

Channeling: Brief History and Contemporary Context

Although the term is new, channeling has been around for centuries. Its essence is hassle-free religion. One gains meaning in life and escape from anxiety from pre-digested 'wisdom' without any commitment or sacrifice.

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SPOON-BENDING is out; channeling is in. This latest psychic craze is being embraced by many thousands of sincere believers, enlightening their minds and often lightening their pocketbooks. "Channeling" describes what supposedly occurs when an individual serves as a conduit for some otherworldly entity to communicate with people of this world. It can take many forms: The channeler might be wide awake, in a trance, or even asleep ("dream channeling"). The channeler may speak or produce automatic writing, or even operate through a Ouija board.

Channeling is essentially the mediumship of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries dressed up in new clothes. Parapsychologists realize this too. They have shown a remarkable lack of interest in the channelers' claims. Most parapsychologists consider the channeled communications to be simply the product of the channeler's mind and experience (Anderson 1988).

The immortal entities who take advantage of the sudden abundance of channelers to speak to the people of this world most often bear names of a biblical or a mythic quality: Archangel Michael, Moses, the Invisibles, Ramtha, and even Jesus, are examples. Despite the erstwhile obscurity of many of the entities, they have been able to propel the people who channel them into some fame and often considerable fortune. For example, Penny Torres, a California housewife, was rocketed into prominence by channeling a 2,000-year-old man called Mafu, who teaches that humanoid colonies live under the earth and that extraterrestrials live among us.

J. Z. Knight, who channels Ramtha, is the best-known and most finan-

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cially successful of the channelers. Ramtha supposedly was born on Atlantis and conquered the entire world 35,000 years ago. Knight gives us some insight into the process of channeling: She claims that in order to channel Ramtha, her soul first must leave her body. To do this, she raises the vibrations of her soul so she can meet Ramtha at his vibratory level; then she experiences the sensation of moving down a tunnel and traveling toward a light that becomes larger and larger. (Note the similarity here with reports of near-death experiences.) Once she enters that light, she knows that her soul has left her body and been replaced by Ramtha; her own essence has transcended to another time and space (Mahr 1987).

Not all entities have such arcane origins as Ramtha and Mafu. Elwood Babbitt, another leading channeler, channels Einstein, among others, and at least two channelers serve as mouthpieces for John Lennon.

Although the term is new, channeling has been around for a long time. It is sometimes claimed that all shamans and prophets, including the Oracle of Delphi, Moses, and even Jesus Christ, were channelers, but a less heady view places the origin of channeling with the renowned mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), who was the first Western medium in that he conversed with the souls of departed men and women rather than just with spirits (Shepard 1978). An accomplished and prolific scientist, at age 55 he resigned his university appointment and became dedicated to the study of the spiritual and occult. He would lay in trances for days on end, conversing not only with the souls of the recently departed but with Moses, Abraham, and Jesus Christ as well.

The next major milestone in the history of channeling occurred in 1848, when Mr. and Mrs. John Fox of Hydesville, New York, heard a number of mysterious rappings in their home, rappings that seemed always to occur in the presence of two of their children, Kate (1841-1892) and Margaret (1838-1893). By assigning a different number of raps to each letter of the alphabet, the rappings were deciphered as being messages from the world beyond. The Fox sisters subsequently enjoyed a worldwide reputation as mediums, starting an interest in mediumship that was to endure well into the twentieth century. Although they confessed in later years that they had created the rappings themselves by using their toes, ankles, and knees, even today there are some who disbelieve their confessions.

An important figure in the history of channeling is Helene Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891). In 1875, Blavatsky founded the Theosophical Society, an organization dedicated to study of the occult. She traveled the world in search of manifestations of the supernatural. She claimed to have direct astral access to two Tibetan mahatmas, and in 1888 she "channeled" on their behalf a book entitled *The Secret Doctrine*, which became an occult tour de force.

Edgar Cayce (1877-1945), well known for his supposed ability to diagnose people's illnesses at a distance, is now being retroactively hailed as a channeler as well. It is claimed that he "channeled healing and prophecy to six thousand people over a forty-three year period" (Mahr 1987). Yet, by Cayce's own

description, he was not a channeler: No guides ever claimed to be using his body, and when he communicated with the dead, the information supposedly emanated from his own subconscious (Westen 1988).

The most recent wave of channeling began with the 1972 publication of *Seth Speaks* by Prentice-Hall. The book was prepared by Jane Roberts (1929-1984) and her husband, Robert Butts, and supposedly presents the communications of Seth, the first “unseen entity” that came to be accepted by large numbers of people. The interest produced by Seth developed to the level of frenzy when Shirley MacLaine began her New Age writings about entities, channeling, and related themes. Like a latter-day Madame Blavatsky, MacLaine has ranged the world in search of spiritual understanding. In 1983, her book *Out on a Limb* became a best-seller, with more than four million copies being sold. Because of her fame, this book brought many people to the occult bookshelf who otherwise might have stayed away. Three years later, her ABC-TV miniseries introduced millions of others to the notion of unseen entities.

What do these eternal entities have to tell us now that they can so readily communicate with this world? Their basic message, which reflects well-established themes found in occult literature, is that we are spiritual and immortal beings in a universe that is essentially spiritual. We move through a series of embodied and disembodied lives until we eventually unite with God, and indeed, within each of us is some form of projection of God. By learning to contact that part of God within us, we can harness a force that will allow us to surmount our problems and find happiness and success. We create our own realities; and so if we want to be happy, we simply need to create a happy reality. There is no need for us to follow a guru, for we are as gods, each one of us.

This message is presented in different ways by different channelers. Often it is hard to discern it from the noisy claptrap in which it is packaged. Indeed, modern channelers are responsible for some of the most outrageous rubbish imaginable, often delivered in almost childishly silly accents and peppered with repetitive clichés. Consider, for example, some of Ramtha’s pseudoarchaic prose:

I be that which is termed indeed, servant unto God Almighty, that which is called the Principal Cause, the Light Force, the Element, that which is termed the Spirit, that which is conclusive all of Itself, that which is termed the All in All, that which is called life indeed” (Mahr 1987:21).

Ramtha might be well-advised to contact Moses or Joshua for some advice on style.

We now know that the trance mediums of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were almost certainly fraudulent, the whole lot of them. Even Madame Blavatsky was condemned as a fraud by some who investigated her. Are today’s channelers simply cheating? While Professor Graham Reed in the following article discusses some psychological aspects of channeling

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that might absolve some channelers from charges of insincerity and fraud, such charges no doubt are fitting in many cases. However, the channelers present a product conveniently resistant to verification or falsification. Most of the information they provide is difficult to assess because of its quasi-philosophical nature. And because the communicating entities usually claim to be exalted beings who left their incarnations a very long time ago or were never incarnated physically in the first place, there is no record to be found of their earthly existence, and no questions to be asked to check the accuracy of their recall.

Why would channelers bother to channel if they were not honest? For one thing, it brings them considerable attention, and for another, it brings them money. The Seth books sold by the hundreds of thousands. People pay up to \$1,500 for a seminar with J. Z. Knight's Ramtha, and she has been able to gross between \$100,000 and \$200,000 for an evening's work! Knight admits that she earns millions of dollars a year from her appearances and the sale of Ramtha materials (Westen 1988).

What about the Seth books? Since they seem, for many people, to stand a league above the other channeled texts in terms of quality and metaphysical surface appeal, they merit some additional discussion. The Seth materials were dictated over hundreds of sessions but *almost always without witnesses*; Seth apparently spoke at a slow enough pace for Jane Roberts's husband to write down the utterings verbatim using a *personal* shorthand. He did not even use a tape recorder, saying that he found it more personal to write out Seth's comments (Roberts 1977). Roberts was conscious during the Seth sessions. Indeed, she reported that it was often difficult for her to know where she stopped and Seth began.

Jane Roberts was an author and poet who as such must surely have worked to develop her literary and creative skills. Indeed, long before Seth, she was producing poetry that in her husband's words "clearly reflected her intuitive understanding of some of the concepts Seth came to elaborate upon much later" (Roberts 1977:11). She was also an avid reader. She and her husband freely admitted to having studied Buddhism, Zen, Taoism, shamanism, voodooism, and the like, and they admitted that there is a similarity between Seth's pronouncements and the contents of some of those belief systems.

In light of all this, the Seth materials must surely be viewed as less than extraordinary. There certainly was the time and the talent for fraud to play a role, but we cannot discriminate between that possibility and the possibility of unconscious production. Indeed, at one time Roberts herself considered

that maybe all the Seth material emerged from her own subconscious. At any rate, given these circumstances, there seems little need to consider the involvement of any supernatural agency.

There is a good lesson here, however. Readers are often impressed by what seems to be an outpouring of metaphysical thought that seems beyond the intellectual capability of the writer. They then take this as an indication that there must be truth to the claim that some supernatural being was involved. Yet superficially impressive writings can readily be produced by an inventive even if otherwise pedestrian mind, particularly if that mind has been exposed to other literature in that domain.

Most people require some sort of philosophical structure in order to be able to find contentment in life. This philosophical structure becomes much more important when one's belly is full and the roof does not leak, when one has time to contemplate one's relationship to the rest of humanity and to the universe as a whole.

It should not be too surprising that many people from all backgrounds and professions have embraced channeling, for its essence is hassle-free religion. One gains meaning in life and escape from existential anxiety without the commitment and the conformity that cults and sects demand. There is no proscription of the pleasures of the flesh as there is in mainstream religions; there are no temptations to avoid, no sins to eschew. The entities' hedonistic and narcissistic wisdom is also predigested and therefore brings no need to wrestle with philosophical enigmas and no lifelong quest for truth.

There is a clear danger in seeking advice from channelers, or at least in following it: People are diverted from trying to grapple in a rational and realistic way with the difficulties of living. For most people, probably all that is lost is a bit of money for whatever comfort was gained. But if one has real problems and real distress, the pastiche of pop psychology and metaphysics offered up by the channelers may prove to be as deleterious for the psyche as the fake treatments proffered by medical quacks can be for the body.

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