

WHAT IS NEW AGE?

by

Joshua D. Rose  
A Thesis  
Submitted to the  
Graduate Faculty  
of  
George Mason University  
in Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Arts  
Anthropology

Committee:

Hugh Gusterson Director

Swan R Trencher

Don H. H.

Swan R Trencher Department Chairperson

83 Dean, College of Humanities  
and Social Sciences

Date:

May 4, 2011

Spring Semester 2011  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

What Is New Age?

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at George Mason University

By

Joshua D. Rose  
Bachelor of Arts  
George Mason University, 2002

Director: Hugh Gusterson, Professor  
Department of Sociology and Anthropology

Spring Semester 2011  
George Mason University  
Fairfax, VA

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my mom. Without her, I would never have made it this far.

Thanks, mom.

I would like to thank everyone who assisted me in the completion of this thesis.

To my thesis director, Hugh Gusterson, thank you for continually believing in my abilities more than I believe in them myself. From the moment I decided to study New Age culture, you have led me admirably towards the completion of this thesis. I couldn't have asked for a better mentor.

David Haines, asking you to be on my committee was a decision I will never regret. Your feedback was always lightening quick, to the point, and strategically formulated so that I could adjust and redirect with almost little effort. You're a thesis surgeon, and don't worry, the secret will be kept between us (and whoever reads this).

To my final committee member, Susan Trencher, thank you for not only being on my committee, but for being the warm and intellectually inspiring figure who made that corner of the second floor of Robinson A feel like more of a home than an academic department. I also owe you a note of gratitude for being the person who inspired a young and confused political science BA student to explore the world of anthropology at a more advanced level. Who knows...I may have ended up studying sociology, of all things, had I not taken your comparative cultures course in the summer of 2001.

Special thanks to the sociologists who may read this for not being offended by that last comment.

A big thanks to:

My three sisters, Jennifer, Bonnie and Kim, for continually expressing how proud you are of my accomplishments (now you are tasked with reading it!).

Jason, Antonia, and Buster at the Yerby Estate for providing me with affordable housing during my graduate studies at George Mason.

Chris Manon, an intellectual whose breadth of knowledge knows no boundaries, for being available to me from the beginning until the last minutes before the thesis submission, offering highly valuable complement and criticism to my theoretical ideas as they developed.

Ozden Ocak, a mentor and friend, for providing me with theoretical references that helped shape my chapter on theory.

Jenny S.C. Adams and Albert Wu for donating money towards the cost of my research adventure in Lily Dale.

Heather Van Werkhoven, friend and fellow anthropologist, for venturing to Lily Dale in 2008 to share in the research adventure, for consistently checking in on the progress of my thesis and for sending me chats and emails in an attempt to light the proverbial fire beneath my coccyx.

Simone Suddreth, the gem of my Summer of 2009, for reaffirming the fact that the social scientific investigation of New Age is relevant, necessary, and beautiful.

Darine Tahhan, the best part of my UAE experience, for offering me your friendship and love, and your encouragement and motivation for me to finish my thesis while I was living in Dubai.

Dave Walker, my friend and brother, for your inspiration. Without our many conversations on this subject matter, this study would not have happened. A philosopher and artist, you are a role model to me.

All of the faculty members of the Sociology and Anthropology Department at George Mason University. Each of you that I had the privilege of befriending were enthusiastically supportive of my goals and research efforts, and I am very grateful.

And finally, a very sincere thank you goes out to all of those awesome people in Lily Dale and Mount Shasta who agreed, all of them enthusiastically, to participate in this research. While many of you were comfortable with your real identities being used in this thesis, I followed the traditional anthropological method of assigning pseudonyms to all who are mentioned in the pages below. Thank you all. You are the dreamers and spiritual artists who have made this project so academically interesting and personally worthwhile.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Table of Contents .....	v
List of Tables.....	vi
Abstract .....	vii
Prologue .....	1
1. Introduction.....	8
2. Literature Review.....	17
3. Two New Age Communities .....	35
3.1 Lily Dale, NY.....	35
3.2 Mount Shasta City, CA .....	54
3.3 Overview of Research Sites .....	71
4. Characteristics of New Age .....	73
5. Conclusion: The Ideological Wilderness of New Age .....	94
Appendix A: Sasha's Interpretive Drift.....	108
Appendix B: Table 1-Participant Demographic Data.....	125
Works Cited .....	126

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
Table 1: Participant Demographic Data.....	125

## ABSTRACT

### WHAT IS NEW AGE?

Joshua D. Rose, M.A.

George Mason University, 2011

Thesis Director: Dr. Hugh Gusterson

The aim of this thesis is to explain the nature and ideological structure of the religious sub-culture of new age in America. Ethnographic data was gathered from conducting interviews and through participant observation in the towns of Lily Dale, NY and Mount Shasta, CA during the summers of 2008 and 2009. Literary research was conducted from academic as well as non-academic 'new age' sources. This thesis concludes that new age belief systems possess three key characteristics: they are alternative; they are ecosophical; they have a decentralized structure (both in its beliefs and in its leadership style). Furthermore, the ideological structure of new age is nebulous, and without a core, presenting itself as a cultural phenomenon that is impossible to define, while the groupings of beliefs in it have distinct characteristics: a cultural paradox.



## PROLOGUE

My most intense personal encounter with concepts that are considered by many Americans to fall under the category of ‘New Age,’ took place in Long Beach, CA between December 19<sup>th</sup> and December 26<sup>th</sup> of 2007. I had decided to spend Christmas with an old friend, Dan, whom I had not seen for over five years.

Long Beach airport is a small one. People exit the planes on those old rolling ladders, and walk across the runway pavement to baggage claim, which for Long Beach airport is a series of carts loaded with bags under a carport-like structure outside. When I arrived, the weather was warm, much warmer than back in Fairfax, and this was what I was thinking most about while waiting for my suitcase. Once I had my luggage, I turned and saw Dan’s green and white VW Bus waiting for me twenty yards away from where I was standing. He got out, came around to me with arms wide open, and gave me the biggest, warmest, longest hug that I ever remember receiving from him. It was during this visit with Dan that I decided to focus my thesis on American New Age spiritualism.

Dan and I grew up down the street from one another in Alexandria, VA, with only a two minute walk between our houses. Our families belonged to the same Pentecostal church, and our church community maintained a worldview that would best be defined as one of fundamentalism (with a lowercase *f*), which Susan Harding describes as a belief system of a relatively wide group of Protestant Christians know as ‘born-again

Christians' who maintain a literal reading of the scriptures of the Holy Bible (2000). Dan and I made our official 'break' from the Pentecostal faith in 1997 when we moved to Long Beach Bible-free and with open minds.

Dan stayed in Long Beach. I traveled around California for four years, attending community colleges in Long Beach and Sacramento, and eventually came back home to continue my education at George Mason. Both of us underwent what Harriet Whitehead calls a process of *renunciation and reformulation*. In her ethnography of Scientologists between 1969 and 1971, Whitehead observed this process, which is more or less the process of conversion. To begin, a convert—usually a religious convert, as in her case study, but the theory can be applied to converts of any doctrine, philosophy, or belief system—goes through a series of experiences that break down the mental structures that organize his understanding of personal priorities and desires, i.e. *renunciation*. An emotional outburst follows, leading to a moment of enlightenment characterized by self-recognition. This is when the reformulation of priorities and desires occurs, when a new and pure organizational structure is introduced with which the convert is to interpret reality, i.e. *reformulation*.

Dan and I both began our process of renunciation relatively simultaneously. Shortly before our journey West, we both read the book *Ishmael*, by Daniel Quinn, who argued that the stories of Creation and the Fall of Man as represented in Genesis were fireside stories of tribal folklore that metaphorically explained the agriculture revolution (1992). We were thoroughly convinced. We even met once a week to have 'Ishmael talks,' where we shared our ideas of inconsistencies between logic and the Bible, largely

inspired by Quinn. Our move to California furthered the breakdown of our Pentecostal understanding, as we were introduced to many alternative lifestyles and views, and as we were further removed from the social milieu (of our families) that had sustained our Pentecostalism. It was not long after we settled down that our phone conversations with our parents back home became focused on salvation and the subversive persuasion of the devil in the form of alternative concepts.

It was at the point of reformulation that Dan and I parted ways. After a year and a half, I was attending community college and living in Sacramento, CA. For me, the organizational mental construction that replaced the Pentecostal one was one of academic rationalization. Concepts that could be argued logically and understood empirically would be the only ones that I would allow time for throughout my undergraduate career. Dan, on the other hand, had not gone to school. He, a jazz and rock saxophone musician, had begun making a name for himself in the Long Beach music scene. The reformulation process that he went through was characterized by open-mindedness, alternative thinking, and, for the most part, peace and love. He was encouraged, inspired, and educated by the woman who is now his wife, Christine. I finally got to meet Christine during my visit to their home December of last year.

Christine is a spiritual medium. Her business card reads, “One Modern-Day Priestess,” and on the back, “Call for a free initial consultation”. The entities that she channels include deceased Earthlings, extraterrestrials, and trans-dimensional beings. She burns incense and is a fan of aromatherapeutic oils, clears spaces of negative energies by burning sage, is able to see the colorful energy auras that living creatures

emit, and in certain situations she is telepathic. Tall, slim, blonde, and always smiling, she is the picture of physical and spiritual health that her clients are drawn to. They come to her for a myriad of reasons. Some want to contact a past relative, others want to know what the wise deceased general from the lost city of Atlantis feels about their place in the world, others want counsel on their relationships, from Christine directly or from a channeled Pleiadian, an extraterrestrial humanoid from a world of love and peace. Some come to her for tips on losing weight and feeling healthy. She is a vegetarian and eats only organic produce. She practices yoga and reiki energy work. She is a practitioner of crystal healing, and she dabbles in herbal and homeopathic remedies as well, while being vehemently opposed to the pharmaceuticals of the biomedical industry. She believes that the positioning of the planets, sun, Earth, and Moon have had and continue to have a profound effect on the life of every creature on Earth. She believes that Earth is alive, and is feminine in gender. She believes in the Buddhist concepts of reincarnation, and the Hindu idea of the seven chakras of energy that all living beings (including Earth) possess. She believes that the ancient adoration for Earth our Goddess is true and being rekindled.

Christine wanted to know all about me when I arrived. She is incredibly easy to warm up to. After just two days, I was answering questions about my childhood and immediate family that I would not have imagined sharing with someone I knew for a short two days. There was one point, while describing my experience as a fourteen year old when my parents split up, when she broke out in tears and said that she could feel my. Dan, also present, explained that Christine is extremely sensitive, and that she was

picking up on my emotional energy while recollecting the memories. It was quite a powerful moment, and her emotional outburst seemed incredibly genuine. I struggled to hold back my own tears. They both could tell that I was holding back, and encouraged me to let it all out. We were having breakfast at a diner at the time, and I told them that I was not comfortable crying in front of others, let alone in a public eatery.

About halfway through my visit with Dan and Christine, we went to a mountain getaway in Tehachapi, CA. On the drive up in Dan's VW Bus, I was told that a great crystal rests underneath the mountains of Tehachapi, and that UFO's are often seen flying in and out of the area. The topic of extraterrestrials and crystals was continued at dinner that night. While Christine's twelve year old daughter and nine year old son listened in, Christine and Dan began telling me the story of the Pleadians. This was the most fascinating dinner conversation that I have ever had to this date.

The Pleadians are a humanoid species that inhabit three planets orbiting stars in the Pleiades Star Cluster, many light years away from our own solar system. The Pleadians have contacted humans on Earth to educate us on our current predicament. We are enslaved within a society that was created and has been manipulated by a species of reptilian extraterrestrials that has been intervening in human history for tens of thousands of years. These '*Greys*,' as the reptilian aliens are referred to based on their skin pigmentation, are responsible for agriculture, capitalism, greed, poverty, homelessness, war, etc. The Pleadians communicate with us via trance-induced channeled sessions. Through these sessions, they teach us that we are all part of the great

God consciousness that was is and will be, and that Love and Light are what we are made of.

To further complicate this interstellar tale of power, oppression, and salvation, our star is entering a sector of the Milky Way known as the galactic equator, and this makes our planet a significant staging point for many species of aliens such as the Sirians, another ET species, who have evolved beyond any physical constitution and are pure energy. They come from the star system of Sirius, and have been in contact with humans here on Earth for some time now.

I was, to say the least, intrigued! I had so many questions regarding the details of the story, such as the place of first contact with the various ET species, and the civilization of the Pleiadians. What are their politics like? Is there an economy? Do they have physical interstellar transportation systems, or do they only communicate via channeling? Christine, who had been very open to my questions initially, began to shut down a bit. She told me that many people come to her interested in the details of the alien civilizations, and those people miss the point of the message that the Pleiadians bring us. My approach to understanding Christine and Dan's culture was, frankly, too academic. I was trying to understand their view of reality from an inadequate vantage point. I was being too analytical, too scientific. In short, I was in need of a renunciation of my academic mental organizational system.

That was the last time that I spoke with Christine at that depth regarding her beliefs during my visit. I spent the rest of my time discussing the future of my academic career with Dan. I was excited and very vocal about my interest in studying the New Age

movements that incorporate ETs into their worldviews. He asked that I only pursue a study of their culture if I was genuinely interested in learning more about their beliefs from their perspective, and not interested in pointing them out as lunatic New Agers who have lost their grip on reality. I assured him this would not be the case.

My last day in California, Dan and I took a walk along Seal Beach, the first beach that he and I surfed when we moved to CA in 1997. He shared with me his and Christine's belief that humans are on the threshold of an evolutionary leap of consciousness, and that the year of 2012 will represent the culmination of this milestone development for our species. He shared with me his belief that quantum physics and string theory parallel his understanding of the way the universe works. This new view made sense to him. It explained to him in detailed and rational ways those things that Pentecostalism refused to confront. Dan and I were brought up defending our beliefs in the face of science. Now Dan was a believer in a religion that, according to him, has yet to be at odds with any of principles of the current scientific paradigm. I wanted to know more, but our time was limited. My visit with Dan and Christine was at an end.

I returned from winter break to school, energized and completely determined to focus my master's thesis on the anthropological study of American new age. While I was thrilled with the idea of studying new age communities whose beliefs were inlaid with cosmic narratives of extra terrestrials and beings from other dimensions, I realized that an incredibly difficult task lay before me, one that would turn out to be a difficult and necessary preliminary project: defining new age. I was incapable of answering the question, 'what is new age?'

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars who have studied the religious and spiritual groups within New Age communities, as well as those within New Age circles, have difficulty explaining what New Age really is. New Age is a mystery, to a great extent; like a cloud that engulfs the top of a mountain. While nebulous, you are still able identify its shape and general characteristics. Yet once you ascend to the top of the mountain, and are now inside that same cloud, you realize you cannot define its structure, let alone determine its boundaries or differentiate between one part or the other. It is much like a wilderness, in the sense that a wilderness lacks discernable civil organization; "a bewildering mass or collection," as Random House defines it (Flexner 2008: 2174). New Age, as we shall find, will reveal itself as a bewildering mass and collection of spiritual beliefs. New Age, then, is a wilderness of sorts—a spiritual wilderness of the realm of religiosity.

To best understand what I mean by 'wilderness,' a visual model will best illustrate this idea. Imagine a wilderness of spiritual and religious beliefs. Every possible fragment of a religious or spiritual idea and belief, and every possible combination of those ideas and beliefs that can be imagined exists in this wilderness. It is wild. It is abundant. It is for all intents and purposes anarchic. This realm of religiosity is enormous—a planet in itself. However, in the distant reaches of this wilderness there are signs of order, structure, and civilization. There are cities scattered throughout the



terrain, with great fortresses, castles with moats and armored defenses to protect their inhabitants from the unrestrained and prodigal spiritual wilderness that exists outside their walls. These fortified cities are the cities of normalized and institutionalized religion. The walls protecting them are built by their dogmas, doctrines and texts. The moats surrounding their cities serve as the threshold of what is right and wrong, good and evil, black and white. Their towers are guarded by clergy, their governments and armies are populated by the hierarchies of their respective organized religious institutions. There is the great city of Christianity, standing tall and strong in the realm of spirituality like the great castle of Minas Thirith built into the mountains of Tolkien's Middle Earth. The equally impressive cities of Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism can be spotted from an eagle's view, but these cities are few and far between in this realm. Between them is where New Age thrives. Between them exist the very spiritual material from which their fortresses were constructed.

From within the protective confines of the fortress of religion X, eyes gaze out upon the golden terrain as the sun sets along the horizon of the wilderness. What is seen is foreign and different from the perspective of the gazer: landscapes of strange ideas and beliefs, ideas and beliefs that are essentially formed from the same building blocks as everything in this realm, but on the surface are extremely different and distinct from what lies within the fortress. A new and interesting storm is seen brewing in the near distance, one that captures the attention of a curious soul. The traveler, as we will refer to him, anxious to experience something different than that which is available within fortress X, decides to wander out and investigate. As he exits the fortress he is warned by the many

levels of security that he passes on his way out that he will be entering a dangerous and mysterious region, and that it is unwise to wander outside of the fortress. There are signs posted at the gates of the fortress. They read, "GODFORSAKEN," "UNTAMED," "BIZARRE," "MANIC," "CRAZY," "UNCIVILIZED." This only entices the traveler to step outside the gates of the fortress. He continues. The fortress is now behind him, and he has now stepped foot in the wilderness.

The storm is hardly discernable at this point; its clouds become fainter with each of the traveler's steps. He walks forward with that thrilling anxiety that one gets when they feel they are somewhere they should not be. It is curiously silent. There is no longer any sign of a storm. The shape of a tree atop a hill can be made out a few hundred yards from where the traveler stands. He approaches, of course, and soon realizes that there are two figures, human from the looks of it, seated beneath the tree having a discussion. One of the figures appears to be a woman, with long blond hair, the borders of which have been put into large braids that frame her face. She is wearing a white hooded robe, and in her hand is a goblet that is medieval in its design, made of some pewter-like material and garnishing designs of dragons and other mythical creatures. She is seated with her legs together, one on top of the other, resting herself on one arm while the other, holding the cup, rests on her knee. She looks at peace, and she is gracefully focusing her attention on her companion to whom she patiently listens with an alluring smile.

Speaking to the woman is a man with a shaved head, sitting with his legs crossed in the lotus position. He is wearing a one piece burgundy Buddhist monk's robe, and

simple brown sandals. He is speaking with a tone of blissful enthusiasm about the 'mechanics,' as he refers to them, of reincarnation. The traveler's initial reaction once he understands the subject of their conversation is to cover his ears, turn, and run. But he does not want to seem alarming or rude. He is close enough to the two that they must know he is standing there listening to them, and they seem so at peace, and far from the descriptions used to warn people within the fortress. He continues listening. As they conclude their conversation, the man drifts into some sort of meditative trance, and the woman slowly gets up from her seated position, and not before glancing at the traveler in an inviting sort of way, she almost glides down the hill towards another gathering of people.

The traveler follows. The woman stops at a group of people comfortably huddled around a bonfire. She takes a similar seated position as before between a man dressed in slacks and a button-up dress shirt and a man wearing a camouflage cowboy hat and a leather vest, shirtless underneath, and a pair of torn blue jeans. There are eight people in this group, now that the gliding robed woman has joined, and the group is discussing the existence of extraterrestrial and extra-dimensional beings that some of them believe they have seen or been in contact with. The traveler is intrigued by this subject, as he has never until this point heard of such ideas. The conversation lasts for what seems like hours before the woman again rises and heads off in a different direction.

Well into the twilight hours, the traveler follows the woman as she wanders the wilderness, meeting and conversing with different groups discussing crystals, spirit mediumship, gods and goddesses, elemental and animistic forces, and the cosmic beliefs

of various aboriginal peoples. The wilderness, the storm, is full of ideas and beliefs that either the traveler has been warned to avoid, or of which he has never heard. There is no sense of structure, no one figure professing that his is the one true way, a red flag from his own socio-religious upbringing, but curious nonetheless. During the discussions, he hears no distinction between that which is worldly and that which is divine. In this wilderness, magic flows from everything, giving even the trees and the fire a beautifully divine quality.

He is overwhelmed with curiosity, and his pursuit of the gliding robed woman has led him to lose complete track of time. Twilight has ended. The sun is rising. He makes his way back to the tree where the monk still rests in meditation. From there he can see his home, fortress X. As he approaches the fortress, he looks back at the wilderness. It seems that the peaceful world of spiritual and supernatural conversation and exploration through which he had so eagerly and curiously wandered about is taking on the form of a storm again. He enters the gates of fortress X and takes a seat at the window from where he and so many others peer out into the wilderness from their protected vantage point. He gazes out, once again, into the wilderness of the New Age. Another storm is brewing.

The traveler has witnessed and experienced what many have when they first wander outside of the fortresses of religiosity where they were raised and into the wilderness of New Age. New Age as a wilderness of beliefs, ideas and philosophies necessarily has no noticeable structure, other than in the moments that are experienced in the periphery of the 'storm,' as it were. During these moments, these shared experiences and discussions, certain common characteristics emerge: a divine universe where all

beliefs seem to manifest within an ecocentric milieu; an abundance of alternative notions and cosmological narratives that, while documented in various texts and oral accounts, dictate no strict adherence to any certain doctrine or structure. And it is in these two characteristics that the paradoxical Janus head of New Age reveals itself before dematerializing again. Something can only be alternative if viewed from an, in this case religious, hegemonic vantage point. However, once in the wilderness, where everything is alternative, hegemony is lost, or forgotten. The alternative becomes the hegemony, which therefore makes it no longer the alternative. In a wilderness of the alternative, nothing is alternative.

This thesis is an ethnographic study of ‘New Age’ culture in America—an anthropological investigation of the group of ideas and cultural elements that have come to be known as ‘New Age’ as the phrase is understood and imagined in the minds of Americans. The questions that this thesis aims to answer are: what is New Age? Is there such a thing as a New Age belief structure or ideology? Is New Age truly contemporary, or have its components and characteristics, should they emerge from this research as identifiable, existed in other forms and as parts of other belief systems and ideologies before the formation of New Age as an American cultural phenomenon?

What does it mean to be New Age? The phrase has found itself homes in both the music and literature retail industries. A walk through the New Age section of a music retailer will reveal a variety of artists from all over the world producing instrumental and meditative music. Amazon.com, for (a virtual) example, has broken New Age music down into the sub-categories of ‘Celtic New Age,’ ‘Environmental,’ ‘General,’ and

‘Meditation’ (Amazon, 2009). The literature New Age section is even more diverse. For example, at Barnes and Noble one will find books on UFOs, spirituality, self-help, organic living, metaphysics, Native American religious beliefs, and more (Barnes 2009). Should those that make the decisions about where to stock various CDs and books in the retail world be granted the authority to determine what New Age is? Indeed, if one looks in the country music section, one will find country music, and in the travel section, a book on traveling to Rome. There is something to be said about what, and more importantly why, we find what we do in the New Age sections of retailers. Even a superficial investigation into the literature and music labeled ‘New Age’ will show that they tend to in some way be inspired by or focused on ideas of the supernatural, the metaphysical, or the spiritual. New Age seems to have an inherent religious component.

But why investigate religion? Religion has long been of significance within the social sciences, and the works that have analyzed religion in search of a better understanding of the human being and human culture and society are numerous. In *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Emile Durkheim wrote that “...religion is something eminently social” and a representation of a “collective reality” (cited in Cristi, 2001: 16). By examining religion, Durkheim believed that one might uncover certain inherent social elements of a people. Alfred Kroeber wrote that “confused thinking about religion was perhaps the most important bar to man’s [sic] progress and freedom” (cited in Steward 1961: 1043). Clifford Geertz, the foremost expert of the anthropology of religion in his time, eloquently and succinctly explained the importance of religion in the study of anthropology:

*For an anthropologist, the importance of religion lies in its capacity to serve, for an individual or for a group, as a source of general, yet distinctive, conceptions of the world, the self, and the relations between them, on the one hand—its model of aspect—and of rooted, no less distinctive "mental" dispositions—its model for aspect—on the other. From these cultural functions flow, in turn, its social and psychological ones (Geertz 1993: 123).*

Religious and spiritual beliefs are simply a fundamentally important component of human culture.

This paper sets out to investigate the nature of New Age as a group of religious and spiritual beliefs. The following chapter will serve as a brief literature review, surveying what social scientists and other scholars have written on New Age culture or who have studied groups that they themselves have categorized as New Age. The end of chapter two will also layout the research parameters of the project. Chapter three takes the reader through the two communities that were the primary locations where I conducted my research. Chapter four will examine the role that the environment plays in New Age beliefs, an examination that serves as an effective entry into the discussion of the key ideas articulated in discussions of New Age as a religious philosophy or ideology. In this chapter, I will focus on one sociological study conducted on New Age as ‘alternative spirituality’ and two pieces of New Age literature, enriching the effort to define New Age with ethnographic data of my own. Chapter five will attempt to establish a theoretical model appropriate for the analysis of such a mysterious and nebulous sub-culture. The primary source from which this theoretical model will borrow is an essay by Dr. Yannis Stavrakakis on the politics and structure of Green ideology, which turns out to be similar in many ways to the way New Age is manifested in American society. This chapter will also serve as the conclusion to this thesis, aiming to

summarize the journey that this paper has taken throughout New Age spirituality in America, and what we have learned from it. Specifically what this research will show is that New Age only exists as a cultural category from outside of New Age communities. That is, the syncretic group of New Age beliefs is only identifiable from the perspective of those who are looking in from cultural vantage points not characterized by the ideas and beliefs commonly called New Age. From within these communities, New Age ceases to exist. The concept as it operates outside of the New Age communities sheds all relevance once it enters the wilderness, if you will, of New Age, making New Age a unique ideological phenomenon, far different than, say, Communism or Christianity. In this sense, New Age is like a Janus head—on one side there seems to be a consensual idea of what the New Age represents, and on the other, a complete vacuum of meaning, “an empty name without substantive content” (Stavrakakis, 1997: 12).<sup>1</sup> In the following chapters, this idea will become clearer as we further investigate the meaning of ‘New Age,’ from both sides of the ethnographic lens.

---

<sup>1</sup> The figurative use of the Janus head was first used by Stavrakakis in his essay *Green Ideology is the same way that I use it here*. It is also used extensively in Bruno Latour in his book *Science in Action* (1987).



## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance (OCRT), an organization that works to develop attitudes of tolerance towards all world religions, lists a wide range of beliefs and practices as New Age. They include monism, pantheism, panentheism, reincarnation, karma, auras, personal transformation through psychosomatic exercises, ecological responsibility, perennial philosophy (listed on their website as ‘universal religion’), channeling (of spiritual, extraterrestrial, and transdimensional beings), crystal healing, meditation, divination, astrology, and holistic healing (Ontario, 2009). Clearly New Age is the product of a syncretic attempt to consolidate the loose ends of a group of items already characterized by miscellaneousness, but by what agency? The retail industry and OCRT seem to have the same range of beliefs and practices in mind when thinking of New Age.

The *World Book Encyclopedia* defines New Age as:

*“a system of philosophy and religion that came to prominence during the late 1980s, and traces its origins to a variety of sources, including oriental mysticism and new scientific ideas. The New Age movement embraces diverse issues, including feminism, astrology, ecology, spiritualism, and pagan ritual, and takes a holistic approach to healing” (World, 2005).*

Within academia similar ideas of what New Age means circulate. In *The Channeling Zone*, anthropologist Michael Brown lists “goddess worship, meditation, inner-child work, and various forms of alternative healing” as characteristic spiritual practices of the New Age movement (1997: 8). Brown also observes that individuals

within New Age groups see themselves as companions on a quest throughout the universe (1997: 125). In her first book, *The Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann defines 'New Age' as the "broad cultural ideology...which privileges holistic medicine, 'intuitive sciences' like astrology and tarot, ecological and anti-nuclear political issues, and alternative therapies, medicines, and philosophies" (1989: 30). Cultural Studies scholar Andrew Ross calls New Age "a kinder gentler science," and a "science-friendly alternative to religion" (1991: 15, 19). Professor of Religious Studies Eugene Gallagher describes New Agers as "spiritual nibblers...who pick and choose among various religious options as it suits them."

Reflecting on the above descriptions and lists of New Age beliefs, defining New Age is no simple endeavor, and it involves the seemingly endless task of listing a hodgepodge of beliefs that awkwardly fit into one incredibly diverse category. In my own experience reading New Age literature and speaking with community members in areas of the US popularly considered 'New Age' by outsiders, there seems to be a fundamental constant within the group that it is not *new* at all. One of my informants local to Mount Shasta, a woman in her sixties who began what she refers to as her spiritual transformation during the 1960s, corrected my use of the phrase 'New Age' by saying, "You mean *old wisdom*?" She said this during a class entitled *Finding yourself in the Universe*, throughout which all of the participants sat in Indian style on flat yoga-esque pillows and shared stories of spiritual paths and enlightenment. Everyone nodded and some giggled in approval of the idea that New Age is, as she suggested, labeled inappropriately. A Spiritualist minister in Lily Dale elaborated on this point:

*I think New Age is basically a reiteration of a lot of ancient traditions and ancient belief systems as well as some contemporary things that have come to the fore in the last couple of hundred years. And as a result of that, due to the dissatisfaction and the discontent of people who were either raised in more traditional church environments or perhaps never even churched at all, they're culturally drawn to these reiterations. A lot of times I find that many of the points of view in the New Age movement, they're nothing new...if you study a lot of its belief structure, you're going to find...wow...that's what Jesus taught, and that's what the Buddha taught.*

A psychologist who lives in Lily Dale during the summer seasons concurred:

*Blavatsky<sup>2</sup> was getting information from the Eastern cultures. It's not like it was a new thing. It's new relative to the context. What is it that makes something new to us? It's not new to a shaman or a Buddhist or... there were Gnostics back when Christianity formed. Gnosticism is the idea of inter-knowing, and there was a Gnostic sect of Christianity that got voted out back in 300 A.D.*

A self proclaimed spirit channel, alien abductee, and witch whom I met in Mount Shasta relayed to me her belief that we as humans are a part of supreme spiritual entity, and that esoteric knowledge can be attained by looking inward. She went on to explain that this belief holds that through meditation, trance, and a number of other similar practices and rituals, humans are able to gain a spiritual understanding of themselves, i.e. spiritual enlightenment, by looking within. Subsequently, the act of finding one's spiritual self can be viewed as a way of tapping into the universal consciousness that is God. As more than one of my informants pointed out, this concept is remarkably similar to many Eastern religious philosophies, including those within the Gnostic, Hindu, and Taoist traditions.

---

<sup>2</sup> Helena Blavatsky was an influential 'new age' thinker of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and considered one of the founders of both Spiritualism and Theosophy (Guénon, 2001). She will be discussed in further detail in the following pages.

## THE ROOTS OF NEW AGE

The earliest known use of the phrase 'New Age' can be found in English poet and painter William Blake's *Milton: A Poem*, published in 1804, who used the phrase to embody a new way of understanding Christianity, one that was less attached to biblically based dogma and separated from what he believed to be materially driven organized institutions of the state, academia, and the church:

*“Rouse up O Young Men of the New Age! set your foreheads against the ignorant Hirelings! For we have Hirelings in the Camp, the Court, & the University: who would if they could, for ever depress Mental & prolong Corporeal War. Painters! on you I call! Sculptors! Architects! Suffer not the fashionable Fools to depress your powers by the prices they pretend to give for contemptible works or the expensive advertizing boasts that they make of such works”* (MacLagan, 1907).

While Blake was writing within a Christian context, contemporarily New Age seems to have maintained at least a few of the signifiers that Blake built into his notion of the phrase, namely a rejection of dogma and centralized authority and a disdain for people and institutions driven by materialistic incentives.

No community members of the towns that I visited, nor scholars that I researched, identified the beginning of New Age as a cultural 'movement' with William Blake. Instead, the roots of the American New Age movement seem to lead to the founding of the Spiritualist and Theosophical movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, pointing specifically to Andrew Jackson Davis and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky as catalytical thinkers of the respective movements' philosophies. In 1845, Davis began dictating *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (1855), a series of lectures that

he claimed came to him in the form of visions from the spirit of “the Swedish mystic and philosopher Emmanuel Sweedenborg... [who] himself had followed a successful career as a scientist with an extended period of visionary encounters with God, Jesus, and other spiritual entities” (Gallagher, 2004: 76). The fundamental point of Davis’ extensive work *The Principles of Nature* was that the humans have spirits that live on in a spirit realm after death. Through the process of mediumship, Davis and others claimed to open up lines of communication with this spirit world. This was the beginning of what is generally termed Spiritualism, a religion that to this day is practiced by millions worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

Just as Davis is considered the founder of Spiritualism, Blavatsky is likewise considered the founder of the Theosophical movement. Roth defines Theosophy as “...a mystically based worldview that infuses with divinity the revolutionary findings in science while retaining the sense of order and progress in the universe” (2005: 45). Roth suggests that Theosophy drew on multiple Eastern philosophies, which were increasingly available to the Western world during Blavatsky’s time thanks to the endeavors of linguistics, archeology and an increased line of communication between the literate societies of the East and the West (2005: 45).

In her books *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, both published in the late 1880’s, Blavatsky laid out the foundation of Theosophical thought. Of the two books, *The Secret Doctrine* was especially illuminating to Blavatsky’s readers, for it not only explained where humans come from and why we represent such a diverse array of

---

<sup>3</sup> Spiritualism as an institutionalized religion will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

phenotypes,<sup>4</sup> but it also laid out the foundation of Theosophical ideology with three key principles. In his book *The New Religious Movements Experience in America*, Gallagher summarizes these points:

*“First, [Theosophy] posits the existence of an omnipresent, eternal, boundless, and immutable principle that is the one Absolute Reality. Second, it asserts that in the boundless plane of the eternal universe there is an absolute universality of the ‘law of periodicity, of flux and reflux, ebb and flow.’ Finally, it affirms the fundamental identity between individual souls and the universal ‘over-soul,’ or between the individual and the universe”* (2004: 81-2).

Davis’s and Blavatsky’s teachings are two of the first recorded teachings of American religious figures who claim to have acted as conduits, or ‘channels,’ of information from a spiritual source. At least one academic observer of the New Age movement has isolated channeling as “possibly the single most important and definitive aspect of the New Age” (Gallagher, 2004: 92). While this one criterion does not fit all New Agers, many contemporary New Age groups hold as their principles teachings and concepts that have been communicated to them from channeled sources.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Theosophy explains the “history of humanity as a succession of seven ‘Root-Races,’ corresponding to seven continents, some sunken, some yet to rise” (Roth, 2008: 46). The first of the Root-Races descended to Earth from the moon, while the others arose from the depths of the sea as continents sunk and were newly formed. The emergence of each subsequent Root-Race was marked by the demise (and literal sinking of the continent) of its preceding Root-Race. Lemurians, the third Root-Race, were said to be the first humanoids to inhabit Earth. The Venusians, extraterrestrials hailing from our planetary neighbor Venus, are non-physical extraterrestrials who have evolved into beings comprised thoroughly of divine energy. Theosophy taught that their purpose of existence has been and still is to guide the Races of Earth through a similar evolutionary journey, just as Earthlings will one day be the spirit guides to the intelligent civilizations of Jupiter and Saturn. Theosophy credits the Venusians for helping the Lemurians and other Root-Races develop such ancient civilizations as the Egyptian and the Mayan. The fourth Root-Race, the Atlantians, emerged as Lemuria fell below sea level. Subsequently, as Atlantis sunk, the fifth Root-Race emerged. When Blavatsky wrote *The Secret Doctrine*, she believed that she was witnessing the demise of the fifth Root-Race, the Aryans, and the rise of the sixth. During the various Root-Race transitions, some of the Races interbred, creating sub-species offspring bearing physical and spiritual features of both Root-Races. This is how Theosophy approached explaining the many phenotypical differences of the people of Earth.

<sup>5</sup> Bruce Campbell's *Ancient Wisdom* provides a more thorough academic historical account of the Theosophical Movement (1980).

## THE 1960'S AND THE AGE OF AQUARIUS

Others look to the countercultural revolution of the sixties as the beginning of the New Age movement. During my first day in Mount Shasta, I attended a class titled “Finding Yourself in the Universe.” There were five of us in the class, three of whom began their stories of spiritual transformation during the 1960s. Indeed, it was during this time that the term *New Age* emerged as a category that grouped together the before-mentioned beliefs and practices. In his book *Getting Saved From the Sixties*, American Sociologist Steven Tipton explored why the sixties might have resulted in the emergence of such beliefs. Tipton argued that during the 1960’s, the dominant interpretation of reality assumed by Americans was that of ‘utilitarian individualism’ (1982: 2). This interpretation of reality held that individuals are meant to seek their own personal interests. Actions are determined by the personal interests of those involved. The ‘right’ way to approach something is the way that leads to the highest number of positive results. Rights and equality are determined by natural law, rationalization, and in relation to self-preservation. In utilitarian individualism, ‘technical reason’ is the moral compass on which human action is based. As one of the reasons for the emergence of this interpretation of reality, Tipton suggested that as society developed into a highly advanced and technical complex of professions, survival for the average person became a face-to-face game of competitiveness in the work world, instead of the age old shoulder-to-shoulder game of us versus nature.

Tipton argued that the countercultural revolution of the sixties arose to challenge this way of thinking. As a result of the economic and industrial success of the United

States, the decades leading up to the sixties saw an unprecedented accumulation of wealth for Middle America. As baby boomers became parents, they could afford to send their children to college in record numbers. In the university, middle class American youth became exposed to many concepts that led them to question the nature of human existence, reality, religion, and politics in ways foreign to the generations that preceded them. It was on the campuses of universities across the nation that protests against the Vietnam War began. While in college, the newly educated Middle American youth were able to protest freely, generally without consequence; they were university students and therefore exempt from being drafted into a war that they felt was immoral. Experimentation with mind-altering drugs, the introduction to Eastern philosophies of spirituality and knowledge, and philosophies of love and peace that arose out of defiance of violence and war, all combined to create the counterculture of the sixties. These children of the sixties saw themselves as the children of the dawning of a New Age—the age of Aquarius.

The countercultural interpretation of reality became a far different reality than that of utilitarian individualism. There was a predominant emphasis on love, and iconic musical figures such as the Beatles, also influenced by Eastern philosophies, engaged the concept of human unity in the spotlight of pop culture. The Beatles song *I am the Walrus* is a clear example of this seemingly different way of viewing human existence: “I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together” (1967). Since all are one, there became no separation between individuals. Within this movement, selfish motivation was replaced with concepts of group harmony. Countercultural philosophy held that one



should not worry about what to do, but instead about what is happening (Tipton, 1982: 15). Ecstatic experience was viewed as far superior to technical reason. Sensitivity became the primary virtue, and decisions were based on intuitive feeling. Human nature was seen as inherently good among the counterculture revolutionaries, and love was the answer to social and political conflict.

Tipton argues that this revolution was short lived, and in the end failed as utilitarian individualism prevailed. As the seventies came around, and the job market became saturated with job seeking college graduates, the revolutionaries of the sixties were forced to get jobs and face the cold realities of the real world, as it were. Tipton considers the countercultural movement of the sixties a middle class American phenomenon. As the radical fires died out, three alternative religious trajectories emerged, each specific to a subclass of the middle-class. Within the lower-middle class emerged 'neo-Christian groups,' within the middle-middle class emerged the 'human potential movement' (such as EST and Scientology), and within the upper-middle class emerged 'neo-oriental groups' (Tipton, 1982: 232). Tipton argues that each of these groups was able to incorporate many of the ideals of the countercultural movement while providing a stable base for individuals to successfully exist within the larger utilitarian society.

Tipton's research was conducted between 1972 and 1979, so it is hard for one to determine whether or not thirty years later the New Age<sup>6</sup> movement is still a middle class one. If celebrities can be considered examples of upper-class America, Shirley McLain,

---

<sup>6</sup> Tipton never actually used the term 'New Age,' but instead 'alternative religions,' as did Bloch, a sociologist who will be mentioned in a later chapter. While not synonymous, these two categorical terms group very similar and at points overlapping groups of people.

Tom Cruise, and Oprah Winfrey might suggest that the New Age movement is one that is not so class specific. These examples, however, are not exactly typical, and the spiritual practices of the elite are by and large inaccessible to the public. My own data reveals that, at least in Lily Dale and Mount Shasta, New Age is a thing of the middle class. In the end, it seems clear that the countercultural movement of the sixties was pivotal in the development of the contemporary New Age religious movement.

### THE WITCH'S CRAFT

In her book *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*, Tanya Luhrmann set out to describe the transformation process of individuals interested in more science-like understandings of the world, in this case witchcraft, to faithful believers in religions of magic.<sup>7</sup> This transformation process, which she calls 'interpretive drift,' is comprised of a number of steps which involve a change in verbal patterns, non-verbal emotional and psychological responses, along with various analytic mutations (Luhrmann: 11). This study was based on witchcraft circles among the middle class in London, England, and along with Tipton, she believes New Age to be a middle class phenomenon (Luhrmann: 100). It is also important to point out that she considered witchcraft to be very much a New Age religion.<sup>8</sup>

While the bulk of Luhrmann's analysis is largely concentrated on interpretive drift, she does offer some interesting insight as to what draws someone to the practices of magic and witchcraft. For example, she found that many witches originally become

---

<sup>7</sup> Witchcraft as a part of the New Age movement will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

<sup>8</sup> Luhrmann distinguishes witchcraft as one of four New Age religious groups, the other three being: "Western Mysteries, ad hoc ritual magic, and non-initiated Paganism" (1991: 32).

interested in magic because it offers an understanding of reality that seems to be in agreement with science. She points to a quote from Starhawk, a leading thinker in witchcraft philosophy, to illustrate the science friendly nature of witchcraft: "...feel your own age, the wisdom of evolution in every cell of your body" (quoted in Luhrmann: 94).

Among the words she uses for those whom she encountered during her research are "imaginative, self-absorbed, reasonably intellectual, spiritually inclined, emotionally intense...rebellious...interested in power...dreamy and socially ill at ease...[and] child-like" (Luhrmann: 100). She goes on to say that "witches have never lost the simple wonder and curiosity of small children" (Luhrmann: 103). She complements this observation by pointing out that witches tend to have been interested in science fiction and fantasy literature for much of their lives. Luhrmann also observes that many witches come from backgrounds of intense religious spirituality, such as evangelical Christianity. This makes sense when one considers the intense emphasis that evangelical Christian doctrine puts on an ongoing spiritual war between the forces of good and evil. The concepts of the romanticized world of spirits, angels, and demons are in place, although the imagery is painted quite differently in witchcraft, and the relationship between humans and the supernatural forces is flexible and multifaceted.

## MAGIC AND SCIENCE REUNITE IN NEW AGE

English and Cultural Studies scholar Andrew Ross offers a compelling interpretation of the New Age religious movement in America that reaches farther back to the Middle Ages. Ross argues that the magician and the scientist have always been

after the same thing—to manipulate the physical world to their own ends. The alchemist of medieval times was the authority on both the spirit and the physical worlds—“*the*<sup>9</sup> medieval science of matter, suffused with the ideology of animism, but very much in cahoots with the industrial logic of mining, dyeing, glass manufacture, and medicinal preparation” (Ross: 24). By using potions, herbs, spells, devices, incantations, and other means, the alchemist was able to prescribe remedies for mechanical, medical, and spiritual problems, to name a few. He had a relatively in-depth understanding of the seasons and the stars, and could advise his neighbor on any number of subjects of inquiry. It was the rise of mechanization, accompanied by a wide scale adoption of laissez-fair markets by artisans throughout Europe, that challenged “the older craft guild system” on which the operating principles of the alchemist was based (Ross: 24). This marked the end of the role of the alchemist as the authority on all matters physical. The Reformation furthered the demise of the alchemist, as practitioners of magic were increasingly considered heretics. This was when magic and science were pushed apart. New Age, Ross suggests, may very well be a remarrying of the two.

Ross believes that the conservative push of the Reagan and Thatcher governments towards a more individually responsible population, a push that Ross believes was an attempt to compensate for the overly paternalistic approach of the administrations of the sixties, was what prompted the emergence of the New Age. Individuals were encouraged to take responsibility for themselves, financially as well as in regards to their physical

---

<sup>9</sup> Author’s emphasis.

and mental health.<sup>10</sup> The eighties thus saw an increase in people interested in self help, diet, nutrition, exercise, and holistic therapies, many of which originated in the Eastern world. While these journeys of knowledge empowerment that average citizens set out on might have begun as self-interested quests to fulfill personal goals, Ross argues that many of them led the journeyer to a deeper and more connected understanding of existence than was offered by the technocratic ideologies of what Tipton called utilitarian individualism. Magic was rediscovered, if you will, via spiritual development of the individual. Through meditation, energy work, and other new (to Americans) ways of exploring their spirituality, many of them eastern in origin, for some the eighties was a decade of spiritual growth. The marriage of self realization and spiritual enlightenment thus became the signature of this New Age. Followers of New Age philosophies began to merge concepts of the scientific paradigm, such as the ideas of string theory and quantum physics which suggest a universal connectedness of all things at the smallest of measureable levels, with ideas of spiritualism and universal oneness. The New Age offered a 'kinder gentler' option to the cold and spiritless concepts of the science world, and a more friendly and open minded spiritual option to the formalized monotheistic, hierarchical, and doctrinal religions of the West.

## THE CHANNELING ZONE

Michael Brown is arguably the contemporary anthropological authority on American New Age spirituality, based on his ethnography *The Channeling Zone*.

---

<sup>10</sup> Religious studies scholars Stef Aupers and Dick Houtman argue that the New Age as a religion is less "unambiguously individualistic and more socially and publicly significant than today's sociological consensus acknowledges" (2006: 201).

Brown's research, which spanned the states of Virginia, California, New York, New Mexico, and Arizona, was focused on the New Age ritual of channeling. Channeling is the process by which someone acts as a communicative conduit through which another entity, whether it be a deceased human, angel, demon, extraterrestrial, extra-dimensional being, and is able to speak to us through that person. Similar to spirit mediumship, channeling is different in that while spirit mediums act as a translator, or messenger, for the words, thoughts, and feelings of beings in the spirit world, channels are used *by* the other-worldly beings to communicate their message. That is, with channels, the consciousness of the channel is put on mute, and they are used solely as a vessel, or tool, through which a being can communicate. Channeling is a spirit possession of sorts, similar to the Pentecostal ritual of baptism of the Holy Spirit, where the person being possessed or baptized is taken over by the spirit and the message is thought to be absent of any influence of the possessed or baptized.

Brown makes a number of interesting observations during his analysis of the communities that he visited. Most notably he argues that among channels, there is a clear predominance of women, and despite the despite their common discussions of a gender balanced spiritually harmonious future for humanity, channeling seems to "depend on the acceptance of a highly polarized view of masculinity and femininity...that men are by nature rational [and] women intuitive" (114).

This observation was consistent with my own research within the town of Lily Dale, NY, as this town was populated almost entirely by women. The investigation of gender within New Age, however, would end up falling below a different research

interest of mine, which is the question of what is New Age. *The Channeling Zone* fails at defining in any clear or constructive way what it means to be New Age. Brown lists, as I found was common during this literature review, what he believes New Age to be—in this case "goddess worship, meditation, inner-child work, and various forms of alternative healing"—without attempting to tackle the bigger question of how those particular items end up in his list. In Brown's defense, I do not believe he aimed to do so. He never actually claims to be after a definition of New Age. His position within anthropology as a leading voice on New Age was an involuntary consequence of being virtually a singular voice on the topic. Left unchallenged, his conclusions have more or less been regarded as *the* conclusions, which I find misleading. Particularly I find Brown's suggestion that channeling is the single most characteristic ritual practice of the New Age to be a premature assumption based on an insufficient amount of research on an undefined cultural ideology. An anthropological analysis of channeling sheds the same amount of light on New Age communities as an analysis of tail-gating at NFL games would on the comprehensive culture of American sports spectatorship.

This is not to suggest that *The Channeling Zone* was not a helpful ethnography to include in my literature review. Brown was clearly interviewing and observing individuals within the New Age, and his observations on gender spawned an intellectual curiosity that will likely lead me towards a future investigation of gender in New Age. However, the most important lesson learned from Brown did not originate from the pages of his book, but from the responses of his academic peers *to* his book. The tone of his position is popularly thought to have been one that did not take his research subjects

seriously, and he has been accused of 'making fun' of them, something we are simply not supposed to do. While I did not find this to be the case throughout his entire report, his concluding paragraphs that dub channeling a 'game' that will "continue to offer a lively arena for the free play of the religious imagination" likely fueled the accusations of his peers (191).<sup>11</sup>

Avoiding this pitfall, it is imperative that the reader be aware of my intention during this research project. I have a great deal of respect for the participants who agreed to assist me in this very interesting anthropological study. Many of them offered substantial theoretical fuel for my ideas, and I am grateful to have been given the chance to hear all of their rich and colorful stories. Many of my informants have become friends, and in no way whatsoever would I write anything that would knowingly endanger the trust that they granted me during our various interviews. New Age is often mocked and jeered at, in ways that would strike the judges of social science as unacceptably abhorrent if directed at the spiritual practices of, say, an indigenous South American people. If we are to learn anything about New Age spirituality in America, then New Age needs a scholar who respects and takes the members of this group seriously, and who will attempt to analyze the structure of meaning that seems to sustain New Age as a cultural ideology. This thesis is an attempt at such an approach.

---

<sup>11</sup> This idea of channeling as a way of expressing one's religious imagination without any rules or barriers will return later in this thesis, in my development of the idea that New Age represents a realm without order or rules.



## RESEARCH TIME FRAMES AND METHODS

The research for this thesis was conducted during the Summer and Fall of 2008, and the summer of 2009. This first leg of the research was conducted during a three week stay in the spiritual community of Lily Dale, NY, where willing participants were recruited based on their own interest in the study. Lily Dale, NY hosts a number of summer events that range from academic seminars to spiritual workshops, nearly all falling under the category of New Age. Many of those who travel to Lily Dale during the summer do so because they wish to experience and learn about the spiritual ideas of the community. Approaching random people and asking that they participate in the study while in Lily Dale might have diminished the Lily Dale experience of those being questioned. Therefore, the only random participants who were recruited to participate in this study were those I have entered into dialogue with naturally, on mutually interested grounds, and who were comfortable with participating in this research project. The methods employed while in Lily Dale will be one on one semi-structured interviews and participant observation.

The second site of research was conducted during a one week stay in Mount Shasta City, a small Northern Californian town at the base of the 14,000 tall mountain. Mount Shasta, I found out while in Lily Dale in 2008, has become a significant location within a number of New Age beliefs. Some believe that it is one of the seven chakras of Mother Earth. Others believe that the rumored giant crystal lying under the mountain is used by aliens as a sort of refueling station for their spaceships. Others believe that Mount Shasta is home to the last Lemurians, an ancient humanoid race who since the

dawn of modern civilization has taken refuge in an intricate series of tunnels under the mountain.

The methods employed during this research project were ethnographic, historiographic, and quantitative. Quantitative methods were conducted exclusively to determine if Americans are drawn to New Age religions based on demographic criteria (gender, age, income, ethnicity, etc.).<sup>12</sup>

The following chapter will be dedicated to describing the communities of Lily Dale and Mount Shasta. Broken into two sections, each is a descriptive flow of events as I remember experiencing them. Keep in mind that I was only in Mount Shasta for a few days, so that section is heavily populated by reflections on my time with Sage, who was more or less my key informant in Mount Shasta.

---

<sup>12</sup> See Appendix B for details on the demographic data.

### 3. TWO NEW AGE COMMUNITIES

#### 3.1 LILY DALE

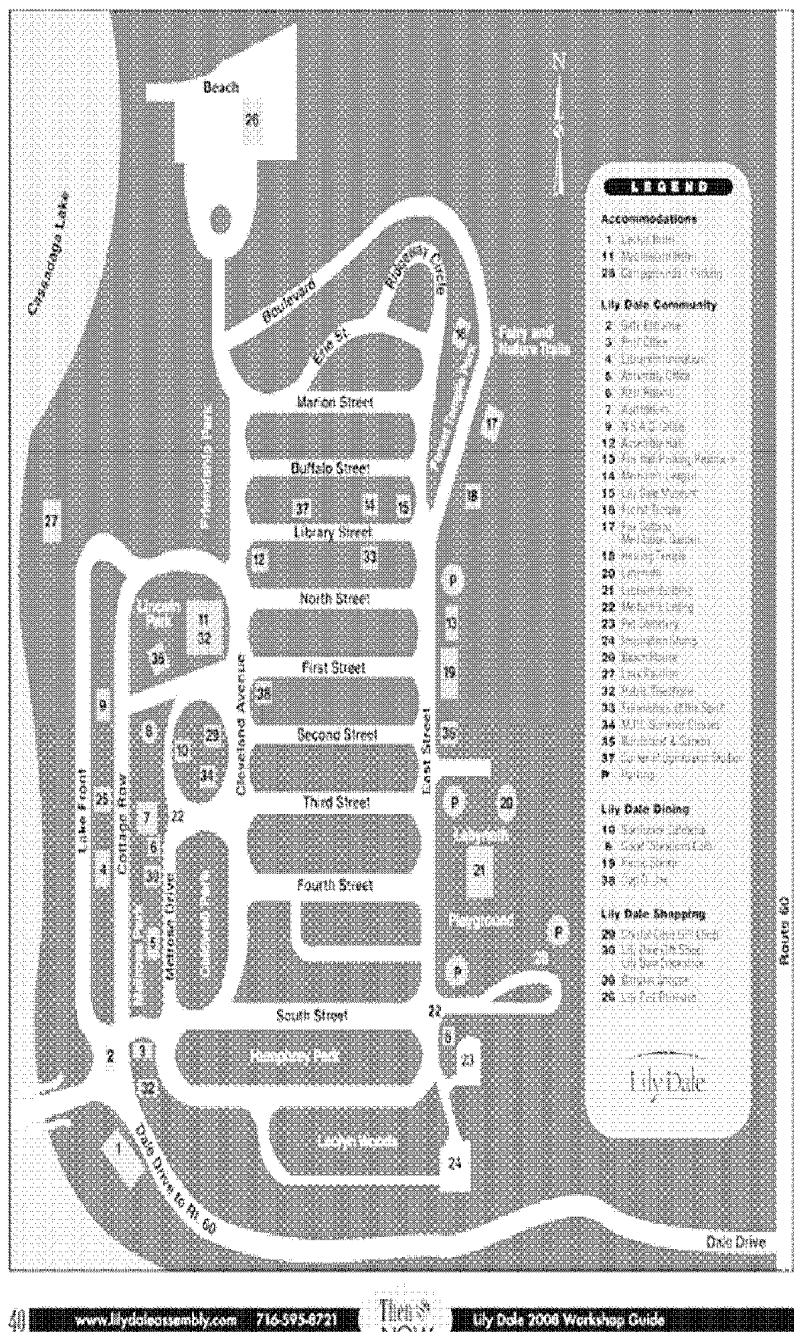
*Healing angels protecting, helping mother earth provide,  
keeping sickness from our bodies, healthiness is at our side,  
may our thoughts be all uplifted, may our heart be filled with pride,  
Spirit answers all our questions, go and seek the truth inside,  
Spirit teachers, guides, and loved ones, listen as we ask with love,  
grant us answers to our questions, lift our thoughts to that above,  
help us raise our own vibration, proving that our path is right,  
let us hear the spirit's message, bringing words of truth and light.*

**Song 41 from the Lily Dale Assembly Song Book**

The idea of where to begin my research came to me in that place where some of the most brilliant and creative ideas are born: an Irish pub. While having a Guinness with my cousin at Nanny O'Brien's in DC, I stumbled into a conversation with a guy from upstate New York. I shared with him my research interests and the fact that I was looking for a New Age community somewhere within driving distance. Without skipping a beat in the conversation he told me that I *had* to go to Lily Dale, and this is where I would end up doing the majority of my fieldwork.

Lily Dale is a small gated community-town in upstate New York, about an hour south of Buffalo. Established in 1870, relatively ancient by American standards, Lily Dale is populated by less than three hundred residents year round. During the summer,

## Map of Lily Dale



however, Lily Dale is quite a busy place, as thousands of visitors come to visit one of the thirty-eight registered<sup>14</sup> spirit mediums who live there.

Most who come to Lily Dale hope to connect with a loved one who has passed onto the spirit world, while soul-searchers and novice mediums also make their way to the small town to take advantage of the workshops and seminars, the topics of which span the entire breadth of the hodgepodge group of beliefs called *New Age*. For lodging, there are two hotels, one inside the gates and one just outside, and numerous guest houses. The most renowned of these guest houses is the Angel House.

I arrived in Lily Dale on a Friday night, and the next morning I took the free tour of the town, led by the town librarian and historian. The town is shaped more or less like a rectangle, with the longer sides running north and south. On the west side is Cassadaga Lake, and on the northeast and east sides lie the virgin forest Leolyn Woods, rumored to be haunted. Lining the threshold of the forest on the east side are temples, playgrounds, a garden maze called the 'Labyrinth,' a park, picnic areas, the campgrounds, and a 'Fairy and Nature Trail.' A stroll through this part of the woods will reveal trees upon trees with adorned with fairy-dolls that guests have pinned up for decorative, so far as I was informed, purposes that allow the town to boast what is likely the only Fairy AND Nature Trail.

On the west side, along the lake, are the community buildings. Aside from a string of lake front houses that number less than perhaps twenty, this is where the

---

<sup>14</sup> Before the governing body of Lily Dale, the Lily Dale Assembly, will allow a spirit medium to work in the town doing readings for paying customers, they must first be registered with the Assembly. To do so, a medium must prove to the Assembly that they are not 'faking it.' They must convincingly give spirit readings to a panel of registered mediums who must each give them their stamp of approval.

sanctuaries, restaurants, and hotel are to be found. There is a small beach on the lake shore, and every Friday night they hold a drum circle by a bon-fire. It was rained out most nights during my stay, but I did make it on two separate occasions. A drum circle is a drumming session where people gather, usually in a circle, and play skinned drums together. There is no lead drummer, although it is usually clear who is more experienced or talented. Newcomers are usually encouraged to play, whether they are experienced or not, and while I was offered a drum during both of the sessions I attended, I was a bit shy and just sat, watched, and listened.

Between the east forest and lake-side community centers are where most of the people live, on the streets that run east and west. On the north end of town is the Boulevard, just east of the beach. One of my informant's sisters lived in a great big home on the Boulevard, with bay windows facing the lake and with three times the land and structural area of the other homes. While Lily Dale boasts an egalitarian culture, there is a distinct difference in price between the homes in the main residential area, the homes on the lake front, and those on the Boulevard, with the homes on the Boulevard being the most costly and the ones in the main area being the most economical.

Aside from the ten or so homes on the Boulevard, the houses in Lily Dale are quite close, claustrophobically so for someone from suburbia Virginia. Walking through the town, it is difficult not to make contact with the residents if they are milling about in their lawns or dining on their patios or screened in porch. Lily Dale residents are rather older than I anticipated, most in their sixties and seventies. Perhaps I had allowed myself to first assume that Lily Dale was 'New Age,' and second, because I had assumed that

anyone interested in something new must necessarily be young. As will be discussed a bit later, my assumptions were less than accurate in both cases.

During the tour, we avoided the main residential area. We walked around the perimeter of the town, stopping by all of the key buildings, landmarks, and monuments scattered throughout, which included The Angle House, while the tour guide gave us the town history. As we passed by, he mentioned that The Angle House is where the academics and the ‘who’s who’ stay when they visit ‘the Dale,’ as they call the town for short.

After the tour, I ventured through the town stopping by all of the little shops—*The Crystal Cove* near the town auditorium; *The Lily Dale Bookstore* at the center of town; *The Bargain Shoppe*, halfway between the *Healing Temple* and the *Sacred Stump*. One of the shops I visited, *The Lily Pad Boutique*, was a house porch that had been transformed into a gift shop. As I browsed the dowsing rods, incense sticks, and dream-catchers, I was greeted by a short and jolly lady in her forties with a big smile. She was the first person in Lily Dale to ask me why I was there, and upon explaining my research intentions, she told me without skipping a beat that I *had* to stop by the Angel House. She said, go there as soon as possible and ask for Quinn.”

I thanked her and went on my way, although I was not in a real hurry to go knocking on the door of a place called the *Angel House* asking for a stranger named *Quinn*, sent by the short jolly lady at the *Lily Pad*. For the next few days I attended some of the free services held at the Auditorium, the Forest Temple, and the Sacred Stump. I

interviewed fellow campers who had come to take a class or get a spirit reading.<sup>15</sup> It was not until one of my visits to the town coffee shop that I seriously considered stopping by the Angel House. While uploading some of my pictures and notes that I had taken onto my computer, the owner of the coffee shop approached me and asked how I was doing...which led to the discussion of *what* I was doing. Again I was told, “you *have* to go to the Angel House.” So, I went.

I passed by the Angel House on my first day in Lily Dale as I made my way to the campgrounds to set up what would be my home for the next three weeks. Located on the corner of South Street and Cleveland Avenue, the Angel House is the biggest house in the Dale. A three story Victorian home with a covered porch that wraps around three sides of the house, the Angel House is hard to miss. The yard is decorated with statues of angels, and the porch is covered with royal purple carpeting, rocking chairs and benches, and angelic figurines and ornaments.

As I stepped onto the porch for the first time, I made eye contact with a few women who were chatting as they sipped coffee and smoked cigarettes near the entrance to the guest house. They smiled warmly and invitingly at me. I would later find that young men are a rare occurrence in the Dale. I rang the doorbell, and this is when I met Sasha. After telling her that I had been ‘sent’ to the Angel House by various people, she

---

<sup>15</sup> One camper named Cage, who attempted to give me a spirit reading in my tent while our camp-side beer drinking was interrupted by a flash thunder storm (which I found was quite common in a town so close to a Lake Erie), told me that a spirit named ‘Quinn’ was trying to contact me. I brushed it off, not convinced of any paranormal activity, and definitely not confident that a guy on his sixth beer was tuned into any spirit world other than the one that you find at the liquor store. However, as strange as it might sound, he was the first of three people who would tell me that a spirit named Quinn was trying to contact me. I was convinced that there was a flyer being passed around among the residents and regular visitors that said, “Academic Skeptic in Campsite 13! Tell Him Quinn is Looking For Him!”



quickly invited me inside. She offered me coffee and cookies, and then went to fetch her husband Quinn and another researcher who was there conducting research, a graduate student of literature interested in the relationship between photography and American folklore. For the next hour, the three of us sat and discussed the concept of *New Age*. During the course of the conversation, I would learn that both Sasha and Quinn hold doctorate degrees, Sasha in psychology and Quinn in philosophy. By the end of my stay in the Dale, they became my closest town friends and informants.

Quinn was kind enough to lend me a couple of tarps to hang over my tent in the campgrounds. While my tent was a fairly high end model, equipped with a rain shield and waterproof sealing, the tarp was a much needed addition. The summer thunderstorms that would roll straight off of Lake Erie and hammer the western coastal region of New York were the heaviest, most intense rainstorms that I have ever experienced. Luckily, having been lent the plastic tarps, and having been assigned one of the few campsites under tree cover and on higher ground than the rest, I was fortunate to have stayed relatively dried, especially when compared to my less fortunate campground neighbors.

One such neighbor ended up being one of the most interesting individuals I met during my stay in Lily Dale. I awoke around eight in the morning after a night of heavy storming to the sound of frantic tent rustling. One of my neighbors had arrived in the middle of the night storm, set up camp, and gone to sleep, only to wake up and find her entire tent was sitting in the middle of a giant puddle.

Serene, as I'll refer to her, was a tall beautiful woman. She stood close to six feet tall, and she was quite athletically fit, with the body of a gymnast. At 35 years old, her silver-white hair gave her a striking look. She had sharp facial features, on a long gentle face. She was a mix of German and Brazilian, and she had immigrated to the US some ten years ago. Starting off in Florida, the universe, or God, spoke to her and told her to pick up and leave. She obeyed, packed her things, and just began driving. While on the road, she stopped and pulled out a map. She scanned the various states on the map in the south-eastern region, trying to pick up on a signal of some kind, a gut feeling or psychic notion that would help her determine her destination. "ARKANSAS!" It finally came to her, and that is where she went.

In Arkansas, she purchased a small house in a rural area with a few acres of land. The pre-existing house, she explained, was just something that happen to come with the land. The real value was the uncultivated state of the rest of the property. For a long time Serene had dreamed of building a completely off the grid self-sustaining and eco-friendly home, built from materials gathered from the same ground that the home would occupy. Over the next couple of years, she made this happen. Her home, as she described it, was totally 100% organic. Located deep into her property, well out of sight, this home had become her off-the-grid oasis.

Lily Dale was one of many stops on a 'vision quest,' as she called it, from Arkansas to Toronto. She had already stopped at a Wiccan festival before arriving at Lily Dale to take a four-day workshop with Barbara Hand Clow, a philosopher and self-claimed (all are) channel of Pleiadians. After each class, she would huddle in my tent

with me and tell me what she had learned, which was a condensed version of the Pleiadian story of Earth as a universal hotspot of spiritual evolution, described in much further detail later on in this thesis.

Serene was so interesting. One day after she orally presented her memory of the day's workshop class to me in my tent, she began explaining how our bodies are just a shell, and that our spiritual selves are eternal and take on many shapes in their existence. She demonstrated this with a game, where we each stared directly at each other for a long period of time, until the shapes of our faces began stretching and re-shaping. It was quite disturbing at first, but then became fun, an optical illusion that was evidence at least to her that her face was merely the windshield of her temporary host of a body, a tentative and perishable house for her eternal soul.

She and I would spend a lot of time together during the five days that she was in town. Our connection was evident, even to others. In the mornings, Serene would do her yoga exercises on the picnic table next to her tent. The balancing act was a sight to see, and she caught the attention of most in the campgrounds, including another campground neighbor, who we will call Pepper.

Pepper and I had already spent some time talking. In fact, I had already interviewed her a few days earlier. Pepper had spent the last few summers in Lily Dale. She would drive up in her RV during her children's summer break, and while they roamed the town playing with the many other kids who were most visiting with their resident medium grandparents, Pepper would take advantage of as many medium related

workshops as she could. In fact, after one particular class, she asked if I would be a guinea pig for her to practice a new technique of spirit reading called 'psychometry.'

Psychometry is a sort of extra-sensory method of trying to detect the spiritual signature of someone by holding something that belongs to them. Once detected, the medium, or psychometrist, should be able to identify specific details about the life and history of the owner of the object. The idea is that matter is made up of a lot of space. In between the nucleus and electron field of every atom or molecule lies a great rift, relative to the distance between the Earth and sun, but on a micro scale. A spiritual signature of energy, so the theory goes, can become trapped in these spaces on matter that remains in the proximity of an individual over a long period of time. My object was a keychain, and interestingly enough, Pepper was able to identify that I liked to take walks with my father by a creek behind the home I grew up with as a child.

Pepper was extremely laid back, and she asked a lot of questions with a sort of calm and gentle inquiry. I remember during one conversation about the nature of New Age, I was toying with the possible theory that New Agers are akin to the Christian colonists of the New World who were escaping the monarchical tyrannies of Europe which were validated by the Church, i.e. the Christian text. When they arrived in the New World, they entered a text-free wilderness, wild in the indigenous untamed sense and 'text-free' in the sense that it was an uncultivated and 'uncivilized' society without a civil text.

This conversation evolved into a conversation about how modern democracy was born from colonies of European monarchies, and further into an overview of the

Revolutionary, Civil, and World, and Cold Wars. While I kept trying to redirect the conversation at her, she kept asking me more and more about world history, and so I indulged her. As we sat there in the sun in the middle of the afternoon, the only two in the entire campgrounds (there are only nineteen sites), Pepper just soaked up everything I had to say. She was a sponge. Listening, I imagine, is an important factor in accurate spirit mediumship. After the history lesson, we split up, and she rode her bike down to one of the classroom buildings to attend another workshop on mediumship.

The people that I encountered in the campgrounds were much different than the residents of Lily Dale. For starters, they were far younger. The average age of those I interviewed in the campground was 36, while the average age of Lily Dale residents about 65. This is evidence of something that more than one Lily Dale resident observed: Spiritualism is a dying religion. There was a clear distinction to be made between those who were attending the spirit readings, and those who would be found at the drum circle, the campgrounds, or one of the various, non-Spiritualism related workshops. While full of creativity and open-mindedness, the Lily Dale population and the Spiritualist visitors that the mediums attract is largely older and female. There are quite a few smokers, and many of the women, specifically the mediums, are overweight. There were far fewer smokers and hardly anyone overweight in the campground. In addition, I only met one man who hadn't been dragged along for the ride by his female significant other. That male was Cage, a New Yorker who I had met early on and with whom I spent my first Saturday night in Lily Dale hanging out and discussing matters of the spirit over beers.

At midnight on this Saturday night, his two female friends had gone to bed, and he invited me to visit the *Inspirational Stump*, an eight minute walk from the campground down a winding dirt path through the haunted *Leolyn Woods Forest*. He said that at midnight mediums are known to go there and do readings. We started the walk, both intoxicated from drinking beers and vodka. It was pretty chilly by this time, and the road was muddy with many puddles to navigate around. I had my flashlight, so this helped.

On our way there, down the path to the Inspiration Stump, we stopped by the pet cemetery. It was an area of about 8000 square feet of nothing but buried pets. He told me that it was a powerful place, and asked if I was ok going there before we entered. He spoke as if he were anticipating that I would be reluctant to enter, possibly because of the associated resonance of Stephen King's *Pet Cemetery*. I said I had no problem going. So we did. It was strange to see the headstones so close, but obviously less earth is required to bury a dog or a cat (I'm sure there were other sorts of animals buried there as well), so that's why initially it looked crowded to me.

We left the pet cemetery after maybe two minutes. On our way towards the Stump, we came across a group of four women walking in our direction. They said that no one was down there, and they asked us if we do readings. Cage, eager to employ his mediumship skills, told them that he is a novice medium, and he said, "let's go see what happens." They joined us with enthusiasm.

We got to the stump, and Cage asked us to gather around it as he said a prayer. He began by welcoming any spirits that wish to be heard to enter at will, and asked that the Great Infinite Spirit bless us, or something along those lines. After a few seconds he

began saying that there were spirits communicating with him. He named a few names, and started describing images that were coming to him. “Is there a Sharon, or a name with a ‘shh’ sound, or ‘saa’ sound. I’m seeing lilies”...and statements like this. It was silent for quite a while.

At first, I wasn’t sure that the group had faith in his abilities. He suggested that someone get up on the stump. According to Cage, the community had put a three foot gate around the stump to deter people from climbing on it because some people had fallen off of it and gotten hurt. But, alas, someone volunteered. The girl who went first had surgery done on her back recently. Despite her physical state she was eager to go first. I gave her my hand and helped her over the fence. She climbed up on the stump and Cage began. He told her that he was picking up a ‘spirit energy’ from her mother’s side. He began turning to where it seemed he believed the spirit to be and whispering, “what was that?” while he held his hand up to us with a ‘hold on’ gesture (he was the only one who I observed doing this during my stay in Lily Dale).

He threw out some names, and when no one responded he said that these names might not be in spirit, but perhaps they could be names of the living that the spirit would like to communicate with, or that the spirit was associated with one of the participants in some way. He then began describing images. Finally, the girl on the stump and one of her relatives (a cousin I think), a large older woman, identified with this spirit, saying that they had confirmation<sup>16</sup> that it was a deceased aunt of theirs. With that, Cage began to give messages, saying that the spirit is happy now and no longer suffering. This went on

---

<sup>16</sup> ‘Confirmation’ is the point during a reading when the person receiving the reading has heard enough matching descriptions of the spirit that the medium is in contact with to confirm that the spirit is indeed someone from their past.

for a little while, and then the girl on the stump began asking direct questions. He ignored those questions and went on. After a while, the girl got tired, and we helped her down. The four women took turns getting up on the stump. Each time that Cage attempted to confirm with each of them that the spirit was related to them in some way, the girl with the back issue was confident that it was she that the spirits were attempting to contact. It got to the point where Cage was assuring her that the various spirits were not interested in contacting her, and were instead related to the person on the stump. He was noticeably annoyed with her persistence.

At one point during Cage's 'stump-work,' as they refer to spirit work done at the stump here in Lily Dale, I had my arms crossed. I was tired, and just trying to reposition myself. We were at the stump for about two hours. Cage asked me if my arms were crossed, and when I confirmed that they were, he asked me to uncross them. He said that crossed arms will block 'spirit' from working. He also added that he could not see that my arms were crossed, but felt that they were. He ended with, "where are you anyways," and all of the girls said "he's right there in the white". At 6'4" with a white fleece on, the light from Jupiter made it pretty easy to make out my figure. At any rate, he continued.

He was adamant about giving me a reading. He asked me to get on the stump, but I had been told by others in the town that it isn't allowed, and besides my reluctance to break the rules of a sacred symbol of the community, I had no confidence at all in Cage's ability to channel the dead. There were a few points when the girls would start making comments about their passed relatives that they believed he was channeling and he would respond, "I wish you hadn't said that because that's what they just told me". I found it



difficult to believe him at all. Perhaps this is because I knew how many beers he had consumed, and they had no idea. He wasn't slurring at all.

I finally sat down, and the girl who had back surgery joined me. Cage attempted another 20 minutes or so of stump work. The whole time she was whispering to me the names of her deceased loved ones who fit the descriptions and comments that Cage was making. Finally Cage finished, and I was exhausted. Cage was pretty pumped up on our walk back to camp. Upon exiting Leolyn Woods, we all said goodnight, and the girls were very grateful to Cage for having done readings for them. Cage asked me a few times what I thought about the reading session. I was extremely tired, and I made it clear that I was tired and interested in crashing as soon as possible. I didn't have trouble sleeping that night.

I should have pursued an inquiry as to what each of the participants of the midnight visit to stump had experienced and how they felt about what transpired. Sadly, I had exhausted myself and had no energy for any further investigation. I was, however, able to ascertain that I was the sole skeptic of the group, and that the women with us were confident, at points desperately so, to believe that something spiritual and paranormal was going on. That is, they *aspired* to believe. They wanted proof that their lost loved one was not gone, confirmation that there is a continuity of life after death. This was a common characteristic of the visitors of Lily Dale who came for medium spirit readings, and those who came to take advantage of the many New Age workshops; those there for the readings were looking for a sort of 'faith-support' from others, while those who were

attending the (non-medium related) workshops were more often than not there to enrich their ongoing journey of self-improvement.

The Angel House was the only place I came across where a combination of those two types of visitors converged. It is a place welcome to all and a home for freethinking, and this atmosphere of the Angel House was something that its host, Sasha, has worked to maintain. Sasha's life history serves as a colorful and intriguing addition to understanding Lily Dale as a place to explore alternative ideas.<sup>17</sup>

Over the years, Sasha and Quinn had turned this guest house into Lily Dale's own modern-day 'salon,' as Sasha referred to it. Nearly every night there would be a gathering of intellectuals, spirit mediums, and soul-searchers lounging on the porch drinking tea, coffee, or wine while discussing topics ranging from the latest paranormal experiences of one of the group to the nature of human knowledge. During a focus group that I held on one evening, for over thirty minutes we discussed the potential extraterrestrial origins of life on Earth.

The spirit mediums were of the most interesting in the group. On one particular evening, a novice medium took out a piece of paper the size of a post card (I believe it was made of wax, but I'm not certain), and held it over a flame, slightly burning it. The result was a series of burn marks. She then turned to me and proceeded to explain how the burn marks represented images that illustrate my upcoming future. The prognosis was grim, as the image was explained as being me falling, having been tripped at the ankles. She elaborated by saying that someone was out to foil my research endeavors,

---

<sup>17</sup> I have included my account of her life, along with a theoretical analysis of her religious and spiritual transformation using Tanya Lurhmann's theory of 'interpretive drift,' history as Appendix B

and that I should keep my notes and recordings close to me at all times. I had a moment of paranoia after hearing this, as I had given my portable hard drive to the anthropology student from Finland so that he could transfer over an audio recording of a workshop that I was unable to attend. This hard drive had all of my school work on it, from undergraduate on to my current studies. I immediately began fearing that I would never see it again. My fears proved to be ungrounded paranoia the next day when my hard drive was returned to me and the files had not been tampered with.

From MARI®<sup>18</sup> readings, to tarot readings, to paper-burning readings, to spirit readings, the Angel House is host to all sorts of paranormal analyses of past, present and future. However, the personal stories of paranormal encounters were even more interesting.

One lady, a recently widowed former nun (who married after leaving the nunnery, of course), claimed to have regular visits from the *Greys* (the aliens with big light bulb-shaped heads, slits for mouths, and big almond-shaped black eyes, who were popularized on American TV by the shows *Unsolved Mysteries* and *The X-Files*). They would just appear at her bedside in the middle of the night, staring at her. The strangest thing was that she was not frightened of them.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> The Mandala Assessment Research Instrument is a tool that Shelley has helped develop (and currently owns the exclusive rights to). It “is a comprehensive system that uses symbols, known as mandalas, to reveal the inner truth and reality of the subject as it is—not what the ego filters of consciousness want it to be—but how it *really* is” (MARI, 2006). Through its culturally universal symbols and colors, the MARI can help one better understand their past, present, and future situations.

<sup>19</sup> Psychiatrist and Pulitzer Prize winning biographer John Edward Mack spent many years researching alien abduction and their possible spiritual or transformative effects, and he authored a number of books on the same subject (1994, 2010). For a less psychological and more narrative approach to alien abduction in America, see Jodi Dean's *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (1998).

I was fortunate enough to hear one Angel House guest recount the following story to Sasha:

*As I lay in bed last night, an angel appeared floating over me. She was young, with fair skin and golden hair, and wore flowing white robes. White flower pedals were falling towards me from all around her. It was beautiful.*

Quinn told me of yet another encounter, during which three of his guests saw pixies and cherubs dancing around on the surface of the wash basin in one of the guest bathrooms.

Lily Dale is a diverse and unique oasis of alternative thinking, spirituality, and Spiritualism (the religion). On one stormy night, I had a dream that three glowing and floating blue orbs were hovering outside of my tent, coming closer and closer to me. I was completely lucid and aware of my being asleep. I sat up in the dream and moved closer to the orbs, and they began moving in some sort of circular motion in response to my movement. As I got closer, a loud vibrating noise, like that of horns blaring off key in a fast beat, became louder and louder until I awoke.

Over dinner with Sasha, a spirit medium, and an astrologer, I shared my story. They each had a different reaction to what I had experienced. Sasha, who was open to any suggested interpretation, was simply intrigued by the experience and encouraged the other two to respond. The spirit medium, a Caucasian woman in her late fifties, was adamant that they were spirit orbs, spiritual entities, as she explained, that sometimes appear in low lighting flash-photographs as small white or semi-transparent circles. Since I was camping within the haunted forest, this seemed a logical answer from her

perspective. The astrologer, also Caucasian and in her early fifties, had another, broader opinion. She was convinced that it was definitely 'contact' of some sort, but she was not sure if it was a spirit, alien, or trans-dimensional being. Regardless, she said that it was important that I was not afraid, because this suggests that the beings were most likely benevolent, as my spiritual, or dream-self, would be able to instinctively recognize malicious intentions, created a sense of fear or guard.

Whether in the campgrounds, the Angel House, or walking the streets, one thing is clear: Lily Dale offers an open and comfortable space for people to share, discuss, and learn alternative ideas of spirituality and the paranormal. In the wilderness that is the landscape of New Age spirituality, Lily Dale is an oasis of community.

Lily Dale was the starting point in my investigation of the New Age, and my conversations with the visitors and residents spawned a myriad of new idea and approaches to the investigation of alternative spirituality, as well as a deeper understanding of the many beliefs that fall into this almost miscellaneous group. More importantly, my time in Lily Dale led me to the second site of my fieldwork: Mount Shasta.

### 3.2 MOUNT SHASTA

*“Sunlight on the water, moss upon the stone,  
autumn leaves are changing, fingers of the crone,  
noggors of the river, milk and honey fed,  
people gather round, and listen what they said,  
they said now heal our water, heal our sky,  
clear your thoughts so we won't die,  
forgive your family, forgive within,  
heal your emotions, and we'll begin,  
to give you more pure water, to give you more to drink,  
to give you more pure water, watch what you think,  
your thoughts carry a motion, the Dragon cloud rides out,  
we'll release the rainfall when you release the doubt,  
the Sacramento River, blood of this place,  
come receive your water, and leave no trace*

**By Sage, a Priestess of Avalon<sup>20</sup>**

I first read about Mount Shasta while in Lily Dale. While browsing through the town library, I noticed a stack of magazines that looked as if they were going to be discarded. As I flipped through the stack, I saw a couple of issues of a magazine called *Fate: True Reports of the Strange and Unknown*. The covers of this magazine grabbed my attention. On one there was an illustration of a tall angelic female being with a golden glow who was holding a flute, bending down and speaking to hundreds of little cherub-like creatures below, also glowing in a golden aura. Each cover listed the titles of three articles within the respective issue: 'Talking Animals,' 'Haunted Lighthouses,' 'Angles Are Everywhere,' 'Vampires Aren't Nice,' 'Enter the Otherworld,' and 'Lemurians on Mount Shasta' (Fate 2007: Cover). This last one peaked my interest, so I picked it up

---

<sup>20</sup> Sage sang this for me during the interview. She had written this song and sung it over the phone for a Californian politician in an effort to persuade him to take action against the cloud seeding, a process by which certain chemicals are released into the atmosphere to create precipitation, that was currently taking place throughout Shasta County.

and started skimming. The librarian who had noticed my interest by this time said that I could take a few if I wanted, so I took this one and one other.

I began reading the article on the Lemurians on Mount Shasta as soon as I left the library. You may recall the Lemurians from the literature review section of this thesis, as they were considered by Helena Blavatsky to be the third 'root race' of Earth. The article begins with the story of a camper who encountered an eight-foot tall humanoid being while spending the night alone in Mount Shasta. The being appeared in front of him in the middle of the night, and then vanished without a trace. This creature is thought by many to be a Lemurian, a race that had once populated a now sunken continent, the last of which now reside in a town called Telos beneath the mountain.

The article goes on to discuss the many other myths and stories surrounding Mount Shasta, such as the belief that beneath the mountain is a huge crystal that possesses a cosmic energy that could power some sort of interstellar portal, which leads to another of the myths of the mountain--that it serves as a galactic space portal. After finishing this article, it was clear that a trip to Mount Shasta would enrich this research project.

I arrived in Mount Shasta in the early afternoon of a sunny day, after having driven for ten hours from a friend's home in Long Beach. Just an hour north of Redding, CA, Mount Shasta is a juggernaut of a mountain that strikes you as it comes into view along the curves of I-5. Towering over 14,000 feet, Mount Shasta's peaks house some of the world only remaining growing glaciers. The town of Mount Shasta, officially named Mount Shasta City, rests at the base of the mountain. After setting up camp at a nearby

park, I took a stroll through the town. With less than 4000 residents, Mount Shasta has a very small town feel to it. There are two main roads that join in a T intersection (US Census 2010).

The shops were made up of the typical variety of small town shops, the florist, the pharmacy, the hardware store, the pub, the burger shop, etc. However, there was a high number of 'New Age' shops as well. 'Berryville,' the organic grocery store, 'The Flying Lotus,' a theater and dance studio, 'The Crystal Room,' a crystal shop selling crystal books, healing tools, angel wings, singing bowls and more, and 'Soul Connections,' "*Your source for New Age, Metaphysical, Sound Healing Tools,*" as the flyer read. While browsing through Soul Connections, I noticed a bulletin board listing various New Age workshops, seminars, and concerts. There happened to be a workshop being held that night, titled *Finding Yourself in the Universe*, and I made sure that I was attending.

This was more of a sharing session than it was a seminar. There were six of us who sat in Indian style in a room designed for dance and yoga. I was the only male. We sat and discussed our spiritual histories and paths, and how we had been 'led' to Mount Shasta. Three of the women in this group were in their sixties, and they talked about how during the 1960s, they had participated in the counter cultural 'hippy' movement, as they referred to it, and that during that time and following in the 1970s, Mount Shasta had become a sort of spiritual 'New Age' Mecca. The fourth woman in the group was closer to my age, in her early thirties, and she was recently divorced and had moved to Mount Shasta to seek a new and 'spiritual' understanding of existence, and she would be the one to introduce me to Sage.



She invited me to a performance at The Flying Lotus by a group of priestesses of Avalon, modern day witches whose beliefs circulate around the mythical land of Avalon, thought to be located in the mists off the coast of Glastonbury, home to the legends of the Holy Grail and King Arthur. As I entered The Flying Lotus, I was greeted within seconds by a short, fit, wide-eyed woman who was standing uncomfortably close to me and who looked up at me and while smiling said, "You're new here. What's your name?" She smelled strange. It was definitely the smell of body odor, but not the kind that seems unclean. That is, as I would later discover, Sage, and many of the other priestesses, their husbands, or 'partners,' as some were referred to, and their children, do not use soaps or deodorants when they bathe. They allow their natural scents to literally become a part of their identity, and this is what I was struck by when I first met Sage. I did not want to seem rude, even though my initial instinct was to back away, not from her scent, but because of how she had so suddenly come into my space. I held my ground, smiled, and introduced myself. She was one of the priestesses who, together, were doing an interpretive dance performance about how each of them had individually discovered the spiritual and symbolic importance of Avalon. We kept the conversation short as she was soon required on stage.

I was seated by a hooded woman who was quiet, polite, and escorted me to my seat quickly but gracefully, like a gliding robot from a science fiction movie. I was seated just moments before the presentation began, but there was still time for a fairy-looking woman, with pointy prosthetic ears, to come and offer to give me an oil-blessing

of sorts. I cannot remember exactly what she said, but it seemed sincere and quite flattering (although I later learned that everyone in the audience received this).

There were bits of dialogue worked into the performance which at times seemed adlibbed. Sage later told me that they only rehearsed the entire piece once, the day before. The impromptu character of the performance gave the experience an interesting and one-of-a-kind feel, and it was enjoyable nonetheless. At the end of the performance, the audience was invited to the stage to be anointed with oil by the priestesses. Everyone except myself joined on stage, and they danced and sang for nearly twenty minutes, and then everyone settled down into a resting position, scattered across the stage, and a discussion began. Some of the audience members shared their own Avalon/Glastonbury experiences with the group, while others asked questions about the performance to the members of the dance group. There were refreshments in the back, coffee, tea, and home baked sweets. It was while perusing the treats when I ran into Sage again. I was again struck by her scent, but I was prepared for it this time. We talked for a about ten minutes. I explained the nature of my project and why I was there. She told me about what the performance was meant to be, as it was still a bit of a mystery to me, although I had put some of the pieces together by that point. She agreed to an interview the following day, while also inviting me to a 'fire-breathing' yoga session that she teaches twice a week.

That evening, while at the local pub grabbing a pint of the local microbrew, I got into a conversation with a semi-local (he was from Los Angeles, but he spends three or four months out of the year in Mount Shasta in his RV) about the New Age presence in the town. It did not take long for him to express clearly that he was not a fan of New Age

beliefs, and that he thought that they were all a bit crazy. Not far into the discussion, however, when the subject of Mount Shasta and its extraterrestrial reputation came up, he invited me to his RV to have some beers and watch the UFOs hover in the distance. I accompanied him to the trailer park where he was living, and we sat and watched what looked like airplanes and bright stars twinkle about in the distance. When I asked him what he believed the lights to be, he said without hesitation that they were UFOs. He did not appear to be interested in discussing in any greater depth the nature of those lights, but only that they are not from Earth. Not a single person who I met in Mount Shasta denied that aliens visit the mountain regularly, although a few avoided the subject, claiming that the presence of ETs was irrelevant. That is, they suggested that my interest in the UFO beliefs in Shasta was distracting me from accessing the religious and spiritual content of the Shastinian community.

I was staying at a campgrounds just outside of Mount Shasta proper, next to Lake Siskiyou, a fairly large lake full of glacier waters from Mount Shasta, which dominates the northeast skies from just a few miles away. The drive to town from the campground would only take me about ten minutes. With Lake Siskiyou on the southwest of Mount Shasta city, and the actual mountain to the northwest of the town, the mountain was in my view every morning. It was quite a beautiful site, and I had to stop a few times to take photos or just stare at the massive beauty of the snow-capped geological juggernaut. Standing alone among its peers, the next largest mountain in the region a dwarf next to it, Mount Shasta's glacier-peaks are only visited by a few brave and expert mountain climbers, and the bizarrely-shaped storm clouds that envelope the mountaintop every

morning after sunrise. These cloud formations, I would later learn, are evidence to many Shastinians that extraterrestrial ships visit the mountain regularly, looming behind the cover of the clouds.

On one particular morning, I was struck by the site of a massive disk-shaped cloud formation, dark in color, that had found itself hovering over the mountaintop. I immediately recalled a part of the article on Mount Shasta from *Fate* magazine where a local Shastinian discusses UFOs in the area:

*"I have seen lights in the sky going toward the mountain and then they disappear," says Mike, matter-of-factly. "There have been several occasions when we have been camping there and I've seen them. UFO sightings are pretty common for people who camp out here. I don't know very many people who live around here who don't think there is something very different about this area." There is a particular cloud formation called 'lenticular clouds' that believers associate with UFO activity. The clouds form a distinct disc shape around the top of the mountain and look like a giant saucer resting on the peak. According to Mike, UFOs may use the clouds to obscure views of UFO landings and departures" (Fate, Nov '07: 24).*

It was quite a sight, this disk shaped cloud hovering over Mount Shasta and engulfing its highest snow-covered peaks. I would soon be hearing Sage's stories of how she herself had experienced UFO and ET adventures that she believes to be a part of her spiritual path.

On the way in every morning, I passed mostly farms and ranches, which is a far different view than the north side provides. On the north side of Mount Shasta City is the industrial area. There you'll find the local newspaper printing facility, a soda factory, and a very large facility belonging to Cross Petroleum. Also on the north side is Mount Shasta City Park. Here is where you will find the headwaters of the Sacramento River, a small trickling waterfall of glacier waters that begins California's longest river (400 miles

long!). It was while sitting here at the headwaters of the river when Sage came up with the song that opened this chapter. I visited the park regularly, as many locals did also, to fill up water bottles with the purest and coldest fresh water I've ever experienced.

The first time I visited the park, I parked next to the tennis courts, where a group of four seniors, two men and two women (all Caucasian), were practicing Tai Chi. There was a bench not far from the stones that would support us as we filled our jugs and bottles. On more than one occasion there was a little person sitting on the bench, no more than three feet tall. She was dressed in colorful flowery clothes and had long hair that was all the same length. Each time I saw her she was busy making jewelry out of thread and beads, with the finished pieces laid out along the bench for sale.

As you move south from the park into town, the shops emerge. The main street of town, Shasta Blvd, is like many small town centers. There is a low speed two way street with lots of cross walks and stop signs, with pedestrians milling about between the shops and restaurants. There are lots of trees, and the town has the quaint rural-town feeling, as there are less than 4,000 residents. As you approach the south side of town, a number signs emerge that seem to have a New Age theme to them: The Velvet Elephant Art Center and Fair Trade Emporium; Berryvale Cafe; The Flying Lotus; Crystal Wings; and the Silver Moon Galleria. Sage's studio, located next to an all-natural grocery store, was on the south side of town.

Our yoga class was intense. It was Kundalini yoga, also known as 'fire breathing yoga,' a type of heavy breathing yoga that can make someone inexperienced quite light headed, as I soon found out. She was quite comforting, however, and offered up

alternative positions and encouragement for those in the class (me, namely) who were having trouble with some of the positions.

The class lasted about an hour, and after everyone else had gone on their way, Sage set down two mats that looked like white animal skins close together on the floor. She invited me over, and she began telling me her story.

### SAGE

Sage was pure enthusiasm and energy every time I saw her. Within her group, she seemed to be the leader. There were, of course, no leaders by title. Egalitarianism was the rule among the priestesses and their families, but Sage was respected and at times almost revered by the others. She was the most charismatic figure in the group, and her unspoken leadership role was likely a representation of what Weber called 'charismatic authority.' It was clear that I had been lucky to establish such a quick connection with someone who turned out to be one of the central cultural figures in Mount Shasta's New Age community.

Sage was raised in New York City. As a young woman she described herself as a party-girl. She moved out to Los Angeles when she was in her twenties, and for five years after having moved to LA, she had not left the city, not until she saw an advertisement for a chance to travel to Joshua Tree and spend time with Native Americans. She stuck the ad on her refrigerator and did not think about it again until her grandmother passed away. She did not have a lot of money at the time, and her

grandmother had left her exactly enough money for her to go on this trip to Joshua Tree.

Seeing this as a clear sign, she quickly signed up and was on her way.

*" In a week's time I had the most crazy supernatural things happen to me.... one thing after the next after the next after the next. And then this person gifted me with a drum and I played that drum on my way home, and I didn't do any psychedelics when I was there, I did zero drugs while I was there. It was about three o'clock in the morning and I'm playing my drum while I'm driving with one hand. A huge mother-ship appeared in the middle of the freeway. And I totally freaked out and I slammed my brakes, and I go through the ship. The only way I can explain it is like me putting my hand through something solid. My body felt all warped. I was like, oh my God. I did not know what to do. I was totally freaked out. I was not like a major UFO aficionado. I definitely have met people since then who are like, 'oh my God...you had a UFO experience, why don't they come to me?' I was like, what the fuck was that? So I felt that I needed to keep driving, so I did.*

[this is just one of many UFO experiences that Sage shared with me. One of her other ET experiences includes being brought aboard an “Arcturian” agricultural spaceship during dream time, an experience that she believes to have shared with fellow Shastinian]

*"Every time I tried to get off of the freeway I couldn't. The next thing I saw was a 10-story high meditating Buddha. At that time in my life I didn't even know what that was. I didn't know anything about Buddhism,... it was like '89 or something. It wasn't like you could just buy Buddha earrings in the mall at that time. How I found out that it was a Buddha statue was, a while later I was walking and someone had thrown out a National Geographic magazine and I saw it in the trash, picked it up and opened it up, and it was the statue that I'd seen in the freeway...and I was like 'oh my god!' So I tried to get off the freeway again but I couldn't, and a huge set of wings were spanning across the freeway without a body. They were angelic wings, they were bird wings, and I was like 'holy shit!' "When I got to my exit for Hollywood I was able to get off...got off, and went straight to my room and completely tripping, I couldn't lay on my bed. I could only lay on the floor on my stomach. I couldn't leave my apartment. I only left my room to go pee. On the third day after being in my room, I called my boyfriend who lived out of town and was like telling him how I was freaking out. You need to come get me. He came to get me, and I went to his house, and that night while I was sleeping, the ceiling opened up in these very long tall beings came in and they put an implant in my forehead. And it was a totally peaceful experience. I didn't struggle at all. And I had this knowing, like chocolate syrup going over my whole body, that I had been waiting to reconnect with my star-seed family for*

*eons. Apparently, as my boyfriend shook me out of it, I was saying, 'the ferry people are here... the ferry people are here'...over and over and over again. "That was the beginning of October, and every single day for the entire month I had crazy supernatural things happen to me. At that time I was singing and dancing on the Queen Mary ship in Long Beach and being visited by extraterrestrials every day. So, there I was in my makeup and my false eyelashes, and my tap dance shoes, doing my whole stage act, doing everything I could not to break down. And this is basically where I blasted wide open and knew I could never continue the life I was leading".*

A spiritual trip induced by Native American drum, with a floating Buddha and an extraterrestrial mother-ship...already these ideas seem at once New Age and yet completely random. The experiences that followed in Sage's life were characterized by different but equally bizarre details. During a mushroom journey in the desert, an outing where people ingest hallucinogenic mushrooms in order to induce a spiritual experience, she recalls having a past-life regressive vision, and she witnessed from a bird's eye view herself being sexually initiated by the horned fertility god 'Kokopelli':

*"...and I envisioned back to a past life where I was the maiden and I was brought to the campfire and there was this huge tent, and inside was a stone slab, and I was laid on the slab and prepared for the god to come. And he came in with antlers and a huge erection. Meantime, at that point in my life, I didn't know anything about fertility gods or nothing like that. And he came in and he placed his erection in the fire, and I opened myself and he went inside me and all I kept saying to myself was, 'this is what it's like when you die, this is what it's like when you die, this is what it's like when you die'...and I came away from my physical body, and then a spark of life! And all my fear of death has been completely erased since that moment."*

The day that followed this mushroom trip, Sage bought a VW Bus and went on a Grateful Dead tour. It was during this tour that she had what she calls an experience of 'divine mother essence':

*"...completely for the first time I was with people who completely accepted me, no matter what I looked like. No matter what, no matter where I turned, people were telling me they loved me, and I didn't have to prove myself to anybody. It was like*



*this whole...just like this, like my first experience with humans, like divine mother essence, that was my first experience."*

She then moved around the country, lived in Colorado and in North Carolina. She experienced a period of homelessness and unemployment. She begged for food and gas money. She believed that she 'needed' to experience hard times in her life so that she could develop the compassion for others in similar situations. She learned and experienced many different spiritual traditions:

*I was doing sweat lodges and pipe ceremonies, and the gathering that I went to Joshua Tree with was Sun Bear and all native American based. Then I was still kinda floating in and out of everything...Hinduism, Buddhism, kind of like everything...little bit of Wicca.*

This was all before she settled into her spiritual identity as a priestess of Avalon, which occurred once she had been living in Mount Shasta for a while.

What brought her to Mount Shasta involved the birth of her child. She was living in PA at the time, and when she first held her baby daughter in her arms, she recalls a moment of communication with the newborn:

*"...as soon as she was born, and as soon as she looked at me with her eyes for the first time, I heard her clearly say to me telepathically, "Call me Shasta." There was no denying that, so I called her Shasta. We moved from PA back to CO... When she was three and a half, I bought her a used CD at the record store called the Mount Shasta Anthology, which had a drawing of Mount Shasta on the front, and it was a CD with all of the Shasta local music, and I thought it would be cool if she had this CD, since her name is Shasta...A couple days later I heard her sobbing...she was sitting next to the stereo, playing the CD, and pointing to the front of the CD cover, and she was saying, "Mommy I'm so sad...I used to know how to fly here. I used to know how to fly to this place. I'm so sad mommy. I can't remember how. Please help me remember how to fly here again". I was blown away, and then she opened up the CD and there were photographs of all of the people who played on the CD, and she pointed to one of the women who was [so and so], and she said I wanna talk to her. And there was a phone number in there on how to order more CD's. I called the phone number and someone answered the phone and I said, "My daughter is having a very strong spiritual*

*experience, and I need to talk to one of the artists on this CD...are you willing to give me the phone number of one of these artists?" She said, "It depends on who it is". I said, "well it's [so and so]." And she said, "I'm [so and so]. I'm the one who produced the CD. Let me talk to your daughter". They had a conversation that lasted for at least 30 minutes, and handed the phone back to me and this woman was saying, "You have to come to Mount Shasta. You must come here...the Mountain is calling you. Your daughter needs to come back home. You've got to come to Mount Shasta." I got off of the phone, and I prayed. I knew that I was somehow gonna be taken care of, and within a month, a plane ticket was put in my hand to come to Mount Shasta, and my daughter and I came and had the most magical week".*

Within two years of their first week there, Sage and her daughter had moved to Mount Shasta.

After my interview with Sage, which turned into a conversation about my own religious and spiritual history, she invited me to a birthday party of the son of one of the priestesses in her group. Despite my reluctance to accept the invitation since I was a complete outsider, she insisted that I come.

The priestess' house was in the middle of the woods on the west of the mountain. The house was of an A-frame type, and it was almost totally hidden behind trees about forty yards into the property. Upon arrival, I was introduced to about twenty very different people. The first person that I met was the father of the birthday boy. He answered the door wearing a sleeveless leather vest, a camouflage cowboy hat, and cargo pants. He smelled of the same sort of natural-but-not-dirty body odor that I had noticed with Sage, although his was distinguishably (and obviously) of a male scent. He welcomed me, although was very shy at first. He would later open up like a fountain and tell me his conspiracy theories surrounding the 9-11 attacks and mathematical ideas that form his metaphysical understanding of existence.

Among the others, there was a man in tie-dye wearing a long skirt-like bottom. He had long brown hair and the fullest beard I'd ever seen. He had given himself a new name upon moving to Mount Shasta, like Black Bear or Grey Horse. There was a couple, a German musician and artist and her American partner, also a musician. They had been a part of the counter-cultural movement of the 60s, experimenting with all kinds of, as they referred to them, consciousness altering drugs. They called themselves *The Deer People*, and were two of the three members of a local band that specialized in Indian instruments (specifically the sitar and the surbahar). The people there seemed to be of all age groups, the oldest was the German woman who was in her seventies, the youngest was a child around four years old.

I was invited to take a seat next to Sage at a low table that had been set on a rug in what was like a front yard, but was more of a part of the forest without trees. As I sat down and we began talking. There were about five dishes on the table, all guacamole. They were having a contest on who could make the best 'raw food' guacamole dip. All of the food at the party, in fact, was raw food. A good majority of the attendants of the party had adopted strict organic raw food diets, meaning that in addition to only eating purely organic foods, they did not cook anything they ate. They were after, as one of them explained, the true 'hunter-gatherer experience, minus the hunting part.'

I explained to them my research project, and the conversation bounced around the table, where about ten of us sat at this point. We discussed what anthropology is, why Mount Shasta became one of the research focal points of my thesis, but the conversation developed and evolved as we discussed astronomy, ETs, mathematics, synchronicity,

environmental issues, and politics. I commented on how grateful I was that they had welcomed me so warmly. I told them that I was in such a comfort zone when speaking with them, that it felt as if we had all known each other for years. Sage then turned to me, with the warmest smile and most pleasant and sincere expression on her face, and said, "...that's because you've come back home. Welcome back to your galactic family."

What she said to me was without question the single most memorable remark that anyone made to me during my research. In Sage's eyes, I had returned home. It seemed that *I* was the traveler, and *I* was seated around a bonfire, around which myself and other travelers were having a moment within the wilderness of New Age. The warmth and welcoming spirit of her words to me, bizarre as they may seem to some, distracted my attention from my immediate goal of observation. My guard was down. I *was* really feeling extremely at ease, albeit I did not recognize the galactic family into which Sage was welcoming me back, but the lack of judgment within the group was warm, and amazingly comforting. I felt as if I could share whatever came to my mind, and I began talking with the group free of inhibition or fear of being analyzed or criticized.

The 'judgment-free' nature of that afternoon is something inherent to nearly all of the conversations, meetings, and gatherings that I was part of. Without doctrine, without a central belief or core principle, judgment of matters of the spirit becomes difficult. Sure, criticism exists in New Age communities, but not the sort of dogmatic judgment that would inhibit someone to speak freely. This zone, for want of a better label, is necessarily a part of New Age. Without it, the syncretic mix of cultural content with which New Age is rich would never emerge from the thoughts and minds of those

freethinkers. Ideas of spirituality alternative to the religious hegemony would be silenced by the voices of judgment, scrutinized under the eye of criticism, or mocked in the name of absurdity. New Age is necessarily free of a predominant voice of judgment.<sup>21</sup>

Sage's experiences that led her to such a judgment-free zone, which she described above as "her first experience with humans, like divine mother essence." She remembers the Grateful Dead tour as almost a conversionary point in her life, when she *found* herself, as it were. Even over the telephone, when she was desperately reaching out to the producers of the CD that her daughter was captivated by, she entered into a judgment free zone. The woman on the other end, clearly a member of a New Age community, was open to what Sage was saying, and in fact she used the same verbiage that Sage would later use with me...*come, or welcome, home.*

Today, Sage is a wife and mother, a priestess of Avalon, an alien abductee, an environmental activist, a former goddess and mate of The Horned God, a yoga instructor and interpretive dancer. She spends dreamtime on out-of-body adventures on agricultural spacecrafts, has standoffs with shape-shifting werewolves, and consults with her spirit guides as she raises her family at the base of the great Mount Shasta, hovering over the judgment-free zone that is the New Age community below. Her biography illustrates two of the fundamental characteristics of New Age—unconventionality and ecosophy—while the

---

<sup>21</sup> The judgment-free zone of the New Age is something that was absent from Pentecostalism, based on my own upbringing. For example, ideas that are considered evil, or of the devil (such as the theory of evolution, homosexuality, or abortion) are quickly silenced or harshly criticized, often in a way that will leave a mark. Judgment is an inherent part of Pentecostalism, and many other Christian denominations, as the Day of Judgment is an important piece of Christian eschatology. Some interesting academic contributions that explore these discussions include Christian Smith's *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, David Watt's *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth Century American Evangelicalism*, Faye Ginsburg's *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*, and Timothy Weber's *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism*.

community she has become a part of, and helped build, embodies the third-decentralization (particularly in terms of beliefs and leadership structure).

Sage was not the only participant in this research project whose beliefs and experiences combine to represent numerous New Age streams of thought. There was an individual in Lily Dale with whom I spent many hours discussing ideas of New Age, and the culture of the communities in which she had been a part over three different continents. However, she was not comfortable with my sharing her story. Sage, completely open to my analysis of her input, excited by my interest, and with genuine and incredible enthusiasm for sharing her beliefs, Sage gave me a solid biography with which to illuminate both the syncretic and structural natures of New Age. The following and final chapter will focus on how an ideological structure can be detected in such a decentralized and seemingly disparate group of beliefs.

Recalling the introduction of this essay, the short story of the boy who wandered out of fortress X into the wilderness of spirituality, there was a woman that enchanted him and captured his attention and imagination. He followed her throughout the dynamic landscape of the New Age as she glided over the hilltops, conversing and communing with a vast array of individuals representing a colorful spectrum of spiritual belief and religiosity. Of the people I met, Sage was the most like that gliding woman. Of the places I visited during my research, Mount Shasta was the most like this wilderness.

### 3.3 OVERVIEW OF RESEARCH SITES

Both Mount Shasta and Lily Dale were quite welcoming to my presence. I quickly made friends in both locations, although the experiences, as you have likely noticed, were far different. Lily Dale was a far more closed community, with a gate at the front and a fee to enter. The Lily Dale economy is based on the summer season of spirit reading-seekers and New Age workshops. The subject of spirituality has had a home there since the founding of the small town. Mount Shasta City was originally a lumber town. While the lumber mills have moved to the towns surround the town, Mount Shasta's role in the New Age movement is a 20th century phenomenon, and is only represented by a small fraction of the community (about 20% based on feedback from participants).

Lily Dale is far smaller than Mount Shasta, as well. By the end of the first week in Lily Dale, everyone knew I was in town. In Mount Shasta, only the people I interviewed knew about my presence in the town. Nevertheless, I was welcomed into the homes of most of the people I met in both locations. Non-judgmental, open-minded, and free-thinking are the words that I would use to describe the people from both communities. I enjoyed the stunning natural beauty and unique culture of each town, I met unforgettable people in each community, and my experiences in both will remain forever unforgettable.

In Lily Dale I interviewed a total of sixteen people: four campers, seven residents, and four locals visiting from neighboring towns and cities. 63% of those I interviewed

were female, while the female component of the town seemed much higher, perhaps 80%. All but two were Caucasian. All had at least some college education, four possessed doctorates in the humanities and social sciences. All that commented seem to be doing just fine financially.<sup>22</sup> Their occupations varied, with the most common being spirit medium.

In Mount Shasta I interviewed eight people. In the particular community that I was introduced into in Mount Shasta, the women seemed to be the community leaders. While the men were vocal, kind and open to conversation, the women were the most excited about participating in my research. Only two of the eight were men. All had at least some higher education. The majority of the Shasta participants did not comment on their income, but not all because they did not want to reveal their income; a few could not recall how much money they bring in. For a table of the demographic data collected, please refer to Appendix B.

In the next chapter, we will dive into some New Age literature, as well as research conducted by sociologist John Bloch, and combined with my own ethnographic data, an attempt will be made at isolating certain key characteristics of New Age.

---

<sup>22</sup> Not everyone answered my demographic question regarding income. However, of the Lily Dale residents who did answer, the average annual household income \$95,000.00.



#### 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF NEW AGE

What then is New Age? If we must isolate the key characteristics of New Age, it seems to be understood as a nebulous conglomerate of unconventional and alternative beliefs, a syncretic grouping of ideas, most of which incorporate matters of the spirit. The backbone of Western materialism, the idea that the world is ours for the taking, using, and exploiting for human needs, is often rejected in New Age circles. Echoing Tipton to a certain degree, sociologist Jon Bloch points out that alternative spirituality seems to be inherently countercultural, and therefore pushes against the grains of mainstream Western thought. He writes:

*“One highly-salient aspect of this alternative critique of mainstream dogma concerns the alleged dualistic distinction that is made between what is considered sacred and what is considered secular...mainstream society is seen as allowing only cosmic forces apart from the earth to be considered spiritual... [while]...alternative spiritualists assert that all aspects of life are sacred, both the sky-like ‘heavens’ and the ‘matter’ of earth”* (Bloch, 1998: 57).

A rejection of dogma and institution leads New Age to a state of decentralization (particularly in the way that leadership and authority are structured), which subsequently turns the task of defining New Age into listing what things *might* be New Age. Considering what has been presented above, one might tentatively define something as New Age if it possesses the characteristics that follow below.

## CHARACTERISTIC 1:

### UNCONVENTIONALITY: A TENDENCY TOWARD THE ALTERNATIVE

New Age philosophies favor unconventional concepts that are considered counter and alternative to mainstream ideas in a broad sense. Namely, they attempt to reject Western thought. The countercultural revolution as the catalyst of the popularization of New Age thought in America has seemingly left its 'counter' mark on the New Age. Although their position within the West prevents New Age philosophies from alienating themselves entirely from the cultural milieu within which they were developed, they aspire towards such a goal as they look for spiritual guidance and wisdom within non-Western sources that either predated the rise of Western civilization or somehow survived the domination of Western thought. Examples of such non-Western beliefs and ideas are numerous—the Hindu concept of deity as *Atman*, the 'oversoul,' if you will, of the universe; Native American and Aboriginal animistic ideas of spiritual agency within the elements of nature; ayurvedic, herbal, homeopathic and other ancient or alternative arts of medicine. The adjective 'Western' is more or less an antithetical descriptor of things not New Age.

## CHARACTERISTIC 2:

### THE ECO-CENTRIC PHILOSOPHY OF NEW AGE

Ecosophy is a term coined by Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss (1989). Ecosophy, or ecophilosophy, refers to the philosophical foundation of the Deep Ecology movement, a movement developed by Næss as a response to what he considered

‘shallow’ ecological approaches to understanding the natural environment and how we relate to it (Sessions, 1987: 112). Næss wrote:

*“Ecology is a limited science which makes use of scientific methods. Philosophy is the most general forum of debate on fundamentals...The significant tenets of the Deep Ecology movement are clearly and forcefully normative. They express a value priority system only in part based on results (or lack of results) of scientific research...It is clear that there is a vast number of people in all countries...who accept as valid the wider norms and values characteristic of the Deep Ecology movement”* (Sessions, 1987: 112).

The normative value system that Deep Ecology espouses is best understood by considering nature as a synergistic and interdependent system, one in which the value and the sum of the individual parts will never add up to the value and sum of the, in this case ecological, whole. A worldview, belief system, cosmogony, or ideology that assumes this normative value system is characteristically ecosophical. Ecosophical ideas, therefore, are necessarily ecocentric (or they necessarily strive towards ecocentricity), as opposed to anthropocentric.

Ecosophical ideas are often manifested within New Age philosophies as a concept best described as 'divine universalism,' the notion that everything in the universe has a sacred or divine nature.<sup>23</sup> This idea smacks of Non-Western and pre-Western philosophy, and is a reflection of the tendency of New Age to lean towards unconventional religious thought. While religious scholars of the traditional sort struggle with inventing metaphors that will aid in the understanding of nature as holy, such as Sallie McFague's *The Body of God* (1993) which redraws the contemporary Christian understanding of God

---

<sup>23</sup> Sociologist Merlin Brinkerhoff coauthored an article with Jeffrey Jacob that investigated in detail what they call the 'Quasi-Religious Meaning Systems of Deep Ecology' (1999).

to include the planet, New Age appears to need no invention. Ecosophy and divine universality are virtually inherent characteristics of the New Age.

New Age philosophies are predominantly ecosophical. Indeed, Deep Ecology is considered by some, within and without the New Age world, to *be* New Age. However, not all New Age beliefs are ecocentric. Some human potential movements, such as EST and Scientology, that have been traditionally included in the New Age nebula see human beings as the most advanced beings, both physically and spiritually, and therefore these beliefs include a certain anthropocentrism. As we shall see, one New Age philosophy is ecosophical but not entirely ecocentric.

### CHARACTERISTIC 3: DECENTRALIZATION AND A LACK OF DOGMA AND INSTITUTIONALIZED STRUCTURES

New Age philosophies seem to, for the most part, be absent of any sort of indoctrination and institutionalization. This characteristic is linked to the non-Western and alternative nature of New Age. Figures of authority on matters of the spirit are considered despotic, and no written text is looked to within New Age as an exclusively holy and inerrant source of wisdom. This is why Christianity is often the subject of critique within New Age circles.<sup>24</sup> Without any central or even confederate framework, New Age comes to represent a multitude of beliefs. A rejection of structure and dogma is the feature of New Age that creates its nebulousness. As ideas develop, within or outside

---

<sup>24</sup> This is not to suggest that other text based monotheistic religions are not subject to New Age criticism.

of the religious and spiritual discourse, New Age philosophies adapt, develop, and emerge. A clear example of how New Age philosophies create themselves based on and informed by the developments of human thought can be seen in the way New Age responds to the natural sciences. An historical glance at the difficulties institutions of Christianity have gone through in order to maintain relevance in the face of the ever increasing understanding of the universe offered by the natural sciences (i.e. Galileo and the Catholic Church; Big Bang and Biblical Creation) will show how dogmatic and centrally structured religions enter into a power conflict with the developments of and proliferation of human knowledge, while New Age philosophies (for their part) adapt and build on scientific advancements.<sup>25</sup> *The Tao of Physics*, a book categorized as New Age, is an example of such an adaptation. Specifically, the book argues that physics more or less parallels, and in a sense proves the validity of, 'eastern mysticism' (Capra, 1975). During my fieldwork in the Spiritualist town of Lily Dale in the Summer of 2008, the most esteemed of the spirit mediums in the town told me that if I was truly interested and dedicated to understanding human spirituality, I should first gain an understanding of quantum physics. Whether or not these claims hold any truth is irrelevant. That science is helping to build and perpetuate New Age spiritual philosophies is of key significance. Science is evermore changing the face of New Age.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> In his book *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris elaborates on the history Christian tension with Science (2004). Anthropological works that contribute to the discussion include David Buchdahl's essay *The Science of Religion* (1977), and Leslie White's *Morgan's Attitude Toward Religion and Science* (1944).

<sup>26</sup> Anthropologist Debbora Battaglia and Religious Studies Scholar George Chryssides have both done fascinating investigations of the Raëlian Church, a UFO-based religion with millions of followers whose world view interestingly incorporates aspects of both scientific determinism and New Age spirituality (Battaglia, 2005) (Chryssides, 2003).

The decentralized and anti-dogmatic nature of New Age, particularly in its range of beliefs, allows for the ability of pieces of New Age philosophy to be adopted by religious groups outside of what is considered alternative or New Age spirituality. These instances fall on the periphery of the nebula of New Age thought, and their absorption plants seeds of the New Age into dogmatic religious traditions in a passive and oftentimes subliminal fashion. Consider Christian yoga,<sup>27</sup> or the idea of ‘the power of thought’ being adopted by leaders of evangelical Christianity, such as Joel Osteen, as examples of this sort of absorption (Osteen, 2007). The ‘power of thought’ in the way that Joel Osteen explains it is the idea that your thoughts have the ability to shape your reality. This is very similar to the idea of ‘co-creating reality,’ a ‘New Age’ idea that gained huge popularity with the release of Rhonda Byrne’s book *The Secret* (2006).

Pop cultural icons who are read and viewed by interreligious audiences are also beginning to reflect New Age thought. Eckhart Tolle, New Age author of the internationally acclaimed books *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*, and *A New Earth: Awakening Your Life’s Purpose*, partnered with Oprah to create an online seminar that taught New Age concepts of spirituality to millions of people worldwide.<sup>28</sup> At the time of writing, claiming three of the top five slots of the New York Times bestseller list within the category of ‘advice books’ are New Age books, two of which are the afore mentioned books by Tolle.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> [<http://www.christianyoga.us/home.htm>], accessed May 11<sup>th</sup>, 2009.

<sup>28</sup> [<http://www.oprah.com/entity/oprahsbookclub>], accessed August 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> *A New Earth* (no. 1), *The Power of Now* (no. 3), and *Soul Wisdom* (no. 5) by healer, physician, martial artist, educator, and author Zhi Gang Sha. [<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/bestseller/index.html>] accessed July 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008.

Even within Christian and Islamic scholarship that address environmental degradation, one can find traces of New Age philosophy. For example, Christian ecofeminist Rosemary Ruether eloquently writes, “To believe in divine being means to believe that those qualities in ourselves are rooted in and respond to the life power from which the universe itself arises” (1992: 5). The rejection of the Western dichotomy separating humans and nature and heaven and earth can be detected in Ruether’s words. Islamic environmentalist Seyyed Hossein Nasr similarly believes that the separation of humans and nature has created a cultural approach to nature that is mechanistic and mundane. He argues that the roots of contemporary environmental problems can be traced back to the Western Renaissance, Scientific Revolution, and Enlightenment, which combined to paradigmatically change the worldview of the West from one that incorporated all of nature into a divine universe into a worldview that sees nature as secular, quantifiable, and to a certain extent (and perhaps in the future totally) controllable. One can hardly disagree when one looks at an English dictionary and finds the word ‘worldly’ as the antonym of ‘divine’ (Random 2008: divine).<sup>30</sup>

Such a decentralized group of beliefs seems inherently syncretistic (both in its beliefs and in the varied ways through which people attain insight), and this is the unspoken characteristic that is built into nearly every piece of the wilderness of New

---

<sup>30</sup> Many environmentalists point to the Genesis story of the Abrahamic faiths, the granting of stewardship over all life on Earth to humans by God, as the ideological beginning of the current environmental crisis. While this might be true to a certain extent, global environmental problems began long after the story of Genesis was adopted widespread. While the Genesis narrative does complicate the effort of developing green-friendly religious worldviews from Christian, Jewish, and Muslim contexts, and for some validate the expansion of human populations and industry, Nasr’s argument that traces the environmental crisis to the development of Western thought in the middle of the last millennium seems more evidential and significant to the purpose of this essay, if only because we can more easily trace the roots of modern human civilization to that time than we can to Biblical times.

Age. Syncretism, the unification of seemingly different or incongruous philosophical or religious beliefs, is apparent in beliefs of the communities that I visited, and as we will see in the New Age literature focused on below. In New Age, nearly any belief can be incorporated into the spiritual philosophy of someone or some group, so long as it is ecosophical and alternative to conventional religious orders. This is largely made possible by the lack of judgment present in New Age communities, the absence of a single textual doctrine or authority, and the focus on self empowerment and proactive spiritual development.

#### JON BLOCH'S SOCIOLOGICAL STUDY ON ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

One cannot claim that there is a list of exclusive characteristics that make something New Age, just as no one can define in the same manner the cultural phenomena of patriotism, religious faith, and freedom.<sup>31</sup> However, the discussion of this essay has at times taken a tone of authority on what New Age is or is not. This, I regret, is a casualty of attempting to define something that is as elusive as a decentralized nebula of alternative contemporary thought. What we do have, however, is a tentative frame of what might often be considered New Age. It would be beneficial for the purposes of this essay to further compare this New Age framework to the ideas and beliefs of individuals within the New Age world.

---

<sup>31</sup> I am not suggesting that these phenomena fall in the same category or categories. What I am suggesting is that similar challenges face those who attempt to define these ideas.



In 1998 sociologist Jon Bloch conducted an ethnographic study of 22 Americans who identify themselves as individuals who practice ‘alternative spirituality.’ While the terminology is a bit different, based on the published piece that resulted from his study, *Alternative Spirituality and the Environment*, he would agree that ‘alternative spirituality’ and ‘New Age spirituality’ are more or less synonymous within an American context (1998: 56). By posting ads in newspapers and in New Age/alternative oriented stores, Bloch recruited eleven men and eleven women to interview in his study, ranging in ages between early 20’s and late 60’s. To begin with, he asked them to tell him about their spiritual development in their own words, and then he asked them a series of questions about their beliefs. Surprisingly enough, he never brought up the idea of environment or ecology during the interviews.

Every one of Bloch’s informants considered mainstream society as being ‘dualistic’ in a way that alienates humans from the nonhuman world. An artist in his twenties remarked,

*“When I’d look around me in the city and just see everything manmade, synthetic, and then think about what’s real when I’m in the woods is just different plants, the ground. [Where I live now, outside of the city] it’s real when you taste your water and it tastes right, and the air: you can really feel it when it rains—you know, the smell when it rains, and –and, uh, the bio-energy from the trees” (Bloch, 1998: 64).*

Apparent from his comments, this informant felt that human civilization, as represented by the city in which he lived, is not ‘right.’ In order for him to get right, he had to move away from urbanity and into more ‘natural’ surroundings. This view is one that reflects a certain rejection of the contemporary and conventional (i.e. the Western) dichotomy that tries to separate humans from nature. Every one of the participants in the

study maintained an ‘unconventional’ worldview in this sense. In their efforts to create new ways of communicating and imagining their existence, Bloch argues that alternative spiritualists push away from the social controls of contemporary society. “By not aligning themselves with a tightly-organized spiritual group, such individuals are enacting their protest against dogma and rigidity” (1998: 68). This sort of decentralization, particularly in its leadership style, is key to a movement that stresses an escape from arbitrarily constructed systems of rules in order to experience human spirituality in its true form.

92% of Bloch’s informants believed that ‘earth issues’ and ‘spiritual issues’ are synonymous, and over 80% of them described environmental knowledge as spiritual knowledge, reflecting on their experiences in nature as spiritual ones. While discussing an experience she had while on a nature retreat, one informant concluded that she “made a really deep connection with the earth, or with Gaia or whatever you want to call the consciousness that is this planet that we live on” (Bloch, 1998: 65). One informant was taught by her mother to regard the woods as “God’s cathedral...where you can connect with spirit the most” (1998: 67). Stating her philosophy on spirit, another informant remarked:

*“I believe that everything has a spirit: trees, animals, you know, and I just have a lot of respect for the earth, and I try to honor that and take care of it. And I kind of view her as my mother, you know, the source of all life”* (1998: 65).

Nature is divine; nonhuman life possesses a spirit; earth issues are synonymous with spiritual issues. These beliefs reflect the idea of ‘divine universality’ that tends to be present in New Age philosophy.

After analyzing the transcripts of the interviews, Bloch points out that “alternative spirituality can be seen as ‘coming back to the earth’” (1998: 66). To illustrate this point, he quotes one of his informants explaining how he understands his experiences in nature:

*“It’s like coming back to the earth, coming back to what Native Americans were all about—you know, living in oneness and harmony with the universe, not in disconnection with it, and it’s like...a celebration...for the earth, to give the earth thanks for all the things it gives us that we don’t really even think about. To give back and give thanks to the earth, and be more of that one community, for that one, you know that oneness...that community that people are looking for”* (1998: 66).

This belief in an attainable harmony where humans live in equilibrium with nature, Bloch argues, is part of the way alternative spirituality is imagined by those who identify as spiritual in this sense, or New Age—this belief is inherently ecosophical.

Bloch’s study of alternative spiritualists illustrates firsthand that New Age is characterized by unconventional, decentralized, and ecosophical beliefs that incorporate the notion of divine universality. An informant in Lily Dale echoed the idea of divine universality in a succinct response to the question of the nature of God: *“I don’t think of God as a separate being. I equate God with the universe.”*

## TWO NEW AGE NARRATIVES

Alternative spiritualists within New Age communities position themselves within human history and the history of the universe through various diverse and colorful narratives. One only need browse the New Age section of any given bookstore to find the myriad of stories that help to explain humanity’s place in the cosmos. A brief look at two books and the master narratives their authors illustrate will help to broaden our

understanding of the world of New Age while affirming that the New Age philosophies in printed form do fit within our tentative framework of New Age. The books that I chose to focus on were suggested to the author of this essay by informants within New Age communities. Both books position themselves within the nebula of New Age philosophies in a distinct and unique fashion.

### AMERICAN WITCHCRAFT

American witchcraft and its close cultural kin neo-paganism are more often than not categorized as New Age. Starhawk, a witch, ecofeminist, and peace activist, has made a name for herself as one of the most influential authors and thinkers within the community modern witchcraft. First published in 1979, Starhawk's most popular book, *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*, is now in its third edition.<sup>32</sup> This book is a witchcraft starter-kit, if you will. Starhawk begins with a description of the worldview of witchcraft, followed by the body of the work which is a tutorial of what Starhawk feels are the most significant rituals, invocations, exercises, and magical spells, and concluding with a vision of the future from the perspective of witchcraft.

The origin myth of modern witchcraft:

*Alone, awesome, complete within Herself, the Goddess, She whose name cannot be spoken, floated in the abyss of the outer darkness, before the beginning of all things. And as She looked into the curved mirror of black space, She saw by her own light her radiant reflection, and fell in love with it. She drew it forth by the power that was in Her and made love to Herself, and called Her 'Miria, the Wonderful'.*

---

<sup>32</sup> Starhawk's *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics* is also of her more popular works (1997).

*Their ecstasy burst forth in the single song of all that is, was, or ever shall be, and with the song came motion, waves that poured outward and became all beings. But in that great movement, Miria was swept away, and as She moved out from the Goddess She became more masculine. First She became the Blue God, the gentle laughing God of love. Then She became the Green One, vine-covered, rooted in the earth, the spirit of all growing things. At last She became the Horned God, the Hunter whose face is the ruddy sun and yet as dark as Death.*

*But always desire draws Him back toward the Goddess, so that He circles Her eternally, seeking to return in love.*

*All began in love; all seeks to return to love. Love is the law, the teacher of wisdom, and the great revealer of mysteries (Starhawk, 1979: 41).*

Even an unsuspecting eye can see the ecofeminist overtone of the origin myth of modern witchcraft. She was love, and progressively as She moved through history She became more and more unlike love, and simultaneously She became He. Masculinity, here, is associated with death and darkness. This origin myth, as Starhawk later elaborates, is the basis for a narrative that holds that the spiritual force of the universe is inherently feminine, the current forces at work in our world are characterized by a masculine force akin to the kind of evil found in other religious narratives.

Starhawk claims that the cosmology and mythology witchcraft “are rooted in that ‘Paleolithic shaman’s insight’: that all things are swirls of energy, vortexes of moving forces, currents in an ever-changing sea” (1979: 42). Within this sea of change, this orgy of energies, conscious beings here on earth are playing out the same story of love, death, and a longing for a return to bliss, when Miria, now characterized by the Horned God, will reunite with the Goddess. Human history as recognized by Western civilization is the narrative of the Horned God, alienated from love and fixated on death and

destruction. Starhawk and her contemporary witches see the male-dominated and patriarchal history of our civilization as evidence that the Horned God has long been without His love, the Goddess. Through Goddess worship, witches believe they can awaken, as it were, the Great Goddess, sparking the beginning of the reunion of the Miria and Herself.

Starhawk explains that Goddess worship as a religion is made up of three fundamental principles: immanence, interconnection, and community:

*“Immanence means that the Goddess, the Gods, are embodied, that we are each a manifestation of the living being of the earth, that nature, culture, and life in all their diversity are sacred. Immanence calls us to live our spirituality here in the world, to take action to preserve the life of the earth, to live with integrity and responsibility.*

*“Interconnection is the understanding that all being is interrelated, that we are linked with all of the cosmos as parts of one living organism. What affects one of us affects us all. The felling of tropical forests disturbs our weather patterns and destroys the songbirds of the North. No less does the torture of a prison in El Salvador or the crying of a homeless child in downtown San Francisco disturb our well-being. So interconnection demands from us compassion, the ability to feel with others so strongly that our passion for justice is itself aroused.*

*“And Goddess religion is lived in community. Its primary focus is not individual salvation or enlightenment or enrichment but the growth and transformation that comes through intimate interaction and common struggles. Community includes not only people but also animals, plants, soil, air and water and energy system that support our lives. Community is personal—one’s closest friends, relatives, and lovers, those to whom we are accountable. But in a time of global communications, catastrophes, and potential violence, community must also be seen as reaching out to include all the earth” (1979: 22).*

While many connections could be drawn by the multitude of themes present in the above passages, focus should be given to the ways in which these core principles of witchcraft reinforce the framework of New Age philosophy presented thus far. Within the ideas of both immanence and interdependence, witchcraft maintains that all creatures on earth are

sacred, i.e. divine universality, and that we are all part of the Supreme Being, i.e. an unconventional rejection of a transcendent god with roots in eastern mysticism. The principle of community that Starhawk describes illustrates a clear ecosophical overtone in the concern for the ongoing health of the entire earth system as a whole.<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the idea of witchcraft being ‘lived in community’ allows the religion to operate on a decentralized level. If every living thing is divine, and if we practice Goddess worship through our lived experience in our environment, there is no need for any sort of structure or institutionalization beyond what is provided by the authors of witchcraft. Now, this allows for decentralization, but it does not demand such a feature, as (the aforementioned) Luhrmann attests to in her ethnography which details her membership in multiple ‘church-like’ witchcraft institutions in London, England during the 80’s. However, for the purposes of understanding what New Age represents, witchcraft does indeed fit the tentative framework set forth in this essay.

## PLEIADIANISM

As laid out in Barbara Marciniak’s 1992 book *Bringers of the Dawn*, the Pleiadians are a multidimensional humanoid species that inhabit three planets orbiting stars in the Pleiades Star Cluster, some 440 light years away from our solar system. The Pleiadians have contacted humans on Earth to teach us how we will play a part in our

---

<sup>33</sup> This can be viewed as an example of an ecosophy that is not necessarily ecocentric. While the ecology of the planet is valued as a holistic community that synergistically operates together in a sense of harmony and equilibrium, the various parts of the ecology that are not ‘alive’ are valued because of the ways in which they sustain and support life on earth. While this view might be ‘life-centric,’ as it were, it is arguably not ecocentric.

own revolution of spiritual freedom. The first paragraph of chapter one, titled

*Ambassadors Through Time*, begins:

*We are here. We are the Pleiadians, a collective of energy from the Pleiades. We have a long history. Our ancestors came from another universe that had achieved completion, a universe. You are simply working on a planet coming to completion, and we are here to help you with that task. This completion, or transformation, has been heralded by many for eons. It is an important time. What happens on Earth now will affect the entire universe” (1992: 3).*

The story continues that our planet, and everything in and on it, has been enslaved and manipulated by a species of reptilian extraterrestrials that has been intervening in earthly history for millennia. These ‘Greys,’ as the reptilian aliens are referred to based on their skin pigmentation, are responsible for agriculture, materialism, industrialism, corporate domination, capitalism, greed, poverty, disease, homelessness, war, and environmental degradation. The Pleiadians communicate with us via trance-induced channeled sessions (it should be pointed out that Marciniak’s book is purported to be a completely channeled work). Through these sessions, they teach us that all existence is part of the great God consciousness that was is and will be, and that Love and Light are what the universe is made of.

To further complicate this interstellar tale of power, oppression, and salvation, our star is entering a sector of the Milky Way known as the galactic equator, an astronomical transit that corresponds to the end of one great cycles of the ancient Mayan calendar, the year 2012. This makes our planet a significant staging point for many species of aliens such as the Sirians, another ET species, who have evolved beyond any physical constitution and are pure energy.



Humans, here and now on planet earth, are the ‘bringers of the dawn,’ the dawn representing a spiritual evolution of consciousness. This evolution, however, will not as the Pleiadians prophesy be limited to an evolution of the homo sapien. It will be a planetary evolution. That is, the earth is alive in a very conscious way, however she is sleeping. Herein lies the environmental ethic of the Pleiadians:

*“This planet is in desperate need of committed entities who are in search of the exalted self” (1992: 132).*

*“When you love yourself and Earth, and you know that you are here to redefine, redesign, and break the boundaries of humanity, you broadcast this” (1992: 133).*

*“The planet is looking for a balance in the self. Since the self is a composite of all things, it is a harmonic that balances all of your extraterrestrial selves, multidimensional selves, and male and female selves” (1992: 199).*

Saving the deciphering of Pleiadian prose for another academic endeavor, attention in the above description of Pleiadian thought should be directed toward the idea of Earth and how we relate to the planet and the universe as a whole. The Earth is not a home for us, or a habitat, or even a spiritual sister, but it is us. Collectively the entire planet is a concentration of spiritual energy, inherently composed of some sort of constitution of love and light. This idea of universal oneness is not foreign to scholars of religious studies, as its aforementioned roots can be traced to eastern mysticism of India, to name just one source. This, of course, is explicitly representative of unconventionality. Further evidence of an embrace of non-Western culture is found in a Pleiadian prescription for spiritual and physical health:

*“We recommend that all of you intend that the Native American teachings come your way. Begin to explore them through sweatlodges, drumming, dancing, and so on. This will awaken many things in you and teach you much about Earth.*

*You are coded to ritual; when you perform ritual, your body begins to remember who you are and what you know” (1992: 169).*

Aside from an adoration of things non-Western, a rejection of the West is easily located in the Pleiadian narrative which bastardizes capitalism, industrialization, and the hegemony of corporations as fruits of an evil alien race of reptiles. Embodied within the idea of everything in the universe being made up of the spiritual basics of love and light is the notion of divine universality. Everything is alike, everything is self, and everything therefore should be treated with kindness and love. Pointing out the ecosophical nature to such a view might seem redundant, but the passages that encapsulate the ecosophy of Pleiadianism are so passionately romanticized that they seem necessary in this discussion:

*“This beautiful Earth is a treasure so profound and so magnanimous that it draws those from far in space to come cherish the beauty that is here. We want you to feel that beauty inside yourselves and let it pulsate within our own beings. As you allow this beauty to come into you, it will move you profoundly, and you will begin as a species to command that beautification of Earth become the first priority for all. We want to seed this idea into you so that you awaken to your responsibility to Earth...” (1992: 159).*

*“It can be one of the most rewarding experiences of this lifetime for you to live in cooperation with a group of people who love the land and get the land—Earth—to respond. In loving the land and letting Earth know what you are after, Earth will nurture and take care of you. That is the key” (1992: 170).*

If earth-centric is ecocentric, which is arguably the case, then Pleiadianism is both ecosophically sound and ecocentrically oriented (or as ecocentrically as a religion created by humans can be).

The most unique characteristic of Pleiadianism is the source of Pleiadian wisdom. There is no council of human channels of Pleiadians, no league of ambassadors of light

on earth. Anyone can be a Pleiadian channel. In the brief time I have spent studying New Age communities, I met three individuals (all female, interestingly) who claim to regularly channel the Pleiadians. The decentralized nature of Pleiadianism is accentuated by the way in which Pleiadianism is practiced. Like most alternative spiritualities, Pleiadianism is extremely personal and experienced on an individual level (although not exclusively). Pleiadianism is, to be plain, New Age.

Throughout the discursive path that this chapter has travelled, we have expanded our discussion of what New Age represents within American culture. New Age along with its many alternative flavors of spirituality is counterculture, embracing indigenous, eastern, and ancient concepts of nature, while rejecting Western thought and religion. The non-Western influence of New Age has engendered notions of divine universality, and ecosophical ideas of ecological value that encourage a flight from what is viewed as the current and destructive path of human industry and materialism, endeavoring to work towards a future of globally sustainable ecological harmony and social justice, a common theme beneath the narrative of many New Age belief structures.

However, the most significant feature of New Age philosophy is its nebulous and dynamic structure. The cloud of meaning that encompasses New Age thought moves across time and space, gaining mass and momentum as it absorbs the ideas and beliefs that either do not click or have been rejected by the conventional cultural base, both religious and secular. In the periphery of the nebula lie passive and subtle streams of alternative thought that are able to adapt to mainstream ideologies as water adapts to the shape of a glass. Neighboring these streams of thought in the peripheral frontier of the

New Age nebula are streams of religious and spiritual thought that have strayed from their base institutions and been cast out as pariahs to the larger community of traditional religiosity. The church of Unity Universalism is an example of such a religious outcast, as it was spawned within the milieu of evangelical Christianity and has migrated, been cast out, or defected to the domain of the alternative and New Age. Likewise, scholars within Christian and Islamic communities have criticized Rosemary Ruether and Seyyed Nasr respectively of being dangerously New Age.<sup>34</sup>

Such a decentralized and nebulous conglomeration of beliefs is like a super WalMart for the spiritual shopper. Lily Dale resident and sociologist Richard Emmons described New Age as the Home Depot of spirituality.<sup>35</sup> Virtually anyone, unless bound by the trappings of fear of eternal damnation or possessed by the fetish of excessive material accumulation, can find spiritual solace of their liking within the world of New Age. Given the flexibility of New Age to the paradigm of the natural sciences that New Age philosophy has espoused (indeed, New Age seems to be informed to a certain extent by scientific concepts), it is no wonder that so many Christians and Muslims are taught to fear New Age as a product of subversion crafted by the horned god himself. Add to this

---

<sup>34</sup> Reference to the instance of Ruether was made during a lecture by Professor Dakake on February 5th, 2008 at George Mason University. Reference to Nasr as a New Age Muslim was made by a Cultural Studies PhD student at GMU and a devout Muslim. I was unable to secure permission to quote said student by the deadline for this essay. While those that I reference here did not personally view Ruether and Nasr as 'dangerously New Age,' they were clear that there exists a large population of Christians and Muslims who do indeed believe this. This is not surprising to me personally (regarding the Christian reference). Upon my decision to focus my anthropological efforts on New Age culture, a Pentecostal very close to my family quickly express mailed me two books: *The Kingdom of the Cults* and *The Kingdom of the Occult*, both by Walter Martin. These books were written as an encyclopedic reference of evil for born-again Christians. Nearly every aspect of New Age culture finds a place in these books, from UFOs to astrology to psychic readings. They are considered aspects of 'Satan's dimension of darkness,' i.e. Earth (Martin, 2008: 3).

<sup>35</sup> Dr. Emmons granted me permission to use his real identity in this project.

situation the notion that New Age represents something inherently eco-friendly in a time when the denial of human-created environmental degradation is tantamount to intellectual retardation or delusional psychosis, and the institutions of traditional religions that fear New Age philosophy have every reason to be afraid, for with such a formidable and attractive alternative, their very relevance to human populations (within the developed world) could very well be in jeopardy (although, with such a weak institutional organization, there could be little to fear from their perspective).

In summary, this tentative definition of New Age holds that it is unconventional, offering alternative worldviews to conventional paradigms of religiosity. New Age, philosophically, favors ecosophical ideologies, versus humanistic or anthropocentric imaginings of human existence, based on the idea that the universe, at every level, is intrinsically divine. And finally, the characteristic of New Age that seems to be the most significant contributing characteristic to its elusive nature, it has no center, no dogma or institutionalized structure holding it together within a coherent, or at even marginally cohesive system. As a working definition of New Age, what we have is a veritable wilderness of spirituality and religiosity. The following chapter will take us on an a theoretical exploration of the metaphorical wilderness of the New Age.

## 5. THE IDEOLOGICAL WILDERNESS OF NEW AGE

The most significant characteristic of New Age as a group of alternative philosophies and ideologies is its structure. The way in which a decentralized and nebulous group of thoughts articulates itself is incredibly important in our quest to understand the meaning of New Age. Luckily, there are other such cultural phenomena that have similarly peculiar ideological structures.

In his essay *Green Ideology: A Discursive Reading*, Dr. Yannis Stavrakakis analyzes a number of the ideologies of political groups that identify themselves with the label 'Green.' In the introduction of this essay, he asks some of the same questions about Green Ideology that this essay asks about New Age:

*“Is there really such a thing called Green ideology? And if there is, is it something really new? What is then its differentia specifica and the reason for its historical specificity? How is it organized and structured, and why? Furthermore, what are the consequences of its current articulations and what are the future prospects for Green discourse in general?”* (1992: 1).

If one were to replace the phrase ‘Green ideology’ with ‘New Age’ in the above excerpt, the resulting paragraph could serve as an introduction to this essay. This concluding chapter will look at Stavrakakis’ investigation of Green Ideology in search of a way of using his theoretical path to illuminate the mystery of New Age ideology.

Early on in his essay, Stavrakakis determines that “Green ideology can be new in some respects and old in others” (1997: 3). He argues that there are many characteristics

of Green ideology that have roots in Marxism, Anarchism, and Romanticism. These elements have found themselves articulated within narratives that have a fundamental environmental undercurrent. Concern for the environment as represented in Green ideology can also be traced to older, even ancient, sources: "...there are deep roots in Green thinking...it is possible to describe a great many other creeds and political movements as Green; Shamanic myths, Indian cultural elements, Taoism, Buddhism, Sufism, Zen, etc." (1997: 2). However, "although the elements of Green ideological discourse are not new themselves, the fact of them posited here and now gives those elements a novel resonance" (1997:3). It is in these moments of contemporary articulation where the novelty of Green ideology exists:

*...what constitutes the identity of Green ideology, beyond any variation of its possible content, is the articulation of its peripheral moments...around a certain ('new') nodal point or a family of nodal points. Green ideology [can therefore be viewed] as a 'new' articulation (due to its nodal points) of 'pre-existing' elements (a certain conception of democracy, a conception of decentralization, etc.) (1997: 3).*

The theoretical model that Stavrakakis is proposing here, while borrowing from the intellectual contributions of Žižek, Lacan, Laclau, Mouffe, and Freeden,<sup>36</sup> is one in which ideology is viewed as an articulation of moments, moments that may or may not have any connection to one another outside of the relationship to the nodal point(s) around which the moments find themselves. These moments, which are built from pre-existing components, what Žižek dubbed 'proto-ideological elements,' find meaning in their

---

<sup>36</sup> Their contributions can be found in Freeden's essays *Green Ideology: concepts and structures* and *Political concepts and ideological morphology* (1995), Žižek's *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Laclau and Mouffe's *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), and Lacan's *Écrits* (1977).

proximity to and articulation within the nodal point. Stavrakakis offers an example first formulated by Žižek to help illustrate this idea of nodal points:

*In the ideological discourse of communism a series of floating signifiers or proto-ideological elements such as democracy, state, freedom, etc., acquire a certain meaning through their quilting by the signifier 'communism.' Thus they are transformed to internal moments of the communist ideological discourse. Democracy is conceived as real democracy opposing bourgeois democracy, freedom acquires an economic connotation, etc. In other words, they acquire the meaning imposed by the nodal point 'communism' (1997: 5-6).*

He elaborates on this idea by relating this structural layout to Freeden's model of discourse as the "arrangements of core, adjacent and peripheral concepts" (Stavrakakis, 1992: 6) (Freeden, 1995). Communism, in this case, occupies the role of the core concept, while the concepts of economy, democracy, freedom, and property occupy roles in adjacent and peripheral locations. These ideas gain meaning based on their proximity to the core concept, or nodal point, of communism. The 'quilting' of these concepts into and around the nodal point or core concept is what transforms these elements into "moments of ideological discourse" (1992: 6).

The most fascinating attribute of this discursive structure is what Stavrakakis refers to as "...the Lacanian 'One,' the signifier that serves as a nodal point" (1992: 6). This nodal point acts to embody the ideology into an understandable identity through the connections that it sustains between itself and the "free-floating proto-ideological elements" (1992: 6). This may lead one to view the nodal point as the foundation of meaning from which the ideology is built. This is not the case. As Stavrakakis puts it, while quoting Žižek,



*“...the status of the nodal point is a truly paradoxical one...the nodal point is not a point of excessive density of meaning, a kind of guarantee of meaning; on the contrary ‘in itself it is nothing but pure difference: it’s role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative...” (1992: 6).*

In other words, the discursive nodal point serves as a unifier of meaning for the proto-ideological elements that it quilts together. For Green ideology, the nodal point is an ethical one, entailing an ecosophical dimension around which Green ideology articulates. However, the nodal point itself, the signifier by which the ideology is identified, is meaningless. If one took a journey from one of these peripheral ideas of Green ideology to the center, once the center was reached, the trekker would need to turn back around and look outward from the center to witness any identifiable ideological content.

*"In that sense the nodal point in Green ideology resembles a Janus head--on the one hand it is presented as a consideration of supreme meaning and, on the other, it is revealed as an empty name without substantive content. (1992: 12).*

This last point, that there is a lack of anything substantial within the center of Green ideology, was the crux of Stavrakakis' argument and led into his conclusion that the Green movement is one characterized by instability and fractiousness. The moments of Green ideology that seem to knit together a new and solid ideology are really pre-existing ideas, the novelty of which is based on their contemporary articulation within the Green nodal point, which itself constitutes no substantive quality.

Stavrakakis' analysis of Green ideology is (incredibly) useful in the quest of this thesis to understand the structure of New Age. Like Green ideology, New Age is similarly made up of moments of religiosity and spirituality that existed before their grouping into the nebula of New Age. This was made clear in our analysis of the two New Age narratives visited in chapter three. Looking at the data collected from both Lily

Dale and Mount Shasta, one can also see how this is not only true, but the informants are interestingly enough conscious of the pre-existing nature of the streams of spiritual belief that flow through New Age communities. Sage, a priestess of Avalon with whom you are already familiar, described New Age to me while sitting in her yoga studio in Mount Shasta in the following way:

*The definitions of New Age are really just about old age...remembering what we used to do and pulling it into the now in a more evolved sense...from what I experience is that it's called New Age because it's something totally new from what we've been doing, but at the same time it's drawing from the past and bringing it in evolved...*

A spirit medium from Lily Dale who had just taught a class on reading astrological charts, echoed this awareness of the antiquity of the beliefs coupled with the novelty of their articulation:

*What is New Age? I've been to New Age book stores and New Age expos, and historically, everyone thinks they're in the New Age. Every new generation, the young people, they're New Age. And it's a lovely word. I mean, 'in the New Age', is that more whole foods and organic markets? Or is that the old age, when we farmed organically, or back in 1843 when people talked about the spirits in the land, or when people talked to the oracle in Delphi? Is astrology New Age? I mean, it's been around for years. So, it's a lovely term, New Age, but what I think it illustrates is a desire. We want a New Age that expresses a consciousness of love and oneness with peace and harmony. That's the New Age we want.*

The New Age, like Stavrakakis' understanding of Green ideology, is novel in the articulation of its moments around a nodal point. As the above informant detailed, ideas of astrology, universal oneness, spirit mediumship, and organic farming, all considered on some level to be considered New Age, existed before Blavatski wrote the Isis Unveiled, and before the counter-cultural revolution of the 1960s. But they are new in

the sense that they are being articulated within a very contemporary discourse that is distinct and separate from the competing mainstream religious discourses of the US.

In September of 2010, while hiking in the Himalayas with a friend from Kathmandu, I ran into difficulty trying to explain what New Age spirituality in America means as a group of religious beliefs. When I isolated specific spiritual philosophies and characteristics that one finds within New Age communities, my Nepalese friend told me that these ideas and beliefs are not new at all. He was right. Most of the ideas I mentioned, such as divine universality, organic living, reincarnation, spiritual auras, animism, were present in the hills of Nepal, and had been for a very long time. Clearly the context of these ideas as they were discussed in Nepal is far different from the context from which we have been analyzing them thus far. How animism is practiced and realized in Nepal is far different in terms of meaning when compared to how it is practiced in the New Age culture in California and New York. New Age is largely a Western phenomenon, because for the most part it is being structured and articulated via Western voices. It is *new* because it tends to be viewed as counter to the religious status quo, the spiritual milieu, if you will, out of which these voices are emerging. As Saussure suggested, meaning in language is indeed heavily influenced by, if not directly spawned from, its structural configurations.<sup>37</sup>

A Metaphysical Christian minister explained what he felt was the reason behind the emergence of the New Age. After conducting a class on how to properly use dowsing

---

<sup>37</sup> Another interesting example of how such Non-Western (in this case Native American and Inuit) spiritual beliefs are being re-imagined and rearticulated in contemporary and globalized America was detailed by Michael Harkin in his article "Person, Time, and Being: Northwest Coast Rebirth in Comparative Perspective" (1994).

rods to locate one's spiritual aura, a process that involves walking around with a brass rod in each hand, waiting for the rods to move in a certain direction thereby marking the perimeter of the personal spirit aura, he remarked that

*New Age is an era of awareness. One that all points of view concerning spirituality can be considered, as opposed to 'this is not mine, therefore it's bad and wrong'. Literally, it's a New Age and new time, a new dawn, a time that discrimination and separation will be diminished, ultimately eliminated. I think there are universal forces that are helping this to occur. I think there are people in spirit who have chosen to incarnate now, who are catalysts for change. Eckart Tolle is an example. ...they have incarnated, I call them enlightened beings, they have come here to make a difference in life. You can go back through mankind's history and see where individuals came into the earth's plane to be catalysts for change. And that change generally has to do with spiritual understanding. Jesus was one, Buddha, Mohammed, Confucius, Gandhi, Mother Theresa...many others whose names were never recorded. They changed the thinking of how people treat each other.*

According to this informant, the free-floating proto-ideological elements that makes up New Age, the *moments* of New Age, moments of unique linguistic configurations, have been articulated before in the history of human civilization. They are new because they are new to contemporary audiences, they are novel in their articulation against a very different and in many ways opposing spiritual backdrop. They are organized, or quilted, in a new fashion.

Naturally, the assumption can be made that within the nodal point which quilts the New Age together in an identifiable cluster of beliefs lies a core of substantial meaning. Just as Stavrakakis was unable to identify a core of Green ideology, there is no core of New Age philosophy. In fact, and paradoxically, the existence of a core would run counter to one of the underlying characteristics of New Age philosophy, which we identified earlier in this essay as decentralization and a lack of dogma and institutional

structure. In a judgment free zone, there is no core, no code, aside from the oxymoronic code of code-lessness. The nodal point, in this case of New Age, "in itself it is nothing but pure difference: it's role is purely structural, its nature is purely performative" (Stavrakakis: 6).

## THE PARADOX

In the end, we are left with a definition that gives us a clear understanding of what is *New Age*, and what *New Age is*. What is *New Age*? Something that is *New Age* possesses the three characteristics laid out in the previous chapter: a spiritual belief or group of beliefs that is unconventional and alternative, ecosophical, and decentralized in terms of doctrinal structure.<sup>38</sup> What *New Age is*, is a veritable open field of spiritual beliefs. The wilderness illustration of *New Age* that this essay opened with serves as a complementary parallel to the nodal-point model. For this syncretic space of beliefs to remain sustainable, and for alternative ideas to co-exist freely within a community, ideas of exclusivity must not be present. It is a spiritual no-holds-barred rule. One might suggest that the inclusion of ecosophy as an inherent *New Age* quality is an exception to the absence of exclusivity. However, ecosophy, in a real sense, does not serve as an exception to the rule of no rules, but instead equals the playing field by eliminating dichotomies that dominate anthropocentric religions, allowing for a wilderness of divine egalitarianism.

---

<sup>38</sup> There is a strong case to be made here for a fourth characteristic: the female oriented nature of *New Age*. Limited time and a lack of supporting demographic data covering a larger geographical area led me to omit this characteristic. However, in my future investigation of *New Age* culture in America, the predominance of women in *New Age* communities will be a focal point of my research.

Up to this point, the reader has likely noticed a certain paradoxical tension between two seemingly different arguments that this thesis proposes: that New Age has key identifiable characteristics, and that New Age has no core, offering a home to anything and everything alternative, making identifiable characteristics an apparent impossibility. Even in the hard sciences, a group of intellectual pursuits governed virtually unconditionally by an adherence to results that never disagree, the micro-particle world of quantum physics has, for now, proven to be governed by principles of relationship that disagree with the principles governing the macro-matter world of general relativity and astrophysics.<sup>39</sup> Contradictions are in some cases an inevitable reality. Identifying them is easy. Rectifying the disagreement is the hard part.

An explanation for why this particular contradiction exists might be that what we are looking at when we examine these New Age belief systems is an altogether never before seen cultural phenomenon in which that which we know and understand about religion and spiritual socio-cultural systems is being challenged. This Janis head of the New Age may very well have opened the doors to an 'undiscovered country' of religiosity that we are unequipped to deal with theoretically. Perhaps our current categorical instruments which we have thus far turned to while trying to define this enigmatic cultural phenomenon are inadequate. Possible evidence of how the label of 'New Age' fails could be the fact that virtually no one that I met identified themselves as New Age. I have never met a Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist, or Hindu who did not tell me that

---

<sup>39</sup> Relativity is the study of macro events in the cosmos, QM is the study of micro events, because of this completely different tools are brought to bear to analyze these very different empirical arenas. What physicists would like is a theoretical mathematical apparatus that can encompass both types of tools at once, so a unified description could be given (Hawkins, 1988) (Greene, 2000).

that is what they were. New Age, as this essay has demonstrated, is structurally different than the many popular world religions that exist today.

Clifford Geertz similarly struggled with an inadequacy of analytical tools when examining religion:

*Only when we have a theoretical analysis of symbolic action comparable in sophistication to that we now have for social and psychological action, will we be able to cope effectively with those aspects of social and psychological life in which religion (or art, or science, or ideology) plays a determinant role* (1993: 125).

Religion, even as it is an ancient component of the human condition, has been affected by the exponentially accelerated change that our species has undergone in the last few thousand years. Globalization, scientific and technological innovation and advancement, and environmental degradation are all processes that have affected arguably 99.9% of the planet's human population. The investigation of religion, as a cultural phenomenon affected by these global processes, must indeed be approached with what Geertz called a more sophisticated theoretical analysis. New Age is arguably driven by these three forces, in the ways that it incorporates science and spiritual traditions from around the world and how it responds to the environmental crisis. Just as political theorists, scientists, and environmental engineers have had to approach their respective and rapidly morphing fields with innovation, so must the anthropologist modify his or her approach to understanding religion. The ways in which we approach an understanding of human culture and interaction are ever-changing, and a theory need never be so static as to reject amendment.

Stavrakakis' theoretical approach to understanding Green Ideology is a good start to such innovative efforts. I do not believe it to be a coincidence that the theory Stavrakakis developed during his analysis of Green Ideology so easily adapted to our study of the New Age; both subject matters seem to be of the same cultural complexity and type, overlapping in their responses to environmental issues. Perhaps the two are kin within the same ideological family of the contemporary human condition.

Social anthropologist Ulf Hannerz offered some advice regarding the need to adjust the way anthropologists speak about transnational identity and culture. He specifically focused on how transnational developments across the globe, in the movement of peoples and the proliferation of packages of cultural image, information, religion, style, etc. via global media, have created a need for us to rethink our current anthropological lexicon. Hannerz suggested we expand our current vocabulary where possible, and introduce words that are relatively new in regard to their ethnographic application; to integrate into the dialogue terms that better illustrate the system of the culturally globalized world we live in.

In regards to the traditional vocabulary, he writes:

*...acculturation, the frontier, the marginal man, diffusion... This is a vocabulary which spans the twentieth century and even a little more, and which also connects continents. At the same time, however, it brings globalization down to earth, and can help show its human face. It suggests that the world is not necessarily becoming all the same. There is struggle but also play. Tricksters thrive in the borderlands (1997: 22).<sup>40</sup>*

---

<sup>40</sup> The use of the term borderlands is arguably applicable to the position that New Agers inhabit in the contemporary American religious cultural sphere, like a wilderness. This is a sign that we're on the right theoretical track!



In regards to a new vocabulary, he offers the induction of 'flows,' 'hybrids,' and 'boundaries,' each of which embodies a unique opportunity at describing our culturally complex and transnational world in innumerable ways.<sup>41</sup> Hannerz wrote this in 1997, when 'globalization' seemed to begin its dominance as an academic buzz word in academia. Fourteen years later, coming up with innovative ways of discussing the cultures and globalization seems par for the course.

Addressing the problem from a more theoretical perspective, Arjun Appadurai describes the current human condition in the following way:

*The world we live in now seems rhizomic, even schizophrenic, calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation, and psychological distance between individuals and groups on the one hand, and fantasies (or nightmares) of electronic propinquity on the other. Here, we are close to the central problematic of cultural processes in today's world* (sited in McGee 2008: 584).

The approach to making sense of this problem of global culture should not be, Appadurai warns, oversimplified. Globalization and its cultural manifestations, realizations, effects, and byproducts, has created an incredibly complex interlacing of cultural matrices, each just as unique and complex as the next. This is what Appadurai refers to as 'ethnoscapes':

*Perspective and representation are affected by the situation of both the observer and the observed. Each perspective and each representation is located within, or upon, an ethnoscape* (191).

That is, as groups of people migrate across Earth, their histories are of course reconstructed to incorporate new locations and more eclectic identities. Culture is no longer that easily identified, spatially bounded, and territorialized object of research that it was traditionally. Instead, culture, in our spatially shrinking world, is becoming more

---

<sup>41</sup> It seems I am not alone in using words borrowed from geography to try and discuss nebulous human cultures.

difficult to observe—the stable communities and networks of kinship, work, and other forms of local human association are complicated by human motion, creating these intersections and nexuses of complex, slippery, and vast group identities: ethnoscapes (191-2). “The ethnoscapes of today’s world are profoundly interactive” (192).

New Age cannot be discussed without a theoretical model that attempts to explain the master narrative of the globalized human condition, or what Appadurai calls the 'macroethnography' (209). The function of the macroethnography should be to attempt to view ethnoscapes in their genealogical and historical contexts, “leaving the terrain open for interpretations of the ways in which local historical trajectories flow into complicated transnational structures” (209).

New Age can aptly be described as a complicated transnational cultural structure, in which 'historical trajectories flow' from seemingly every possible direction. While conducting my research, I met a Russian woman who identified as a Christian, believed that the Buddha knew 'the way,' was a tiger-yoga instructor, practiced Tibetan Astral Travel (taught by a lecturer from New Zealand), and worked at an organic food store that specialized in Native American and African herbal remedies.<sup>42</sup> The case for New Age being a cultural spawn of the era of globalization makes itself. It is, and must be approached theoretically as, a part of globalization.

A piecing together of the contributions of Hannerz, Stavrakakis, and Appadurai could prove to create a powerful theoretical vehicle with which to explore the wilderness of the New Age. Specifically, this 'hybrid' theoretical approach could serve as an ideal

---

<sup>42</sup> Richard Webster is from New Zealand and has published many books on the idea of astral travel, the idea of the soul leaving the body to travel in a spirit, or alternate, dimension (2005).

framework to investigate one of the important, if not *the* most important question that this thesis has left unanswered: why? We have an idea of *what* New Age is: New Age in America is a veritable wilderness of spirituality, bearing in its realm a wide variety of beliefs and philosophies that share the key characteristics of unconventionality, ecosophy, and decentralization. We must now pursue the answer to *why* New Age exists. This thesis merely scratches the surface of the shadow of this answer. As always is the case, more work needs to be done.

## APPENDIX A

The below essay was my first attempt at analyzing the data that I had gathered from Lily Dale. It focuses on the life of my informant Sasha, and the path of spiritual transformation that she entered onto after first visiting and later moving to Lily Dale.

### SASHA'S INTERPRETIVE DRIFT

This paper is about the life of a psychologist who has been living within the Spiritualist community of Lily Dale, NY, a place nicknamed “the town that talks to the dead” (Wicker, 2003: cover), for almost thirty years. Sasha , and her husband Quinn, own and operate the *Angel House*, a three story Victorian guest house near the center of Lily Dale. Though numerous guests of theirs have had more paranormal experiences than the two can recall, neither of them have had a single such experience. However, Lily Dale has served as a landmark of spiritual development and awakening for Sasha, and even though she has not experienced a paranormal encounter herself, she believes that these things do happen in Lily Dale all of the time.

#### B.2: Lily Dale

Lily Dale is a small gated community-town in upstate New York, about an hour south of Buffalo. Under three hundred residents live their year round. During the summer, however, Lily Dale is quite a busy place, as thousands of visitors come to visit

one of the thirty-eight registered<sup>43</sup> spirit mediums who live there. Most who come to Lily Dale hope to connect with a loved one who has passed onto the spirit world, while soul-searchers and novice mediums also make their way to the small town to take advantage of the workshops and seminars, the topics of which span the entire breadth of the hodgepodge group of beliefs called *New Age*. For lodging, there are two hotels, one inside the gates and one just outside, and numerous guest houses. The most renowned of these guest houses is the Angel House.

### B.3: The Angel House

I arrived in Lily Dale on a Friday night, and the next morning I took the free tour of the town, led by the town librarian and historian. We walked around stopping by all of the key buildings, landmarks, and monuments scattered throughout the town, which included The Angle House, while the tour guide gave us the history of the town (which dates back to the year 1870...almost ancient for American standards). He mentioned that The Angle House is where the academics and the ‘who’s who’ stay when they visit ‘the Dale,’ as they call the town for short.

After the tour, I ventured through the town stopping by all of the little shops—*The Crystal Cove* near the town auditorium; *The Lily Dale Bookstore* at the center of town; *The Bargain Shoppe*, halfway between the *Healing Temple* and the *Sacred Stump*. One of the shops I visited, *The Lily Pad Boutique*, was a house porch that had been transformed into a gift shop. As I browsed the dowsing rods, incense sticks, and dream-

---

<sup>43</sup> Before the governing body of Lily Dale, the Lily Dale Assembly, will allow a spirit medium to work in the town doing readings for paying customers, they must first be registered with the Assembly. To do so, a medium must prove to the Assembly that they are not ‘faking it.’ They must convincingly give spirit readings to a panel of registered mediums who must each give them their stamp of approval.

catchers, I was greeted by a short and jolly lady in her forties with a big smile. She was the first person in Lily Dale to ask me why I was there, and upon explaining my research intentions, she told me without skipping a beat that I *had* to stop by the Angel House. She said, go there as soon as possible and ask for Quinn.”

I thanked her and went on my way, although I was not in a real hurry to go knocking on the door of a place called the *Angel House* asking for a stranger named *Quinn*, sent by the short jolly lady at the *Lily Pad*. For the next few days I attended some of the free services held at the Auditorium, the Forest Temple, and the Sacred Stump. I interviewed fellow campers who had come to take a class or get a spirit reading.<sup>44</sup> It was not until one of my visits to the town coffee shop that I seriously considered stopping by the Angel House. While uploading some of my pictures and notes that I had taken onto my computer, the owner of the coffee shop approached me and asked how I was doing...which led to the discussion of *what* I was doing. Again I was told, “you *have* to go to the Angel House.” So, I went.

I passed by the Angel House on my first day in Lily Dale as I made my way to the campgrounds to set up what would be my home for the next three weeks. Located on the corner of South Street and Cleveland Avenue, the Angel House is the biggest house in the Dale. A three story Victorian home with a covered porch that wraps around three sides

---

<sup>44</sup> One camper who attempted to give me a spirit reading in my tent while our camp-side beer drinking was interrupted by a flash thunder storm (which I found was quite common in a town so close to a Lake Erie), told me that a spirit named ‘Quinn’ was trying to contact me. I brushed it off, not convinced of any paranormal activity, and definitely not confident that a guy on his sixth beer was tuned into any spirit world other than the one that you find at the liquor store. However, as strange as it might sound, he was the first of three people who would tell me that a spirit named Quinn was trying to contact me. I was convinced that there was a flyer being passed around among the residents and regular visitors that said, “Academic Skeptic in Campsite 13! Tell Him Quinn is Looking For Him!”

of the house, the Angel House is hard to miss. The yard is decorated with statues of angels, and the porch is covered with royal purple carpeting, rocking chairs and benches, and angelic figurines and ornaments.

As I stepped onto the porch for the first time, I made eye contact with a few ladies who were chatting as they sipped coffee and smoked cigarettes near the entrance to the guest house. They smiled warmly and invitingly at me. I would later find that young men are a rare occurrence in the Dale. I rang the doorbell, and this is when I met Sasha. After telling her that I had been ‘sent’ to the Angel House by various people, she quickly invited me inside. She offered me coffee and cookies, and then went to fetch her husband Quinn and another researcher who was there conducting research, a graduate student of literature interested in the relationship between photography and American folklore. For the next hour, the three of us sat and discussed the concept of *New Age*. During the course of the conversation, I would learn that both Sasha and Quinn hold doctorate degrees, Sasha in psychology and Quinn in philosophy. By the end of my stay in the Dale, they became my closest town friends and informants.

Sasha

Sasha and I sat on the screened-in back porch of the Angel House in a comfortable cushioned couch that had been built into the corner of the porch, and over coffee and cigarettes, she began to tell me her story.

Sasha was born in Fort Benning, Georgia in the late 40’s. She spent most of her time growing up in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, PA. She was raised Lutheran, but her family was not really religious. They attended church merely as a ceremonial ritual that

her parents thought they were culturally obligated to participate in. When Sasha entered Clarion University, she became interested in matters of the mind and how humans know and understand things, and she ended up majoring in psychology. She met Quinn, her psychology professor at Clarion, when she was twenty-one years old. They were soon married and started a family. Being around Quinn, a dedicated philosopher and academic, along with her ongoing interest in the nature of epistemology, Sasha was encouraged to continue her education at the graduate level.

It was during her graduate studies in psychology when she first visited Lily Dale. In school, she was learning behaviorist concepts and reading the works of scholars like B.F. Skinner, who she said “thought that they could put a child in a box and create a lawyer, or a doctor, or whatever.” Sasha was not a fan of this view on human behavior. She was inclined to believe that everyone has their own path to follow. She quoted Joseph Campbell as someone who fueled her longing for an individualized meaning of life with his book *The Hero’s Journey*.

Lily Dale offered a different, somewhat contradictory way of understanding human behavior. At that time, she and her sister had been spending a week or two every summer at her brother-in-law’s vacation home not far from the Dale. Sasha and her sister had found out about the strange little town by word of mouth, and decided to visit as tourists, solely interested in experiencing something different. They were hooked, to say the least. They soon began taking classes and workshops on subjects like positive affirmation and neurolinguistic programming. Sasha was intrigued, and she enmeshed herself into these ‘transpersonal’ ideas, although she did not identify them with such a



label at the time. She believed that what she was learning in school was missing what she was learning in Lily Dale, which she said put her ahead of the thinkers and self-help authors of the 80's such as Martin Seligman and his positive psychology:

*In Lily Dale, I was learning things like neurolinguistic programming. That's the affect of your words on your thinking and your brain...like, 'pay attention to what you're saying to yourself because every time you say that you can't do something, you really can't do something.' Positive affirmation, which was in the early 80's, was what I was learning here in Lily Dale way before, although they weren't calling it transpersonal. Transpersonal psychology is psychology that does not exclude spirituality, because historically psychology used to include spirituality. The healer would heal however, body and mind. People used to venture to the temple, like in Delphi or whatever, and at some point it split. It used to be the psychology of the soul, and somewhere along the way it became the psychology of the mind. I remember in journals when I was in graduate school we read that if a client had questions about spirituality that we were to send them to their religious leader. It was not permitted to discuss matters of the spirit with your clients.*

*Transpersonal brings back spirituality in the largest sense. It does two things: it includes that which is greater than us...beyond the personal, because cognitive behavior is personal and behaviorism is personal. It addresses the question of how one can see beyond the personal to the transpersonal, and beyond the physical to the metaphysical. But transpersonal also goes beyond Western epistemology to recognize what they were doing in other cultures, cultures that we have traditionally kind of looked down on as being primitive.*

Sasha embraced these views that would become known as transpersonal, but she did so privately and unbeknownst to her academic peers. She was living two lives, so to speak, fearing that she would be ridiculed at school if they found out that she was dabbling in spirituality. This did not stop her from enriching herself with these new ideas.

In the meantime, she and her sister had decided to buy a home in Lily Dale. The homes there were selling for prices that were lower than a new car at the time, and Sasha was convinced that a summer home at such an affordable rate was an offer not to refuse

(she would later reflect on her purchase as being a part of the bigger plan, an individual spiritual providence of her own making). During the next fifteen years, Sasha took every course and workshop that the Dale had to offer. She began to see meaning behind everything she did. She says that she began to ‘wake up’ to many aspects of her life that she had previously viewed as banal and mundane. She began waking up in her relationship with her husband:

*I had married my college professor and I thought I had married God. I would literally go places and say, “I think I got married to God.” Anyway when I started waking up, and I didn’t want to, I started questioning Quinn’s intentions. He would be in the living room reading about the meaning of life and I would be making Christmas cookies with the children in the kitchen. I started thinking, “well what’s this?” And [the curiosity] crept in... and I didn’t want it. I used to say that I think they should give women little lobotomies when they begin to wake up to these things. Just little ones that don’t interfere with brain functioning but just so you can go back to that peaceful place where you’re happy and didn’t think too much.*

As she looks back, she feels that she was in need of, not a lobotomy, but a mentor. She again referenced Joseph Campbell—this time his idea of the destined mentor that everyone has in life; how invariably, there is someone out there who will help you along your path. It was Lily Dale where she found that person, and that person was Lynn.

*Lynn was here for me. She was my mentor. Just magically there she was and no one could have fulfilled her role. First of all she was brilliant and deeply spiritual. She was one of the best people who ever walked this Earth...she truly touched everyone she met. But to go back to my waking up with Quinn, when I started wanting more in my relationship, I initially interpreted that as something was wrong with me. But she fed me and fed me and fed me and created me into the person I am today. She shaped me beautifully and I’m forever grateful to her because of the way she changed me. One of the things she did specifically was that even after I was fed and filled up, I would still wake up and think Quinn has to change. I thought there was something dark inside of me, for wanting to change someone who does everything for me. But Lynn, who was smarter than me, finally said, “you’re not wrong for thinking these things Sasha, because you don’t want it for yourself...you want it for him.” Had she not said that to me my*

*life would be very different. I would not have trusted myself and proceeded with Quinn.*

Lynn helped Sasha become comfortable with and confident in her feelings and interests. As she continued to wake up to dormant interests and ideas in Lily Dale, she grew excited about sharing this information with people back home. Armed with her reinvigorated self-confidence, she began teaching a course at the continuing education school for adults in her hometown. The name of the class was *New Psychology and the New You*. She recounts:

*I had felt for a long time that there was a more positively oriented psychology out there, and I wanted to teach it to others. On the first night of the class like 20 people showed up, and outside the door there were twelve security guards with walkie-talkies waiting because the churches were going to protest my class because I had the words spiritual, new paradigm, holistic, guided relaxation, and things like that and didn't want that kind of thing coming to their town. But that was an ordeal, and you learn your greatest lessons in the ordeal. I remembered while driving home thinking, "there's nothing wrong with what I'm trying to teach and I can't live my life caring that I might piss off some dumb little church person."*

Sasha began to see the events of her life through the Jungian lens of synchronicity. That is, everything that had happened in her past had led her to Lily Dale to find her mentor and develop herself spiritually. Meeting and marrying Quinn, continuing her education in psychology, visiting Lily Dale as a tourist, buying the summer house (seemingly because it was a great deal)—these were all necessary steps in her journey towards spiritual awakening.

*Everything led me here to Lily Dale. Dale is a freethinker town—a community of freethinkers. As luck would have it I'm in the exact right place where I should be being a freethinker, thinking out of the box. So now looking back I can see that there was a guidance that was greater than me. There was no grand understanding as it was happening, but looking back, there definitely is.*

Years down the road, Quinn and Sasha decided to purchase a home that had been sitting empty on the corner of South Street and Cleveland Avenue for twenty years. Knowing that Quinn, who had since retired from teaching, liked to keep busy,<sup>45</sup> they decided to turn their new investment into a guest house.

Today, during the summer, when the Angel House is operational, Quinn takes care of the administrative and managerial responsibilities of the house, while Sasha teaches courses on MARI®<sup>46</sup>. One informant called the Angel House ‘an oasis of academia within the Dale.’ This is no exaggeration. Through visits to the Angel House, I met two psychologists, a sociologist, two published authors (one a journalist and the other a Spiritualist minister), an MA student in English literature, a Finnish PhD student in cultural anthropology, and, of course, a philosopher.

Over the years, Sasha and Quinn had turned this guest house into Lily Dale’s own modern-day ‘salon,’ as Sasha referred to it. Nearly every night there would be a gathering of intellectuals, spirit mediums, and soul-searchers lounging on the porch drinking tea, coffee, or wine while discussing topics ranging from the latest paranormal experiences of one of the group to the nature of human knowledge. During a focus group that I held on one evening, for over thirty minutes we discussed the potential extraterrestrial origins of life on Earth.

---

<sup>45</sup> During their first few summer at the Dale, to keep busy, Quinn worked as a dishwasher at the Lily Dale Cafeteria where he was known as ‘PhDish.’

<sup>46</sup> The Mandala Assessment Research Instrument is a tool that Sasha has helped develop (and currently owns the exclusive rights to). It “is a comprehensive system that uses symbols, known as mandalas, to reveal the inner truth and reality of the subject as it is—not what the ego filters of consciousness want it to be—but how it *really* is” (MARI, 2006). Through its culturally universal symbols and colors, the MARI can help one better understand their past, present, and future situations.

The spirit mediums were of the most interesting in the group. On one particular evening, a novice medium took out a piece of paper the size of a post card (I believe it was made of wax, but I'm not certain), and held it over a flame, slightly burning it. The result was a series of burn marks. She then turned to me and proceeded to explain how the burn marks represented images that illustrate my upcoming future. The prognosis was grim, as the image was explained as being me falling, having been tripped at the ankles. She elaborated by saying that someone was out to foil my research endeavors, and that I should keep my notes and recordings close to me at all times. I had a moment of paranoia after hearing this, as I had given my portable hard drive to the anthropology student from Finland so that he could transfer over an audio recording of a workshop that I was unable to attend. This hard drive had all of my school work on it, from undergraduate on to my current studies. I immediately began fearing that I would never see it again. My fears proved to be ungrounded paranoia the next day when my hard drive was returned to me and the files had not been tampered with.

From MARI® readings, to tarot readings, to paper-burning readings, to spirit readings, the Angel House is host to all sorts of paranormal analyses of past, present and future. However, the personal stories of paranormal encounters were even more bizarre.

One lady, a recently widowed former nun (who married after leaving the nunnery, of course), claimed to have regular visits from the *Greys* (the aliens with big light bulb-shaped heads, slits for mouths, and big almond-shaped black eyes, who were popularized on American TV by the shows *Unsolved Mysteries* and *The X-Files*). They would just

appear at her bed side in the middle of the night, staring at her. The strangest thing was that she was not frightened of them.

I was fortunate enough to hear one Angel House guest recount the following story to Sasha:

*As I lay in bed last night, an angel appeared floating over me. She was young, with fair skin and golden hair, and wore flowing white robes. White flower pedals were falling towards me from all around her. It was beautiful.*

Quinn told me of yet another encounter, during which three of his guests saw pixies and cherubs dancing around on the surface of the wash basin in one of the guest bathrooms.

Perhaps even stranger is the fact that during the thirty years that Sasha and Quinn have been coming to Lily Dale, neither of them have had a single paranormal encounter! Yet, they both still believe that what is happening to their guests, friends, and others within the town is quite real. When I asked Quinn why he does not see angels, cherubs, and spirits, he responded:

*...because I am very left-brained in my orientation. I'm basically a very cognitive person, and it has to do with my emotional, philosophical and theological training.<sup>47</sup> That is, I was taught to think about what's logical and reasonable etc. etc. And even though I'm very, very sympathetic to these events taking place, I have not been privy to the experiences myself, so, I kind of chalk it up to what I am and who I am and that's fine with me.*

Sasha's rationalization of not being able to see the paranormal phenomena surrounding and filling the Angel House was a bit deeper:

*It's like I'm somewhere in the middle, between believing that spirit readings are all general guessing games, where if you throw out enough names of*

---

<sup>47</sup> Quinn had intended to become an evangelical minister, and he was studying theology and philosophy in preparation for his future as a clergyman.

*grandmothers, you'll eventually convince someone that your talking about their dead relative...between that and believing that it's all true, 100% of the time. I'm somewhere in the middle. I mean, people we don't even know have been coming into the Angel House for years and seeing things. They'll say, "Wow, busy house." It's to the point that it's ironic that we are not more like the people that stay here—to the point that there has to be a greater reason that we don't see or hear these things. I think part of the greater reason was that I was supposed to do the MARI®, which is based, not on paranormal experiences, but on individual intuition. I think if my life had gone differently I might not have done MARI®.*

Then Sasha continued by explaining why she is not sensitive to psychic communication or telepathy:

*I used to work full-time as the director of a single-parent and homemaker program, and I did this for 12 years. I had 57 groups and each group had anywhere from 15 to 18 women. And the women stayed together as a group for six weeks, which meant that you had to make sure they all got along. I was their counselor, their teacher, and their mentor, and I got 97% of them into school or college. It changed their lives. I know I could not allow myself to pick up on what was underneath the surface of each of their stories. I had to see them optimistically and with hope in mind, thinking of a new start for them, instead of the raw unfiltered truth of their painful memories. I couldn't allow myself to feel the pain and crap and cesspools of stuff from the universe that was going on in that class, and I unconsciously was more optimistic about what they could do and I just couldn't be opened to their pain. I didn't realize that I shut down part of my intuitive self. I also think that it's just not my path to be a medium.*

The decisions Sasha has made, and the life path that those decisions have taken her on, tell her story. In her words, this story is her 'divine destiny.'

Anthropologist T.M. Luhrmann offers an interesting framework from which to analyze Sasha's story. In her book *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft*, Luhrmann explains religious conversion as a series of transitional stages that she collectively terms 'interpretive drift.' She defines this concept as "the slow, often unacknowledged shift in someone's manner of interpreting events as they become involved with a particular activity" (Luhrmann, 1989: 312). Luhrmann, who based her book on observations she

made while studying witchcraft and magic circles in London, England in the 80s, argued that a nonbeliever in magic would transition into a believer in magic through three phases: “interpretation, experience, and rationalization” (1989: 312-3).

The stage of ‘interpretation’ involves the introduction of the newcomer to a host of information and knowledge that attempts to explain existence. Often, Luhrmann observed, would-be magicians were drawn to magic because it offered a seemingly rational and accessible model for explaining everything, the natural world that we observe with our senses, and the mystical world that we imagine through our dreams and with our emotions. This new way of interpreting the world...

*“...enables [one] to distinguish between events and to associate them to other events in ways not done earlier. [One] becomes accustomed to particular assumptions about the constitution of [one’s] world” (Luhrmann, 1989: 313).*

These assumptions are acquired through literature and dialogue, and slowly their relevance and applicability to the real world becomes more sensible and natural—“the magician becomes more likely to ‘believe’ in their truth, by acting as if they were true and defending them in conversation” (Luhrmann, 1989: 313).

Sasha's stage of interpretation began when she and her sister first started taking classes at Lily Dale. Initially, the concepts she was being introduced to served to fill an intellectual void—a mysterious space between that which she was hoping to learn, i.e. the total truth, and the knowledge and answers being offered by her graduate school professors. These new ideas made sense to her. Why shouldn't spirituality be included in psychological discussions (this was, of course, before the emergence of transpersonal psychology)? Sasha's mentor, Lynn, amplified the voice of this new belief system. Sasha



had questions, and Lynn, along with a friendly and articulate community of believers, was there to answer those questions. Indeed, it was during her time in Lily Dale learning from Lynn when she realized that she had been on a divine path, a road riddled with moments of coincidence and opportunity that now stood out to Sasha as obvious instances of providential synchronicity.

The second stage of interpretive drift involves experience. Experience solidifies, or enforces, a new set of magical beliefs. Luhrmann writes that, as a new magician immerses herself in the experiential world of ritualistic magic, they encounter a personal and powerful kind of symbolism (Luhrmann, 1989: 314). That is,

*“the experiences give the magical ideas content: the magical ideas make sense of the experience. Intellectual and experiential changes shift in tandem, a ragged co-evolution of intellectual habits and phenomenological involvement. Magicians demonstrate the rite’s efficacy by their experiential response; they interpret their dreams with altered intellectual habits. And the more the rituals are confirmed in the dreams interpreted, the more sensible the magic becomes. Magicians can understand the newness of the experience, the pleasing quality of the involvement, easily if they understand that quality as part of the magical way of looking at the world, a package with the intellectual habits they acquire.*

For Sasha, Lily Dale was the experience; it was the package. In a town where the precondition for applying for the purchase of a home is to have been a member of a Spiritualist church for at least one year, one need not look far to find some sort of spiritual experience. In the beginning, Sasha and her sister would go to the daily 2:30PM message service at the auditorium to watch clairvoyants give spirit readings to random people from the congregation. If one goes to enough message services, one will eventually get a reading. As one of the more prestigious and experienced spirit mediums who I interviewed told me, “if someone looks at me when I’m up there in front of the

congregation, eye to eye, with that hunger, with that look that says they are thirsty for a reading, I will come to them [with a spirit reading].”

For years Sasha has literally *lived* in the experiential world of Lily Dale. Aside from the experiences that she had throughout the town over the years, through meditation, during healing ceremonies, and having her various readings done, there were also the experiences of the Angel House. When enough people tell you, people with advanced academic degrees and well-paying jobs, that there are angels floating above them and cherubs dancing in your bathtub, it's hard not to believe that something mystical is going on around you. When we were talking about how she was unable to see the things that others could in her house, Sasha joked, “either they’re crazy, or I’m stupid.” However, we know that Sasha does not think that she is stupid, and she certainly does not believe her friends and guests are crazy. We know this because she explained to us why she believes she has never developed the proper intuitive senses necessary to see, hear, or feel the spiritual and supernatural energies and entities in and around Lily Dale. This brings up Luhrmann's final transitional stage of interpretive drift: rationalization.

Rationalization, Luhrmann argues, is of significant importance contemporarily, as today, skeptics are armed with the cultural-linguistic means to “accuse magic of irrationality” (Luhrmann, 1989: 314). In response, believers in magic must defend their beliefs in the arena of argumentative discourse. They must ‘rationalize’ their belief system. However, these arguments are less an exercise of recruitment, but more an act meant to help them “make sense of [their beliefs system] and reinforce their own commitment to it” (Luhrmann, 1989: 314).

Sasha rationalizes her beliefs in human spirituality, as well as her lack of paranormal experiences. The absence of an explanation of human spirituality and intuition within the field of psychology during her time in graduate school left the door wide open for Lily Dale's host of explanatory models of understanding these phenomena. The emergence of thinkers like Martin Seligmann coupled with a revisiting of Jung's idea of consciousness, only fortified (and even stimulated) Sasha's view that human existence represents a holistic experience of mind, body, and spirit.

The way that she justified the absence of sensory evidence of a spirit world was an extension of this rationalization. In a metaphysical world of interconnectedness and synchronicity, one's inability to sense manifestations of the spiritual realm can be rationalized by recognizing that everyone has a unique and personal divine destiny. After all, matters of the spirit hail from the realm of the unconscious, and it is difficult to argue the illogic of one's belief in the unconscious through the lens of the necessarily conscious lexicon of rational thought. Her psychic abilities were underdeveloped in order to protect her from the painful truth behind the surface of the life stories of the women whom she taught and counseled, and her inability to experience the paranormal allowed her to develop her skills in understanding the transpersonal and intuitive-based MARI®.

"Mythology...is a poetic, supernormal image, conceived, like all poetry, in depth, but susceptible of interpretation on various levels" (Campbell, 1959: 472). Sasha's journey, as seen from the vantage point to which her interpretive drift has carried her, is one of mythical proportions. She crosses the boundaries that separate the secular world of academia from the mystical world of Lily Dale and the like as if there existed no

distinction between the two; the two worlds complete each other in a synergistic reformation of what she believes is a true, holistic psychology. The nature of her belief in the phenomena of the spirit world should not be judged as illogical or irrational, just as one should not judge the Judeo-Christian belief in the father-figure god who watches over humanity with ubiquitous, yet invisible and undetectable, omnipotence.

Luhrmann argues that the challenge for anthropologists who attempt to analyze cultures of religious belief is to describe how the self-descriptive and ambiguous term ‘belief’ operates—what does belief do (Luhrmann, 1989: 309)? By looking closely at Sasha’s life history, I have attempted to tackle this challenge, though I believe more work must be done to understand exactly how belief has operated in the context of her story. To comfort me while I document the potential inadequacies of this paper, I take refuge in something that Quinn told me during one of our discussions:

*Philosophically I'm in the position where I believe that human capabilities of knowing are very limited, and when you understand that, then the question is, what does any particular system of ideas matter? What difference does it make if your beliefs are false? I'm very much in line with William James and his Jungian pragmatism who indicated that we don't know a lot of things, and if we don't know, what difference does it make?*

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

Community	Sex	Ethnicity	Age	Education	Marital Status	# in Household	Household Income	Industry
LD C/G <sup>48</sup>	M	Caucasian	38	Some College	Married	6	\$145,000.00	Mother
LD C/G	F	Caucasian	28	Some College	Single	no comment	no comment	None
LD C/G	M	Caucasian	43	Some College	Single	2	\$75,000.00	Printing
LC C/G	F	Caucasian	n/a	n/a	Married	3	no comment	no comment
Lily Dale	F	Caucasian	n/a	n/a	Single	no comment	no comment	Spirit Mediumship
Lily Dale	M	Japanese American	75	PhD Philosophy	Married	2	\$115,000.00	Education
Lily Dale	F	Caucasian	65	PhD Psychology	Married	2	\$115,000.00	Education
Lily Dale	F	Panaminian American	39	Seminary School	Married	2	\$120,000.00	Spirit Mediumship
Lily Dale	F	Caucasian	61	Some College	Single	1	no comment	Spirit Mediumship
Lily Dale	M	Caucasian	65	PhD Sociology	Married	2	\$100,000.00	Education
Lily Dale	F	Caucasian	57	Some Graduate	Widowed	2	\$70,000.00	Spirit Mediumship
Lily Dale (non resident)	M	Caucasian	52	Bachelors	Married	2	\$47,500.00	Retail
Lily Dale (non resident)	F	Caucasian	72	Bachelors	Married	2	\$64,000.00	Masage Therapy
Lily Dale (non resident)	F	Caucasian	72	Bachelors	Married	4	\$47,000.00	Politics-Retired
Lily Dale (non resident)	M	Caucasian	46	PhD History	Same sex Marriage	2	\$140,000.00	Higher Education
Shasta	M	Caucasian	32	Some College	Single	1	\$20,000.00	Local Government
Shasta	F	Caucasian	60	Some College	3 x divorced	2	no comment	Nursing-Retired
Shasta	M	Caucasian	33	Associates	Married	5	\$90,000.00	Music
Shasta	F	Caucasian/Native American	56	Some College	Divorced	no comment	no comment	Retail/Photography
Shasta	F	Caucasian	43	Some College	Married	3	no comment	Priestess/Dancer
Shasta	F	Caucasian	43	Some College	Divorced	4	no comment	Mother
Shasta	F	Caucasian	35	Some College	2 x divorced	2	no comment	Retail
Shasta	F	Caucasian	32	Bachelors	Divorced	3	no comment	Priestess

<sup>48</sup> 'LD C/G' refers to informants in Lily Dale who were staying in the campground.

## WORKS CITED

- Amazon Online. 2009, August 3. Retrieved from [www.amazon.com/new-age-MP3-Albums-downloads](http://www.amazon.com/new-age-MP3-Albums-downloads).
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2008. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History* (McGee). 582-601.
- Aupers, Stef and Dick Houtman. "Beyond the Spiritual Supermarket: The Social and Public Significance of New Age Spirituality". *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (May, 2006), pp. 201-222.
- Barnes and Noble Online. 2009, August 3. Retrieved from [search.barnesandnoble.com](http://search.barnesandnoble.com).
- Battaglia, Debora. 2005. "Insiders' Voices in Outerspaces." *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces*, edited by Debora Battaglia. Durham: Duke University Press. 38-93.
- Blavatsky, Helena. 1877. *Isis Unveiled*. New York: J. W. Bouton.
- Blavatsky, Helena. 1888. *The Secret Doctrine*. London: Theosophical Publishing Company.
- Bloch, Jon P. "Alternative Spirituality and Environmentalism," *Review of Religious Research*. Vol. 40, No. 1 (Sep., 1998), pp. 55-73).
- Brinkerhoff, Merlin B. and Jeffrey C. Jacob. "Mindfulness and Quasi-Religious Meaning Systems: An Empirical Exploration within the Context of Ecological Sustainability and Deep Ecology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Dec., 1999), pp. 524-542.
- Brown, Michael F. 1997. *The Channeling Zone*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Buchdahl, David A. "The Science of Religion (and the Religion of Science)." *American Anthropologist*. Volume 79, Issue 2 (June, 1977), pp. 397-413.
- Byrne, Rhonda. 2006. *The Secret*. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing.

- Campbell, Bruce F. 1980. *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Campbell, Joseph. 1959. *Primitive Mythology: The Masks of God*. New York: Viking Penguin.
- Capra, Fritjof. 2000 (1975). *The Tao of Physics: An Exploration of the Parallels between Modern Physics and Eastern Mysticism*. Boston: Shambhala Publications.
- Chryssides, George. 2003. "Scientific Creationism: A Study of the Raëlian Church." *UFO Religions*, edited by Christopher Partridge. London: Routledge. 45-61.
- Cristi, Marcela. 2001. *From Civil to Political Religion: The Intersection of Culture, Religion, and Politics*. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- Davis, Andrew Jackson. 1855. *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*. New York: S.S. Lyon and W. Fishbough Publishing.
- Dean, Jodi. 1998. *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Fate*. 2007. Volumes 60-1. Nos. 11-2. Issues 691-2. Lakeville: FATE Magazine, Inc.
- Flexner, S. (Ed.). 2008. *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* (2nd ed.). New York: Random House, Inc.
- Freedden, M. 1995. "Green Ideology: concepts and structures." *Oxford: OCEES Research Papers*: 3-4.
- Gallagher, Eugene V. "The New Age and its Antecedents," *The New Religious Movements Experience in America*. Westport: Greenwood Press (May, 2004), pp. 72-101.
- Geertz, Clifford. 1993. "Religion as a cultural system," *The Interpretations of Cultures: Selected Essays*. Waukegan: Fontana Press, pp. 87-125.
- Ginsburg, Faye. 1989. *Contested Lives: The Abortion Debate in an American Community*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Greene, Brian. 2000. *The Elegant Universe*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Guénon, René; et al. 2001. *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*. Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis.

- Harding, Susan F. 2000. *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Harkin, Michael E. 1994. "Person, Time, and Being: Northwest Coast Rebirth in Comparative Perspective." *American Rebirth: Reincarnation Belief among North American Indians and Inuit*, edited by Antonia Mills and Richard Slobodin. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 192-210.
- Harris, Sam. 2004. *The End of Faith*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Hawkins, Stephen. 1988. *A Brief History of Time*. New York: Bantam Dell Publishing Group.
- Jonas, Hans. 1984. *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of an Ethics for the Technological Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Lacan, J. 1977. *Ecrits*. London: Tavistock/Routledge.
- Laclau, E. and C. Mouffe. 1985. *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Latour, Bruno. 1987. *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Lennon, John and Paul McCartney. 1967. "I am the Walrus" [The Beatles]. On *Magical Mystery Tour* [CD]. London: EMI Studios.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 1989. *Persuasions of the Witch's Craft: Ritual Magic in Contemporary England*. Boston: Harvard University Press.
- Mack, John Edward. 1994. *Abduction: Human Encounters with Aliens*. New York: Scribner Publishing.
- Mack, John Edward. 2010. *Passport to the Cosmos: Human Transformation and Alien Encounters*. Guildford, England: White Crow Press.
- Maclagan, ERD and AGB Russell. 1907. *The Prophetic Books of William Blake*. London: Chiswick Press.
- Marciniak, Barbara. 1992. *Bringers of the Dawn: Teachings from the Pleiadians*. Santa Fe: Bear & Company Publishing.
- MARI® Creative Resources website. 2006, December 8. *What is the MARI®?* Retrieved from <http://www.maricreativeresources.com/whatismari.htm>.



- Martin, Walter. 2003. *The Kingdom of the Cults*. Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers.
- Martin, Walter. 2008. *The Kingdom of the Occult*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson.
- McFague, Sallie. 1993. *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.
- McGee, Jon R. and Richard L. Warm. 2008. *Anthropological Theory: An Introductory History, 4<sup>th</sup> Addition*. Boston: McGraw Hill.
- Næss, Arne. 1989. *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline of an Ecosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. 1996. *Religion and the Order of Nature*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ontario Consultants on Religious Tolerance. 2009, August 3. Retrieved from <http://www.religioustolerance.org/newage.htm>.
- Osteen, Joel. 2007. *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day*. New York: Free Press.
- Quinn, Daniel. 1992. *Ishmael*. New York: Bantam/Turner Books.
- Ross, Andrew. 1991. "New Age: A Kinder Gentler Science," *Strange Weather: Culture Science and Technology in the Age of Limits*. London: Verso Press, pp. 15-74.
- Roth, Christopher F. 2005. "Ufology as Anthropology: Race, Extraterrestrials, and the Occult," *E.T. Culture: Anthropology in Outerspaces*, edited by Debbora Battaglia. Durham: Duke University Press. 38-93.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. 1992. *Gaia & God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Sessions, George. "The Deep Ecology Movement: A Review," *Environmental Review: ER*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 105-125.
- Sha, Zhi Gang. 2007. *Soul Wisdom: Practical Soul Treasures to Transform Your Life*. San Francisco: Heaven's Library.
- Smith, Christian. 1998. *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Starhawk. 1999 (1979). *The Spiral Dance: A Rebirth of the Ancient Religion of the Great Goddess*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.

Starhawk. 1997 (1989). *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex, and Politics*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Stavrakakis, Yannis. (1992). "Green Ideology: A Discursive Reading," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 2.3: 259-79.

Steward, Julian H. 1961. "Alfred Louis Kroeber 1876-1960," *American Anthropologist*. 63:1038-59.

Tipton, Steven M. 1982. *Getting Saved From the Sixties: Moral Meaning in Conversion and Cultural Change*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Tolle, Eckhart. 1999. *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment*. Novato, CA: New World Library.

Tolle, Eckhart. 2005. *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Boston :Dutton Adult.

Hannerz, Ulf. 1997. "Flows, Boundaries and Hybrids: Keywords in Transnational Anthropology," *Mana* (Rio de Janeiro), 3(1): 7-39.

United States Census. 2010, November 24. Retrieved from <http://factfinder.census.gov>.

Watt, David Harrington. 1991. *A Transforming Faith: Explorations of Twentieth Century American Evangelicalism*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.

Weber, Timothy P. 1983. *Living in the Shadow of the Second Coming: American Premillennialism, 1875-1982*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Webster, Richard. 2005. *Astral Travel for Beginners: Transcend Time and Space with Out-of-Body Experiences*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications.

White, Leslie A. 1944. "Morgan's Attitude Toward Religion and Science." *American Anthropologist*. Volume 46, Issue 2 (April): 218-230.

Whitehead, Harriet. 1986. *Renunciation and Reformulation: A Study of Conversion in an American Sect*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

World Encyclopedia. 2005. *New age*. © World Encyclopedia 2005, originally published by Oxford University Press 2005.

## CURRICULUM VITAE

Joshua D. Rose received his GRE from Woodson High School, Fairfax, VA in 1996. He received his Bachelor of Arts from George Mason University in 2002. He was employed as a retail manager in Fairfax, VA for four years, as a teacher in Italy and The United Arab Emirates for two years, and received his Master of Arts in Anthropology from George Mason University in 2011.