

The New Age: The Need for Myth in an Age of Science

The New Age movement is a symptom of a fundamental rift in society between those who emphasize subjective, inner experience on the one hand, and those who stress objectivity and rationalism on the other. This rift may be repaired by a synthesis of the two points of view.

Ted Schultz

IN 1972, I DROPPED out of college, abandoned my home state of Illinois, and set off in pursuit of the budding New Age movement. One year later, at the age of 20, I was living in the heart of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district, happily immersed in the whole range of twentieth-century mysticism, spirituality, and alternative culture: yoga, Tai Chi, Buddhism, Taoism, meditation, vegetarianism, and various occult and psychic practices. In marked contrast today, more than 15 years later, I'm a graduate student studying evolutionary biology at Cornell University.

What happened? While most folks would consider the transformation from mystic to scientist to be a transition of the most radical sort, I really haven't changed very much. My motives in 1972 were the same as they are now: to place myself as close as possible to genuine sources of wonder. But as I became intimately acquainted with various New Age cosmologies that claim to describe how the universe really works, I came to an important realization: They couldn't all be true—many of the scenarios were in fact mutually contradictory. And as it became increasingly obvious that I couldn't believe all of what I encountered in New Age San Francisco, it also became obvious that some kind of objective standard was needed for separating what was true from what was unproved.

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This simple realization lies at the heart of scientific empiricism; and armed only with this and a reasonable model of the natural world, it was perhaps inevitable that I would be led to the far more promising fountains of wonder that are currently the primary focus of my attention. On the other hand, I would not have spent years exploring the New Age had I not enjoyed many beneficial and rewarding experiences that, as I have come to understand in retrospect, proceeded from a side of the New Age that does not lend itself to empirical testing. It deals with the subjective dimension of human experience, the dimension of emotions, dreams, inspiration, intuition, imagination, the dimension of the symbolism and mythology of the unconscious mind. Objectivity and rationalism are of little use here, and unless the skeptic takes into account the power of New Age systems to access these “nonrational” realms, he or she will fail to understand the primary attraction of the New Age.

Most adherents (including myself in the early seventies) are drawn to the New Age less for the explanatory power of its contradictory cosmologies than for the tangible effects on their lives generated by “subjective arts” like trance induction, meditation, physical therapies (like yoga and massage), psychological counseling, and the pleasure of love and friendship within a shared social context. For example, many astrologers function as psychological counselors, providing their clients with a cartography of personality based on astrological symbolism. Likewise, genuine insights into unconscious processes may be generated via the symbolic imagery of “past-life regression” hypnotherapy. The emotions, revelations, and understanding imparted in such New Age-style counseling sessions can be real and life-changing despite the fact that the contexts of astrology, reincarnation, psychic healing, and meditation on “crystal energy” are not empirically true. For individuals primarily concerned with psychological growth and relatively unconcerned with formulating empirically accurate models of the natural world, it seems a small step from entertaining fictional ideas in a therapeutic context to swallowing the accompanying cosmologies hook, line, and sinker.

Whatever potentially useful tools for psychological growth may exist in the New Age, they are obscured to a degree directly proportional to the blurring of the distinction between subjective psychological experience and objective truth. In the New Age this blurring is extreme, and subjectivity has become elevated to the lopsided status of sole arbiter of the truth. This reliance on subjectivity has led to a distrust of the scientific enterprise that, like many elements of New Age thought, can be traced back to the occult movements of the late 1800s, especially Theosophy. In her books *Isis Unveiled*

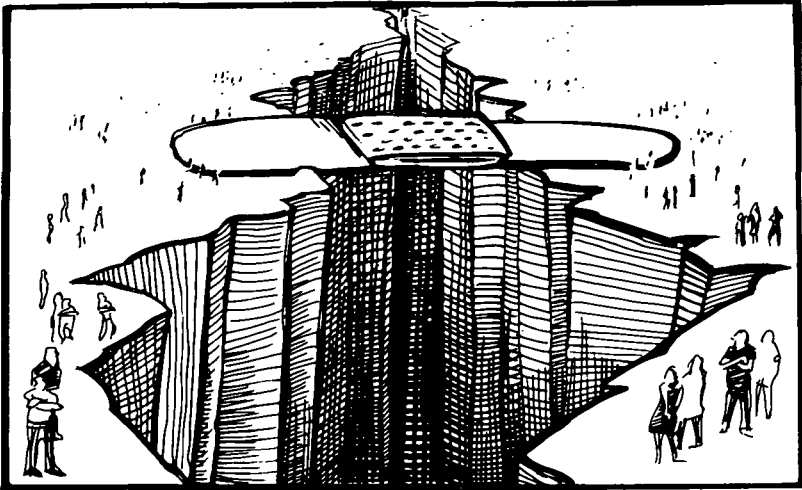


Illustration by Pat Linse.

and *The Secret Doctrine*, the founder of Theosophy, Madame Helena P. Blavatsky, repeatedly attacks what she derisively calls “materialistic science,” contrasting it to “occult science.” In occult science you don’t need tiresome experiments or painstaking observation to find out what’s going on in nature. Instead, all you have to do is close your eyes and meditate upon your subject of interest. Blavatsky’s books set forth a bizarre history of the universe revealed in just this way. Two of her disciples, Charles Leadbeater and Annie Besant, even produced volumes on “occult chemistry” based on their clairvoyant perceptions of atoms and molecules.

Today’s New Age “channels” conjure up information about ancient civilizations or beings from other planets in a similar fashion; likewise, the subjects of past-life regression learn about their previous incarnations while hypnotized. If these methods really worked, think of what a revolution in science they’d bring about! We could dismantle all of our expensive research equipment and learn everything through clairvoyance and meditation. But, alas, this is not to be. There’s simply no way to discriminate between supposed “information” received in this way and pure fantasy, and while the cathartic psychological benefits of such practices may be high, the information content is virtually nil. No objectively verifiable evidence has ever been produced in the tens of thousands of channeling sessions and past-life readings that have taken place. Never, for instance, has an all-knowing channeled entity told us the correct latitude and longitude of some buried, ancient temple, nor has a past-life memory ever led us to a file in an old public-records office that proved the existence of a previous incarnation. This lack of corroboration suggests the far simpler explanation, lost to most New Agers in their disregard for objectivity, that such personalities and memories are the products of the unconscious mind.¹

A number of things can be done to help mend the unnecessary rift in society between those who are concerned with inner, subjective, frequently

irrational realms of human experience and those who are concerned with physical, objective, rationally comprehensible realms. First, we need to accept that both are important. It's easy to mock New Agers, but I think a far more profitable enterprise would be to research and understand those unmet human needs that are compelling tens of thousands of people to turn to the New Age for satisfaction. We must somehow learn to nourish these nonrational dimensions in ways that are not antithetical to rationalism and science.

Second, empiricists should continue to test New Age claims about the natural world, preferably as neutrally and sympathetically as possible. Naturally there is not enough research money, nor are there enough researchers willing to sacrifice their valuable time, to check out every bizarre claim; but surely the most popular ones, believed in by tens of thousands of people, deserve to be tested. The true believers will most likely remain unconvinced, but I learned something from my experience of editing a special issue of *Whole Earth Review* in 1986 that was devoted to critiquing New Age claims: There are many undecided people who are open to critical examinations of the paranormal, as long as they perceive that the studies are fairly and objectively carried out.

Third—and most difficult—we have to offer people something better. I would suggest that it is the perennial human need for mythology that fuels not only the New Age movement but many other irrational religious movements as well. Novelist Ken Kesey once offhandedly commented: “Facts are dull. Stories are interesting. We're up to our noses in facts. We want Story. We need Story.” The late mythologist Joseph Campbell pointed out that our culture has outgrown the mythologies of the past. In the light of modern science and society, these ancient world-views no longer hold any explanatory power—but they still hold emotional power. Since we haven't replaced the old myths with new ones, some of our contemporaries periodically reconstruct hybrid mythologies out of the rubble of the old stories, investing them with belief and then dogmatically defending them. This is as true of the current wave of Christian fundamentalism as it is of the New Age.

The people who feel the need for a larger myth most acutely go out and invent their own. Some of these modern myths, drawn from the raw material of the unconscious minds of their creators, are actually quite imaginative. At the very least, they can be regarded as a kind of early-warning system telling us that if we can't supply a myth—a Story with a capital “S” that *includes* science and rationalism—then a host of eccentrics will supply their own versions, versions that most likely contradict what we have empirically learned about the natural world.

For those of us who value rationalism and objectivity, the challenge presented by the New Age and other twentieth-century supernatural mythologies is this: A living myth must be constructed that incorporates an understanding of the physical and natural sciences. Such a task is contrary to the traditions of science, which normally avoids any kind of larger philosophizing. It is contrary as well to most mythmaking, which generally

employs an overdose of supernaturalism and a disdain for rationalism. Perhaps the job requires a new sort of individual, a kind of popularizer-of-science/philosopher/artist. Whatever the answer, this synthesis is a goal well worth pursuing, and perhaps the first place to look for clues is in the fanciful and contradictory New Age myths of the late twentieth century.

Note

1. For a description of the unconscious processes underlying such personalities and memories, including psychological phenomena that superficially suggest paranormal forces at work (e.g., cryptomnesia, automatism, dissociation), I refer the reader to my essay "Voices From Beyond: The Age-Old Mystery of Channeling" in *The Fringes of Reason: A Whole Earth Catalog* (New York: Crown, 1989). ●

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