FIVE

Moving Toward the Light

Self, Other, and the Politics of Experience in New Age Narratives

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> Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things. . . . If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.
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> —Laing, *The Politics of Experience*

To read R. D. Laing's work today is to revisit an era—temporally close, temperamentally distant—when a renowned psychiatrist could conclude a book with fifteen pages of LSD-inspired word salad and still produce a bestseller.[1] Laing claimed that self-estrangement was ubiquitous in American society, and he blamed it on resistance to the truth of inner experience. In his quest for a prophetic language that would bridge therapy and religion by revealing how an authentic self can achieve healthy communion with others, the mercurial Laing mapped terrain still under exploration by the New Age movement today—more than three decades after the publication of Laing's *The Politics of Experience.*

Informed by a powerful current of millennialism, the New Age holds that humanity is entering a time of transition, at the end of which collective rediscovery of the divine will inspire a social and political renaissance unlike any other in human history. People wary of rigid categories are unlikely to apply one to themselves, and "New Age" is no exception. Some spurn the term; others use it only for ironic effect. But it has stuck nevertheless. Today "New Age" encompasses practices and philosophies as diverse as shamanism, neopaganism, aura reading, goddess worship, channeling, crystal healing, past-life regression therapy, and the performance of rituals inspired by American Indian traditions. Within its ample

boundaries some scholars also locate certain new religions—the Church of Scientology, for instance—and quasi-religious groups that draw on the long-standing American obsession with self-improvement.

Since the New Age first came to public attention in the early 1970s, it has puzzled social scientists and cultural critics, who disagree about its scale, significance, and trajectory. Surveying recent publications, one finds some that confidently identify the New Age as a movement of massive proportions and others that dismiss it as an inconsequential audience cult. The popular media, perhaps taking their cue from this scholarly ambivalence, alternately portray the New Age as everywhere and as nowhere at all. The *New York Times* made the latter claim a decade ago in a front-page article assessing the results of a landmark survey of American religious affiliation: "And despite all the attention given to what devotees call the New Age, the number of adherents, 28,000 [in the entire U.S.] is practically insignificant" (Goldman 1991).[2] Only five years later, this supposedly trifling movement had taken up residence in the White House, where Hillary Clinton carried on imaginary conversations with Eleanor Roosevelt under the direction of the therapist Jean Houston. The magazine *Forbes*, a publication not generally known for interest in alternative spirituality, reported in the mid-1990s that New Age workshops, book sales, and related activities generate nearly $14 billion a year in personal spending (Ferguson and Lee 1996), a figure that, if accurate, offers compelling evidence that the movement has a significant public following.

If, as sociologists such as Brulle (1995: 316) argue, a movement's political power may be measured in part by how its rhetoric influences the "definition of what constitutes common-sense reality," then there is ample evidence that the New Age is more influential than many experts are willing to admit. The movement has made possible the emergence of new, explicitly spiritual forms of psychotherapy, a trend that will surely accelerate in the coming decades as affluent baby boomers grapple with mortality. The health-care industry has come to embrace alternative healing modalities—acupuncture, herbal medicines, natural childbirth, and the like—long championed by the New Age. Perhaps more surprising is the movement's impact on management consultants and motivational trainers whose clients include the nation's largest corporations (Bromley and Shupe 1990; Rupert 1992). The pervasiveness of New Age concepts in the world of training seminars came to wide public attention when it was revealed that the Federal Aviation Administration paid $1.4 million in fees to a disciple of the controversial channeler J. Z. Knight for stress management

classes attended by FAA employees (Hosenball 1995). In this and other ways, the movement plays an important role in the relentless expansion of therapeutic idioms and perspectives in contemporary life (Nolan 1998; Rieff 1966).

However pervasive the New Age may be, its ideological diffuseness and anti-institutional thrust make it difficult to assess from a traditional social movements perspective. New Age followers typically express skepticism about conventional politics and show little interest in influencing media images of their goals. Social grievances or conflicts with the state seldom become a focus of movement activities.[3] Aside from rare instances when New Age spirituality has taken an authoritarian turn, the movement's collective projects tend to be short-lived, continuing only as long as participants find them mutually therapeutic. These features suggest that the New Age is best considered a "new social movement" (NSM) as defined by Johnston, Laraña, and Gusfield (1994). More than other NSMs, however, the New Age has a consumerist quality that has much to teach us about popular visions of social change in an era when capitalism and the project of the self have become so thoroughly intertwined that the act of making consumer choices is increasingly perceived as a logical and even sacred means of reshaping the social order.[4]

In common with other NSMs, the New Age benefits from the growing fragmentation of communications media. Infinite variations in belief can easily be accommodated by new Internet discussion groups or, to a more limited extent, by cable TV channels directed to niche audiences. This proliferation of media forums, many of which are accessible to groups possessing only modest financial resources, has exerted a powerful leveling effect, as audiences find it harder to distinguish mainstream information sources from those in the cultural borderlands. New Agers see this expansion of perspectives as a positive development, evidence that the monolithic truths of Western Christianity are being contested by more authentic voices.

Given the difficulties of tracking a movement that almost by definition shuns political action and conventional expressions of power, narrative offers a useful point of analytical purchase. Indeed, to an outside observer the New Age seems largely constituted *by* narratives: life histories, tales of spiritual adventure and "self-empowerment," moments of "personal sharing," and accounts of affliction and recovery. The movement's networks and collective gatherings are designed to provide opportunities for storytelling that serves as a unifying force in encounters

otherwise characterized by the centrifugality of individual needs and experiences. In these encounters, one witnesses a potent form of what Silverstein and Urban (1996: 2) call "entextualization," the use of texts to "create a seemingly shareable, transmittable culture."

In the New Age case, the entextualization process is simultaneously normative and oppositional. Narratives mobilize group sentiment, create a web of shared meaning, and demonstrate to participants that their individual work contributes to a panhuman process of spiritual transformation. But narratives and other speech events are also used tactically in ways that shed light on the movement's underlying misgivings about stable organizations and their perceived pathologies. In this chapter I offer an assessment of New Age stories and speech events that draws special attention to how these contrasting principles are deployed in and through narrative.[5]

My analysis is based on participant-observation fieldwork undertaken in various parts of the United States between 1990 and 1995. This research primarily focused on the practice called channeling, a modern version of spirit mediumship in which human "channels"—a term many practitioners use in preference to the more familiar "channelers"—enter a trance with the goal of opening themselves to spiritual beings, who then communicate to an audience using the voice of their human ally. Because people drawn to channeling events are also likely to participate in other expressions of alternative spirituality, I found it necessary to familiarize myself with related practices that ranged from prosperity consciousness to fringe psychotherapy. Documenting such a sprawling movement presents a daunting task for a single ethnographer. Fortunately, there is a growing body of comparative literature against which my own research can be evaluated. A review of these sources suggests the account that follows is representative of New Age social practices, although it should be kept in mind that some branches of the movement—neopagans, for example—show greater organizational stability than do the groups documented here.[6]

LIFE STORIES AS ORGANIZING NARRATIVES

As a movement focused on the transformation of individual lives and, by a process of spiritual accumulation, all of humanity, it is hardly surprising that life stories play a central role in New Age encounters. For practitioners of specific spiritual or healing techniques, a life-story narrative is a résumé that substitutes for university degrees and other professional credentials. Life histories are offered in background documents that advertise workshops or training sessions, and they may be presented orally by session leaders as part of an opening discussion. In explicitly therapeutic encounters, the life history of the client may be equally important. Indeed, interpretation of a client's life story may be the encounter's ostensible goal.

The life story of Mary Beth Allen, a woman who offers intuitive counseling to clients in Santa Fe, New Mexico, illustrates key features of New Age life stories.[7] Sitting in the shade of her small garden on a warm day in June, Mary Beth described herself as someone who was brought up in an achievement-focused middle-class Jewish household in New England. Her father was a Harvard-educated attorney, her mother a housewife. She is, she said, a "bridge person" who has made the transition from science to spirituality. Her formal education was an extended battle between the halves of the bicameral mind: the scientific half, which led her to complete most of a mathematics major in college, and the intuitive, expressive half, which pushed her in the direction of religion and the arts. A stint with the Peace Corps in Zaire exposed her to African religious practices and helped, as she put it, "to open up my mind." "By the end of my time in Zaire," she said, "I believed in sorcery. It made sense in the African context. Whatever belief system you have makes sense if everyone is believing in it and working from it."

Returning to the United States, she experienced growing tension between the career expectations of her family and internal spiritual currents unleashed by her experiences in Africa. As she commented, "I went through this period when everything fell apart. I've gone through it several times, where everything kind of crumbles and I need a change." She sold her belongings and moved to Santa Fe, which she heard was a beautiful place. There she gravitated to people involved in various kinds of spiritual work, and she began to see a professional psychic who helped to "open doorways." She contrasted the immediacy of these new religious experiences with the more abstract spirituality of her family's Judaism. "Judaism is about being a good person. But to me God was always far away, rather patriarchal. That didn't draw me in." Meditation and a related technique called "visualization," in contrast, gave Mary Beth "a more expanded vision of who and what I was. I felt more peaceful." Eventually her teachers convinced her that she had the gift of psychic insight: "I was told by

different psychics that I had a gift. People who live in that realm looked at me and saw something that I was just coming into awareness of. I wound up going out in the world with it very slowly, bit by bit, feeling my way."

These experiments in trying on the role of a spiritual advisor gave Mary Beth new confidence in herself and a real sense of satisfaction. She saw her experience as a process of changing the "thought-forms" that pattern emotions. Most of us, she believes, are "trapped in our heads" and therefore unable to access higher truths that lie in the body:

> We are encouraged to rise up into the head a lot. That was my background. There is so much pain in this culture, so much pain—addictiveness, dysfunctional families . . . We need some way to deal with the violence inside ourselves. We need to find a loving place towards those parts of our self that are in fear. That's the way to make better choices.

She began to see her counseling goal as helping others find an appropriate path to self-understanding and self-love:

> When I work with people, I'm into personal answers. So I say, "There are many ways to worship God. Which one is your way?" That is my focus, not "Oh, you should become a Buddhist." I ask, "What is it that works for you and that really brings you to a fuller and richer life?"

She insisted that her openness leaves room for discrimination, the ability to separate spiritual wheat from chaff:

> I'm skeptical and leery. When I hear about movements like Ramtha [a being who speaks through J. Z. Knight, a celebrity channeler now based in Washington State], I'm sure that although there was some good stuff in there, for a lot of people it was just entertainment, like going to see the latest movie or something. In a way it makes me irritable. . . . I have heard bad stories about psychics who say you should do something this way or that way. They are so full of ego, but it's just crap.

Mary Beth felt that her life has finally arrived at a stage in which she is nearly liberated from the internal messages fostered by family upbringing and by society as a whole, which prevent her and others from understanding who they really are. Her personal history is part of a global process of transformation:

> There is definitely something happening now that is qualitatively and quantitatively different from anything we've faced before as a species. Things have come to a boiling point. We've leaped into global awareness. It's only been the last four hundred years. That's a miniscule amount of time. [New Age spirituality] is something transcendent and extremely powerful that can be used in everyday life, and it's now part of this culture that came out of the Industrial Revolution. It's like a new frontier. It's tremendous. I do believe that I'm part of some flux of awareness or consciousness. I'm just one little bit of it.

This life history underscores several themes common to New Age narratives. One is that contemporary American culture privileges reason over "inner knowing." Mary Beth's personal growth came when she succeeded in freeing herself from the false values of her upbringing and replacing them with a perspective that validated her spiritual gifts and sense of self-worth. This process of self-discovery never ends, for one's needs and understandings evolve throughout the life process. A second and related theme is the arbitrariness of belief, evident in her comments about thought-forms and their mutability. Beliefs and ideas that do not promote individual happiness should be discarded and replaced by ones that work better, a view that might be labeled "cognitive utilitarianism." This in turn helps to explain Mary Beth's insistence that she can be skeptical of spiritual practices that privilege the assertions of one person, usually a charismatic guru or teacher, over the actual experiences of another, typically an emotionally vulnerable client. A third motif concerns the important role that the spiritual efforts of isolated individuals play in contributing to a larger historical process, which will eventually give rise to spiritual rebirth on a global scale.

These themes map discursive fields within which social actors negotiate the collective dimension of New Age practice. By discursive fields I mean something akin to Goffman's "primary frameworks," structures of meaning that define "the sum total of forces and agents that these interpretive designs acknowledge to be loose in the world" (1974: 27). In the New Age case, two discursive fields are especially salient: Self/Other, which encompasses the tension between self-knowledge and group

process, and Belief/Experience, which concerns the unstable relationship between discrimination and faith.

SELF AND OTHER: GROUP FEELING AND ITS LIMITS

A key expression of New Age practice is the workshop or "intensive" that brings together a spiritual counselor and an interested audience in an encounter that may last anywhere from a few hours to several weeks. To service the profusion of spirituality workshops across the nation, there has arisen a loose network of conference centers that provide meeting space and, in some cases, more elaborate facilities such as dormitories, meditation rooms, organic gardens, and cafeterias. Conference center catalogs inevitably include photographs of workshop participants basking in good fellowship: dancing, laughing at a speaker's humor, holding hands in a circle, or just sitting together in some attractive (usually rural) setting. In reality, the intimacy depicted in catalogs may be difficult to achieve in gatherings that bring together a group of strangers in an impersonal place. Mainline religious denominations solve this problem by following a liturgy, more or less invariant, that unites visitors in a familiar ritual process. People drawn to New Age events, however, typically value spontaneity and self-expression rather than liturgical order, which represents exactly the kind of formality that they endeavor to avoid. To the extent possible, New Age events should be interactive. Those who organize gatherings of this nature therefore face the challenge of successfully conveying their message, whatever it may be, while simultaneously creating a sense of community and allowing clients to have their say.

When dealing with small audiences, a common opening gambit of presenters is to invite participants to introduce themselves and perhaps offer a few comments about their background and interests. This bridges the distance between expert and audience while helping strangers feel comfortable with one another. Introductions also signal the interests and personal styles of attendees, information that a skilled presenter may use to tailor his or her workshop along appropriate lines. For large audiences, however, individual introductions generally prove impractical. A common alternative strategy is to propose an exercise in visualization, a guided meditation in which the group is led on a relaxing inner journey that binds them together through shared experience.

The following text is part of a guided meditation recorded during a 1991 workshop that took place in a small town in upstate New York. The speaker, a middle-aged woman named Sally, channels several spirit entities who provide her with information that she describes as life-transforming. The setting is a New Age bookstore that rents space for workshops during the evening hours.

> Just let your body relax and feel the individual muscles as they begin to release the tension. The body is a marvelous thing. It holds itself together by means of whirling energy patterns moving unpredictably, singing us to sleep as it clicks and whirs in its balance. So let your body completely relax, beginning with your toes, the outermost portions of your toes. There's a wonderful light around you. It's moving outward from your body, and it carries with it all of the tensions of the day. . . . The energy you release flows down to the water and out to the ocean. And eventually it evaporates and goes up to the sun and is purified. And so by the very act of breathing and of relaxing, you are an integral part of the universe. Your body adds to the body of our earth and is part of the song. Let your body completely find its right place in the universe. And find yourself in a room in which there is a scent that reminds you of the best thing you ever made. In this room there is a scent of you; it's the best flower, it's the best sky, it's the best childhood memory, and most of all it carries with it the balm of healing. It brings forth beautiful, beautiful visions of who you are, in your best and your highest self.

The complete meditation, which lasted approximately fifteen minutes, took Sally's audience into a magical land populated by helpful animal companions, babbling streams, and mysteriously glowing gemstones. Most guided meditations close by leading participants back to where they began, but the flow of Sally's exercise was interrupted by an incoming call on the bookstore's telephone—an unforeseen distraction that sparked audience laughter and unexpectedly helped to break the ice.

As a speech event, Sally's narrative has a performative intent: it seeks to constitute as well as to describe (Austin 1975). She aims to relax the audience, a goal furthered by the quiet, even tone of her voice and the soothing images of natural settings invoked by her narrative. The performance also

knits participants into a group. For the fifteen minutes of the visualization sequence, the audience cedes its autonomy to Sally and allows her to shape an experience that, however superficially, unites them in a collective process.[8] A skillfully presented meditation induces a gentle euphoria that evokes sighs of satisfaction and even tears of joy from participants. Afterwards, they are likely to comment that the "room was really filled with energy" or that "something incredible happened in there."

Note that unlike recitation of a canonical text such as the Lord's Prayer, Sally's narrative does not ask anyone to endorse a specific message or set of beliefs. The few statements of fact (e.g., "The body is a marvelous thing. It holds itself together by means of whirling energy patterns") are sufficiently banal or metaphorical that few could disagree with them. Instead, members of the audience are asked to experience their *own* bodily process or to explore their *own* personal memories at the appropriate moments within the framework of the narrative. The group process of the exercise, in other words, is counterbalanced by ample provision for individual experience, which might be acknowledged by inviting participants to share their impressions of the exercise with the rest of the group. The resulting narratives are likely to include spontaneous personal confessions ("I'm an incest survivor," "I suddenly had an image of my mother as she was dying") that intensify the prevailing sense of shared intimacy. A proficient session leader will move deftly between these stories and themes central to his or her area of spiritual expertise. Leaders with less developed interpersonal skills sometimes allow the gathering to be dominated by members of the audience who doggedly insist on talking about their own personal concerns. Because New Age values provide few avenues for questioning the experience of others, it is a tricky business to steer discussion back to the session's main agenda, but successful session leaders soon master the art of keeping a workshop on track. Even in the best-run gathering, however, audience opinions about how the process is going are never far from the surface as speakers move nervously between comments about the event and metadiscourse about its meaning and direction. In this sense, their narratives embody what Anthony Giddens (1991: 32) calls the "reflexive project" of modernity—a constant self-monitoring of experience.

In gatherings of short duration—say, two hours or less—participants have little opportunity to challenge the presenter's leadership, although they may intervene obliquely by offering polite statements such as, "I was looking forward to some time for questions," or, "Some of us were

hoping that you'd talk about X." Seminars that last for several days are more likely to see direct intervention by participants who are, for one reason or another, dissatisfied with the way things are going. The frankest expression of reflexivity is found in private, post hoc exchanges about workshops or seminars that participants found disappointing. After attending an expensive class led by a channel famous for his work with a prominent Hollywood actress, Donna Liston, a middle-class social worker from the New York suburbs, expressed her concern that "I didn't enjoy it when Mark just channeled all the time. I thought there was going to be more group participation. I wanted to be able to start learning how to do this myself." Donna acknowledged that the channeler was insightful and entertaining, but she was ultimately frustrated because he neglected to provide a forum in which she could expand her own spiritual understanding through personal experience.

Themes in Donna's critique are echoed in the account of Peter Goldman, a forty-year-old writer once deeply involved with the Church Universal and Triumphant, a Montana-based congregation led by the controversial channel Elizabeth Clare Prophet (see Lewis and Melton 1994). Unlike most New Age groups, Prophet's church is authoritarian and puritanical, which is why Peter labeled himself a "cult survivor." Peter described Prophet as "very powerful, very hypnotic, very charismatic." He reported that prior to her public channeling sessions, her assistants would lead the audience in a form of chanting called "decreeing," which he said produced a trance state that made Prophet's followers passive and emotionally malleable. Although Peter admitted that he found the experiences convincing at the time, he now rejects Prophet's teachings and the techniques that he saw used in her church, which he considers a form of brainwashing:

> I tend to base my evaluation on the bottom line. What does this do for people? Does it turn them into zombies or does it make them powerful? If something is liberating, it enables people to fulfill more of their potential in a context of freedom rather than in a context of servitude, which a lot of these organizations tend to foster. The power that they think they gained through their association with these groups or gurus or channelers is no power at all. It turns out to be an illusion. And I speak from my own experience.

In these excerpts from larger life-story narratives, Donna and Peter express doubt about spiritual leaders who fail to make allowances for the needs and interests of their followers. Both clearly want the emotional involvement that comes from working with a group, yet they also demand that this experience reaffirm their sense of themselves as unique individuals following a distinctive personal path.

BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE: CONTESTATIONS OF TRUTH

Stories of belief, doubt, and experience constitute another key discursive field for those involved in New Age practices. In contrast to popular portrayals of the movement as a haven for naive minds, discussions at New Age events often focus on the value of skepticism, on the grounds that firsthand experience should always trump belief based on simple faith.[9] The contextual nature of belief and skepticism was revealed in a workshop offered by Kevin Ryerson, a well-known trance channeler, to a paying crowd of forty at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, a major conference center located in Rhinebeck, New York. Ryerson opened the event by discussing his own experience of channeling, which includes serving as a medium for a host of historical figures. He believes in the scientific reality of the channeling phenomenon, he said, because the observations of his spirit-beings have been validated through empirical research:

> John [an entity channeled by Ryerson] once identified a site as a place that Hebrew rituals had been performed. Archaeologists denied that ancient Hebrews had built anything in this area. Yet two years later, the archaeological site was discovered. An archaeologist who had expressed doubt about John's information wrote to say that he had now become a believer.

Yet only moments after asserting the empirical truth of channeling's insights, Ryerson insisted that information about the activities of sinister extraterrestrial beings offered by other mediums cannot be taken literally; instead, it should be seen as metaphorical. The mediums who produce such information, he said, are "channeling through their fears."

Throughout the workshop, Ryerson distinguished between analytical thought and forms of understanding based on intuition and the emotions.

He explained that analytical thought is ultimately destructive because it leads to the runaway technologies that endanger the planet and fuel human alienation. "Constructive change can only come about through direct knowing," he emphasized. Audience reaction to these statements suggested that most were sympathetic to his invocation of the primacy of personal experience over other forms of understanding. I was therefore surprised when, during a breakfast conversation the following morning, three of my fellow participants recommended that I test the authenticity of Ryerson's channeled insight by asking his spirit entities for information that could only be known to me personally. Although my interlocutors declared themselves deeply committed to the expansion of intuitive, experiential understanding, they also readily embraced strategies of empirical validation when it suited their purposes.

This edgy tacking back and forth between different approaches to validation reflects underlying attitudes toward belief. In ways that mirror the critiques of positivism mounted by postmodernists, those drawn to New Age practices tend to think of beliefs as completely arbitrary, especially when organized into "belief systems," an expression that has come to connote the received orthodoxies of religion. A critique of belief systems as authoritarian and limiting is consistent with the observation (Heelas 1996: 155–159) that the New Age movement embraces the "de-traditionalization of self," a condition that Heelas associates with radical modernity. The de-traditionalized self thinks of social norms as constructed rather than as immutable and sacred, thus shifting the locus of moral authority to the individual. Personal growth becomes a process of shedding the artificial parochial accretions of social existence—"our cultural baggage," in the idiom of the movement—in favor of inner truths. Once traditions lose intrinsic moral worth, ideas can be freely detached from their cultural nexus. They become little more than floating signifiers, which explains why, to many observers, the ideology of the New Age resembles a vast smorgasbord from which people combine bits of tradition according to personal taste.

On what basis, then, can one distinguish between true and false beliefs? Sandy Randolph, a Santa Fe channeler who claims to bring forth information from a group of American Indian spirits called the Medicine Women, answered the question this way:

> I've learned, very much the hard way and through personal experience, that channeled information isn't all valid. I need to run it

> through *me* and see what fits for *me*. Every time I channel for someone else now, the Medicine Women open with this little disclaimer. What they say is, "Take what's said to you, hold it in your heart. If it fits, it's yours. It's our gift to you. And if it doesn't fit, please let it go." And sometimes they'll add, "You could put it off to the muttering of some funny old ladies."

Sandy's statement is marked by striking contradictions. We can interpret the identity of her channeled source, a group of female American Indian healers, as an implicit appeal to the authenticity and wisdom that her clients find in indigenous peoples. Even as the identity of her spirit allies inspires trust, however, the entities' words encourage skepticism. We might dismiss their cautionary advice as a rhetorical strategy that disarms doubt. The question of whether the statement can be taken at face value is less important than the utilitarian calculus that it invokes: Are these ideas *useful?* Will they help me become what I want or acquire what I need?

Willingness to mix and match beliefs according to their perceived utility leads to situations such as that of women's identity groups conducting sweat-lodge ceremonies—even though the American Indian rituals that inspire such practices typically excluded women. When I pointed out this contradiction to interviewees, the reply was often something on the order of, "The belief that women are dangerous or polluting made sense for Indians, but it simply isn't useful anymore." An equally pragmatic approach to belief was offered by Peter Goldman, who embraces cognitive utilitarianism because of his earlier disappointment with the Church Universal and Triumphant. Here he explains his attraction to the work of Jach Pursel, who channels an entity named Lazaris:

> I'm willing to believe that there's an energy called Lazaris that speaks through this guy Jach Pursel. I am willing to believe that based on what I've seen. I can neither prove nor disprove the solid, objective reality of what's going on there. If this fellow is just making it up, then he's one of the finest psychologists or teachers I've ever seen. When Lazaris leads a meditation, you can feel that power. You can feel the energy. You can even feel the love. Now maybe you can call that a subjective situation, and maybe I'm just making the whole thing up. Really, I'm willing to believe after checking it out carefully, reading the material, going to a few of the events, including a four-day intensive where he's talking a lot. What I hear Lazaris saying, and what I feel Lazaris saying, is of great benefit to me personally.
>
> We can choose to believe anything we want. So why not choose to believe this is real if it's not hurting anybody, especially you, and if you could possibly benefit from it?

Similar logic informs the life-history narrative of Pamela Davis, a middle-aged woman who moved to New Mexico to pursue her interest in a range of spiritual practices, a journey that eventually led her to become a spiritual counselor to fee-paying clients. Pamela characterized herself as "very, very skeptical and very unsure of what this was all about when it first came to me—the [paranormal] phenomena stuff, the spaceships, and so on. I just stumbled in and I trusted my gut. I learned as I went, and I questioned." Learning and questioning, in other words, are consistent with choosing to believe only those ideas that can be confirmed through personal experience.

As a corollary to cognitive utilitarianism, New Agers hold that the imposition of one's beliefs on others should be avoided whenever possible. Jon Lockwood, an interior designer and channeler from northern New Mexico, warns his clients to avoid spiritual teachers who distract followers from the goal of listening to their own hearts. "This process is about connecting with all that is *inside*, not outside," he said. "We are in the process of re-identifying who we are and no longer using the external to identify ourselves." Pamela Davis developed this theme while describing her philosophy of dealing with clients. "I'm not going to put out any kind of dogma or any kind of structure that says, O.K., this is a little box, if you don't do it this way you're going to the fiery pit," she insisted. "No, I'm just going to offer the knowledge that I have, the philosophy. It can be accepted or rejected."

Critics of authoritarian gurus are often more forgiving in their assessment of the gurus' followers. While recounting her life story, Ellen Devens, a Massachusetts woman whom I interviewed in 1993, mentioned that she regretted having "given away" her free will to Scientology during her involvement with the church. Still, she suggested that participants in authoritarian groups may need the experience of yielding up personal sovereignty so that they can come to appreciate its value. Referring to the Branch Davidians and their charismatic prophet, David Koresh, Ellen insisted, "Even in Waco individuals were exploring the loss of free will. If

individuals get involved with cults, I feel that most of them are sincerely doing what they feel they need to do. So who am I to judge?"

When considering stories such as those of Peter Goldman, Pamela Davis, and Ellen Devens, even a sympathetic listener may suddenly feel thrust into epistemological free-fall. Like many others whose stories I recorded, they articulate a species of relativism so absolute that each of us comes to occupy a nearly autonomous universe. Social scientists would be hard pressed to find a clearer expression of the multiplication of life-worlds that we now see as a hallmark of modernity. As Giddens (1991: 195–196) notes, most of us navigate this pluralized world on autopilot, insulated from the anxieties of radical doubt by the habituating structures of work and family. People drawn to New Age practices, in contrast, enthusiastically seek modernity's multiple possibilities, confident that above the infinite diversity of the self there lies transcendent unity.

At the same time, we should keep in mind that radical relativism and the autonomy of experience are ideals. They define this discursive field much as the axes of a graph set the limits of key variables. Speakers invoke the ideals as touchstones for their personal philosophy, but in the flow of everyday social interaction they also find ways to accommodate the beliefs of others in the pursuit of common goals. In a narrative context, this is accomplished through the use of abstract language that leaves considerable room for personal interpretation. Consider, for example, the following exchange during Kevin Ryerson's workshop at the Omega Institute. The main speaker is one of Ryerson's spirit entities, a 3,000-year-old Nubian priest named Atun-Re; audience responses are noted in brackets:

> Ah, I am being Atun-Re and I've come to speak with you. So how are you doing? ["Fine."] That is good. Well, you're feeling fine now, but after I'm done with you, we'll see. [General laughter.] Do you understand? ["Yes!"] . . . Now you are looking at this issue of intuition and futurism, is that not so? ["Yes."] Well, you know it has been said that in order to have a healthy future one must make peace with oneself. Do you understand? ["Yes."] It is, if you will, inside of you the balanced individual that is able to then move forward along the middle that is the successful path. Do you understand? ["Yes."] Isn't that fascinating? ["Yes."] Now you must come to know more fundamentally your true nature. Do you follow? ["Yes."] And your true nature is that you really are more beings of spirit than you are transitorily through the body. The body is like the so-called cocoon—Do you understand?—that goes through the stages of transformation that allows you to command the full range of your spirit in the various transitory opportunities that allow you to present yourself. The full range of masks that you wear from youth to old age constitutes the fulfillment of a journey. . . . Do you understand? ["Yes."]

Given the aphoristic and metaphorical nature of Atun-Re's pronouncements, it was easy for listeners to bestow their assent even if, as I learned in subsequent interviews, a few doubted the authenticity of the channeled voice. Speech at most channeling events is likewise organized around evocative but vague words—"energy," "manifestation," "ascension," "oneness," and so on—that let listeners fill in the blanks according to their personal predilections. For their part, audience members are willing to adopt a laissez-faire attitude toward the assertions of spiritual teachers and fellow workshop participants as long as the general atmosphere remains nonjudgmental. This live-and-let-live approach to belief changes only when groups coalesce into more durable congregations based on a formal theology and a shared approach to spiritual practice.

FROM SINGULAR TO PLURAL AND BACK AGAIN

Although the New Age offers other discursive fields worthy of analysis, the two considered here stand as prominent landmarks on the movement's social map. The Self/Other field, which fosters wariness about subordinating individual process to collective needs, and the Belief/Experience field, which privileges experience over faith, together conspire against collective action.[10] When groups do coalesce for some joint purpose, their leadership tends to be indirect and their membership variable. Equally fluid is the content of New Age therapies and spiritual teachings. Although the movement's central goal of expanding individual consciousness has remained constant over the past three decades, specific techniques of self-expansion shift with the winds of fashion. Variability of content allows for the constant incorporation of new members while offering long-time participants opportunities to tailor their activities to fit constantly evolving personal needs.

The internal tensions characteristic of the Self/Other and Belief/Experience fields help to explain the relative rarity with which the movement has produced intentional communities similar to those that proliferated during earlier chapters of American religious experimentation. Although spiritually oriented communities such as the Findhorn in Scotland, Sirius in Massachusetts, and Sparrow Hawk in Oklahoma enjoy a hallowed place in movement ideology, they attract only a small percentage of those drawn to New Age activities. Ellen Cahill, a channeler from western Massachusetts, recalled her experience as a resident of one of these communities:

> [The members of the community] seemed like neat people, but after living there I decided I'd rather stick to my own path. There's always some kind of *stuff* to deal with in spiritual communities. It's hard to develop your own identity. There's usually some kind of leader, and you end up with a system that everyone's supposed to follow. . . . I came to realize that everyone has a different way of experiencing spirituality and that it's a very personal connection. Everyone goes at their own rate and opens up to different elements of it at their own time. After eight years of that, I finally gave up the path because I wanted to connect to my own source of spirit.

The salient issue in Ellen's statement is the alleged inability of stable groups to promote the personal growth that she actively seeks. Without inner change, group activities become another forum for the power games of a few dominant personalities.

It might seem from these narratives that New Age spirituality is so inherently atomistic that it scarcely qualifies as a social movement. Yet at the brink of anarchy its proponents step back from the individual and return to the social. This tendency to swerve rapidly from the individual to the collective is evident in the comments of Ted Berenson, a Santa Fe psychotherapist and channeler who offers well-attended workshops across the country:

> Whenever you get a church, you get hierarchy. We saw this happen with the Berkeley Psychic Institute [in the 1970s]. They turned it into the Church of Divine Man, and all of a sudden there were bishops and the Very Right Reverend this and that, and it was a hierarchy. It started to get political and you could see the writing on the wall. When people get into a church kind of organization, they just can't help themselves. They get into the hierarchy business. To us that's not a sense of community. One of the reasons we increased our evening workshops here is because people really want a sense of community, when they can socialize and have a sense of camaraderie.

Ted Berenson's ambivalence about community brings the paired themes of group feeling and individual growth back to where we began: the need to have one's personal efforts ratified, even if only occasionally, by contact with other like-minded seekers. This attraction to the social is driven, in part, by practical considerations. Groups furnish interpersonal support and opportunities to learn new things, hear new stories. The catharsis offered by collective exploration of spirituality also affirms participants' faith that inner work produces better ways of being together. They can experience on a small scale what they expect will eventually take place at a global level. Their search for good fellowship, however, is tempered by assertions of autonomy and the primacy of personal experience, which participants surrender only with great reluctance.

To understand why people find such a fragmentary movement satisfying, the New Age must be seen against the larger backdrop of American religion. Wade Clark Roof (1993) and others have observed that the United States has become a nation of "religious shoppers" who are more inclined than their parents to change religious identification and to affiliate with groups that meet their personal needs. This instability has largely benefited nondenominational Christian congregations, mostly evangelical and conservative, but it also helps to fill halls at personal growth centers across the country. The life histories of the people who participate in the New Age movement often include a period of membership in an established congregation. The hierarchy and theological rigidity of a church eventually prove limiting for individuals who feel the need to explore more widely and to achieve a sense of spiritual mastery. This is especially true for women. Unlike mainstream Christianity and Judaism, which continue to be dominated by men, the New Age movement is open to female leadership and woman-centered theologies. What both men and women get from the movement, then, is the opportunity to craft a sense of their own spiritual strengths and understandings. Having achieved this understanding, many are willing to drift back to established denominations as their life circumstances change and they feel the need for more stable forms of religious community.

Let me close with a narrative performance that illustrates in microcosm the movement's remarkable ability to fashion contradictory ideas into an overarching vision that still privileges individual experience. The setting was an annual convention sponsored by a magazine devoted to the creative synthesis of Buddhist philosophy, alternative healing methods, and techniques of personal growth. Three thousand conventioneers, mostly affluent and well-educated, gathered in a hotel ballroom in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., for a lecture by one of the movement's stars, a woman known for her best-selling books on spirituality and health. Although the biography on the flyleaf of her books inevitably attaches "Ph.D." to her name and notes her long association with a distinguished medical school, on this occasion her talk used science as a foil for ruminations on the body's ability to access its own wisdom and to heal itself without the patriarchal intervention of Western medicine. Moving comfortably about the stage and emphasizing her points with visual images drawn from molecular biology, Hindu epics, and Greek mythology, she wove the lecture around a series of stories: her upbringing as a "recovering Jewish-American Princess" (which served as a launching-pad for jokes about the therapeutic possibilities of shopping), experiences with various alternative healers, and a recent brush with breast cancer—the latter cured by a combination of Jungian techniques and the timely intervention of a famous female surgeon. At the end of the talk, the audience leapt to its feet in thunderous applause.

The lecture's blend of science and myth, feminism and millenarianism, accommodation and resistance, high-tech and no-tech, personal anecdotes and sweeping generalizations, and above all, its message that each of us must craft a personal vision according to the dictates of experience, obviously struck a responsive chord in listeners, who are busily creating their own narratives. Having taken to heart R. D. Laing's claim that "the condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man" (12), they are doing everything in their power to find the stories that will restore them to consciousness and cure the self-estrangement that today passes for normality. In so doing, they believe, they will improve the world as well as themselves. Laing, who was felled by a heart attack in 1989 during a game of tennis in St. Tropez, did not live long enough to see the full flowering of his ideas. As a classically trained intellectual, he might have deplored the commercial and, in some cases, superficial turn that the quest for self has taken since the appearance of *The Politics of Experience*. Then again, as

one of the movement's philosopher kings, perhaps he would have enjoyed presiding over all this extravagant storytelling.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am grateful for helpful comments by Joseph Davis and David Bromley, neither of whom is responsible for any of the chapter's deficiencies. My fieldwork was made possible through the generous support of the School of American Research, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and Williams College.

NOTES

1. Laing's life and work are documented in Burston 1996.

2. Experts who downplay the scale of the New Age movement include Finke and Stark 1992 and Kosmin and Lachman 1993.

3. Accounts critical of the movement, such as Kaminer 1999, Rossman 1979, and Schur 1976, portray it as irrational, self-indulgent, and fundamentally antipolitical. Such critiques tend to ignore offshoots of the New Age, such as goddess-focused ecofeminism, that welcome the expression of political and social grievances (Luhrmann 1993). Admittedly, however, these exceptions represent only a small percentage of those who participate in a movement that generally resists involvement in conventional politics.

4. "Market activities, and possibly voting," Robert Wuthnow (1987: 81) observes, "actually constitute the major forms of public participation. . . . The market, therefore, provides an important means of discharging moral responsibilities to the society in which we live."

5. Hank Johnston (1995) offers an ambitious formal approach for the analysis of social movement narrative, whose influence on this chapter I am happy to acknowledge. Although sympathetic to Johnston's search for rigor, I am skeptical that the flow of social life studied by ethnographers sorts itself into the bounded discursive units that Johnston apparently seeks. Johnston's declaration that "the fundamental task in the microanalysis of discourse and text is the specification of all sources of meaning" (220) is at once a truism and a search for the impossible. In this chapter I follow a looser approach to frame analysis based

on the assumption that readers are interested in the general question of how my subjects create, contest, and modify their social world through talk. The discreteness of the texts presented here is entirely artificial, and at present I see no practical alternative to that inherent artificiality.

6. Details of my research are presented in Brown 1997 and 1999. Other works on the New Age with a strong empirical foundation include Albanese 1990, Heelas 1996, Hess 1993, Lewis and Melton 1992, and York 1995.

7. For privacy reasons, I use pseudonyms for channels and, in some cases, for their spirits, whose identity is often closely tied to their human vehicles. The only exceptions are channels who qualify as public figures, including Kevin Ryerson, J. Z. Knight, and Elizabeth Clare Prophet. The narratives presented in this chapter have been edited for conciseness and continuity.

8. These observations are directly inspired by the late Roy A. Rappaport's work on the performative aspects of liturgical orders. "Liturgical orders are public," Rappaport (1979: 194) writes, "and participation in them constitutes a public acceptance of a public order, regardless of the private state of belief. Acceptance is, thus, a fundamental social act, and it forms a basis for public orders."

9. David J. Hess has analyzed how Shirley MacLaine uses skepticism for rhetorical effect in her best-selling book *Out on a Limb*. According to Hess (1993: 52), MacLaine projects a "New Age self" that "synthesizes a skeptical, scientific voice of an earlier phase of her life with a believing, spiritual voice of past lives and ancient knowledge."

10. In his presidential address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion, David G. Bromley (1997) proposes an analytical scheme that maps American social forms according to their position on two major ideological axes: covenantal/contractual and priestly/prophetic. Bromley's model is entirely compatible with the discursive fields (self/other and belief/experience) outlined in this chapter but takes them far beyond the narrow scope of my analysis. He places the New Age at the contractual and prophetic end of his analytical axes, a zone that in recent decades has expanded its influence in American social and political life (108, 127–129).

SIX

Fundamentalism

When History Goes Awry

JOSHUA J. YATES AND JAMES DAVISON HUNTER

Religious fundamentalism is a complex and diverse phenomenon. Fundamentalist movements are a highly contingent, historically specific set of local, regional, and national movements operating toward any number of discrete ends: some expressly political, some cultural, some theological, and most, various combinations of all three. As a global concept, "fundamentalism" has limitations, and attempts to ascribe a substantive degree of analytical unity to the term across the complexities of world-religious expression require caution. For every generalization, one could no doubt find an exception. Acknowledging this fact, however, does not imply that the term is conceptually fallow. Structuring the aspirations of fundamentalist movements grounded within specific cultures and religious traditions is a "symmetry of intention," which is nothing less than the reestablishment of social (and often political) order on a religious basis. This symmetry, we argue, is rooted in the shared narrative of modernity.

In this chapter, we seek to demonstrate the utility and importance of a narrative approach for making conceptual sense of religious fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. The first part considers conventional approaches to fundamentalist movements and argues that a narrative account greatly augments and strengthens standard treatments of the subject by introducing the discursive form that gives fundamentalism its evocative power. The second section takes a first step in applying a narrative approach to the study of fundamentalism by examining and comparing the

STORIES OF CHANGE

Narrative and Social Movements

EDITED BY
Joseph E. Davis

STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK PRESS

2002