

# A Serious Look at New Age Spirituality

An anthropologist examines how channeling has filtered down to middle-of-the road America

BY CHRISTOPHER SHEA

WASHINGTON  
FOR HIS LATEST BOOK, Michael F. Brown spent more than one evening kicking back on a sofa and taking notes while the people around him jabbered in the tongues of extraterrestrials or 3,000-year-old Nubian priests.

Dr. Brown, an anthropologist at Williams College, has been studying "channelers," a subculture within the New Age movement that even most New Agers consider fringe. Channelers believe they can use themselves as conduits for communications from other epochs, other planets, or other dimensions.

Most academics despise the New Age. They find the loose conglomeration of spiritual views that goes by the name to be self-indulgent, anti-rational, and terribly middlebrow.

So you might sympathize if the conventionally tweedy Dr. Brown, Princeton class of '72, confessed to feeling uncomfortable among channelers in full yawp.

Yet, he says, "I liked the people I worked with, with few exceptions. I thought they were smart and funny. Sometimes their imaginations were a little, oh, unconstrained for my taste. But I liked their willingness to consider almost everything. I found it refreshing."

People outside the New Age loop may know channeling from the "Doonesbury" parody: A ditzzy female character is occasionally taken over by "Hunk-Ra," an assertive 21,000-year-old warrior. The parody is based on J. Z. Knight, a former suburban housewife who became a channeling celebrity—and a millionaire—after a revelation that someone named "Ramtha" was trying to speak through her.

## SOLID BOURGEOIS STANDING

Dr. Brown's new book, *The Channeling Zone: American Spirituality in an Anxious Age* (Harvard University Press), looks at J. Z. Knight and at channelers more extreme. But it also looks at the way channeling has filtered down from a few charismatic figures into self-help groups full of mall-going, middle-class Americans. Sometimes it doesn't differ much from meditation. Channelers may still be on the fringe, Dr. Brown argues, but their solid

bourgeois standing magnifies their cultural influence.

"I tried to use channeling as a gateway to understand some broader ideas," he says. "I wanted to do justice to the understanding of the kind of sensibility that is reflected in channeling, but also to show how that sensibility is reflected and refracted in the world as middle-class people experience it."

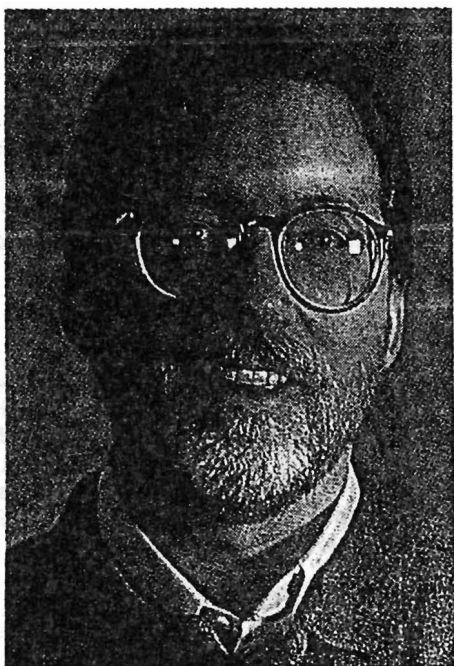
"A lot of the language of channeling is the same language you hear on PBS shows about 'self-actualization,' or from motivational speakers hired by businesses."

## A SOJOURN IN SANTA FE

Dr. Brown got his first real taste of the New Age eight years ago, during a sojourn at a Santa Fe, N.M., think tank. He was finishing a book on an alliance between a Peruvian rebel movement of 1965 and local Indian tribes that viewed the rebels as divine. A neighbor sometimes kept him up nights by beating on a tribal drum during impromptu "healing sessions." Curious, he started hanging out at self-improvement workshops and asking questions.

Now he finds evidence of the New Age's reach even when he visits his parents in Naples, Fla. "It's a very Republican community," he says, "but I'll be at a party and some guy in white shoes will come up and say, 'My wife and I went to see a channeler. It was kind of fun.'" In America, where 70 per cent of adults say they believe in angels and 25 per cent accept the possibility of reincarnation, channeling comfortably co-exists with Bill Bennett-style moral conservatism.

In a typical fieldwork expedition for the book, Dr. Brown spent several hours in upstate New York with a group that channels "Kana." Kana "lives on a future dimensional plane, parallel to ours but ahead of us by many thousands of years," according to a brochure printed by the channelers. The main channeler, "Paul" (Dr. Brown granted most people in his book anonymity), spoke in a robotic voice for about an hour and a half, sharing such glimpses of Kana's world as, "We are of one thought and mind. We share all feelings and deeds." He called on his listeners to balance runaway technology with eco-



ERIC POGGENPOHL FOR THE CHRONICLE

*Michael F. Brown of Williams College:  
"A lot of the language of channeling is  
the same language you hear on PBS shows  
about 'self-actualization.' "*

logical sensitivity—a goal he said Kana's race has already accomplished.

As Dr. Brown describes it, the evening sounds less like a religious event than a cocktail party with an eccentric guest of honor. An engineer challenges Kana on technological details of his world. Kana

---

**Sometimes channelers' imaginations were a little, oh, unconstrained for my taste. But I liked their willingness to consider almost everything. I found it refreshing."**

---

cracks bad jokes. (Someone asks him if people on his planet have antennae on their faces. "No," he replies. "We have cable.")

But afterward, one woman marvels:

"These encounters teach us that our powers are far greater than we know. I'm amazed by the human mind and by how far we can expand ourselves."

Other channelers have a style that is much closer to lecturing. You wouldn't know, unless they told you, that their pronouncements about freeing the mind from the shackles of Western reason were supposedly coming from another planet.

Dr. Brown sees a coherent philosophy in all of the approaches: Human beings are the equivalent of gods, able to tap into the deepest powers in the universe. We can shape reality with our thoughts. Rational judgment of almost any kind is a bad thing.

Channeling has roots in spiritual traditions stretching from Brazil to Scandinavia, he argues, but it also reflects some quintessentially American concerns. It taps into the long-standing American impulse to do away with religious middlemen and have a direct experience of the sacred. (One group he met with claims to channel Jesus.) It finds support in the all-American belief in the limitless potential of every person.

#### DEALING WITH FRAGMENTATION

Channeling also reflects some very modern, or postmodern, worries. Cultural critics are always talking about how people faced with the information overload of the late 20th century—and who fill such varied roles as mother, businesswoman, consumer, and Internet surfer—have the sense that their identity is fragmenting. Channeling may be a way of dealing with, even celebrating, this feeling.

Channelers, furthermore, sometimes assume roles that society has denied them. Some studies have found that twice as many women as men channel, and that they often channel hyper-masculine figures. They may be indulging in "gender play," akin to people who take on a new identity on the Internet.

One historical antecedent of channeling is the spiritualism movement, which swept America in the 1840s and lasted through the 1870s. In 1843, Shaker mediums in New York welcomed the spirits of Cromwell and Caesar to a religious gathering.

*Continued on Page A18*

THE FACULTY: RESEARCH

---

*Continued From Page A16*

The most prominent theologians of the day debated whether it was possible to summon family members from beyond the grave. One change since then, Dr. Brown notes, is a growing ambivalence about the family: No one wants to channel Mom anymore.

**LITTLE INTEREST FROM SCHOLARS**

Despite its influence, the New Age doesn't attract many researchers. "Most people I know who are thinking of studying the New Age decide not to," says Robert Wuthnow, a professor of sociology at Princeton University who writes frequently about religion. "It really isn't a coherent movement—even the term doesn't adequately describe it. That's why I think

Brown's work is important. It takes up one aspect of current spirituality and gives us a good understanding of it."

Some scholars shun investigating the New Age out of fear that their colleagues will think they have gone native. "The taboo quality tends to rub off on the academics involved," says David J. Hess, author of *Science in the New Age* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1993), which looked at the debates between New Agers and debunkers.

Dr. Brown, like a good anthropologist, suspended judgment during his research, although he is temperamentally a skeptic. Many of the groups he sat in on were so small he couldn't avoid participating, which led to some awkward moments. In one San-

ta Fe workshop, he was asked to pick up a crystal that a woman had added to a pile of personal effects, and to tap into the "personal energy" it exuded. "To my surprise," he writes, "I saw an incendiary landscape of southwestern mesas that evoked a sense of regret followed by a feeling of reconciliation." The woman said he had channeled one of her dreams.

**'A KIND OF FREE ASSOCIATION'**

"I gave it my best," he says now, with a shrug. "I think a lot of it was a kind of free association, and that's fine, that's okay. It's like friends sitting around a room late at night, saying, 'Let's talk about the first thing that pops into our heads.' You are moving away from rational thought, experi-

menting with a different way of being in the world. It's actually kind of fun, if you aren't worried about where it's headed."

In some cases, it's headed toward radical relativism, disengagement with the world, and "self-important apocalyptic babble," he says.

He knows, however, that New Agers don't have a monopoly on those failings. In the workshops he attended, he heard something unsettlingly familiar in the constant assertions that there is no truth beyond individual viewpoints—that the worst sin is to challenge someone's emotional recounting of their own personal experience.

"In my darker moments," he says, "I think the New Age speaks much the same language as the humanities today." ■