Moving Toward the Light

Self, Other, and the Politics of Experience in New Age Narratives

MICHAEL F. BROWN

Our behavior is a function of our experience. We act according to the way we see things. If our experience is destroyed, we have lost our own selves.

—Laing, The Politics of Experience

To read R. D. Laing's work today is to revisit an era—temporally close, temperamentally distant—when a renowned psychiatrist could conclude a book with fifteen pages of LSD-inspired word salad and still produce a bestseller. Laing claimed that self-enragement was ubiquitous in American society, and he blamed it on resistance to the truth of inner experience. In his quest for a prophetic language that would bridge therapy and religion by revealing how an authentic self can achieve healthy communion with others, the mercurial Laing mapped terrain still under exploitation by the New Age movement today—more than three decades after the publication of Laing's The Politics of Experience.

Informed by a powerful current of millennialism, the New Age holds that humanity is entering a time of transition, at the end of which collective rediscovery of the divine will inspire a social and political resurgence unlike any other in human history. People wary of rigid categories are unlikely to apply one to themselves, and "New Age" is no exception. Some scorn the term; others use it only for ironic effect. But it has stuck nevertheless. Today "New Age" encompasses practices and philosophies as diverse as shamanism, re-corporation, aura reading, goddess worship, channeling, crystal healing, past-life regression therapy, and the performance of rituals inspired by American Indian traditions. Within its ample
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Informed by a powerful current of millennialism, the New Age holds that humanity is entering a time of transition, at the end of which collective rediscovery of the divine will inspire a social and political renaissance unlike any other in human history. People wary of rigid categories are unlikely to apply one to themselves, and “New Age” is no exception. Some spurn the term; others use it only for ironic effect. But it has stuck nevertheless. Today “New Age” encompasses practices and philosophies as diverse as shamanism, neopaganism, aura reading, goddess worship, channeling, crystal healing, past-life regression therapy, and the performance of rituals inspired by American Indian traditions. Within its ample
Boundaries among subfields also become even more pronounced—whether the Church of England or the Society of Friends. At the extreme, it is possible that the movement plays no significant role in the concerns of other groups that share the same general social background. The movement is largely a matter of deviance, and the deviance is largely a matter of social change. The movement is largely a matter of social change, and the change is largely a matter of social control.
LIFE STORIES AS ORGANIZING NARRATIVES

As a movement focused on the transformation of individual lives and by extension, of social institutions, the New Age offers a unique organizational framework that allows for the synthesis of individual, communal, and macrocosmic perspectives. This approach recognizes the interconnectedness of all beings and seeks to foster a sense of unity and shared purpose. Through the practice of spiritual techniques, individuals can experience a profound shift in consciousness, leading to personal growth and collective transformation. This method of organizing narratives is not only a means of self-discovery but also a pathway to societal change, as it encourages the development of empathy and understanding among diverse groups, promoting harmony and cooperation. By integrating these principles into daily life, individuals can contribute to a collective awakening that transcends narrow personal goals, fostering a more holistic approach to living.
We have been in a state of spiritual crisis for some time. Many individuals feel disconnected from their spiritual selves and are seeking ways to reconnect. This state is often referred to as depersonalization, where one feels detached from their own body and consciousness.

One common experience that many individuals report is a sense of ungroundedness or floating, as if they are not connected to the physical world. This can be unsettling, especially for those who have always felt connected to their bodies and their environment.

Another experience is a feeling of emptiness or meaninglessness, where one feels disconnected from their purpose or direction in life. This can lead to feelings of hopelessness or despair, and can be a barrier to personal growth and development.

In recent years, there has been a growing interest in spiritual practices and meditation, as people seek ways to reconnect with their inner selves and find meaning in their lives. These practices can help individuals to develop a sense of connection and to experience a sense of peace and inner tranquility.

The key to overcoming these experiences is to cultivate a sense of presence and awareness, and to develop a deeper connection with one's own body and consciousness. This can be achieved through practices such as meditation, mindfulness, and other forms of spiritual inquiry.

By cultivating a sense of presence and awareness, we can begin to reconnect with our inner selves and experience a sense of peace and inner tranquility. This can help us to overcome the experiences of depersonalization and meaninglessness, and to experience a sense of purpose and direction in life.
The following text is part of a guided meditation recorded during a workshop by a New Age bookstore. The facilitator guides participants through a visualization exercise to help them find inner peace and balance.

"Joining the New Age bookstore that runs space for workshops during the evening hours.

You're body is a precious vessel. It is a temple that houses your soul. Your body is a machine that transforms energy from the sun into the nourishment you need to live.

Just let your body relax. Feel the tension in your muscles as they begin to release the tension. Begin to imagine a serene and tranquil place where you feel safe and at peace.

Breathe slowly and deeply, allowing the air to fill your lungs and nourish your body. Feel the energy flow through your body, warming your entire being.

And then, imagine a beautiful and serene landscape. Perhaps a lake surrounded by trees, or a mountain range with snow-capped peaks.

Visualize yourself standing at the edge of this landscape, taking in the beauty and tranquility of the scene. Feel the energy of the universe surround you, filling you with a sense of peace and serenity.

Now, imagine yourself moving through this landscape, walking on the grass, feeling the sun on your face.

And as you move through this place, feel the energy of the universe pushing you forward, guiding you towards a deeper sense of peace.

Eventually, you arrive at a place where you feel completely at ease. You feel centered and balanced, and you know that you can carry this sense of peace with you throughout your life.

Now, take a moment to tune into your body, feeling the energy of the universe within you. Breathe deeply and allow yourself to feel centered and balanced.

As you continue to breathe deeply, allow yourself to carry this sense of peace with you as you move through your day.

Thank you for joining us tonight. We hope you have found this meditation to be a source of comfort and peace.

Goodnight, and may the universe be with you."
knits participants into a group. For the fifteen minutes of the visualization sequence, the audience cedes its autonomy to Sally and allows her to shape an experience that, however superficially, unites them in a collective process. A skillfully presented meditation induces a gentle euphoria that evokes sighs of satisfaction and even tears of joy from participants. Afterwards, they are likely to comment that the "room was really filled with energy" or that "something incredible happened in there."

Note that unlike recitation of a canonical text such as the Lord's Prayer, Sally's narrative does not ask anyone to endorse a specific message or set of beliefs. The few statements of fact (e.g., "The body is a marvelous thing. It holds itself together by means of whirling energy patterns") are sufficiently banal or metaphorical that few could disagree with them. Instead, members of the audience are asked to experience their own bodily process or to explore their own personal memories at the appropriate moments within the framework of the narrative. The group process of the exercise, in other words, is counterbalanced by ample provision for individual experience, which might be acknowledged by inviting participants to share their impressions of the exercise with the rest of the group. The resulting narratives are likely to include spontaneous personal confessions ("I'm an incest survivor," "I suddenly had an image of my mother as she was dying") that intensify the prevailing sense of shared intimacy. A proficient session leader will move deftly between these stories and themes central to his or her area of spiritual expertise. Leaders with less developed interpersonal skills sometimes allow the gathering to be dominated by members of the audience who doggedly insist on talking about their own personal concerns. Because New Age values provide few avenues for questioning the experience of others, it is a tricky business to steer discussion back to the session's main agenda, but successful session leaders soon master the art of keeping a workshop on track. Even in the best-run gathering, however, audience opinions about how the process is going are never far from the surface as speakers move nervously between comments about the event and metadiscourse about its meaning and direction. In this sense, their narratives embody what Anthony Giddens (1991: 32) calls the "reflexive project" of modernity—a constant self-monitoring of experience.

In gatherings of short duration—say, two hours or less—participants have little opportunity to challenge the presenter's leadership, although they may intervene obliquely by offering polite statements such as, "I was looking forward to some time for questions," or "Some of us were hoping that you'd talk about X." Seminars that last for several days are more likely to see direct intervention by participants who are, for one reason or another, dissatisfied with the way things are going. The frankest expression of reflexivity is found in private, post-workshop exchanges about workshops or seminars that participants found disappointing. After attending an expensive class led by a channeler famous for his work with a prominent Hollywood actress, Donna Liston, a middle-class social worker from the New York suburbs, expressed her concern that "I didn't enjoy it when Mark just channeled all the time. I thought there was going to be more group participation. I wanted to be able to start learning too to do this myself." Donna acknowledged that the channeler was insightful and entertaining, but she was ultimately frustrated because he neglected to provide a forum in which she could expand her own spiritual understanding through personal experience.

Themes in Donna's critique are echoed in the account of Peter Goldman, a forty-year-old writer once deeply involved with the Church Universal and Triumphant, a Montana-based congregation led by the controversial channel Elizabeth Clare Prophet (see Lewis and Melton 1994). Unlike most New Age groups, Prophet's church is authoritarian and patriarchal, which is why Peter labeled himself a "cult survivor." Peter described Prophet as "very powerful, very hypnotic, very charismatic." He reported that prior to her public channeling sessions, her assistants would lead the audience in a form of chanting called "decreeing," which he said produced a trance state that made Prophet's followers passive and emotionally malleable. Although Peter admitted that he found the experiences convincing at the time, he now rejects Prophet's teachings and the techniques that he saw used in her church, which he considers a form of brainwashing:

I tend to base my evaluation on the bottom line. What does this do for people? Does it turn them into zombies or does it make them powerful? If something is liberating, it enables people to fulfill more of their potential in a context of freedom rather than in a context of servitude, which is what a lot of these organizations tend to foster. The power that they think they gained through their association with these groups or gurus or channelers is no power at all. It turns out to be an illusion. And I speak from my own experience.
In these excerpts from larger life-story narratives, Donna and Peter express doubt about spiritual leaders who fail to make allowances for the needs and interests of their followers. Both clearly want the emotional involvement that comes from working with a group, yet they also demand that this experience reaffirm their sense of themselves as unique individuals following a distinctive personal path.

**BELIEF AND EXPERIENCE: CONTESTATIONS OF TRUTH**

Stories of belief, doubt, and experience constitute another key discursive field for those involved in New Age practices. In contrast to popular portrayals of the movement as a haven for navel minds, discussions at New Age events often focus on the value of skepticism, on the grounds that firsthand experience should always trump belief based on simple faith. The contextual nature of belief and skepticism was revealed in a workshop offered by Kevin Ryerson, a well-known trance channeler, to a paying crowd of forty at the Omega Institute for Holistic Studies, a major conference center located in Rhinebeck, New York. Ryerson opened the event by discussing his own experience of channeling, which includes serving as a medium for a host of historical figures. He believes in the scientific reality of the channeling phenomenon, he said, because the observations of his spirit-beings have been validated through empirical research:

John [an entity channeled by Ryerson] once identified a site as a place that Hebrew rituals had been performed. Archaeologists denied that ancient Hebrews had built anything in this area. Yet two years later, the archaeological site was discovered. An archaeologist who had expressed doubt about John's information wrote to say that he had now become a believer.

Yet only moments after asserting the empirical truth of channeling's insights, Ryerson insisted that information about the activities of sinister extraterrestrial beings offered by other mediums cannot be taken literally; instead, it should be seen as metaphorical. The mediums who produce such information, he said, are “channeling through their fears.”

Throughout the workshop, Ryerson distinguished between analytical thought and forms of understanding based on intuition and the emotions.

He explained that analytical thought is ultimately destructive because it leads to the runaway technologies that endanger the planet and fuel human alienation. “Constructive change can only come about through direct knowing,” he emphasized. Audience reaction to these statements suggested that most were sympathetic to his invocation of the primacy of personal experience over other forms of understanding. I was therefore surprised when, during a breakfast conversation the following morning, three of my fellow participants recommended that I test the authenticity of Ryerson’s channeled insight by asking his spirit entities for information that could only be known to me personally. Although my interlocutors declared themselves deeply committed to the expansion of intuitive, experiential understanding, they also readily embraced strategies of empirical validation when it suited their purposes.

This edgy tacking back and forth between different approaches to validation reflects underlying attitudes toward belief. In ways that mirror the critiques of positivism mounted by postmodernists, those drawn to New Age practices tend to think of beliefs as completely arbitrary, especially when organized into “belief systems,” an expression that has come to connote the received orthodoxies of religion. A critique of belief systems as authoritarian and limiting is consistent with the observation (Helas 1996: 155–159) that the New Age movement embraces the “de-traditionalization of self,” a condition that Helas associates with radical modernity. The de-traditionalized self thinks of social norms as constructed rather than as immutable and sacred, thus shifting the locus of moral authority to the individual. Personal growth becomes a process of shedding the artificial parochial accretions of social existence—“our cultural baggage,” in the idiom of the movement—in favor of inner truths.

Once traditions lose intrinsic moral worth, ideas can be freely detached from their cultural nexus. They become little more than floating signifiers, which explains why, to many observers, the ideology of the New Age resembles a vast smorgasbord from which people combine bits of tradition according to personal taste.

On what basis, then, can one distinguish between true and false beliefs? Sandy Randolph, a Santa Fe channeler who claims to bring forth information from a group of American Indian spirits called the Medicine Women, answered the question this way:

I’ve learned, very much the hard way and through personal experience, that channeled information isn’t all valid. I need to run it
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about someone else; I can imagine someone else's experience and feel for them. When I imagine them, I can feel the experience of the other person. I can understand why they might have done something differently if they were in my shoes. I can imagine the qualities of the person they are, and I can understand why they might have acted in a certain way.

In the same way, when I imagine myself doing something, I can feel the sense of self that I have in the present moment. I can feel the sense of self that I have in the past and the sense of self that I might have in the future. I can understand why I might have acted in a certain way if I were in their shoes. I can imagine the qualities of the self that I am now, and I can understand why I might have acted in a certain way if I were in their shoes. I can understand why I might have acted in a certain way if I were in their shoes.

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individuals got involved with cults, I find that most of them are sincerely doing what they feel they need to do. So what am I to judge them?—

David Manager

Not all religious experiences take place in the privacy of

... through the body. The body is like a spiritual container. Do

you think that one through the senses or surroundings

 vary among people and circumstances? What does it mean to have

 various sensory experiences that help you to present yourself

 to the world as a spiritual person?—

 [Yes]

 Given the subjective and metaphysical nature of religious experi-

 ences, it was easy for researchers to believe these experiences,

 learned in subsequent interviews a few dozen had claimed the

 channeled voice. Speech was lost. The most important events were

 considered by the participants to be the discovery of a new

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The internal tensions characteristic of the off-the-rails Beaufortçı village once fields help explain the relative ease with which the movement has spread across other chapters of American religious experimentation. Although particularly in schisms and sparrow孵化s in Oklahoma entered a hallowed place in religious movement ideology, they attract only a small percentage of those drawn to New Age activities. Elise Callahan, a character from Western Massachusetts, recalled the experience of a resident of one of the communities:

"The members of the community seemed like most people, but there was something different about them. It was hard to develop your own identity. There was an unusual kind of isolation, a sense of being isolated. Everyone went on their own way, and everyone seemed to be doing different things. It was a different environment, a different kind of lifestyle."

The Salt Lake City statement, the alleged inability of stable inner change group activities to produce similar results, has been a source of considerable debate. The setting of the crisis is not a social movement, but rather a collective response to the situation. This tendency to oversee rapidly from the initial phase of the community to the later phases of the church and to view the community as a religious movement in search of an identity. This process is essentially a religious awakening, but it is also a social one. The crisis eventually led to the formation of a New Age movement. The awareness of the hierarchy of the New Age movement, the incorporation of the New Age into religious life, the social and cultural impact of the New Age movement, and the relationship of the New Age movement to the Christian community, were all important factors in the process of the New Age movement.
Let me close with a narrative performance that illustrates in microcosm the movement's remarkable ability to fashion contradictory ideas into an overarching vision that still privileges individual experience. The setting was an annual convention sponsored by a magazine devoted to the creative synthesis of Buddhist philosophy, alternative healing methods, and techniques of personal growth. Three thousand attendees, mostly affluent and well-educated, gathered in a hotel ballroom in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., for a lecture by one of the movement's stars, a woman known for her best-selling books on spirituality and health. Although the biography on the flyleaf of her books inevitably attaches "Ph.D." to her name and notes her long association with a distinguished medical school, on this occasion her talk used science as a foil for ruminations on the body's ability to access its own wisdom and to heal itself without the paternalistic intervention of Western medicine. Moving comfortably about the stage and emphasizing her points with visual images drawn from molecular biology, Hindu epics, and Greek mythology, she wove the lecture around a series of stories: her upbringing as a "recovering Jewish-American Princess" (which served as a launching pad for jokes about the therapeutic possibilities of shopping), experiences with various alternative healers, and a recent brush with breast cancer—the latter cured by a combination of Jungian techniques and the timely intervention of a famous female surgeon. At the end of the talk, the audience leapt to its feet in thunderous applause.

The lecture's blend of science and myth, feminism and militarism, accommodation and resistance, high-tech and no-tech, personal anecdotes and sweeping generalizations, and above all, its message that each of us must craft a personal vision according to the dictates of experience, obviously struck a responsive chord in listeners, who were busily creating their own narratives. Having taken to heart R. D. Laing's claim that "the condition of alienation, of being asleep, of being unconscious, of being out of one's mind, is the condition of the normal man" (12), they were doing everything in their power to find the stories that will restore them to consciousness and cure the self-estrangement that today passes for normality. In so doing, they believe, they will improve the world as well as themselves. Laing, who was felled by a heart attack in 1989 during a game of tennis in St. Tropez, did not live long enough to see the full flowering of his ideas. As a classically trained intellectual, he might have deployed the commercial and, in some cases, superficial turn that the quest for self has taken since the appearance of The Politics of Experience. Then again, as

one of the movement's philosopher kings, perhaps he would have enjoyed presiding over all this extravagant storytelling.

**ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

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**NOTES**

1. Laing's life and work are documented in Burston 1996.

2. Experts who downplay the scale of the New Age movement include Finke and Stark 1992 and Kossin and Lischman 1993.

3. Accounts critical of the movement, such as Kaminick 1999, Rossman 1979, and Schur 1976, portray it as irrational, self-indulgent, and fundamentally antipolitical. Such critiques tend to ignore offshoots of the New Age, such as goddess-focused ecofeminism, that welcome the expression of political and social grievances (Lashman 1993). Admittedly, however, these exceptions represent only a small percentage of those who participate in a movement that generally resists involvement in conventional politics.

4. "Market activities, and possibly voting," Robert Wuthnow (1987: 81) observes, "actually constitute the major forms of public participation. . . . The market, therefore, provides an important means of discharging moral responsibilities to the society in which we live."

5. Hank Johnston (1995) offers an ambitious formal approach for the analysis of social movement narrative, whose influence on this chapter I am happy to acknowledge. Although sympathetic to Johnston's search for rigor, I am skeptical that the flow of social life studied by ethnographers sorts itself into the bounded discursive units that Johnston apparently seeks. Johnston's declaration that "the fundamental task in the microanalysis of discourse and text is the specification of all sources of meaning" (220) is at once a truism and a search for the impossible. In this chapter I follow a looser approach to frame analysis based
on the assumption that readers are interested in the general question of how my subjects create, contest, and modify their social world through talk. The discreteness of the texts presented here is entirely artificial, and at present I see no practical alternative to that inherent artifice.


7. For privacy reasons, I use pseudonyms for channels and, in some cases, for their spirits, whose identity is often closely tied to their human vehicles. The only exceptions are channels who qualify as public figures, including Kevin Ryerson, J. Z. Knight, and Elizabeth Clare Prophet. The narratives presented in this chapter have been edited for conciseness and economy.

8. These observations are directly inspired by the late Roy A. Rappaport’s work on the performative aspects of liturgical orders. “Liturgical orders are public,” Rappaport (1979: 194) writes, “and participation in them constitutes a public acceptance of a public order, regardless of the private state of belief. Acceptance is, thus, a fundamental social act, and it forms a basis for public orders.”

9. David J. Hess has analyzed how Shirley MacLaine uses skepticism for rhetorical effect in her best-selling book Out on a Limb. According to Hess (1993: 52), MacLaine projects a “New Age self” that “synthesizes a skeptical, scientific voice of an earlier phase of her life with a believing, spiritual voice of past lives and ancient knowledge.”

10. In his presidential address to the Association for the Sociology of Religion, David G. Bromley (1997) proposes an analytical scheme that maps American social forms according to their position on two major ideological axes: covenantal/contractual and priestly/prophetic. Bromley’s model is entirely compatible with the discursive fields (self/other and belief/experience) outlined in this chapter but takes them far beyond the narrow scope of my analysis. He places the New Age at the contractual and prophetic end of his analytical axes, a zone that in recent decades has expanded its influence in American social and political life (108, 127–129).

SIX

Fundamentalism

When History Goes Awy

JOSHUA J. YATES AND JAMES DAVISON HUNTER

Religious fundamentalism is a complex and diverse phenomenon. Fundamentalist movements are a highly contingent, historically specific set of local, regional, and national movements operating toward any number of discrete ends: some expressly political, some cultural, some theological, and most, various combinations of all three. As a global concept, “fundamentalism” has limitations, and attempts to ascribe a substantive degree of analytical unity to the term across the complexities of world-religious expression require caution. For every generalization, one could no doubt find an exception. Acknowledging this fact, however, does not imply that the term is conceptually fallow. Structuring the aspirations of fundamentalist movements grounded within specific cultures and religious traditions is a “symmetry of intention,” which is nothing less than the reestablishment of social (and often political) order on a religious basis. This symmetry, we argue, is rooted in the shared narrative of modernity.

In this chapter, we seek to demonstrate the utility and importance of a narrative approach for making conceptual sense of religious fundamentalism as a global phenomenon. The first part considers conventional approaches to fundamentalist movements and argues that a narrative account greatly augments and strengthens standard treatments of the subject by introducing the discursive form that gives fundamentalism its evocative power. The second section takes a first step in applying a narrative approach to the study of fundamentalism by examining and comparing the
STORIES OF CHANGE
Narrative and Social Movements
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