

## A GROUP OF SEEKERS

### The unit of service

Units of service are laying the necessary foundation for the emerging new age.

(Leaflet: *Units of Service*, Lucis Trust, n.d.)<sup>1</sup>

The aim of our group is spiritual and practical service in the world.

(Alison, Unit of Service)<sup>2</sup>

### **Making contact**

A group of people, working in a united effort, guided by a common purpose, can have an effect on their environment far out of proportion to their numerical strength.

(Alison, Unit of Service)<sup>3</sup>

In October 1994 at a holistic health fair in Glasgow's City Halls I came across a small group – two women and a man – sitting behind a trestle table covered with pamphlets, information sheets, small cards, and a selection of thick paperback books with austere midnight-blue covers. The sober and restrained presentation of this stall stood out in the otherwise bustling and sensuous ambience of the fair as a whole (mapped in Chapter 8), and the books really caught my eye. I discovered that these were the 'Bailey books', of which around 8,000 are sold per annum in Europe and the British Commonwealth and as many as 24,000 in North America.<sup>4</sup>

I told the group of my attempt some twenty years previously to read Bailey's 1925 blockbuster, *A Treatise on Cosmic Fire*. The elder woman nodded sympathetically: 'that's a *hard* one'. The group were linked to Alice Bailey's ideas. They called themselves a 'Unit of Service' and their principal activity was a short group meditation at the time of the full moon. 'It's not about witchcraft or anything', she said, 'it's just that the energies are at their peak then – it's a kind of high tide – which means our meditation can be of most service'. She handed me a flyer which explained the metaphysics behind this:

The moon itself has no influence on our work; but the fully lighted orb of the moon is indicative of the free and unimpeded alignment which exists between our planet and the *Sun* . . . the energy source for all life on earth of *physical consciousness*, of *soul awareness* and of *spiritual life*.

‘We’re giving a talk and meditation in December’, said the man, handing me details. ‘Help yourself’, said the other woman, indicating the cards and pamphlets, ‘it’s free’. A small bowl for donations stood discreetly to the side. I selected a sample, deposited some small change, and moved on to the next stall.

That evening I read the material. It was detailed yet curiously abstract, and immensely wide-ranging. In one pamphlet, entitled *Preparation for the Reappearance of the Christ*, I read of ‘a great and divine plan’ in which ‘a Spiritual Hierarchy guides humanity’. The head of this Hierarchy in the present period was ‘the Christ’, it seemed, and its ‘Senior Members’ were the ‘Masters of the Wisdom’. A leaflet entitled *One World – One Humanity* listed some key words for our times: Goodwill, Interdependence, Co-Operation, Global Spirituality. Two other pamphlets were called *Education in the New Age* and *The New World Religion*.

On a wintry December weekend I travelled to a large warehouse building on an industrial site in Livingston, a new town in Scotland’s central belt, to investigate further. Inside the air was sweet with incense as another holistic health fair got under way. This time it was a small, friendly event similar to the one in Glasgow but with a larger ‘psychic’ contingent (and hence a more plebeian social base) of scryers and Tarot readers. Once again, the Unit had its stall, but this time the elder woman – its founder, as I later discovered – was to give a talk. The typescript described her as a Quaker and ‘for over twenty years a student of the Alice Bailey books and of the esoteric traditions of many world religions’.

I joined a very modest audience. The talk was entitled ‘Meditation as a form of service’. It discussed the power of thought, the importance of the right kind of meditation, and the background to the Unit’s activities. Addressing herself to ‘students of the spiritual path, or seekers’, the speaker quickly outlined a metaphysic in which ‘action is a result of inner causes’ and correct meditation a ‘form of extended mental concentration’. Such ‘sustained thinking’ could, over time, open us to the powers of ‘the Soul’. These powers generated love, described as ‘a fine unimpeded inflow from the higher nature’. In short, through meditation and sustained concentration we were to ‘go beyond the desires of the little self and begin to serve as the soul’. She mentioned various promotional techniques and activities connected with the Alice Bailey books, which in turn provided the requisite ‘esoteric teaching’ to ‘precede and condition the “New Age”’,<sup>5</sup>

After the talk, a group meditation was proposed. A complicated six-stage procedure, typed out on an A4 sheet, was passed around. In Stage I, we were to imagine ourselves linked up ‘in thought’ with sympathetic individuals throughout the world. Then we spoke aloud this ‘mantram’:

The sons of men are one and I am one with them.  
I seek to love, not hate.  
I seek to serve and not exact due service.  
I seek to heal, not hurt.

Next we were to turn our attention to 'the inner Spiritual Kingdom of the planet' and picture ourselves 'immersed in the consciousness of the Christ'. We were then to utter the following:

In the centre of all Love I stand;  
From that centre I, the soul, will outward move;  
From that centre I, the one who serves, will work.  
May the love of the divine Self be shed abroad,  
In my heart, through my group, and throughout the world.

Now we were to visualise 'the energy of love flowing into the hearts and minds of men' and to 'meditate on ways of spreading goodwill and wholeness'. To accomplish this, we were to act as a channel between 'the inner Spiritual Kingdom' and the everyday world. Finally, we finished with the grand prayer of the Bailey work, the Great Invocation (see below). The entire process lasted some fifteen minutes, during which we sat upright with eyes closed, and hands on laps or knees. The contrast between an active, engaged mind and bodily quiescence could not have been more marked: I found the combination of sustained concentration and alert posture surprisingly tiring.

Afterwards I bought an early Bailey title, *From Intellect to Intuition* (Bailey 1987), and joined the group for lunch in the vegetarian cafe. The speaker and *de facto* leader, Alison, who was also the founder of the Unit, was explaining the enthusiasm of 'spiritual seekers' today to be a direct result of increasing numbers of 'young souls reincarnating'. 'Never before has there been such an interest in spirituality and meditation', she assured us, 'and this fair is proof of it'. Gill, the other woman, nodded sympathetically. I discussed my research interests with Patrick and we compared backgrounds. He had pursued research in philosophy before becoming disillusioned with academic epistemology. He described himself as an 'ex-Catholic' who occasionally attended Mass ('for aesthetic reasons') but who rejected papal authority and church dogma. But in any case Patrick stressed that 'religion' was of little import or interest within the Unit. Its purpose was to practice 'spirituality' and 'world service'.

### **Group meditation at the full moon**

We meet together at the time of the full moon to meditate, as a group, and as such to serve through the power of united thought and love. We are in this work acting as channels through which the energies of love and light can flow for healing and stimulation in the planet.<sup>6</sup>

Just before Christmas I attended a full moon meditation. It was held at eight o'clock in the evening at Alison's small flat, two storeys up in a tenement building in one of the larger Scottish cities. We met in Alison's living-room-cum-kitchen. The walls carry some of her work – she is an accomplished painter and wood engraver trained at London art schools – and the flat doubles as a workplace, exuding a cluttered domesticity.

On this occasion there were seven of us altogether: four women and three men, all apparently in their thirties or forties. We sat on cushions on the floor, or on upright chairs. The sole armchair was occupied by Alison. There were the three faces I already knew – Alison, Gill and Patrick – plus two other women – Deirdre and Pam – and Iain, a newcomer like myself. Iain knew Alison from Quaker meetings in the city, which she sometimes attended. I knew Iain from previous contact in Scottish alternative circles when he had been training as a Reichian therapist, and we had been partners in a massage workshop at the Salisbury Centre (see Chapter 8). But our paths had not crossed for several years: 'I've been here and there', he explained, 'I lived in Denmark for a while'.

In a short preamble Alison explained the timing of our gathering in terms of planetary 'alignment' and astrological rhythms. Then she gave a lengthy talk on this month's zodiacal sign, Sagittarius, drawing liberally on Alice Bailey's writings. Her exposition was detailed and sometimes abstruse, but I wasn't sure whether this was down to Alison or ambiguities in the Bailey books. Sinclair (1984: 111) freely admits, however, that Bailey's style

militates against superficial reading: one has to read the passages back and forth and often go back to the beginning of a sentence before one has come to the end of it. There are qualifications, provisos, and endless subheadings.

Alison spoke from a small exercise book for nearly half-an-hour. We listened attentively, the soft hiss of the gas fire underscoring an impression of group readiness and commitment. Some sat cross-legged, others with closed eyes or lowered gaze. At the end there was a pause, and then Alison handed round a meditation schedule. The particular meditation performed at the full moon is called 'Letting in the Light'. In silence, and once more with closed eyes, we worked our way through seven titled sections, taking our lead from Alison who quietly announced each new section. We began with 'Group Fusion', in which we announced our intention to join 'the New Group of World Servers' in special work 'mediating between Hierarchy and humanity'. In 'Alignment' we were to 'project a line of lighted energy towards the Spiritual Hierarchy of the planet – the great Ashram of Sanat Kumara': at this point in the meditation our group was deemed receptive to 'extra-planetary energies'. We next contemplated 'the reappearance of the Christ' and meditated upon a 'seed thought' connected to the astrological sign of Sagittarius: this was 'I see the goal. I reach that goal and then I see another'. Then followed a stage called

'Precipitation', in which we visualised 'energies of Light, Love and the Will-to-Good pouring throughout the planet and becoming anchored on Earth'. In 'Lower Interlude' we had to 'refocus the consciousness' and recite another affirmation. Finally, the 'Great Invocation' brought matters to a close. We recited it slowly and sonorously together:

From the point of Light within the Mind of God  
Let light stream forth into the minds of men.  
Let Light descend on Earth.

From the point of Love within the Heart of God  
Let love stream forth into the hearts of men.  
May Christ return to Earth.

From the centre where the Will of God is known  
Let purpose guide the little wills of men –  
The Purpose which the Masters know and serve.

From the centre which we call the race of men  
Let the Plan of Love and Light work out  
And may it seal the door where evil dwells.

Let Light and Love and Power restore the Plan on Earth.

We finished by humming an 'Om' syllable three times in unison.

The meditation lasted about twenty-five minutes. People opened their eyes slowly, smiled quietly or stretched. 'I'll put the kettle on', said Alison, rising from her chair. 'That was powerful!', said Deirdre, looking round the circle. 'Wasn't it?', agreed Gill. 'They always are, but they're different every month', said Alison. Iain said it reminded him of Liberal Catholic Church ceremonies he had attended in Denmark. I asked the group who the 'Masters' were. 'A good question', said Gill, with an enigmatic smile. There was reluctance to respond among the group: finally Patrick suggested: 'Enlightened beings?'. 'It's not about glamour', explained Alison hurriedly, 'it's not helpful to speculate on identities'. 'A Master *might* be a world leader, or a figure in the news' explained Deirdre. 'Or they *could* be you or me' said Patrick, adding hurriedly 'I'm not saying they *are*'. What, then, was 'the Plan'? This provided relaxed amusement. Alison said: 'It's easier to describe it by what it isn't', implying that 'everything' was part of its grand unfolding. Patrick alluded to a vast emergent cosmology in which only God ultimately knew the Plan for each particular planet or even solar system.

Were there other Units of Service in Scotland, I asked? No one seemed sure, or even particularly interested. Patrick said he thought there was 'similar stuff' going on at Findhorn. Alison said that there were a 'good many' individuals connected with the Unit who lived too far away to attend meetings. The Unit also had connections with groups in Dublin and Cork. A brief conversation

arose among Alison, Deirdre and Gill concerning the ‘peace processes’ in Northern Ireland and Palestine: the gist of their discussion was that we all needed to remain optimistic and to continue thinking and working positively for peace. There was a final conversation on symbols. The group consensus was that the more dynamic form of the spiral was supplanting the circle as the appropriate emblem of our times: ‘humanity’, someone said, had had enough of ‘going round in circles’; evolutionary energies were now urging things on and *up*. Gill emphasised the power of the upward spiral: one kept returning to the ‘same’ place, but always ‘higher up’. ‘Anyway, the darkness will give way to light in the end’, she said simply. As the meeting broke up, Alison lent me her copy of Alice Bailey’s *Unfinished Autobiography* (Bailey 1973). We descended into the cold street to go our respective ways: Gill to her flat nearby, Iain and Pam to local buses, Patrick and Deirdre by car across central Scotland, and myself on the train to Stirling.

### **The Unit of Service in context**

#### **ARE YOU A SEEKER?**

Searching for answers to your innermost spiritual questions

- \* *the purpose of life*
- \* *the power of love*
- \* *the meaning of death*

Insights from the teachings of Alice Bailey give keys to spiritual growth and loving service<sup>7</sup>

This group was part of a wider network of Units of Service, of which there are just two or three in Scotland and some thirty in England and Wales, in addition to some two hundred others around the world including the US, South America, and Africa. These small clusters of seekers are described in a directory as ‘groups and individuals working in co-operation with the service activities of the Lucis Trust’.<sup>8</sup> Most of the British groups appear to have started up since the 1960s; several have only been together a few years. However, the idea of such groups goes back to the 1930s, when they were called ‘Goodwill Action Committees’ (Nation 1989: 7), and the 1940s, when the present title seems to have emerged.<sup>9</sup> Our group had been formed in 1984 and its principal activities were holding full-moon meditations, distributing Bailey literature and (more recently) maintaining a low-key public profile at holistic health fairs.

Units of Service thus belong to the wider network of projects constituting the Lucis Trust, namely the Arcane School, World Goodwill, Triangles meditation and, not least, faithful study of the Bailey books. As I sketched out in Chapter 2, this cluster of initiatives stems from the post-Theosophical career of Alice Bailey in the 1920s and 1930s, and her claimed contact with a Tibetan Master, Djwhal Khul (‘the Tibetan’), which produced a vast corpus of ‘received’ or ‘channelled’ texts. While there is no requirement for Unit members to

participate in other Lucis Trust activities – indeed the opinion was forcefully expressed within our group on several occasions that the Unit was not exclusively a ‘Bailey’ group – the three most regular attendees in our group were all involved in ‘triangles’ meditation and in the Arcane School. Emic protestations notwithstanding, the weight of evidence is that the Units of Service are essentially an Alice Bailey project, derive almost all their ideology from this and sibling sources, and are largely sustained by committed students of the Bailey work.

As we saw in Chapter 2, Bailey set up the Arcane School to offer systematic study for individuals looking for ‘guidance in their search for truth without being subjected to the usual limitations of dogmatic creeds’.<sup>10</sup> According to the Lucis Trust, it has around three thousand students worldwide at any one time, four hundred or so of whom live in the UK. In the seventy or so years between the early 1920s and the late 1990s this translates into ‘tens of thousands’ who have participated for various lengths of time, including a proportion who have ‘passed right through’ – that is, spent ten years or more in School study.<sup>11</sup> The majority of students have no religious affiliation other than to the Arcane School, although there are notable minorities, including Christians, Muslims and Rosicrucians. The organisation was summarised by one former student as a ‘correspondence school keeping people of like mind in touch’ through the teaching of a ‘Christianised, interfaith Theosophy’.<sup>12</sup> Material for study consists largely in thematic excerpts from the Bailey books coupled with extracts from other post-Theosophical writers and assorted psychological and environmental sources. Written assignments are assessed by senior students known as ‘secretaries’, who typically work in different countries and are swapped around periodically to encourage impersonality in Arcane School relationships and foster the desired shift from ‘ego’ level to ‘soul’ work. Specified daily meditations and mantras (uttered aloud if appropriate, otherwise affirmed silently) complete the student’s curriculum. Some breathing exercises, to be undertaken prior to meditation practice, are added at a later date.<sup>13</sup>

Patrick’s weekly practice incorporated eight or nine specific meditations to be done on different days or at certain times of the day, in addition to the recommended half an hour of daily study. He summarised the work as ‘pretty much reading, writing and meditating’, understanding the latter in particular as a simple yet profound act of ‘world service’. Details of the meditations are not available outside the School in order to ‘safeguard’ the work. Patrick explained that because meditation was working with energy, one had to be careful how to approach it: ‘if you’re not prepared, if you’re not ready for a particular stage, it could create difficulties’. But it is unlikely that the meditations differ significantly from the two outlines discussed in this chapter, and others readily available elsewhere, in their serial procedures of aligning with higher energies, meditating on them, and then occultly distributing the ‘grounded’ energies. Like the Rosicrucian Order, Crotona Fellowship in the 1920s and 1930s, the governing ethos is ‘private’ rather than ‘initiativ’ or ‘secret’: for example, Alison

said forcefully ‘I *never ever* talk about AAB [Bailey] or the books in my daily life’.<sup>14</sup>

This impression of discretion and selection was reinforced when I attended the annual conference of the Arcane School in London in 1996. Certainly the morning sessions of the conference were for students only, but the afternoon sessions were open to the public and were structured around a formal schedule of meditation, the Great Invocation, addresses by speakers, and small discussion groups. The atmosphere was keen, animated and open, but the parameters of discussion were fairly circumscribed. This impression continued when I visited the Lucis Trust headquarters. These could scarcely be less evidently ‘religious’ in presentation and were more like a government department or a firm of stockbrokers. The Trust occupies a suite of sizeable rooms in an imposing neoclassical building behind Whitehall in central London. Here a few paid staff and a handful of volunteers co-ordinate the Trust’s various projects, largely financed by donations and legacies.<sup>15</sup> I was courteously shown around the premises by an Arcane School co-ordinator who, like the seven or eight other people I met that afternoon, was in his late thirties or early forties. Nationalities were markedly mixed: my guide was English, but others came from Egypt, Greece, Ireland, and New Zealand. The atmosphere was calm, sober and somewhat bureaucratic: the general impression was of a small business or family firm. Sober oil portraits of Alice and Foster Bailey hung discreetly on one internal wall, and administration was centred on specific ‘desks’ – the ‘Triangles desk’, ‘World Goodwill desk’ and so on. The language of corporate business has also contributed to the Trust’s stock of esoteric metaphors: hence the ‘Masters’ are described in an early (but still circulated) pamphlet as ‘a worldwide group of executives . . . far more practical and realistic than the most efficient big business executives’, and initiating ‘the kingdom of God’ requires ‘sensible business procedures and carefully considered programmes’.<sup>16</sup> In the basement is a small printing press that maintains the pamphleteering side of the work, together with similar plant in New York and Geneva. The thick, midnight-blue Bailey books, on the other hand, are all printed in the US. The office suite also houses an eclectic lending library on popular esotericism, with an understandable bias towards its own material.

The ‘New Age’ remains a focus for the Lucis Trust. A new Bailey compilation was published in 1996 as *The Seventh Ray: Revealer of the New Age* and the Lucis Press was promoting the two volumes of *Discipleship in the New Age* at a special price in 1997. But although Melton (1986: 115) reports that the Great Invocation ‘is frequently heard’ at ‘New Age gatherings’ and Perry (1992: 29) claims it has even been used at inter-faith events, Bailey’s influence upon the idiomatic ‘New Age’ culture of human potential, healing, and mind, body and spirit pursuits is practically nil. Her books continue to exert a muted impact upon more ascetic spiritual groups, and certainly Steyn (1994: 101) found that nearly two-thirds of her interview sample of white South Africans had been ‘markedly influenced’ by Bailey in the 1970s and 1980s. But as I argued in



Chapter 2, the distinctiveness of Alice Bailey for a genealogy of the field lies in creating and disseminating a discourse on 'New Age' that early on acquired a life of its own beyond the control of the Lucis Trust.

We can trace the impact of this discourse in the biographies of 'New Age' activists from the 1940s to the 1970s. According to Walker (1994: 287), possession 'of at least one' Bailey book was *de rigueur* at Findhorn in the 1970s and early 1980s and a 'working knowledge' of her system was 'a prerequisite for any serious candidate for high office'. Luminaries of the early 'New Age' networks such as Anthony Brooke (1976: 93) and George Trevelyan (1977: 162) knew and used Bailey's Great Invocation, and later activists such as David Spangler (1984: 30) and William Bloom (1991: 2) acknowledge their debt to Bailey's 'New Age' discourse. Riddell (1991: 285) notes that the Great Invocation was displayed in the original Findhorn sanctuary as recently as the early 1990s, and it is significant that, following the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York in September 2001, a new daily programme of 'Network of Light meditations for peace' began in this sanctuary, based around utterance of the Great Invocation.<sup>17</sup> Walker's (1994: 287) observation that Bailey's influence on Findhorn 'should not be underestimated' is indeed a shrewd one.

All this is by way of showing that, out of all proportion to its small numbers and almost invisible public footprint, the Unit of Service is located in, and derives ideological sustenance from, closely interconnected spiritual circles. These are based partly in specific Lucis Trust projects and partly in a wider field of alternative spiritual practice, which in turn has been watered by Bailey's distinctive 'New Age' discourse.

### Persevering

What you've got with the Unit of Service is meditation. It's not a massage group, it's not for self-enlightenment, it's not for holding crystals, it's not for self-development, it's for world service: *that's* its purpose.

(Alison, Unit of Service)<sup>18</sup>

Early in January 1995 I received through the post a photocopied newsletter giving notice of the next full-moon meditation. The date, time and place were given, along with the enigmatic 'keynote' of the month's zodiac sign, Capricorn: 'Lost am I in light supernal, yet on that light I turn my back'. There were also a few quotations from Bailey and a postscript appealing for donations towards the cost of hiring a stall at the next holistic health fair. During my time with the Unit it was invariably Alison who put these newsletters together: sometimes they reproduced one of her engravings, but otherwise the format was much the same each month.

Numbers at this month's meditation were the same, although Iain and Gill were replaced by two individuals new to me: Gordon, an energetic

self-employed 'green' businessman who had lived at Findhorn in the 1970s, and Mark, a younger man in his thirties who had trained at art college and now practised 'psychic art' for a small living; he showed me his portraits of the Christ and two other 'Masters', Morya and Koot Humi. Pam, Deirdre, Patrick and Alison were the familiar faces. As I entered the room, Gill telephoned, and Alison relayed her message to the group – 'she can't come, but she's linking up' – meaning that Gill would synchronise with the group meditation in her own home. Patrick had already begun the evening's preliminary talk, in which he correlated 'Capricorn energies' with historical events such as the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. Several of the group nodded thoughtfully.

At 8.25 p.m., the precise time of the full moon, we began the meditation. I worked hard tonight to bring alive the meditation outline – to put imaginative flesh on its bones – and I noted later that 'by the time of the invocation, I was subtly aware of the group breathing in together, and speaking in the outbreak'.<sup>19</sup> Afterwards Gordon said: 'That was beautiful!' 'Wasn't it?' said Alison, filling the kettle. Over cups of herb tea and a few biscuits, there was more discussion of astrology, and we compared our 'sun', 'moon' and 'rising' signs. It turned out that the group had a preponderance of fire and air signs, which triggered some amused interpretations of the group's fiery energy and extravagant ideas, but a lack of 'grounding' from earth and water signs. Patrick and Alison were quick to point out that in any case these standard interpretations were actually the 'astrology of personality': *esoteric* astrology, on the other hand, which the group should prefer, worked deeper, 'at the Soul level'. Gordon then proposed organising an Edinburgh meditation festival jointly with other interested parties – he suggested Transcendental Meditation and the Brahma Kumaris – but conversation on this idea petered out. I steered talk round to Findhorn, where Deirdre and Mark had done 'Experience Week', and to 'New Age' in general. Alison said she didn't like the term, and there was general agreement. Mark said 'New Age' was 'a media thing', and that many of the groups concerned were actually 'Old Age' in their attitudes, anyway. Alison thought that small groups and meditation were the essence.

At the following month's meeting there were only six of us. Pam was absent – I never saw her again – and Iain had not reappeared. But Gill was back, and this time it was Gordon who telephoned to say he was 'linking up'. As usual, the gathering began with a talk, again by Alison, on astrology. The February full moon was in Aquarius, the keynote being 'Water of Life am I, poured forth for thirsty men', and there was animated discussion of 'Aquarian energy', which, the group felt, showed itself in the increasing numbers of small spiritual groups in the culture at large. After a short pause, we composed ourselves and Alison announced quietly, 'Meditation: letting in the light'. My field notes, written afterwards on the train home, describe the night's meditation as 'a deep and powerful experience':

I was aware tonight of a strong suspension of disbelief on my part. I worked hard at the various visualisations, and intoned the ‘responses’ with intention and weight. Consequently I felt much more of a participant than previously, and felt my role as a ‘researcher’ blurring, so that I spontaneously said to Alison on leaving, ‘I found the meditation really *worked*’ – as though I was an ‘apprentice’.<sup>20</sup>

### **Group profile**

The main activity of the Unit of Service is *group meditation*.

(Flyer: *Full Moon Meditation Meetings*)

The true meeting place of the group is the plane of mind.

(*The Science of Meditation*: booklet, p. 12)

By now I had encountered most of the characteristic features of the full-moon meditation meetings over a period of some two years’ semi-regular participation. The rhythm of events was predictable: some two weeks before the full moon a newsletter would arrive confirming the date (the gathering being held either on, or at the nearest possible weekday evening to, the full moon) and location (invariably at Alison’s flat). Although faces would come and go, there were typically some half a dozen individuals present, including a core of three or four regulars. The meeting lasted about one hour and a half, and consisted in some twenty minutes’ introductory talk or reading, twenty minutes to half an hour devoted to the meditation, and another half an hour talking quietly over tea and biscuits. During the latter period, practical matters might be raised such as the details of hiring tables at fairs. The slender finances of the group were covered by a tin for donations, which Alison usually put out during tea, although expenses were never more than marginal (the table, for example, was obtained at a special charity rate from the fair organisers).

The group existed primarily, indeed almost exclusively, for the purposes of meditation: it was understood that we were not gathered for therapy, discussion or chat, but to meditate at an auspicious moment in the occult calendar by way of rendering ‘world service’. What exchanges of views there were chiefly revolved around the task in hand and the strengthening or deepening of technique through the application of insights from the publications of the Lucis Trust in general and Alice Bailey in particular. Particular episodes during the time of my involvement with the group reinforced the hegemony of Bailey’s scheme in the wider field of alternative spirituality. For example, early on I suggested holding a separate reading group to cater for more discursive interests. The new moon was identified as a good time for this kind of approach, and Patrick, Deirdre and I duly met at the next new moon in my home in Stirling to read and discuss sections from Bailey’s *A Treatise on White Magic* (1934). This was a subdued meeting that on Patrick’s suggestion began and

ended with Lucis Trust meditations and involved some rather guarded discussion, Deirdre and Patrick largely looking to me to raise questions. My tentative comparisons of Bailey's scheme to other spiritual systems were received with indifference, and it was apparent that Deirdre and Patrick largely saw the reading group as an opportunity for the Unit to read more intensively in the Bailey corpus. This new-moon initiative flagged but was revived the following year by Gordon, the most eclectic Unit member, who indicated that he would like a more inclusive forum. Yet the first of the revived series again inclined strongly towards an orthodox curriculum, with Gordon himself suggesting we study a collection of Bailey's astrological writings, *The Labours of Hercules*, and Alison proposing we work with a Lucis Trust study series entitled 'Problems of Humanity'. Even in ostensibly more relaxed and eclectic settings, then, the discourse inclined inexorably towards the Bailey books and their interpretive machinery.

The atmosphere of the Unit in general was one of quiet reflection, concentration and mental work. Conversation was muted and episodic, and bodily contact was at a minimum. There was relatively little discussion of the families, careers and everyday lives of group participants and a period of absence on the part of a semi-regular participant like myself occasioned no comment beyond a welcoming 'good to see you again'. The lack of concern with the private lives of individuals contrasted with a lively interest in politics and current affairs, however, although this tended to be articulated in generalised, impressionistic terms. Furthermore, although the working vocabulary included words such as 'occult' and 'esoteric' – the meditation ritual at one meeting was explicitly explained as '*esoteric* work' – the regular members were keen to stress the group's accessible, non-religious, non-doctrinal nature. Thus Alison spontaneously announced at this same meeting: 'This is not a *cult*, it's very simple and straightforward work'.<sup>21</sup>

In fact the work – performing and correctly interpreting a ritualised full-moon meditation – was anything but simple. Some knowledge of astrology and post-Theosophical cosmology in general, in addition to a keen interest in the Bailey books, was effectively a prerequisite for viable participation. Group conversation and practice was otherwise abstruse and there was only limited opportunity for clarification or analysis of terminology during the evening. Skill in working with visualisation techniques was also required of participants, for a high degree of concentration was required to bring the meditation 'to life'. The heightened subjectivity required and in turn fostered by the internalised ritual also discouraged seeking 'outside' help from the group, and in any case the impressionistic subtleties of the process tended to dissolve once I attempted to formulate them in words. According to the group, the formalised stages were actually 'incredibly open' and 'dynamic' in practice, since each meditator visualised in a manner appropriate to themselves, reflecting their own position on 'the spiritual path': there were no set images or semantic associations. However, for several months in lieu of an opening talk we studied a Lucis Trust

booklet called *Meditation at the Full Moon* and it became clear that, through group socialisation over time, one would gradually learn, absorb and recapitulate the characteristic features of Bailey's worldview. Meditation practice as a whole was deeply shaped by Bailey's understanding of 'the Soul' as the realm of ultimate, causative reality with which one strove to 'align' oneself both in meditation and daily life. In other words, the 'mental planes' were seen to be portals to the 'real world' of the soul to which one gained ritual access through correct performance of the sequence of visualisations. It followed that our individual subjectivities were ultimately windows on an objective, causative but occult reality, and the 'group sentience' generated in the course of meditative work was its manifestation.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, learning to meditate competently was a subtle process involving trial and error practice in a group context. Halting conversations on technique emphasised subjective acts such as refining one's intuition and developing an openness to sensory hints and fragments. So the nature of occult meditation was said to be variously 'active', 'mental', 'imaginative', 'creative', and 'highly visual'.<sup>23</sup> Meditation worked like a 'funnel' to 'channel down energies,' Alison said. Mark explained the technique as 'impressionistic, like a painting. Or maybe you smell things.' Sinclair (1984: 46) refers to 'the art of spiritual impression', an impression being 'like a hint' that can be 'accepted or rejected at will'. But 'it's not an intellectual exercise,' cautioned Deirdre, 'you have to experience it in practice.' 'And you have to keep your consciousness high,' warned Patrick.<sup>24</sup>

Patrick's remark was also a veiled warning against dangerous illusions – 'glamour', in Bailey's terms – which pandered to the pride and ambition of the ego while obscuring the reality of the Soul. Glamour could contaminate any level of enquiry or practice. At one holistic health fair, Mark told me he thought the Transmission Meditation sessions on offer were 'dubious' or, as he put it, 'glamoured'. Transmission meditation was a group ritual devised by a former Alice Bailey student, Benjamin Creme, and Mark was particularly unhappy with the photograph promoted by Creme's group, which showed a tall turbaned man, whom Creme claimed was the Christ, addressing a crowd in Nairobi. If the Christ *had* returned, Mark said passionately, he would be working away quietly and selflessly, not parading for the world's cameras in exotic locations. On another occasion when I asked about the identity of 'the Masters', Patrick warned me that such enquiry was intrinsically 'glamoured'. And when I asked Deirdre which Bailey books she had personally found most informative, she told me gently that 'we've all got our own glammers to deal with and we walk the path alone', implying that what had been illuminating reading for *her* might actively mislead *me*, and that my question had been 'glamoured' in the first place.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, the uniformity of material in Unit newsletters and group practice underscored the fact that, like any other occult system, one needed to invest substantial time and energy in the study of Bailey's cosmology to be able to 'do'

the meditations successfully and, indeed, to persist in the group at all. It was not a casual option. The commitment required is reflected in the small attendance at the full-moon meditation meetings. In my span of involvement with the group – part-time over nearly two and a half years – I met seventeen different individuals in all,<sup>26</sup> and although Alison told me she had a list of about fifty people interested in the work of the Unit, she only sent out about fifteen newsletters each month. Both facts point to a very small active constituency, despite the busy ‘alternative’ milieu in which the Unit was located and in which it advertised itself through hiring tables at health fairs.

However, I was told that achieving a certain quality of practice rather than attracting  $x$  numbers of practitioners was the Unit’s chief concern. The sustained practice of a core group of meditators could have a spiritual impact on the ‘mental planes’ almost in inverse proportion to its paltry public footprint. As Alison explains it:

To maintain the integrity – the inner life – of the group there has to be a spiritual tension at its centre, which is why you need two or three very committed people right at the centre of this group work.

It is also telling that the core group in this Unit (and surely in others) were Arcane School students involved in Triangles work. It is precisely this trio – Alison, Patrick and Deirdre – who generated the ‘spiritual tension’ in the Unit to keep it vibrant. Alison was a trained painter and engraver who not only hosted the meditation meeting but had founded the group; she had been involved with the Arcane School for twenty-five years as student and ‘secretary’. Patrick had been a student for around eight years, and had recently worked as an adult education lecturer; brought up as a Catholic, he had read widely in Hinduism, Taoist yoga and Subud before settling down to the Bailey work. Deirdre had been episodically enrolled in the Arcane School and had recently rejoined; she worked as a nursing auxiliary and had formerly been involved with a different meditation network, Fountain International, associated with the eccentric but charismatic theorist of conspiracies, David Icke. She and Patrick travelled some forty miles to the meetings, often sharing a car. This core group were all single, although Alison and Deirdre had grown-up children. All three were present at the Arcane School conference in London I attended. Patrick’s commitment to the Bailey work became deeper still: towards the end of my involvement with the group, he moved to London to work full-time for World Goodwill.

In addition to this core group of ‘regulars’, there were some half-a-dozen occasional attendees. Some might also be Arcane School students, as was Mark. ‘Occasional’ actually meant ‘semi-regular’, since although these individuals, like myself, participated in substantially fewer meetings, they continued to attend over time. For example, Gill, who lived near Alison, was present at about half of the meetings I came to, but when absent she often telephoned to say she was

'linking up', and she regularly helped out on the Unit's table at the health fairs. Gordon attended slightly more regularly, and would also contact Alison if he couldn't come. He lived with his family in a market town some fifteen miles away. Gordon had wide experience of 'New Age' activities: he was a former trustee of the Salisbury Centre and had lived at Findhorn during its period of expansion in the 1970s, where he had known Peter and Eileen Caddy and other luminaries. Gordon was the participant most likely to discuss non-Bailey groups and activities. At various meetings I attended he publicised a 'peace concert' by Indian guru Sri Chinmoy, circulated a newsletter from Anthony Brooke (whom we met in Chapter 4), mentioned his participation in the Lamplighter movement (also Chapter 4) and spoke enthusiastically about alternative politics: he had stood as a Green Party candidate in European elections but now favoured the Natural Law Party, the political wing of Transcendental Meditation. This range of experience made Gordon the unspoken deputy to Alison, even though he did not attend as regularly as Patrick, his nearest contender in this regard. I also met Austin, a young man who was hoping to get into primary-school teacher training. He had been an Arcane School student and had previously come to the meditations for six months or so, but had found it too far to travel. He, too, had attended the Fountain International meditation group a few years ago, where he'd met Deirdre.

Still others attended on a handful of occasions or were one-off visitors. In my time with the group there were some half a dozen 'casual' attenders. At the briefest end of the scale, Andrew, an older man involved in the National Federation of Spiritual Healers, came only once. More persistently, Shaun, a young Australian, attended three consecutive meetings before dropping out; he then rejoined after I left. Pam, a quiet woman in her early thirties whom I never saw again after my early visits, was probably a 'casual' attender although it is possible she was an 'occasional' who had finally moved on. As I've shown, Unit of Service participation requires ideological commitment and adroit ritual technique, as well as social skills to balance the intimate domestic setting of Alison's flat with the restrained formality of group practice. Hence the preponderance of 'regulars' and 'occasionals' over 'casuals' should not surprise.

In summary, a typical full-moon meditation gathering for this Unit of Service numbered about six; a slightly higher representation of men overall was offset by a two to one ratio of women to men in the 'core group'; age tended to be over thirty; single people were to the fore; and access was through personal contact (word of mouth, a friend of a friend, or through contact at a health fair).<sup>27</sup> The group as a whole had an ascetic and somewhat gnostic character. Thus Alison introduced the meditation on one occasion by explaining that we were actually spiritual beings, or 'angelic lords', who had undertaken to incarnate on earth but had forgotten our true identities. An emphasis on selfless 'service' is pervasive: Patrick told me that 'the Path' was by nature lonely, and that the Arcane School discouraged students who were really seeking a social or therapeutic group.<sup>28</sup> Finally, the act of meditation is

consistently referred to as a perfectible procedure or technology. Thus a booklet called *The Science of Meditation* describes it as ‘a scientific technique which can be relied upon to produce results if followed through with care and precision’. And Bailey herself says in another booklet, *Meditation at the Full Moon*: ‘The inevitability of Christ’s return is established, scientifically and under law; this constitutes a call which He may not deny and one which He must obey’.

### **History of the Unit of Service and links with other groups**

We are not working alone for there are many other similar groups all around the world. In this way we are in a very real sense part of a worldwide subjective network. A unit or cell of service is not an organisation so much as an organism.<sup>29</sup>

The genesis of the group is intimately linked with its founder’s search for ‘some kind of discipline’ in her spiritual quest. Alison says she was ‘intensely religious, reading, reading, reading, thinking, thinking, thinking since I was very young’. She read mystical and devotional Christian literature, books on Buddhism, and others – ‘you name it’. She also absorbed the work of artists like William Blake, Samuel Palmer and Cecil Collins. She became involved in the Bailey work in her late twenties while living in the North-West Highlands with a young baby and her then husband, a native Gaelic speaker. ‘There was nobody I could talk to’, she recalls, ‘you can’t get a hold of the minister by the lapels and say, “look, come on, tell me!”’ A friend advised her to try an ‘esoteric school’, and so Alison obtained a specialist book catalogue. Out of some 200 titles she chose *Discipleship in the New Age*. ‘The minute I read it’, she said, ‘I’d come home!’ She enrolled in the Arcane School. In the late 1970s she was looking for a way to offer ‘service’ and decided to advertise meditation meetings in her house. She had the Great Invocation printed in the local newspaper, *The West Highland Free Press*, and put up posters in the neighbourhood. ‘It was laughed at’, she recalls, although she says her father-in-law, a Free Church lay preacher, admired the Great Invocation. For about a year, Alison says, no one came: ‘I just meditated on my own’. Once she was visited by an angelic presence during the meditation: ‘there was a sudden whoosh!, a beating of wings, then it was gone’. She persisted for four years with a handful of occasional participants. When she moved to the city in the mid-1980s, the Lucis Trust put her in contact with six or seven individuals looking for a group, and a new Unit of Service was born. Since then Alison estimates that ‘fifty to a hundred’ people have passed through the group:

People come and go. There’s always been a core, an inner core, of dedicated regular people. And then there’s the people on the periphery, who come in now and again. But everyone’s needed, it’s like a little ashram in that sense.



While the format of the meetings has become fairly standardised, with the meditation at its heart culminating in group recitation of the Great Invocation, the Unit cautiously incorporates fresh openings when they enhance the dominant Bailey base. During my period of involvement, contact was made at the Arcane School conference with members of two groups in the Irish Republic, and our meetings subsequently incorporated a short mental 'link-up' with a Unit of Service in Cork and a 'Goodwill Group' in Dublin. And as we have seen, spurred initially by my own enquiries into the Bailey cosmology, a 'New Moon' meeting was set up in 1996 to concentrate upon discussion and study of wider Lucis Trust material.

The Unit practises three general kinds of 'networking'. First, through Alison there was an informal connection with the local Quaker meeting house. She occasionally attended meetings for worship there and delivered a paper called 'What is Spirituality?' at a Quaker-sponsored forum in 1997. The Unit had also organised three public events at the meeting house in recent years, on the themes 'Building Wholeness' (1989), 'One Humanity' (1992), and 'Building Right Relations' (1997). These were day-long gatherings featuring speakers and discussion, and attracting audiences of fifty or so: Alison told me she modelled them on the Arcane School conference. Perhaps the most heterogeneous networked connection was a workshop called 'Dancing the Sevenfold Energies of Life', which the Unit effectively sponsored at the Meeting House in June 1996. This was an ambitious programme mixing Alice Bailey's esoteric philosophy of seven rays of creation with 'sacred' or folk dances from Europe and the Middle East.<sup>30</sup> The event was strongly dependent upon Unit of Service input, since Alison herself had suggested the venue to the couple leading the workshop, and in the event five of the eight participants, including myself, were Unit members. However, the workshop involved a degree of physical movement and touch that was rare in our group culture, and not all were comfortable with this – Alison herself made her excuses and left after lunch. We danced in a circle, holding hands, around a simple centrepiece consisting of a sky-blue scarf loosely spread out, with a small brass plate holding a light-blue candle in the middle. This burnt continuously and formed a natural focal point as we concentrated on the dance steps. In between dances we discussed in detail the creative and destructive characteristics of the seven rays according to Bailey's philosophy, and attempted to correlate the ritual movements of specific dances with psychological and spiritual 'inner' states.

In addition to this informal but persistent connection with the Quaker venue, the Unit maintained a more formal public presence at alternative health fairs – which is where I, for one, first met them. The hired tables at these events were deemed a success insofar as a good deal of literature (supplied by Lucis Trust HQ in London) was picked up by browsers, a few pounds accrued in donations, and a newcomer came along to the full-moon meditation now and again. Occasionally, as at the Livingston event mentioned earlier, the group also presented a talk and public meditation: on one occasion in Glasgow this

attracted an audience of fifty.<sup>31</sup> Our table was supervised by whoever came along, with the core group predominating as usual. I helped out on several occasions, most prominently in October 1995 in Glasgow when I looked after the display alone for two hours while Deirdre attended a talk on spiritual healing. During this time I self-consciously fielded a variety of enquiries. One man asked about the Unit's relationship with Theosophy, a woman inquired into the 'Triangles' work, a young man involved in the Gnostic School of Anthropology asked me if, like them, we did *kundalini* meditation; a former acquaintance of mine from a writer's group shared his newfound interest in David Icke; and a young woman told me her father had been in the Arcane School and that they still had all the Bailey books in the house.<sup>32</sup> The group was pragmatic about these fairs: Deirdre said they reminded her of 'the hippie thing' and that you had to pick and choose very carefully; Gordon thought that the Unit's stall was 'a great service'; but Alison disliked the fairs and was glad when the Unit stopped participating around 1999.<sup>33</sup>

A third type of outreach was the result of individuals' particular lives and careers. I have noted some of Gordon's networks: he rejoined the Salisbury Centre as a Trustee during my time with the group and once or twice the Unit met there when Alison was away. Like Gordon, Deirdre was familiar with Findhorn, had done 'Experience Week' there, and at one point planned to do its three-month resident programme. Mark made a small living as a psychic artist, and for a time worked for an alternative health promoter: he, too, had visited Findhorn, and like Deirdre had participated in workshops on trans-personal psychology, a therapeutic movement sympathetic to the Bailey work. For her part, Alison occasionally spoke in public about Alice Bailey and the Lucis Trust and she also sometimes exhibited her drawings and paintings in which Bailey's symbology was usually to the fore: for example, at a private gallery during the 1996 Edinburgh festival her display included impressive line and watercolour illustrations to Shakespeare's *King Lear* alongside small woodcuts illustrating passages from the Bailey books.

Five years after my first contact with the Unit there was a significant shift. Alison's new husband assumed leadership of the group and plans were mooted to move the meditation meetings permanently to a public venue such as the Salisbury Centre or the Quaker Meeting House. Alison was relieved: she told me that running the Unit had 'always been a line of great resistance for me', the implication being that the task had been part of her 'soul' training and 'service' and not something her ego would willingly have chosen.<sup>34</sup>

### Coda

In his survey of heterodox spiritual groups in the US, Ellwood (1973: 105) considered that the full-moon meditation groups had 'peaked in the early postwar years'. Certainly the eschatological 'New Age' promoted by the Lucis Trust contrasts markedly with the post-1970s turn towards human potential and

self-realisation. The stance of the Unit of Service – indeed its very name – recalls many features of early ‘New Age’ instincts and attitudes, surveyed in Chapters 3 and 4. These include the emphasis on the group as an impersonal organism synthesising individual personalities, or egos, at a ‘higher level’; the focus on technique and procedure as ‘scientific’ methods for achieving occult goals; the acceptance of ‘hierarchy’ and hence of the principle of organisation, role-differentiation and (implicitly) group statuses; the prominence of mental work in the form of concentration, visualisation, meditation, and correct thinking; a somewhat austere aesthetic emphasising mental and physical hygiene; and the grand idealism of ‘world service’ and selfless work for a universalised ‘humanity’. Not least in this list is the Unit’s quiet millennialism, encoded in the key petition ‘may Christ return to earth’ with which the Great Invocation closes. Indeed, the Lucis Trust confidently expects a conference of the Masters to take place in 2025, at which a decision will be made regarding the reappearance of the Christ. As Patrick quietly pointed out, because this ‘great spiritual event’ is ‘fairly imminent’, many of us can expect to see ‘significant things happening’.

Finally, the small numbers and slight footprint of the Unit need not, in the emic view, mitigate its potency: indeed, by homeopathic analogy, empirical dilution might occultly *strengthen* its effect in the specific operation of hastening the return of the Christ.<sup>35</sup> And like Sheena Govan’s group or the early Findhorn community, the Unit of Service has no commercial dimension: indeed, this was the sole site in my fieldwork in which a money transaction was *not* a prerequisite of entrance.

After the ‘Leo’ meditation meeting of August 1995 I scribbled this on the train home:

To use a much-loved Bailey word, it is very *un*-glamorous: nearly half the group travel from out of town; there is only a little social intercourse, and an acknowledgment that the group is there to work – or to *serve* – rather than exist as a ‘discussion group’; there is no such thing as a ‘recruitment drive’ – and the vastness of the Bailey cosmology suggests that – as Alison pointed out tonight – while cause and effect are inextricable (the law of karma), there’s no knowing the *timescale* on which it operates. Thus, the ‘light’ generated tonight during the meditation might take a hundred years to have its particular effect.<sup>36</sup>

For her part Alison simply said:

It doesn’t sound much, does it, what we’re doing, just meditating? But I think it’s very important, it’s fundamental. It’s a real commitment.

# A COLONY OF SEEKERS

## Findhorn

While we have no formal doctrine or creed, we believe that humanity is involved in an evolutionary expansion of consciousness which is creating new patterns of civilization and a planetary culture infused with spiritual values.

(Findhorn Programme,  
April–October 1996, p. 2)

We provide a training ground for spiritual seekers wishing to understand and express their own unique spirituality.

(Walker 1994: 17)

### **Findhorn today**

Some people come here seeking to change the world; they may not be aware that the modern method of doing this is by changing themselves.

(Riddell 1991: 133)

Findhorn<sup>1</sup> has grown into a substantial settlement that since 1962 has hosted three generations of spiritual seekers exploring alternative spiritualities, therapies, expressive arts and crafts, and gardening. In the 1960s and early 1970s, as we have seen, Findhorn was known as a ‘New Age centre’ or a ‘centre of light’. More recently ‘spiritual community’, ‘eco-village’ and ‘mystery school’ (Walker 1994) are terms that have peppered its discourse and it now also describes itself as a ‘NGO [non-governmental organisation] associated with the Department of Public Information of the United Nations’.<sup>2</sup>

This kaleidoscope of self-representations makes it difficult to pinpoint Findhorn’s primary purpose or function. The shifting nomenclature is bound up with fluid organisational structures and a relatively high turnover of personnel: in the early 1990s Metcalf (1993: 10) pointed out that more than half the colony had been there ‘less than five years’. The basic organisation consists in a ‘core’ group, which guards and tends Findhorn’s overall vision; a manage-

ment group, which handles practical decisions; and several work departments with their own budgets. Each department has a ‘focaliser’ (see below); there is also one focaliser for each of the two main settlements, and a focaliser for the Findhorn Foundation as a whole. Nevertheless, institutional adjustment is endemic to Findhorn: during the winter of 1996–7, for example, a radical overhaul saw the *en masse* resignation of the management committee and a lengthy process of internal consultation on long-term structure and aims. Simultaneously a new body, the Findhorn Bay Community Association, sprang up to speak for the interests of alternative practitioners and small businesses in the area in general, since the colony has attracted wider settlement in the locality by ex-residents and affiliates.<sup>3</sup> A further index of flux at Findhorn is the number of official ‘vision statements’ floated in recent years, ranging from the succinct – Judy Buhler-McAllister’s (1995: 35) simple statement ‘we are here to serve the transformation of consciousness’ – to the verbose:

The purpose of the Findhorn Foundation is to create a centre of service and living education for the integration of spiritual principles into everyday life: specifically to create new models for individuals and communities that seek to embody inspired forms of ecology, economy, culture and spirituality.<sup>4</sup>

So Findhorn at the beginning of the twenty-first century continues to be in the near-constant state of reflexive monitoring and organisational experiment that has characterised it from the beginning. The colony now occupies a number of buildings and grounds in and around the market town of Forres and the peninsulate village of Findhorn, twenty-five miles to the north-east of Inverness on the Moray Firth. It has grown and diversified over four decades, and now comprises two main geographical sites. The original settlement is called ‘The Park’, an abbreviation of ‘Findhorn Bay Caravan Park’, where the pioneers set up home in their caravan in November 1962; it was finally purchased in 1983. In 1972 the Findhorn Foundation was constituted as an educational trust and in 1975 it bought Cluny Hill Hotel (‘God’s Hotel’ of Chapter 3), now known simply as ‘Cluny’. These sites – some seven miles apart – and other Foundation properties, including the home of the Moray Steiner school and Newbold House, an affiliated community household – are linked by a daily minibus shuttle service.<sup>5</sup>

The Park is a small section of land bordered on the west by the main road into Findhorn village and, beyond it, the water of Findhorn Bay, and to the other sides by scrub and afforested land adjoining RAF Kinloss, a busy airbase. The latter is a persistent presence in the area: the main thoroughfare in The Park is a stretch of former aircraft runway. The Park gives the general impression of a well-tended holiday park: a profusion of caravans, chalets and wooden houses provide the bulk of resident accommodation, some community-owned, others now private. A Community Centre caters for the communal life of the

settlement; the Universal Hall, a large stone building designed and erected by the community, seats three hundred and is the focus for conferences and meetings as well as touring theatre and music; the Apothecary sells homeopathic and herbal medicines; a Victorian villa accommodates an eclectic library of esoteric literature; and the Phoenix Shop is a sizeable foodstore and bookshop.<sup>6</sup> Communal meditation takes place in The Sanctuary, a large wooden chalet dating from the late 1960s, and also in a small, semi-underground chamber, the Nature Sanctuary, constructed in 1986. A 'green' agenda can be seen in some turf-roofed buildings, an ecological sewage treatment plant, a wind-powered turbine, and 'Trees for Life', a charitable project regenerating native forest in Highland glens. There is a scattering of cars, and some bicycles, but people largely walk around the site.

The 'Cluny' site consists in the massive Victorian hotel building with its sloping garden grounds, including a wooded knoll said to be a 'power point', up and around which a worn spiral path has been trodden over the years. The building itself contains several floors and around two hundred rooms, including large kitchens, a dining room, a ballroom, several large lounges, and a small bookshop. A high-ceilinged room at the rear of the building accommodates Cluny's Sanctuary. It is a busy building, like a large but comfortable youth hostel, and hosts the majority of Findhorn's visitors.

In 1991 the Foundation had about one hundred and seventy 'members', including children and dependents.<sup>7</sup> The community in total – ex-members and associates in addition to the resident core – numbered between four and five hundred. A 1989 count showed that almost two-thirds of the adult residents were women, nearly three-quarters were aged between thirty and fifty, all were white, and a sizeable majority came from the UK, the US and West Germany (Riddell 1991: 132). Participation in Findhorn by Scottish nationals has been, and remains, minimal, with the exception of early figures such as Lena Lamont, one of the 'Nameless Ones' discussed in Chapter 3, and an Edinburgh Theosophist, R. Ogilvie Crombie, who visited regularly in the 1960s. Of two separate fieldwork visits I made in 1995, the 'Experience Week' group contained only one participant resident in Scotland (myself), and less than ten per cent of participants in a sizeable conference on the 'Western Mysteries' lived in Scotland. A simple questionnaire that I circulated within the community supports and clarifies this profile. The self-selected sample of respondents rarely claimed 'New Age' identities, although most could offer sophisticated definitions of the term. They preferred 'spirituality' to 'religion', the latter being understood as 'dogmatic' and 'political'. Alternative medicine and healing were widely advocated, practised, and interwoven with this 'spirituality'. Respondents were overwhelmingly early to late middle-aged: that is, a quarter were aged 30–39, two-thirds 40+. A high level of education was in evidence: almost two-thirds of the sample had attended a university.<sup>8</sup> Another survey, conducted internally in 1997, mapped the kinds of spiritual practice followed at Findhorn: from a sample of one hundred, forty-nine meditated in some way,

seventeen prayed, sixteen ‘walked in nature’, and seventeen studied spiritual texts.<sup>9</sup>

### **Findhorn ethos and economy**

It is a sort of spiritual supermarket, where you can pick and mix and try to find something which suits you.

(Male Findhorn resident)<sup>10</sup>

Life at Findhorn, according to Riddell (1991: 62), is essentially an ‘ongoing workshop’.<sup>11</sup> The metaphor appropriately suggests a culture of discussion and experiment, risk and change. In the mid-1990s the Findhorn Foundation had a turnover of around one million pounds a year, most of which stemmed from its year-round programme of residential courses, conferences and workshops. These feature experimental spiritualities, healing practices and ecological concerns and are advertised in brochures distributed via an international mailing list of some twenty thousand individuals, groups and organisations (at the peak of outreach in the mid-1990s). For example, over the winter of 1994–5 there were conferences on ‘Process-Oriented Psychology’ and ‘The Western Mysteries’, and a three-month gardening course. Week-long courses included ‘Towards Inner Peace and Planetary Wholeness’, ‘Enlightened Leadership’, ‘Inner Listening’, ‘Celtic Creation’ and ‘Iona – A Landscape Temple’. Multi-week ‘spiritual journeys’ led by Foundation staff have also been available: for example, ‘Sacred Nepal’ and ‘African Wilderness and the Human Spirit: a Spiritual Journey to Zimbabwe’. More recent workshops have explored ‘The Gay Man’s Inner Journey’, ‘Relationships as a Path of Spiritual Growth’, and ‘Shamanic Consciousness’.<sup>12</sup> The brochures also include details of residential training in the Foundation lifestyle, ranging from the mandatory ‘Experience Week’ to an apprenticeship of a year or more, after which one might become an employee of the Foundation, settle in the locality, or simply move on.

As one might expect, the demographic profile of visitors closely matches the resident population: Riddell (1991: 112) notes that the majority are white, middle-class professionals, aged 30–45, interested in the environment and self-development; she also notes ‘more than average’ single and divorced people for the age cohort. But the general profile of Findhorn is changing as more Japanese, Brazilian and East European nationals visit. Such shifts reflect wider trends in the global economy. In the early 1990s, for example, Metcalf (1993: 11) discerned a ‘dramatic shift’ since the 1970s from an American to a European core of visitors, and from the ‘alternative’ to the ‘mainstream’ sector: he claims that two-thirds of contemporary guests increasingly pursue careers in ‘mainstream’ society, and half again are ‘business people’. This, of course, fits Riddell’s demography and indicates the acculturation of a general idiom of spirituality, healing and personal growth in the culture at large. Metcalf also perceived a

trend in the 1980s ‘of privatisation and devolution’ in the colony that eroded the oft-perceived ‘communality’ of Findhorn. But consider a remark of a recent chief focaliser of the community: ‘The Findhorn Foundation Community is often talked about as an intentional community. It wasn’t, it was an *accidental community*’ (Buhler-McAllister 1995: 35; emphasis added). This is further support for using ‘colony’ or ‘settlement’ as the most apt descriptors of Findhorn, since these terms accommodate the characteristic to-ing and fro-ing of seekers and the constantly shifting institutional structures, characteristics that are homogenised and reified by the term ‘community’.<sup>13</sup> I return to this point at the end of the chapter. In the meantime, as the following ethnography of ‘Experience Week’ suggests, ‘community’ is less an agent than a by-product of Findhornian praxis: the main focus of the colony is the reflexivity and regeneration of the individual seeker.

### **Experience Week: Findhorn in a nutshell**

It is a week spent saying hallo to spirit in very practical ways.

(Riddell 1991: 117)

Findhorn’s mandatory vehicle of socialisation is ‘Experience Week’, a week-long introduction to the colony’s co-operative lifestyle. Riddell (1991: 117) describes it as ‘an experience of our life in microcosm’. In contrast to the fluctuating structures and personnel mentioned earlier, Experience Week has demonstrated consistency of form and content over time since its trial run in the mid-1970s and hence serves as a reliable guide to certain norms and values operative at Findhorn (and, by extension, elsewhere in alternative spirituality).<sup>14</sup> The following ethnography is based on my fieldwork notes and observations from one such week in February 1995.<sup>15</sup>

My first contact with Findhorn was an envelope franked with the slogan ‘Expect a Miracle’. Inside I read that ‘Experience Week’ was a ‘group experience’ designed to enable individuals ‘to find personal expression in a group context’:

Work is an integral part of our life here through which many of our spiritual lessons are learnt. The rest of the time is devoted to group activities, which aim to deepen your understanding of the Foundation, to encourage you to give and receive support in the ongoing process of spiritual growth, to bring forth your inner riches of love and truth as unique contributions to the world, and to honour the Divine in all life.<sup>16</sup>

It was clearly a serious undertaking. A ‘willingness to meet others with love and respect, to share yourself openly and to participate fully’ was stipulated and prospective participants had to submit a personal letter detailing their ‘spiritual



background, if any' and explaining why they wished to come. I outlined my research interests and also mentioned my personal career as a seeker in the 1980s. I concluded earnestly that

if pressed, I would probably describe myself as a 'religious humanist': that is, I don't believe in 'God', but I do believe that all relationships, all things, must somehow be experienced 'religiously' if we are to begin to fathom the depths and mystery of our worlds.<sup>17</sup>

What the personnel at Findhorn made of this cerebral play I am not sure, but the process of composing a lengthy personal letter to an unknown institution, and then waiting for a reply, made me both expectant and a little anxious. Had I written the 'right kind' of letter? Would my research be tolerated? In short, would I pass muster? In fact a prompt and friendly reply confirmed my place, but contained otherwise troubling information for a researcher on 'New Age': 'Yes, people seem to associate our Community with the "New Age"', wrote the Foundation employee, 'although the general feeling here is that the "New Age" is over'.

As Brierley and Walker (1995: 33) acknowledge, Findhorn is 'by and large dependent upon people travelling hundreds of miles to visit it'. In fact my own journey from Stirling, in central Scotland, was significantly simpler in cost and mileage than those of the other members of my Experience Week group. Increasingly expensive and time-consuming journeys had to be made by Vicky from Manchester, Nick from the Bristol area, Walter from Torquay on the Devon coast, Conor, an Irishman, from Kent, and Sonja, a Serbian student, from London. Others came from further afield: Anna from the Netherlands; Jutta from Munich; Veronique, a Swiss national, from Berlin; Kathy from Oregon; Martine from Brazil; and Corinne, an American, from Switzerland. Many were thus dependent upon air travel, which increased the financial outlay of the week considerably.<sup>18</sup> Two others – Kirsten from Germany and Ingrid from Sweden – were resident Findhorn staff who were participating as part of an internal training programme in group facilitation, and so were already on site. We were fourteen in all, then: ten women and four men, all white Euro-Americans, and three-quarters aged in our thirties and forties, although the overall age range was wide: the youngest, Martine from Brazil, was twenty-one; the oldest, Walter from Torquay, was seventy-eight. Our group profile thus broadly conformed to typical Findhorn demography.

The week ran from Saturday afternoon to the following Friday evening. Apart from two free evenings and one free afternoon, the days were fully programmed. Concentration and stamina were required, and the atmosphere could be emotionally intense. Built into the week was a variety of activities that exemplified Findhorn's environment and lifestyle: guided tours, group sessions, work placements, and informal talks and 'sharings' from residents.

## Saturday

Saturday morning, Experience Week  
 I'm so nervous I can hardly speak  
 Arrive at Cluny Hill, half past ten  
 Almost turned and went home again.<sup>19</sup>

I arrived in Forres just after eleven o'clock on a sunny but cold February morning, prepared for a brisk walk from the station to Cluny in time for registration by noon. However, a handful of individuals had boarded a plain white minibus in the car-park, and on enquiry I learnt that this was the Findhorn Foundation bus and it was going to Cluny. Inside two men in their thirties – Conor and Nick, I later found out – gazed pensively out of opposite windows. An American woman of a similar age – Kathy – asked the driver some questions about Findhorn as we got going. He said non-committally, 'Wait and see, you'll find out for yourself'. We drove through busy shopping traffic. Just outside the town, we headed up a short drive – unsignposted except for 'Private' – and emerged in front of Cluny's imposing bulk. The reception area was busy as our group arrived and another group left: people came and went, parting with smiles and hugs, moving luggage here and there. In the adjoining lounge others read newspapers or talked quietly.

We were directed up a wide staircase to the 'Beech Tree room', a spacious apartment with a bay window. Here it was darker and quieter. A tape of popular songs from the 1940s played and the atmosphere was demure and relaxed. A bursar took outstanding monies and introduced Dagmar and Paul, respectively German and English, both also in their late thirties, who were to be our 'focalisers' for the week ahead. Riddell (1991: 97–8) explains that focalisers are responsible for 'holding the energy' of a group, which means 'connecting with, and making sure others connect with, an inner, spiritual significance of situations, so that things can happen "from the inside out"'. Dagmar gave us a timetable for the week and then led us on a brisk tour of Cluny's facilities: laundry rooms, small shop (books, postcards and candles), dining room, kitchens, Sanctuary, and finally our bedrooms. My notebook records: 'Everything neat, precise, aesthetically quite luscious'. I shared a room with Conor, the Irishman from Kent. On our beds, tucked into folded towels, were 'blessings' cards – small commercially-produced mottoes – left by the housework team. On mine was printed, mysteriously, 'Sisterhood'. I mulled this over. Conor and I chatted. When I explained why I'd come to Findhorn, he said disapprovingly: 'So you're not a heartfelt New Ager, then?'

I wandered outside to admire the view: Cluny sits on a rise overlooking a manicured golf course with small hills beyond. Vicky was sitting on a bench in the sun, apologetically smoking a cigarette. We chatted briefly: like Conor, she'd travelled the previous day and taken a local bed and breakfast for the night. She

put out her cigarette – smoking is rare at Findhorn – and we went to join the noon meditation in the Sanctuary.

There are now three Sanctuaries in all, two at the Park and one at Cluny. The main Park Sanctuary is a purpose-built wooden chalet with a low ceiling, net curtains, a circle of plain upholstered armless chairs, and an abstract weaving of a sunrise on the main wall. There is also a more intimate Nature Sanctuary, which I describe later. The Cluny Sanctuary, where we now headed, is a large airy room with high bay windows at one end where several potted shrubs and plants grew. A stained glass panel on the opposite wall pictured the roots and branches of a flourishing tree. Outside the room we followed the etiquette of removing footwear, leaving our shoes alongside other neat pairs. Atmosphere and deportment in preparation for Sanctuary practice was markedly sober, even grave: I noticed that people now avoided body and eye contact where elsewhere they actively sought it.

Inside the Sanctuary about eighty chairs and a dozen cushions were arranged in a circle around a low table holding a large candle in an elaborate artificial flower arrangement. That Saturday there were perhaps only two dozen people present. I took a seat; a few more came in, in ones and twos. Most people chose the comfortable armless chairs, although some used bulky meditation cushions clustered around the centrepiece. A rota volunteer switched on a prominent red bulb outside the room to warn latecomers that the meditation session had begun: no one should now enter or leave (without good reason) in order to avoid disturbing the ‘energy’ generated by the group meditation. This volunteer read out a few words from Eileen Caddy’s book of guidance, *Opening Doors Within* (a copy of which was left in each sanctuary) and then struck a metal bowl. This emitted a low, reverberating note. The meditation had begun, and continued in silence for some twenty minutes. Most meditators had closed eyes – one man wore a sleeping mask – and sat with feet on the floor; some sat cross-legged on the chairs; many rested cupped hands lightly on their laps, palms uppermost, thumbs lightly touching. Twenty minutes later the bowl was struck again to conclude the session. Most left quietly then, although one or two lingered in solitary meditation. Someone picked up the Caddy text and pondered it. As we walked quietly down to the dining room for lunch, Conor asked me ‘How was the meditation for you?’ His had been ‘powerful’, he said.

Meditation at Findhorn revolved around two sanctuary sessions daily, in the morning and at noon. Abstract themes supplied a general focus for each session, such as ‘love’, ‘wisdom’, ‘compassion’, and ‘healing’. Special meditations also took place: during my stay, for AIDS sufferers. There were also regular singing sessions using songs and chants from the French Christian community, Taizé. Individual use of the Sanctuaries also proceeds more or less around the clock, and it was not unusual to see one or two pairs of shoes or slippers outside the door at most times of the day or evening.

Food at Findhorn is vegetarian with some vegan options, although fish is

served on Fridays when alcohol is also available.<sup>20</sup> After a tasty buffet lunch, we gathered in the Beech Tree room for our first group session. We sat on comfortable straight-back chairs in a large circle, in the middle of which was placed, on the floor, a lit candle in an arrangement of dried leaves and pine cones. We discussed the week's schedule and were given a thumbnail sketch of the community by our focalisers. Paul said that Findhorn's focus was getting in touch with divine reality: 'what we call Spirit', he said, 'or the God within'. Dagmar and Paul now introduced us to a ritual practice called 'attunement'.<sup>21</sup> To 'attune', we remained in a circle, facing in, joined hands and closed our eyes. The ritual requires a special way of connecting hands: the right hand is offered palm-up, the left palm-down (we fumbled self-consciously with this at first, some of us giggling). Dagmar spoke a few words – 'let us bless the week ahead and be open to all that it brings' – which we considered quietly for a few moments. Then she lightly squeezed her neighbours' hands and let go: this signal was passed round the circle and we gradually opened our eyes. Our first attunement was over. For a few moments, the group remained quiet and thoughtful, some smiling, others making gentle eye contact. Looking around me, I thought I saw stiller bodies and calmer faces.

We were now ready to be instructed in 'sharing'. In this practice, individuals take it in turns to speak about whatever they wish so long as they express themselves 'from the heart', as a popular expression in the colony has it. Dagmar said: 'We share according to what I call the popcorn principle: when you feel something bubbling inside, it's your turn, you're ready to go!' But Paul carefully explained that sharing is no emotional free-for-all. He introduced some ground rules. First, we were to speak from our own experience, from what we had 'gone through' ourselves, rather than according to opinions we had formed or ideas we had acquired 'second-hand', as it were. Second, we were to speak in the first person only, a speech act known as making an 'I' statement or 'owning' one's communication: speculation and abstraction were out. Third, we should seek eye contact with whomever we were addressing, rather than looking away as we spoke. Fourth, listeners were not to interrupt when someone was sharing – whether to agree, dispute or offer advice – although a challenge could be made to a contribution deemed overly discursive and hence lacking the crucial ingredients of spontaneity and reflexivity. Such a challenge was soon forthcoming from Dagmar to my room-mate Conor, when he began to talk rather abstractly of finding 'things' difficult and depressing. 'Conor, is that an "I" statement you're making?', she prompted, 'are you talking about yourself?' Similarly, when Sonja, the Serbian student, suddenly became self-conscious in the middle of a sentence and dropped her eyes, Paul said: 'Sonja, look up, look around you, look at the group!' Former Findhorn resident Akhurst (1992: 116) has written: 'There is something tender about such a gaze that touches a deep level, a place near the heart that lets the other in, attaching no judgment or expectation'. Perhaps so, but it could be disconcerting to the novice, particularly among a group of people who had only just met. But 'stranger' was

a concept that would soon be challenged under the accelerated conditions of Experience Week.

The purpose of this first session quickly became apparent. We were to apply our understanding of the new ritual practices we had been taught – focalising, attuning and sharing – to our personal ‘introductions’ to the rest of the group: that is, our biographical stories of how and why we had come to Findhorn. Taking it in turns around the circle, we passed two hours in this fashion. The careful choice of words by each speaker, close reciprocal attention from the group, and a general heightening of emotional intensity all round were the noticeable effects of our clumsy but game experimentation with these new interpersonal rituals. Nick, a self-employed computer programmer and Quaker attendee, told us he’d known of Findhorn ‘for years’ – ‘I always knew I’d come’ – but had prevaricated ‘because I was afraid I’d never leave once I got here!’ Vicky, a mother and ‘closet’ Pagan, was keen to explore the Community’s understanding of ‘nature’, but commitments to her children had prevented her from visiting sooner. Corinne, also a mother, used images of pregnancy and childbirth to celebrate her female creativity; born in America, living now in Switzerland, she described herself as a ‘world citizen’. Kathy, another software programmer, had come as part of an extended European holiday she had organised to take stock of her foundering marriage; she claimed to know relatively little about Findhorn and to have come on impulse. Veronique, a Swiss-born midwife from Berlin, had just ended a long-term partnership; like Kathy, she remained preoccupied throughout the week and was particularly unforthcoming in this first session, partly through language difficulties. One exchange in particular underlined the new ethos of expressivity and bodily contact. In the middle of telling us how he had left a secure job in computers to travel on his savings, Conor became tongue-tied and agitated, whereupon Walter, a long-term Theosophist who had previously visited Findhorn in the 1970s, crossed the room and said, ‘come on, old son, stand up: you need a hug!’ Thus two men who had only just met – one in his late seventies, the other in his mid-thirties – embraced briefly and awkwardly in front of the group: the first of many such hugs.

And so it went on until all had spoken, whereupon we held hands again to ‘tune out’.<sup>22</sup> A pattern of interaction and a conceptual framework were deftly set out by Dagmar and Paul during this first session. Whatever else we did in the week ahead, we would meet as a group every day, attuning, sharing and generally taking our cue from the hints and nudges of our focalisers. The willed intensity of this attitudinal transformation on the part of a group of strangers from all over the world was summed up in Corinne’s remark to me after dinner: ‘We’re a family now’. That same morning we had not even met.

In the evening there was a mixed gender sauna, but such self-disclosure was more than anyone in our group was yet ready for. Before bed I spent twenty-five minutes in the Sanctuary, alone, digesting the events of the day. My notes

read: 'I decide to go *deep within* and *listen*, rather than look to a lead from others in the group'. Findhorn was already casting its spell.

### Sunday

We do not attempt to come to simple, rational decisions, based on the perceived interests of the parties involved. We seek to find 'what wants to happen', by inner attunement.

(Riddell 1991: 93)

Something inside me said, *Yeah – that's it*. It wasn't a voice, more a feeling, but I knew it was true. My mind said no, while my heart said yes.

(Tattersall 1996: 22)

'Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists. Herein lies the peace of God'. These opening words from *A Course in Miracles*, a massive channelled text first published in America in 1975, were quietly intoned by an Irish woman in her forties to begin morning Sanctuary meditation. I recognised some of our group among the twenty or so present. Yesterday we had been encouraged to join in the community meditation schedule, but although many of our group, including myself, participated most days, on no occasion was the Sanctuary more than about half-full at most. Akhurst (1992: 113) noticed a similar pattern when he lived at Findhorn in the mid-1980s: 'Guests told me they could see all the Experience Week [participants] in the Sanctuary morning and evening, but where were the members? Did they meditate at different times?'<sup>23</sup> I return to this point later.

This morning a visualisation exercise followed the lesson from *A Course in Miracles*. We were invited to imagine ourselves moving towards an intense source of light that was obscured by clouds, and yet to understand that these clouds had no real substance; we were invited to feel them soft and wet against our eyes and forehead as we floated into them and through them . . . and then we were left to the morning silence. A thrush called outside; someone coughed; the candle in the middle flickered and recovered. Walter and Veronique breached Sanctuary etiquette by stumbling in when the red light was on and whispering noisily in the vestibule. Later I overheard the rota volunteer telling Dagmar to make sure our group understood correct procedure.

After Sanctuary we gathered in the ballroom to do 'Sacred Dance': folk dances from Greece, Yugoslavia, Israel and Russia. Introduced into the community by a German musicologist in the 1970s, Sacred Dance – elsewhere called 'circle dance' or 'international community dance' – is now an established feature of Findhorn life.<sup>24</sup> Music was provided by a well-worn tape-recording of the Findhorn Sacred Dance Band. These dances required close physical contact, from holding hands to clasping each others' waists. Once again we were

encouraged not to flinch from eye contact nor to ‘block the energy’ in needless chatter between dances. In my notebook I wrote: ‘They’re fun, simple steps and neat movements, and a good way to relate without words’.

At brunch in the palatial dining room I sought out Dagmar, who was sitting alone by the large bay window. I tentatively voiced my scepticism about some ingredients in the Findhorn mix – UFOs, ‘Spirit’, ‘power points’. To my surprise, Dagmar laughed: ‘Yeah, I don’t feel anything when I go up there, either’, she said, referring to the ‘power point’ behind Cluny.

In the afternoon we drove by minibus to Findhorn village. It was cold and wintry; the village was quiet, the large caravan park shut up for the winter. We came to the beach, a long, bare expanse of sand and pebbles. We milled around for a while, skimming stones, scanning the cold sea for dolphins, or simply gazing out on the dark hills across the Moray Firth. Paul chose a special pebble he told us we would need for our group work later in the week. Then we drove the mile or so back to the Park, where an Australian resident took us on a walking tour of the original caravan settlement. Although now considerably expanded and landscaped, the Park retains a ‘frontier’ atmosphere: despite increasing numbers of new houses, much accommodation is still chalets, caravans, and even whisky-barrels (a cluster of converted distillery casks, known as ‘Bag End’ after Bilbo’s home in *The Hobbit*). The overall impression is simultaneously parochial and countercultural, a cross between a seaside chalet park and an ‘alternative’ village. Buildings nestle among trees, shrubs and a network of paths. We visited the shabby but welcoming Community Centre, the Universal Hall (an imposing edifice with a large performance hall, basement recording rooms, and cafe), and the Nature Sanctuary, all built by the community. Our tour ended at the latter, a small oval chamber whose site had been chosen, according to our guide, following advice from ‘one of the little people’: a fairy or nature spirit. Heating kept the room warm, comfortable and curiously womb-like. We sat on cushions around the walls; a candle on the cleft stone centrepiece was lit; and Paul and Dagmar introduced a new exercise. First, as usual, we attuned; then we each silently meditated upon a particular ‘quality’ we wished to receive from the week. Finally we drew an ‘angel card’ from a small pile. This represented the reality of the ‘quality’ or issue we had to ‘work with’, like it or not. Like the ‘blessings’ card slipped into our towels at Cluny, the angel card showed an abstract word, but this time illustrated by a rather schmaltzy cartoon of angels.<sup>25</sup> In my meditation I had requested ‘Confidence’, but actually drew ‘Faith’. The picture showed two angels in mid-air flight between trapeze swings. Not unlike the epistemic acrobatics required by the fieldworker, I thought. On the other hand, perhaps the angels were nudging me to rethink my scepticism? Others were not so fortunate: Kathy, for example, struggling with feelings of depression over her failing marriage, drew ‘Joy’, and bitterly displayed her selection to the group. A card was also drawn to symbolise the group’s overall essence: it was ‘Release’. ‘Mmm’, nodded Dagmar. Paul raised his eyebrows and smiled.

Back at Cluny, we gathered after dinner. Paul added the pebble from the beach and the group's 'Release' angel card to the candle arrangement in the centre of the circle. Now we were to attune to find appropriate work placements for each of us in the week ahead. Several of the group – Anna and Vicky in particular – wanted to work in the famous Findhorn gardens. Paul read out a list of the departments currently needing help, and we were asked to meditate to discover which one we felt 'drawn to', the idea being that 'we would feel something inside ourselves' for the right job (Tattersall 1996: 22). The list was then read out again, and by a pragmatic combination of meditation and reflection, the various requirements were resolved. Following half an hour of sharing, the evening concluded with a session entitled 'Inner Life'. 'Frank is coming to share with you on spiritual practice', said Dagmar. Frank was an American in his late forties or early fifties. He enthusiastically described Findhorn to us as 'living Zen'. 'It's about being *here, now*', he said, 'rather than *there, then*'. He supported this message with readings from Benjamin Hoff's *The Tao of Pooh* and T. S. Eliot's poem *Little Gidding*. Frank spoke charismatically about his own 'spiritual path', which began with Psychosynthesis, took him to Findhorn in the 1970s and then on to Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh in Poona, India, before recently returning to Findhorn. To end the session he led a visualisation exercise in which we were to imagine ourselves sitting in a darkened film theatre ready to watch the 'movie of your own life'. But the film was playing in reverse, running backwards through our recent past, into early adulthood and teenage years, back into our childhoods, and finishing with us as discarnate spirits about to enter our mothers' wombs. We then quickly re-wound the film to the present and visualised ourselves leaving our 'home movies' with fresh understanding of our life purpose. Frank's mellifluous drone wove an atmosphere of drama and empowerment around this simple exercise in the recuperation of popular culture for spiritual practice.

## Monday

Work is love in action.

(Findhorn saying)

Today we began our work placements. Jutta, the young German woman from Munich, and I had attuned to posts in the Community Centre at the Park, so we took the morning minibus from Cluny, arriving just in time for meditation in the Park Sanctuary. This is the original Findhorn Sanctuary: as we saw in Chapter 2, it occupies a site said to be a 'power point'. It is a quiet chalet sheltered by trees and shrubs. This morning about forty meditators were present, and the session began with a Taize chant.

The Park Sanctuary is a stone's throw from the Community Centre (known as the 'CC'), where work began just after nine o'clock. We were six in the work group: the CC focaliser, Stella, one of the few Scots residents I met, a



Glaswegian with infectious spontaneity; Jane, a studious American who was enrolled as a Foundation student; a Swiss student, Heidi, who had decided that Findhorn wasn't for her and was in her final week there; Rudi, an Austrian psychotherapist now experimenting with spiritual healing; and the Experience Week neophytes, Jutta and myself. The group gave us a warm welcome, and we sat on benches round one of the dining tables to attune and share. Stella, the focaliser, went first. 'I'm feeling just great!' she announced, throwing out her arms and laughing, 'It's just great to *be* here'. 'Mmm,' said Rudi, smiling and nodding slowly as he looked at each of us in turn, 'I'm feeling *good*.' 'Yeah, I'm feeling pretty good this morning, but tired after a busy weekend' said Jane. Only Heidi was muted: 'I think it's time for me to move on,' she said, and shrugged. The others nodded soberly. But the general enthusiasm was contagious. I said I was glad to be at the Park and among the wider community: indeed, I was beginning to find our group sessions at Cluny claustrophobic and reminiscent of group therapy.

We set to work. Our remit was to clean the entrance hallway, toilets, dining and lounge areas of the CC while the Kitchen staff – including Martine from our group – laboured behind the hatch preparing the lunch. We were to clean the furniture, maintain condiments and candles on the table tops, and vacuum and mop the floors. As it happens, I was working in a celebrated role: no less a figure than Peter Caddy (1996: 328) – presumably with his own catering apprenticeship in mind – thought that cleaning the CC was

a wonderful training ground for future leaders, for it was necessary to be very aware: to make sure that the tables were lined up, the salt and pepper pots were full, the window sills dusted, and that the tables were laid in time for each meal. It involved real discipline and attention to detail, and was where the founding principles of Findhorn could be put into practice – to love where you are, to love whom you're with, and to love what you're doing.

If the tasks nevertheless seemed menial, the atmosphere was pleasant – Rudi put some orchestral music on – and the pace was leisurely. 'Those toilets look great!', called Jane to me as she wandered past with the vacuum cleaner. We had an extended tea-break, and were comfortably finished in time for noon Sanctuary. We ended the session by tuning out: Stella blessed the morning's work and enjoined us to release our feelings and 'move on' into the rest of the day. After Sanctuary, the CC filled up for lunch with about sixty people, most of them residents and employees. Many lit candles at their tables. The atmosphere was busy and convivial.

Back at Cluny a session of 'trust' games was scheduled under the heading 'Group Discovery'. Two Foundation staff, a young Italian man, Dario, and an older German woman, Helge, were our focalisers. 'You're gonna enjoy this,' said Dario, in heavily Americanised English, 'I just *love* seeing groups open up to the

games'. We began with a mirroring exercise. I paired up with Walter, the elderly Theosophist. Facing each other, we took it in turns to initiate movements – facial gestures, arm or torso movements – which the other copied as closely as possible. The aim was to reach a point where movement and response were so seamlessly integrated that it was difficult for an outsider to differentiate them. Next we played 'cars and drivers': the 'cars' closed their eyes, and were directed by the 'drivers', who stood behind them and 'drove' them with hands on shoulders. Paired with Jutta, I found her enthusiastic 'driving' quite unnerving. Although I kept my eyes shut, I tensed my body. Afterwards Jutta said, half-accusingly, half-jokingly: 'You didn't trust me!'

Two exuberant games followed. The first was a children's tag game where you could only escape being 'it' by hugging somebody. This occasioned waves of adrenalin and gales of laughter. In the second, we stood with closed eyes while our focalisers assigned us one of several animal categories. At the command 'dogs!', 'goats!' or in my case 'sheep!' (and was this esoterically significant, I wondered?), we had to locate our fellow creatures across the room by making appropriate animal noises and feeling with our hands. This was generally hilarious, and 'baa-ing' at each other became a running joke through the week between myself and Veronique.

There were two quiet physical exercises. In the first, to the accompaniment of ambient music we took it in turns to assume a contorted shape on the floor to symbolise isolation and retreat from the world. The partner – in my case Paul the focaliser – then carefully 'unfolded' my knotted shape, lifting my limbs and rearranging me in a more relaxed position. In the space for feedback afterwards, I told Paul I found his handling of me a bit brisk. 'Sorry', he said, simply. In the second, we closed eyes again and were paired with an anonymous partner. Taking one of their hands in ours, we were to express, with the activity of our fingers only, various stipulated moods and emotions: for example, 'sadness', 'joy' or 'irritation'. I found this an intimate and touching exercise.

This session dramatically promoted a wide spectrum of physical contact, including the rumbustious, the sensual and the tender. Tears, laughter and hugging spread like a contagion through the group as we got into our new behavioural stride, and the afternoon finished in a riot of hugging, in couples, trios and, finally, as one large group. Such close physical contact was encouraged by the pervasive culture at Findhorn of taking the other's hand or touching her arm when speaking, even in brief everyday encounters, and by generous hugging when greeting, sharing or parting, often for a minute or longer. I overheard one individual hail another at Cluny reception with the exclamation 'Hey, give me one of those famous Findhorn full-frontals!', meaning the colony's characteristically close, lingering hug.

That evening, following a relaxed half-hour of sharing, a staff gardener visited us to talk about 'Nature'. First we did a guided meditation to attune to the 'nature spirits' – in my case, unsuccessfully – and then the gardener told us of her favourite gardening techniques, including meditating with the plants and

dowsing for ‘earth energies’. Some tentative, even awed, questions followed, particularly from Vicky regarding the nature spirits and the ‘Pan energy’ associated with Findhorn. There was also some approving discussion of the ‘Perelandra’ method of esoteric gardening in the US, whereby selected rows of crops are ‘offered’ to local fauna, such as rabbits, in exchange for their not encroaching on the rest of the crop. In my notebook I wrote impatiently: ‘Much talk all day on “energy”, which is a word that stands for much and anything’. Talismanic use of the term ‘energy’ is in fact pervasive in the discourse of alternative spirituality. St John (1977: 39–40) notes how ‘an individual may feel a lot of energy or a lack of energy’, that ‘energy in a group may be high or low, may suddenly surge or droop’ and that in general ‘energy is something that gets blocked (bad) or flows freely and spontaneously (good)’.

## Tuesday

Tuesday morning, with a Hoover in my hand  
 Cleaning out the dining room, beginning to understand  
 Tuning in, tuning out  
 Startin’ to see what Findhorn is all about.

In the morning I was back in the CC at the Park, one moment polishing table tops, the next talking about spiritual healing with Rudi at teabreak. These work placements gave us insight into the day-to-day life of the wider community, a factor also advantageous to Findhorn since without exception prospective students, even those who wish to take further workshops, must begin their career in an Experience Week. The work placement also suggested that the intense interpersonal contact propagated in our group sessions remained high in the colony at large and was not simply an exaggerated distillate of Experience Week. As one might expect, however, effusive and indiscriminate sharing seemed to be particularly redolent of novices like ourselves, and a degree of behavioural routinisation (less demonstrative, more selective) could be detected in other strata in the colony, especially among veteran residents and families (a distinctly minority grouping). But mixing with residents generally reinforced the new behavioural and cognitive norms we had learned. At the same time Stella genuinely encouraged us to re-evaluate our attitude to mundane work: instead of seeing it as a chore to be done as quickly as possible, we should see it as an end in itself and learn how to *enjoy* it. Thus cheery conversation, jokes and bright music were typical punctuations to a week of undemanding but essentially dreary domestic labour.

The morning passed quickly and we tuned out with Stella’s simple blessings on the work. Just before lunch there was a special gathering to mark the restoration of the Caddys’ original caravan, just across the path from where Eileen Caddy now lived, in a timber house symbolically named ‘Cornerstone’. Part of the original garden beside the caravan was also restored and dedicated

to the nature spirits. Forty to fifty residents and friends were gathered, including Caddy herself in fresh lipstick, blue-rinsed hair and wellington boots, and carrying a large framed photograph of her husband, Peter, who had been killed in a car crash the previous year. There was some live music from violin and accordion and then the focaliser of the restoration project spoke. The caravan embodied the spirit of Findhorn, he said; it marked the site where 'spirit first came into matter'. Although some had opposed the restoration project, he continued, Eileen herself, the sole founder still in residence, had wanted the caravan to be saved. Then Caddy herself, in a clipped English accent, pronounced a 'blessing of the Christ' on the caravan.

Back at Cluny we gathered on the grass outside the main entrance at 1.50 p.m. sharp (the week was immaculately choreographed) for a group photograph. Next on the schedule was a 'Nature Outing'. We drove to a popular beauty spot on the Findhorn river, attuned beside the swirling peaty water, and were invited by Dagmar simply to '*be in nature*' for the next couple of hours. 'Feel the energy. See what happens', she said with a smile. Some wandered off in pairs; others, including myself, chose to be alone. Apart from Vicky, whom I saw sitting on a boulder beside the spate, swaying and chanting in impromptu Pagan worship, and Sonja, whom I passed in a sandy cove sadly prodding the water with a stick, I scarcely saw the others. My notebook simply records: 'Many thoughts came and went'.

The evening sharing was long and relaxed: 'much giggling, as well as from-the-heart accounts', reads my notebook. But I also wrote: 'When does Findhorn become "easy", "glib"? How open is it to feelings of conflict, of anger?' I realised that the emic response to my query would be to turn it back on itself: or rather, to turn *me* back on *myself* and hence to see the question as a projection of my own suspicion and scepticism, my own negativity. For the second half of the evening Christina, overall focaliser for the Park, joined us to explain management structures at Findhorn. These, she said, were always fluid: the main tension was between 'core group', guardians of Findhorn's spiritual vision, and management group, who budgeted for the bigger picture.<sup>26</sup> To Corinne's complaint about the apparent lack of provision for children and families at Findhorn, Christina replied that the dynamic flux of the place 'throws the spotlight on *you* to create the space *you* want'. Since 'external events are really reflections of internal processes: that is, the world, and everything in it, is a mirror of the self', then it was simply up to us to identify and effect the changes we desired.<sup>27</sup> The goal was to find space for a variety of lifestyles at Findhorn. Christina said she herself was a single parent and sought a 'more feminine vision of leadership' to defuse polarities and embrace opposites. 'There is no such thing as an enemy', she said passionately, 'only friends and potential friends'. When Sonja spoke up emotionally at this point to describe her guilt and paranoia as a Serb demonised by media coverage of the then-raging Balkan war, Christina embraced her warmly, declaring 'as a German, how I know what this feels like!'

### Wednesday

Don't leave even a speck of dust. It must be perfect. God made us perfectly, so only perfection is good enough for God. No sweeping things under the carpet!

(The Caddys' instructions to their housekeeper,  
in Caddy 1988: 2)

After morning meditation in the Sanctuary we gathered in Cluny's lounge. Paul and Dagmar introduced Sam, a wiry white New Zealander in her late forties who described herself as a 'modern gypsy'. Sam was to focalise a special group project: spring-cleaning the lounge. We began, as usual, with attunement. Sam spoke of the need to clean the external world with the same thoroughness we would apply to our 'inner work' (a pervasive metaphor in Findhorn genealogy, as we have seen). We then attuned to individual jobs. I found myself with Corinne and Sam carrying chairs along the passage to the old ballroom, where we painstakingly polished them. Sam was brisk and resolute: when I suggested we stack the chairs outside the lounge to save time and energy, she said, simply but sharply, 'No!'

In the afternoon we settled down in our circle to study a pamphlet by David Spangler. Dagmar introduced his work as the 'next step' in Findhorn's evolution, after Eileen Caddy's guidance by 'Spirit' and Dorothy Maclean's co-operation with the 'devas' or nature spirits. *Cooperation with Spirit: Further Conversations with John* is a collection of communications received in the 1970s by Spangler from a homely inner guide he calls 'John' (see Chapter 5). Dagmar explained that we would read the text aloud in a circle, taking a paragraph in turn. We shouldn't believe every word, she advised, but should be open to 'resonances', including the esoteric significance of the particular paragraph it fell to each of us to read.

Progress was slow: many of us struggled with Spangler's abstract language. After a while we stopped to share, and a variety of feelings were aired, some at a tangent to the text. Martine spoke of her sadness at living in Brazil in personal comfort, but alongside poverty and homelessness. She said, 'I know it's their karma that they have chosen this purification, but to see little children starving – it makes me feel so unhappy!' Some murmured agreement. But I said I was sceptical of the existence of karma and 'spiritual worlds': I didn't believe that anyone 'chose' to be born in poverty. The group listened impassively. Dagmar nodded thoughtfully. But no debate followed. Later I wondered how much passion might emerge in the group if uncomfortable feelings were enunciated as clearly as more normative emotions and attitudes. Certainly our group was quite conformist, even placid (was this because of, or despite, the 'release' invoked by our group angel?). Everyone attended all sessions; there was little or no challenge to the authority of our focalisers; and most of us worked diligently to adapt to our new environment. Although criticism and 'negative' feelings

were not expressly forbidden, scepticism was voiced privately (if at all).<sup>28</sup> However, I would guess that our group's amenability is broadly typical of Experience Week culture, since the considerable travel and expense involved in combination with mythified expectations of the colony are likely to encourage a behavioural 'honeymoon'.<sup>29</sup> As and if neophytes penetrate deeper into colony life, they will inevitably be faced with real interpersonal conflicts and differing social statuses of a kind already hinted at in this account (Bruce 1998).

Frank returned before supper to share a favourite passage from an Alice Bailey book. 'I've carried this around the globe with me', he said, waving a dog-eared paperback called *Glamour: A World Problem* (1950). The extract he had chosen was from the 'Rules of the Road', an allegory of the spiritual quest first published in *Discipleship in the New Age* in 1944. Rule three gives a flavour of the series:

Upon that Road one wanders not alone. There is no rush, no hurry.  
And yet there is no time to lose. Each Pilgrim, knowing this, presses his  
footsteps forward, and finds himself surrounded by his fellowmen.  
Some move ahead: he follows after. Some move behind; he sets the  
pace. He travels *not* alone.

(Bailey 1981: 584)<sup>30</sup>

Frank gave another virtuoso performance, slowly and rhythmically reading out the text and then providing an esoteric gloss. I found this quite cathartic. It also triggered a response in Sonja, who became angry and tearful about her Serbian identity. For the first – and last – time that week, a voice charged with real frustration and rage disturbed the equanimity of the Beech Tree room.

### Thursday

When I was still and listened to my inner self, I learned I would never be led astray. What seemed to be trivial coincidences proved to be quite significant. These incidents all had purpose and importance.

(Tattersall 1996: 30)

My notebook today tersely records: 'Morning: work at Park. Conversation from Rudi around chakras and colour energy. I cleaned the toilets.' The afternoon was free. I browsed in the Phoenix Shop, which stocks an extensive selection of books, magazines, Tarot decks, jewellery, wind-chimes, incense, music, clothes, drums, candles, and a wholefood, organic grocery. Then I followed a path that led beyond the whisky-barrel residences and came down over scrubby dunes to the beach. In the lea of the dunes I came across some spiral patterns marked out with pebbles and driftwood, presumably by Findhornians. I followed the

largest spiral carefully into its centre: the passage was just wide enough to accommodate one pair of feet.

### Friday

We had naturally become as a family to each other in a mere seven days. However, in our final meeting we could feel our group's energy begin to dissipate. We then understood that the appropriate time to leave Findhorn had come.

(Tattersall 1996: 32)

On the minibus to the Park this morning I chatted with Martine, the youngest member of our group. Experience Week was her last port of call in a year of travel that had also included four months on an Israeli kibbutz. 'It was hard work', she said, 'and fun, but not a spiritual place, not like here'. Today's work session in the CC was the last. Just before lunch we gathered and drew 'blessings' cards – appropriately enough, mine was 'movement' – and then we shared and tuned out for the last time.

Back in the Beech Tree room after lunch were copies of the group photograph taken earlier in the week. Paul announced forthcoming workshops, advertised some Findhorn books and explained ways of 'keeping connected': for example, we could join the 'Stewards of Findhorn' network or we could meditate for twenty minutes each day at local noontime to 'align with' Sanctuary practice and help 'create a network of light around the world'. Then we settled down for our last session: 'Completion'. The stone that Paul had chosen on the beach last Sunday was to be the 'talking stone'. Whoever held it, spoke, and when finished, passed it on to the individual whom she or he sensed the stone 'wants to go to' next. 'Say whatever you need to say to complete the week for you', advised Dagmar.

Most of the group took their time, weighing the pebble thoughtfully in their hands as they sought suitable words. Some – Kirsten, Anna, Sonja – were shy or reserved and spoke little; others – Jutta, Kathy, Veronique – tried to articulate difficult feelings; a few – Vicky, Walter – waxed lyrical. Conor described himself as a bird of passage: 'Findhorn is a rock', he said, 'and I'm perched on it for a while, but that's all'. Nick said 'I just want to say thank you' and quickly passed the stone on. I was last. I had a photograph of my son Owen, then just six months old, lying on his back after a bath. I passed it round the circle to general amusement and cries of delight. 'He's lovely!' said Ingrid. 'He's giving you a dirty look!' exclaimed Walter. Suddenly embarrassed, I looked down and away. 'Steve, look up, look at the group!' said Dagmar, touching my knee to get my attention, 'see the pleasure on their faces!' We finished up passing kisses round our circle and then stood quietly together. 'That's it!' said Paul, stretching. 'It's over' said Dagmar. Someone put on a tape and the afternoon broke up amid free-style dancing.

### Postscript: the post-Experience Week experience

Although no one left until the following morning, the week had effectively finished, and it felt like it. Some were staying on – Conor to enter the student programme, Anna, Jutta, and Kathy to do ‘Experience Week 2’. Kirsten and Ingrid, and our focalisers Paul and Dagmar, melted back into the community. I returned home with a Findhorn candle and a few books and – still in my fuzzy role – made a few attempts to ‘link up’ with Sanctuary meditation; for a few months, too, I kept my angel card (‘Faith’) in my wallet. A few communications came out of the blue. Conor sent a note from Orkney and a postcard from Ireland after packing in the student programme. He wrote: ‘I think Findhorn is great but it’s not right for me at present’. Vicky sent me a birthday card with the Pagan greeting ‘bright blessings’. Veronique sent a postcard of people swarming across the Berlin Wall. She wrote: ‘I try to remember my angel and the angel of the group. I am feeling better at work; beside that, there has been no great miracle in my life.’ In the summer I received a circular letter from Sonja in London promoting a month of meditation and prayers for Bosnia. In an accompanying note, Sonja said she was about to return to Findhorn following involvement in the ‘Alternatives’ programme at St James’s Church, which she described as ‘real spirit of Findhorn in the heart of London’.

Nearly two years later, only Sonja, Walter and Anna replied to my letter asking for reflections on the long-term effects of Experience Week. Sonja sent me a lengthy list of the talks, courses and workshops she had been attending in and around London. Walter reiterated the personal strength he found in Theosophical metaphysics and explained how this chimed with the Findhorn worldview. Neither had kept in touch with any of the group except for a few postcards. Nor had Anna. But she had a copy of Eileen Caddy’s book *Opening Doors Within*, which she read from daily. ‘What I learned from Findhorn is to be present in the moment’, she wrote from the Netherlands. ‘Don’t look too far ahead, because a lot of things come in another way than I expect [*sic*]’.

### Accidental community

At the moment I tend towards Eastern religions but I don’t follow anything specific, I like to pick out what is true for me and follow that and use it.

(Kirsten, Findhorn resident  
and Experience Week participant)

I first came to Findhorn on the track of answers to the Big Questions such as: Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going? Whose turn is it to buy the next round? And, your place or mine?

(Dennis Evenson, ex-resident)<sup>31</sup>



Findhorn is a hall of mirrors, a place to meet yourself round every corner, in every object, in every person you meet.

(Nick Rose, resident)<sup>32</sup>

Despite other indices of institutional flux, Findhorn ideology and practice over the years has consistently revolved around 'inner work'. Such a focus is now ideally suited to contemporary cultural conditions where, with the dilution of traditional sources of corporate authority such as a master narrative, a priesthood and the discipline of the congregation, religion has become by default a self-sited and personally-negotiated practice of strategically-interacting individuals. To be sure, religion has always been this *in part*; but at Findhorn, as elsewhere in the field since the 1970s hermeneutical shift, it is now *largely* this.

At the same time this radical rhetoric of personal and inter-personal transformation and spiritual freedom should not be allowed to obscure the functionalism of group culture in servicing the needs of seekers over the past half-century. In this sense 'New Age' group culture has certain inbuilt constraints, sharing affinities with the evangelically-derived piety of Sheena Govan's Pimlico circle or the secular confessionalism of encounter groups rather than with, say, the shifting forms of the early twentieth-century anarchist movement, the syndicalist committees of the 1968 student movement or the communal drift of 'New Age travellers'. Findhorn's 'pietist' heritage can be seen in the ubiquitous practice of 'sharing', a technique derived in part from Faith Mission evangelism (Sheena Govan) and the Moral Re-Armament movement (Peter and Eileen Caddy). Similarly the encounter group influence of the 1970s persists in the physical culture of touching and hugging, the emotional expressivity and the recuperation of the sensuous, fleshy body as a devotional site through dance, yoga, sauna and massage. Indeed, the role of this hybrid group praxis in fomenting lay expressions of spirituality explains in part the vituperation heaped upon all things 'New Age' by conservative evangelicals, particularly in the US, who detect in 'New Age' groups a powerful rival in the expanding market of de-clericalised religion.

The confessional culture bequeathed by both pietist and encounter currents is encapsulated in the general injunction at Findhorn to speak 'from the heart', the latter symbolised by the heart-shaped logo placed next to signatures on letters and notes. The heart symbolises authenticity and wholeness, in contrast to the head, which is popularly portrayed as the rather cold and alienated source of reason and calculation. 'Too heady' was a frequent complaint made by members of the audience at the 'Western Mysteries' conference. One of the conference organisers justified this reaction by explaining that Findhorn was not an academic community: rational debate, he said, was 'interesting, but polarising'. Findhorn, on the other hand, sought inclusivity and consensus. Findhornians therefore had a 'right' to be 'suspicious of academics'.<sup>33</sup> As a male resident explained to me: 'I am moving away from the purely mental/conceptual ideas of religion and into the heart': the former, he said, was

‘cold/hard/limited in scope’ whereas the heart was ‘warm/soft/flowing and limitless’.<sup>34</sup> The role of affectivity in late ‘New Age’ is exemplified in the results of a questionnaire I gave out in my Experience Week group: as a descriptor of the most important type of spiritual experience, almost all respondents ticked my category of ‘emotional release: overwhelming feelings of devotion, love, peacefulness, happiness, etc.’ The fact that such values are now diffused in Anglo–American popular culture demonstrates the extent to which the gap between ‘alternative’ and ‘mainstream’ spirituality has been closed since the 1970s: the biography of Diana, Princess of Wales and ‘Queen of Hearts’ in the popular mourning following her death, is a case in point (Woodhead 1999).

In sum, Experience Week offers visitors competence in managing a particular style of spirituality partly imported from the wider culture and partly fine-tuned at Findhorn itself. The groundrules for Experience Week (making ‘I’ statements, seeking eye-contact, not interrupting) articulate a practical, accessible and portable interpersonal ethos. And a metaphysical message is built into this simple behavioural script: divinity is no longer ‘out there’, where traditional models of religion would like to consign it (so the popular discourse goes), but ‘in here’, within ‘us’, seeking release. We need to ‘get in touch with’ the vital ‘energy’ (St John 1977: 39–40) circulating in this subtle inner world. A range of techniques is available for tapping this ‘biological electricity’ in the daily round, including meditation, visualisation, touch, confession, and devotional reading. The result is a user-friendly, problem-solving spirituality well-suited to the everyday world of housework and jobs, kin and peer groups. Encouraging mottoes help keep spirits up and minds focused: ‘work is love in action’ or ‘love where you are, whom you’re with and what you’re doing’. Trial and error sampling under the rule of attunement determines what is appropriate, in spiritual life as in careers and relationships. ‘Try it’, suggests Eileen Caddy (1992: 11) of the technique of ‘guidance’ passed on to her by Sheena Govan, ‘it really does work’. ‘If you had an experience of the sacred . . . why aren’t you repeating it?’, asks William Bloom (1993: 18). Successful navigation between the promptings of ‘inner’ world, ‘emotional intelligence’ and fleshy body can equip the whole person to function as a compact, efficient organism. In sum, a focused brain and relaxed body, animated by ‘spirit’ or ‘the god within’, can generate a confident sense of self well prepared to handle both the risks and the opportunities of contemporary social, cultural and technological change.

That, at least, is the gist of the ideology now driving the ‘New Age’ idiom. What actually obtains will be affected by other variables, including the realistic constraints of social life that operate here as anywhere else. Sanctuary attendance offers a useful test case on the balance between organismic self-expression and institutional routinisation. Clearly, attending Sanctuary, like collective worship anywhere, constrains the charisma of spiritual expression. On the other hand, as I’ve noted, the Sanctuaries were rarely more than half-full, suggesting a reluctance to surrender spiritual spontaneity to the Foundation’s timetable. Akhurst (1992:

113) says this trend of declining attendance developed during the 1980s, in sharp contrast to the mid-1970s, when one newspaper article reports ‘a hundred people crowded together’ in the Park Sanctuary.<sup>35</sup> The implication, of course, is that Findhorn residents have come to regulate, even to resist, participation in the central collective ritual to which they must perforce direct new recruits if the colony is to continue. Note also the chronology of this change from ‘crowded’ to ‘half-empty’ sanctuary, which accompanies the shift in ‘New Age’ hermeneutic from circumscribed emblem to promiscuous idiom in the 1970s and 1980s, demonstrating once again the symbiotic relationship between ‘congregational’ discipline and public self-representation that has haunted the field.

But, forty years on, the colony has developed considerable skill in managing the inherent tensions between seekers and host institution, drawing extensively on small-group culture as an interface between the two. The women and men at Findhorn come to represent themselves less as ‘members’ of, or ‘converts’ to, a demarcated religious organisation than as individuals practising a spirituality liberated from bureaucratic hegemony. As seekers, they are sceptical of the revelations proffered by traditional and new religions alike and are interested less in ‘making up the numbers’ than in fully engaging with life’s experiences. In other words they see themselves as an ensemble of individuals or an orchestra of soloists: in Troeltsch’s pungent phrase ‘a parallelism of spontaneous religious personalities’ (cited in Hill 1973: 56).

The paradox at the heart of Findhorn culture, and of ‘New Age’ discourse in general, is how to reconcile the conflictual demands of the virtuosic ‘seeking’ that connects and gathers people with the ‘congregational’ discipline that must be at least minimally maintained if a collectivity is to survive at all. For creating a communal lifestyle is not and has never been an end in ‘New Age’ networks.<sup>36</sup> The group is not the goal but a means to another, always deferred, end: just as individuals come and go at Findhorn, so do its various groups ceaselessly form, disband and reconstitute in workshops, conferences, management meetings, and meditation. The net effect is to intensify the present moment and current experience. The ensuing sense of a heightened, even feverish, present-tense is suggested by Corinne’s remark to me after our very first group session on day one: ‘We’re a family now’. What this means is that the authority of the group – and by extension, the colony as a whole – is contingent upon, and hence ultimately secondary to, that of its individual constituents. The group merely serves as a strategic device to gather, affirm, and sooner or later disseminate its participants. And this returns us to the moot question of collective structure and identity at Findhorn with which this chapter began. The evidence suggests that Buhler-McAllister (1995: 35) is correct to consider Findhorn an ‘accidental’ rather than ‘intentional’ community, for the real focus of the colony is the reflexivity and regeneration of individual persons. Hence Findhorn is better described as a ‘colony’ or ‘training ground’ (op. cit. Walker 1994: 17), terms which better express its aggregative, ceaselessly reconstituting ecology of spiritual seekers.

## A NETWORK OF SEEKERS

### Holistic healing

Many new age seekers are now using a therapy or combination of therapies as part of the process of inner development and spiritual growth.

(Wilson 1989: 82)

Healing is any process that enhances our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being.

(Waters 1996: 106)

Diseases do not exist in holistic health, only imbalanced individuals.

(English-Lueck 1990: 50)

### **Health, well-being and ‘New Age’: modes and metaphors**

There is plenty of evidence in secondary sources that major concerns of ‘New Age’ as both emblem and idiom overlap with those of ‘alternative’ or ‘holistic’ healthcare. As Albanese (1992: 75) points out for North America:

It is no accident that the network of communication that has promoted the message of the New Age has relied noticeably on massage therapists and chiropractors, on bulletin boards in natural food stores and in alternative healing clinics, on ephemeral publications strongly supported by advertisers who purvey one or another form of physical, mental, and/or spiritual healing.

In *Health in the New Age*, an ethnographic study of holistic healing networks in California, English-Lueck (1990: 2) argues that the ‘New Age’ idiom and alternative healthcare had converged by the early 1980s. She describes practitioners of ‘alternative health’ as ‘not simply a group of people favoring one health care system over the prevailing paradigm’ but as ‘an ideological

community actively pursuing a desired future'. Nor is this a peculiarly American development: in South Africa, Steyn (1994: 288–9) found that a fifth of her interviewees were practising healers. Levin and Coreil (1986) and Danforth (1989: 253) have even proposed a discrete category, 'New Age healing', to include phenomena as diverse as 'astral projection, guided visualisation, iridology, reflexology, chromotherapy, rebirthing, shiatsu, and pyramids and crystals' (Danforth 1989: 253).<sup>1</sup>

There is also an abundance of primary evidence. In Scotland, three-quarters of my small sample of customers at an alternative health fair in Edinburgh considered 'New Age ideas' to be 'positive' or at least 'interesting' (Sutcliffe 1995). A number of autobiographies interweave themes of healing and spirituality, such as actress Shirley MacLaine's international odyssey *Out On a Limb* (1983) or Lori Forsyth's British quest, *Journey Towards Healing* (1993). And entries in surveys and directories associated with 'New Age' typically include substantial space for 'holistic healing' (Osmond and Graham 1984) or 'alternative health' (Considine 1992).

The present chapter adds to this body of primary evidence through profiles of popular hybrids of healing, well-being and spirituality in Scotland in the mid-to-late 1990s. In these circles, people come and go and pick and choose with very few, if any, boundaries to negotiate, unlike the tricky balance required at the Findhorn colony or the more rigorous commitment required by the Unit of Service. Personal involvement in healing, whether receiving treatment as a client or participating in a workshop of some kind, may last no longer than an afternoon. Structurally, this has the effect of dramatically highlighting the individual's agency: the 'solo seeker' is a prominent role-type in this field and the ideology of the group is perhaps at its weakest. Yet at the same time the intricate networks of healing practices and their concrete nodes – fairs, workshops and small centres – draw seekers together in a busy exchange of news, views and practices. In this context, following one's own path or truth may be the rhetoric, but the practice is eminently social, and elements of a common culture can be mapped in the field.

By 'alternative' or 'holistic' health I mean a cluster of aetiologies and treatments that are quite differently formulated in comparison with the kind of medicine regulated by the 1858 Medical Act and since institutionalised in the UK in the National Health Service of 1948 onwards. Saks (1992: 5) correctly argues that this institutionalisation of allopathic medicine legitimated 'a single register of legally recognised practitioners with self-regulatory powers and a monopoly not only over the title of "doctor", but also state medical employment'. Allopathic medicine involves a 'parts-oriented' diagnosis and intervention through drugs and, if necessary, surgery, with 'cure' of the organism the ultimate goal: as Saks (1992: 4) puts it, the body is seen as 'a machine whose individual parts can be repaired when breakdown occurs'. On the other hand, non-allopathic treatment promotes the recovery, under optimal conditions, of a 'whole' person through her or his latent resources. There has been some debate

over the most appropriate terminology for non-allopathic approaches. 'Alternative', 'complementary' and 'holistic' are in practice near-cognates and choice of one or the other arguably reflects a particular political agenda towards the medical establishment (respectively to confront, co-operate or synthesise) rather than an essential divergence in methodology.<sup>2</sup> Whatever the term chosen, Saks (ibid.: 4) points out that the approach is likely to be holistic, meaning 'an emphasis on stimulating the life force of the individual in his or her total social environment'. I return shortly to these notions of vitalism and holism. But the gist is that non-allopathic health systems seek

to recruit the self-healing capacities of the body. They amplify natural recuperative processes and augment the energy upon which the patient's health depends, helping him to adapt harmoniously to his surroundings.

(Fulder 1996: 4)

In addition to undergoing specialist treatment regimes the person will be kept busy at an everyday level, assessing and choosing systems and techniques from a variety of sources including popular magazines and television as well as from accredited practitioners and dedicated outlets. The holistic health world is imbued with a strongly populist ethos, seen in the teaching and learning of such practices as aromatherapy, massage and yoga through evening classes, magazines and paperback books. Accreditation is widely available: some long-established systems, like homeopathy, offer relatively high-status legitimation after substantial training, while other less complex systems that are essentially single techniques, such as crystal healing or Reiki, offer simpler, faster accreditation.<sup>3</sup> But a 'do-it-yourself' approach predominates, embracing both the simple self-prescription of Bach flower remedies on the one hand and the sophisticated self-monitoring of brainwave activity in Biofeedback training on the other. Even when a trained practitioner or a group of patients are involved in treatment, their role will be – in Saks's words – to 'stimulate the life force' of the subject in question: exterior intervention simply functions as a trigger for internal recuperation. In this sense self-healing is the paradigmatic model of holistic healthcare. As I was told at a Bach flower remedies workshop in Edinburgh in 1996, 'health is listening to our inner voice' and the flower remedies function 'to connect you with your higher self'. Not for nothing was founder Edward Bach's breakthrough publication called *Heal Thyself* (1931).

It is important to note that it is 'healing' and not 'curing' that is the goal here: that is, an open-ended engagement with the illness or disease (often rendered 'dis-ease') is encouraged over attempts to stifle or eradicate its symptoms. Emphasis is upon process rather than goal, on supporting the organism while the illness follows its course. This may or may not lead to quantifiable 'recovery'. While a successful allopathic treatment may have the effect of

neutralising an illness relatively painlessly and quickly, proper healing in emic eyes consists rather in re-evaluating one's emotional attitude to illness, which means taking into account the wider context of the disease and subtler interpretations of what it *is*, what it *does* and the *meaning* it has for the sufferer.

There is evidently a strong degree of abstraction involved in making this move from a physiological to an essentially metaphysical model of illness. A popular theodicy is implied: illness is 'no random event' but 'a lesson' (English-Lueck 1990: 19–20), a 'sign that body and mind are not being used properly'. Ill-health has moral significance: it can even be 'a very fruitful teacher, at times the only one to whom we would be willing to listen' (St Aubyn 1990: 87). Bloom (1991: 75) goes so far as to describe his own severe episode of hepatitis-B as 'a blessing'. Such statements challenge allopathic understandings of healing as curing, as a tangible restoration of physical health. For example, the 'philosophy of care' statement displayed in the waiting room in Glasgow's homoeopathic hospital where I attended for consultation in 1996 began: 'We aim to help people self-heal – if possible from their disease, but always from their suffering'. According to St Aubyn (1990: 31), the outcome of a course of healing will 'be the right one for the person's overall soul evolution': that is, 'it may not include an alleviation of physical suffering, but will almost certainly comprise a shift in attitude or perspective'. In a wider metaphysical context in which death has been deferred through widespread acceptance of reincarnation and karma,<sup>4</sup> authentic healing does not necessarily obviate a painful illness: death may even be part of the process. For as St Aubyn (1990: 87) explains 'death itself cannot be regarded as frightening once we accept it as an adventure we have already undertaken many times'. In a similar mode, at a packed workshop I attended in Glasgow in October 1996, the American 'clown doctor' Patch Adams said his so-called 'silly hospitals' were designed to demystify death; one of his first publications, he said, was called 'Fun Death'.

A demonstration of spiritual healing given at a health fair I attended in Glasgow in October 1995 provides a case study of this approach in action. Eighty people, around three-quarters of whom were women aged mid-thirties and above, gathered in a seminar room while harp music played softly on tape. Ian Scott, vice-president of the National Federation of Spiritual Healers (NFSH), explained that the aim of spiritual healing was to achieve balance or harmony between body, mind and spirit – the 'inner being' or soul, as he put it. It was said to be particularly effective for stress-related conditions. A central premise was the availability to the healer of a 'central energy source – you can call it god', he said. The healer acts as a channel for this energy, which may then 'kick-start' the client's own energy resources.

Two volunteers from the audience, both women in their thirties, came up for healing from Scott and a colleague. Scott gave a running commentary on his own healing ritual. He began by 'balancing' himself, with eyes closed, and then asked permission from the 'central energy source' to be a conduit for healing. Next he laid his hands on the client's shoulders to allow the 'inner being' of

healer and client to make contact. Then he removed his hands and, keeping them several inches away with palms facing inwards, moved them over the body, working down from the crown of the head, 'scanning' and 'balancing' the energy points or 'chakras' within the body. He would not, he said, touch the body again during the healing process unless he intuitively felt it would help to 'cool' the client's pain. He also worked briefly on the client's 'aura' which, he said, emanated from the chest area and enveloped the person in a subtle 'cloak' of energy. To finish, he 'closed down' the chakras – which he had 'opened up' by passing his hands over the body – and gave thanks for the healing. The actual healing ritual lasted about fifteen minutes. Afterwards, the volunteers reported feeling 'really relaxed' and 'growing stronger in balance'. Scott said 'we merely help what is supposed to be the situation': his most profound act of healing, he added, had been a case in which he 'helped' a young woman with cancer 'to die' – that is, to accept her death with serenity and grace.

The concept of self-healing helps to substantiate the interrelationship between holistic health and 'New Age' spirituality. The elevation of the organic unity and agency of the person over and above the invasive, scientific 'doctoring' of allopathic medicine recalls preferences in 'New Age' circles for the 'inner' agency of the soul (Alice Bailey) and for 'speaking from the heart' rather than the 'head' (Findhorn). In short, self-healing and self-realisation go hand-in-hand in post-Seventies 'New Age' discourse. Both require modification of the actor's conventional vector of engagement with the world in favour of self-referentiality and reflexivity.

Moreover, the kind of worldview associated with 'New Age' provides an ideal backdrop to specific healing practices and models of well-being since the alternative cosmology it provides can supply a higher-level, metaphysical legitimation for the esoteric aetiologies and anatomies of holistic healthcare. For example, the chakras, aura and 'energy source' invoked by the NFSH vice-president, and the references to reincarnation and karma by St Aubyn, are widely disseminated as causal agents in the discourse of alternative spirituality. In her study of healing practices in suburban America, McGuire (1998: 5) went so far as to conclude that particular healing practices were used by exponents predominantly as a means of locating themselves within an overarching cosmology. That is,

only a tiny minority of adherents initially came to their alternative healing group or healer out of a need to heal a prior condition. Most adherents were initially attracted by the larger system of beliefs, of which health-illness related beliefs and practices are only one part.

In other words, seekers may approach holistic therapies as accessible, concrete portals into an attractive yet otherwise abstract framework of popular beliefs and values. At the very least, particular spiritual practices and alternative treatments



go hand-in-hand, as when I was told that the Bach remedies were ‘a good adjunct to meditation’ since they could ‘fine tune’ the user’s emotional state. Additional support for a cross-fertilisation hypothesis comes from English-Lueck (1990: 111) who found that a significant percentage of her holistic health informants were also ‘religious defectors’ or ‘apostates’ from American mainstream religion.

But despite more recent calls for a genuinely ‘complementary’ medicine (meaning a partnership between allopathic and holistic treatment) and the increasing availability in the UK of assorted holistic treatments from NHS-funded surgeries, there remains considerable tension, even incompatibility, between ‘scientific’ and ‘holistic’ aetiologies of health and healing. The British Holistic Medical Association’s agenda for desirable healthcare, for example, includes such abstract, esoteric affirmations as ‘matter and energy are interchangeable’ and ‘there is an interconnectedness between all things, microscopic–macroscopic, living–non-living’ (BHMA 1992: 239). The difference in approach extends to training and accreditation: ‘even the simplest’ of holistic treatments ‘involves a view of the body unrecognisable to anyone trained in medical school’, claims Fulder (1996: 4). No doubt he has in mind the recondite anatomies of ‘astral/etheric bodies’, ‘zones’, ‘meridians’, ‘auras’ and ‘chakras’ typical of alternative–holistic discourse. A simple index of difference here is that while one can learn how to use these terms competently in discourse and interpretation, they cannot be falsified according to Popperian methodology, as can aetiologies of bacteria and cell subdivision, for example. In practical terms this often means that the instructions explicitly given for the self-prescription of Bach flower remedies apply across the board: ‘if you need a remedy, it’ll work; if not, it’ll do you no harm’.

As I mentioned earlier, there are two major premises through which holistic health finds a larger grounding in ‘New Age’ cosmology: vitalism and holism. Briefly, vitalism claims that the body is animated by a ‘life force’ (Saks 1992: 4) or, simply, ‘energy’ (Fulder 1996: 4). In this, the body is the microcosm of a wider cosmic order: both are ultimately animated by the same divine energy source (recall St John’s ‘biological electricity’, cited in the previous chapter). At the Bach Flower Remedies workshop, for example, we were told that distilled water should never be used in the preparation of flower essences since, unlike spring or boiled water, ‘it doesn’t carry the life force’.

The second premise, holism, is a talismanic word in contemporary religious discourse. The term itself was coined from the Greek *ολοζ*, ‘whole’, by the South African statesman and amateur philosopher Jan Smuts (1870–1950) in his book *Holism and Evolution*, and refers to ‘the making or creation of wholes in the universe’ (Smuts 1927: 98). Smuts thought that ‘wholes’ were ‘self-acting and self-moving’ units exemplifying a ‘principle of movement or action not external to itself but internal’ (ibid.: 101). Wholes could be found as ordered, synthesised units at all levels of creation, from the ‘organic biological world’ to the ‘highest expressions’ on ‘mental and spiritual planes of existence’ (ibid.: 99).<sup>5</sup>

Smuts's term, if not his particular exposition, has acquired wide currency in popular discourse, perhaps on account of its combination of etymological parsimony and referential abstraction that gives it an emblematic lustre similar to 'New Age'. Olsen's (1989: 4) definition of a 'whole' as a system that is 'something *more than* the sum of its parts' conveys the flavour of popular understanding. In California, English-Lueck (1990: 16) found that the term 'holistic health' could function as 'a keyword trigger' for a popular discourse on spirituality. She also notes the logical conclusion entailed by applying holism to health aetiologies: 'diseases do not exist' but 'imbalanced individuals' do. Consequently 'medical histories become life histories' (ibid.: 50), a logical slippage that helps to explain the functional pairing of 'healing' and 'seeking' in personal biographies.

Where holistic health works out these premises in the tangible context of afflicted organisms, 'New Age' discourse plays them out in an abstract populist metaphysic. Through the pervasive privileging of belief over practice in modern constructions of religion, this discourse has come to rationalise and legitimate alternative healing practices, providing a popular intellectual framework for often bewilderingly diverse treatments and practices. The discussion has indicated some central ideas and behaviours in holistic healing networks and their seamless connection with the 'New Age' idiom. In the emic view the individual, traditionally the passive object of hierarchical medical and ecclesiastical establishments alike, can metamorphose into a fully active subject: a spiritually empowered, hale organism, 'self-acting and self-moving' (Smuts 1927: 101), for whom self-realisation and self-healing are two sides of the same coin. Or in Olsen's (1989: 31) terms, the 'healing journey' becomes a 'spiral revolving around an essential core of who we are'.

The snapshot ethnographies that follow map some particular locales in this broad terrain of holistic training. I begin with a profile of an alternative health fair in Scotland which exemplifies contemporary cultural trends in the UK and north-western Europe (York 2000). I sketch a demonstration of Reiki healing at the fair, before moving on to discuss the function of small healing centres. Finally, I describe a workshop in firewalking, a popular model of healing and personal growth developed in the US from indigenous rituals. The chief interest of holistic healing for me here is its function as a significant domain of popular cultural practice, legitimated by the alternative cosmology of 'New Age', and reflexively constructed by participants seeking what Smuts (1927: 222) stirringly calls 'the great overplus of the whole'.<sup>6</sup>

### **Browsing at an alternative health fair**

Those who attended the festival were seeking something: . . . Almost every path on view began in the same place, inside the seeker.

(Bernard Levin, *The Times*,  
on the 1978 'Festival for Mind and Body' in London)<sup>7</sup>

Of the nineteenth century's major sources of heterodox healing – herbalism, hydropathy, homeopathy and mesmerism – Cooter (1988: xiv) remarks:

It was not uncommon for the exponents of these systems to commit themselves to several in tandem and sometimes to orthodox medicine at the same time. . . . The engagements could be multiple and the splicings, conjoinings and abandonments frequent.

A similar situation holds good at the turn of the twenty-first century. Interested parties may pick and choose not only between treatments, but how and where they are delivered. In contemporary Scotland as elsewhere, alternative health provision is a pervasive 'cottage' industry conducted in a variety of settings: in the home, in hired public rooms, or in a small co-operative practice. Locale is no obstacle: while alternative treatments find their largest social base in towns and cities, a thriving rural culture also exists. Forsyth's (1995) directory of holistic health care in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland is a case in point, collecting over forty individual practitioners and a handful of group practices scattered across a vast and superficially inhospitable rural terrain. Holistic and alternative healthcare is also available through adult education classes, public fairs and – increasingly – mainstream medical outlets, including the National Health Service, where it is promoted under its 'complementary' tag.

A good cross-section of what is available at any one time in the industry is provided by the display of goods, services and practitioners in alternative or holistic health fairs. In contemporary Scotland, day or week-end events can be found in large conurbations, smaller towns and rural villages alike. These fairs are neither new nor discrete phenomena. They incorporate elements of spiritual and political – usually 'green' or libertarian – countercultures as well as perennial 'health' concerns. As D. and L. Jorgensen (1982: 375) summarise the function of a similar event in late-1970s America, such gatherings allow a sometimes scattered community to 'make new friends, exchange ideas and services, reaffirm established relationships, develop business arrangements, present positive images to the public, make converts, and recruit members'. The Jorgensens are in fact describing a 'psychic fair', but there is considerable cross-over in content and function with 'health and healing' fairs. For example, the 'Mind Body Spirit' Twentieth Anniversary festival in London in 1996 incorporated a 'psychics and mystics' section to cater for demand in Tarot, palmistry and clairvoyance, while to muddle categories further, the Edinburgh Body and Soul bookshop currently organises separate 'health' and 'psychic and healing' fairs. Broadly speaking, 'psychic' events serve a more plebeian constituency and are rooted in divination and prophecy on supernaturalistic models, while a naturalistic expansivity of self dominates 'health' events and attracts more middle-class seekers. Fuller (1989: 103) generalises the contrast like this:

While holistic healing groups are trying to broaden conventional medical theory to include a role for spiritual factors, psychic healing groups are primarily concerned with establishing the lawful activity of an extrasensory reality.

In practice, the two inclinations push and tug in a popular dialogue that undermines tidy compartmentalisations of culture. Alternative health fairs anchor this discourse in a material form, providing a 'foundation for a common culture' (D. and L. Jorgensen 1982: 375), seen in the gentle ritualising of ordinary acts, exchanges and spaces of everyday life, and cheerful, pragmatic boundary transgressions.

In October 1994 I visited the 'Scottish Alternative Health Exhibition' in central Glasgow. Organised by the editors of a small Scottish alternative health magazine called *Connections*, these weekend gatherings have run more-or-less regularly since the early 1980s and conform to a general format successfully established in Britain in the late 1970s by the 'Mind Body Spirit' festival in London (Hamilton 2000). The fair was held in the City Halls, a large municipal building with a central hall and ancillary rooms. I spent Sunday afternoon at the event, taking the role of a casual customer, browsing from stall to stall, chatting here and there, and picking up leaflets. This pattern of behaviour was typical of the general public, of whom some three thousand visited over the week-end. It was at this event, and in this role, that I first ran into the Unit of Service (see Chapter 6), which demonstrates the lively reticulation of contemporary fields of spirituality and healing. Women constituted well over half the numbers present, both as stallholders and customers.<sup>8</sup> The vast majority were white; I heard Scottish accents, both east and west coast, but also English and North American intonation. Participants looked to be predominantly middle-aged: that is, between early thirties and late fifties.<sup>9</sup>

Around seventy different groups were represented. Available techniques and practices included the Bates Method of eyesight improvement, the Alexander Technique and a locally-devised system, the Circle Method, in addition to more generic approaches such as massage, herbalism, aromatherapy, and homoeopathy. 'Eastern' treatments and techniques included acupuncture, shiatsu, Chinese herbal medicine, T'ai Chi, and Qigong. Variations upon spiritual healing were offered by the Order of the Ascending Spirit and the NFSH, as well as Reiki – which I profile shortly – and SHEN therapy, a new 'hands-on energy field intervention' from America. All offered dedicated training programmes to capitalise on the teach-yourself impulse fuelling the field, for as English-Lueck (1990: 146) comments, 'learning to become a practitioner is an extension of the role of the client'.

A handful of new religious movements were also in attendance, including the Brahma Kumaris and the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order. A post-Theosophical current was represented by the Unit of Service and the local

Rudolf Steiner School, which provided a creche. Material provisions available at the fair included incense, toiletries, candles, crystals and books, and technological aids such as treatment couches and meditation stools could be purchased. Two bookshops had large stands, testifying once more to a vigorous reading culture. Organic vegetables and groceries were available from the well-established Grassroots wholefood shop, and the cafe served vegetarian food.

Around thirty free talks and demonstrations were offered over the weekend by participating stallholders. This was evidently a draw for the crowd: most of these forty-minute sessions were full. Experiential learning was characteristic of the event as a whole, and various 'taster' sessions – in massage, shiatsu, spiritual healing, magnet therapy, aura photography, and Tarot readings – were available beside stalls. Browsers – like myself – would stand and watch a treatment for a few minutes before signing up or wandering on. Massage and spiritual healing were particularly popular: the latter had spread onto the large stage area where clients, sitting upright with closed eyes and hands in laps, were treated by several busy NFSH practitioners.

A market atmosphere predominated: goods both tangible or intangible were for sale and the flow of money from customer to stallholder was close to the surface. Yet despite a busy turnover of customers, the prevailing mood was relaxed, comfortable, slightly sensuous. Incense burned at several stalls and clothing was loose and colourful. I browsed, watching people receive neck and shoulder massages, shiatsu and Tarot readings. Ambient music played on tape with indigenous sounds of didgeridoos and gongs, and samples of birdsong and whale calls. At one table I picked up the 'New World Music' catalogue, retailing music 'to calm you, to relax you, to inspire, balance and heal you'. It listed around one hundred recordings with titles like 'Spirit of Tibet', 'Illumination: A Celtic Blessing', 'Return of the Angels' and 'Mystic Heart'. 'Music for Healing' was said to provide 'waves of soft melodic music' to 'spiral around the listener, bathing the senses in delightful ripples of serene relaxation'. At 'Avalon', a Pagan-oriented 'healing crafts' shop from Edinburgh, I bought some hand-mixed herbal incense to burn on small charcoal tablets. At 'Grassroots' I bought organic apples and fairly-traded peanut butter. At the table occupied by the 'Order of the Ascending Spirit', I talked briefly with its charismatic foundress, an American woman in her late forties presently based in a country village an hour's drive from the city. In her literature she described herself as 'a healer and spiritual teacher' offering counselling, psychic skills and landscape tours. The Order provided a variety of classes at 'Steppingstone', an alternative centre in Glasgow, including a weekly 'healing circle' and courses such as 'Rites of Passage' and the 'Nearly Everything Class': this was described as 'an ongoing psychic and spiritual development course in which we'll do a little of almost everything – meditation, healing, imagery, Tarot, biscuit reading, and more'.

With the exception of one broadsheet I picked up, entitled 'Reflections on the New Age' (cited in the introduction to the present book), the emblem 'New

Age' was scarcely in evidence, although ideas and images associated with the post-seventies hermeneutic turn suffused the event as a whole. In fact the mixture of psychotherapeutic, dietary and spiritual idioms was such as to baffle an easy distinction between a 'health treatment', a 'therapy' and a 'religious tradition'. The ensuing collage of ideas and practices is precisely what has become popularly identified with – indeed, taken to *be* – 'New Age'.

### A Reiki demonstration

It is one thing for me to describe how an apple tastes; it is quite another thing for you to have your own 'bite'. . . . It is the same with Reiki.

(Hall 1999: 4)

Just for today do not worry/Just for today do not anger/Honour your parents, teachers and elders/Earn your living honestly/Show gratitude to everything.

(‘Five Spiritual Principles of Reiki’,  
in McKenzie 1998: 52–3)

After lunch in the busy cafeteria, I joined the queue for a Reiki demonstration in one of the large ancillary rooms. A leaflet I had picked up described Reiki as ‘a powerful tool for both physical healing and for expanding our conscious understanding of life and the nature of reality’.<sup>10</sup> A relatively new treatment in Britain – Stanway (1982), an otherwise comprehensive guide, does not mention it – Reiki is now ‘flavour of the month’ among healers, according to Lee (1997: 36).<sup>11</sup> The Reiki demonstration today was given to a full house by ‘Reiki Master’ Kim Hastie and a female student. Hastie, a dynamic woman in early middle-age, operates from ‘The Silverdale Centre’ in Cheshire. She began by outlining the history and philosophy of Reiki. The transliteration from the Japanese means ‘universal’ (*rei*) ‘life force energy’ (*ki*), and the system was devised in Japan in the early twentieth century by Mikao Usui.<sup>12</sup> In due course, Usui is said to have ‘cured’ the ‘serious tumour’ of a Hawaiian woman who duly became a ‘Master’ under his tutelage, and who in the 1970s trained some twenty successors (Lee 1997: 37, 56). From these small beginnings the practice has proliferated, and there are now both ‘orthodox’ teachers (known as ‘Usui Reiki’) as well as mavericks, some trained in Usui Reiki but founding their own line, others self-appointed and self-accredited.<sup>13</sup>

The claim that Usui *cured* a cancerous growth vouches for the founder’s charismatic touch, and McKenzie (1998: 48) reports no less than four miracles worked by Usui on the same day the secret symbols of Reiki were revealed to him, according to tradition, on Mount Kuri Yama in Japan. But ‘curing’ is by no means ubiquitous in Reiki, and claims to *heal* and claims to *cure* dynamically co-exist in comparative spiritual healing. Consider for example the case of Mari Hall, who describes herself as the UK’s first Reiki Master, founding the

International Association of Reiki in Scotland in 1990 before moving to the Czech Republic. In vivid contrast to Ian Scott's statement that his most profound act of healing had been to help a client face death, Hall includes testimonies of five 'miracles' she has witnessed in the course of her practice as a Reiki healer, including her own recovery from partial paralysis (Hall 1999: 33–40). At the same time Hall undercuts her own agency in these strong examples of healing-as-curing by stating that 'many miracles come through Reiki but I am not doing them' (Hall 1999: 6, 33). In other words, the healer is a channel for transcendent, god-like powers.

In her talk, Kim Hastie stressed the universality of Reiki, claiming that Mikao Usui had had to find a 'spiritual path' beyond both Christianity and Buddhism in order to receive (or devise) his system. The technique was thus open to all, irrespective of creed or personal perspective. Like Hall, Hastie understood the 'opening of the healing channels' in a Reiki treatment to be an impersonal process giving direct, unmediated access to the divine. She was at pains to stress that we all instinctively 'knew' what she meant by the words 'divine' and 'God'. If necessary we should translate her words into our own terms – 'cosmic energy' or 'the source', for example.

Hastie concluded her lucid introduction by inviting the audience to 'come up for healing', as Scott had done in the NFSH demonstration discussed earlier. A steady supply of clients, mostly women, took the opportunity to sit, relaxed but upright, for ten-minute sessions with the Reiki master and her student. Treatment was simple and consisted in the healer placing one hand on the top of the client's head and the other on the upper back. The hands stayed in motionless contact while Hastie continued to talk.<sup>14</sup> She used illustrations from popular science to explain that Reiki viewed the world as a vibrant 'energy field', rather than as a collection of static 'things'. Recalling Smuts, she claimed that all entities were 'wholes' with different levels of atomic vibration. Reiki healing was a matter of 'restoring the appropriate vibratory level' to the body in question, be it person, animal or plant. The healer draws the 'energy' from a universal source, using her own body as a channel. In popular discourse, 'you realise you are acting only as a conduit or transformer for "something" much greater than you' (Heavens 1992). Self-healing and other-healing become inextricable:

The channel is never drained when giving healing, because they [*sic*] too are treated in the process of giving another a treatment. This also means that the more we use the energy, the more we assist our own healing process.

(Silverdale Centre leaflet)

Reiki is effectively a modern oral tradition, depending upon an initiatic transmission (for a fee) from Reiki master to student. Hastie emphasised that training required hands-on tuition from 'a living Master'. It wasn't possible,

she insisted, to learn the technique from books. McKenzie (1998: 46) agrees and infuses the ambivalence and mystery that accompany the oral history and practice of Reiki into the total package transmitted from master to student:

as with all storytelling, some versions are more satisfying than others, but when we choose a Master we also choose the story we will hear. Afterwards we can create our own story based on our own experience of Reiki.

There were various levels of initiation, involving ‘fine tuning the physical and etheric bodies to a higher vibratory level and opening a purified channel for the energy to pass through’. In particular, second-level students are taught the Reiki symbols, a series of signs drawn in the air. Hastie also offered ‘energy exchanges’, in which ‘advanced’ and ‘master’ practitioners could gather to transmit energy among themselves. Her dynamic exposition made it plain that Reiki was more than a specific healing technique: it was esoteric, initiatic and gently utopian. In her leaflet *Reiki Training: A Powerful Tool for Personal Transformation*, she writes:

As Reiki begins to move in and heal our whole system, it begins to move us into the next step in our evolution. It starts to work on and break through our limiting beliefs and attitudes thus increasing our ability to take responsibility for our lives and well being.

Not just a therapeutic technique but a pragmatic theology and accessible cosmology – a self-contained spiritual system, in fact – Reiki packages central concerns of holistic health.

### Centres

Outside the Christian Church in this country we are witnessing a rise of centres of spiritual power and transformation. I do not refer to drop-out communes or fringe Christian groups.

(Peter Spink, letter to *The Times*, in Spink 1980: 3)

An additional node in holistic healing networks is the ‘centre’, which provides a concrete base where participants can interact. An example on the grand scale is Findhorn, discussed in the previous chapter. The kind of centres Spink has in mind are private or co-operative houses scattered throughout Britain, Western Europe, the US and Australasia.<sup>15</sup> Healing may be the sole focus of the centre or it may co-exist with a variety of spiritual practices. Indeed, the same individuals and groups often reappear in local fairs and centres. Spink (1980: 4) catches the flavour of these centres:



Each is independent and autonomous. . . They exist both in town and country, occupying large old country houses or tenement buildings in the suburbs. . . Some are constituted as educational charitable trusts, others function in private houses. . . They range in size from the now world-famous Findhorn Community in the North of Scotland . . . to the recently formed Portland Centre at Brighton in Sussex which centres around a small book shop and which organises festivals on the south coast.

Three representative examples in Scotland are the Salisbury Centre in Edinburgh, Steppingstone in Glasgow, and the Westbank Centre in rural Fife. These are all projects of at least a generation's standing, two of them dating from the 1970s and the latter from 1959 (we first came across Westbank in Chapter 4). Let me begin with the Salisbury Centre, a large Georgian house in an affluent Edinburgh suburb complete with library, meeting rooms and an organic garden. It was set up in 1973 through the joint efforts of a Sufi group and a Jungian psychotherapist, Winifred Rushforth (1984: 136–43) and is maintained by a resident core of mostly young adults guided by a smaller group of trustees. It describes itself as a 'holistic education centre' promoting 'spiritual, emotional and physical wellbeing'.<sup>16</sup> The Salisbury Centre belongs to a loose network served in the UK in the 1990s by a newsletter called 'Open Centres', which linked 'Centres, Groups, Private Houses and Friends' involved in 'the awakening of the individual to a deeper spiritual consciousness'.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, 'Steppingstone' is a private Victorian flat in the west end of Glasgow. It was set up by the owner in 1978 to pursue her interests in Anthroposophy and the White Eagle Lodge, but has since become more eclectic. The owner is a Londoner in her mid-fifties who lives in an equally spacious apartment next door. During my visit in January 1995 she told me that contemporary Christianity had been 'pruned' and that her interests as a 'heretic' lay rather in what she called the 'secret teachings of Jesus', the legends of the Holy Grail, and the Culdee tradition that she claimed had inherited 'the Druidic spirit'. Steppingstone is now vigorously inclusivist: the Order of the Ascending Spirit, whose representatives I met at the alternative health fair, ran classes there, and I later attended an Aetherius Society meeting there entitled 'UFOs: Their Mission to Earth'. The centre consists in several large rooms hired out to groups and individuals, a long hall with posters and leaflets, and one room, a 'universal sanctuary', set aside for silent meditation and 'developing peaceful energies', with Islamic calligraphy on the fireplace tiles, a small electric water fountain and a driftwood sculpture embedded with crystals.

My final example is the Westbank Natural Health Centre in the village of Strathmiglo, Fife. Established in 1959 by a retired army major and spiritual healer, the late Bruce MacManaway, and his wife Patricia, Westbank claims to be 'Scotland's longest running healing centre' and has as its motto 'helping people to better health'.<sup>18</sup> In contrast to the Salisbury Centre's oligarchy and

Steppingstone's individual direction, Westbank is a family-based concern: the Macmanaway's sons practice geomancy and healing at the Centre, including work with animals, particularly horses (Holland 1998). Westbank claims to teach 'upward of 500 students each year' in subjects such as meditation, stress control, healing, ESP and yoga. The family also owns a house on the island of Iona. As we saw in Chapter 4, Westbank was a significant node in the 1960s 'New Age' network: Peter Caddy, then a regular visitor, considered Bruce MacManaway 'one of the finest healers in Britain' (Caddy 1996: 243). Given this lineage, it is appropriate that Westbank should be the venue for the final ethnography of this chapter and of the book as a whole.

### **A firewalking workshop**

The firewalk was the perfect metaphor to encompass all aspects of life, the full spectrum: from anguish to bliss.

(Tolly Burkan, founder of American firewalking,  
in Danforth 1989: 261–2)

To walk unharmed over incandescent coals is to take a step into a different and somehow magical world where all things become possible, where we begin to see clearly that all limits are self-imposed and ultimately illusory.

(Shango 1996: 12)

Alternative metaphors of health and well-being are dramatised in the ritual of the firewalk. Firewalking enjoyed considerable popularity in Anglo-American culture in the 1980s and 1990s. In its contemporary popular form – that is, largely isolated from indigenous context and packaged in a workshop format – it substantiates Waters' (1996: 105) remark that, in holistic health and the 'New Age' idiom alike, 'healing and personal development are very nearly synonymous'. The ritual of firewalking encapsulates the self-expressive dynamic of contemporary healing, in which a nebulous sense of well-being and a discourse of spiritual self-empowerment blend.

My account actually begins some time after the event. On a Wednesday morning in March 1997 I received a letter addressed in a familiar hand: mine. I had written it just over a year ago at the end of a firewalking workshop, on the instructions of the leader, and in a flush of excitement and relief. The workshop's host – the Westbank Centre – had agreed to post on our letters in one year's time, as the final reflexive fruit of the event. I read it now self-consciously:

Dear Steve

Remember this night? You've just walked over burning charcoal, from the fire we built earlier this afternoon at the raised garden here at

Westbank. Now we've just had coffee and cake, preparing to go home on the slow road to Stirling.

Your PhD will be just about finished – or at least, getting that way. I hope you feel pleased with it, and feel that this night helped get something together. Remember the word you chose tonight: CLARITY.

And by the way, the other word that you toyed with, but didn't quite use, was WRITE. You can do this. You will do this. After all, you can walk on fire.<sup>19</sup>

I had discovered Westbank through a combination of serendipity and 'networking'<sup>20</sup> typical of the field. I first read about the centre in a book, then heard of it by word of mouth (from the proprietor of the new shop Healthworks, in fact, mentioned in Chapter 5). Next I found a historical reference in Peter Caddy's (1996) memoirs, and finally an address in the alternative health magazine *Connections*. Moreover, Westbank was less than an hour's drive from where I lived. In short, the contact was ideal for 'seeker' and researcher alike and invited exploration. I got on the Centre's mailing list and early in 1996 received a poster headed 'Firewalking: A Sacred Ritual of Personal Empowerment':

Firewalking is an ancient practice intended to empower and heal. Walking barefoot over hot coals burning at over 1200 degrees Fahrenheit seems impossible, yet over half a million Americans and many in the UK have done it. How many other things in your life seem impossible?<sup>21</sup>

On a cold day in February I telephoned Westbank for further information. 'Let me put you on to the firewalker herself', said the secretary. 'Hi, Hazel here', said a relaxed American voice. 'I'm interested in doing the firewalk', I say. 'How long does the workshop last?' 'Well, once we're into sacred time it's difficult to say exactly', says Hazel. I ask about the risk of 'getting burned'. 'That's a *big* question', she replies. 'Three-quarters of a million Americans have done this, and thousands elsewhere. There are only a few cases of burns – but what interests me is, why *those* people, compared to all those who make it through?' In any case, Hazel tells me, she is a doctor 'if necessary' (of Chiropractic, it turns out). 'Wait until you're standing in front of the coals before you decide whether or not to walk', she says, 'but I promise you, it'll impact on the whole of your life'. I check on the price reduction offered for early registration. 'It's an added bonus', she confirms, 'the workshop actually begins the moment you're committed to it'.<sup>22</sup>

Snow was lying on the fields as I drove to Strathmiglo in the prime farming country of central Fife on a grey February Sunday. The Westbank Centre is behind the village, a cluster of buildings with a slightly worn and rambling appearance. Parked tightly in the cramped courtyard space were a dozen

middle-range cars. We gathered in a large rectangular room, with french windows leading out to a small garden. Chairs stood in rows facing a flip-chart and about thirty people had gathered, including members of the MacManaway family. Some were chatting, evidently on familiar terms. Apart from two boys, all looked over thirty, with a scattering of older people. Women were slightly in the majority, and with two exceptions, all were white. I sat beside Annie from Edinburgh, who described herself as a ‘regular’ at Westbank and also at the MacManaway’s house on Iona. We chatted briefly about my research, and her own explorations in alternative healing. She had an ‘evangelical’ son, she told me, who thought that ‘this sort of thing’ – firewalking – was ‘devil-worship’.

Hazel Price, the firewalker, appeared. Aged around late thirties, she had long, straight hair and wore a full skirt with bands of primary colours, a turquoise blouse and a ‘devil’s eye’ pendant. ‘Okay’, she said, ‘I think we’re ready to go’. She flipped over the top page on her chart. It read:

- 1 Whoever shows up are exactly the right people
- 2 Whenever it begins is always the right time
- 3 Whatever we co-create here together is the only thing that can possibly happen
- 4 When it’s over it’s over.

Hazel launched into an explanation of these statements, strolling backwards and forwards in front of us as if on a small stage. Firewalking, she said, was about breaking down limiting ‘cages’ of belief, our self-imposed structures of thinking and expectation. These cages are not fixed: they can expand. We can make them. It followed that anything we might not currently understand in our lives – including what was happening right here, right now at this workshop – must be referring to something beyond our present ‘cage’ of beliefs. But we would ‘get it’ eventually – if we really wanted to. So certain things might or might not make sense during the evening: it all depended on how flexible our individual cages were at this moment in time. ‘But that’s OK’, she laughed, ‘don’t worry, that’s how it is!’ Some of us nodded uncertainly.

‘Let’s break the ice a bit’, she said, sizing us up. ‘Do you know this one?’ She began to sing ‘If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands’. ‘Come on!’ she called out. People began to join in, and soon we were all singing, clapping and stamping feet. ‘OK’, Hazel said, ‘that’s good, we’re getting some energy moving’. Now she spoke of Tolly Burkan, the ‘father of the firewalking movement’, who had personally instructed her.<sup>23</sup> Burkan stressed the significance of intentionality: that *how* we do what we do, and not necessarily *what* we do, is the real basis of healing and growth. Heather gave the example of eating ice cream: we could choose to eat it ‘with guilt’ (the typical adult mode, she said) or ‘with glee’ (the child’s proper attitude). In either case our intent would have greater effect than calories. By analogy, she claimed, ‘fire burns *or* fire heals’, the

difference being intent or faith. 'Flesh cannot firewalk, but Spirit can, moving *through* the flesh', she concluded earnestly.

Hazel showed us slides of her visits to native firewalkers in Hawaii and Sri Lanka. Originally the preserve of 'mystics and shamans', she said, firewalking was now opening up to everyone – 'with the shift in human consciousness I think we're all aware of'. But first we needed to get to grips with fear and its potentially crippling effect on our lives. She said that opinion polls had discovered that peoples' greatest fear was public speaking. 'So let's do it!', she announced, rubbing her hands, 'I want each of you to stand up and tell us all why you're here tonight!' Dutifully we stood up around the room to introduce ourselves. Brief aspirations or confessions quickly became the norm: 'I've *always* wanted to walk on fire', said one; 'I want to walk on fire because I'm scared of being myself', said another. 'I've walked three times already, but I'm trembling here at the thought of walking again'; 'I got lost coming here tonight, and I think that says something about my life'. After each introduction, we applauded vigorously.

In this first session, which lasted around an hour and a half, Hazel spoke rapidly and with great energy, sometimes acting out figures of speech or walking in a direct, determined line to mimic the act of the firewalker, sometimes cracking a joke, sometimes delivering an insight or aphorism with fiery conviction. Pre-written charts structured her monologues. This was very much a performance: we were the audience, responding to her leads, mimicking the behaviour and internalising the rationale of the successful firewalker. Now it was time to build the fire. As part of our mental preparation, we were asked to write down a word expressing our personal 'intention' for the evening and to be ready to place this piece of paper on the fire at the right moment in the ritual. Also, Hazel distributed a form waiving our right to hold her, Westbank or anyone else apart from ourselves responsible for the results of our stepping onto the coals. This was portrayed less as accident cover for the organisers as an opportunity for us to claim responsibility for our intent and actions at the event and therefore to 'own' our decision to firewalk. In other words, if I 'got burned', it was down to nothing or no one but myself and my own bad faith (compounded of guilt and fear, according to Hazel). Even then, evidence of 'failure' is recuperated by firewalking ideology: Danforth (1989: 279) points out that firewalkers emphasise that 'getting burned is simply another opportunity to learn and grow', which means that 'even burning becomes a healing experience'.

The mood became reflective and sombre. Silently we filed out to the small garden. Here turf had been removed to a depth of about six inches to form a shallow rectangular trench five feet by ten. Half-melted snow muffled the earth. Hazel began to shake a rattle to consecrate the space, making slow, swooping gestures as she moved around the trench. We collected one log at a time from a helper beside a large pile, and under Hazel's direction placed it in the middle of the trench to build a square stack. Hazel urged us to carry each log tenderly, 'like

a baby', to honour its contribution to the ritual. We solemnly added the slips of paper with our written intentions and formed a circle round the trench, holding hands in the twilight, some of us skipping up and down against the cold. The helper doused the stack with vegetable oil, and Hazel lit it. Then she moved gracefully around our circle, blessing each person's 'aura' and giving us herbs – a twist of sweet grass as a symbol of 'sweetness' and a pinch of sage for 'purification'. Flames took hold of the stack, and smoke billowed out and up. Finally Hazel blessed the fire and thanked the earthworms and other small creatures for giving up their lives for our sakes.

We went back inside. The mood was now restrained. Hazel turned again to her flipchart and unveiled this acronym:

**F**alse  
**E**vidence  
**A**ppearing  
**R**eal

'Fear', said Hazel, 'is nothing but this'. Our belief cages programme us into interpreting situations misleadingly, she explained: hence the tale of the man who, primed with fearful warnings against poisonous snakes, mistook a coil of rope for a cobra poised to strike. So, if we *think* the fire will burn us, it will, but its heat is actually 'false evidence' that cannot fool an 'awakened spirit'. Here Hazel invoked popular accounts of neurobiology and physics, the gist of which was, simply, the power of mind over matter.<sup>24</sup> 'I'll give you an example', she said, producing a small plank of yellow pine and placing it across two chairs. She concentrated for a few moments, breathing deeply, and then with a fierce 'Hah!' karate-chopped it in half. A buzz went round the audience. 'Come try it', Hazel grinned, 'some folk actually find this bit more difficult than the firewalk'. We gathered round the chairs, Hazel whooping and others applauding as individuals successively smashed their pieces, with just one failure, and one abstention (me, feeling distinctly heretical). In the former case, an older woman tried several times: after her final attempt there was a moment of embarrassed silence before someone called out 'Well *done!*', and people remembered to clap.

We returned to our seats and Hazel delivered a moral fable about life's purpose. Three men are hitting rocks with a sledgehammer (she acted this out with relish). The first man is in a chain-gang: he cries 'I'm breakin' rocks in the hot sun!' The second is a breadwinner: he cries 'I'm workin' to feed my family!' But the third says quietly: 'Me, I'm breaking stone to build a cathedral to the glory of God'. Beside me, Annie caught my eye and nodded approvingly.

So how will we know it's *right* to walk the fire, Hazel asked? We're not to walk from egotism, after all, nor from asceticism or masochism, nor from fear of being left out (the karate exercise demonstrated an instinctive group conformity but at the fireside, in the dark, I suspect that not everyone firewalked – including Hazel herself, as she told us afterwards). The secret was this: our 'Higher Self'

would know if and when it was right to walk. We needed to get ‘in touch’ with this inner source by listening quietly and trusting our guidance. But there was a catch, said Hazel: our Higher Self or inner voice lives *in the present moment only* and is infallible *only then*, not for past or future tenses. Hence, a second too early or too late (the rational mode) will not work. Conditions will have changed and the inner voice will no longer ring true. It has to be accessed and heeded *right now*.

As we digested this, Hazel called us to our feet. ‘It’s time to dance!’, she said, pulling back chairs, ‘find a partner!’ We formed a circle again, and Hazel taught us a folk dance similar to the sacred dances at Findhorn. We were to sing a song as we danced, and while we danced and sang we were to look each other directly but softly in the eye, recalling the groundrules on eye contact during Experience Week. The words were:

Maybe this is the healing, that we share this feeling  
and find a compassionate love,  
flowing from my heart to yours,  
flowing from my heart to yours.

As we sang the first line, we faced our partner and spread our arms up, out and down to bless each others’ auras. To the second line, we crossed hands on our chests, still facing each other. To the third, we placed one hand on each other’s chest, just over the ‘heart centre’ or ‘chakra’, and as we repeated this line we moved round the circle, taking a new partner. It was tricky to co-ordinate singing, dancing and hand movements, and I found it a little unnerving to look progressively into twenty-nine strangers’ eyes. When we finished, Hazel asked us to stand quietly for a few minutes in order to feel ‘the energy’ around the room. Some of us were breathing heavily. Suddenly her helper entered the room. ‘The fire is ready!’, he announced. We shuffled nervously. ‘OK!’ said Hazel, and she swept across the room, mimicking yet another successful firewalk. ‘Go for it! *Bliss* is on the other side of that fire!’

Outside there was no moon, but village street lights glowed down the short rise. The stack of logs had burnt into a crumpled heap of glowing charcoal. We stood in a circle, barefoot on the cold grass, holding hands while Hazel raked out the coals to form an even covering over the bed of the trench. Then a few logs were scattered down one side: these flared up. Suddenly Hazel shouted: ‘The fire is now open!’ and began a chant, with no explanation of the words. We took it up, clapping hands and stamping feet. After a short hiatus, the first person – Hazel’s helper – came to the top of the trench, paused, then briskly crossed the coals to a great cry of excitement. The way had been opened. A trickle of followers began, soon becoming a busy procession as people came to the head of the jostling circle and crossed the trench to whoops, applause, continual chanting and clapping. Some walked quickly or half-ran, and were lightly caught by helping hands on the other side; others kept to a

regular walking pace; a few danced and skipped across, or stepped slowly and deliberately as if testing the coals.<sup>25</sup> Sparks sometimes jumped up from heels, and a hose of water was kept handy on the far side where hugs and congratulations were exchanged among the neophytes. I went across twice, in four or five longish steps. The bed of charcoal felt crunchy underfoot, like warm cornflakes. My feet were already cold from the ground, so it was difficult to gauge the heat, but as I didn't want to reap the fruits of bad faith, I didn't linger. Eager hands met mine at the far end; someone patted me on the back, someone else said 'Nice one!' In the dark it was hard to tell who was who.

Finally Hazel cried 'One minute' and, shortly after, 'Last call!' One or two cameras flashed, freezing phantom figures on the coals. Then Hazel motioned us to stop chanting. She said solemnly: 'I invite anyone who chooses to walk the fire in silence. Say your intention before walking, and the group will say it back to you.' A few did so, calling out words like 'love', 'healing', and 'transformation'. We stood in silence, watching the coals glow. An hour had passed: it was becoming very cold. 'Let's go inside,' said Hazel quietly.

We talked and joked a little now as we walked down the gravel path. Some said the pain of the cold, or the gravel underfoot, was worse than the fire. There was a sense of comradeship and achievement. At the door we washed each other's feet in bowls of warm water. Inside, people sat chatting with cups of tea. The workshop had lasted nearly six hours. I felt exhausted. Before we dispersed, Hazel – also looking drained – handed out some photocopied sheets. These included a reflexology chart for treating any 'hot spots' on the soles of our feet, and a list of 'The Five Points of Power'. These were 'Pay attention', 'Speak the truth', 'Ask for what you want', 'Take responsibility for your experience' and 'Keep your agreements'. We were also to write down an inspiring message to ourselves, which Westbank would post on to us in one year's time to rekindle memories of the experience. 'Write what you like,' said Hazel, 'but remind yourselves of what you did here tonight. Feel your own power!'