

America's Spiritual Scene in the 1990s

A Firsthand Report

BY RICHARD LEVITON©1993

When, just before his inauguration in January 1993, U.S. President Bill Clinton attended a weeklong retreat in South Carolina the American media, noting the seminar's emphasis on bonding, intellectual sharing, and, Clinton's favorite, hugging, dubbed it a "new age gathering." When, a month later, renowned independent television journalist Bill Moyers presented his five-hour report on national TV—"Healing and the Mind," a sympathetic investigation of the claims and successes of holistic medicine—the mainstream media praised its insightful connection of the mind, body, and health as "possibly modern medicine's biggest breakthrough ever." With these two prominent public events, the American "new age," always oppositional, had finally arrived in mainstream culture—and ended.

Paradoxically, acceptance for an oppositional ideology must spell its end. So in 1993 with the ascendancy of Bill Clinton, 46, and Al Gore, 45, to national leadership, something representing at least a dilute expression of new age values had been acknowledged by the American voters. Since the 1960s "new age" in America has encapsulated the precocious, transformative coalition of the growing tip of an entire generation called the Baby Boomers (post-World War II babies). Its idealistic, eclectic, youthful, rebellious energy was in opposition to *everything* represented by the Establishment: its Judeo-Christian sexual mores, its aggressive militarism, rampant materialism, conspicuous consumerism, environmental rapacity, political and intellectual conservatism, its meat-centered diet, its ineffective, costly medical system. Now, in the popular perception, with the Clinton administration the Baby Boomer new age had, if only symbolically, attained the White House.

To understand America's spiritual scene (or "new age") in the 1990s we need to review developments over the last forty years. Traditional religious and cultural forms, for many Americans, long ago proved empty and unreliable. Thoughtful Americans have been frantically shopping for replacements since the early 1950s, always on the alert for serviceable imports. First it was Gary Snyder's Beatnik Buddhism, Allan Ginsberg's bebop Zen, and Jack Kerouac's Dharma Bums in the 1950s. In the 1960s we witnessed pandemic political agitation, against the Vietnam War, against racist segregation, in favor of liberation in sexuality, lifestyle, recreational drug use; our metaphysical horizons expanded in complement with the erotic extravagance of 1960s' psychedelia. The 1970s birthed the natural foods industry, the search for alternative energy, the inundation of Hindu yogis, Buddhist roshis, Sufi holy men, and celebrity Asian gurus with prescriptions for meditation and yoga, new psychological techniques for inner growth, back-to-the-land living, Earth Day, the pseudo-piety of Japanese macrobiotics and the self-righteousness of vegetarianism. In the 1980s "new age" meant crystals, shamanism, UFOs, spiritual pilgrimages and eco-tourism, channeling, disembodied Masters, karmic scenarios, past lives, paranormal adventures, Near-Death Experiences, Harmonic Convergence, and dolphin communications. The counter-culture pedestallized invisible astral savants, like Ramtha and Lazaris, making their orating secretaries millionaires.

And the 1990s? This new enigmatic decade is still for many a troubling question mark. To a degree the exuberances and lush growths of the spiritual scene have subsided; in America it pauses in a lull between acts, perhaps subdued in part by the economic pressures of recession and apparent social disintegration, even the destructive uncertainties of Nature. The 1990s is the *E*

decade—for Earth, ecology, ecumenism, environment, elders; the native elders and shamans of the North American continent have been rising up from cultural oblivion to command a sunset prominence. Earlier exotic metaphysics blossomed and withered yet we're still living in peril—why should it be any different with the wisdom of the native peoples? As a culture, our eleventh hour shopping seeks a practical metaphysics for survival in a world undergoing profound transmutation.

Still on hand as reliable guides for this protracted cultural shift are some of the spiritual scenes founders, such as Marilyn Ferguson, whose incisive *The Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980) put the movement and its future in perspective, framing the goals of the new age for the 1980s. Hindu emissary and iconoclastic spiritual teacher Ram Dass (*Be Here Now*, 1971) continues to lecture regularly nationwide on compassion and service. Physicist Fritjof Capra, internationally known for his landmark fusion of Asian mysticism and quantum physics (*The Tao of Physics*, 1976) and who now directs the Elmwood Institute, shepherded the movie version of his study of paradigm shifts, *The Turning Point*, into American art theaters as *Mindwalk*, starring Liv Ullman. The widely praised prodigy of consciousness studies, Ken Wilber, recently recounted (*Grace and Grit*) his gruelling experience with the death by cancer of his wife and their forays through the therapies of holistic and allopathic medicine in search of a miracle cure.

Michael Harner, a Ph.D. anthropologist, author of *The Way of the Shaman* (1980), continues to stimulate profound interest with the mystical ways of native peoples with his popular experiential seminars in shamanic techniques. Psychiatrist Stanislav Grof, M.D., who linked psychedelics, NDEs, symbolic dying meditations, shamanic breakthroughs, "holotropic breathing," and psychological developments, beginning with *The Human Encounter With Death* (1978). Grof encourages clients to credit that consciousness could be independent of the body and that death could be a voyage into the "cosmic unknown." More recently in *The Holotropic Mind* (1992), he explains how to consciously access and experience the mind's three core levels, which he describes as biographical, perinatal, and transpersonal, for psychospiritual healing. And Roman Catholic rebel Matthew Fox, proponent of heretically positive ideas such as original blessing, the cosmic Christ, multiethnic spirituality, and theological feminism, was, not surprisingly, finally excommunicated from the Church. That doesn't stop the independent Dominican Father from inspiring audiences across the country with his iconoclastic spirituality.

Here are highlights from America's spiritual scene in 1993. Native American culture and its shamanic artifacts have pre-eminent status today. Neo-Mayanism is the newest icon, representing the investigation, if not adulation, of everything from indigenous peoples as native elders, their grandchildren, and their many interpreters get out the word. Jamie Sams, a Seneca-Cherokee medicine teacher, has catalyzed considerable interest in the ways of the Clan Mothers's sisterhood teaching lodges and the wisdom of animal totems in her popular books (*The 13 Original Clan Mothers, Sacred Path Workbook*) and oracle decks, *Sacred Path Cards* and *Medicine Cards* (which have sold 260,000 copies). Eagle Man Ed McGaa, an Oglala Sioux ceremonial leader, applies Native American teachings, rituals, and journeying on the Red Road to contemporary American living in his books *Mother Earth Spirituality* and *Rainbow Tribe*. Jim Berenholtz, a "visionary spirit dreamer and shamanic musician," recounts his travels and initiations on the path of the pre-Columbian Feathered Serpent in his new *Journey to the Four Directions*. Journalist Steven McFadden faithfully reports the prophecies of native elders and the legends of Rainbow Warriors in his collection of interviews and field notes, *Profiles in Wisdom and Ancient Voices, Current Affairs*.

Ariel Spilisbury and Michael Bryner distill the predictive wisdom and "galactic perspective" of the ancient Mayan Tzolkin calendar for ardent Westerners in their popular *Mayan Oracle* set of divination cards. Mayan Daykeeper Hunbatz Men reveals esoteric sacred teachings formerly held in secret by the Mayan priesthood in his *Secrets of Mayan Science/Religion*. Meanwhile Jose Argüelles, the doyenne of Mayan Mysteries, serves up the entire Mayan revelatory oeuvre in his unique board game, *Dreamspell—The Journey of Timeship Earth 2013*,

as a “fourth dimensional set of galactic tools” to facilitate our shift to an “Earth-centered galactic spirituality.”

The search among indigenous cultures for viable shamanic rituals and metaphysical systems inevitably leads, as intrepid explorer Carlos Castaneda discovered in the 1960s, to experimentation with vision-producing botanical drugs. One of America’s foremost exponents of the ritualized, consciousness-expanding use of hallucinogenic ethnomedicines is Terence McKenna who argues for the “ethnopharmacology of spiritual transformation” in a series of books including *True Hallucinations*, *Food of the Gods*, and *The Archaic Revival*. Renowned quantum physicist Fred Allan Wolf reports on his shamanic initiations and mind-bending perceptions with ayahuasca among Peruvian medicine men in *The Eagle’s Quest*. As a sibling to this revival of interest in botanical hallucinogens is the search for technologically-enhanced consciousness. The virtual, artificial, and interactive reality of computer-generated cyberspace, reports Howard Rheingold in his survey *Virtual Reality*, offers an experiential window into illusory invisible mind worlds through “electronic LSD.” Psychotechnology claims to shortcut the efforts of meditation, induce euphoria, relieve stress, bring peak experiences and maybe enlightenment through electronic mind machines based on scientific knowledge of brain waves and chemistry, argues psychotronics maven, Michael Hutchison, author of the comprehensive review, *Megabrain*.

Out on the occult side of consciousness expansion we find a continued interest in alleged extraterrestrial communication, planetary infiltration, abduction, indoctrination, and divinely-mandated Earth missions. Psychics Lyssa Royal and Keith Priest speculate on human galactic heritage in *The Prism of Lyra* and counsel distraught UFO abductees in *Visitors From Within* in using the abduction phenomenon “as a tool for personal and planetary evolution.” Barbara Marciniak introduces the channeled teachings of the “enlightened” Pleiadians to the earthly “Family of Light” as an aid in our struggles to reach a new stage of evolution in her best-selling compilation *Bringers of the Dawn*. Psychohistorian and “cosmic archeologist” Barbara Hand Clow completes *The Mind Chronicles* trilogy with her *Signet of Atlantis* in which she weaves out of the collective unconscious a mythopoeic tapestry of past lives and intergalactic intrigue. Solara Antara Amaa-Ra (author of *The Legend of Altazar*, and *El*An*Ra —The Healing of Orion*) continues her Star-Borne Unlimited preparations for the epiphanous ascent of the worldwide starry family through the 11:11 doorway sometime in the next 20 years, keeping her followers informed through *The Starry Messenger* newsletter. Spiritual raconteur and world peregrinator Timothy Wyllie keeps talking, telepathically, with angels, ETs, dolphins, and other “spiritual intelligences, as recounted in his newest book, *Dolphins, Telepathy & Underwater Birthing*.

Angels, angelmania and angelology, incidentally, are rapidly becoming the 1990’s version of channeled entities, thanks to a series of mainstream best-sellers about angelic encounters such as Sophy Burnham’s *A Book of Angels* (360,000 copies sold) and *Angel Letters*, plus Timothy Wyllie’s *Ask Your Angels*, Malcolm Godwin’s *Angels, An Endangered Species*, and Joan Anderson’s *Where Angels Walk: True Stories of Heavenly Visitors*.

The field of feminist spirituality and Goddess theophanies continues to be fertile and provocative in the American spiritual scene. One of the movement’s most prolific scholars and polemical advocate, Barbara Walker (author of 9 titles, including *The Skeptical Feminist* and *The Crone*) puts it all together in an engaging novel, *Amazon*, about a woman warrior and time-traveller from the matriarchal past who establishes a Goddess temple in 20th century New Jersey. Ecofeminist and Wiccan peace activist Starhawk (*The Spiral Dance*, *Dreaming the Dark*) also fictionalizes feminist issues this year in *The Fifth Sacred Thing* about a matriarchal clan that negotiates peace among warring male-dominated technological groups in 21st century California. Then there is the hugely popular *Women Who Run With the Wolves*, Clarissa Pinkola Estes’ Jungian-based study of myths and stories of the wild woman archetype, about bad, disobedient, courageous women like Thelma and Louise—and Lilith. Iconoclast, radical feminist philosopher, and protean wordsmith Mary Daly (*Gyn/Ecology*, *Pure Lust*, *Wickedary*) offers her

uncompromising autobiography and logbook of “momentous moments” from her “A-mazing, Be-dazzling Voyage” in *Outercourse*. Visionary artist, ontological feminist, and shamanic inner traveller Rowena Pattee Kryder guides us through myth, personal initiation, symbolism, and planetary transformation in her *Gaia Matrix Oracle*, an interactive divination system with informative text. Noted anthropologist, shamanic educator, and Zen student Joan Halifax artfully integrates these concerns with a wayfarer’s ecofeminism in her sensitive autobiography about reconnecting with the body of Earth, *The Fruitful Darkness*.

Closer to Earth and everyday life Deborah Tannen explains the linguistic and conversational basis of gender relation difficulties in *You Just Don’t Understand*, which has been on the *New York Times*’ bestseller list for 97 weeks. Political feminists and cultural historians Gloria Steinem (*Revolution from Within*), Susan Faludi (*Backlash*), and Naomi Wolf (*The Beauty Myth*) assert that mainstream American culture is regressively patriarchal, still in need of profound overhaul by the women, while “anti-feminist feminist” renegade upstart and intellectual provocateur Camille Paglia (*Sexual Personae*, and *Sex, Art, and American Culture*) says mainstream feminism is reactionary, stagnant, antisexual, pompous, —politically correct perhaps but boringly ineffective.

Meanwhile the post-macho feminist-sensitized men are off in the woods banging shamanic drums in search of the deep masculine. Ever since poet Robert Bly galvanized the nascent mens’ movement with potent images from myth and Jungian psychology in his profoundly influential *Iron John* in 1990, spokesmen for the New Man have sprung up everywhere out of the collective masculine psyche with variations on this potent theme. John Lee (author of *The Flying Boy* and *At My Father’s Wedding*), founder/director of the Austin (Texas) Men’s Center, one of America’s foremost new masculinist enclaves, focusses on the recovery aspect, healing wounds of addiction, father-son relations, and the woes of misdirected masculinity. Sam Keen outlines the psychological protocols of a new masculinity in his *Fire in the Belly*, while Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette counsel men in accessing the kingly, generative archetype of the male psyche in *The King Within* and new magazines like *Man! Changing Men*, and *Wingspan* explore mens’ issues, relationships, recovery, politics, and the prospects for masculine renewal.

When the genders of America are not embroiled in the rhetoric of confrontation or same-sex psychological reconstruction, they’re mutually busy with freeing themselves from the sticky webs of co-dependency, addictive behaviors, childhood abuse, dysfunctional families, lack of esteem, and varying degrees of pain, affliction, and disease. Self-healing through a multiplicity of holistic techniques—medical, psychological, symbolic, meditative—is a primary preoccupation of many Americans. Chris Griscom, director of the Light Institute in New Mexico and author of *Ecstasy is a New Frequency*, offers Nizhoni “multi-incarnational” Intensives to cleanse the emotional body, achieve feminine fusion and the ageless body. Individual styles of psychotherapy (based on the empirical researches of single Ph.Ds, and often trademarked) proliferate but as noted neo-Jungian James Hillman and journalist Michael Ventura quip in a new book, “We’ve had a hundred years of psychotherapy and the world’s getting worse.” Organizational consultant Anne Wilson Schaef, an expert on freeing oneself from the “addictive process” and whose works have sold a million copies, argues in her latest, *Beyond Therapy, Beyond Science*, that the dominant psychotherapeutic worldviews themselves perpetuate addiction and should be replaced by her own novel approach called Living Process work.

Meanwhile, Baby Boomers are seeking the inner child, searching for forgotten visions of childhood innocence, for what elementary school educator Samuel Silverstein calls “child spirit—the child’s experience of God in school.” One of America’s most televised spokesmen for reclaiming and championing the inner child is pastoral counsellor John Bradshaw, author of *Homecoming*. Isha and Mark Lerner have capitalized on this strong interest by combining fairy tales, myths, and nature in their *Inner Child Cards*, a 78-card divination system based on traditional Tarot to “reawaken the child within by gently helping us to interact with the most

potent archetypes of the inner world.” For that matter, do-it-yourself divinatory, oracular card systems, Tarot-clones and adaptations (about 40 different sets are available in 1993) are wildly popular in America’s spiritual scene, offering guidance from Celtic, Egyptian, Russian, and Tibetan sources. Equally popular are psychological interpretations and self-help guidance based on the symbolic archetypal mythography of C.G. Jung and Joseph Campbell.

In the last 20 years in which the multifloriate “new age” or counter-cultural spiritual scene has been consolidating its eclectic life, the mainstream world has generally regarded it with benignly pejorative terms. New Agers, said the major newspapers, magazines, and TV networks, are self-absorbed, narcissistic, pretentious, occasionally self-righteous faddists—dangerous, not at all, says the media, except for the “hucksters” who know how to make lots of money from the widespread interest. But that’s the nature of America; in this ultra-capitalist society if you’re clever you can market *anything*, and people do, even if it’s the Higher Self. If anything, the professionals in America’s spiritual scene are cashing in on safe, well-established, lucrative trends, looking for best-sellers, whether they be ideas, techniques, durable goods, or themselves as teachers.

But we needn’t blame the marketers for their finesse. America is a society of acquisitive shoppers and browsers; this is true across the generations, lifestyle, and demographic booms. Americans are dabblers, experimenters, dilettantes, collectors, and irrepressibly, materialistically practical. It doesn’t matter if it’s computer technology or inner child affirmations. Americans want to know if it works, how to do it, then proceed to do it without hesitation expecting immediate results. This is a key fact, often overlooked, about the American spiritual scene: it arises from the context of American society and is not fundamentally different from the main features of the cultural landscape.

At its best the spiritual scene represents this culture’s promising, phototropic growing tip but it grows on behalf of the entire plant. American mass culture in fact owes a great deal to the positive reforms and idealistic innovations the “new age” Baby Boomers have introduced, such as recycling, environmentalism, chemical-free foods, new medical options in healing, respect for intuition, a greater psychological sophistication. After all concurrent with his election U.S. Vice President Al Gore’s book *Earth in the Balance*, which passionately links personal spiritual awareness with global problems, was a national best-seller. As that pre-eminent European analyst of American mores, Alexis de Tocqueville noted in *Democracy in America* (1832), men and women are “seen on a greater equality in point of fortune and intellect, or, in other words, more equal in their strength, than in any other country in the world.” But he added: “A middling standard is fixed in America for human knowledge.”

In de Tocqueville’s prescient analysis we see the main strokes of the American spiritual scene—democratic equality in fortune and intellect with perhaps middling standards for knowledge. The American spiritual scene, like much of American culture, is historically parochial and anti-intellectual, exhibiting more finesse with active techniques than abstract consideration of ideas. Baby Boomers, like their cultural forebears, are impatient, results-fixated, and achievement-oriented, demanding immediate tangible results for their time and money investment, whether it’s with a new psychotronics mind machine or technique to access the inner lover. Yet as cultural historian Martin Green kindly notes in *Prophets of the New Age*, there is a quality of expectancy, insuppressible optimism, and beautiful naivete at play here amidst the “endless proliferation of spiritual tools and weapons, ideas, icons, myths, rituals” that chart the possibilities of a transformed cultural frontier.

Green calls this energy of unqualified, visionary optimism, the classic new age attitude of unbounded enthusiasm and hope, the “naïve temperament.” The naïve mind affirms absolutes and realizes ideals; naïfs abound in enthusiasm and courage, try things others wouldn’t dare because their sense of limits are very different. Reality and its possibilities are wide-open and apparent obstacles more insubstantial and surmountable than most people think—such as the “immense immobilities” of empires, whether it’s the Reagan-Bush administration or the Berlin Wall. Of

itself, the American spiritual scene describes its activities, according to slogans found in the prominent alternative magazines, summer camps, and weekend seminar institutes, in terms like these: a guide to well-being, health and conscious living, holistic education of mind, body, and spirit, rethinking the way we live.

The trouble is, Americans have been rethinking lifestyles, getting healthy, contemplating new routes out of our restrictive ordinary realism for so long that things within the movement have stagnated, stalled out, lost their socially corrective edge. The American spiritual scene is at midlife, comfortable, relatively affluent, a good growth industry with some major blindspots. In the 1970s the “new age” was the elaboration through new avenues of the basic dialectic posed by the psychedelic politics of the 1960s that divided people into “straight” and “freak;” the battle lines were redrawn according to “new ager” or “Establishment.” Even so, the labels carried an oppositional connotation as their advocates espoused a new framework of reality, belief, lifestyle, medicine, food, housing, relationships, a wholesale repudiation of mainstream materialistic, atheistic, or falsely, vacuously pious American culture. The “new age” label identified those sufficiently bold to undertake major personal changes along eclectic spiritual lines in the hopes this would help transform society. But as the 1990s dawned, this healthy dialectic was exhausted and people now resort to repeating popular themes of the previous three decades, from hallucinogenic drugs to macrobiotics to the newest Asian guru. It’s a new species of platitudes. The new growth phase of the spiritual scene is barely visible and in a strange sense movement leaders and opinion-makers are reluctant to embrace it for fear of losing their market sinecures. But as outspoken cultural historian William Irwin Thompson notes in *The Reimagination of the World* (1988), despite the broken-down ideas, the planetization of the archaic, the vulgarization and degradation of the spiritual scene, it has represented “positive, genetic information for the future—a necessary horizon to our imagination.”

I can only insinuate the outlines of this next emergent phase. It is global, holographic, and multidimensionally relational; it requires strongly individuated and independent women and men free of inherited spiritual tradition, ideology, ethnicity, or nationality; it is authentically, uncompromisingly Aquarian, a radical new way of being whose textures are barely suspected. In America it has not dawned on citizens how politicized the practice of medicine has become in this allopathically-dominated society; the politics, however, most acutely pertain to the freedom to elaborate one’s molecular, immunological individuality through a genuinely free choice of medical modality such as homeopathy or herbalism. Therefore I hope the spiritual scene rightly politicizes immunology. The spiritual scene must develop ways to integrate personal spiritual practice with the planetary ecological domain through a unique form of spiritual geomancy in which we actively meditate on behalf of Gaia. Here I hope the American spiritual scene spiritualizes ecology.

Similarly, we must learn how, in the context of personal interactions, to defuse, reframe, and resolve vexing, tumultuously conflicting issues from the collective social psyche. This pioneering work is being undertaken by the Swiss-trained Jungian process-work therapist Arnold Mindell, whose “dreambody” model encompasses events from the intrapsychic life of dreams, to illness, relationships, accidents, synchronicities, and conflict resolution. In his latest book, *The Leader as Martial Artist*, Mindell insightfully reconfigures major world problems like racism, religious fundamentalism, ethnic fanaticism, as elements in the psyche of vast energy fields called “time spirits” within which we all live and are moved as if we are puppets. Mindell travels the globe teaching groups, on behalf of communities and nations, how to resolve turbulent conflicts within this psychophysical world dreambody that holds them in its grip.

“The world’s situation is everyone’s task,” says Mindell. “To become conscious citizens of the third millennium we must consciously react to these forces, participate in history, and contribute to transforming the times in which we live.” That’s the key, says Mindell, to our consciously co-creating the world and our future along more positive lines. That, I contend, is an aspect of the face of the spiritual scene as it renews itself in the later 1990s. And it is in no small

measure the inspiration behind the new Clinton administration, the fruit of America's culture-transforming Baby Boom. With President Clinton's proclivity for personal hugs straight from the heart and Vice President Gore's sincere commitment to global environmentalism, America's spiritual scene, so carefully wrought over the last 25 years despite criticism and sarcasm, now casts a salutary influence over the White House and, one hopes, upon the world as a whole.