has to be about bringing people together. That is what it is really all about—God is one, and God is everywhere, and we can *all* connect to him."

The rejection of organized religion is a characteristic of many New Age spiritual movements, and the phenomenon has incited a debate that won't be going away anytime soon. Jonathan Sack, the Chief Rabbi of the United Kingdom, wrote in an article recently, "Organized religion is on the wane, but the search for meaning, especially if it takes exotic forms, is as strong as ever. . . . The current cult of spirituality is the attempt to achieve the results of religion without the disciplines, codes and commitments of religion. That is not good news. There are no shortcuts to heaven on earth."

His point is worthy of serious consideration: when an organization like the Kabbalah Centre divorces a *Jewish* mystical tradition from Judaism itself, do they lose the very spiritual and religious foundation that made it so profoundly enlightening for its devotees for the last eight hundred years? What are the costs of modernization and accessibility?

The Kabbalah Centre isn't necessarily interested in these kinds of questions. Their stated purpose is to democratize



enlightenment, to take it from the fringes of spiritual culture and put it right in the middle of popular culture, where perhaps it is needed the most. In order to do this, they've created a new form of Kabbalah, and it has all the markings of postmodernity: superficiality masquerading as depth, a fusion of high and low culture, and esotericism made at times inane and exotic.

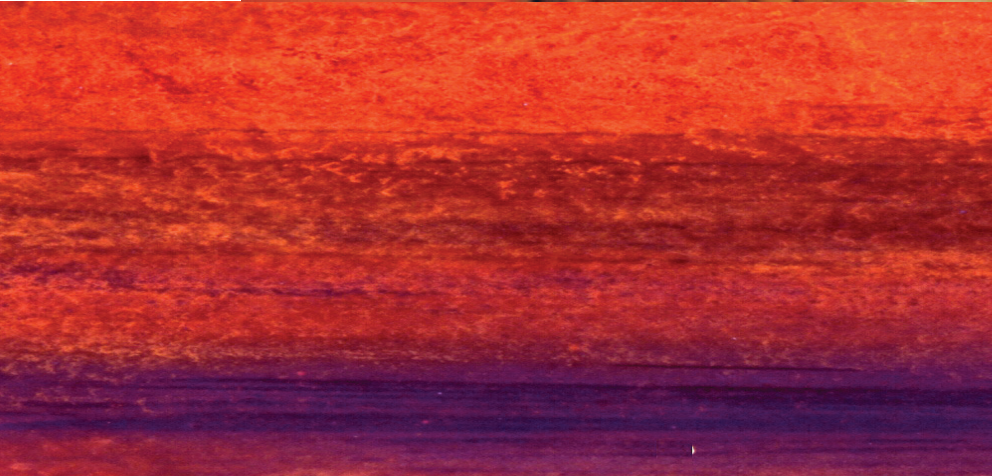
Although many people perceive these qualities as critical problems, they are the real reasons the Kabbalah Centre is succeeding at engendering their version of a people's revolution of enlightenment in a mainstream secular culture where spirituality has been decidedly "out." People can relate to the teachings of the Kabbalah Centre and, in turn, these teachings seem to understand them. "My life has been completely transformed," the woman beside me passionately explained during Shabbat at the Kabbalah Centre. "No one who knows me can believe how much I've changed. I'm a completely different person, a better person, after coming here." As I watched Madonna praying in Hebrew across from us, in spite of my deeper instincts, I found myself entertaining the idea that maybe there *are* some shortcuts to heaven. God knows we need some. ■

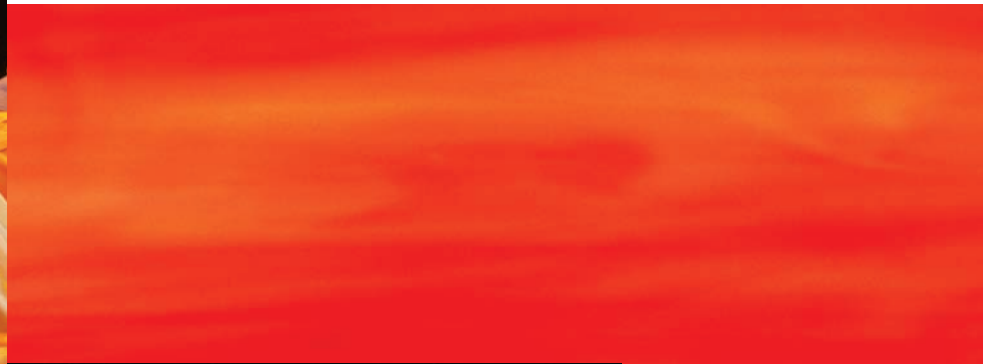
The section entitled "A Celestial Visitation [or How I Learned Kabbalah the Old-School Way]" is intended to represent the general philosophical ideas of Kabbalah and should not be read as actual quotations of Moses de Leon.

Special thanks to Daniel C. Matt, Boaz Huss, and Rabbi Marc Gafni for their generous time and help with the research for this article.



feature section





IF HEAVEN WERE A PLACE ON EARTH

A Pilgrimage to the 2004 Parliament of the World's Religions

by Carter Phipps and Craig Hamilton

Religion today is not exactly at its historical apex. There was a time, after all, when the Pope could speak a few words and all of Europe would tremble, when Islam had a culture that made Christendom look barbaric, when Buddhism ruled benevolently over a peaceful Asian continent, when Taoism helped awaken the subtle aesthetics of the Oriental mind, when Mount Athos of Greece vibrated with the spiritual passion of thousands of black-robed

ascetics, when Zen monasteries dotted the hills of Japan and China, and when Buddha-nature lit up the souls of the great patriarchs. By those lofty standards of prestige and influence, the Parliament of the World's Religions, which convened this past summer in Barcelona, might seem pretty low on the totem pole of historical significance. Yet, in our brave new world of chaos and complexity, we have scientific validation for what has always been a matter

of faith—that the small ripples of a few can sometimes influence the larger tides of history. So while nine thousand people gathering on the east coast of Spain may not signify the ascendance of religion in world affairs, who knows what unexpected potentials can emerge when individuals come together across the boundaries of tradition, country, and culture to explore the role of religion in the twenty-first century. Last July, a team of *What Is Enlightenment?* editors ►►



"MY FAITH TRADITION TELLS ME THAT TO HAVE A 'TOLERANT' SOCIETY is to demean society. If I say that I will tolerate you, I am demeaning you. If I say that I will accept you, I am still demeaning you. Now if I was to say, 'I will respect you,' that would be slightly better. But what if I said, 'I will lay down my life for you!'? You have to try and have that kind of spirit of sacrifice."

Mohinder Singh, Chairman, Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha, Birmingham, UK



- and a small film crew boarded a plane to Barcelona in order to find out.

The Parliament was first convened as part of the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 when the sight of a Hindu swami was still exotic in the Christian West and when one particularly extraordinary Hindu teacher, Swami Vivekananda, made history with his impassioned speech calling for interreligious harmony. It was a time when globalization, or what was then called internationalism, was just beginning to capture the attention of the intelligentsia and when all kinds of transnational and interfaith organizations were springing into exis-

tence. But despite these initial bursts of ecumenical spirit, the multifaith celebration was still limited to a small slice of the population, and it would take many more years and much more sacrifice before the ideal of religious equality would establish itself deeply in the Western psyche. So even as we lift our glasses to tolerance and diversity at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we shouldn't forget that these are values that historically have been far from intrinsic to religious sentiment. Indeed, whether or not it's politically correct to say so, some form of *exclusivism*—the idea that one's own faith is inherently

superior to another's—is built into the very marrow of most religious traditions, either theologically or culturally, and despite attempts to pry it away, still remains embedded within many faiths.

An entire century passed before the Parliament of the World's Religions finally reconvened, again in Chicago, in 1993, followed by Cape Town, South Africa, in 1999. What makes the Parliament unique among even contemporary interreligious organizations is that, for all its emphasis on tradition, it is quite a progressive and independent forum. In Spain, for example, there were no "official" representatives from the

Nine thousand people came to Barcelona because they wanted to take the pulse of religion at this point in the twenty-first century.



major faith traditions, which makes for more frank, off-the-record discussions between participants. (The Pope would certainly be welcome, but as a private citizen only, not as an official spokesman for Catholicism.) It also allows for a more interesting guest list. Unlike the UN Peace Summit of 2000, where Chinese influence held sway, the Dalai Lama was more than welcome, but sadly, he was unable to attend due to illness. And finally, there was a large contingent of what we might call nonaligned transreligious progressives—including primatologist Jane Goodall, author Deepak Chopra, Association for Global

New Thought leader Michael Beckwith, and of course, *What Is Enlightenment?* magazine—many of whom were prominent participants in the events of the week.

So picture, if you will, the scene: thousands of people, from every populated continent in the world, all passing through the doors of one conference center. Essentially every religious tradition is represented, from indigenous shamans to Shinto priests to Orthodox monks to Pakistani imams to evangelical Christians to Zoroastrian scholars to New Age teachers. Hundreds of panels, presentations, talks, meditations, workshops, and dialogues are in the offing.

Interested in peace? Well, then you can explore “Pathways to Peace in Sikhism.” Worried about fundamentalism? How about “The Battle for God” with author Karen Armstrong and Rabbi Michael Lerner? Want to know what the coming years will bring? Try “World Spirituality: Into the Future.” Curious about other religions? Maybe you could attend “Human Moral Development in Islam, Christianity, and Buddhism.” Concerned about the scourge of AIDS? Visit the daylong AIDS symposium sponsored by Kashi, the organization of spiritual teacher Ma Jaya Bhagavati. Is all the complex theology piling up in your mind? Maybe some “morning observances”—Hindu meditation or contemplative prayer or perhaps labyrinth walking—will be just the thing to clear your head. And if all the interfaith excitement leaves you famished, just walk down by the sea to the large open-air tent where hundreds of gracious and generous Sikhs have flown in from all over the world to serve thousands of delicious meals twice daily to Parliament participants, entirely free of charge.

For journalists, the whole event was something of a bonanza. We sat in the presence of great saints like India’s Mata Amritanandamayi, discussed our precarious future with passionate activists like Thai Buddhist Sulak Sivaraksa, and explored the nature of the universe with enlightened teachers like Dadi Janki of the Brahma Kumaris. Parliament participants by day, we spent the nights further pursuing issues of religion, ►



► evolution, and consciousness in salons organized by *What Is Enlightenment?* Inviting some of the most interesting thinkers and spiritual leaders in attendance to join us, we delved into questions like: How can those at the leading edge of religious discourse focus their efforts for greater synthesis? What are the limits of ecumenism and tolerance? Can we break rigid and inflexible religious structures and see our way through to the light of a universal spiritual ethic? Do we need an entirely new religion, completely free of any ties to the past? And we also addressed the question that was on everyone's mind during the course of the week: Can gatherings like the Parliament have any real impact on a twenty-first-century world that looks more dangerous every day?

The latter question offered no easy answers. One only needed to spend a few minutes in the relatively quiet press room to be reminded that religion isn't

exactly setting the agenda these days when it comes to organizing the world's affairs. Despite the rapid growth of Christianity and Islam in the developing world, the fact remains that religious figures rarely line the corridors of power, and, with some exceptions, religious institutions have had a limited and declining influence in shaping the direction of our post-World War II society. In fact, when religion does show up in the public eye, it's generally not as inspiring an example of spiritual faith and moral character in turbulent times. Rather, it tends to illustrate again and again—from terrorism to pedophilia to stem cell research to evolution debates—the failure of our premodern past to embrace the changing social realities of contemporary culture. And the often disruptive consequences of that fundamental gap don't seem to be easing. Religious scholar Mark Juergensmeyer recently noted that in 1980, when the

U.S. State Department first started keeping track of terrorist organizations around the world, there were only a few on the list that defined themselves as religious. Two decades later, that number is over fifty percent.

But you wouldn't have known it in Barcelona. There, optimism abounded. Perhaps it was the intoxicating Mediterranean sea breeze, or the

WIE: How can a gathering like the Parliament help to advance humanity in its moral and spiritual evolution?



◀ **Mata Amritanandamayi:** People come for a gathering like the Parliament; they are participating, listening to talks, and that in itself shows there is inquisitiveness. There is interest in the people. So whatever people hear here, it's definitely helping. It's creating necessary awareness. But the progress is not as it needs to be. It's not growing or developing with the speed, the urgency that is required. There is the call of the hour, but people are not really practicing it. If you write 'honey' on a piece of paper and lick it, you won't get sweetness. A cow's picture won't give you milk. So things won't happen simply by hearing these words. Everything depends on how much you translate this into action. That's the most important thing.

"I BELIEVE THAT WE WILL NEVER HAVE WORLD PEACE UNTIL THERE'S PEACE BETWEEN THE FAITHS, until the people who are acknowledging the ideals of religion all over the world live up to those ideals—not just preach them but practice them. And so the Parliament has proven to me that people from different faith traditions can actually relate to one another, they can find common ground, on the subterranean truths that run under those diverse traditions. And out of virtues like humility and respect, we can live in harmony. Not necessarily unity, but we can get closer to what Martin Luther King, Jr., called the beloved community, the world house. The Parliament is a civil community, and in that, it is a microcosm of the future world civilization."

Rev. Lawrence Carter, Dean, Martin Luther King, Jr., International Chapel, Morehouse College ▶



progressive spirit of the Catalanian culture, but more likely it was the fact that those who come to interfaith gatherings are a self-selected group, already predisposed to believe in the transformative potential of interreligious dialogue and the power of words like diversity, pluralism, and tolerance. Indeed, it didn't take but a few days at the Parliament to see that for all the unique backgrounds, this

group of nine thousand was essentially like-minded. Yes, there were some spirited disagreements during panels and presentations, and all kinds of philosophical and theological questions were explored and debated. But all of it took place within the context of a fundamental acceptance and appreciation of the amazingly eclectic array of faiths represented. In this sense, the entire conference was

a sort of harmonious microcosm of the world's religious diversity. "There will be no peace in the world until there is peace among the religions of the world," writes eminent interfaith scholar Hans Kung, and it is hard to imagine a more peaceful group of people than was gathered in Spain. "When people get face-to-face with individuals of other traditions, it humanizes them," claimed Parliament ▶



- director Dirk Ficca, and the evidence was all around.

At the same time, there was no escaping the fact that, for the most part, the interfaith messengers were preaching to the choir. “The people who are here are not the people who need to be here” was the truism voiced by many during the week. It is the catch-22 of interfaith conferences. Those who are most interested in coming to such gatherings are usually the more open-minded and progressive members of their respective religious communities, and therefore, from a certain point of view, they are the *least* in need of interreligious dialogue. So the real buzz of the Parliament was not actually about interfaith dialogue at all. No, the buzz was about *intrafaith* or *intrareligious* dialogue—dialogue between different groups of individuals within the same tradition. For example, since 9/11 many have called upon moder-

“THERE WAS ONLY ONE PROBLEM WITH THE PARLIAMENT OF THE WORLD’S RELIGIONS: the people who attended aren’t the problem. They’re not the fundamentalists, the narrow-minded, the intolerant. By and large, they’re the people who already see humanity as one giant family, who already grant the validity of people from other cultures and other faiths. So the Parliament was, to some extent, an exercise in interfaith dialogue among people who don’t especially need it. The more challenging and urgent task (as an Anglican bishop at the Parliament pointed out) may lie in intrafaith dialogue: the struggle of moderate Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus to moderate the fundamentalists within their own faiths. Don’t get me wrong, the Parliament was definitely a useful thing. As these people returned home, thinking anew about how to fight for tolerance in their own backyards, they must have drawn strength from the knowledge that they have counterparts in the other great faiths fighting the same fight. And leaving aside the question of the Parliament’s usefulness, it was flat-out inspiring to see so many people from so many cultures coming together, trying to do the right thing. Globalization has a poor reputation among a lot of people these days, but if this was one aspect of it, it can’t be all bad.”

Robert Wright, Author of *Nonzero: The Logic of Human Destiny*



ate Muslims around the world to speak out regarding those who are spreading violence and terror under the banner of Islam. Essentially what they are calling for is precisely that—intrafaith dialogue between Muslims themselves, in the hope that the more progressive voices of Islam can steer the faithful away from the darker reactionary currents within their own tradition. “Increasingly, people

are speaking about intrareligious dialogue,” Muslim imam and scholar Rashid Omar explained. “And that’s a tough one.” No doubt. But it may also be the best chance there is to bring the openness and tolerance so prevalent in the interfaith movement to those who aren’t already predisposed to such attitudes. Hindus may simply have a better chance of influencing other Hindus; Christians,



In a gesture that conveyed more than a thousand speeches ever could, a Sikh community from Birmingham, UK, served daily *langar*—a delicious free lunch and dinner—to the entire Parliament gathering. Every afternoon and evening, thousands filed down to the Sikh Gurdwara (an air-conditioned tent) by the seashore, donned white scarves to cover their heads, and partook of this holy feast. And as if unlimited free food, bottled water, and soft drinks weren't enough, while we sat barefoot on the tent's carpeted floor, Sikh volunteers even cleaned our shoes.



"WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG BOY, GURU NANAK, OUR FIRST GURU, was given twenty rupees by his father and sent out to go and make a profit with it. And when he went to the market, he saw some wise men sitting there who were hungry and desolate. So he bought food and served them food, and when he went back home, his father asked, 'What have you done?' and he said, 'I've gained a fantastic amount of profit from the twenty rupees. I've served all these people.' And that's where the langar started."

Harjinder Singh Matharu
Guru Nanak Nishkam Sewak Jatha
Birmingham, UK

a better chance of transforming the attitudes of fellow Christians. "Religious leaders should tell their congregations, they should tell their flock, that if anyone is intolerant toward anyone in another religion, they're not practicing their religion," declared popular teacher and author Deepak Chopra. As strange as it may sound, the future of peace and harmony between all of us may depend

on how effectively organizations like the Parliament can inspire moderate members of religious traditions to spread progressive values within their own ranks.

Can such a project succeed? Can intrafaith dialogue help solve the problem of religious violence, extremism, and intolerance? "It's not clear to me that the answer is yes in any kind of straightforward or easy way," said well-known

author Robert Wright, a first-time visitor to the Parliament. "Fundamentalists tend not to communicate with the moderates in their religions and may not have especially warm feelings for them. So this may be an interfaith gathering, but intrafaith communication is more of a challenge, and may be more important. Can these people, through sheer force of persuasion, exert a moderating

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What Is Enlightenment? asks:

How do the religious traditions need to change to meet the demands of the future?



"I THINK WE HAVE TO ACKNOWLEDGE THAT RELIGIONS HAVE BEEN DIVISIVE and quarrelsome and frequently based on idiotic ideas. If I had to believe everything in religion, I would have to deny all of evolution, biology, physics, astrophysics, the Big Bang, et cetera. So like everything else, religions will have to evolve as we evolve. They'll have to be consistent with our current map of reality. I mean, we are still going to have the same questions: Do I have a soul? What happens to me after I die? Does God exist? But I think that religion's view of the spirit or God or reality has to expand. It's very ethnocentric, racist, frequently bigoted and prejudiced, and in fact, if anything, it often diminishes the magnificence of what we call God."

Deepak Chopra, Author of *How to Know God*

"I THINK THE RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS HAVE BEEN LAGGING BEHIND what's actually going on in the world today. There's been a tremendous emphasis on spiritual development, on morality, as it relates to how to deal with other people, but there's been very little emphasis on living in harmony with nature, on what I've learned so clearly from the chimps: that there isn't a sharp line dividing humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. It's no good just talking about spiritual development unless it's in the context of caring for the environment."

Jane Goodall, Primatologist, Founder, Roots and Shoots ▶



"THE FIRST THING THAT HAS TO HAPPEN is for religion to overcome the triumphalism and chauvinism that exists within each religious tradition so that we can affirm the unity of all humanity and our common set of interests and recognize that there are many different spiritual paths connecting to the highest truth or to the God of the universe. But then, secondly, we need to get those religious and spiritual traditions to take seriously their own message: that the world could be based on love and kindness and generosity and compassion. We need to insist on developing a strategy to change the world so that the world would reflect those values, a way to take those spiritual visions outside of the religious community into the mainstream of political and economic social change."

Rabbi Michael Lerner,
Founder and Editor, *Tikkun* magazine

What are the challenges facing your tradition
as we move into the twenty-first century?



*"BUDDHISM, AS YOU KNOW, WAS
FOUNDED OVER 2,500 YEARS AGO.
And traditionally, it has been a
wonderful religion, helping people
to be mindful, to be aware of suf-
fering, to transform greed into
generosity, to transform hatred
into compassion, to transform
ignorance into wisdom. But to be
honest with you, as it has tradition-
ally been practiced, it won't work
anymore. Society has now become
much more complex, with urbaniza-
tion and globalization and the idea
of structural violence embedded in
social systems themselves. Unless
the Buddhists learn how to tackle
these issues, Buddhism will be only
good for those who want to have
personal happiness."*

Sulak Sivaraksa, Founder and
Director, International Network of
Engaged Buddhists



*"I WOULD SAY THAT THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR MUSLIMS
TODAY, at the international level, is to avoid victimization. Okay,
so maybe people don't like Islam, and all the discussion is about
terrorism and violence. But among Muslims there is a lack of self-
criticism, as if everything is coming from outside and we are not
responsible for what we are experiencing and the stigmatization
we are dealing with. It's important to stop that victimization and
to come back once again to a rereading of our sources. We have
to reach out, to speak out more about what we do stand for. For
example, the principle teachings, the fundamentals of Islam, are
not known by most people, and we aren't explaining them. We are*

▲ *just on the defensive, trying to justify ourselves. We should also be promoting partnerships with
others. We shouldn't accept this isolation we are experiencing."*

Tariq Ramadan, Professor of Islamic Studies, University of Fribourg, Switzerland

*"I think we will have to improve the role of women.
More than fifty percent of my congregation are
women, and I think they have to play a bigger role,
especially in my African culture. In Africa, women
are marginalized, and we can't continue like this in
the Church. We have to promote women. There's a
lot being done already, but there's still more room
for the women to play a greater role."*

▶ Rev. Fr. Centurio Olaboro, Director,
Uganda Martyrs Orphans' Project





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- influence on their own faiths and spread an ethos of tolerance? Or do political and economic facts on the ground have to change before people of a more fundamentalist bent are receptive to this kind of message?"

History does offer encouragement, as there has been a substantial increase in tolerance and civility over the last centuries. Yet the slow pace of historical development only highlights the need for more dramatic progress. Indeed, if religions are to help avert the multitude of ecological, political, and economic troubles that loom on our global horizon, they simply do not have much time to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps, so to speak, and face the realities of our modern society. Otherwise, religions, in their current form, may not be able to play a constructive role in the philosophical and cultural debates that will decide the direction of the twenty-first century. The once-great wisdom traditions of our premodern heritage may find themselves increasingly side-

lined, unable to provide a relevant moral compass for an evolving, globalizing, pluralistic world. Other spiritual visions will have to fill that cultural void.

Whatever the case, the bottom line is that we must all find a way to inhabit this small planet together, and as a model of a kinder, gentler global village, the Parliament of the World's Religions was about as good as it gets. We didn't see any lions lying down with lambs, but about every other example of inter-religious goodwill was on display, and it's hard to imagine that anyone left the conference without being deeply moved by the sheer beauty of nine thousand openhearted religious men and women all dedicated to doing the right thing in their own diverse communities. If they genuinely represent the future of religion, we should feel optimistic about the potential of our faith traditions to meet the zeitgeist of our global culture. No doubt, there is a latent energy and power within religions that, if tapped in the service of truly forward-looking values,

could work wonders on the world stage. But it would mean a fundamental shift of priorities. Mainstream religious traditions would have to begin to do their part in addressing the common challenges of our world society. They would have to stop playing the predictable laggard in relationship to the social and scientific developments of the last few centuries. And they would have to start addressing the moral context of the soul's relationship to *this* world with the same passion and commitment with which they have always addressed the moral context of the soul's relationship to eternity. Simply put, it would mean an entirely different world. Maybe it is an unrealistic dream. But for a few days on the Spanish edge of the Mediterranean, it was a dream that actually seemed possible. ■

SPECIAL ONLINE FEATURE:

For more on *What Is Enlightenment's* journey to the Parliament of the World's Religions (including audio and video interviews), visit our website at www.wie.org/parliament

THE FUTURE OF RELIGION

What Is Enlightenment? talks to Rev. Dr. Michael Beckwith, Founder and Spiritual Director, Agape International Spiritual Center, Culver City, California.



WIE: *How do you think the traditions need to change to meet the demands of our time?*

Michael Beckwith: I think that those of us within the tradition need to develop a radical appreciation of each other's traditions, so that we begin to discover that at the core, we are all speaking about the same thing. I think we will find that when we strip away the cultural and historical trappings, we'll discover some basic truth that can be put into practice by all of us. Now they may be practiced differently—through different forms of meditation, different forms of service, et cetera. But if we are willing to let go of our biases and our prejudices and appreciate someone else's stance and then begin to see that in essence, religions are the same, there will be a revolution in the evolution of religion. And I think if you start to break down the shell of religion, then this essence will be more available to everyone—the fundamental practice of the presence of life, the presence of God, the presence of love being everywhere, in and as everyone.

WIE: *Do you think that as that happens, the religions will become more alike or even start to move toward some form of universal human religion?*

Beckwith: I think people will always have a tendency to want to hold on to the shell a little bit. Which doesn't bother me—everybody can celebrate their shell. Just as people can celebrate their gender, their sexual orientation, their race—as long as you don't allow the celebration of those shells to get in the way of the essence, it's okay. But if you want to just celebrate those particular shells and that gets in the way of the essence, then it's a problem.

WIE: *Because the great traditions emerged thousands of years ago, the great myths that represent what you're calling the "shells" of those traditions often seem like they're going to have less and less relevance as we move faster and faster into the future. And it's going to be interesting to see to what degree the traditions can maintain their own identities while at the same time letting go of those shells. Because myths that aren't able to respond to the real needs that human beings actually have in the time we're living in, that aren't an expression of the life conditions that people are actually experiencing, inevitably end up holding us back. Do you think it would be possible for an*



ancient tradition to move forward and maintain its fundamental identity while relinquishing, at least to a certain degree, its deep attachment to some of the myths?

Beckwith: Well, I think that even if they don't let the myths go, they may have to reinterpret them to a degree to make them fit modern times. Take a lot of the young folks, for example—they have a kind of existential angst because they don't relate to a lot of the old myths. Those myths don't make sense to them, so there's a void that they're feeling. So there needs to be a reenchancement that happens now in the modern world. I mean, these young kids can jump on a computer and in seconds download just about anything—they're not necessarily going to be captured by an old story. And so there has to be a way to reenchament them, either by reinterpreting the old myths or by bringing about some strong ethics, some strong ways of being in the world, of making that stuff real in our life in a way that is transformational.

WIE: *So you are saying that together we have to create, not necessarily new myths, but a new context that's going to serve the same purpose, the same function, for us.*

Beckwith: Absolutely. Without that, the myths are just dead shells. And when people are practicing their religion over and over without the heart, that's just tradition; that's not necessarily religion. I think there's a difference between tradition and having a real religious experience or a real awakening. If something has a transformational impact on you, then there's joy and there's happiness and there's a degree of fearlessness and creativity in your life. But there are many people who hold fast to tradition, who will fight for it and die for it and make their kids be a part of it, even though it doesn't have any transformational value in their life, even though they're sad and they're fearful. So a lot of the old shells are going to have to be transformed from the inside out, or maybe, in some cases, discarded entirely, so we can awaken to a whole new paradigm. ■





The Reincarnation of Durga

Perhaps the Truest Story of Phoolan Devi, India's Bandit Queen

by Elizabeth Debold

THE TRUE STORY OF PHOOLAN DEVI has eluded us. Legendary Queen of the Bandits, whose life was bastardized in a popular Indian film that she loathed, she transcended all limits of gender, low caste status, and even conventional morality to seek justice for herself, for women, and for all of her "backward" class. What was the source of her strength? Limited by the modern mindset, journalists and her biographers seem to have ignored what Phoolan herself has said about her deep devotion to Durga, the Hindu goddess of justice: "For centuries every dacoit [bandit] has honored the goddess Durga," she told an *Atlantic Monthly* reporter in 1996. Within the Hindu tradition, intense devotion to a deity is often rewarded by attaining the attributes of that god or goddess. Phoolan Devi's commitment was profound: "She is what sustained me; whatever she has, I have; whatever she wants, I want. And all of the men in my gang considered me to be a reincarnation of Durga."

Where the myth of Durga meets the legend of Phoolan Devi, a new story can be heard—one that compels us to bear witness to a divine fury that ferociously ignited in her the desire for triumph, the courage to speak the truth, and an unbridled demand for equality and justice.



Phoolan Devi at her surrender, Bhind, 1983

The Myth of Durga

After years of austerities, Mahishasura, king of the asuras [demons], was finally granted a boon by Lord Brahma: No man or god would be able to kill him. Inflated by the enormous power that this boon gave him, Mahishasura, the fearsome buffalo demon, began to terrorize Heaven, inflamed with the desire to rule the world. For one hundred years, he waged war against the gods, invading Heaven with an army of asuras. Insane with blood lust, he wantonly killed one god after another, destroying everything in his path. Chaos and anarchy reigned. Driving the gods from Heaven so that they were left to roam on Earth as mere mortals, Mahishasura grabbed the throne.

Frightened, the gods begged the Lords Vishnu, Brahma, and Shiva to put an end to Mahishasura's tyranny. Hearing their fellow gods' pleas, their faces contorted in rage and they gathered all of their power, creating an enormous glare that lit the skies. Then light issued from all of the gods, uniting in an unequaled brilliance that sent flames into every corner of Heaven. Vishnu, Shiva, and Brahma called forth a feminine presence, knowing that Mahishasura's life was not protected from a female adversary. Lo, from this light emerged a woman—fully grown—gorgeous, bright yellow, with many arms. Her name was Devi Durga. Gracefully, forcefully, she rode a lion, a permanent scowl etched upon her beautiful face. Durga was born to kill.



Phoolan Devi, 1995

The Story of Phoolan Devi

On a small spot of earth near one of the thousand bends in the sacred Yamuna River, there was a town large enough to have a name but too small to be found on any map of India. Living here were two brothers, born into a caste only slightly above the untouchables (the pariahs below the caste system itself): Bihari, who was sly and cunning and the father of sons, and Devidin, good-hearted but timid, the father of four girls and a boy. Immediately after the death of their father, devious Bihari confiscated the family land. With his wealth, he achieved a level of affluence that gave him influence far beyond his caste. He thereby exiled his younger illiterate brother to a world of humiliation and hunger, left to desperately scratch a living from land too exhausted to yield more than cucumbers. Devidin's wife, Mooli, continuously bemoaned their fate—robbed of their land and burdened by daughters who would need dowries that they could ill afford.

Day after day, year after year, the second daughter, Phoolan Devi—meaning “Goddess of Flowers”—watched her father grow stooped and her mother increasingly enraged as they struggled to support a too-large and too-female family. Small, dark, with a wide, flat nose like her father, Phoolan inherited her mother's anger. It glittered in her eyes, fueled her quick intelligence, and bestowed on her an uncanny confidence. One day, Phoolan convinced her older sister to accompany her to their uncle's land—land that should have been theirs. Laughing and eating raw chickpeas from the uncle's field, the girls drew

the attention and ire of their much older cousin, Maiyadin. Phoolan taunted him when he demanded that the girls leave “his” land. As Maiyadin and his servant tried to forcibly remove them, Phoolan bit her cousin's hand and tripped him, watching in satisfaction as he fell in the mud, ruining his spotless white kurta. He beat her unconscious with a brick. The next day, Maiyadin brought the police. For the girls' offense, their mother and father were beaten with sticks.

Phoolan Devi, born a burdensome girl into a life where those of her caste were treated less well than animals, prayed to her father's favorite goddess, Durga, asking her “to show me how to slay demons as she had done, and to give me a stick too, so I could fight back.” Phoolan Devi was born for revenge.

Seeing the goddess born out of their collective brilliance, the gods rejoiced. Each god bestowed upon her his unique power and weapons. Shiva gave her a trident, called forth from his own. Vishnu gave her a discus, and Brahma gave prayer beads and the water gourd of an ascetic. From Himalaya, lord of the mountains, came the gift of the lion that was her mount. A sword and shield, impenetrable armor, a garland of snakes, jewels, lotus flowers, and much, much more were other gifts from the gods. Holding a different weapon in each of her many arms, Durga laughed defiantly.

Mahishasura saw Heaven and Earth quaking, the oceans churning, and the mountains heaving as the Devi roared again and again. Bellowing in wrath, he rushed toward the source of the sound. Then he beheld her: Her radiance penetrated all three worlds—the earth buckled under her feet, her crown scraped the sky, and her thousand arms reached in all directions. Mahishasura sent his demon warriors into battle with the Devi—millions upon millions. But Durga cut them down as if it was child's play. As her thousand arms wielded their weapons and dispatched the demons to their deaths, she remained calm, serene. And each sigh that escaped her frighteningly beautiful lips created throngs of warriors who joined her in the fray.

One day, when Phoolan was about eleven, she was playing with her little sister on the mudbank by the river. Suddenly her mother came and dragged her by her hair back to the village. Her mother and other village women removed Phoolan's little-girl blouse and skirt, bathed her five times using different oils, and then slid silver bangles on her arms and rings on her toes. She was wrapped in a sari with her head covered so that she couldn't see. This was her wedding. Awkwardly walking through the ceremony, Phoolan found her tiny fingers engulfed

by the large, plump, and sweaty hand of the man who would be her husband—a man over twenty years her senior whom she had seen only once before.

Her husband, Putti Lal, was supposed to wait before bringing Phoolan Devi to live with him—because she was not yet a woman. Emboldened by her family's poverty, he insisted on taking her with him immediately. And he was most likely encouraged by Maiyadin, the son of Bihari, who wanted his spirited cousin out of his way. Her mother and father protested and cried in vain. Putti Lal persisted, and despite the fact that it was against the law for Phoolan to be his wife at such a young age, her parents relented, hoping for the best. And Phoolan, having no idea why her parents were distressed, comforted them, saying she would be back soon.

She was right. Months later, her family heard that she was ill. Her father went to retrieve her and found her bone-thin, with her hair falling out in clumps, her body covered in boils, and deep racking pain in her abdomen. Putti Lal had not waited for her to grow up. He had used her in every possible way, punched her in the face when she cried out, and beat her repeatedly. And her sighs, moans, and screams did not bring a single soul to her rescue. "There was nothing I could do to stop him," Phoolan said. "But I swore to the goddess Durga who drank the blood of demons that he would pay for the pain he caused me. . . . He had said himself that I would grow one day. So I vowed that I would survive, and I would have my revenge."

The blood of the demons and their elephants and horses ran in rivers through Heaven as Durga and her millions destroyed them all. Mahishasura transformed into his buffalo form and trampled Durga's legions. Then he rushed toward her lion. With his horns he threw mountains into the air, while his lashing tail whipped the oceans until they overflowed. He tore the clouds of the sky with his horns and trampled the earth beneath his hooves.

The Devi Durga was roused to fury. She caught Mahishasura in her noose, and he changed into a lion. As she severed the lion's head, he transformed into a man with a sword. After she shot him through with arrows, he became an elephant and grabbed her lion with his trunk. Durga chopped off his trunk, and then he reverted to his awesome buffalo form. He hurled mountains at her, and she turned them to dust. He pounded with his hooves until all of the worlds trembled. Drinking a divine potion, Durga warned him that the place where he stood bellowing would be the place where the gods would rejoice in his death. She leapt on him, piercing him with her spear. Mahishasura emerged, fighting, from the mouth of the buffalo, but Durga beheaded him with a clean stroke of her sword.



Durga battling Mahishasura, the Buffalo demon



The dacoit life: Phoolan Devi and the bandit gang



By the age of sixteen, Phoolan Devi had lost battle after battle with demon after demon. When she slapped a village councilman's daughter because the girl had assaulted her mother, the councilman flayed Phoolan and her sister with a whip until they were covered in blood. When she complained about being harassed by the council leader's son, the son and a friend scaled the walls of her family home and raped her on the dirt floor in front of her parents. When she dared to seek vengeance on the council leader, her cousin Maiyadin and the council leader staged a robbery and then accused her of being part of a bandit gang. When she protested her innocence in court, the police took her into a room and gang-raped her for three days, warning her that if she told anyone, they would torture her, burn the family's house down, and destroy her family. Because she had been in prison, she was shunned for being promiscuous. Because she refused to be shamed and silenced, she was again gang-raped, this time by Thakurs (upper-caste landowners) in front of her parents, who had been beaten into passivity. Because she had been raped, the rumor spread that she was available to any man for sex, so other Thakurs came from all over the countryside, looking for her. She hid from these demons who appeared out of nowhere and who assumed that their upper caste status gave them a right to use her body as they pleased.

Finally, something snapped, and Phoolan stepped beyond fear. She realized that it wasn't just the poor who lived in terror—the position of the rich and ruling classes was built on intimidation, and they, too, lived in fear. So Phoolan did what no girl—and certainly no woman—of her caste had ever dared to do: She intimidated them back. "All you had to do was frighten them! Because they used violence, you had to be violent too!" she explained. And frighten them she did. Phoolan threatened

to chop Maiyadin's sister into pieces. She went to the council leader's son and told him that if, after what he had done to her, he didn't marry her, she would "cut it off." To the Thakurs who wanted her for sex, she asked, "Would you like someone to do to [your wife and daughters] what you want to do with me?" and she threatened to shoot them, although she didn't own a rifle. No one bothered her anymore. "All it took was courage," she said, "and the threat of violence."

No one in the village could even imagine that Phoolan, who was born into a subservient lower caste, would dare to be so outrageously bold on her own. Rumors spread that she really *was* part of a bandit gang. So the powerful men in the village arranged for some bandits to take her away, to use her as they wished, and then to kill her. But by Durga's grace, Phoolan Devi was not killed by the bandits. Just as the bandit leader—an upper-caste Thakur—was going to rape her, his second-in-command, Vikram, who was lower caste like Phoolan, shot him through the head.

The gods praised Durga, offering her flowers from paradise, anointing her with perfumes, and burning incense in her honor. They bowed down before her. In Devi Durga they recognized the embodiment of all the powers of the gods. Realizing that she brought fortune to those who are good and misfortune to those who are evil, they asked her to protect the universe. Because the gods had seen her unfathomable destructiveness, they urged her to be gracious to all creation. They called her to remove fear from those in distress and to dispel suffering and poverty.

The awesome Devi Durga granted the gods their wishes.

“Long live Phoolan Devi! Long live Phoolan Devi!” cried all of the villagers on Phoolan’s first visit back to her village after her kidnapping. Phoolan told them all to go to hell. She had left the village in terror and returned in triumph, the second wife of dacoit leader Vikram Mallah. The villagers had already heard that she had mercilessly beaten her former husband, Putti Lal, leaving him for dead with a note, written by Vikram, pinned on him: “Warning: This is what happens to old men who marry young girls!” And they also knew that she had been involved in the murder of the man who had trumped up the robbery charges against her. The powerful men in her village now came to her on their knees. The village council leader declared that she was the reincarnation of Durga and touched her shoes with his forehead. She whipped him—just once—across his back, leaving him with his well-fed face in the mud. “Like the goddess,” she recounted, “I was driven by my hunger for justice, for revenge over demons. That is what gave me my strength. When the rich did bad things, our duty as dacoits was to make them pay.” Phoolan and Vikram spent a year bringing dacoit justice to the Chambal Valley. Vikram taught Phoolan the dacoit way of life: how to shoot a gun, kidnap the wealthy for ransom, disguise themselves as police, hold up truck convoys, and hide in the ravines and the jungle. They divided the spoils of each raid into three parts: one part for themselves to buy food and ammunition, one part for the local Brahmin at the temple for Durga and the gods, and the last for the poor to give them relief from the dual tyranny of a violently oppressive feudal caste order and the constant complaint of their empty stomachs. Songs celebrating their victories rang throughout the valleys, and the police put a price on their heads.

Then Vikram’s life was cut short. Phoolan could not get him to heed the omens that Durga had sent to warn them. Shri Ram, a bandit who was once a mentor to Vikram and was a Thakur, murdered Vikram in his sleep. He then chloroformed Phoolan Devi, bound her, and took her to town after town ruled by Thakurs. “They fell on me like wolves,” Phoolan recounted. “I saw crowds of faces and I was naked in front of them. Demons came from without end from the fires of Naraka to rape me. I prayed to the gods and goddesses to help me, to let me live, to let me run through the damp fields, climb the ravines, to let me have my revenge.” Through the kindness of a Brahmin, she escaped—battered inside and out, her wrists broken, thorns embedded in her flesh, feet swollen, and haunted by her memories.

Phoolan Devi made a vow to herself: “I would be a woman no longer. Whatever I did from then on, I would do as a man would do. Evil had left its mark on me. I had survived the evil of men, and I had nothing more to lose. I was stronger than ever.” So the Bandit Queen allied herself with another bandit leader,



Phoolan Devi, 1995

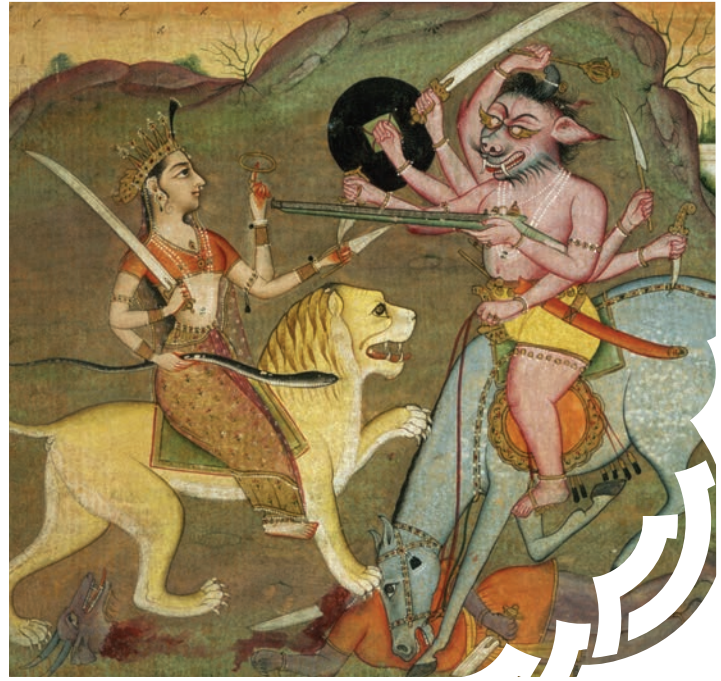
a Muslim named Baba Mustaqeem. He gave her the pick of his men and asked them to recognize her as their brother, calling her by the masculine version of her name: Phool Singh. Mustaqeem gave her a rubber stamp that said: “PHOOLAN DEVI QUEEN OF BANDITS” to stamp onto the doors and walls of the homes in the villages that she and her gang raided. She would shout into a megaphone, “We are the friends of the poor and the sworn enemies of the rich. Vikram Mallah *ki jai!*” in honor of her former partner.

Phoolan was heralded as the “Avenging Angel” among poor women and girls. “I punished the wicked with the same tortures they inflicted on others, because I knew the police never listened to the complaints of the poor,” she declared. “I knew there were hundreds of girls who had been forced to undergo dangerous abortions to avoid disgrace, or else throw themselves in the river or drown themselves at the bottom of a well because they were treated like prostitutes, and they were afraid. They were all afraid.” Her justice was swift and brutal: “I crushed the serpent they used to torture women. I dismembered them. It was my vengeance, and the vengeance of all women.” Her legend grew fearsome: “People of my caste heard all about it. If a mother wanted to protect her daughter, or a father his wife or his sister, they knew all they had to do was say to the rapist that Phoolan Devi would punish them. And I did.”

But Phoolan Devi would not rest until her enemy, Shri Ram, was destroyed. All of her men and those of Baba Mustaqeem knew how important this was to her—how deeply, inhumanly she had been defiled and degraded. Hearing that Shri Ram and his brother were in the Thakur village Behmai, the gangs headed into the town. What happened on that day remains a mystery. At the end of the raid, twenty-two Thakurs were shot; all but two would die. Shri Ram and his brother were not among them. Phoolan Devi was held responsible, although eyewitness



Billboard from *The Bandit Queen*, 1995



reports are contradictory. She herself said that she was on the other side of the village when it happened. “What can I say?” she said. “You know how it is: If a woman does something, men have to prove themselves to be superior and therefore go further. . . . I do not believe in killing people without a positive reason, but the situation got out of control and, in the eyes of Durga Mata, I am innocent of these deaths.”

Eons after the death of Mahishasura, two asuras, Sumbha and Nisumbha, seized the powers of the gods. Remembering that the Devi Durga had offered protection, the gods called to her, bringing her radiance forth to light the Himalayas. Sumbha and Nisumbha set off to see her, and pleased by what they saw, Sumbha sent a messenger to ask her to marry his brother or himself. Durga smiled in response. She replied that she would only marry he who could defeat her in battle. The messenger scoffed at her foolishness: “Why do you want to suffer the indignity of being dragged by the hair to your master? How can a woman alone defeat those who have vanquished the gods?”

They sent one asura after another to fetch her until the great Devi was so enraged that Kali, goddess of destruction, sprang forth from her brow. Laughing, Kali devoured the armies, shoving them into her hideous mouth, and

quickly decapitated her foes. All of the feminine forms of the gods emerged as more and more asuras met Durga and Kali in battle: Brahmani, Mahesvari, Kaumari, Vaisnavi, Varahi, Narasimhi, Aindra.

Sumbha and Nisumbha fell into a rage. Mighty Nisumbha fell, slaughtered by the Devi. Then Sumbha called to Durga, declaring that she used the strength of others to fight. But the Devi replied, “Look, vile one, I am alone in the world; the goddesses that you see are only projections of me.” So, one by one, the forms of the goddesses merged back into the One Great Goddess. Quickly, she destroyed her enemy.

The gods rejoiced with such devotion that she granted them a boon: Whenever danger arises from demonic sources, Durga will descend and bring about their complete destruction.

No photographs of the Bandit Queen had ever been made public. Eight thousand curious peasants, and press from around the world, came to the small town of Bhind to see Phoolan surrender on terms that she had negotiated for herself and her men with Indira Gandhi’s government. For the preceding two years, Durga had whispered softly in her mind, telling her where to go, how to escape from one of the most intense dragnets ever

mounted in India's history. Her enemy, Shri Ram, had been murdered—killed in a fight over a woman. Phoolan Devi stood on a platform, held her rifle over her head, and handed it to the Chief Minister of Madhya Pradesh. She bowed to the portraits of Mahatma Gandhi and Durga that had been placed on the platform at her request. It was to Durga and Gandhi that she gave herself up.

A tiny, foul-mouthed, angry woman stood before the hungry eyes of the crowd, shattering the projected fantasies of a society that worshiped Durga but refused to recognize the rage of a lower-caste woman. Where was the woman who was reported to be “nearly six feet tall,” whose wild lovemaking would be “like drinking the most delectable deadly poison?” Where was the brazen nymphomaniac who slept with men before she killed them? She was, one report said, “too dark, too short, flat-chested and rude.” She was every woman—with a vengeance. The upper-caste press devoured her. And even so, a doll in her likeness became one of the most popular toys among girls throughout India.

After “rotting” in prison for eleven years, Phoolan Devi was released in 1994 just at the time when the lower castes began to exert political power. Having kicked down the door to dignity for herself, she wanted to open it wide for others to follow. Immediately, she began forming the Eklavya Sena, an organization to teach self-defense to the poor. Twice she was elected—by adoring women—as a member of Parliament to the House of the People on a platform proclaiming the rights of girls and women. Here she discovered another world, a world that to her mind was equally, if not more, filled with crooks and thieves: “In New Delhi people are so much more duplicitous,” she told a reporter. “In Chambal . . . you can do things your way, and by the will of God.”



Thousands watch Phoolan Devi's surrender, 1983



Grieving mourners at Phoolan Devi's funeral, 2001

Just as in the valleys of the Chambal, Phoolan Devi knew when she was in danger—perhaps it was still Durga whispering warnings to her. In the summer of 2001, she told a friend that she knew her time was near. On July 25, she stepped out of her car in front of her home in Delhi and assassins pumped bullets into her head and into her chest. She died before reaching the hospital.

Let Durga hear her prayer:

Sing of my deeds

Tell of my combats

How I fought the treacherous demons

Forgive my failings

And bestow on me peace.

Taking the Quantum Leap...

Not Just a Movie Review of *What the #\$*! Do We Know!?* by Tom Huston



SOMETHING UNUSUAL HIT THE WORLD RUNNING this past spring. Opening at art-house theaters across the western U.S., and winning every independent film festival award it was nominated for, an effects-laden docudrama began stunning viewers everywhere with its creative confluence of science and spirituality—and subverting common notions of reality along the way. “Once in a while a film comes out that can change the world, and this is one of those films,” avowed one fan on the film’s website. Said another: “I started crying in the middle of this movie because it was the first time in my life I had proof that there were *lots* of people who believe like I do.” And its impact is continuing to spread, as word-of-mouth acclaim brings the movie to new theaters across the country every week, with an even wider release slated for this fall. Called *What the #\$*! Do We Know!?* (aka *What the BLEEP Do We Know!?*), this feature-length film is an ambitious and entertaining attempt to turn such heady subjects as quantum physics, the nature of God, and neurochemistry into fun and easily digestible concepts. It does so through a cleverly edited blend of interview clips, a dramatic fictional narrative, animated CGI (computer-generated image) “characters,” and perhaps even more space-time-warping visual effects than most major Hollywood blockbusters manage to conjure up.

Starring Oscar-winning actress Marlee Matlin (*Children of a Lesser God*) as Amanda, a professional photographer whose unfortunate favorite pastime seems to be chain-popping antidepressants, *What the Bleep*’s story line is a simple tale of personal transformation—from self-hatred to self-acceptance—with some

unusual characters offering the protagonist helpful information along the way. What isn’t simple about this hybrid documentary’s narrative element is the way it’s presented: peeking out here and there between bursts of interview footage and grand CGI tours of quantum and cellular realms, the plot is initially hard to figure out. Indeed, for at least the first half hour, the drama may even seem unnecessary and vaguely reminiscent of a PBS after-school special. The longer you watch, however, the more *What the Bleep*’s complex docudrama blend starts to make sense, and Amanda’s transformative journey is recognized as the essential meandering line connecting all the other dots.

Walking through downtown Portland, Oregon, taking pictures and looking alternately anxious and despondent, the deaf but lip-reading Amanda finds herself in a number of odd situations and interacting with some unusual characters. For example, there’s the basketball-playing, reality-bending whiz kid Duke Reginald, who comes off as a twelve-year-old version of *The Matrix*’s earnest prophet Morpheus, only funnier. He challenges Amanda to a game of basketball on his “court of unending possibilities” while explaining to her some far-out physics facts, such as the notion that material objects (like her hands and the ball she’s holding) never actually touch, because nonbonded atoms energetically repel each other and don’t make physical contact. Indeed, how “physical” is anything, anyway? When the whiz kid launches his basketball into the sky, we’re drawn along with it into outer space where the scene opens onto stunning cosmic vistas before diving deep into impressive computer-generated

Too Far?

feature



sequences of molecular, atomic, and subatomic realms. Here a disembodied commentator explains that what we perceive as solid matter is really composed almost entirely of empty space and is ultimately—proceeding down to the quantum level where energy bits phase in and out of existence—completely insubstantial. “The most solid thing you can say about all this insubstantial matter,” the narrator tells us, “is that it’s more like a *thought*—it’s like a concentrated bit of *information*.”

Soon after her strange encounter with young Duke Reginald, Amanda is looking at a subway-platform presentation of the work of Japan’s Dr. Masaru Emoto, whose experiments purport to demonstrate the effects of positive or negative thinking on the formation of either beautiful or unsightly ice crystals in water, when she meets a mysterious man. “Makes you wonder, doesn’t it?” he intones. “If thoughts can do that to water, *imagine what our thoughts can do to us*.” That sentence replays itself in Amanda’s mind more than once as the film progresses, and it turns out to hold the key to her eventual psychological breakthrough. In fact, the idea that *you create your own reality* is the New Age notion lying at the heart of *What the Bleep*, the fundamental concept upon which all its other ideas thrive.

However, before Amanda gains the mental clarity to recreate her reality, she must contend with a chaotic Polish wedding that she’s been hired to photograph. Here the film delves into the mysteries and mechanics of the human mind, explaining the function of neurotransmitters through stunning visual effects. The main focus is the way in which we become

chemically “addicted” to certain varieties of neurotransmitters based on the emotional experiences they’re associated with. “If you can’t control your emotional state, you must be addicted to it,” says one of the frequently shown interviewees, Dr. Joe Dispenza. Through an entertaining and sexually charged twenty-three-minute scene, Amanda mingles clumsily with the wedding guests, taking pictures, having flashbacks to her own ill-fated marriage, and experiencing further hallucinatory visions of CGI marvels. This time, rather than the electric-blue energies of the quantum realm, she sees multicolored dancing gumdrops—human cells under the influence of various neurotransmitters. Amanda begins seeing them at work in everybody, including herself: a room full of biochemically conditioned people, absorbed by lust, hunger, rage, and shyness, while apparently oblivious to the impersonal interplay that’s actually happening between them all on the deeper level of animated chemicals. Despite its cartoonish feel, this is perhaps *What the Bleep*’s most implicating and thought-provoking scene, confronting viewers with questions like: Are we really just biological puppets controlled by a slough of chemicals? And if so, how do we cut the strings?

In the midst of all this activity, popping up constantly to offer choice commentary on the physics or metaphysics that parallel whatever situation Amanda finds herself in, are the medical doctors and scientists, not to mention a 35,000-year-old channeled entity, who have been interviewed for the film—and,

**“If you can’t control your emotional state,
you must be addicted to it.”**

Dr. Joe Dispenza

indeed, *are* most of the film. Through the insights of fourteen personalities in total, nearly all of whom are authors of books with such titles as *The Quantum Brain* and *Conscious Acts of Creation*, Amanda is fed a wealth of paradigm-shattering information, being somehow mysteriously attuned to whatever frequency they’re broadcasting on and subconsciously picking up on their pithy profundities. “We’re living in a world where all we see is the tip of the iceberg—the classical tip of an immense quantum mechanical iceberg,” says physicist John Hagelin of Maharishi University. Former University of Oregon physics professor Amit Goswami adds, “You really have to recognize that even the material world around us—the chairs, the tables, the rooms, the carpet, camera included—all of these are nothing but possible movements of consciousness.”

What all of this eventually leads Amanda to is the realization that in order to change her life, she needs to change the way she *thinks* about it. She needs to embrace a new worldview, a new paradigm—one in which quantum physics, biochemistry, mind, emotions, God, and everything in between are interconnected in a seamless matrix of infinite potentials that is capable of being radically altered by thought alone.



As mentioned earlier, *What the Bleep* has been very successful for an independent film, and its popularity only seems to be growing. But *why* are people converging on theaters to see it? Why are so many Americans, from Gen-Y teens to boomers in their late fifties, finding a rather peculiar documentary that explores the intersection of science and spirituality so compelling? Could it be simply the fact that there even *is* a film depicting the peaceful coexistence of these typically antithetical worlds?

What the Bleep was written, produced, and directed over

The implication inherent in quantum mysticism is that each of us has the potential to affect the world directly through the power of our own consciousness.

a period of three years by a trio of filmmakers from Yelm, Washington. William Arntz, Betsy Chasse, and Mark Vicente came together in 2001, convinced that the Hollywood standard of “rape, pillage, and plunder” as entertainment wasn’t the only way to go about pleasing moviegoers. They wanted to make a spiritually uplifting and scientifically educational film—one that would appeal to mainstream audiences while also managing to convey a few key concepts from quantum physics and biology. “Science has been saying the mind affects reality for quite some time,” Arntz has said. “This is the first non-fantasy film that not only says this, but shows mind/matter interaction, and it does it in a thoroughly entertaining way.” *What the Bleep* is undoubtedly entertaining, and by all accounts it is affecting audiences profoundly. Yet it is the matter of what exactly “science has been saying” that many reviewers, myself included, find questionably represented by the film. And this seems indicative of a larger confusion in our culture regarding the actual connections between science and spirituality—a confu-

sion that has been rampant within the domain of pop spirituality for over two decades.

All three of *What the Bleep*’s producers are students at Ramtha’s School of Enlightenment (RSE). For those who aren’t up on the *Who’s Who* of the New Age, Ramtha is the aforementioned 35,000-year-old channeled entity who speaks frequently throughout *What the Bleep*. Channeled by former Tacoma, Washington, soccer mom J.Z. Knight since 1978 (a year after Ramtha first appeared to Knight in her kitchen one Sunday afternoon), Ramtha—described by his students as a “master teacher” and “hierophant,” and always referred to as “he” despite the gender of his channel—has been teaching people for over two decades about such classic subjects as the true history of Atlantis, the nature of reality, God, past lives, and how to take charge of one’s personal destiny. But perhaps more than any other New Age authority, Ramtha has used the hallowed clout of science to support his spiritual teachings—particularly when it comes to the idea that we “create our own reality.” This is where Ramtha sees quantum physics seamlessly merging with his brand of metaphysics, and he definitely isn’t the only one.

Fritjof Capra’s *Tao of Physics* (1975) was the book that started it all, with Gary Zukav’s *Dancing Wu-Li Masters* (1979) appearing shortly thereafter. Countless others followed throughout the 1980s (for example, Deepak Chopra’s *Quantum Healing*) and 1990s (Michael Talbot’s *Holographic Universe*), and into the new millennium (Arnold Mindell’s *Quantum Mind and Healing*). All of them are based on the premise that quantum physics and mysticism, despite being such seemingly disparate disciplines, actually have much in common. Capra’s book, for instance, maintains that while quantum physics and mysticism are completely separate approaches to interpreting reality, both nevertheless exhibit similar logical paradoxes (wave/particle duality for one, Zen koans for the other), and both view the universe as being in a constant state of flux or impermanence. But many authors go further than merely drawing intriguing parallels between the two—*much* further. Quantum physics and mysticism, these theorists claim, are ultimately *indistinguishable*—two equivalent paths leading to the same exact truth: that at the deepest level of reality, all is One. The teachings of Ramtha, and the opinions expressed by the physicists interviewed for *What the Bleep*, are clearly of that more extreme brand of “quantum mysticism.”

The thinking behind this has a number of subtle and complex variations, but there are two lines of thought that seem favored in *What the Bleep*. The first comes from quantum field



theory and says that certain principles of quantum physics suggest that the material world, at its most fundamental level, is actually a limitless sea of energy called the “quantum vacuum,” which is seething with the *potentiality* for all material manifestation. “At that deepest, *subnuclear* level of our reality, you and I are literally one,” says Hagelin midway through the film. And this underlying and all-pervasive quantum vacuum, the logic goes, is the same “ground of being” that has been experientially recognized by mystics throughout the ages as our own deepest self or consciousness.

The other version of quantum mysticism presented in *What the Bleep*, while related to the first, is based on more traditional concepts from quantum physics and is a little more complicated. The basic idea is that the most fundamental units of matter, *quanta*, can only be considered as clouds of “probability waves” with an indeterminate location, until an unspecified *act of measurement* “collapses” the waves into a fixed particle with a fixed location. And while physicists and philosophers have carefully debated the finer points of this idea since the 1920s—with a particular focus on what exactly constitutes the “act of measurement” responsible for the collapse of the probability wave—the quantum mystics have seized upon it, ignoring the opposing theories (mechanical detection, “hidden variables,” etc.) to conclude that the act of measurement must imply an observation made by *human consciousness*. Moreover, they’ve concluded that if this applies to the quantum micro-world, then it must apply to the everyday macro-world as well (since any material object, no matter how big, can be presumably reduced to its quantum components). “Suppose we ask, Is the moon there when we are not looking at it?” writes Goswami in his 1993 treatise, *The Self-Aware Universe: How Consciousness Creates the Material World*. “To the extent that the moon is ultimately a quantum object

(being composed entirely of quantum objects), we must say no. . . . Between observations, the moon also exists as a possibility form in transcendent potentia.”

In other words, the idea is that when *your consciousness* is not perceiving something—like this magazine, or the room you’re sitting in, or even other people—then that “thing” loses its apparent solidity and coherence and dissipates back into an indeterminate cloud of potential quantum states until you open your eyes and perceive it again, whereupon it instantly collapses back into actuality. Needless to say, this is hard for most of us to wrap our minds around, reminiscent of the old tree-falling-in-the-forest metaphysical mind-twister. And that’s probably why many physicists have dismissed it entirely—including Albert Einstein, who famously remarked, “I like to think that the moon is there even if I am not looking at it.”

The implication inherent in both of these versions of quantum mysticism is that each of us has the potential to affect the world *directly*, at its most fundamental level, through the power of our own consciousness. If we understand that the universe is a quantum sea of possibilities, then we can learn to bring certain more desirable possibilities into existence via nothing more than our conscious intention—no PhD in physics required. “And therefore, literally,” says Goswami in *What the Bleep*, appearing before a CGI background of wavy blue quantum energy fields, “*I create my own reality.*”

It’s a fascinating idea. However, it seems that the majority of quantum physicists see no need for the injection of human consciousness into the mathematical formalisms that form the basis of their science. As Ken Wilber pointed out twenty years ago, even the founding fathers of quantum physics/mechanics—Max Planck, Niels Bohr, Werner Heisenberg, Erwin Schrödinger, Sir Arthur Eddington, et al.—*who were all self-proclaimed mystics*,

That we should even feel the *need* to overcome the doubt of the scientific materialist worldview indicates how all-pervasive it actually is, and how thoroughly steeped in it most of us are.

strongly rejected the notion that mysticism and physics were describing the same realm. The attempt to unify them is, in the words of Planck, “founded on a misunderstanding, or, more precisely, on a confusion of the images of religion with scientific statements. Needless to say, the result makes no sense at all.” Eddington was even more explicit: “We should suspect an intention to reduce God to a system of differential equations. That fiasco at any rate must be avoided. However much the ramifications of physics may be extended by further scientific discovery, they cannot from their very nature [impinge upon] the background in which they have their being.”

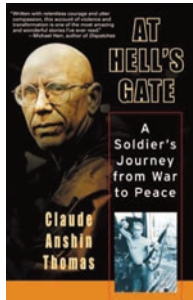
And there’s the crux of the confusion. Quantum physics deals with the abstract, symbolic analysis of the physical world—space, time, matter, and energy—even down to the subtlest level, the quantum vacuum. Mysticism deals with the direct apprehension of the transcendent Source of all those things. The former is a mathematical system involving intensive intellectual study, and the latter is a spiritual discipline involving the transcendence of the intellectual mind altogether. It’s apparently only a very loose interpretation of physics, and a looser interpretation of mysticism, that allows for their surprising convergence—and opens the door to the even wilder idea that by drinking some of this quantum mystical brew, you’ll be able to create your own reality.

“I wake up in the morning and I consciously create my day the way I want it to happen,” says Dispenza, a longtime student of Ramtha, during one of his many appearances in *What the Bleep*. In the film, after Amanda experiences her radical breakthrough into a positive new world, most of the interviewees chime in to explain the mechanics behind such a transformation—all presenting variations on the theme of creating one’s ideal reality through the power of thought and intention. However, the degree to which “creating your reality” is taken *literally* varies widely among the interviewees, from Stanford professor William Tiller’s idea that, upon realizing the interconnectedness of all things, we should take responsibility for our effects on the world, to Dispenza’s notion of literally “consciously designing our destiny” to suit our own desires by “infecting the quantum field.” It’s this latter use of quantum–physical reality creation that begs questioning—if only because it represents, again, that peculiar confluence of physics and mysticism, and appears to also contradict the very nature of mysticism itself. Mystical practice is traditionally aimed toward the mind-shattering revelation that

there is actually only *one* reality and *one* self, and this revelation is said to liberate the individual from his or her attachment to personal desires. So if we’re pursuing the manifestation of our desires by consciously manipulating the quantum field, and thereby attempting to re-create reality itself in our own image, how spiritual can that be, *really*?

In any case, it is understandable that so many people would feel a need to, as Wilber has put it, “rest their souls on the findings of physics.” In our postmodern and scientific age, what is the most obvious direction for a spiritually seeking soul to turn in search of Truth (with a capital T) after traditional mythic religion has been seen through and left behind? Why, it’s toward science, surely, with its claim to universal truth and its mathematical certainty to ten decimal places about the inner logic of space and time. Having our spiritual beliefs backed by science lends them some degree of legitimacy, however tenuous the connection. Moreover, it seems to make those beliefs more easily defensible against the preying guards of scientific authority—that is, the skeptics and scientific materialists of our era—both when encountering such adversaries in the world at large and when the same materialist doubts arise in our *own* minds.

So maybe the widespread popularity of quantum mysticism, and its latest offspring, *What the Bleep*, is pointing not just to our cultural propensity to be enamored by the amazing insights and innovations of science but to our innate fear of scientific materialism, which seeks, by definition, to squelch soul or spirit wherever it finds it. That we should even feel the *need* to overcome the doubt of the scientific materialist worldview indicates how all-pervasive it actually is, and how thoroughly steeped in it most of us are. In fact, the very need to base our belief in the transcendental Divine on the findings of science seems indicative of the strange spiritual desert in which we currently find ourselves, and in which humanity possibly has been lost since modern science first arose to trump religion centuries ago. Having left the world of myth, dogma, and superstition behind, we leapt into the wider embrace of science, logic, and rationality. But the scientific paradigm also has its limits, and despite the insistence of those who claim otherwise, perhaps what humanity needs now is a *higher* worldview: one that understands the miracles of science to be merely the modern expression of an ever-evolving Mystery, which only reveals—each time it is glimpsed—how little we really do know. ■



AT HELL'S GATE

A Soldier's Journey from War to Peace

by Claude Anshin Thomas
(Shambhala Publications, 2004,
hardcover \$19.95)

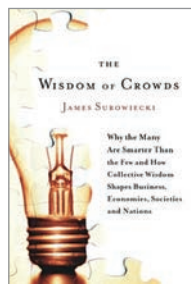
In *At Hell's Gate*, Claude Anshin Thomas tells the story of his courageous transformation from trained killer to holy drifter. During the Vietnam War, under the relentless pressures of training, Thomas decided to be what the Army wanted: a good soldier. After boot camp, assigned as a door gunner on an assault helicopter, his job was to fire until the enemy was destroyed. He made no distinctions—men, women, children, animals—he didn't stop until nothing moved. After only a few months of combat, Thomas was already responsible for hundreds of deaths.

Decades later, struggling to overcome the fear, addiction, and anguish that had shattered his life, he reluctantly attended a retreat with Vietnamese monk Thich Nhat Hanh at the urging of a counselor. Thomas was so terrified of Vietnamese people and so plagued by attacks of panic at the prospect of being unarmed in the midst of "the enemy" that he insisted on doing a full perimeter check of the area before entering the retreat center. But when the gentle monk walked in to begin the retreat, Thomas broke down. The presence of this beautiful man so deeply conflicted with his own inhuman attitude toward the Vietnamese, it triggered a cascade of horrifying memories, suppressed since his time in combat.

Later, Hanh invited Thomas to spend time at Plum Village, his community in France, but instructed him to live among the Vietnamese students rather than with the Westerners. By forcing Thomas to confront his deepest horrors, Thich Nhat Hanh helped him learn how the choices he had made and the suffering he had inflicted in the past affected his life in the present.

Today, Thomas is a wandering Buddhist monk in the lineage of Roshi Bernie Glassman. He roams across continents teaching Oneness, mindfulness, and nonviolence, helping veterans and nonveterans alike realize that the demons within us that we refuse to face are the real source of violence and hatred in this world. And what gives his perspective so much weight is that it carries the rare and undeniable authority of one who has seen firsthand the extremes of both good and evil that lie in the human soul.

Jeff Carreira



THE WISDOM OF CROWDS

Why the Many Are Smarter Than the Few and How Collective Wisdom Shapes Business, Economies, Societies and Nations

by James Surowiecki
(Doubleday, 2004, hardcover \$24.95)

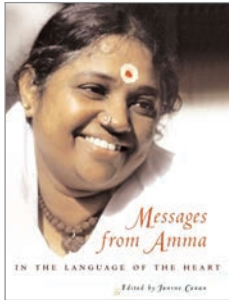
In 1906, eight hundred people at a country fair placed wagers on the weight of the meat on a living ox. Their diverse guesses averaged 1,197 pounds. The poor ox, cut up, weighed

1,198. This is only the first of dozens of remarkable stories pulled together by James Surowiecki to demonstrate that many people making independent judgments can generate a surprising level of collective intelligence. In fact, under the right conditions, the aggregate wisdom of groups consistently outperforms that of their individual members—even experts.

Surowiecki, a financial columnist for *The New Yorker*, explores the economic implications of group wisdom in some detail, and he touches briefly on its implications for democracy. Unfortunately, however, he does not explore the role of consciousness—collective fields, higher-order intelligence, ESP, the power of focused attention—as factors in group wisdom. Instead, he believes that most collective wisdom derives from the aggregation of diverse, independent, free individuals making rational, self-interested choices. And he also tries to understand cooperation, duty, and people's sense of fairness as mere expressions of self-interest. But might communion actually be a natural state of affairs, from which many things—including collective wisdom—can arise?

Yet his pioneering work is vital to anyone intending to further the conscious evolution of civilization. He helps us understand our uncanny *collective* ability to accurately estimate present-time realities and future possibilities, to successfully coordinate our collective affairs without direction, to generate wisdom in small groups, and to cocreate collaborative systems that evoke trust and fairness. And he helps us see why we so often *fail* to do these things. Indeed, this fascinating, story-filled book just might inspire our innate self-interest and our drive for self-transcendence to find new ways to dance powerfully together into collective transformation.

Tom Atlee



MESSAGES FROM AMMA

In the Language of the Heart

Edited by Janine Canan

(Celestial Arts, 2004, hardcover \$14.95)

Messages from Amma is a beautiful collection of quotations taken from the talks and writings of Mata Amritanandamayi, or Amma, best known as the God-intoxicated hugging saint who travels unrelentingly throughout the world to embrace countless thousands of people in a seemingly endless outpouring of compassion. No one alive today more fully embodies the ideal of what many would call unconditional love, and although much of the book explores this aspect of her remarkable being, there are many passages that reveal Amma to be much more than a fountain of tenderness. Indeed, she is also a fierce guru who never denies that God's love comes at a heavy price.

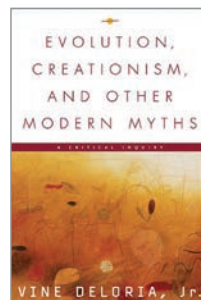
According to Amma, you can only feel love by expressing it. And ego—which means pride and selfishness—stands in the way. “Ego . . . is the only offering God asks,” the divine mother tells us, going on to state that if you are not willing to give up your ego once God has asked for it, then it will be taken from you.

Emphatically and unapologetically, Amma insists that a real guru is essential for awakening to occur, because seekers simply cannot dislodge subtle negative tendencies by themselves. “The ego must be removed,” she insists. “This painful process is only possible through surrender to the

teacher. The teacher breaks the ego's shell.” Spiritual practice is the other component of a seeker's life that Amma considers vital for any real advancement to occur: “The person who constantly studies without doing spiritual practices is like the fool who tries to live in the blueprint of a house.”

Amma's recipe for living a spiritual life is profoundly simple and absolutely demanding—give selflessly to others always, die to your prideful ego, engage earnestly in spiritual practice, and surrender to the wisdom of a true guru—instructions that are not likely to gain her nearly the same popularity as her unconditionally loving public image.

Jeff Carreira



EVOLUTION, CREATIONISM, AND OTHER MODERN MYTHS

A Critical Inquiry

by Vine Deloria, Jr.


(Fulcrum Publishing, 2004, paperback \$18.95)

For almost a century, fundamentalist Christians and secular scientists have been waging battles in American courts over which version of the history of our planet should be taught in schools. While scientists generally seek to defend Darwin's ideas—that life, including ours, was created over eons through a gradual and random process of change known as “natural

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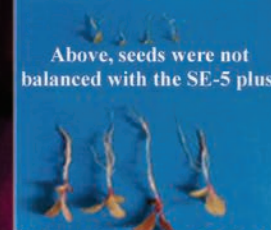
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selection”—Christian fundamentalists seek to present a story of creation that is more in harmony with their beliefs, either in the form of biblical literalism or, in recent years, as theories of “Intelligent Design,” which argue for the existence of some creator or creative force guiding evolution. But in *Evolution, Creationism, and Other Modern Myths*, celebrated Sioux author Vine Deloria claims that neither can do the job. Both approaches, he says, “are passé and represent only a quarrel within the Western belief system, not an accurate rendering of Earth history,” and neither can prepare the next generation for the world they will inherit.

Deloria, a distinguished scholar called “one of the eleven great religious thinkers of the twentieth century” by *Time* magazine, begins by taking Darwinism to task. As he painstakingly documents, orthodox Darwinism has

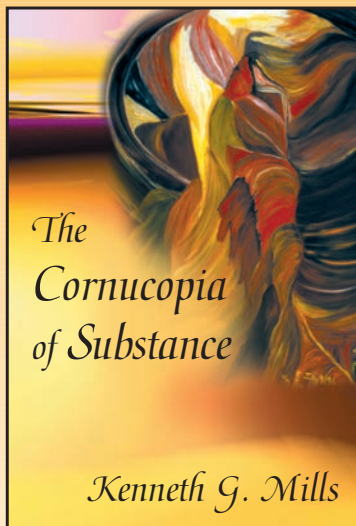
become plagued by dogma, conservatism, arrogance, and sloppy logic. Not only does Deloria argue that many reputable scientists gloss over the lack of hard evidence to support the theory, but he cites mounting scientific evidence suggesting that the evolution of life has been far from gradual. For example, new data show that catastrophes—like the sudden occurrence of the Ice Age—seem to lead to explosive proliferations of life.

Deloria is likewise critical of fundamentalist attempts to force a belief in biblical creation on others. The simple conclusion that life was merely “created,” he argues, leaves no room for investigation and inquiry into the mechanics of its emergence. Deloria is also critical of Intelligent Design explanations of the formation of our planet, which he sees as scientifically unfounded attempts to sneak Christian

dogma in through the back door. Moreover, he takes issue with the fact that Judeo-Christianity is the only tradition represented in public discussion about the relative merits of religious and scientific accounts of the earth’s origins. Indigenous people, Deloria points out, often have stories of creation that are much more in accord with recent scientific findings—such as the Hopi account of a time when the earth was completely frozen.

So, Deloria boldly asks, if neither orthodox Darwinism nor Christian-based creation theories accurately describe the origins of life, then why don’t we dispense with them altogether, rather than wrangling over two different forms of dogma? Basing education on dogma, he contends, lulls us with a false sense of how the world works and squelches the inquiry and creativity that might otherwise be applied to the pro-

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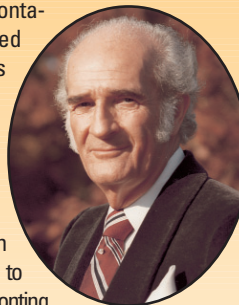
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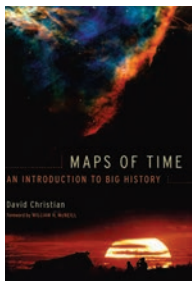


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Igal Moria



MAPS OF TIME
An Introduction to Big History

by David Christian
(University of California Press, 2004,
hardcover \$34.95)

In *Maps of Time*, David Christian takes on the Herculean task of integrating thirteen billion years of history into a single book. His mission: to forge a modern creation myth in order to cure the deep sense of displacement and anomie in postmodern culture. "Big History," a term coined by Christian himself, describes a new vein of historical narrative locating human history within the larger story of the universe. Just as all creation stories provide us with frameworks for understanding our lives, *Maps of Time* aims to recontextualize the human experience in a way that can take us beyond the fragmented view of life and history in the postmodern era.

Cosmic history is mysterious, Christian reveals. Despite all of our knowledge, the origins of the universe and life, specifically human life, remain elusive. From voidness came the Big Bang, energy became matter as it cooled, and light-years-long hydrogen

clouds gave birth to stars. Those very stars in turn exploded, triggering the formation of new stars, and their dust coalesced into relatively small marbles we call planets. Three billion years ago on the face of one such marble, Earth, some chemicals did something we're still unsure of and became the first strings of DNA that brought forth life. On and on this continued, until after millions of years, an asteroid wiped out the dinosaurs, clearing the way for mammals to rise to dominance. Hominines—bipedal cousins of the great apes—eventually exploded on the scene, and after evolving into myriad forms, one branch several million years ago yielded humankind.

In Christian's view, human history has been a tragic, glorious, violent, and profound unfolding of the process of sharing information and fighting for ideas. This network of innovation has allowed us to develop ever more complex forms of socialization, intelligence, and technology. It was the key to our evolutionary success in the past, and for Christian, it remains our greatest asset in facing the challenges of the future.

Yet despite Christian's argument for the evolutionary benefits of innovation and increasing complexity, he also claims that what is more complex is not necessarily "better" or more significant. And this, it seems, works against his own stated mission to provide a meaningful context for twenty-first-century human life. How can we find new meaning when we can not even conclude that human life and consciousness have any greater significance than that of a single cell? Even so, *Maps of Time* is a noteworthy contribution to an emerging form of historical narrative, and Christian's sensible, evenhanded treatment of information makes it worthwhile reading for anyone seeking an integrated view of the universe's story, and our own.

Paul Bloch

The Science of Self-Realization

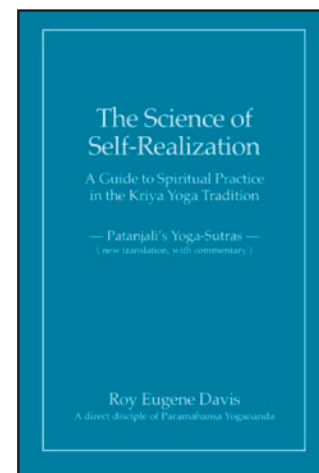
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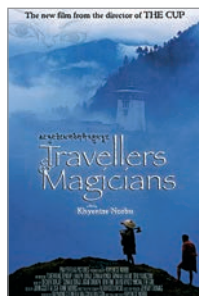
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TRAVELLERS AND MAGICIANS

Written and directed by
Khyentse Norbu
(Prayer Flag Pictures, 2004)

"Let me tell you a story about a dream-land . . ." With those words, a Buddhist monk slowly and hypnotically imparts the tragic, dreamlike story of Tashi to his traveling companions on a winding mountain road in Bhutan. The monk particularly directs this parable—of a young man whose desire for a beautiful woman leads to murder and profound regret—toward Dondup, a young government official eagerly making his way from his rural village to a new life in America. "Just don't get lost . . . like Tashi," he cautions him. "What we hoped for yesterday, we dread today."

Travellers and Magicians is an all-too-human tale that transmits the essential and timeless messages of Buddhism, the spiritual tradition of its writer and director, revered Bhutanese lama Dzongsar Khyentse Rinpoche, whose screen name is Khyentse Norbu. The incarnation of a nineteenth-century Buddhist saint and the son of one of the twentieth century's preeminent Tibetan teachers, Thinley Norbu Rinpoche, Khyentse Norbu is uniquely carrying Buddhism forward into the twenty-first century, bridging East and West and bringing the Buddha dharma to the silver screen. "For centuries," he says, "Buddhism has adopted the method of artistic representation in order to express the messages of compassion, love, and wisdom . . . for me, film can be a modern-day *thangka*."

Marrying his ancient dharmic lineage with a cinematic lineage that includes some of the great masters of motion picture, Khyentse Norbu follows in the steps of directors like Satyajit Ray, whose simple stories of village life in India reveal the universality of human experience through the quiet and steady observation of ordinary moments captured in one exquisitely framed image after another. True to this tradition, *Travellers and Magicians* is beautifully and evocatively photographed, focusing on minute details—gestures, glances, movement—conveying the unfolding of human relationship, and

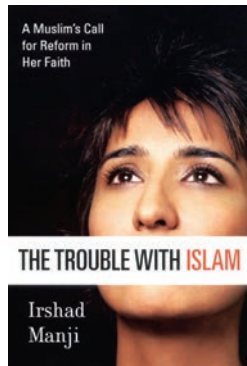
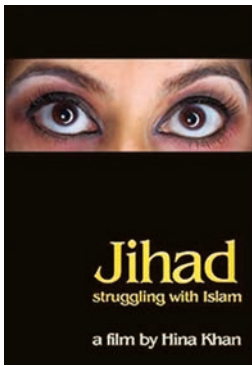
ultimately its evanescence. ("A peach blossom is beautiful because it is temporary," says the traveling monk.)

Indeed, in an age when cinema is filled with spectacular special effects, graphic violence, and explicit sex—the often full-blown dramatic depiction of karma-in-the-making—*Travellers and Magicians* is beguiling in its simplicity and humanness. And under Khyentse Norbu's direction, this chronicle of a small group of travelers simultaneously evokes fullness and emptiness—the bittersweet poignancy of human life and the inherently dreamlike and transitory nature of it all.

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JIHAD: STRUGGLING WITH ISLAM

Produced, directed, and written by Hina Khan
(OMNI Television Independent Producers Initiative, 2004)

THE TROUBLE WITH ISLAM

A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith
by Irshad Manji
(St. Martin's Press, 2004,
hardcover \$22.95)

Two Canadian Muslim women are seeking contemporary interpretations of Islam, fanning the flames of a small yet significant aspiration for change in the Muslim world. Independent film producer Hina Khan offers an autobiographical snapshot of a Western woman encountering her Eastern Muslim heritage in *Jihad: Struggling with Islam*, taking viewers along on her personal journey of reckoning with Islam after 9/11. And bestselling author and journalist Irshad Manji gives an impassioned argument for Islamic reformation in her book *The Trouble with Islam*, inviting readers to engage with the much-needed resurrection of Muslim free thought.

In *Jihad*, winner of the 2004 National Film Board of Canada award for Best Canadian Documentary, Khan's personal and emotive journey of self-discovery unfolds through a series of meetings with various Muslim scholars and practitioners, strung together by her self-reflective narrative. Khan, who is Canadian-born with Afghan origins, opens the film by introducing her own tenuous connection with Islam through

a heart-wrenching exchange with her religious and loving grandmother. She then launches into the heart of the film, stating that 9/11 has driven her to seriously question her Muslim identity.

Embarking on a whirlwind tour of meetings, Khan travels from Canada to London and back again, encountering different faces of Islam along the way. Moderate and progressive Muslims offer her encouragement; "Hijabi women" who wear the burkha leave her unconvinced of their dress code; fundamentalists in London, purported to have celebrated the 9/11 bombings, leave her deeply disturbed. Emotionally engaging throughout, *Jihad* provides an inroad for non-Muslims to appreciate different perspectives within Islam. The emphasis on Khan's inner journey, however, comes at the expense of more footage of her encounters, limiting the depth and wider relevance that the film might otherwise have conveyed.

In *The Trouble with Islam*, Irshad Manji takes a different approach to the same questions of Muslim identity. The book, praised by the *New York Times*, chronicles Manji's investigation of Islam from her early childhood years through her current efforts as an advocate for change in Muslim society. Born in Africa and later emigrating to Canada, Manji deeply valued the supportive environment for open inquiry she found in the West—an environment that led to her own passionate and critical investigation of Islam. Her unfettered desire to question, uproot, and confront all sacred cows is refreshing, informative, and engaging. Openly gay,

she challenges even the most moderate of Muslims to ask themselves how independent from indoctrination, prejudice, and fear their own views really are.

Taking her readers through the so-called Golden Age of Islam up to the present day, she throws down the gauntlet, calling Muslims to rediscover the little-known Islamic tradition of independent reasoning. Called *ijtihad*, this tradition "allowed every Muslim, female or male, straight or gay, old or young, to update his or her religious practice in light of contemporary circumstances," but over time it was gradually suffocated by authoritarianism. Because of the suppression of free thinking and the oppression of women in Muslim culture, Manji argues, the religion has stagnated, leaving it at the mercy of "Desert Islam"—of those who cling to the "founding moment" of the faith fourteen hundred years ago as the one, the only, and the final interpretation of Islam. Manji is also critical of non-Muslims who, by taking multiculturalism too far, can also allow backward interpretations of Islam to prevail, where inhumanity is justified by cultural sensitivity. "Why should the cops back off when a father (or mother) threatens death to a daughter who chooses to marry outside the religion?" she asks. To defend our diversity, she contends, we may have to be less tolerant of, or at least more vigilant about, the more fundamentalist expressions of Islam.

At a time when Islam is so visibly entwined with global sociopolitical tensions, both *The Trouble with Islam* and *Jihad: Struggling with Islam* are bold invitations—to Muslims and non-Muslims alike—to question deeply held beliefs and perceptions about world religion seemingly at odds with the twenty-first century.

Aterah Nusrat



WWW.HOLLYWOODJESUS.COM

Who knew that James Cameron's acclaimed killer-cyborg time-travel movie *The Terminator* was really an allegorical tale of the life of Jesus Christ? Well, David Bruce, for one, the creator of *HollywoodJesus.com*—a film, TV, and music review website whose tagline reads: "*Pop culture from a spiritual point of view.*" Elaborating on the Terminator/Christ connection, Bruce points out that "the main character John Connor's initials are J.C." and that "the dual natures of the terminators should also be noted. They are human/machine as Jesus was human/divine."

But that is just the tip of the revelatory iceberg. The parallels Bruce finds between the lives of Superman, Spider-Man, and Jesus are even more striking, and who would dispute the Christlike nature of Steven Spielberg's homesick space monkey, E.T.?

HollywoodJesus.com's homepage boasts that the site has received over 450 million hits from users since it first went online seven years ago, and it declares that anyone is welcome, regardless of religious orientation, including "Wiccans, Muslims, New Agers, [and] Atheists." However, those looking for a *nonsectarian* spiritual analysis of the current state of cinema,

be advised: the site's reviewers are all Christian, and among them, the level of spiritual depth and subtlety ranges considerably. Still, no matter what your religious preferences may be, there's something innately compelling about the sheer volume of Christian symbolism and allegory that can be found pervading secular entertainment. The popular adage "to a hammer, everything looks like a nail" comes to mind, and one wonders how many Christian references are actually intentional and how many, in true postmodern fashion, are entirely in the eye of the beholder.

Tom Huston

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a 21st century love story part IV

"The third installment of *A 21st Century Love Story* found Evan and Ella worlds apart and facing into the harsh truths of reality unmasked. Compelled by the urgency of her deepest aspirations, Ella arrived in India, desperate to change the world for the better—only to find that life doesn't always go as planned. Meanwhile, Evan, challenged by a heated dispute with his parents, contemplated suicide beneath the soul-numbing gaze of the California sun.... Series fans will enjoy the continuing saga of this online romance, which once again reveals the ontological inferno of American youth, wherein the husks of old meanings are discarded and new ones made."

—*The Savannah Sun-Times*

From: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
To: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
Date: Tue, 31 Aug 2004 17:30:09 (PDT)
Subject: jacob's ladder

dearest ella,

it's so good to hear from you. it's been a while, huh? i'm sorry i didn't write to you sooner. i wanted to respect your space.

yes, i am still seeing a shrink! he's actually a very rockin' dude. since you asked, his name is dr. jacob tabberson, and he's created this seven-step path to body-mind-soul integration called "jacob's ladder." i laughed the first time i heard about it, when my sister started going to him, but i'm definitely not laughing anymore. wait--actually i've been laughing a lot lately! but only at myself. (the third

rung of the ladder: don't take yourself so seriously!) jacob is also a very spiritual guy, who had his first mystical breakthrough while he was--get this--*surfing* in hawaii. so as you can imagine, we always have plenty to talk about. i think my sessions with him are really helping me straighten myself out, and helping me become more mature and responsible and caring and all that. it's cool.

but what about YOU? how's life in india these days? have you learned hindi yet? are you still smoking those indian cigarettes? do you realize it's been almost a year since we last saw each other...?

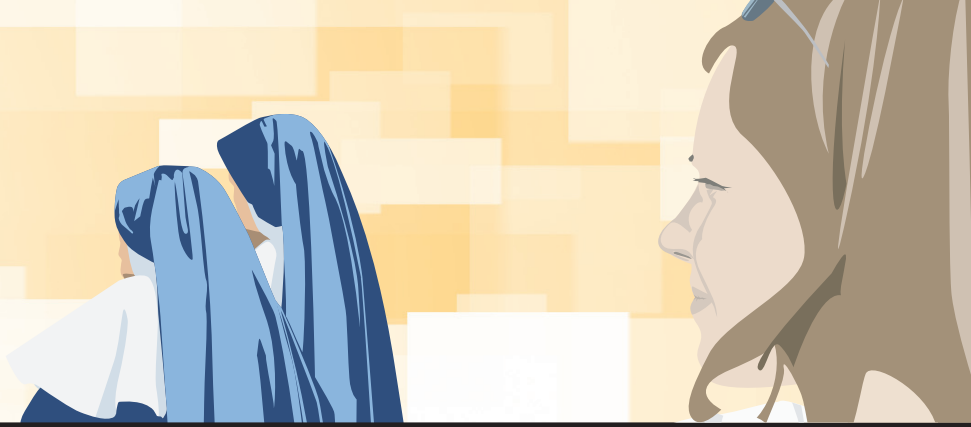
miss you,
evan

From: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
To: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
Date: Sun, 05 Sep 2004 01:09:50 (EDT)
Subject: Re: jacob's ladder

Dear Evan,

Well well, it's been a long time since I've heard from you. So, step three of the Jacob's Ladder is "don't take yourself so seriously"? Are you sure that's a problem you need to work on? (ha) Just seeing if all that therapy has made you lose your sense of humor... One of the reasons I wrote you was because I was at a party the other night and I met a guy who reminded me of you. He's about as useful to the world as you are--all he does is travel around the globe attending meditation courses. He just got back from one in Bodhgaya, a small town in northern India where the Buddha supposedly got enlightened. He also had this shaggy blond hair just like you. I only talked to him for a few minutes

1st



but it brought back a lot of memories. I really started missing you!

Right now I'm actually writing from the Missionaries of Charity base in Calcutta, otherwise known as Mother Teresa's. Can you believe it? I'm here as a "pre-aspirant" which is a six month work period that leads to the "aspirant" level and so forth until you become a nun. I'll anticipate all your questions and say right now that I don't know if I am going to stay here longer than six months, and I'm not sure that I want to become a nun--it's such a huge commitment...

Have you ever heard how it works? The nuns drive trucks around the city "collecting" the sickest, most decrepit, and incapacitated people they can find in the gutters, garbage heaps and shanties. Then they bring them back to one of our buildings around the city, where someone like me has been scrubbing floors and washing the sheets and generally trying to keep things as antiseptic as possible. We give whoever they have brought their own stretcher, and we dress their sores and wounds, and give them warm food. And then we do that every day for them until they die. Not a day goes by that we don't bring tens of bodies to the burning ghats by the river to be cremated. By the time we return someone else has already filled their cot. A few of the sick actually get better while they are here because they are receiving some nutrition regularly for the first time in their lives. Eventually one of the nuns will have to ask them to leave to make room for others.

I've come to see the whole process as one of bearing witness to these people who have been neglected since birth--to let them die with some degree of dignity even if all that means is having food in their bellies and clean

bandages. We have to acknowledge them, even if it is just in the last minutes of their life, as human beings. Every day you just think about Life and Death, about what it all means, there is very little respite. I've noticed something interesting about the nuns though. Instead of becoming cold or stoic, they seem to become warmer and more human. Is that some kind of miracle? Faced with the total inhumanity of these dying people's plight they become more human. God, I am in total awe of them...

I myself find some relief from work by going out whenever I get a chance, going dancing or on a long motorcycle ride around the city. I have a friend here who has one and after a long day we tear around like we don't have a care in the world.

I'm interested in what step four of the ladder is--I can't possibly imagine what it will be...

Ella

From: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
To: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
Date: Wed, 08 Sep 2004 12:01:29 (PDT)
Subject: st. ella of brooklyn

dearest ella,

wow. i figured you'd be deeply involved with something really positive by now--but i had no idea it'd be carrying on the work of mother teresa! you constantly amaze me. i would never have guessed that you'd even *consider* becoming a NUN!! i'm really glad you're not "100% sure." let's keep that percentage decreasing even further, huh?

century

you asked about the fourth rung of jacob's ladder. well, it's actually cool what's been happening--i've been seeing the fourth rung popping up literally *everywhere* in my life, many times a day. jacob told me that it is a sign of the "natural progression" of our work together. what is the fourth rung? simply put: "learn to love. care about yourself, care about others, and care about the universe. love until it hurts." it sounds simple, right? but the power of it runs deep--as you yourself must be realizing. your work in india is a *perfect* expression of the fourth rung. that's actually a great example of how this keeps mysteriously appearing--i've been contemplating nothing but the nature of care and love, and then you write me this incredible email about that very same thing!

what's most interesting is how all the facets of the fourth rung actually fit together. for instance, how do we love the universe? by loving *ourselves*! because we *are* the universe, the universe is not some abstract concept--we literally *are* it! when i finally realized this, the fourth rung blasted wide open for me, and i suddenly saw what the problem has been all along: i've been completely divided about how much i'm actually willing to love *myself*. when i told jacob i'd realized this, he had tears in his eyes.

ella, i'm sorry i've been so distant--both physically and emotionally. i've actually been avoiding intimacy not just with other people, but with my own soul. you and i are not separate, el. not really. we've been living a lie.

all my love,
evan

p.s. who have you been riding around on a motorcycle with? one of the nuns?!

From: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
To: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
Date: Thu, 16 Sep 2004 11:01:54 (EDT)
Subject: Re: st. ella of brooklyn

That sounds kind of strange, Ev. Just out of curiosity, does this guy have a degree or anything?

Anyway, in regards to us "living a lie," I do live like 6,000 miles away from you so of course we've been "physically" distant. Our differing experiences as a result of the physical separation leads to a natural emotional incongruity. No problems though! (Maybe that's the fifth rung of the ladder that you haven't gotten to yet!)

Don't worry, my desire to be a nun has been decreasing steadily, although i'm not sure how serious i took it from the beginning (the third rung!). I think I wanted to have the experience of working here more than anything else. It sounds rather bad, but I need to have the freedom to walk away if I want to.

When I first got here I was continuing to meditate like I had been in Brooklyn but these days all I do after work is go to a nice hotel with some air conditioning and have a few beers (there's just one kind of beer here that everyone drinks called Kingfisher that only comes in these really big bottles), before going out to listen to some music at a club or something. Have you ever heard hindi rap? It's really good! I was introduced to it by this weird hippie

Love

from Chechnya a few weeks ago. (The less said about him the better. Suffice it to say I had a *really* bad experience.)

Well, I need to go to practice a little more "fourth rung" and later I'm going out for a long ride with my friend (no, they aren't a nun!).

Yours Truly, Ella

From: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
To: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
Date: Sat, 18 Sep 2004 23:11:00 (PDT)
Subject: karmic destiny

hey ella,

thanks for writing. are the nuns okay with you going out like that? what do you mean by "bad experience"? i hope you don't mind, but i showed jacob your last two emails because i was concerned about you. it just seemed to me that you're simply confused about what your true purpose is (that's the first rung). but when i showed jacob, he laughed and said,

"evan, sometimes it can take *years* for us to figure out what we're doing in this crazy world. it's just part of the process, and you *don't* want to rush the process. besides, you're just jealous."

this reminded me of something i mentioned to you before, about you and i not being separate. as part of my work on the fourth rung, jacob had me visit this past-life regression hypnotist over on mission st. i was pretty skeptical, since even the dalai lama has said he can't remember his past lives, but within minutes my mind was totally blown. it wasn't just vague and dreamlike fantasizing--i literally REMEMBERED my last lifetime, and many previous ones. or i should say, OUR lifetimes! girl, you and i have been together for a long, long time... we are two sides of the same soul--the masculine and the feminine--spiraling upward together through life after life of learning and loving. in light of this, it makes total sense why you're tempted to hang out with other guys. that's been going on for a long time too. but ella, we aren't *meant* to be apart. we've already tried that before.

i'm planning to fly into calcutta next saturday, arriving in the early evening. i don't know if you'll get this email before



story

then, but i'll be seeing you soon. i also hope to meet your mysterious motorcycle friend...

love,
evan

—
From: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
To: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
Date: Tue, Sep 21 2004 06:31:15 (EDT)
Subject: Re: karmic destiny

You're joking right?! You can't come to Calcutta! You wouldn't last a day here. And where do you think you'll stay? You absolutely cannot stay with me. By the way, my "mysterious motorcycle friend" has a name--Donatello. Does he show up in any of your past life fantasies? I may be confused about what my true purpose is here but at least I'm not just climbing some imaginary ladder to god knows what futile end.

How could you buy into all this new agey crap?! At least before your narcissism had

some redeeming qualities. What's happened to you anyway?

—
From: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
To: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
Date: Tue, 21 Sep 2004 20:53:27 (PDT)
Subject: samsara circles endlessly

ella, if you only knew how many times we've played out this drama, over and over again, you'd understand why i could only laugh when i saw your email. if i've learned anything from this "new agey crap," it's that we can't keep playing the same game forever.

oh, and "donatello"? you've been hanging out with a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle??? wow, that's really impressive...

evan

—
From: "Ella Paris" <ellaparis@hotmail.com>
To: "Evan McAllister" <glassyzen@yahoo.com>
Date: Wed, 22 Sep 2004 09:47:05 (EDT)
Subject: Re: samsara circles endlessly

Oh My God. I can't believe what I'm reading. Where do you get this infantile shit? You know what? FINE, you can come! I hope you are prepared because--listen closely--this place is going to kick your ass.

TO BE CONTINUED...

email them: ellaparis@hotmail.com
glassyzen@yahoo.com



continued from page 11

their gurus. As far as I know, I'm the only woman who has written a book about my affair with Carlos Castaneda, the details of his harem, and my role in it.

I hope Ms. Roemischer's profound article and any books by women who feel ready to "come out of the closet" will have an impact on the choices women make when we're tempted to give away our power to an apparent "higher being."

Amy Wallace

Los Angeles, CA

MOST IMPORTANT ELECTION?

Quite frankly, I find it slightly disturbing that the editors of arguably the most progressive popular spiritual magazine in the world are prone to display such clear signs of what I can only identify as nationalism. Don't get me wrong—such representatives of American culture as Ella, Evan, Indy, and Thomas de Zengotita all authentically enhance the search for truth and beauty. However, it is my personal opinion that the editors would do well to remember that the world is slightly larger than the United States of America. Furthermore, I find it fundamentally mind-boggling that any spiritually inclined individual would consciously subscribe to the belief that replacing George W. Bush is the solution to the political, social, and economic challenges the United States of America is currently facing. Clearly Mr. Bush is merely a symptom of a fundamental flaw in a system that, unlike your magazine, regards the phenomenon of transfiguration with reluctance. Electing John Kerry will solve very little unless a fair number of people start to ask themselves how a clueless cowboy like George "Fool Me Once" Bush ever got elected as President of the United States.

Lee Mason

Amsterdam

QUALITY NOT QUANTITY

Most of the magazines I subscribe to get a quick page-through, during which I look at the headlines and illustrations, and then put them down to read later (which I seldom do). But when *WIE* arrives, I grab a cup of coffee, sit down, and don't get back up until I've read at least one-third of the articles. Usually in a day or two, I'm done (heck, I even take notes!) and realize I have to wait months for your next issue. I understand that to offer the quantity and quality of articles you do limits the number of magazines you can put out each year. Believe me, I'd rather have a fantastic magazine four times a year than a mediocre one every month.

Margaret Duarte

via email

EGO IS THE ONLY PROBLEM

Congratulations and thanks for hitting the existential nail so squarely on the head, with your comments on the almighty ego in the Aug-Oct 2004 issue of *WIE* ("The Higher We"). You are dead on in pointing out that the ego constitutes the greatest single barrier to attaining our evolutionary potential. Devious and sly in the extreme, it has been little understood even by some of our most enlightened teachers, who have themselves often fallen victim to its hidden ways and modus operandi. So many who would like to claim an enlightened status are ultimately tricked by their egos without ever being aware of it! Hence, it is all the more important that *WIE* keep on peeling away the many layers of deception and illusion that sustain us collectively in deep sleep, impotent to move on. In my estimation this is the ultimate responsibility and challenge facing your great editorial team of writers.

John H. Boyd

WIE FOR KIDS

I'm sitting with my 15-, 16-, and 17-year-old students (some of whose IQs double my own) trying to help them decipher one or more of *WIE*'s extraordinary articles that I've shared with them, when I'm thinking, *wouldn't it be great if WIE had one, yes, even just one article per issue specifically geared to helping adolescents along the spiritual path? How can I enter "The Cafe at the Beginning of the Universe" [WIE May-July 2004] with my students? I wonder. How to translate the Guru and the Pandit's conversation about the authentic self into kidspeak, albeit sophisticated kidspeak?*

The answer? I can't—not without your help. Hence my appeal to you and your contributors. Could you please add a Spirituality 101 page, filled with pearls of wisdom young adults could really savor and not agonize over? They do so want to understand what I challenge them with, but it is really quite difficult for them. Just yesterday, a male voice piped up from the back of the class. "Miss, we hear that you meditate . . ."

"Yes," I answer tentatively.

Emboldened, my student continues, "Would you do it with us?"

I do a double-take. My mind is racing. I'm poker-faced, but my soul is roaring. *I'm a newbie myself*, I think. *I'm not equipped to expand anybody's consciousness!*

How can I deny my students, though? I can't, but I will need an awful lot of help. Articles in *WIE*, with young readers in mind, would be such a blessing.

Cecilia, English teacher

via email



A New Spiritual Canon

by Andrew Cohen

WHEN THE SPIRITUAL IMPULSE EXPRESSES ITSELF IN A SECULAR WORLD, all the rules change. In our postmodern context, unencumbered by premodern, traditional moral and philosophical strictures, when that impulse begins to awaken within our own hearts and minds, we find ourselves in a position unique to our time: *we can literally choose any spiritual path that appeals to us*. From the ever-growing variety of popular New Age teachers and teachings to the vast treasure trove of esoteric secrets from the world's great traditions, the spiritual marketplace has never held more options than it does at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

On this new frontier, an intriguing development has occurred. Whether it's in the most popularized form of spirituality found in the bestseller section of your local bookstore or in a highly sophisticated new spiritual paradigm being taught for credit at alternative colleges in California, the line between the religious and the secular, the sacred and the profane, has become blurred. Indeed, as we attempt to embrace a spiritual perspective with as much authenticity as we can muster, many of us find that we're actually unsure where that line is. Some may even wonder if such a line exists at all. It's a confusing picture because we're so very much on our own—literally having to make up the rules as we go along. Many of us are convinced that this freedom from the strictures and “thou shalts” of tradition is the door to an alternative and truly liberated future. But I wonder how many of us are *actually* free and independent enough to create such a future. The truth is that, living in a secular context with no rules or tradition or overarching philosophical and spiritual canon to guide us, we are overwhelmed, more than we're willing to admit, by the sheer enormity of having to figure it out for ourselves.

Another interesting phenomenon is that the yearning for soul development in this context is satisfied, more often than not, by practice and direct experience rather than by adherence to any overarching spiritual doctrine. Indeed, the *subjective* experience of the individual has achieved almost sacred status, while the notion of

being beholden to anything higher than one's own fleeting intuition is often held as suspect. We have, it seems, lost our moorings to any deeper or higher principles beyond our own direct experience. And even when we do manage to glimpse a higher perspective, a deeper and more inclusive way of seeing, we're rarely able to sustain access to it. Being products of our own time and culture, our attention too easily reverts back to how we feel about ourselves. It's the rare individual who remains rooted in an all-embracing spiritual perspective to which his or her personal experience is always subservient.

It's obvious that we've got to move forward. And it is equally obvious that in order to do so, we have to find a way to define a new moral, ethical, philosophical, and spiritual canon—one that will enable more and more of us at the leading edge to face the future *together*. In order for this to occur, we have to begin to think out loud about what the fundamental tenets of such a canon would be. We have to be willing to stretch our capacity for thoughtful consideration in ways that embrace not only the past and the present but, more importantly, the future we need to create. We need to cultivate the capacity to reach beyond what we already know so we can begin to envision a future that has yet to be imagined.

Once we have done so, the enormous challenge for all of us will be simply this: Will we be able to sustain our adherence to a mutually agreed upon overarching perspective—a *higher truth*? One that may be, for most of us, *far* beyond what our actual experience is? Will those of us who are products of this postmodern secular context, who tend to be more infatuated with our own personal experience than any other generation in history, have the humility to live in accordance with higher principles and purpose, in subservience to a cause greater than ourselves? ■

Andrew Cohen, founder and editor-in-chief of *What Is Enlightenment?* has been a spiritual teacher since 1986 and is the author of numerous books, including *Living Enlightenment* and *Embracing Heaven & Earth*. For more information, visit www.andrewcohen.org.