

Playing truths: logics of seeking and the persistence of the New Age

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“But as a movement, I believe, the days of the New Age are numbered. Why? The New Age has relied heavily upon contemporary science in its new synthesis of traditional occult/metaphysical teachings (...) [but science] is already moving beyond concepts from which the New Age movement has constructed its worldview. The very activity of science tends to undercut any metaphysics drawing heavily upon it. Once given religious meaning, words and models have difficulty changing and developing with the demands of science. As science continues to change, the New Age synthesis will simply fall apart. There are already strong indications that the New Age synthesis is crumbling” (Melton 1991: 51).

Predicting the imminent demise of the New Age seems about as easy, and as common, as predicting its arrival. Both prophetic demonstrations make use of aesthetically pleasing, often esoteric, meta-reasoning to prove the inevitable. In spite of our propensity as academics to believe the former and smirk at the latter, the New Age as phenomenon has remained persistently present, and its proclaimers robustly predicting for over twenty years. Even more to the point, the above quotation reifies New Age as a synthesis of outdated metaphysical premises and simple, static understandings of science. Yet, as I will argue throughout this article, the crux of New Age, the power of New Age, is generated by the fluidity of the playful attitude on the part of those persons who continuously create phenomena that can be identified with New Age. These persons, whom I will refer to as ‘seekers’, play with all phenomena, including those disciplined by science. Theirs is a metaphysics of the playful and the adventurous which respects none of the authorized, disciplinary boundaries of our phenomenal worlds. It thereby evokes the antagonism of authorized

disciplinary representatives. In the logics of seeking there are no stabilities in metaphysical syntheses and methods of questing. In this article I explore these logics of the playful attitude and their consequences for what is called New Age.

This article is based on one and a half years of fieldwork in Houston among white middle and working-class New Age groups.¹ These groups were informal, open and friendly. They were not secretive, and neither was I. I began my fieldwork as a study of New Age bookstores and quickly found them to be key nodes in a heterogeneous network of organizations and groups - doctrinal organizations, independent teachers, educational centers and home groups - with seekers circulating in and out of them.

Dispersed and informally related, these New Age institutions have almost complete autonomy from each other. Connections between them are loosely maintained through seekers, and through shared advertising space in newsletters. There is thus no membership in the New Age as a whole. The groups themselves were often transitory and their membership

fluid. They share many of the characteristics of new social movements as described by Alberto Melucci - loose heterogeneous networks, no secure leadership, and partial participation (1989, 1996, see also Gerlach and Hine 1970). During my fieldwork, two of the groups in which I was participating disappeared completely, without formalities. On this institutional accounting, then, seekers could be said to participate in a virtual community, coherent only through their shared involvement in this loose network of sites (Stone 1992).

Seeking

Participation in the New Age is best described as oblique, with membership being a matter of perspective. A 'New Ager', as I use it in this article, is someone presumed to be part of the New Age movement defined, typically, by an accuser. To call someone a New Ager is to transubstantiate a New Age movement and presume to be able to speak about it (Bourdieu 1985). A good working definition of a New Ager is anyone who has been to a New Age bookstore in the last two months, and people like them.

A 'seeker', by contrast, is a person who is currently engaged in a certain logic of practice and who narrates his or her self as 'on the way'. 'Seeking' is a term used by many of the people I talked with. Straus, using the same term, commented on the processual nature of seeking: "Even identity as a seeker emerged only in the course of seeking (...) the person comes to specify his or her quest on the basis of one's concrete interactions with others or the representations in books and other media" (Straus 1979: 162).² The New Age is thus an appellation, a category constructed and imposed by others, an effect of demarcations and constraints. While seeking is an active form of life that happens to be prevalent among those involved with topics or disciplines grouped under New Age. From the perspectives of seekers, seeking is a mode of living, a

way of playing with knowledge, of experimental and adventurous living. Not all seeking is concerned with the New Age, nor are all New Agers seeking. When seeking intersects with New Age, it often responds playfully and parodically to the serious attempts of categorizers (of science, of religion) to keep boundaries neat and clean. And though most seekers reject the New Age as descriptive of what they do, it is the activity of seeking that I hope to show is the key form constituting the continued persistence and even the success of the New Age as a manifest movement.

Instead of looking for ways in which New Agers are predestined for participation, and therefore finding tendencies and reasons for why someone becomes one of them, I will present the various ways by which people can come to speak of themselves, that is, to speak themselves, as seeking, as filled with the playful attitude toward realities and toward their potential for malleability. This discourse-centered approach helps demarcate many things overlooked by other methods, namely the broader intra-cultural phenomenon like bookstores, mainstream publishers, desktop publishing, and so forth, which bridge and, so deny a neat separation of who is speaking for and who is speaking New Age. Recognizing the role of discourse means paying attention to the social uses by individuals of verbal resources and the play of multiple, shifting, and competing statements with practical effects within a group (Abu-Lughod 1991). This approach complements and complicates the work done by ethnographers of specific groups and churches within the New Age (McGuire & Kantor 1988, Csordas 1994, 1997).

Playfulness permeates the New Age - all the fruits of science and technology, religion and psychology, indigenous beliefs and healing systems are available to be selected, combined, sold and consumed. Capitalism and spirituality both contribute to a celebratory self-making and self-help. In Sutton-Smith's (1972) terms, this was a playful site where the boundaries of play and not-play were actively played

with. The pragmatics of everyday life - saving time, gaining energy, dealing with stress, finding happiness, and making money - were taken seriously and were figured as part of an epic adventure. But if this New Age seems to be a particularly modern form of consumerist self-fashioning, the specific form of New Age remains to be analyzed (cf. Heelas 1996). The eclectic congerie of religions, psychologies, entertainment and sciences collected together requires an accounting, as does the kind of self - that of the seeker - who can be playfully and willfully fashioned within it. The seeking self desires to experiment with and try out any and all phenomenal and spiritual forms without regard for disciplinary and occupational boundaries and categories. Seekers find power in playing with the premises and propositions of social existence that others see as stable, natural, and proper, or as changing in disciplined and controlled ways.

Seeking truth illegitimately

Seekers emulate and parody the science, religion and university disciplines by enacting the practices of authority outside of approved accreditation. For instance, they study for, award, receive and recognize diplomas for teaching New Age topics. Unapproved topics taught by unapproved teachers to unapproved students enact what can only be called 'serious play'. Seekers demonstrate a thorough cultural knowledge of the roles and ruses of expertise and professionalism, and it is their mastery of these roles which makes their playful activity so disturbing and so subversive of these professions. The perceptions of seeker playfulness as parody are those of experts who disapprove of seekers entering their authorized and privileged domains of knowledge. From the perspectives of seekers, they playfully and creatively engage with all knowledge that comes their way, without regard for the compartmentalization of expert knowledge. That which is perceived as parody from outside New Age is

perceived as playful by its practitioners.

The categories of playing and acting are particularly important in understanding the discursive tension with expert discourses of science, medicine, and religion, borrowing from them and playing with them, and playing with them simply by borrowing from them. This kind of cultural parody has to be understood within and against the context of cultural authority it plays with: "discourses of authority only work when recognized as legitimately used the right person, the right place, the right time" (Bourdieu 1985: 113).

Science, fundamentalism and social science are professional discourses, which are deployed polemically as integrated wholes in order to perform gatekeeping - keeping the gates into the profession well guarded and their contents secure from (mis)appropriation. By controlling the discourse about New Age, gatekeeping controls discourse about itself and its realm of knowledge.³

"Over and above everything which sets them against one another, specialists agree at least in laying claim to a monopoly of legitimate competence which defines them as such and in reminding people of the frontier which separates professionals from the profane... Those in possession of the legitimate competence are ready to mobilize against everything which might favor popular self-help (magic, 'popular medicine', self-medication, etc.)" (Bourdieu 1990: 151).

The following two passages negatively characterize the New Age from the outside. They each find the New Age both unbelievable and insidious, worthless and yet worthy of sustained criticism. Maureen O'Hara, representative of humanist psychology, fears both the New Age and fundamentalist Christianity. Constance Cumbey, speaking from within the First Baptist Church, rails against both the New Age and humanistic psychology in general. Each thus includes the other as part of a broad, bad New Age movement.

“She [a prominent New Ager and member of the Humanistic Psychology Association] seems quite willing to erase the line between science and fiction and what is worse, does not seem to recognize the sinister possibilities of such suspension of disciplined thought (...) a state of acritical solipsism (...) hopeless solipsism... Perhaps we should simply withdraw from philosophical discussion of truth and declare everything metaphor (...) The community needs some form of established science (...) we need a way to separate what might ‘possibly be true from what is actually true’” (O’Hara 1988: 156-61).

“They use rock music to break down existing thought forms to make room for the new (...) They will hook you through the mind (...) with flattery: ‘you shall be as gods’ (...) The movement is much larger than Ferguson reported, it is bigger than Eastern religions (...) Most of the New Agers are nice, sensitive people, who were working through problems when the devil hooked them. The mystical experience seduced them” (Cumbey 1985).

Functioning as an excluded Other for more than one discourse, the New Age takes on the quality of a particularly robust object of criticism: it becomes a ‘negative boundary object’, a term I adapt from Star and Greisemer’s excellent (1989) study of boundary objects in science. A negative boundary object derives its usefulness not from being a shared thing by each discourse which refers to it, but from being something a set of discourses wishes to exclude. The New Age is used as an open-ended, mobile referent to demonstrate what and who is not scientific, what is not spiritual, what is not normal. As a shared object of repugnance, the New Age appears especially real. The playful, fluid attitudes of seekers are crucial to this repugnance of gatekeepers toward the New Age. This situation merits investigation because clearly the New Age movement is serving as a peculiarly useful object-of-avoidance.

This ability of the New Age movement to be repugnant to so many professional discourses is ironically quite productive for seekers. Seekers find heroic subjectivity in being singled out by authoritative discourses so forcefully, and the intensity of exclusion also draws attention to the New Age movement, serving to make non-seekers curious, and even ‘recruit’ them. Through their playful attitudes, seekers continually recast the gravity of these disciplines and discourses - now as strange, now as familiar - as they borrow and mix the ingredients of their own changing New Age discourse. Here the power of the playful comes to the fore. This power may be understood as the capacity to live life fluidly, treating phenomenal worlds as changing kaleidoscopes of stimulating themes whose relevance can be altered at will.

Seeking everyday adventures

The seeker is a phenomenal subject whose body is one of affects - good vibes, signs of transformations, and embodied knowledge. Seekers are narrativized in the sense that seeking means continually talking about, writing about, interpreting, enacting, and playing with narratives about persons and their bodies. Seekers perceive their own activities and explorations as playful. They constantly give attention, indeed meta-attention, to the performative aspects of their practice.

At a lecture that took place at a New Age center that I attended regularly for a year, Middle Ground, this playful approach to truth was evident. This particular event was a scheduled presentation about the *Keys of Enoch*, a book which was presented word for word to its author, J. Hurtak, and contains information about how to live, the future, science and much else. This presentation was listed on the monthly calendar/newsletter (desktop) published by the center and distributed throughout Houston. It was also mentioned in other New Age newspapers and posted in bookstores.

The event takes place in the middle of the week at seven p.m. and is given by one of the founders of the center, Gabrielle, who sees herself as primarily a teacher and who also is an accountant. She is introduced by Angela, another founder of the center. The lecture is held in the largest room of the house that is a formerly foreclosed house bought with donations (called 'tithes'). The large room has about eighty folding chairs arranged in rows with an aisle down the center. At the front is a fireplace, a small podium, a small table that serves as an altar, a bookshelf, and some sound equipment, speakers and a microphone. Tonight there is a white-paper easel for drawing on. Angela is wired for sound with a cordless mike, and is being professionally recorded in the back of the room where there is a master recorder. Copies of previous lectures and music are for sale.

When the event begins, with an invocation and a short introduction about Middle Ground by Angela, there are twenty-five people in attendance, scattered through the room in groups of one to four. Many, like myself, have notebooks, tape-recorders, or both. A few have their own copies of the *Keys*. This introduction, like most seeking speech, is addressed to an audience personally and individually. Personal references by the speaker are opportunities for each listener to find their own references and apply what is being spoken about to their own uncertainties and desires (Wuthnow 1997). As with many speakers, this personal tale evoked low-key call and response patterns, "yes!" and "uh-huh" were frequently heard.

Angela: "I took Gabrielle's class (...) it turned out to be a phenomenal experience for me (...) I found that as I went week to week, I was activated into greater levels of awareness with every passing minute, and although I am not a very left-brain person and I don't know how much of it I absorbed on that level, I'm real clear that I absorbed all of it on other levels. And it was as if we had a [stable] environ-

ment with the hierarchy and the angels and the holy ones - it was as if they knew we were there once a week and that they were all present in the room; the energy field that was created each week as we went through this class was just phenomenal".

Authority, in Angela's testimony, is centered squarely on 'personal experience', or 'what one has gone through'. The proof of the power of her class is that the 'I' who is speaking is only present as this 'I' because of the transformation wrought by the experience. In spite of her lack of intellectual and cognitive (left-brain) learning, she knows she has learned much because she has profoundly felt the experience of learning. Scientific, verifiable, impersonal knowledge is segregated as one not particularly important way of knowing, learning and growing. Rather, a language of bodily feelings (e.g. energy, awareness) is used to convey a personal sense of participating in something extraordinary and therefore valuable.

Angela: "I met people that in the course of this class had become very, very different and I know will be life-long friends - it was as if we were brought together to a higher purpose (...) and so we came together as families (...) so, to say it's powerful is an understatement. It's really quite an experience, and the thing that was especially wonderful to me about the class is that it pointed out all the universal threads, it tied it all together, all the greatness on the planet and all the world and nations, and all the things that seemed unclear and contradictory in the past suddenly came together real neatly. As you study the book it becomes blatantly obvious that the information in the course is profound. So, after completing the course, I think we started in August and completed around January, and within six weeks I received a vision at Middle Ground and we were on the road (...) so what's very important to me and to other board and council members and we're really thrilled and excited about

Gabrielle coming and teaching this class at Middle Ground - we've been asking her to do it for a while".

Further emphasizing the extraordinary or uncanny aspects of the class, Angela describes its pivotal role in transforming more than one individual and leading directly to the founding of Middle Ground. She tells this history through a particular kind of time, 'adventure time', a time of significant events and challenges arranged in stages. Each is seen and felt as a turning point leading to metamorphosis, and then to further stages. Seekers can be said to emplot their experiences as part of a magical journey, an 'everyday life adventure'.⁴ In this Bakhtinian chronotope, the personal, magical and spiritual are woven together such that the mundane is always potentially allegorical for the sacred (Bakhtin 1981: 120). This adventurous life is private as opposed to public; these adventures are personally observed and meaningful. By adopting this chronotope into their self-narration, seekers cast and recast events as magical or of spiritual relevance.

Journeys from one perspective to the another (e.g. from meditation to astrology), provide a concrete enactment of one's personal figuration via a path. Such paths are playfully represented as a spiritual résumés, in conversation or in advertising - they place one on the map, so to speak. A useful comparison is the way in which intellectuals narrate their careers as moving from one theory to another, one paradigm or frame to another. This is an illustrative comparison because it calls attention both to the parodic aspect of New Age, and to the curious way by which intellectuals narrate a life of problems.

Communicative doing

Gabrielle now takes the podium and begins by leading a prayer and guided visualization with the aim of creating a productive and conducive atmosphere. She then tells the story of

how she came to the book:

Gabrielle: Out in a pasture in Arkansas (...) this nice couple came up (...) we talked for a while, felt each other out, and so we went to their motor home and he pulled out a copy of the *Keys of Enoch* and said: 'this is the book, this is what you need'. All beat up, marked up, underlined. And that was that. So I wrote the name down and I came back and I found this book and it seemed real important - I took it home (...) Now, I'm not brilliant at scientific things and I got intimidated by all the formulas in this book. (...) Then this man [Cyrus Bear] who I was studying with, said he was going to be teaching a one week intensive on the *Keys of Enoch*. And I said, 'My my, how interesting, he knows this book as well'. So, right there I made the decision to take this class [and I] went out to New Mexico (...) I came back that summer and really wanted to get this information out, like it was really really critical (...) I've been putting this information out for three years now and what I've seen is very similar, people going through an affirmation process, upgrading, looking at a lot of things".

In this adventure story, 'the book' and the 'information' in it are agents of change; they actively present themselves and orchestrate Gabrielle's journey. As knowledge, they are valuable, and they urge their own dissemination. This is an excellent example of what Greimas calls 'communicative doing'. As opposed to veridictory doing, where knowledge is only valuable to the extent that it can be verified, in communicative doing, "what matters is that there is communication [of the information], not the truth-status of that information" (Greimas 1982: 93). Finding certain information personally helpful is reason enough to need to pursue it and to pass it on.

The notion that knowledge is inherently good is a product of modernism, according to Blumenberg (1983: 361). Angela and Gabrielle deploy this notion to criticize attempts to control dissemination, especially attempts to pre-

vent students from freely teaching what they know.⁵ This critique of knowledge ownership is often directed at the scientific and medical establishments as well, who are seen as 'too possessive' and 'secretive' about their findings, and not willing to open up. Contrary to these establishments, seekers want to personally evaluate information, they are the bottom line.

At the end of the lecture, Angela recounts an uncanny story of contacting the book:

Angela: "I know that when I first picked up the book and I read the introduction of the book, I was moved to tears. Something just snapped in me and I knew that I had to study it. But there is something real moving in it".

Gabrielle: "I know when I first turn Angela on [to it] (...) I put it in her hands and chills, bumps, just went up and down her arms".

Angela: "And then I opened it up and said: 'What is this, you want me to study this!' [laughter] (...) Taking this class does not mean you surrender your whole way of life to this particular way of thinking. That is the bottom line. It's something I studied for nine months, I took what I needed. I don't read the *Keys of Enoch* every night before I go to bed. It's just something I took in and accepted and moved on. That is what to me is so special about what Gabrielle is doing, it has a beginning and an end, and you can take what you need and move on".

The medium is the message. As with Angela, the information communicates its value through the body, literally moving the person to take it up and study it. At the same time, the uniqueness of each individual's path is emphasized. Each must evaluate the personal value of each bit of information. Seekers correspondingly disapprove of claims that there is any one right way. Spirituality in this sense is 'modular', all paths are theoretically equal and appropriable, it is up to the seeker to pick and choose, combine and synthesize his or her own journey. Seeking is a mode of shopping

for the right combination of psychospiritual goods to make yourself up, take in what you need, and move on (Luckmann 1989). Adapting a phrase of Arjun Appadurai's, this is a "fetishization of the consumer" rather than of the commodity (1986: 56). Ordinary goods, which are all potentially sacred, become transcendent in the presence of the right person. Nonetheless, this is done through the eclectic and the collage, mixing and stirring and delighting in these combinations.

The notion of a personal path for everyone also helps to accommodate explicit conflicts. A constant and sensitive topic among seekers is how to understand their own feelings that there is some 'truly fringe' stuff out there that is just plain bad and not worth anything. Because seeking capitalizes on accepting rejected knowledge and providing a safe haven for a variety of points of view, conflicts of interest must be dealt with very carefully. Yet, beyond this, there is an open, playful attitude, especially toward positions one personally does not subscribe to. Thus there is a liberal ethical and theoretical tolerance of others' beliefs, even where one is highly skeptical. For example, when pressed to articulate a sense of what is 'really fringe', even the founder of Middle Ground had difficulty:

Angela [in a separate interview]: "A lot of the channeling that's going on to me is on the fringe because I question its validity. I don't question the validity of channeling - cause I know that's a very real phenomenon. But I question how many people are really doing it. You know, how many people are really tapping into higher levels of awareness versus people who are just talking from their subconsciousness (...) I question teachers who channel and give people specific guidance on how they should lead their lives, that's fringe to me. And yet I'm not judging it because I had an experience with gem therapy that was real profound. People laid stones on my body and I went through a healing - miraculous. I'm not saying that's not true. But that really stretches

people. You really have to stretch to believe that if you lay on the floor and put stones on your body, that it is going to heal you. So I guess the stuff that really stretches you is more fringe stuff”.

The New Age as a deviant space thus does not function the way the discourses of gate-keeping would have it function. Through a particular kind of partial or oblique identification, seekers are able to address the stigma of New Age directly, indeed personally, shifting the question from “Is this true?” to “How is this ‘true’ for me”, or “How do I find it fraudulent”. When Gabrielle describes how the *Keys* came to be, she speaks directly to a probable dislike of channeling among members of her audience. She uses channeling as a sign to distinguish her class from others, and to help constitute her listeners as a group (Zaretsky 1974: 192). She is able to present herself as discriminating and open.

Operational aesthetics

Gabrielle: “It’s very important to realize that this is not a channeled book - it is not channeled - he’s very adamant about people realizing that it’s not channeled. This is not channeled work. So there’s a very high degree of accuracy. Also, like Bear points out, there is no perfect being, there’s no perfect text, there’s no perfect institution no perfect religion - nothing (...) So don’t hold that every single word and every single thing you hear is absolutely, unquestionable at any point in time. Again, I’ll just invite you to take it, consider it, hang out with it, meditate on it, see what works for you, take the parts that you’d like to use and then go on. If there’s one thing I know, that’s to not encourage people to blindly accept anything ever. Please question. So that there seems to be a pretty high degree of accuracy. So the origin of the *Keys*’ basically was in 1973. J. J. Hurtak who was/is a professor of religious studies and is Jewish by faith, at a University

in California. He studied the sacred scriptures - the Bible, the Old Testament, etc. for many many years and in his 33rd year he felt very confused - he had this vast expanse of knowledge but he didn’t know how it all fit together. It’s like the more he studied, the more confused he became, and finally, he cried out in a state of desperation, ‘Please show me the higher light of the scriptures!’ And an amazing thing happened. The master Enoch, who is the master of light on the higher realm said, ‘Are you ready to go to the higher realm?’ And he was literally and physically, not astral projection, literally and physically taken up, transported through the higher dimensions of light, all the way to the throne of divine light. And up to the highest level of light, and he was encoded, and I don’t know how to explain to you what they mean by encoded except maybe zapped. It’s like it was instantaneously, in a matter of minutes, this information was in his head, in his brain. So he was encoded with this information”.

Nuancing a notion of divine inspiration which is not subject to subjective weakness (i.e. which is not channeled), requires a canny sense of metaphor (Zaretsky 1974: 167). More than this canny sense though, the delight with which these ‘high-tech’ descriptions are spun out points to another key logic of seeking, an operational aesthetic. Gabrielle and the *Keys* are playfully spinning out possibilities (not probabilities) for the world, possibilities whose parameters are contemporary technical discourses and entertaining synthesis. Neil Harris who coined the ‘operational aesthetic’ to account for the popular love of hoaxes and controversies, describes it as “an approach to experience that equated beauty with information and technique, accepting guile because it was more complicated than candor (...) a philosophy of taste (...) exploring the possibilities of exaggeration” (Harris 1973: 57). Thus Gabrielle’s multi-dimensional transport and high-speed data link not only frees the *Keys* of the interpretational and communicational inter-

ference problems traditionally associated with astral spirit mediumship, her description also invites ludic participation in its formulation.

Furthermore, Gabrielle's metaphors illustrate the lack of understanding that critics of the New Age such as Melton (cited at the beginning of this article) have regarding the metaphysics of seeking. Melton claims that science "is already moving beyond concepts from which the New Age movement has constructed its world-view (...) As science continues to change, the New Age synthesis will simply fall apart" (1991: 51). Melton assumes a static cosmology for the New Age and a dynamic one for science. Ironically, he misses completely the playful power of the operational aesthetic to take up and even anticipate scientific advances through its constant playing with current theories, metaphors, and practices.

The operational aesthetic also works to democratize the balkanization of scientific discourse by experts. Most New Age disciplines are positioned in direct relation to the authoritative discourses of science (and academia). From their explicit emphasis on the scientific nature of their principles, to the prominent place given to the PhD's of their book authors, there is a constant New Age desire to be inside science and to 'be able to speak about it'. Combined with the notion that the truth is personal, its implication is that anyone who can learn about something can talk about it, play with it, and lecture about it, science included. Gabrielle is offering her audience not truth, but "the utter fun of the opportunity to learn and evaluate" (Harris 1973: 75), the chance to creatively explore technical vocabularies without being responsible to any professional, expert authority for how these vocabularies are used.

The relationship of an operational aesthetic - of "wanting-to-talk-about" - to believing is not easy to describe. Gabrielle is indifferent to the gap between knowing or not-knowing the 'truth' about the *Keys*, and this indifference disturbs and threatens those whose iden-

tity is bound to a sharp boundary between the two. Authenticity and accuracy are located not in (cold) objectivity, but in a personal relationship with the book. She is offering them the chance to play with science, religion and self fashioning. Gabrielle's description appeals to those who "want-to-talk-about" science, psychology, and religion.

Playing at teaching

Practically, simply passing on information means that every seeker is a potential teacher and every New Age teacher is seen as a fellow traveler, on the way. Since there are no forms of accreditation needed, informal groups often serve to generate new teachers. For example, many people in one meditation group I sat with were experimenting with teaching.

Dawn [in an interview]: "We can share our experiences, and learn to teach. The idea is that each of us can grow. Then we can share it with other people. Sometimes it can be real scary [to teach]. Whoever feels like it can lead. Sometimes special talkers are brought in, guest speakers. [It is a] safe environment for people to lead. A support group".

Can a priest 'practice' a prayer? Seekers participate in a lecture by doing things with the information and with the performance. They continually judge and advise teachers on their tone, inventiveness, surety, etc. Rather than asking, "Is what she said true? How can it be tested?", a lecture is evaluated within the three logics of the operational aesthetic, communicative doing, and a personal life adventure. All three logics engage the creativity of playfulness. Talks are appreciated as entertainment - "Bravo! I loved it", or "Too complicated" (see Zaretsky 1974, Truzzi 1985). They speak quite openly about the entertainment value of sessions. Talks are also appreciated through participation - "let's meditate on it", or "I'm going to go home and try that". And they are

appreciated as personally effective - "Thank you, that helped me to..." or "That doesn't feel right to me because...". In short, seeking lectures and group ritual performances have to be interpreted as behind-the-scenes rehearsals as well as the 'real' thing (Fabian 1990).

Seeking as practiced and seeking as practice come together in this liminal zone of playing, experimenting, and performing extraordinary ordinary adventures within and around authoritative discourses. In doing so, they are perceived by the experts as engaging in destructive parody, though this is not their intention. The parodic is produced in the very overturning of the proper order of things (as this is perceived by professional experts). Seekers threaten other discourses through their playful experimentation with accepted categories - combining matters that should not be conjoined, and thereby speaking of and shaping things without the authority to do so.

Conclusion: powerful play

Angela [giving testimony at the end of the *Keys* lecture]: "Astrologically, I'm a Virgo and I want something that's understandable, explainable - thank you very much - I mean, maybe, extraterrestrial outer cosmological, but it needs to make sense in some scheme of understanding, and that's what this book did for me. It tied together a lot of the prophesies from Nostradamus to the book of Revelation - it tied together my sensing, my intuitive knowing that there'll be upcoming earth changes (...) it tied together a lot of different information, a lot of different data in a really comprehensible way - complex at some points in time - but at least it came together in a sensible way, and I was really grateful for that. Because I've had all these diverse different interests in factions, in areas that are full of confusion, because you have the New Age saying this and Science saying something else and the Fundamentalists also, it's like how can all this be tied together? And this book did that for me".

Referencing a host of other disciplines, Angela emphasizes the complex and comprehensive nature of the information. The New Age is full of competing systems and meta-systems are aesthetically appealing. She offers her astrological sign as a personal explanation, of her mode of seeking and portraying information in much the same way as academics defend their modes in interdisciplinary contexts ("As a historian, I would look at..."). Angela also notes other factions situating the New Age among science and fundamentalism, describing a certain distance from all of these, including the New Age. And in an interview she noted how she did not like the term New Age since it connoted too much commercialism.

Angela is claiming to be among the New Agers, yet not one of them. Rather, she is seeking to understand how the New Age and other discourses all fit together. Her position, in other words, seems uncomfortably close to mine. But what is the 'repugnance' I nevertheless feel, upon making this comparison. Whose side am I on? And who is making the sides? It seems easy enough to distinguish between the anthropologist and the New Ager - training, a degree, a certain smug distance from taking anthropology and 'all those' things seriously. Yet anthropology is also situated in the different registers I have been describing, as any anthropologist who has ever professed their occupation to non-academics knows. If we are not seen as digging up bones, we are experts on something like shamanism, a most popular New Age category. Furthermore, this problem of anthropological identity is exacerbated (depending on your temperament) by the insistent claim by New Agers that the New Age is grounded in many ways on the discipline of anthropology itself: most notably Frazer, Eliade, and Campbell. While there are many different 'insider' senses of what anthropology is up to, these differ in kind from insider-outsider differences. Marilyn Strathern has begun to trace the history of anthropologists' attempt to fashion themselves as far away as possible from outsider interpretations

of anthropological texts:

“‘Frazerian Anthropology’ is a synonym for undisciplined raids on ethnographic data without respect for their internal integrity, for the way they fit together as parts of a system or have meaning for the actors” (1990: 254-5).

I have been arguing for a similar understanding of New Age identity and insider differences as well as insider-outsider differences.

Seekers, also, each have their Frazers, while at the same time being collectively characterized as a vague, intriguing, homogeneous and strange bunch. It is their para-academic aspirations and successful adoptions of anthropological authority which make them particularly repugnant (and Frazerian) to us.

I would like to conclude this article by meditating on the possibility that New Agers are analog to Michael Taussig’s peasants (1987) who literally ‘live out’ the drama of the Columbian State with their bodies. Rather than looking to the form of the New Age rituals, how they are emplotted, and how they are played out, what if we pay close attention to the content of this content? I have studiously avoided analyzing the content of New Age content because it always seems to be taken as an indication of a certain backwardness, primitivism, or naive escapism inherent in the New Age - an explanation of why the New Ager is a New Ager. But what if this content is not taken in opposition to the content of our own (academic and proper) beliefs and desires, but examined for clues to how it mimics our own professional backwardness, crudeness and primitivism?

What if the New Age is an anthropological *doppelgänger*? What if the modernist dream of producing an encyclopedic database of cultures is now popularized and lived out in a micro-relativist Disneyland where everyone has the opportunity to design their own personal culture out of the fragments of colonialism? Could this explain the New Age fascination with enacting adaptations of Native Ame-

rican rituals and visiting Native American ‘power spots’? Might this help to explain the desire to leave one’s white Wonderbread™ culture behind and become-Other, an other who is documented as being more in touch with the world, and able to experience magic? What are we up to, and who are we empowering, when we playfully produce our ethnographies? What can we learn by examining the many ways in which seekers and others read and make use of them?

Notes

1. New Agers, as I will show, are not readily countable. The groups I found through networking were almost exclusively Euro-American, one group counted three Pakistani-Americans and one Indian-American among its fifty members. While there were Latino and African-American groups which advertised in New Age guides, neither I, nor any of the people I talked to sought them out.
2. Straus seized on the notion of the seeker to provide an active account of conversion which was not limited to passive, mechanical metaphors. “Of the seeker, we ask how the person comes to be a seeker and then how the seeker goes about finding a more adequate world of everyday life. Particularly where this leads to massive transformations of identity, belief, experience and/or conduct, we marvel at how a person can bring this off” (1979: 161).
3. “Discursive practices of institutions take primacy over knowledge by making knowledge possible by marking out the boundaries of knowledge [e.g. of the New Age] for the subject” (Foucault 1972: 118).
4. Understanding one’s life as a journey is a metaphor well-worn in American culture (Quinn 1991: 80). On emplotting, see (White 1987: 9-13). Emplotment is a characterization I adapt from Hayden White’s *Metahistory*, where he uses it to analyze the level of explanation at which a historiographer reveals the kind of story she is telling. Sequences of events can be narrated as a tragedy, a romance, a comedy, or a satire in White’s framework. He goes on to name some possible combinatory emplotments

romantic-comedy, satirical-romance but specifically names as self-contradictory the romantic satire. I would like to propose, however, that it is precisely this self-contradictory mode of explanation which guides New Age self-telling. Life for the seeker has been a satire in which forces and events have always overwhelmed the individual; nevertheless, the possibility exists that if only one can follow this new path, this new set of directions, this new guru, then one will not only end up better, however defined, but one will have (romantically) transcended the world and won. This 'if only', however, is a peculiar tense which understands the world as always divided into satire (the past and near future) and romance (the farther future). It keeps the latter in play without promising success, in a potentially endless deferral. Told from an outsider perspective, this endless deferral is simply satire. For the lived everyday of the seeker, however, there is a real possibility of achievement and success. The story is unfinished and one is in suspense.

5. This is, however, in spite of a high regard for and promotion of licenses and teaching certificates, which remain primary modes of discerning the potentially valuable from rip-offs. The emphasis on coupons and licenses signifies a form of paraprofessionalism later on (cf. Douglas 1967: 69; Appadurai 1986: 24).

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