Coda

The New New Age

From one point of view, the New Age movement began when enough people who thought about a dawning "new age" began to use upper instead of lower case letters to refer to the time. Put another way, the New Age movement happened when participants and observers who had identified a certain kind of emergent community began to reify it. This occurred sometime in the early-to-mid 1970s, and, arguably, it occurred because the media had noticed and sought to name the apparent whirlwind. It is instructive to browse through "old" books from the years before designations and attitudes became fixed. Doug Boyd's 1974 account of the celebrated Cherokee and adopted Shoshone shaman Rolling Thunder, for example, contains this casual reference: "Many Indians were returning to the tradition. Many new-age young people were developing awareness of the Indian way. These people could help the Indian to reverse the present pattern of polluting, exploiting and destroying nature." Boyd himself, who first heard Rolling Thunder address a small white professional audience in 1971, located him for readers in a continuum that told them how to think Rolling Thunder and how to think spirit. "Rolling Thunder expressed ideas and concepts that I had heard from spokesmen from India, Japan and Tibet. He said there was a law of nature that causes all things to be balanced, a law that says that nothing comes free, that all things must be paid for, that all wrongs must be righted. Teachers from all over the world have spoken of this law of karma. Rolling Thunder told how medicine men and others of similar practices communicate without words. Practitioners of all times and places from witch doctors to shamans to yogis, swamis and sages, have had this ability."[1]

As Boyd made clear, whatever else this lower-case "new age" was, it had been marked by a grand ecumenicity, a combinativeness that made the old-style "perennial philosophy" look effete and elitist beside it. A similar comprehensiveness

marked Marilyn Ferguson's *Aquarian Conspiracy* (1980), which by the time of its second edition in 1987 had sold one-half million copies and which has often been cited as a basic statement of New Age views. Ferguson's original edition, though, contains no index entry for the term, and—so far as I can tell—it appears nowhere in her text. Instead, Ferguson was ebullient over an exploding interest in "consciousness" since the 1970s and over the phenomenon of networking (her "conspiracy") that she found seemingly everywhere. Her text gave no index entry to Alice Bailey either. But in its introduction Ferguson confessed that she was "drawn to the symbolic power of the pervasive dream in our popular culture: that after a dark, violent age, the Piscean, we are entering a millennium of love and light—in the words of the popular song [from the Broadway musical *Hair*], 'The Age of Aquarius,' the time of 'the mind's true liberation.'"[2]

Seven years later, when the second edition appeared, however, its paperback cover excerpted *American Bookseller*'s review of the book as the "New Age watershed classic." Ferguson herself, in an afterword for the new edition, noted a series of "breaking stories." Among them was "*increasing media coverage of metaphysical/spiritual news*." Then, citing a *New York Times* front-page feature in September 1986 on the "growing number of adherents to spiritual views," Ferguson—one time only—used the much-repeated term: "Over the next few months other major features on the 'New Age,' some positive, appeared in publications like *Time*, *U.S. News and World Report*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and on television ('20–20,' 'Sixty Minutes,' network morning shows). Soon virtually all the popular magazines, major newspapers, and television networks were providing ongoing coverage. Since then, the emerging views and values have become the topic of TV dramas, even situation comedies."[3]

Ferguson had noticed that the New Age movement was, in large part, constructed as a media event. When numbers of metaphysically inclined spiritual seekers who were calling themselves "new-age" discovered themselves in print to be part of the New Age movement, they found that their ranks, seemingly overnight, swelled and augmented. Named by an independent and authoritative arbiter (the media), they grew surer of their own identity and the attitudes out of which it was formed. And if any one media "moment" shifted perception to this upper-case New Age, it was probably the publication of film star and political activist Shirley MacLaine's autobiographical *Out on a Limb* in 1983, with its video version by 1986.[4] *Out on a Limb* was translated into Spanish, Italian, German, and Polish as well as Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Meanwhile, in its video format, its made-for-television friendliness captured a huge American audience that, in many cases, may not have had significant prior exposure to her new-age concerns. MacLaine's story, with herself as star, invited the same kind

of study of important texts that American Daoism would promote. It also thrust the actress and many of her readers into novel (for them) practices such as channeling. Most startling of all for most, it pushed MacLaine into a secondhand encounter, in a different hemisphere, with a reported space visitor—who seemed a reconstituted theosophical master and who was, like MacLaine, a woman.

This is not, of course, to ignore perceptions of a coming new age (we began there) before Shirley MacLaine discovered the New Age and the media cooperatively evangelized for her. More precisely, by the 1960s a major shift in the metaphysical discourse community was taking place regarding a new age, and it was probably easiest to locate among Theosophists. J. Gordon Melton has pointed to the role played by the several hundred organizations that can be traced to the parent Theosophical Society. Continuing revelation kept continuing; and ascended masters apparently kept finding new people with whom to converse. Moreover, as Melton notes, the beginnings of what became the New Age movement could be tracked to Britain. There a confluence of spiritualists and Bailey-style Theosophists (Bailey had predicted the new age would come late in the twentieth century) flourished in a context made still more metaphysically congenial by the arrival of Eastern teachers after World War II. Concepts of "spiritual energy" to come at the dawn of the Aquarian age fed into a mood of general millennial expectation. At Findhorn near Inverness in Scotland, Peter and Eileen Caddy and Dorothy Maclean from 1965 built an experimental community, claiming that the aid of nature spirits was enabling them to grow spectacularly large and lush produce on ground that could hardly be expected to yield at all. As they reported their communings with the land and its spirits, they taught a theology of immanence. At the same time, others of a metaphysical bent began to talk of spiritual "light" as they recalled theosophical teachings on the coming of a new age. In the process, they came to see their own gatherings as points of light. Linked to one another, they believed—as in the old Alice Bailey vision—that they could bring new and greater light, channeling it to the world and engaging in a work of global transformation. Supported by small organizations such as, from 1971, Sir George Trevelyan's Wrekin Trust for exploring metaphysical themes, study groups networked with one another and spread the mood of expectation. "The message of the New Age swept through the ranks of the psychically attuned in much the same way that the charismatic movement did at the same time through ranks of evangelical Christians," Melton observes.[5]

The British new age hardly stayed home, and by the close of the 1960s it had spread internationally and linked itself to metaphysical discourse communities in North America. "Light" groups were in, and so were crystals. In a world in which vernacular readings of the new quantum science had taught people how

to think light, mystical and scientific light mingled and fused in crystals: Crystals were crucial in technological applications in the dawning computer age and crucial as well, for believers, in focusing and transmitting spiritual intention and energy. Worn as a pendant around the neck, a crystal became a new and Western lingam, a source of ever-available energy to infuse life into life. Placed at strategic locations to mark boundaries and enhance the flow of spirit, crystals protected and augmented the life force of believers and, in their view, all to which they extended. Even before the light groups, however, theosophical influence encouraged other stateside believers to expect an imminent new age in a context of expanding light. The new age, they thought, would be ushered in by space brothers or space-age ascended masters.

As early as June 1947, private pilot Kenneth Arnold claimed to have sighted nine silvery disks near Mount Rainier in Washington state, disks that he estimated to be flying at 1,200 miles per hour. Arnold made sure to tell a news reporter, describing the objects as moving like saucers that skipped across water. So began the era of unidentified flying objects (UFOs), spotted by a series of observers and provoking continued speculation. In one notably metaphysical explanation, for example, Swiss psychologist Carl Jung argued that the sightings were the result of displaced psychic contents—the "self" in space. Some, however, were not so sure, and they were not content to gaze at the unexplained and speculate on origins. They felt that they were making contact with space vehicles and whoever was flying them. The claim of contact with extraterrestrials, as we saw, had already been made in the eighteenth century by Emanuel Swedenborg, and spiritualists like Andrew Jackson Davis had felt no apparent qualms about describing life on other planets. Now, however, in an age of heightened technology and sophisticated flying objects of human construction, claims of contact with space beings gained new immediacy and plausibility. Tellingly, many of those who reported contacts with extraterrestrials ("contactees") displayed, as a group, backgrounds of immersion in theosophical and/or spiritualist lore.[6]

When in 1952 Polish-born George Adamski claimed conversations with a Venusian named Orthon, he had already, since the 1930s, been working as a metaphysical teacher, issuing publications from the "Royal Order of Tibet," for whom, he said, he was lecturing. Adamski hastened to produce books on his contactee experiences in 1953 and 1955 (as well as later ones), and he attracted a following. Plagued by allegations of fraud, he still had contributed an important word to a conversation that continued. Unlike ufologists, who saw the "saucers" as scientific mysteries to be clarified, contactees like Adamski and their devotees thought that they were dealing in mysteries that were metaphysical. The outlines of the message of the space brothers were clear: Humans were being warned to reform

their evil ways, to "fly right," in so many words. As Jerome Clark summarizes, "What the contactees created was a space-age version of an occult visionary religion, with roots in theosophy, the I AM movement, and other supernatural belief systems in which wise extraterrestrials played a role."[7]

Examples of the theosophical and spiritualist pasts of contactees abound. George King, for instance, who founded the Aetherius Society in London in 1954 and then settled himself and his center in Los Angeles, had been a medium, a yogi, and a student of theosophical lore before his space-age experiences. After the beginning of his reported revelations from Master Aetherius of Venus in 1955, who—according to King—named him the "primary terrestrial mental channel," King delivered trance lectures from "masters." Robert Ellwood thought them to be "identical to the 'Great White Lodge' of Theosophy." In the late 1950s, with their project Operation Starlight fully unfolding, members of the society traveled to Holdstone Down in England—to behold Master Jesus in cosmic light—and then to nine English mountains called by the Cosmic Masters through King "New Age Power Centers." Later, in the 1960s, they conducted Operation Karmalight, suggesting once again the prevalence of theosophical discourse and the continuing significance of light. In still another case, George Hunt Williamson, an archaeologist and also a student of Theosophy, published his account of contact with Martians through automatic writing from as early as 1952. But Williamson also claimed contact with ascended masters, and he later became associated with the Brotherhood of the Seven Rays, the name of the organization alluding to the full spectrum of light rays associated with ascended masters. According to Williamson, the brotherhood had first been established when the lost continent of Lemuria was destroyed between 10,000 and 12,000 B.C.[E.], and now, in 1956, it was being resuscitated as a monastic system in the Andes Mountains of Peru.[8]

The new high-tech ascended masters—now no longer earthlings but still functionally persons and profoundly wise ones at that—provided what Robert Ellwood has called "symbols of mediation." Like the multiplied forms and beings guaranteeing complexity to old Gnostic and Kabbalistic myths, these new answers for the Hermetic imagination announced that the universe was hardly vacant and that humans were not at all alone in it. Those who received their messages did so through a reconstructed form of mediumship that came to be called channeling. "Channels"—as on radios, television sets, and advanced technological gadgetry considered to be communication devices on spaceships—brought information and wisdom to believers. Now, though, the communicators—Ellwood's "symbols of mediation"—were no longer only or mostly the spirits of the intimate departed, or of historic scientific and political professionals, or of Ameri-

can Indians or African Americans or even Russian Cossacks. Instead, they were space brothers or extraterrestrial masters, and—as time passed—they became "entities," beings who had never been human or—as in the case of later well-known channel JZ Knight's Ramtha—came from lost civilizations (like Ramtha's Atlantis). Alternatively, they were collective beings representing "group souls."[9]

Contactees, however, soon had public company. In 1970, when writer Jane Roberts published *The Seth Material*, she launched an era of nationwide awareness. Communication with other-than-human entities had now left the boundaries of the contactee community and its followers to spread in the larger culture. Roberts was Jane Roberts Butts, a former Skidmore College student and now housewife who had taken different jobs during her married life and even published a novel in 1963. "Seth," the being with whom she claimed contact, had emerged when, experimenting alongside her husband with a Ouija board, they both received messages from the mysterious communicator. Thereafter Roberts found that she could become entranced and that Seth came channeling through while she was in trance states. He apparently had very much to tell, and Roberts produced book after book, some sixteen in all. The Seth writings became enormously popular in metaphysical circles, contributing to the self-identity of an emergent New Age movement and also augmenting its ranks.[10]

Roberts herself, despite all the fanfare, led a quiet life even as she questioned the source of the phenomenon, calling Seth a "dramatization of the unconscious" but implying that the unconscious in question was different from her own. In the second of the Seth books, for example, Seth announced concerning his mysterious identity: "I can quite literally be called a ghost writer, though I do not approve of the term 'ghost.' It is true that I am usually not seen in physical terms. I do not like the word 'spirit,' either; and yet if your definition of that word implies the idea of a personality without a physical body, then I would have to agree that the description fits me." Seth also boasted that he had "donned and discarded" more bodies than he cared to tell. "Consciousness," he declared sententiously, "creates form. It is not the other way around."[11]

Channeling and contact with space visitors—probably the two most flamboyant themes that marked this early New Age—had functioned as metaphysical harbor lights for MacLaine's 1983 *Out on a Limb*. She had dutifully, at the behest of a friend, visited the huge and well-stocked Bodhi Tree, the fabled metaphysical bookstore on Melrose Avenue in Los Angeles, and had begun to read the books recommended to her. They provided a short course on the metaphysical tradition, with special attention to reincarnation, and soon she was supplementing them with contacts with a series of trance channels, including the well-known Kevin Ryerson. She knew about Alice Bailey and Jane Roberts, and she was well

aware of Roberts's doubts about and resistance to the channeling phenomenon. When MacLaine met Ryerson, he was adamant about not being religious. "What church would have me?" he answered in reply to MacLaine's question. He explained, though, that "two, three, or maybe four spiritual entities" used him "to channel information." Then, in trance as the entity "John," Ryerson told the actress that he had information both about her and about the cosmos based on "that which ye would term the Akashic Records." "Akasha," he continued, "is that which ye might term the collective unconscious of mankind, stored in ethereal energy. This energy could be termed as the mind of God."[12]

MacLaine's spiritual journey reached a new point when David, her California metaphysical friend, invited her to Peru and the Andes Mountains (Peru and the Andes, as we have seen, were already favored by devotees of ascended masters and space contacts). Up in the Andes, "in the sulphur baths and along the banks of the bubbling Mantaro," David told MacLaine about "a girl called Mayan." Mysterious and beautiful, she transmitted vast reservoirs of knowledge and insisted that "the most important relationship was between each soul and God." But he had trouble telling MacLaine about her origins. "Where could she be from that's so hard to say? Another planet." "You got it!" David said. "You guessed it. You're right." Later, MacLaine learned that the locals routinely spotted UFOs. "'Shirley,' said David, 'everyone I've talked to up here has a flying-disc story. *Every single one.*'" He also told her that Mayan had come from the Pleiades (a theme that the Swiss farmer Edouard ["Billy"] Meier had introduced into the contactee literature in the 1970s, although Meier himself was trailed by numerous allegations of hoax). From what Mayan had told David, he confided, extraterrestrials were "*superior* because they understand the process of the *spiritual* domain of life." The mysterious woman from the Pleiades was reaching out to MacLaine through David because the actress was meant to be a "teacher" on a "much wider scale" than her mentor and friend. She was appointed to write the "simple truth" that was the "Big Truth." "'The simple truth,' he said, 'of knowing yourself. And to know yourself is to know God.'"[13]

It was an odd message, given the twin bookends of the MacLaine account. Trance channels and space visitors came from outside. They got consulted for guidance and direction, and they assumed the authority, for seekers, that institutions had for many who were perhaps less questioning and certainly more conventional. It was as if the Hermetic legacy had been turned inside out in this new New Age—as if the tensions and contradictions that had plagued American metaphysical religion since its nineteenth-century appearances had been ratcheted to new heights in the continuing quest for spiritual energy. The people who would be "as gods" found it necessary to consult. Americans who sought

to create their own reality had discovered that they needed to get directions—both on the reality and on the programmatic strategies for obtaining it—from somebody else. Moreover, when they consulted and got directions, they did so on a cosmic scale. That was perhaps appropriate, for there was nothing secret, or esoteric, in what Americans were pursuing. The nonsecrecy had been a fact since the mid-nineteenth century, when mass spiritualism—with its collection of trance-produced books seemingly a dime a dozen—had opened Hermetic secrets to American takers. Now the media had made even surer of the *exotericism* of what was transpiring, and New Age people cooperated enthusiastically. MacLaine was not alone in her instinct for grand announcement when she wrote a book that built to its Peruvian denouement with a woman from the Pleiades.

Still, for all that, Shirley MacLaine's outland gospel could not withstand the domesticating onslaught of the barrage of media coverage that rendered the secret public and exoteric. Americans grew more comfortable with extraordinary visitors and their messages, even as those who considered themselves New Age in the later 1980s and after often skirted past preoccupation with channeling and visits with space people. Increasingly, in the combinative habit intrinsic to metaphysical religion New Age Americans moved on to amplify numerous themes that were already woven into the texture of their synthesis. If they were "Star People," descended from benevolent space beings, as contactee Brad Steiger had declared, they were also heirs to a panoply of metaphysical and related themes bequeathed them by their American experience. The post-1983 MacLaine provides an instructive example. If she had been enthralled by channeling and space contact in 1983, a check-in six years later shows her teaching the gospel of the God-self as Mayan, through David, had desired her to do, but complexifying it in noticeable ways and also reading it largely as therapy. Several books after *Out on a Limb*, in her new autobiographical advice manual *Going Within*, the reconstructed MacLaine still acknowledged UFOs and space contacts, but her strongest interests lay elsewhere. The inside front and end papers of the book are telling. Both portray a stylized woman in yoga attire seated in lotus posture with seven appropriately colored circles—the chakras—illuminating the figure. On the opposite page a full-colored circle for each chakra sits centered between text describing its nature and function. In the book itself, MacLaine announced to readers that there was "nothing new about the New Age," told them that the New Age was "about *self*-responsibility," and displayed concern about personal and social healing. She instructed them in meditating and chanting and explained how she herself used meditation to allow her "Higher Self" to "reveal itself." "Directions coming from the Higher Self," she testified, were "by their very definition attuned to harmonious love and light energy."[14]

This "Higher Self" was the "personalized reflection of the Divine spark." Still further, with the end papers of her book telling the story already, MacLaine learned about "a specific power of aligning with certain energies." The physical body was "but the reflection of a series of more subtle bodies of energy within." These reflected "the vibration of the God Source"—at the disposal of humans if they but knew "how to access it." Everybody seemingly agreed. "The Egyptians, the Chinese, the Greeks, the North American Indian and African tribes, the Incas, the early Christians, the Hindus of India, the Buddhists of Asia, and today's metaphysicists and mystics everywhere in the world share, to some degree, a common belief." What was it? They all thought that the body was "only a physical manifestation of energies that together create an entity beyond that which can be seen." They believed that "those levels of existence, those energies, that entity, reflect the nature of God and the universe." MacLaine had discovered chakras, and she had found auras. She meditated on the proverbial "wheels," visualized them, and used sound to free up emotions and heal. Confident in her enlightened body-self, she explored other means of healing as well—experiencing psychic surgery from Filipino Alex Orbito and pondering how it could be. "There was no doubt in my mind that his hands had entered my body. I had felt it and seen it, not only in myself but in others as I stood over them and observed." She invoked "all the spiritual masters," who testified that the "physical" was "fundamentally a coagulation of molecules" that were "a product of our consciousness."[15]

MacLaine explained for readers: "If my body is made up of molecules determined by my consciousness to take the human form and all of it is actually composed of immortal God-like energy, I can accept the concept that psychic surgery is performed through a spiritual connection with the Divine." The connection, she thought, separated "living atoms one from another with an energy that doesn't violate, but simply and gently slips *through* the physical, much as a hand slips gently, without violation, through liquid." Humans were all "part of God," and within the "profound realization" of the "God within," they could "trust the loving and well-ordered magic" of who they were "meant to be."[16] So the New Age, for MacLaine and many other believer-practitioners, was about healing false beliefs and getting out of their own way to allow changes in consciousness to change the physical order. If the message seemed distinctly similar to New Thought (even Christian Science) and to a more diffused rendition in positive thinking, it was: The metaphysical ballast supplied by older metaphysicians shaped the New Age pragmatically. Alternative healing became the order of the New Age day, even as the psychology of Carl Jung and the human potential movement being celebrated at Esalen Institute helped to shape it. So there

was energy and there was healing; there was the power of mind and the correspondence between body-self, Higher Self, nature, universe, and God.

All the pieces of American metaphysical history came together in the New Age—Transcendentalism and spiritualism, mesmerism and Swedenborgianism, Christian Science and New Thought, Theosophy and its ubiquitous spin-offs, and especially metaphysical Asia. Quantum physics provided a horizon of discourse that could enable MacLaine and others to engage in mystical-scientific speculation about spiritual healing and psychic surgery. Parapsychology pushed the scientific argot toward the paranormal. Astrology—with its millennial expectation of the dawning age of Aquarius—charted quasi-scientific star maps to explain, according to principles of correspondence, the relationships between personality, destiny, and an individual's place in the universal scheme. Astrological dispensationalism, paralleling the Protestant fundamentalist version, told of coming ages, or dispensations, and their character and consequences.[17]

Meanwhile, as the example of Rolling Thunder already suggests, Native American shamans and teachers were hardly shy about sharing spiritual goods with white takers. The Chippewa Sun Bear, to the consternation of more traditionalist Indians as well as (later) Native American academics, gave the store away when he founded the (white) Bear Tribe Medicine Society and regularly sponsored Medicine Wheel gatherings from 1966. New Age people appropriated Native American rituals with enthusiasm, holding sweats, using rattles and drums, wearing feathers, beads, and gemstones in ceremonial ways, and adopting sacred-pipe ceremonies as well. From Indians they learned to make pilgrimages to sacred sites, often native ones, and they also learned to engage in mental journeying on a shamanic model. Imitating the Native America (and the Asia) of their imagining, they revered nature and exalted ecology. Earth became a living being, and environmental concerns—alongside other concerns for peace and a harmonious and holistic feminism—began to shape a social ethic.

The term "New Age"—now loosened from its ties to Theosophy, UFOs, contactees, and even channels and crystals—became a catch-all designation for an alternative collection of beliefs and behaviors. No one participant in the movement necessarily endorsed and supported all of them—or even knew about them all. Andrew Jackson Davis's mid-nineteenth-century distinction between a philosophical, or speculative, form of spiritualism (his own harmonial philosophy) and a phenomenal one (séances and their enthusiasts) became strikingly appropriate for this mature New Age. A new generation of metaphysical thinkers emerged with pragmatic agendas for everything from mystical practice to environmental needs, from pursuit of the divine feminine to international peace, and from

promoting true science and holistic health to spiritual and psychological transformation. To take a leading example, New Age teacher-prophet Ken Wilber, with strong interests in the relationship between science and spirituality, rose to prominence when he placed transpersonal psychology on a New Age intellectual map in his 1977 *Spectrum of Consciousness*. Working in a field that came to be called "noetic studies" (that is, studies of consciousness), Wilber produced book after book—which all seemed one book. From one point of view, he was teaching, for a new time, mid-twentieth-century perennialism. From another, he was supplying it with a distinctive psycho-physical tilt in an advance portrait of the enlightened body-self. In *Spectrum of Consciousness*, for instance, he invoked dualistic and nondualistic modes of thinking with the expected conclusion. It was "of the utmost significance," Wilbur wrote, "that, of the vast number of scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and theologians that have fully and deeply understood these two modes of knowing, their unmistakable and unanimous conclusion is that the non-dual mode alone is capable of giving . . . 'knowledge of Reality.'" He had already discovered Asian sources, and he blended them facilely with Western ones to teach the supreme virtue of the "Now-moment." For Wilber, it was "in this moment, right now, we are . . . always arriving at Mind, we are always arriving at WHAT IS NOW, whether that be suffering, seeking, pain, joy, or simple confusion." The journey did not "start Now," but instead it ended "Now, with whatever state of consciousness is present at this moment." "That," Wilber flatly declared, was "the mystical state, and that we are." He preached (for it was such) a "future-less Present," in which what came was "mortification, this Great Death, this total dying to the future by seeing Now-only." Paradoxically, with no future in sight what was missing, too, was the past; and with the absence of both came "no beginning in time" and "no end in time." Instead, traveling from the mystical horizon came an "awakening" to "that which is Unborn, and therefore to that which is Undying."[18]

The problem, as Wilber saw it, was that humans erected for themselves a "boundary," and so they could not reach the unitive state that represented the truest expansion into personal growth. Once "primal resistance" began to "dissolve," a person's "separate self" dissolved with it. In teachings that drew copiously on an approved short list of Asian metaphysical teachers—Ramana Maharshi, Chögyam Trungpa, Tarthang Tulku, Suzuki Roshi, and Jiddu Krishnamurti, for example—Wilber pushed for the "no-boundary" state. "As you begin to see that everything you do is a resistance, you start to see that even your feeling of being a separate self 'in here' is also nothing but a resistance. . . . But as this becomes obvious, there are no longer *two* different feelings here, no longer an experiencer on the one hand having an experience on the other hand, but only one, single,

all-pervasive feeling—the feeling of resistance. . . . The feeling of self condenses into the feeling of resistance, and both dissolve."[19]

This New Age mysticism, to be sure, seems like classic teaching, rewritten (and often not elegantly) with the discourse community of contemporary alternative science in mind, and rewritten as well with the body-self and its transpersonal psychology in mind. Apparently, too, some contemporary religious professionals did not object. Jesuit David Toolan's "journey into New Age consciousness," for instance, opened with the baths at Esalen (the enlightened *body*-self, with clothing an anomaly) and progressed to India. It returned west to a rediscovered account of Genesis, in which new physics—with its "tantric thermodynamics"—brought order through fluctuation, and it traveled the path of meditation in ways that climaxed in Jean Houston's ritual theater. To prime the "neural system" and the "kinesthetic body" became keys to transpersonal reality and a new natural theology. "You have to travel far and hear the meaning of the journey from a stranger," Toolan wrote, "perhaps from a[n] Israeli physiotherapist, a clairvoyant Californian, a Sufi clown, or a reincarnate Tibetan wise man. Spirit is like the wind; you never know where it's coming from or when." Toolan, as a Jesuit, freely acknowledged the tension with Catholicism that his pilgrimage brought. He was "grateful for the internal resistance" that his Catholicism gave to "Neoplatonism," grateful that it saved him from "quick-fix transcendence and gnostic escapes." Still, he had made the journey, and using the language of theoretical physicist David Bohm on the implicate order and the hologram for support, Toolan found the whole in the part and the part in his body. "If this is true, the body is silent metaphor, habitation of soul, a reservoir of prophetic dreams, our depth probe into the abyss of God's will."[20]

From a more academic perspective, process theologian and ethicist David Ray Griffin's explorations of religion, science, and postmodernity have invoked New Age teaching without attaching a New Age label. Griffin sought a reenchanted science and a reenchantment of the world—a return to a sense of subjectivity, experience, and feeling within nature—and he argued that reenchanted science was different from "sacred" science, immune to criticism. He found the ingredients for the reenchantment in a certain reading of quantum physics, one that was not its "dominant interpretation . . . limited to rules of calculation to predict the content of observations." Nor was Griffin happy with the usual New Age glide from quantum physics to mysticism. Perhaps surprisingly, though, to support his more nuanced account, Griffin turned to Ken Wilber, citing Wilber's argument that quantum physics promoted mysticism but did so indirectly. "As these physicists became aware that physical theory gave them only shadows and symbols of reality, rather than reality itself, they became freed from the material-

istic worldview and hence open to taking their own conscious experience as real and revelatory." Griffin likewise cited J. E. Lovelock and Lynn Margulis for their "Gaia hypothesis" of the earth as a living organism, carefully separating himself from overreadings of the same. He went on to point to David Bohm and his view that "every natural unit, as an act of enfoldment, in some sense enfolds the activity of the universe as a whole within it," with the universe "as an active whole" that could be seen as "divine." Bohm, Griffin thought, was "suggesting that postmodern science, in speaking of the implicate order, would include reference to divine activity."[21]

These kinds of issues, raised by elites and intellectuals, seem a far cry from ordinary practice among those who, in one way or another, thought of themselves as New Age. Phenomenal practice in the New Age was always—as we have seen for metaphysical religion in general—practice grounded in ordinary procedures and sacred technologies that, in the large sense, could be called magical. As this narrative has elsewhere suggested, magic means a noncausative transformation of a practitioner's self and environment in the direction of a good desired. It is accomplished either through material means (the cultivation of active imagination through symbolism, ritual, and alternative forms of energy work) or purely mentalist operations (meditation and directed mental processes, such as New Thought affirmations and denials). In the pursuit of such magic, New Age metaphysicians combined freely from many sources to find the techniques and practices that worked for them. With healing so prominent, for example, energy healing practices such as Reiki flourished. Here, in a Japanese initiatory form of palm healing, a practitioner through a series of "attunements" felt himself or herself to be a conduit for universal life-force energy directed to a client. Or there was Therapeutic Touch, publicized by Dolores Krieger from ideas and practices supplied by Theosophist Dora Kunz. Tellingly, Kunz—who claimed perception of subtle energies from childhood—would become president of the Theosophical Society in America (the Blavatsky-Olcott society) from 1975 to 1987, and she traced her lineage to British Theosophist Charles W. Leadbeater, with whom she studied in Australia. By contrast, Krieger, the publicist, was a registered nurse with a Ph.D. She began to teach Kunz's method at New York University, meanwhile also lecturing widely at other American and Canadian universities and professional organizations. Almost missionary in her effort, she systematized what she had learned for general consumption, using radio and television to effect, giving workshops, publishing essays, and, especially, publishing her book *The Therapeutic Touch.* Here she wrote familiarly of South Asian prana, teaching that people in good health had an excess of the same and that they could transfer it to another less blessed. The process of transfer, she declared, did not usually de-

plete the giver because the healer was "in constant energy flux," in a "continued constant flow." It was clear, too, that the "touch" was a touch of energy and that no physical contact was involved. The healer's hands stood several inches away from the client; auras and chakras—carefully disguised for in-hospital use and consumption—were the covert order of the day.[22]

Various forms of New Age shamanism cultivated active imagination in other venues, and so did an array of related practices, such as the appropriation by some of the Chinese art of placement—furniture, accoutrements, and similar objects—in a person's local environment. Feng shui practices changed energy, practitioners and their clients said, and rendered a disagreeable environment into a harmonious one. Everywhere, seemingly, the enlightened body-self found new niches that required transformation; everywhere the New Age world got upended and reconstructed. Still, the time for relative quiet came in the work of meditation. Even here, though, the preference for agency encouraged meditative techniques that promoted energy shifts and augmentations. Kundalini and microcosmic orbits were congenial; so was visualization in extensive formats that made real a desired good. Nor were practices so disorganized as at first they might seem. The combinative leanings of those who pursued the New Age, their valorization of change, and their fear of the lackluster imprisonment of institutions—none of these would lend themselves to the creation of strong organizations. Instead, as this narrative has already noticed, more fluid forms of community available through networks and networking predominated. Here, as sociologist Paul Heelas has observed, it is best to notice different levels of commitment. Individuals could express strong affiliation, working on the inside as New Age service providers; or they could be strong followers—people who showed up at a series of workshops, participated regularly in one or another small group, or the like. Or, finally—in a variation of the now-proverbial "nightstand Buddhists," they could be "nightstand" New Age people, reading occasional books, attending infrequent lectures or even conferences.[23]

Who were these New Age people? Sociological and demographic clues have been sketchy and general, but there is enough, for the late twentieth century, to suggest a pattern. Those who have identified with the movement are often unaware of their connections to a metaphysical path but sometimes not. Either way, they share a series of characteristics with earlier American metaphysical religionists from the Anglo-American mainstream. They have been mostly white, more female than male, often middle-aged, sometimes young, and frequently urban dwellers. Although media have often overstressed their wealth by focusing on expensive weekend workshops and seminars and the entrepreneurial goods and services that movement people provide, the New Age population has seemed

to be middle class and upwardly mobile, better educated than average, and not especially alienated from society. Still, a strong working-class component of the New Age cannot be written off, even if it is quieter and less noticeable. In terms of the formal religious backgrounds from which New Age people have come, evidence again is less than totally persuasive, but it does suggest representative participation by mainstream American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. Sometimes the protestations of Jewish rabbis seem to point to a New Age overinhabited by Jews, but the protests can be read as more a function of Jewish fears of disappearance than of demographic realities. Similarly, sometimes the mystically oriented practices of the New Age seem to attract more than an even share of Catholics—perhaps caught between their sacramentalism, which honors materiality, and their sexual ethic, which fears and reproves it. (Jesuit David Toolan's narrative hints at this, and a generation of Catholic New Age nuns also suggests the same.) But again, there are no real demographics to support the characterization.[24] Still more, with the fine line that can be drawn between entrepreneurship and evangelization—and with the self-help enthusiasm evident in many evangelical circles—it can be argued that Protestant evangelicals provide a backbone to the New Age. Again, the evidence is largely impressionistic, and the contrary arguments for Jews and Catholics point to the presence of sizable representation from all three traditions.

Given the fluid profile of "members" in a changing network of believers and practitioners, can anything at all be said about numbers? Criteria for "membership" have been clearly disputable, and data to support any given set of criteria seem often as dubious. In 1993, for example, Barry Kosmin and Seymour Lachman announced confidently that twenty thousand Americans could be counted in the New Age. On the basis of impressionistic evidence alone, that estimate seems untenably low. At the other end of the spectrum, literary critic Harold Bloom—on the basis of his decidedly nonsociological survey of the field—has argued that "Gnosticism" (that is, metaphysics) has been the real religion of Americans. And, in fact, even if survey data seriously delimit the all-expansiveness of a Bloom, it can still yield very large numbers of New Age sympathizers. Consider, for example, data suggesting that perhaps 25 percent of Americans accepted reincarnation beliefs in the late 1980s. Meanwhile, if we want to return to the camp of the narrow, we can limit membership to people who have subscribed to major New Age periodicals, listed themselves in movement directories, or signed up as participants in New Age–identified events such as the Whole Life Expos held in a series of cities as annual gatherings and emporia. Or, as another strategy, we can sweep most of the unchurched into a catch-all New Age designation—with roughly 7 percent of the populace in the category by the mid-1980s, and

among baby boomers and those younger noticeably more. To be safe, we could add some crossover members from traditional religions.[25]

None of these strategies has seemed entirely persuasive, and sociological estimates themselves have moved from the Kosmin-Lachman twenty thousand to a high of sixty million believer-practitioners for the United States alone. In this context, the most sophisticated guess for the American situation may have come from British sociologist Paul Heelas, with his tripartite reading of levels of New Age involvement—"fully-engaged," "serious part-timer," and "casual part-timer." On the basis of all three, Heelas was willing to offer his view in the mid-1990s. "Thinking of the USA," he wrote, it was "safe to say that well in excess of 10 million people currently have *some* contact with what is on supply. But we neither know the total figure, nor the numbers—over the 10 million figure—for whom the contact is, to varying degrees, significant."[26]

Still, with the thorough combinativeness of New Age aficionados—with the readiness with which all universalist metaphysical beliefs expand and incorporate others—the attempt to segregate a New Age community can never fully persuade. New Age beliefs, by definition, merge into general American beliefs and values, and the generalization is especially cogent for the philosophical side of the movement. More than that, signs of the decline of an ebullient New Age movement, by the early twenty-first century, are marked. The millennium happened, and it had not happened. The new world of the New Age was still clearly encased in the old. New Age people themselves declared the movement to be over, and so did some scholars. On the basis of media coverage alone, it is clear that the story has not been so compelling as it had been two decades earlier. Decline, however, is hardly the end. From the first bursts of upper-case enthusiasm for the New Age, some in the metaphysical community—with all the requisite beliefs and practices—resisted the designation. Indeed, sometimes it seemed that those who accepted the New Age label functioned as counterparts to self-styled fundamentalists among conservative Protestant evangelicals: Not everybody whom scholars would call fundamentalists called themselves that, and those who did had their reasons. From a far different perspective, the distinct repertoire of beliefs and practices that acquired the New Age label tumbled over boundaries—as had the beliefs and practices of an earlier New Thought—to become more or less public property. In the early twenty-first century, arguably, a renewed and far more encompassing metaphysical spirituality was abroad in the land.

For an example of resistance to New Age characterization, consider the neopagan community of the late twentieth century. In his huge and literature-based study of New Age religion, Dutch scholar Wouter J. Hanegraaff sets aside an

entire chapter to discuss the phenomenon of neopaganism and its status as a form of magic. He sees neopaganism as one of the major trends in New Age religion—channeling, healing, and New Age science being others—and he clearly has grounds for the argument. In his reading, neopagan magic is "different from traditional magic" because the magical worldview is "*purposely adopted* as a reaction to the 'disenchanted' world of modern western society." Hanegraaff cites major historical markers for any discussion of American and English neopaganism—the presence of Wicca, its foundation in 1939 by Britisher Gerald Gardner, evocations of medieval witch persecutions by Margaret Murray in her *Witch-Cult in Western Europe*, the ritual magic of another Britisher, Aleister Crowley, "spiritually-oriented feminism" resulting in the Goddess movement, and the like.[27]

This might all seem unexceptional, save that American neopagans have themselves resisted New Age categorization. With comments on neopagans' rather extensive cultural borrowing, for instance, religious studies scholar Sarah M. Pike has alluded to the general neopagan disdain for New Age people as "inauthentic." Admitting that neopagans find it hard to distinguish themselves from the New Age community, she observes that clearly, for neopagans, the boundary is "very significant" because people persist in "making the attempt" to separate the two. One neopagan whom Pike quotes writes that the New Age is "a very shallow approach to everything, taken without any real context or understanding of **anything**. It also seems to have been stripped of anything that might really challenge people or make them uncomfortable—yes, you too can achieve Total Enlightenment in about an Hour!" New Agers are "superficial" and pursue "worry-free knowledge." Unlike pagans who attend festivals to draw closer to the natural world, New Age people "hypocritically" avoid "any real contact." Neopagans feel that those who identify as New Age do not like the community of witches any better than the witches like New Agers. Moreover, neopagans complain of New Age financial exploitation. All of this, of course, hardly adds up to a clear and analytically cogent set of distinctions, and it is not material that is easily falsifiable. Even more, a set of shared beliefs and practices can be identified, as Pike notes. Both pagans and New Age people, she observes, share "beliefs and practices that many conservative Christians find dangerous: visualization, sacralization of nature, 'occult' techniques such as divination and astrology, and interest in American Indian and other non-European religions."[28] Still, the refusal to connect with the New Age agenda continues to point to an abiding sense of separation and distance in the self-perception of pagans. The simple fact that one can distinguish semantically—the New Age, the neopagan—itself speaks volumes.

Yet if neopagans were issuing a call to separation from New Age metaphysi-

cians, even as they read their manifestos a counter-process was occurring. Against the backdrop of the new millennium, the *old* millennialism of the late-twentieth-century New Age was coming apart. The early and lower-case new age had come largely out of theosophical splinter groups of Baileyite and I AM provenance and later. It had transformed ascended masters into space-age extraterrestrial visitors of superior wisdom and had reinvented spirit communication as entity channeling in a technological new-science milieu with the energy of light and crystals carrying multiple significations. The mature New Age, with its upper-case authority and media blitzes, had folded space commander-teachers, channels, and crystals under a larger, looser canopy of holistic healing. It had included among its blessings not only physical, emotional, and spiritual health but also pleasure and prosperity, magic and metaphysics. And it was fed more evenhandedly by New Thought and Theosophy, and also by Transcendentalism, quantum physics, human-potential discourses that opened to transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, environmentalism and Native Americana, astrology, and very much more. Its habit of combination only grew stronger as, like a vast cultural sponge, it absorbed whatever spiritual moisture was available. The postmillennial New Age, however, found the moisture disintegrating the medium. New Age became old age, the relic of a slightly unfashionable past—still around to be sure but beginning to seem a little too musty and precious. Like Ken Wilber's "now," the media-promoted New Age was dying to its own past and to a future.

The slow and continuing death of the New Age, however, was the beginning of its rise and future. Just as Theosophy and New Thought, in the early twentieth century, had dissolved into more and more diffuse renderings, just as their spin-offs and ideational contents spread outside their cultural containers into America at large, the New Age began to do the same. Now it was "new spirituality"—a new spirituality that went its way innocuously and underlabeled. Meditation became a property that even mainstream churches promoted. Environmentalism brought sacred sensibilities into the offices of lobbyists. Alternative healing, to the consternation of mainstream medical professionals, became a majority practice alongside the work of credentialed physicians. Psychics found their niches as service professionals, helping police, for example, to identify criminals. Hypnotherapists helped people to lose weight, curb their smoking, cut their alcoholism or their drug habit, and succeed in testing situations in which previously they had been frozen. Testimonies to the creative power of thought were everywhere, and motivational speakers made them their paycheck. Life coaches became fashionable. Indian-style jewelry and crystals seemed mostly unremarkable. Even past lives could provide the stuff of accepted party conversations, while references to a person's karma did not raise eyebrows. Chakras functioned as part

of a new spiritual vocabulary. The New Age was stepping aside for a new and exoteric spiritual America.

In this new spiritual America, metaphysical religiosity—found already in its proto form among the mix of peoples in North America in the early seventeenth century—was showing itself the resilient, chameleonlike, and pervasive reality that it was. By refusing to be separated out into a set of organizations or discrete identities, by disengaging its own discourse community in favor of generalization, metaphysical religion made itself a lingua franca that could be shared, even for those who self-consciously identified with one or another organized religious body. Metaphysicians could exist both in and outside Christianity, or Judaism, or other inherited traditions. Still further, the lingua franca did promote certain semantic choices, and it did provide a vocabulary of engagement that marked its late-twentieth/early-twenty-first-century time. Metaphysical religiosity—in the declining New Age and in the new spirituality that was succeeding it—was different from the metaphysical religion of a century previous. The old teaching of correspondence was there, and so was the discourse of the power of mind—whether God's or a person's own. A disguised Hermeticism still prevailed. But the mind had manifestly acquired a body, and the body refused to stay out of metaphysical discourse. It was the enlightened *body*-self that twenty-first-century metaphysicians and their immediate forebears hailed. More than that, it was an enlightened body-self in seemingly perpetual need of energy. Was the world racing too fast? Were there too many tasks to be done? Was there not enough time or space for contemplation? Whatever the spiritual and practical dilemmas, the sense of exhaustion and the need to be charged with a divinizing energy were ubiquitous. New spirituality in America meant energy spirituality, and the energies of mesmerists and ether vibrations were only preparation for what had transpired.

In its exotericism the new spirituality had also taken the mid-nineteenth-century spiritualist impulse for mass marketing and run with it in new and more sophisticated ways. As the media grew in a computer-age technological universe, so did the mystical capacity for exotericism keep pace. Metaphysicians had come out of their closets to make headline news, and clearly they were loving it. Secrets had gone public by a mile or a beer keg, and nobody seemed to mind. In this atmosphere of public scrutiny and public property, too, the old social agendas of metaphysicians assumed new cogency. Alice Bailey's Triangles could function under the shadow of the United Nations in quiet ways, but—more noticeably—new-spirituality advocates learned their politics in order to work concretely for environmentalism, peace, and feminism. They could side with political candidates—Greens, Natural Law, and even old-fashioned Democrats and Republicans—as issues and values warranted. Out of the closet meant entry into history,

and metaphysicians—who had always known that there was a social order—by the twenty-first century knew it more. Their religious history had been a history of combinative belief and practice, and they unabashedly continued their combinative ways as they preached behavioral sermons, unawares, on the exchange meaning of community. Indeed, what befell the New Age was also befalling the new spirituality. Both combined themselves so habitually and unremarkably that, as regular fare, they tended to lose themselves and find themselves reinvented.

For the American religious historian, though, the metaphysical habit of combination provides a large historiographical clue about how to make sense of the spiritual life of the nation. Seen from the perspective of early-twenty-first-century metaphysical religion, combinative practices supply an important insight about what everybody had been doing all along. If consensus historiography needed to be long gone in the face of the ongoing demise of a central Protestant consensus, the historiography of pluralism seems also to limp. Americans were neither purely and simply tolerating one another nor contesting one another for limited goods, as the standard interpretive tropes of the pluralist historiographical model suggest.[29] Rather, from a religious perspective, they were begging, borrowing, and stealing from one another, and they were doing it in broad historiographical daylight with little or no apology. Catholics and Protestants did it, and so did Jews. When Muslims became new neighbors on the block, they did it as well, and so did South and East Asians. Native Americans and African Americans had long since made their appropriations, and the public secret that was now emerging was that whites had all along borrowed from Indians and from blacks as well. Americans, in short, were—and had long been—reinventing their spiritual selves and communities to produce transformed religious worlds. Hence they require a historiography of connection, one noticing that contact is much of what there is to tell and that contact demands a new emplotment as a comprehensive American religious narrative. Religion in the United States, in general, needs to be noticed for its overlapping between and among cultural worlds.

For metaphysical religiosity itself and its contemporary presence as new spirituality, its embrace of mental and material magic has pointed one way toward a reenchantment of the world. If as Jonathan Z. Smith has argued, religion is a process of human labor—and labor that, in ritual terms, goes on in the struggle with incongruity—the religious work of magical presence needs to be recognized for its access to the powers of human imagination and, so, for its theological power.[30] Metaphysicians, through the course of American religious history, struggled with human incongruity—intellectual, emotional, environmental, practical, spiritual. They felt the pain that others felt and—in their vernacular community—took a hands-on approach to finding solutions. So they created—stories, more

sophisticated narratives, theologies. It was labor, indeed—often hard work; and its results were likewise often uneven. When creations did not function smoothly, metaphysicians sometimes hyperinvented them, and thus they perpetrated hoax and fraud. When the creations needed novelty to arrest and attract, metaphysicians sometimes also hyperinvented those, and the results were absurdities. Even when they exalted themselves as gods in the making or already made, metaphysicians still found that they needed to consult and that often the consultations came as revelations from beings who were higher than their godly selves. But metaphysicians had gifts for persuasion, and they found ready niches in the imaginations of their friends and neighbors. Sometimes their work turned out well, and sometimes it became mightily persuasive. Whether they produced art or kitsch, however, they did labor at religion outside the box. In their openness and vulnerability, their failures and successes, a magic still dwells.