THE AQUARIAN CONSPIRACY

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN THE 1980s

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Foreword by Max Lerner
kind to be arbitrary and ultimately meaningless categories.” The Cartesian-Newtonian worldview becomes philosophically untenable. It seems simplistic and arbitrary, useful for the practical purposes of everyday life but “unfit for the purpose of philosophical speculation and understanding. . . . The universe is [now] seen as a divine play and an infinite web of adventures in consciousness.”

If it can be demonstrated that subjects in unusual states of consciousness have access to accurate information about the universe, if they experience it as portrayed by quantum-relativistic physics, “we might have to abandon the derogatory term ‘altered states of consciousness.’” At least some of these states might be seen as a valid source of information about the nature of the universe and the dimension of the human mind.

“The essential conflict,” Grof said, “is no longer between science and mysticism.” Rather it is between the emergent paradigm and a “coalition” paradigm: the joining of the old mechanical model of science and ordinary or “pedestrian” consciousness. In other words, the problem is not so much contradictory data as contradictory states of consciousness—a conflict Grof feels is resolved by the holographic view.

THE SPIRITUAL ADVENTURE

In his account of a Sufi apprenticeship, Reshad Feild said:

I suddenly understood that it is most certainly necessary to seek, to ask the question; rather than pushing away the answer by dashing after it, one must ask and listen at the same time. . . . At that moment I knew that I was being heard, that I was dissolving and becoming food for the great transformation process that was taking place in the universe. . . . At the same time that I was dying I was being born. . . .

Hamid said, “The Soul is a knowing substance.”

In the West religious issues are customarily supposed to be resolved by faith, but a teacher in the traditions of direct knowing encourages questions, even doubts. This spirituality asks the seeker to drop beliefs, not add to them.

Assorted dangers await the spiritual adventurer. We have discussed some obvious ones in an earlier chapter: regressive
behavior, unsettling experiences, fanaticism, the passive surrender to an unworthy teacher, pendulum change.

But the disciplines themselves warn of other, subtler dangers. "The Way in this world is like the edge of a blade," says a Hasidic master, and, in the Katha Upanishad, the famous caveat: "The path is narrow... sharp as a razor's edge, most difficult to tread."

Whereas the outsider may perceive the spiritual seeker's transient loss of internal equilibrium as alarming, a teacher might consider it a necessary step. The greater danger, in the teacher's mind, is that the student may become certain of the answers, stop there, and never reach appropriate uncertainty.

Asked to name ideas they had given up as a result of the transformative process, several of those who responded to the Aquarian Conspiracy questionnaire said "conventional Christianity," "religious dogma," and about an equal number said "atheism" or "agnosticism."

The Radical Center of spiritual experience seems to be knowing without doctrine.

One contemporary seeker described his own experience:

There were a number of times when I felt I really understood what it was all about. Then several years later I would have to say that was a stupid thing... From a subsequent vantage point, I obviously hadn't understood a damned thing. I think this is fairly universal.

... Every time you enlarge that knowing—or acquire more of it—you see things in a different perspective. It isn't that it was really wrong before, but it's just seen quite differently, in a different light... That's the essence of transformation, reaching the part of ourselves that knows, that doesn't feel threatened and doesn't fight the metamorphosis...

Teachers and techniques in the spiritual disciplines must be considered together, for the teacher does not impart knowledge but technique. This is the "transmission" of knowledge by direct experience.

Doctrines, on the other hand, is second-hand knowledge, a danger. "Stand above, pass on, and be free" is the advice of RinzaI, the same sage who advised the seeker to kill the patriarchs or the Buddha if he should encounter them. "Do not get entangled in any teaching."

Disciples are supposed to find the teacher, not vice versa.
The teacher's authority rests on personal liberation. One follows qualities, not people.

The path to direct knowing is beautifully illustrated in a series of paintings from twelfth-century China known as the ten ox-herding pictures. The ox represents "ultimate nature." At first (Seeking the Ox) the searcher undertakes to look for something he only vaguely apprehends. Then (Finding the Tracks) he sees in traces of his own consciousness the first evidence that there truly is an ox. After a time (First Glimpse) he has his first direct experience and knows now that the ox is omnipresent. Next (Catching the Ox) he undertakes advanced spiritual practices to help him deal with the wild strength of the ox. Gradually (Taming the Ox) he achieves a more subtle, intimate relationship with ultimate nature. In this phase, the seeker unlearns many of the distinctions that were useful in earlier stages. "The Ox is a free companion now, not a tool for plowing the field of enlightenment," Lex Hixon, a meditation teacher, wrote in his sensitive commentary on the pictures.

In the stage of illumination (Riding the Ox Home) the former disciple, now a sage, realizes that disciplines were not necessary; enlightenment was always at hand. Afterward (Ox Forgotten, Self Alone and Ox and Self Forgotten) he comes even nearer to pure consciousness and discovers that there is no such person as an enlightened sage. There is no enlightenment. There is no holiness because everything is holy. The profane is sacred. Everyone is a sage waiting to happen.

In the penultimate phase (Return to the Source) the sage seeker merges with the domain that generates the phenomenal world. A scene of mountains, pine trees, clouds, and waves emerges. "This waxing and waning of life is no phantom but a manifestation of the source," reads the caption. But there is a stage beyond this idyll.

The final picture (Entering the Marketplace with Helping Hands) evokes human compassion and action. The seeker is now shown as a cheerful peasant who wanders from village to village. "The gate of his cottage is closed, and even the wisest cannot find him." He has gone so deeply into human experience that he cannot be traced. Knowing now that all the sages are one, he does not follow great teachers. Seeing the intrinsic Buddha nature in all human beings, even innkeepers and fishmongers, he brings them to bloom.

These ideas are part of all traditions of direct knowing: the glimpse of the true nature of reality, the dangers of early experiences, the need to train attention, the eventual disassociation
from ego or individual self, enlightenment, the discovery that
the light was there all along, connection with the source that
generates the world of appearances, reunion with all living
things.

The methods for attaining liberation were likened by Buddha
to a raft that takes you to the far shore. Once on the opposite
bank, you have no need for the method. Similarly, the teacher
is compared to a finger pointing to the moon. Once you see the
moon—once you understand the process—there is no point in
looking at the finger. Just as we need to become rich before we
can discover we didn’t need to be rich, we acquire techniques
that teach us we didn’t need techniques. The sacred takes us
back to the profane, but we will never again know it as profane.

We need not still our passions, Blake said, but only “cultivate
our understandings. . . . Everything that lives is holy.”

FLOW AND WHOLENESS

Two key principles seem to emerge in all mystical experience.
We might call them “flow” and “wholeness.” The ancient
Tibetan teacher Tilopa referred to them as “the principle of the
nonabiding” and “the principle of nondistinction,” and he
warned against harming them. Our culture has indeed harmed
these principles. We try to freeze the nonabiding, we try to
imprison that which exists only in movement, freedom, relation-
ship. And we betray wholeness, nondistinction, by break-
ing apart everything in sight so that we miss the underlying
connection of everything in the universe.

In mystical experience there is the sense that “this is the way
things are.” Not how we wish them to be, not how we analyze
them to be, not as we have been taught, but the nature of
things—the Way.

Flow and wholeness are seen as true principles, not just in
relation to work, health, or psychological growth but
throughout the fabric of life. The developer of a kind of psychol-
ogical aikido for dealing with conflict remarked on the way the
technique of flowing with an opponent causes a gradual
change in the practitioner. “It may be subtle at first, but even
the most mean-spirited of people begin to relinquish their
grip on their aggression, lose their anger, and reconnect with
the living force.”

These mystical experiences reflect, more than just the flow-
ing wholeness inherent in living systems (as in the theory of
dissipative structures), the flow of our world from another dimension and the tendency of the universe to create ever more complex wholes. On an everyday level this knowledge shifts our time frame from temporal to eternal; we accept impermanence and cease struggling to keep the same all that must change. We experience life’s blows and blessings with greater equanimity.

Our futile efforts at control impede the flow we might otherwise have in our lives. Once we get out of our own way, we can become ourselves. “I set the rivers free for all mankind,” says that most ancient of mystical writings, the *Rig Veda*.

“The world is a spinning die,” according to an old Hasidic passage, “...and all things turn and spin and change, for at the root all is one, and salvation inheres in the change and return of things.”

Just as we must trust ourselves to the buoyancy of water if we are to swim, we can relax into that flow, turn with the spinning die. The novices in Zen monasteries are called *unsui*, cloud-water. They are meant to move freely, to form and reform spontaneously, to seek a way around obstacles. In ancient traditions, consciousness itself is pictured as an emergent wave from the source, very much like the interference patterns postulated in the holographic theory described in Chapter 6.

The second principle of wholeness — non-distinction — represents the connectedness, the context, of everything. Just as science demonstrates a web of relationship underlying everything in the universe, a glittering network of events, so the mystical experience of wholeness encompasses all separation. “In free space there is neither right nor left,” says a Hasidic master. “All souls are one. Each is a spark from the original soul, and this soul is inherent in all souls.” Buddhism maintains that all human beings are Buddhas, but not all have awakened to their true nature. *Yoga* literally means “union.” Full enlightenment is a vow to save “all sentient beings.”

This wholeness encompasses self, others, ideas.

Love is felt as a dynamic state of consciousness rather than as an emotion. Just as fear is constricted and chaotic, love is wide and coherent—a creative flow, harmony, acceptance of human frailty imbedded in deep self-knowledge. It is defenseless power, communication, vanished boundaries, closure.

You are joined to a great Self: *Tat tvam asi*, “Thou art That.” And because that Self is inclusive, you are joined to all others. In the mystical vision of William Blake:
Awake! awake o sleeper of the land of shadows, wake!
expand!
I am in you and you in me, mutual in love...
Fibers of love from man to man...
Lo! we are One.

Or, as a contemporary mystic expressed it on a personalized
license plate, IMU URL.

This wholeness unites opposites. This Radical Center, this
healing of the separation of human beings from each other and
from nature is described in all mystical traditions. Nicholas da
Cusa called it the coincidentia oppositorium, the union of oppo-
sites. In the Hasidic writings it is "the union of qualities, twos
which oppose each other like two colors... but seen with the
true inner eye form one simple unity." In Buddhism it is
madhyâ, the transcendent middle way. The Kogi Indians of
Colombia speak of the Way of the Souls leading at once up-
ward and downward, the joining of polarities, the black sun.

In these spiritual traditions there is neither good nor evil.
There is only light and the absence of light... wholeness and
brokenness... flow and struggle.

A young therapist said:

An image occurs to me: the ocean shore. An outcropping
of rock extending into the sea, strong and narrow. Which,
when I restrict my field of vision sufficiently, appears to
split the water into two distinct and separate bodies. The
action of the waves lapping up on either side makes it
seem as though these two are ever straining toward one
another, striving with each surge to overcome this rock
which prevents their joining... when, by simply stepping
back and seeing more, by taking an all-encompassing per-
spective, expanding consciousness, I see that the separa-
tion is only an illusion—that both waves are and always
were part of the one ocean, separated only by choice of my
perception and my notion of striving to be one....

I see that I am already whole, that there is nothing to
overcome. In those moments of emptiness, of letting be,
of complete contact with another, I know that I am all I
can be.

He is whole, "in place," awake to what Huxley called the
"Allrightness" of the world, what Milton Mayerhoff described
as knowing that "life is enough," the creative insight Rollo May
called "this-is-the-way-things-are-meant-to-be." Home is not a place but an experience. The open secret of the spiritual disciplines is becoming whole, becoming oneself, going home. "The way home," said Colin Wilson in his study of mystics and artists, "is the way forward, more deeply into life." By definition, the Aquarian Conspiracy is in the world, like the "hidden yogis" of which Sri Ramakrishna spoke.

In this wholeness, oddly enough, virtues we might once have sought in vain through moral concepts now come spontaneously. It is easier to give, to be compassionate.

GOD WITHIN: THE OLDEST HERESY

In the emergent spiritual tradition God is not the personage of our Sunday-school mentality but more nearly the dimension described by William James:

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether other dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world... We belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong, ...

I will call this higher part of the universe by the name of God.

God is experienced as flow, wholeness, the infinite kaleidoscope of life and death, Ultimate Cause, the ground of being, what Alan Watts called "the silence out of which all sound comes." God is the consciousness that manifests as lila, the play of the universe. God is the organizing matrix we can experience but not tell, that which enlivens matter.

In J. D. Salinger's short story, "Teddy," a spiritually precocious youngster recalls his experience of immanent God while watching his little sister drink her milk. "...All of a sudden I saw that she was God and the milk was God. I mean, all she was doing was pouring God into God..."

Once you have achieved the essence of religious experience, asked Meister Eckhart, what do you need with the form? "No one can know God who has not first known himself," he told his medieval followers. "Go to the depths of the soul, the secret place... to the roots, to the heights; for all that God can do is focused there."
British theologian John Robinson writes of a “shot-silk universe, spirit and matter, inside and outside, divine and human, shimmering like aspects of one reality which cannot be separated or divided.” To Alfred North Whitehead, whose influence has risen like a flood tide in recent years, God is “the mirror image to structure in the [material] world. The world is incomplete; in its very nature it requires an entity at the base of all things, to complete it. This entity is God, primordial nature.”

Buckminster Fuller tried to capture the sense of God as process:

For God, to me, it seems  
is a verb  
not a noun,  
proper or improper;  
is the articulation  
not the art...  
is loving,  
not the abstraction of love...

Yes, God is a verb,  
the most active, connoting the vast harmonic  
reordering the universe  
from unleashed chaos of energy.

We need not postulate a purpose for this Ultimate Cause nor wonder who or what caused whatever Big Bang launched the visible universe. There is only the experience. To Kazantzakis, God was the sum total of consciousness in the universe, expanding through human evolution. In the mystical experience there is the felt presence of an all-encompassing love, compassion, power. Individuals revived after clinical death sometimes describe passage down a dark tunnel to an unearthly light that seems to emit love and understanding. It is as if the light itself is a manifestation of universal mind.

Mystical experiences nearly always lead one to a belief that some aspect of consciousness is imperishable. In a Buddhist metaphor the consciousness of the individual is like a flame that burns through the night. It is not the same flame over time, yet neither is it another flame.

A number of those filling out the Aquarian Conspiracy questionnaire commented that their experiences had forced them to give up their previous assumption that bodily death ends con-
sciousness. Despite their disaffiliation with formal religion, 53 percent expressed strong belief in such survival and another 23 percent said they were "moderately sure," a total of 75 percent. Only 5 percent were skeptical and 3 percent disbelieving.

The strongest believers were those who recounted brushes with death. Belief correlated strongly with the incidence of peak experiences and the pursuit of spiritual disciplines. A famous actress attributed her lifelong interest in the spiritual to a near-drowning when she was three: "Euphoria, music, and color surpassed anything known in the natural physical state."

Although he did not mention the incident in his 1927 account of his famous flight, Charles Lindbergh described in *The Spirit of St. Louis* (1953) an experience of disembodiment, the transcendence of space and time, loss of the fear of death, a sense of omniscience, remembrance of other lives, and a lasting shift in values.

Lindbergh wrote that in the eighteenth hour of his journey, he felt himself as "an awareness spreading through space, over the earth and into the heavens, unhampered by time or substance...." The fuselage behind him filled with ghostly presences, "vaguely outlined forms, transparent, moving, riding weightless with me in the plane." He "saw" them behind him "as though my skull was one great eye." They conversed with him, advised him on problems of his navigation, "giving me messages of importance unattainable in ordinary life."

There was no weight to his body, no hardness to the stick. He felt more akin to the spirits, "on the borderline of life and a greater realm beyond, as though caught in the field of gravitation between two planets...." He felt as if he were acted upon by forces too weak to be measured by normal means, "yet representing power incomparably stronger than I've ever known."

The presences seemed neither intruders nor strangers, more like a gathering of family and friends long separated, as though he had known them in some past incarnation.

"Death no longer seems the final end it used to be, but rather the entrance to a new and free existence," he wrote. The values of his twenty-five years — even the importance of the long-dreamed-of flight — altered sharply.

Fifty years later, when Lindbergh lay dying in his cottage in Hawaii, his wife asked him to share with her the experience of confronting the end. What was it like to face death? "There isn't anything to face," he said.
THE VISION: LIGHT AND THE COMING OF LIGHT

Contemporary mystical experiences from many individuals and many parts of the world have centered in recent years on a collective and intensifying vision, the sense of an impending transition in the human story: an evolution of consciousness as significant as any step in the long chain of our biological evolution. The consensual vision, whatever its variations, sees this transformation of consciousness as the moment anticipated by older prophecies in all the traditions of direct knowing—the death of one world and the birth of a new, an apocalypse, the "end of days" period in the Kabbalah, the awakening of increasing numbers of human beings to their godlike potential. "The seed of God is in us," Meister Eckhart said. "Pears seeds grow into pear trees, nut seeds into nut trees, and God seed into God."

The instruction booklet for Stargate, a contemporary symbolic game relating to consciousness, opens: "The turning-about is upon us, the turning of mind, the expansion of eyes... the light that shapes from within."

Always, the vision of evolution toward the light. Light is the oldest and most pervasive metaphor in spiritual experience. We speak of enlightenment, the city of light, the Light of the World, children of light, the "white-light experience."

"Light... light," wrote T. S. Eliot, "visible reminder of invisible light." To Honoré de Balzac, it seemed that humankind was on the edge of a great struggle; the forces are there, he insisted: "I feel in myself a life so comestous that it might enlighten a world, and yet I am shut up in a sort of mineral." In The Reflexive Universe Arthur Young, inventor of the Bell helicopter, offered in speculative scientific terms an idea as old as myth and Plato: We represent a "fall" into matter from light, and the lightward ascent has begun again.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti wrote a poem about "Olbers' paradox," the observation of a learned astronomer that there were relatively few stars nearby; the farther away he looked, the more there were.

So that from this we can deduce
that in the infinite distances
there must be a place
there must be a place
where all is light
and that the light from that high place
where all is light
simply hasn’t got here yet...

"Let the light penetrate the darkness until the darkness shines and there is no longer any division between the two," says a Hasidic passage. Before the soul enters the world, it is conducted through all the worlds and shown the first light so that it may forever yearn to attain it. The sadik in the Hasidic tradition, like the Bodhisattva of Buddhism, has allowed the light to enter him and shine out into the world again.

To the third-century mystic, Plotinus, it was "the clear light which is itself." The Sufi dervish dancer does the "turn" with upraised right hand, symbolically bringing light onto the earth. The shaman achieves a state of perfect balance so that he might see a blinding light.

The dream of light and liberation is poetically expressed in an apocryphal contemporary Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ. For too long, it says, our temples have been the tombs of the hidden things of time. Our temples, crypts, and caves are dark. We have been unable to see the patterns. "In light there are no secret things... There is no lonely pilgrim on the way to light. Men only gain the heights by helping others gain the heights...."

"We know that the light is coming over the hills. God speed the light."