

Introduction to Channeling

The New Age movement, as discussed in the previous unit of our course, is an extremely broad-based, diverse social movement. It encompasses a wide range of beliefs and practices, and appeals to a wide range of diverse participants. Because the movement is so diverse, it has been suggested that the New Age movement actually encompasses *conflicting* messages or theologies, not simply different ones. Channeling is a central practice of the New Age movement that differs to quite a degree from Mother Earth Spirituality, and might in some respects even be said to conflict with the central focus of Mother Earth Spirituality. Whereas the Mother Earth Spirituality movement places primary stress on nature (Gaia), on animal spirits, and on rituals designed to heal the planet and heal the person by re-attuning her to the natural rhythms of the planet, channeling places primary stress on otherworldly sources of divine inspiration, on radical individualism, and on a rejection of any kind of naturalistic focus. Although channeling does not advocate the abandonment or abuse of nature, it does almost invariably argue that humans are already overly concerned with physical things, and that the key to spirituality lies in transcending this preoccupation with the physical world.

In addition to these differences between channeling and Mother Earth Spirituality, however, there are also similarities. Both aspects of the broader New Age movement share the New Age concern with individual self-transformation, with a wholistic understanding of the universe, with the evolution of our spiritual consciousness, with the coming of a new, spiritual age. Although undeniably different from one another, therefore, both channeling and Mother Earth Spirituality clearly participate in the broader worldview of the New Age movement. They can be viewed as opposite poles in the same spiritual quest.

Historical Influences and Precursors

There are numerous historical influences effecting the development of contemporary channeling. For our purposes, the most significant of these are the global, historical practice of spirit communication or necromancy practised in almost every religious tradition known to mankind; the nineteenth century religious movements of Spiritualism and Theosophy; and the influence of one particular influential channeling precursor named Edgar Cayce.

Necromancy

Necromancy is the art of speaking to the spirits of the dead in order to reveal hidden knowledge to the living. Shamans throughout the world's religious traditions have practised it, as have prophets, priests, and visionaries. Necromancy was known in ancient Egypt, where priests and priestesses communicated with the gods through trance; in China where individuals communicated with ancestor spirits through a Ouija board-like instrument; in Japan, where shamans channeled the voices of gods; in Greece, where oracles entered trance and were possessed by spirits who spoke through them; and in Israel, where Biblical figures such as Saul and Jesus spoke to the spirits of the dead.

The shamanic practice of speaking to the spirits of the dead is possibly the oldest form of necromancy. The contemporary Norse Neo-pagan practice of Seidhr is an example of this form of communication with the spirits of the dead. In this form, the shaman enters a trance by various means (drumming, chanting, meditation, drugs), and spiritually descends to the land of the dead, where questions can be asked and answers received. The shaman then brings this knowledge back to the land of the living.

The prophetic and/or priestly practice of speaking to the spirits of the dead is somewhat different. Often, some sort of ritual action will be required, in order to bring the spirit of the deceased person here, to this world. Once here, the spirit can speak as a disembodied voice, or

more frequently will be made to materialize in visible form - to appear, in other words, as a ghost. This is the kind of priestly/prophetic necromancy practised by King Saul in the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible. In I Samuel 28, Saul contacts the spirit of Samuel, who materializes and chastises Saul for bothering him. This is also the kind of necromancy apparently practised by Jesus in the New Testament. In Mark 9:2-8 Jesus climbs a mountain and speaks to the spirits of Moses and Elijah. Many New Agers cite this example as evidence that communication with the spirit world is both possible and spiritually valuable.

Spiritualism

Although the Bible itself may contain instances in which communication with the spirits of the dead take place, the historical approach of many Christian denominations has been to condemn the practice as demonic. For this reason, despite a few notable exceptions such as the psychic prophet Nostradamus (1500's) and the visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), most of the accounts of spirit communication or necromancy from within the Christian tradition are associated also with accusations of witchcraft, satan worship, and heresy. The most famous of these cases is probably that of Joan of Arc, who was burned as a witch. Joan claimed to have received the mandate to liberate France from the British from spirit voices (in particular, the spirit of St. Catherine.) The nineteen people killed for the crime of witchcraft at Salem, Massachusetts were also accused of speaking to spirits, or being possessed by them.

Because of this negative association attached to necromancy, it was not until the nineteenth century that the practice became common in the West. It was the religious movement of Spiritualism, begun with the mediumship of the Fox sisters in 1848, that popularized the practice of communicating with the dead. Spiritualism was discussed in more detail in our introductory lecture on the New Age Movement. In addition to the widespread practice of trance

mediumship, as discussed earlier, Spiritualists also used automatic writing and the planchette to communicate the messages of the dead. A planchette was a triangular shaped pointer either attached to a pencil for writing spirit-inspired messages, or for pointing to letters painted on a board, like the modern day Ouija board available from Parker Brothers Games.

The messages received by Spiritualist mediums were almost all from the spirits of loved ones - deceased relatives and friends - or from famous personages wanting to pass along "proof" of the continuation of life after bodily death. Spiritualists were concerned to "prove" that death was not the end of life, and for this reason focused their energies on obtaining little details from those in the spirit world that would confirm to their still-living loved ones that the souls of those who had died in the body continued to live in the spirit realms. Critics of the movement argued that the commonplace nature of the messages given by spirits proved either that mediums were frauds with nothing significant to say, or that the spirit world was a boring, dreary place where no self-respecting thinking person would ever choose to go. Spiritualists themselves, however, argued that it was the very commonplace nature of the messages themselves that "proved" the truth of spiritualist claims. Although deeper philosophical messages from spirit were not unknown in the nineteenth and early twentieth century context, they were the exception rather than the norm. The popularity, and later influence, of the Spiritualist religious movement may well be due to this personal, commonplace nature of the messages from spirit.

Theosophy

While Spiritualism accounts for the widespread popularity of spirit communication in the modern era, Theosophy is primarily responsible for contributing to the New Age stress within the teachings of contemporary channelers on the concept of "elevated masters" as spiritual teachers. The religious movement of Theosophy was founded by Helen Petrovna Blavatsky.

The teachings of Blavatsky and the Theosophical Society were also discussed in more detail in our introductory lecture on the New Age Movement. While similar to Spiritualism, Theosophy placed more stress on eastern religions, more stress on speaking to enlightened spiritual masters, or "mahatmas," (than on speaking to deceased relatives), more stress on a monistic view of the universe in which everything is really just a manifestation of God, and more stress on reincarnation, than Spiritualists ever did.

In terms of the New Age channeling movement, the idea that the universe is really just a manifestation of God, and that we too are part of this manifestation, has become mainstream, as has the idea that enlightened spiritual masters can choose to pass on their wisdom through human channels. Reincarnation has also become a central tenet of the channeling movement.

Edgar Cayce

One of the most famous "channelers" (he did not use this term) of the early twentieth century was a man named Edgar Cayce. Cayce was born in 1877, and completed only a grade school education before apprenticing himself to a photographer. In 1900, Cayce fell ill and developed laryngitis. Despite various treatments, the laryngitis lasted for several months, and in a last-ditch effort at treatment Cayce agreed to be hypnotised. While in a hypnotic trance, Cayce diagnosed his own illness and prescribed a cure. The cure worked, and as word of his success spread, others began to come to him for health readings. Cayce conducted occasional health readings for those who asked him for the next twenty years. It was not until the 1920's, however, that Cayce began to practice trance channeling or mediumship fully. It was at this time that he became known as the sleeping prophet, for he would fall asleep and, while sleeping, deliver spirit-inspired lectures on a wide variety of topics. He had produced more than 30,000 readings by the time he died in 1945.

Cayce's inspired "readings," as he called them, were on topics ranging from health, to astrology, to religion, to politics. Cayce did not claim to "channel" any one particular spirit or spiritual force. Instead, he claimed to receive his information from a source he called the Akashic Record. The Akashic Record was supposed to be a cosmic information source in which all events, and all personalities, and all knowledge that has ever been, are recorded. Cayce was a devout Christian who was sometimes dismayed by the content of the readings he delivered while sleeping. This was the case when he found he had referred to past lives and reincarnation in one of his readings. It was not until he found reference to reincarnation in the Bible that he reconciled himself to this teaching. After this, Cayce became very famous for his past-life regressions, of himself and of others who wished past-life readings.

Cayce has been a major influence in the New Age movement because of the vast body of records that were kept on the readings he gave. Most of his readings were recorded by a stenographer, and as a result a huge library of materials is available to study. While alive, Cayce founded the Association for Research and Enlightenment (A.R.E.), to help facilitate his daily readings, and the Edgar Cayce Foundation, to look after his papers. His son Hugh Lynn Cayce became head of these organizations following his death, and worked to publish some of his father's works in the 1960's. Others set up study groups based on these published works, and by the 1970's Edgar Cayce had become one of the most famous psychics and medium/channelers to have ever lived. The topics of interest to Cayce - healing, astrology, spirituality, and reincarnation - continue to be of dominant interest in the New Age movement.

Worldview

The worldview of those involved with contemporary New Age channeling is radically individualistic, monistic, wholistic, evolutionary, and millennial. Channeling represents the

archetypal "new age" worldview discussed earlier in Chapter Four. Channeling also represents a possible departure from other facets of New Age worldview, however, for in addition to stressing a monistic view of the universe, and a wholistic one, channelers almost always, by implication if not explicitly, articulate a dualistic view of reality also. This dualistic emphasis is implicit in the nature of channeling itself, for in turning to spirits "out there" as sources of spiritual inspiration, a separation between "here" and "there" is established. Rather than turning to nature as a spiritual focus, channelers turn to the realm of disembodied spirits. Rather than see the divine or the spiritual as immanent in the world, channelers conceive of it as external to the world. This dualism at first glance seems incompatible with a monistic view of the universe in which the doctrine "all-is-one" is encapsulated. However, despite the otherworldly, and hence implicitly dualistic focus of the practice of channeling, the *message* of channeled entities is almost invariably a monistic one. This dichotomy is resolved in the message given by many channelers that difference, or distinction, between "here" and "there" or "I" versus "Thou" is simply a matter of false perception, and that true reality equals cosmic unity of all things.

Within the contemporary New Age practice of channeling, there is no set formula by which channelers practice their craft. Some channelers work in a light trance, in which they are fully conscious of what is being said or done, but also in which conscious control of their voices and bodies is given to the visiting spirit entity. Others work in deep trance, in which they are totally unaware of anything said or done while in trance state. Some speak the messages of the spirit entity verbally, others use automatic writing to communicate the message. Some present messages in their own voices, others take on the characteristics of posture, voice intonation, accent, etc. of the visiting entity. Some work in small private groups, others work on public platforms with hundreds in the audience.

Within the contemporary New Age practice of channeling, there is also no set definition of "what" a visiting entity might be, nor "where" a visiting entity might come from. Some channelers channel the spirits of deceased human beings, some channel spirits from Atlantis, or Lemuria, some channel beings that have never been incarnate as human beings, some channel "angels," and some channel extraterrestrial beings.

Organization

There is therefore no real "organization" within the contemporary New Age channeling phenomenon. Each individual channeler articulates an individual message, based upon the nature of the entity being channeled. Although some New Agers interested in the message of one or more particular channelers might choose to move to a particular city to be close to the source, this has not resulted in any kind of formally organized movement or community. Generally speaking, the individualist emphasis of the New Age movement is strongly reflected in the channeling phenomenon.

The Message

Despite the lack of any social organization, there does seem to be a commonality of message found in the channeled materials of contemporary New Age channelers. Although no two channelers articulate exactly the same message, the "core" teaching of New Age channelers seems to consist of eight central teachings.

- 1) Personal responsibility/self-salvation
- 2) Salvation through love of self
- 3) Fear = obstacle
- 4) Death = illusion/ reincarnation = truth
- 5) Overcoming physicality trap

- 6) Getting in touch with higher self
- 7) You create your own reality
- 8) You are god

The Channelers/Sources

It has been estimated that there are more than one thousand people in North America currently acting as "channels" to discarnate entities. Many thousands more have participated in workshop lessons and private sessions led by individual channelers.

Seth

The most famous channeled entity within the New Age movement to date is an entity named Seth, channeled by a woman named Jane Roberts. Seth made contact with Roberts in 1963, through an unplanned session of automatic writing while Roberts was writing poetry. Later, Roberts and her husband began to experiment with a Ouija board, through which further contact with Seth was made, and still later began entering trance and having Seth speak through her. Seth described himself to Roberts as an "energy personality essence," and Roberts therefore left open the question of whether Seth was the spirit of a deceased human being (she thought he must surely be more than that), or some aspect of her own subconscious. Roberts began doing trance sittings twice a week, and her husband took notes to record the teachings of Seth. These teachings, called The Seth Material, have been published in numerous books, including The Seth Material published in 1970, and Seth Speaks in 1972.

The teachings of Seth focus on the true nature of God and the true nature of human beings. Seth defines God as "All that Is," and suggests:

[God] is not human as you (use the) term though he passed through human stages... He is not an individual, (but) an energy gestalt... Its energy is so

unbelievable that it does indeed form all universes, and because its energy is within and behind all universes, systems, and fields, it is indeed aware of each sparrow that falls for it is each sparrow that falls.ⁱ

According to the Seth Material, each individual has God within themselves. Seth suggests that:

there is a portion of All That Is [God] directed and focused within each individual, residing with each consciousness. Each individual is, therefore, cherished and individually protected.ⁱⁱ

Because each person participates in the reality that is God, and contains God within themselves, they are separate from the constraints of space and time. Personality is multi-dimensional, and all of time and space exists at one time and in one space. At some level of reality, individuals are aware of this:

There is also a part of you that is not imprisoned with physical reality, and that part of you knows (that) there is only an Eternal Now. That part of you knows (that) this is the whole self.ⁱⁱⁱ

Given that each individual is aware, at the deepest level, that their true nature transcends space and time, and given that each individual carries God within themselves, and so is in the deepest sense God themselves, it follows that each individual is individually responsible for their own lives. Seth teaches a doctrine of reincarnation, personal responsibility, and spiritual evolution, and suggests that anything encountered in this life was chosen before birth for the lessons it can convey:

We cannot blame God, society, or our parents for misfortunes, since before this physical life we chose the circumstances into which we would be born and the challenges that would best bring about our development.^{iv}

Clearly, therefore, the spiritual teachings of Seth reflect the teachings and worldview of the broader New Age movement.

A Course in Miracles

Another very well known and influential set of channeled material is the three-volume work titled A Course in Miracles, which was channeled by a psychologist and medical school professor named Helen Cohn Schucman between 1965 and 1973. The source of the Course was Christ. Schucman, who was an atheist herself, one day heard a voice say to her 'This is a course in miracles. Please take notes.' Although Schucman was initially sceptical, when an inner mental voice later that night began dictating the Course in Miracles, she wrote down the words. The book, which consists of a 622 page text, a 478 page workbook containing 365 lessons, and an 88 page teachers' manual, was initially published anonymously, for Schucman did not want to associate herself with the channeled work.

The key teachings of the Course are that Nothing Unreal Exists and Nothing Real can be Threatened. According to the Course, God is a Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father is eternal, changeless, pure Spirit. Only things that share these characteristics are real - in other words, only God is Real. The world is not real, for it is changeable and finite. Death, hate, sin, etc. are all unreal. Christ, the Son, is an extension of God sent into the illusory world to free us from the illusion of the world. We are not really separate from God, but we have mistakenly come to believe we are. In believing that we are, we *experience* a separation, and this false state needs to be overcome. Christ's message in the Course is that this separation is an illusion. The Holy Spirit is the bridge that links us, as mistaken, deluded children of God, back to the eternal father. The goal of the Course is to teach us to give up guilt and fear, which come from the imagined separation of ourselves from God. This separation is understood as sin, and neither the

separation, nor the sin, are real. Learning to see the world differently is to grasp a "miracle." Once we have grasped the lesson of forgiveness, and have embraced love rather than fear, once we have learned the lesson of the unreality of the world, and the unreality of our separation from God, our experience of separation will end, fear will be replaced with love, and we will be reunited in the only reality that is - God.

The Course in Miracles has a very strong Christian framework, which is unusual in channeled material. The language of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit links the Course into the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. However, the Course is classically New Age in its stress on the immanence of God within human beings, the need not for forgiveness from God, but the recognition of being God, the stress on the idea that sin is an illusion we make for ourselves, rather than God's judgement on us, and the argument that reality is only what we make of it, not an external truth over which we have no control.

Ramtha

Although the Seth material and the Course in Miracles are "classic" channeled material, both Jane Roberts and Helen Schucman are now deceased, and other channelers have moved to the forefront of the channeling movement. The most famous of these contemporary channelers is a woman named J.Z. Knight, channeler for the spirit of a 35,000 year old warrior who conquered Atlantis and who liberated Lemuria named Ramtha. Knight first had contact with Ramtha in 1977 when she and her husband were experimenting with "pyramid power" by building small paper pyramids to see if they really could do the miraculous things that popular books in the 1970's claimed for them - everything from preserving food to making miraculous anti-wrinkle creams. In a fit of silliness, Knight placed one of the paper pyramids on top of her head and jokingly announced that the miraculous pyramid was about to bring about a miraculous

transformation in her own "limited" intelligence. When she lifted the pyramid away from her face, she saw Ramtha for the first time. She writes,

After a few moments, I lifted the end of the pyramid just to eye level and, laughing so hard that tears were streaming from my eyes, I caught a glimmer of a bright light at the other end of my kitchen... I blinked, and to my utter shock and amazement, there stood a giant man at the other end of my kitchen... just standing there, aglow.... His face... it was the most beautiful face I had ever seen... A moment later - I don't know, maybe it was an *hour* later - I formed an utterance of words that must have come from a feeble innocence within my being. `You are so beautiful. Who are you?'... [He replied,] `I am Ramtha, the Enlightened One. I have come to help you over the ditch.'^v

The "ditch" that Ramtha was talking about was the "the ditch of limitation and fear." According to Ramtha, "everyone has the power to master his destiny and achieve his desires through positive thinking."^{vi} The way to do this is to realize that God is not outside of yourself, but instead that you *are* God. According to Ramtha,

for ages you have been taught that God is outside of you, somewhere in the fathoms of space. Many of you have believed this and accepted it as truth. But I am here to tell you that God, the principal cause of all life, has never been outside of you - it is you. It is the wonderful thought processes, the supreme intelligence that lies silent and ever present within man.^{vii}

The only difference between Ramtha and the rest of us is that "he knows (that) he is God and we don't."^{viii} He realized this while still alive, and hence did not die, but rather transformed himself into the light. The only others so far to have attained this wisdom and truth are Jesus and the

Buddha, but the path is open to anyone with the wisdom and desire to see the truth. The path of spiritual development is therefore the path that leads to the realization that each person is God, and that the reality they experience is simply a reality that they create for themselves.

J.Z. Knight is somewhat controversial because she has become wealthy selling books, audio and video tapes of her channeling sessions, and from leading channeling workshop sessions. She now owns an arabian horse-breeding ranch in Washington State. She has founded a company called Sovereignty, Inc. to organize the workshop sessions and book sales, and has a newsletter called Windwords for disseminating the teachings of Ramtha. J.Z. Knight suggests that criticisms of her wealth and of the prices she charges for workshop sessions (approx. \$400) are unfair. When she first began to channel, she says, she had people camped on her lawn and she wound up having to cook and clean as well as channel for them, and her financial resources were dwindling fast. She asked Ramtha what to do, and Ramtha told her that charging money would be okay.

Lazaris

Somewhat less controversial than Ramtha and J.Z. Knight, but equally well known within the New Age movement, is the entity known as Lazaris, channeled by a man named Jach Pursel. Unlike Ramtha, Lazaris claims never to have been incarnate in human form. Instead, he is described as "a spark of love and light." Lazaris is able to advise us on our human concerns despite never having been human himself because "we are outside the set of 'all those who have ever been physical,' and therefore we are capable of a deeper level of insight about you and your world."^{ix} Pursel began to channel Lazaris in 1974, when his wife Penny noticed that when he fell asleep during meditation, he would begin to speak with a voice different from his own, with a strong "middle-english" accent. Lazaris's message is similar to that of other channeled entities:

self-love, self-mastery, Godhood, and the unreality of the universe except as a construct within which we work out our own development. Unlike A Course in Miracles, however, Lazaris suggests that the material world around us does serve a purpose. Time, and space, are necessary frameworks so that we can master the lessons we need to learn in order to realize our oneness with God. They are not therefore illusions, but rather are safety nets - not the sum total of reality, but helpful nonetheless. On the issue of time, for example, Lazaris states"

Though you often treat it like an enemy, time is actually a grand and valuable friend. It is the cushion between the thoughts you think and the reality they create. Time is the net under the high-wire act of life. When you make a mistake, it catches you. You bounce rather than crash. Time gives you a second chance. Without time, your life would be insane. Imagine for a moment that every thought you think happens *now!* As you are reading these words, an errant thought about sickness or death occurs, and you never even get to finish the sentence... As you drive to work you have a stray thought about an auto accident and `you didn't even see them coming.'... Life would be insane!^x

Despite this emphasis on the necessity of time, Lazaris' core message is that reality is what we create for ourselves, and that we are, ultimately, "`evolving, spiritual, immortal beings'... at one with the universe."^{xi}

The Pleadians

As a final example of contemporary channelers, there is Barbara Marciniak, who channels a group of extraterrestrial entities known as the Pleadians. Like the other entities we have looked at, the Pleadian message is essentially one of Cosmic Love, and the need to take charge of your own fate by recognizing that reality is what you make of it. Unlike the other

entities, however, the Pleiadians place human spiritual nature in the larger universal context of a brotherhood of extraterrestrial beings. According to the Pleiadians, humans were genetically engineered by extraterrestrials so that they could fulfil a tremendous spiritual potential, and in doing so reach a cosmic unity with other races of the universe. Unfortunately, we have forgotten our spiritual purpose, and have been led astray by poorly evolved alien entities who are afraid of the potential contained within us. They have consequently convinced us to focus on worldly concerns, and to ignore the spirit realm.

Barbara Marciniak suggests that the government is in league with these bad aliens to keep us from realizing our spiritual natures and spiritual potentials. As a result, each individual must strive to seek the spiritual path and not let the forces of oppression, alien or government, keep them from that path. Many channelers see the "powers that be" as restricting access to new spiritual truths. For most, the goal is to overcome all restrictions - both personal, emotional, social, political, etc. - and raise your consciousness to the next spiritual level. The emphasis that Barbara Marciniak places on the government's attempts to restrict access to the truth is reflective of the "government conspiracy" camp within the UFO movement, as we will see in the last three sections of our course.

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- i Bjorling, Joel. Channeling: A Bibliographic Exploration. New York/London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1992, pp. 249-250. Taken from Jane Roberts. The Seth Material. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1970, pp. 237-238.
- ii Bjorling 1992, p. 251. From Roberts 1970, p. 245.
- iii Bjorling 1992, p. 252. From Roberts 1970, p. 148.
- iv Bjorling 1992, p. 252. From Roberts 1970, pp. 3-4.
- v Knight, J.Z. A State of Mind: My Story. Ramtha: The Adventure Begins. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1987, pp. 11-12.
- vi Bjorling 1992, p. 264. From Knight, J.Z., quoted in George Hackett and Pamela Abramson. "Ramtha, A Voice from Beyond," Newsweek 108 (December 15, 1986), p. 42.
- vii Bjorling 1992, p. 264. Quoted from a brochure introducing the book Ramtha by Steven Weinberg. (Yelm, WA: Sovereignty, Inc.)
- viii Bjorling 1992, p. 265.
- ix Riordan, Suzanne. "Channeling: A New Revelation?" in Perspectives on the New Age. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, eds. Albany: State University of New York, 1992, 105-126, p. 109.
- x Quoted in Riordan 1992, p. 121.
- xi Bjorling 1992, p. 268.