

church of some kind. For now, however, she needs to explore her own divinity. "In my sessions working with Deborah," Marilyn said, "DK told me that you can't go by somebody else's rules on sexuality or the types of food that you eat or how to live your life. You have to go by what works for you. My choice has been to step outside the organization frame of mind. As soon as I made that choice, I felt the expansion."

## TOWARD SACRED ANDROGYNY

The self-expansion that Marilyn and others pursue through channeling routinely takes them into unusual gender territory. Although women were prominent in the rise of channeling in the 1970s and 80s, for instance, most of the entities they channeled were identified as male. In the 1990s, channels report more frequent contacts with feminine or sexually ambiguous beings, and they emphasize the important role that spiritual gender-crossing can play in broadening people's views of their own internal multiplicity. Their increasing self-consciousness about the connection between gender and spirituality parallels the rise of gender-focused religious movements elsewhere in America.

In mainstream Christian denominations, some women not only demand a larger role in day-to-day participation and decision-making but also seek representation in liturgy through the introduction of feminine symbols such as the biblical figure Sophia, a female personification of God.<sup>1</sup> Even among evangelical Christians who see men as the biblically ordained leaders of home and church, feminist ideals

have subtly influenced teachings about marriage and family. At the same time, and partially in response to the emergence of women-centered forms of spirituality, thousands of men now flock to revivals organized by the Promise Keepers, an evangelical fellowship dedicated to helping men "reclaim their manhood" within a Christian moral framework. The most dramatic expressions of gender-focused spirituality take place farther from the mainstream, in ecofeminist workshops, neopagan covens, Goddess seminars, men's drumming groups, and, in smaller numbers, communities that experiment with nontraditional family arrangements and sexual practices.<sup>2</sup>

This is hardly the first time that a preoccupation with gender has arisen in American religion. In the nineteenth century, groups such as the Shakers and the Oneida Community experimented with novel family structures and approaches to sexuality, ranging from total celibacy to free love, in an attempt to offer a level of personal freedom denied them by the wider society. Although nineteenth-century spiritualists were not prominent among those advocating novel rearrangements of family structure, they were deeply committed to the emergence of women from their subordinate status in Christian churches. At the very least, spiritualism offered female mediums an escape from the straitjacket of social convention. Between 1854 and 1861, for example, a former invalid from Vermont named Achsa Sprague held audiences spellbound with her inspirational lectures, presented while she was deep in trance. Her fame as a public speaker opened to her a life unknown to most women of the time. She traveled extensively, acquired independent means, and felt free to decline offers of marriage from admirers. Other women found that spiritualism allowed them even bolder forms of self-expression. The English medium Annie Fairlamb regularly produced a

spirit named Minnie; who was given to caressing and kissing gentlemen in the audience. Another of Fairlamb's spirit manifestations, a brazen, bearded man named George, liked to kiss women at séances, and his salty language sometimes scandalized listeners. Fairlamb and other female mediums thus became vessels for the spirits of men, allowing them to explore male language and even male embodiments in ways that, for some at least, proved liberating. More important, the direct connection that mediums established with the spirit world bypassed the male chain of command then characteristic of religious congregations.<sup>3</sup>

Women continue to be disproportionately represented in New Age religious practices. Regional magazines oriented to natural healing and alternative spirituality in New England typically advertise the services of roughly twice as many female practitioners as male, and the discrepancy is even greater if one limits the comparison to those who offer psychic counseling and psychotherapy. At channeling sessions, women often outnumber men by a factor of three to one or more, and the ratio of male to female channels is approximately 1:2 in New England and the Southwest.<sup>4</sup>

Channels typically account for this disparity by appealing to notions of inherent differences between the sexes. In a 1990 interview, Kim Westin and Ian Hanson, channels who provide spiritual counseling from the back of their bookstore in a former mining town in New Mexico, argued strongly that men and women have fundamentally different spiritual attributes and potentials. As we spoke, the corrugated iron roof of their store snapped and buckled under the blast-furnace sunlight of late June.

"Women are intuitive by nature," Ian mused.

Kim interrupted. "A woman is a natural receiver. A man is a natural sender."

"That's right," Ian agreed.

"For a man to be a trance medium or a channel, he has to be a feminine polarity in his male body to receive that information," Kim continued. "So there are far fewer feminine-polarity males than there are feminine-polarity or masculine-polarity females. But a masculine-polarity female isn't going to be a channel either. It's going to be a feminine-polarity or . . ."

Ian interjected, "It's all yin and yang. You've got it both, you know—the masculine and the feminine. And for me I'm . . ."

Kim ignored Ian's elaboration. "But it's the receiving types, not the outputting types, who are likely to be good channels," she said.

Ian persisted. "I can be yin or yang. I mean we *all* are, but it's easy for me to allow the feminine side to come in. A lot of men have subtle hang-ups when that sensitivity starts coming in. But I don't have any problems with that. I can get very yin, almost to the point where you'd say, 'Well, is the guy gay or what?' At the same time, though, I can turn that around and be aggressive and very, very yang."

Ian and Kim's animated burst of opinion about gender expresses beliefs held by many of those who are involved in channeling. Masculine and feminine represent two poles with contrasting attributes and predispositions. The masculine is rational, analytical, power-seeking, and self-absorbed; the feminine is emotional, intuitive, nurturing, and other-focused. About the root cause of these differences, however, there is considerable disagreement.

Some channels argue that the contrast between the sexes has been created by our upbringing. As one woman put it, "Women

are trained to yearn for connections, while men are trained to yearn for individuality." Anna Swenson, the channel from upstate New York, put the issue more starkly: "Women haven't had the intuitive aspects beaten out of them." In a variation on this theme, some mentioned alleged developmental differences in the brain hemispheres of men and women. Social experience supposedly encourages men to favor left-brain activities (for instance, analytical thinking), whereas women are allowed to develop such right-brain functions as artistic creativity and holistic thinking.<sup>5</sup> Ironically, by discouraging women from involvement in politics and intellectual life, patriarchal oppression left them free to explore their intuitive powers. Because men were off playing power games, the argument goes, their own intuition withered.

Others contend that the differences between men and women begin at a deeper level, in genes or chromosomes or fundamental "energies" unique to each sex, forces that supposedly make women spiritual by nature. This view underlies Kim Westin's claim that women are natural receivers while men are natural senders. The female energy is perceived to be "more open to intuition, feelings, and emotions," whereas the male energy is seen to push men in the direction of analysis and self-consciousness. A channel from Massachusetts stressed women's skill in nonlinear thinking. "The act of channeling involves trust, intuition, and submission to a total experience. You have to be *in* it, not analyzing it at the same time," she said.

Such views echo nineteenth-century reasoning about why women were more likely than men to become mediums. Women, it was asserted then, are by nature impressionable, sentimental, passive, and even angelic—all qualities that open them to spiritual influence. Although today's female channels might

object to the characterization of women as naturally passive, the rest of the portrait would strike them as accurate.

Another explanation offered for the predominance of women as channels is eschatological, based on the belief that history follows a sacred plan. Among those involved in women-centered spirituality, it is virtually an article of faith that all societies were once matriarchies dedicated to the worship of the Goddess. Matriarchal utopias, the story continues, were eventually overthrown by the male institutions that have dominated human history for the last three millennia. (The absence of support for this view among reputable scholars is considered further proof of patriarchal domination.) As our species moves toward a new synthesis of male and female, patriarchy is crumbling under the weight of its pathologies.

This eschatology has percolated into the worldview of channels and their clients. A New Mexico channel described recovered memories of her previous incarnations, dating to a period before the destruction of matriarchy. "I can remember lives of being in temples, and I can remember lives of being a medicine woman," she said. "I have memories of being empowered, of leading groups of people and communing with groups of women, doing Moon Lodges and all these wonderful things that are starting to happen again." For Sandy Randolph, also from New Mexico, the dark ages of male dominance were needed so that humans could understand the effects of imbalance. "There was a time for Spirit to withdraw and for people to have these experiences of competition and killing," she explained. "Spirit is now returning. You can see this in all the angels and entities that are coming through now." As this spiritual transition advances, women lead the way for men, many of whom are paralyzed by anxiety as their patriarchal world collapses around them.

Women's aptitude for intuitive work is cited to explain their over-representation at channeling events, as is the conviction that women can achieve a sense of accomplishment by developing their intuitive powers. Sandy Randolph, whose spiritual services include channeling and American Indian pipe ceremonies, argues that women predominate in her workshops because "it's time for them to give up their woundedness, to come back into their own feminine power." Occasionally, channels provide more prosaic reasons for the high proportion of women who turn out for workshops and lectures. With a mischievous grin, Jill Parsons, a channel from Santa Fe, claimed that single women also attend channeling events in hope of meeting a man who's "willing to open his heart and talk about what he feels," a quasi-mythical species of male known as a SNAG ("Sensitive New Age Guy").

Despite their celebration of the spiritual re-emergence of the feminine, most women involved in channeling distance themselves from feminism, which they describe as negative and reactive, a state of being against men. "I'm not a feminist, I'm a people-ist," one insisted, making clear her belief that gender should not be used to throw up walls between people. Pamela, a middle-aged channel from Santa Fe, put it this way: "Feminism is not equality to me. It's a response to male chauvinism that's taken to an extreme. I wouldn't be a feminist, but I'm an advocate of absolute equality between men and women." Like Pamela, most women involved in channeling hold feminist positions on grassroots issues: equal pay, child care, sex discrimination, and abortion rights. As a group, they are precisely the sort of self-confident, forceful women one might expect to identify with a feminist agenda. A contrast between strong support for the political goals of feminism and rejection of a feminist identity is hardly



unique to channels; according to some feminist writers, it reflects a national pattern.<sup>6</sup> But what is particular to them as a group is their commitment to ideals of harmony and wholeness incompatible with what many see as feminism's confrontational outlook. Women involved in channeling seek an alliance between the sexes, not greater conflict. Some invoke the mystical integration of yin and yang to explain their search for balance between masculine and feminine powers. Others insist that sexual balance simply offers the best hope for happier lives. Such attitudes help to explain their enthusiastic defense of the men's movement, which finds few supporters among feminist intellectuals. The men's movement, among other things, claims to help men reconnect to the spirit of the primordial male at a time when male roles have become increasingly ambiguous. In explaining her sympathy for such experiments, one channel said, "The guys are having a hard time. There's no role model, no pattern for any kind of male energy now. That's why men's groups are wonderful."

Even the channels who identify themselves as committed feminists admit that channeling has made them more open to masculinity, if not to men. Katherine, a therapist who also holds a divinity degree, described how this transformation had taken place for her. "All the feminist stuff that we talked about in divinity school, that doesn't work for me anymore," she said, referring to feminism's focus on the coercive power of patriarchal institutions and attitudes. "In channeling, there isn't any agenda. There's no power in a negative sense." Katherine explained that one of her guardian spirits—a "gatekeeper," as she called him—is decidedly masculine, and their alliance has affected the way she looks at masculinity. "He's around a lot, and that relationship balances me in a way that gets me to understand mascu-

line/feminine on a really experiential level." Katherine argues, in other words, that channeling offers direct experience of masculinity without the emotional risks associated with human relationships. For her, feminist theology is oriented to a "battle" between male and female, whereas her direct, channeled experience of masculinity is nonconfrontational. It heals the wounds of gender and allows her to move on to other things. Anita Sanderson, a close friend of Katherine's and a channel herself, agreed. "Channeling really has to do with balanced energetic forms of male and female. People are now coming to the place of exploring androgyny itself—not necessarily acting in a bisexual manner but simply holding balanced energy," she said.

Women who channel male spirits report that the experience has broadened their understanding of other ways of being. Deborah O'Neill explained her connection to the male entity Dwahl Khul in terms of a desire to offset her natural femininity: "A male guide provided an energy format that helped me to achieve male-female integration. At first I worried that I had a male, left-brained, scientific guide because of some patriarchal tendency on my part, but I found that the male was what I needed for greater integration." Deborah stressed that channeling provides a way to achieve totality by "filling in the gaps." For her, that means exploring masculine assertiveness in her spiritual work.

Some women disapprove of the predominance of male spirits that characterized channeling in the 1970s and 80s, attributing it to the lingering influence of patriarchy. Male figures, they observe, had more credibility in the channeling movement's initial stages. Tamara Jenkins, a Massachusetts channel who holds strongly feminist views, commented, "Many beginners channel male entities because they seem more authoritative. I warn people about this tendency in my channeling workshops." Sandy

Randolph sees her alliance with the Medicine Women, a group of Native American healers whom she regularly channels, as proof that the pattern is shifting. The spirits who contacted her "could have had many incarnations that were not female, yet they've chosen to represent themselves as female or feminine." For Sandy, their choice indicates a desire to "work with the matriarchy," thus helping to rebalance a world too long held in the grip of patriarchal control.

Male channels express views of gender similar to those of their female counterparts. They agree that the male domination of religion is ending, to everyone's benefit. Unlike women, who talk about their "opening to channel" as a process of discovering personal power, men tend to view it as a path to their feminine side: intuition, emotional availability, and a sense of connection to others. Nevertheless, a note of defensiveness sometime crept into men's descriptions of being male in a world undergoing spiritual feminization. A male channel in Florida spoke with approval of feminine empowerment but then added quickly that "Spirit can't be restricted solely to the feminine form." In New Mexico, a man talked of how much he had grown by learning to express his feelings openly, then confessed that he was "looking forward to the time when men don't feel like they have to make excuses for being male."

For male channels, channeling offers a forum for exploring alternatives to masculinity by allowing them to develop intuitive, poetic, or nurturing qualities that they associate with femininity. The balance or symmetry sought by women is seldom fully realized in men's channeling practice: there are few men who regularly channel female spirits, although some predicted that this will become more common as society moves toward gender balance. At present, however, most men consider the act

of channeling to be feminizing enough in itself. James Borden, a channeling psychotherapist from New England, insisted at first that channeling had no effect on his gender identity. After reflecting a moment, however, he admitted that his experiences as a channel for feminine energies had broadened his understanding and enriched his spiritual life.

Gay channels disagree among themselves over whether their sexual orientation is a significant factor in their approach to channeling. Most feel that it is irrelevant, but Bryan Wood, a particularly outspoken New Mexico channel, alleged that many straight channels believe that gays and lesbians are spiritually unbalanced. "What they say is that gay people have a problem integrating their male and female energies, which I think is homophobic nonsense," he said. As a strategy for expanding his channeling practice, Bryan developed a less assertive form of counseling that would appeal to female clients uncomfortable with male authority figures. "There are a lot of feminists among my upper-class white clients," he explained. "I downgraded my authority so that I didn't offend them. I also came out about being gay. So feminists tend to be at ease with me because they see me as part of an oppressed group."

The search for internal gender balance, as well as the frequently stated desire for a new synergy of masculine and feminine principles in the world at large, has led channeling toward several versions of sacred androgyny, the notion that highly developed spiritual beings encompass male and female principles in fruitful complementarity. The prevailing belief in reincarnation provides conceptual support for such ideas. Channeling the entity Michael during a channeling session in Arizona, David Johnson explained that in different lifetimes individuals acquire experiences unique to each gender or sexual orientation. "About ten

percent of the population on the planet is homosexual," David said, "because that's the percentage experiencing and needing to learn the lessons of homosexuality." Other necessary lessons can only be acquired through heterosexual experience, both as a man and as a woman, he explained. In the course of hundreds of reincarnations, in other words, we will inhabit bodies that live out all possible permutations of gender and sexuality. Our spiritual core incorporates all aspects of gender and therefore transcends them.

This line of thinking has given rise to a growing number of genderless spirits. Their channels describe them as citizens of different dimensions or galaxies that have either evolved past gender or never experienced it in the first place. From this vantage point, they analyze the sexual foibles of human beings and hold out the promise of a world in which these troubles can be eluded. An ardent follower of the teachings of Seth, the being channeled by Jane Roberts in the 1960s and 70s, mentioned Seth's assertion that humans are nothing but consciousness. "So there is no gender," she continued. "When you get back to what we really are outside of physical reality, there's no gender to any of us."

The healing power of androgyny is celebrated by a group of channels based in Sedona, Arizona, who claim to be walk-ins. In a video distributed by the group, which calls itself the Extraterrestrial Earth Mission, a man and two women dressed in matching yellow jumpsuits sit on a stage. The thickset man, who goes by the name of Aktivar, explains, "It is time for male/female balance to come to the fore. We talk to many beings about androgyny, which we find to be an exquisite state: delightful, balanced, beautiful, powerful!" The goal of Aktivar and his companions is to prepare us for the imminent metamor-

phosis of the planet, its transformation into a heavenly world of light. "Isn't it neat to be androgynous beings, because you get a fresh start! You get a chance to transcend all that bullshit that has developed over the ages." As he speaks, the woman to his left begins to channel high-pitched tones as her head wobbles in an erratic ellipse: "Whoooooo! Pah! Weeeeeeep!" He seems unruffled by the sounds exploding from his companion. "By allowing your androgyny to come forth," he continues, "you are either in a male or female body, but you are not purely male or female. You are a third type."<sup>7</sup>

Another variation on the theme of androgyny was developed in a channeling session that took place in Santa Fe in the autumn of 1993. The advance literature for the event explained that a couple from Colorado were organizing meetings which would allow participants to "experience the empowering Love of the Divine Maternal-Paternal" by activating "the twelve-fold chakra system encoded within your DNA." The document implied that the event would expose participants to a channeled energy made up of strongly marked male and female qualities combined as a powerful, unitary force.

The flier's allusion to something called the "I AM Presence" signaled that the channels' work was influenced by the "I AM" Religious Activity, founded in 1930 by a mining engineer named Guy Ballard and his wife, Edna. Ballard claimed to have experienced a series of revelations near Mt. Shasta, California. Appropriating names and concepts from Theosophy, Ballard reported a number of encounters with the Ascended Masters. Ballard explained that the Ascended Masters had evolved to the level of what he called the "I AM," the universal source of divinity. Prominent among them were Saint Germain (held by



some to be an incarnation of Francis Bacon), his "twin flame" Portia, El Morya (once a Rajput priest), and Jesus Christ. Ballard assumed the role of messenger for the Ascended Masters, and he regularly delivered communiqués from Saint Germain and a host of lesser-known figures.

Writing under the name Godfre Ray King, Ballard described these visions in a series of books that became best-sellers. With the help of his wife and son, he organized a movement that by 1940 had attracted nearly a million followers. Ballard had a knack for making arcane teachings clear and accessible, and his books gave Theosophy an American face by locating the Ascended Masters in Mt. Shasta, Yellowstone, and the Tetons. After Ballard's death in 1939, the "I AM" Activity was torn by a series of internal disputes. Legal suits charging the "I AM" Activity with fraud were eventually overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court in two rulings (*Ballard v. United States*, 1944, and *Ballard v. United States*, 1946) now considered landmarks in the legal separation of church and state. By the 1950s, splinter elements within the "I AM" Activity had begun to make their own contacts with Ascended Masters, whose circle has widened to include extraterrestrials. Today many channels, some of whom know little about Guy Ballard and his work, claim to communicate with Ascended Masters, especially Saint Germain. Channels influenced by the "I AM" offer an erotically charged androgyny that differs markedly from the rather sexless androgyny offered by other practitioners.<sup>8</sup>

The leaders of the "I AM"-inspired event in Santa Fe were Diana and Alistair Lovejoy. Alistair, a spare, bearded man with unruly white hair, wore loose white cotton slacks and a blue polo shirt. He appeared to be in his sixties. The first thing one noticed about Diana was her diminutive size: she was well under

five feet tall and needed to support her feet with a pillow to sit in a straight-backed chair. Her hair was light brown, running to blonde; crow's feet clustered around her eyes, breaking up the squareness of her features and lending an air of maturity to a face that otherwise looked younger than Alistair's. Diana was dressed in a beige-colored sweater, beige slacks, and white slippers.

The session took place in the home of Sarah McGuire and Ruth Como, practitioners of holistic healing and channeling. The living room decor of their adobe house was haute New Age: a beige rug, leather couches and chairs, candles, icons of spiritual masters, books hilled up on shelves. Gauzy autumn light, sifted through the leaves of a nearby cottonwood, fluttered on the wall. Soft music issued from a stereo in the far corner.

Counting Sarah, Ruth, and myself, six people had gathered in the living room with the Lovejoys. One was Mahmud, a gaunt but handsome Palestinian whose spiritual quest brought him to New Mexico, a place that reminded him of his homeland. Next was a young man named Jeff, who said that he was trying to resolve childhood issues and, like Mahmud, to arrive at a "heart-opening." The young woman on Mahmud's right, Theresa, identified herself as the assistant to a well-known Albuquerque channel. Later in the afternoon we were joined by Mark, a man from New England who had moved to Santa Fe as part of a personal religious search that had also taken him to California and Arizona. As the participants identified themselves and explained their motives for attending, Diana and Alistair listened attentively and radiated high-intensity friendliness.

While a signup sheet and a basket for donations (the suggested offering was \$10) was passed around, Alistair explained that he and Diana had been together for five years. He had received instructions to seek out his "soul twin" at Mt. Shasta, the



site where Guy Ballard had received his first messages from the Ascended Masters. As predicted, Alistair met Diana there, and they have been together ever since. Diana then took over the conversation. She converted to Mormonism in her late teens, she said, but the church excommunicated her when she began to channel Jesus, whom she called Yeshua Sananda. She eventually received the training necessary to channel the "I AM" energy in its multiple forms.

Alistair laid the philosophical groundwork for the session while Diana quietly sat next to him. He asked participants to open themselves so that the "I AM" energy could move in and through us. Diana's channeling would simply "mirror" us, he said, giving shape to the divine power surging through us all. Alistair began a long explanation of the "I AM" principles for the benefit of first-time participants. He named key Ascended Masters, including Saint Germain, Maitreya, Ashtar, and Kadar Mon-Ka, each of whom had a feminine counterpart. He explained that the rational mind has to give way to an emotional heart-opening based on unconditional love. We must become empty vessels for the transformative "I AM" energy, which we ourselves help to co-create. If we do this, the Divine Maternal will gently embrace all in her limitless love.

Alistair was in full tilt when Diana put her forefinger to his lips, quieting him. She sat up straight while Alistair adjusted a tape recorder. After a long invocation, Diana closed her eyes and breathed deeply. Minutes passed. She opened her eyes and began to speak in a gently accented voice, a warm, reassuring alto. (It was, Alistair told us later, the presence of Master Saint Germain.) Smiling beatifically, Diana called us "beloveds" and "dear ones." Her words flowed poetically, ranging out across the universe and then circling back to people in the room. "I

assure you," she said, "that while at times it seems as though the Father-Mother and that radiant being called Christ might appear to be behind a closed door, in truth that door is always open. And the Father-Mother have stepped beyond the threshold and entered upon the path and run out to meet you." During a pause in the monologue, Alistair quietly interjected, "We receive your limitless love in our hearts with profound gratitude for this reflection of who we are."

After carrying on as Saint Germain for ten minutes, Diana again began to breathe deeply. She emerged from this state to ask Alistair for help: he should bring her a container of rose oil from an adjoining room. "Dear hearts," she told us in her mellifluous voice, "I request your permission to enter more profoundly into your energy field, to come to each of you." She added that if we did not want her to come into our sacred field, she would honor our wishes. Alistair explained that our energy had called forth "the I AM presence of Yeshua Sananda and his divine complement, Mary Magdalena, blended in a perfect balance of masculine and feminine." This, he continued, would summon "the divine maternal energies of unconditional love to bless us." The Yeshua-Magdalena presence is a sacred gift, he said.

Diana sang a simple song—several notes, deep and sustained. The words were indecipherable. Turning to Sarah, she commenced a ceremony that was part blessing, part anointing. She stood over Sarah with her right hand raised, two fingers pointing up. Her breath came with a rasping sound. She asked permission to come into Sarah's space. Diana rubbed rose oil on her own hand and then made slow circles in the air around Sarah's head. She slowly closed in on Sarah's face: touching her forehead, her temples, her throat. She gently brought Sarah's

hand up to touch her own chest above the heart. Diana began to sing again; the words sounded vaguely like Hebrew. This time, the song was nearly a howl, abrasive and unsettling in the absolute quiet of the room. Diana knelt before Sarah and took her left hand, rubbed oil onto it, slowly touched the palm in various places, then gently kissed the palm. She repeated the process with the right. She moved to Sarah's feet, carefully rubbing each with rose oil. Diana's breath still rasped loudly. She stood before Sarah, looking into her eyes. The words they exchanged were inaudible. The process was excruciatingly long, perhaps fifteen minutes. Her movements were gentle but labored. Tears welled up in Sarah's eyes.

Moving around the room, Diana repeated the procedure with the others, although the details varied slightly with each. Alistair occasionally explained what was happening. "Know that Diana isn't representing Mary Magdalena," he said at one point. "Mary has presented herself in Diana through the divine energy of I AM, the I AM Presence in all of us. The maternal force of Mary Magdalena is coupled with the twin-flame masculine presence of Yeshua Sananda, whom you know as Jesus." The implication seemed to be that the integration of Jesus and Mary Magdalena generated a sexual synergy that was far more powerful than masculine or feminine energies alone.

After performing the ritual with everyone, Diana returned to her chair. The process had taken an hour and a half. Mary Magdalena-Yeshua Sananda wished everyone well and departed. Diana became her normal self moments later. Diana rubbed her eyes during the long silence that followed. Alistair was the first to speak. "This is amazing," he said. "You must know how honored you are. This is only the third time that the Magdalena-Yeshua presence has manifested in Diana. You have been

bathed in the nurturing warmth of the Mother Energy." People began to exchange impressions, sharing the emotions they had experienced while Diana worked on them. As we gathered our things to leave, Alistair urged us to drink plenty of distilled water with lemon. Otherwise, he said, we would feel exhausted because of all the energy that had flowed through our bodies during the event.

Diana Lovejoy's erotically charged language, with its "twin flames" and "empowering Love of the Divine Maternal-Paternal," defines a world in which the combination of male and female energy produces a spiritual incandescence that burns with the intensity of nuclear fusion. More typical of contemporary channeling, however, is a relatively sexless androgyny, the performance of which establishes for both practitioner and audience that the human soul exists at a level beyond such earthly considerations as gender, with all its dilemmas and limitations.

The gender play characteristic of contemporary American channeling is found among spirit mediums in other parts of the world. In Africa, Latin America, and Asia, women are more likely than men to be possessed by spirits, many of whom are identified as male. The reasons for this are fairly straightforward. Women are often excluded from formal positions of religious power, so they fight for a voice in religious matters by speaking for capricious spirits whose opinions men are obliged to respect.

A vivid example of how women use spirits to overcome powerlessness is provided by Michael Lambek, a Canadian anthropologist who for the past twenty years has studied spirit possession on Mayotte, an island lying off the southeastern coast of Africa. In one case of possession documented by Lambek, two women entered trance simultaneously. Their spirits began

a conversation that focused on conflicts between one of the women and her husband. The woman's spirit spoke forthrightly of her objections to his drinking and other personal failings. The husband, who was present during the event, then had to defend himself publicly against the spirit's accusations. This exchange can be seen as a form of family therapy in which the woman and her husband use spirits to mediate a discussion of problems that are too sensitive to be talked about directly. The work of Lambek and others has made it virtually a cliché that spirit possession represents women's resistance to the overweening power of men.<sup>9</sup> But is this true for channels in the United States as well?

There is no simple answer. Like other useful terms that find their way into academic fashion, "resistance" has been reduced to a platitude nearly stripped of meaning. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that women are drawn to contemporary channeling for the same reasons that they were a strong presence in nineteenth-century spiritualism—notably, their continued exclusion from positions of influence in mainstream churches. In that sense, women who channel may be resisting male power or claiming it for themselves. But with few exceptions, channels themselves reject this way of looking at it. Instead, they see their quest in proactive terms, as a positive, loving search for personal strength and global healing between the sexes.

It is important to remember that channeling is only one element of a much larger mosaic of religious options open to Americans. Other pieces of the mosaic offer forums in which women can work through rage or confusion over the injuries of gender. An anthropologist who worked closely with neopagan groups, some of which promote a militantly feminist spirituality, found that they celebrate what she calls "images of anger and destruc-

tion." For women involved in neopagan worship, this dark imagery can be therapeutic.<sup>10</sup> Channeling, in contrast, offers safe haven from such emotions. In its embrace, men and women can explore the qualities of the opposite sex as part of a journey of self-expansion that leaves a gendered identity far behind, a process that female channels in particular find satisfying.<sup>11</sup>

But do such performances reshape conventional sex roles in significant ways? Current theories of gender suggest that they might. Scholars have proposed that gender is less a fixed condition—something hard-wired into our genes—than it is a state of mind and body maintained through daily performance. Movements, gestures, dress codes, and subtle inflections of voice constitute the raw materials of gender display. What performances create, they can also undo, subtly shifting the boundaries of gendered identities. Women who channel claim direct experience of pure masculinity—"clear male energy," as one put it—that dramatically broadens their understanding and, in their view, strengthens their sense of personal power. They encounter this male energy in a physical, embodied way. They *enact* masculinity, in other words, which may help them to domesticate it or otherwise render it less threatening. The gender enactments of male channels are not yet symmetrical to those of women, for few are inclined to embody feminine beings. Many seem to be moving in that direction, though, and most cultivate a slightly androgynous style in their self-presentation. For men, it may be feminizing enough to relinquish control to the outside force of spirits. Whether experienced directly or merely witnessed by members of an audience, ritual performances of androgyny have the effect of making gender seem, to quote the anthropologist Janice Boddy, "less naturalized, less unquestionable, indeed, less subjectively real."<sup>12</sup>

Paradoxically, this gender play depends on the acceptance of a highly polarized view of masculinity and femininity—for instance, the belief that men are by nature rational, women intuitive, and so forth. For channels and their clients, however, these absolute, “natural” states are not models to which they aspire; instead, they are envisioned as diffuse energies that can be interwoven and rebalanced to suit personal needs. Like so much of the bricolage or creative blending that characterizes New Age spirituality, the gender work that takes place in channeling is oriented to an amplification of the self. During her channeling workshop in Santa Fe, Deborah O’Neill explained to participants that when a man channels, he connects to something “poetic and creative and softer.” For a woman, in contrast, channeling offers the experience of “taking authority and standing in a seemingly masculine position.” Above all, channeling offers both men and women the opportunity to “feel and act as if all your gaps had been filled.” “When you’re channeling,” she concluded, “you’re asking for your totality.”

## DREAMING OF COMMUNITY

Events that bring people together to celebrate their collective identity—feasts, barn-raising, weddings, funerals—may create a whole greater than the sum of the parts, an order beyond the personal. As social beings, humans can be invigorated or destroyed by the collective energy of the group. Even channels, most of whom are committed to an intensely individualistic form of spirituality that shuns orthodoxy and compromise, must occasionally come together to share experiences and to taste what Emile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology, referred to as the “effervescence” of communal worship. Many, in fact, insist that their work is laying the foundation for a global renaissance of community. Adam Bell, a New Mexico channel, explained that the spirits to whom he connects speak frequently of the need for humanity to join together in cooperative ventures. “Community is a common theme among the entities,” he said. Deborah O’Neill echoed Adam’s comments when she declared that channeling helps her “to become less identified with our culture, our