

Foreword

by David Spangler

In 1976, my friend Mark Satin published a groundbreaking book, *New Age Politics: Healing Self and Society*. It was a slim volume, privately published, lacking the polish that a large, mainstream publisher could have given it. But for all its modest appearance, it was a revolutionary document, the first attempt to marry the idealistic philosophy of the New Age movement with a political vision. The purpose was to provide a means by which the good will and visionary ideas of the New Age could be translated into effective public policy and social change; it was a manifesto for a movement.

An attempt was made to translate Satin's ideas in this book into a political party. Alas, this effort foundered, in part because as we entered the Reagan years, the New Age movement turned away from being a transformative social movement. Attention turned inward to explore self-development and personal states of consciousness rather than outward to grapple with issues of societal wellbeing and wholeness. Instead of remaining a symbol for positive change and a hopeful future, the New Age became an image of narcissism that invited ridicule.

Now Teena Booth is daring to pick up the tattered and torn banner of the New Age and restore to it the meaning it once had. Once again, a passionate advocate for a better, more holistic future is seeking to marshal a transformative spirit to empower a movement for change. This book seeks to do for our time what Mark Satin's book did thirty years ago. It calls us to remember

why many of us were attracted to the idea of a new age in the first place and the promise it held to make a difference in the world. It once again calls us to heal self and society.

The New Age may seem like a strange candidate for such a calling. In recent years, if we hear about it at all, it's usually in a way intended to dismiss a person or group as self-indulgent or out of touch with the "real world." To be New Age is to be at the fringe of society, engaging in marginalized beliefs or practices.

But the idea of a New Age is hardly marginal. It is an idea as old as humankind, found in all our visions of a better future. It may spin off into utopian fantasies but it's also present in all the dreams that ultimately lead to human progress. It is at the heart of our power to imagine; it embodies our human capacity to revision the present in ways that open the doors to new possibilities and potentials. In essence, the New Age idea says simply that the past need not determine the future. Positive change is possible.

Fertile ground for a movement

The modern New Age movement has numerous roots. Many of them are in Christian millenarianism, the expectation of the Second Coming of Christ and the end of history as we know it. Indeed, as far back as the Twelfth Century, the mystic and monk Joachim of Fiore was prophesying, using words that would parallel those of many modern authors, about the birth of a new age that would usher in a whole new spiritual consciousness for humanity.

More recently, parts of what have become New Age thought can be found in the Transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau. Likewise, the New Thought movement that grew out of the work of Phineas Quimby, Mary Baker Eddy, and Ernest Holmes fed significant ideas into the mix. The American Theosophist Alice Bailey was also writing about a coming New Age in the early years of the Twentieth Century. And decades before the performers in the musical *Hair* sang about the dawning of the Age of Aquarius,

astrologers were anticipating this transition from one astrological age to another.

So the New Age is not a new idea, but it is an evolving one. This I can testify to at first hand for in one way or another I have been associated with the modern New Age movement for the past fifty years, even before it was known as such. I have seen it go through many phases, rising and falling in public estimation. If Teena Booth has anything to say about it, it's time for it to rise again, but if it does so, it will be in a new way yet again.

I first encountered the idea of the New Age in the late 1950s, at the age of fourteen, when the Cold War was heating up and fears of a nuclear war were rampant. Some were building backyard bomb shelters, but others were paying attention to prophecies received by psychics like Edgar Cayce, the "Sleeping Prophet," who proclaimed that a New Age was about to be ushered in by an apocalyptic event that would devastate the old order. This event could be catastrophic earth changes, or World War III, or even the arrival of beings from another world in UFOs.

The linking of prophecy, disaster, and the expectation of a new era is common in Western civilization. There have been apocalyptic millenarian movements at various times in European history, all of them originating, not unsurprisingly, among the dispossessed classes, the ones who had nothing to lose and much to gain if the existing power structure and social order were to be overturned. Lacking the power to bring about such radical changes themselves, the poor could only envision some form of divine or natural intervention in the form of some disaster that would bring the expected new age into being.

Our time is not so different. While we no longer have classes of serfs and peasants, most people still feel disempowered by the largeness of existing social, political, and economic powers and by the challenges that the world faces. So the idea of change brought about by the intervention of powerful outside forces—spiritual, natural, or extraterrestrial—remains attractive. So does the idea of

apocalypse, as witness the current rising interest in the so-called Mayan prophecies of 2012 as an end date for civilization. It's as if we can't quite grasp our power to change things ourselves so we must look to disasters and extraordinary forces to intervene and make changes on our behalf.

The New Age comes together

In 1965, I became a spiritual teacher and lecturer. All my life I have been in communication with non-physical beings, and from them I learned that yes, humanity was in a time of profound and historic transformation, and a new age was indeed emerging, but it would not come about through any form of apocalypse. I learned that the New Age was not an event at all—certainly not a world-changing disaster—but a symbol of humanity's creative power to shape its future. In other words, the New Age was an invitation to understand and use an innate capacity for change.

I lived and taught in the San Francisco area, the heart of several major social movements emerging at that time. There was the anti-war movement that had one of its major centers at the University of California at Berkeley. There was also the drug and hippy counterculture centered in the Haight-Ashbury region of San Francisco whose slogan was “turn on, tune in, and drop out.” Further down the peninsula around Stanford University in Palo Alto, humanistic and transpersonal psychologies were evolving as well, giving birth to the human potential movement.

The convergence of these movements created a different kind of womb for the New Age. When the movement was considered the result of some prophesied disaster, there was no room for human agency or creativity. One simply waited until the apocalypse came to usher in the new era. Yet, both the civil rights and anti-war movements were demonstrating the power of individual citizens to make a difference. Likewise, the human potential and counterculture movements were proclaiming the innate power

of the individual to make radical changes in consciousness and behavior. Under the influence of these ideas, the New Age metamorphosed into something very different from what it had been. It became a vision for culturally creative and visionary individuals to remake society in a more humane and holistic image. In other words, the New Age wasn't something we waited for; it was something we could bring into being.

As the 1970s began, the New Age sought to bring a visionary spiritual element to the forces of change represented by the anti-war, civil rights, and counterculture movements. In a similar way, though this might seem strange today given its current reputation for narcissistic self-involvement, the movement took the self-development focus of the human potential movement and put it into a cultural, collective and visionary context. It proclaimed the power of self-development as a way of unleashing our creative power to imagine and work for social change.

This movement took on a new energy in the 1970s with the Arab oil embargo which raised petroleum prices to unheard of heights. Ever since Rachel Carson published her landmark book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962, an environmental movement had been growing. With lines at the gasoline stations stretching around the block in many American cities, the need for conservation took center stage, which in turn bolstered ecological awareness. Sustainability became a buzzword as various forms of alternative energies began to be explored with greater social support. This in turn gave the New Age a more ecological and earth-oriented character as well.

In 1971, a cultural historian from M.I.T., William Irwin Thompson, published a book, *At the Edge of History*, about the transformation of modern culture. It was a finalist in 1972 for the National Book Award (the *Whole Earth Catalog* was the winner that year). It was followed three years later in 1974 by *Passages about Earth: an Exploration of the New Planetary Culture*. These two books cemented Thompson's reputation as a literate and scholarly spokesperson for the possibilities—indeed, the need—for a global social

transformation. In 1974 he founded the Lindisfarne Fellows, a gathering made up of various disciplines that would meet once or twice a year to discuss and collaborate with each other's ideas and projects, all in pursuit of a more holistic and planetary vision of human culture. A list of the fellows is like a Who's Who of the leading edge thinkers of that time: microbiologist Lynn Margulis, economist E. F. Schumacher, poet Wendell Berry, scientist James Lovelock, mathematician Ralph Abraham, anthropologist Gregory Bateson, futurist Stewart Brand, monk David Steindl-Rast, architect Paolo Soleri, ecologists John and Nancy Todd, and composer Paul Winter among others.

As one of the fellows, I came to realize that this group of individuals and their work collectively represented the very heart of what the New Age was about. For this group, as for many others during the 1970s, the guiding image of the New Age was not an apocalyptic prophecy but the development of a planetary consciousness and the emergence of a holistic society. The catchphrase was to "think globally but act locally" in order to create a better future. It was in this context that Mark Satin published his book *New Age Politics*.

This was the New Age I knew best and the one I lectured on continuously for over ten years as co-director of the Findhorn Foundation Community in Scotland and beyond. And it seemed for a time, particularly during the years the Carter Administration was actively supporting alternative energy research and application, that a real cultural transformation was at hand. For example, Belden and Lisa Paulson created the High Wind ecological and alternative energy community and center in central Wisconsin, an overtly New Age center, the story of which has been recently published in *Odyssey of a Practical Visionary*. (For anyone interested in the history of the New Age movement as a social, environmental and political force in the 1970s, I recommend it highly.)

But everything changed during the 1980s. It was as if America's collective spirit took one look at the possibility of transformation

and said, “Um, maybe later.” With the Reagan years and the return of cheap oil, many pulled back from efforts at conservation and research into alternative energies. The New Age movement changed, too, slowly at first, but then more rapidly as interest in cultural transformation shifted to interest in psychic phenomena and personal development. This change in emphasis became cemented in the public awareness with the TV airing of Shirley MacLaine’s miniseries, *Out on a Limb*. MacLaine’s adventures with channels and psychics, past lives and power points, and esoteric spiritualities suddenly defined the meaning of New Age for most people from that moment on.

The wind shifts

The effects of the change in public perception were immediate and dramatic for me. Literally the day after the *Out on a Limb* miniseries ended, I went into my local bookstore, part of a national chain, and discovered that the label “New Age” had been removed that morning from the shelves that contained books on alternative energy, ecology, new science, and cultural change—and placed on the shelves that held books on astrology and psychic development. Within a matter of weeks, organizations that had hired me to give talks on the New Age wrote either to cancel the engagements or to ask that I drop the term “New Age” from my title. In a stunningly short period of time, New Age went from meaning a positive, transformative social movement for a better future—the kind of New Age Teena writes about so eloquently in this book—to a private quest for esoteric spiritual development.

Of course, the real impetus and work for cultural change continued under other names. The desire to envision and work towards a better future is innate in human beings and is unaffected by labels as such. But as Teena describes, the shift in direction for the New Age movement did have a dampening effect on many thousands of people who might otherwise have played a more sig-

nificant role in the political and social events of the past twenty years.

It's possible to look at the story I've told and say that the New Age failed. Indeed, in the mid-1980s, the leader of a successful New Age center said to me in some despair, "the New Age is dead." It's also possible to say that when economic times are tough, as they were in the 1970s, people look for transformation, but when times get better and everything is going along fine, as they were for many in the 1980s and 90s, people simply want to keep the status quo. But I think there is a cyclical movement to changes in consciousness and society.

From my point of view, the modern New Age movement was the result of a powerful influx and stimulation of spiritual energies beginning in the mid-1950s, setting in motion changes in human consciousness. I think of it as a tide coming in to shore and reaching a high water mark in the late 1970s and then, as tides do, receding. A time of activity and turmoil was replaced by a time of consolidation. It's a natural cycle and gives an organism a chance to reflect, digest, and assimilate.

In effect, what became known as the New Age movement in the late 1980s is in some ways only the surface moisture left on the land after the water receded. Yet, underneath the surface, largely out of sight, water is still soaking the land and germinating seeds. New Age ideas have taken root in society in forms such as holistic healing, yoga, health food stores, meditation, and a greater ecological awareness. Also, as Teena points out, the efforts to transform society in positive ways haven't disappeared; the people involved with them just don't want to call them "New Age" anymore for fear of not being taken seriously.

Still, in one important way, the shift in perception of the New Age from that of a William Irwin Thompson or a Findhorn to that of a Shirley MacLaine is more apparent than real. The real New Age has always been more about capability than about content, a point often overlooked in discussions of the "death" of the New

Age. What changes—what has changed—is largely content, what people talk about when they say they are New Age. What has not changed is the sense that we have a power to keep the future from being simply a rerun of the past. We have the innate capacity to choose and implement transformation.

This capacity doesn't by itself determine the nature of that transformation. We can make things worse as well as better. Intelligence, wisdom, love, compassion, a sense of the larger wholes of which we are a part, and skill in action are all required to shape our creativity in positive directions. But we don't and won't bring these qualities into play unless we first understand and believe that we each, through our attitudes and our actions, can truly make a difference in our world. That is what the New Age is really about.

Which brings me to *Unfinished Evolution*, Teena Booth's outstanding new book. In this volume, she seeks to recover that power, to bring back the possibility that the New Age can again inspire people to engage with society and act with vision to create a safer, saner, healthier future. She links the valuable work of self development with an engagement with society that can be healing and transformative.

Is this possible? Can she succeed? Certainly, the times are ripe. As in the 1970s, we again face rising oil prices and the need to rethink and change our lifestyles. The environmental challenges are more threatening than they were thirty years ago, largely because we let slip the opportunities that we had then to make meaningful changes. A spirit of anxiety and anticipated apocalypse is again rising in the land. Clearly, all the elements are there to make a call for the creation of a new age once more meaningful.

Yet, can the New Age overcome twenty years of ridicule and marginalization? Can its adherents overcome twenty years of focus on the self to embrace once more a larger vision and the challenges and responsibilities that come with it? These are vital questions, for which I do not have an answer. It's possible that the

term “New Age” has had its day, shot its bolt, and now some newer term must appear to galvanize the spirit and focus our energies. But as Teena points out, none of the candidates so far have made the grade. And like her, I believe there is inherent in the term New Age a simplicity and a directness that is hard to beat when it comes to talking about new visions for the future. For that is what the work is about. Put simply and directly, we must create a new age for the benefit of our children and all our descendents, or we are lost.

Having lectured on the New Age for many years, in recent time I have been focused on developing what I call an incarnational spirituality. This looks at the inner, creative resources we have as individuals to make a difference in our lives and in the life of our world. I have not written or spoken on the New Age hardly at all for ten years. It wasn't that I had given up on it; I simply had other work to do. But when I received Teena's manuscript and went to her Web site, I felt a thrill and a passion I had not felt for some time. I felt like an old New Age workhorse that was ready to wear the saddle again. I was inspired. It honored the work that I and colleagues of mine such as Belden Paulson and William Irwin Thompson have done over the years on behalf of the movement.

This book says the New Age as an idea—as a call to service, as a vision of constructive and compassionate change, and as a statement of human possibility—has a future, not just a past. I endorse that heartily. It's what I believe as well. But Teena is the one who has done the work to say so and to say it thoughtfully, eloquently, and passionately. I am grateful for it.

So I end by saying again what I said in *A Pilgrim in Aquarius*, a book I wrote many years ago at Findhorn's request.

I am proud to be a New Ager.

— David Spangler

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