



Introduction: My New Age Journey

I still remember—vividly—the first time I read Shirley MacLaine's *Out on a Limb*. I was 19 years old and full of questions about reality and meaning and my purpose in being alive, questions that seemed unrealistically (and depressingly) answered by my family's version of Christianity-from-the-cradle. I'd never been exposed to any other worldview, and as I read through MacLaine's New Age experience, I had to set the book down every few pages to catch my breath and hold my swimming head.

She wrote that God is energy, the divine energy that makes up everything that exists. She wrote that physical reality is an illusion, the surface reflection of a deeper spiritual reality. She wrote that we each may have lived before, past lives in which we probably knew our loved ones. And I thought, is she serious? Are such things *possible*?

From that moment on, I was a New Ager. Not because I swallowed whole everything MacLaine wrote in her book (I didn't). But because encountering the ideas in her book was like being grabbed and spun around to look at the world from a different direction, a direction that, as it turned out, felt natural and right to me.

Growing up, the religious dualism I learned at church, along with the scientific materialism I learned at school, had been so confidently presented to me that it never occurred to me there might be another window from which to view the world. This other window is idealism—the philosophy of “spirit as the ultimate reality” first given form in the East by the Hindus and in the West by Plato. And it quite literally saved me to discover a way out from between the mental rock and hard place of the West’s two mainstream points of view.

I loved the New Age. I loved that it took a basic and beautiful philosophy and braided it together with humanistic psychology, quantum physics, and mystical religion, along with a thread of the occult for color. I loved that it was inclusive and respectful and supportive, and how it illuminated the difference between right and wrong. I loved how it helped life make sense to me—and gave me a sense of balance that allowed me to navigate through intense challenges and difficulties.

More than anything, I loved the sense of hope it gave me for the world in which I was raising three children. I wholeheartedly embraced the vision of the future presented by the New Age, in which more people would awaken to a greater spiritual reality, one individual at a time, until we reached critical mass and tipped the planet into an actual new age of harmony.

Life is change

And then, sometime in the early 1990s, I first read the news in *Publishers Weekly*: “The New Age is dead.” People I knew, and read about, were not just dropping the term, but were suddenly embarrassed by it. They now preferred to be just plain “spiritual,” or “holistic.” They preferred to shop for books marked “Mind/Body/Spirit.” Once thriving New Age magazines like *Magical Blend* and *Body Mind Spirit* folded, while others, like *New Age Journal*, changed their names to something bland and generic.

By the turn of the millennium, the entire movement was declared over and done. The vehicle that was supposed to be carrying us toward the next quantum stage of evolution had been entirely abandoned. Over the next several years, there would be studies published that questioned whether there had ever been such a thing as a New Age movement at all.

Of course, the movement wasn't really dead. Spiritual idealism was still very much alive and well in the hearts of millions. Web sites by the thousands about "cultural creatives" and "emergent culture" popped up all over the Internet. And many of the authors connected to the movement continued to publish books that enjoyed brisk sales. Yet it seemed to me these books arrived unconnected from their rightful context. They were addressed to the individual concerns of the individual reader, and not an audience with a collective identity and the means to join together and effect change.

Still, many seemed glad to be rid of a label that had become heavy with too much baggage. And although I wasn't one of them, I tried to practice be-here-now acceptance, along with detachment from outcomes, and moved on with the times like everyone else. But now and again, I would be surprised by feelings of dismay—even anger—at the loss. One minute I had been one of millions, riding the leading edge of a transformation sweeping over society; the next minute I was sitting alone in the dry corner of an abandoned movement.

For years I had proudly called myself a New Ager. Now what was I going to call myself? How would I identify and explain my beliefs to others?

Like most, I didn't call myself anything at all. I felt denied an identity. When filling out a form that asked my religious preference, I would check the box marked "Other," then sigh at the blank line beside it. There wasn't enough room to scrawl in "The spiritual idealism briefly known as New Age."

While I still nurtured my dream of the gradual awakening of

society—the same dream passed on like a torch by idealists of every society, in every century—I could not help but notice that even the most hardcore idealists I knew, including myself, were becoming more preoccupied with materialistic goals.

Something's wrong with this picture

In 2001, Shirley MacLaine, the person who first introduced me to New Age ideas, the person who had represented “New Age” like no one else, traveled the country on a speaking tour. I bought a ticket for her well-attended stop in Phoenix, and went with the hope of hearing her say something about the passing of the New Age label. Did she mourn it as well?

But MacLaine did not mention the phrase “New Age” at all; instead, she referred to herself as a “Cultural Creative.” In the Q&A session that followed her speech, a woman stood up to talk about how lonely she felt in her spiritual quest, how difficult it was to find others who shared her beliefs. MacLaine said something about how we all need to become complete within ourselves, something smart and true. Still, I'm sure the woman left feeling no less lonely.

Truly astonishing and horrifying events soon followed: The attacks of 9/11. The march to war in Iraq. The rise of fundamentalist fervor and conservative power. All of which gave a severe shaking to my idealistic notion that humanity is evolving toward higher consciousness.

And then came the election of 2004.

As far as I was concerned, this was it—our big defining moment. This was the test to answer the question posed to us by the events of 9/11 about who we are, and how we planned to manage the problem of hate versus love. If there was any validity to the assumption of a steady awakening and enlightening of society, and any hope at all for a new age of harmony, then surely this was the time, and this was the election, when it would become apparent.

Along with so many others I knew, the choice seemed so clear to me, so obvious, that I was sure that George W. Bush's conservative politics of fear and force could not possibly carry the day.

Except that it did. On November 2, 2004, long after the dawn of the Age of Aquarius in the most enlightened society on earth, the idealism of "we are all one" failed. Instead, the materialism of greed and the dualism of good vs. evil was voted back into power. If American society was moving in any direction at all, it was clearly, tragically, backwards.

Face to face with my convictions

Now, it may seem that I have wandered from my New Age subject with this digression into presidential politics. But for me, the election of 2004 brought me face to face with my convictions in a way no personal crisis ever had.

Of course, all progressives were depressed about the outcome of the election, and many made half-joking plans to leave a country that suddenly seemed like hostile territory. But my own depression over the election settled into a much deeper disillusionment that put my entire way of thinking into question.

On the surface, I tried to comfort myself with idealistic notions of dialectic progress, which says that every expansion is necessarily followed by a contraction. I told myself that one step back after the two steps forward does not mean that progress is not being made. And, like any good idealist, I tried to practice detachment from outcomes.

But down deep, I could not shake the feeling that my philosophy was somehow inadequate, that I was missing an important piece of the puzzle, maybe even the most important piece. And I couldn't stop myself from thinking that maybe idealism as I understood it was not *the* answer after all.

Today I know that during those months after the election, I was coming to terms with the limits of *flatland* idealism, which

says that all views are created equal. This brand of relativistic idealism, delineated for me by the integral philosopher Ken Wilber, formed the core of the New Age movement and was ultimately responsible for its demise. It was also responsible for my post-election pain.

You see, my shallow understanding of idealism had made it so that even when I believed the re-election of George W. Bush would be an unmitigated disaster for our country and the world, I did not do a thing beyond stepping into the ballot box to help the more enlightened candidate win. My brand of idealism had encouraged my belief, but allowed me to sit out on the action because, after all, my little belief was no better or worse than any other.

Ultimately, my depression over the election was not about the lack of vision in others—or what others failed to do. My depression was over my own lack of vision—and what *I* had failed to do. And I felt absolutely wretched with the burden of my responsibility. And not just for the outcome of the election. I was finally starting to grasp my responsibility for all the other dire problems that plague us as a society, problems that I had done almost nothing to alleviate, year after year, day after day.

For yet another painful stretch of time, I wondered if the New Age was indeed guilty of leading us all into do-nothing narcissism, as many critics accused, and wondered if we were better off without it. But the more I have thought and read and contemplated, the more I have come to understand that it is the disappearance of the New Age as a communal movement, and our abandonment of it, which left us stranded in flatland idealism with no way out. The New Age had promised to take us on an evolutionary journey. But when we idealists hopped off the movement to strike out on our own individual spiritual paths, our collective evolution was left unfinished.

Today I feel unreasonably certain that if the New Age had not been allowed to drift away like a fashion trend without value, but had been supported and refined and encouraged to mature into

a fuller expression of idealism—and its ideas passed along as the saving instruments they are—the world would be a much different place right now.

A clear purpose

I want the New Age back. Not exactly as it was—it generated a lot of superfluous fluff that unhelpfully distracted us. (Okay, that's an understatement. The New Age generated such copious amounts of fluff that years after it helped suffocate the movement, much of it still floats around like wilting balloons that hang around days after the party is over.)

But with our planet in immediate peril from global warming and terrorism and economic collapse, we are now, more than ever, in need of a vehicle to help us make that long-awaited leap to the next stage of our evolution. We are now, more than ever, in need of tools and inspiration and social capital to change our lives and save the world.

Fortunately, the hopeful election of Barack Obama in 2008 has restored the bright sheen of possibility to the prospect of transformation. And I believe that the New Age—accurately understood and collectively supported—is still the right vehicle to get us there. So I intend to do what I can to dust off all the fluff and see if it will start up again, this remarkable vehicle that once made it possible for me and so many others to explore reality, share ideas, and join together for the purpose of transforming society.

Of course, the New Age may well be dead, and I may simply need to better learn to let go and move on, learn to be plainly spiritual, or humbly holistic. But just in case it's still there, hiding quietly in the hearts of idealists everywhere, waiting for this moment of expansion to make itself known and take up its vital work, I am going to make my case in this book and get it out into the world. And I am going to ask you, and anyone who will listen, to help.

Although I do admit, when I present this intention to some of my spiritual friends, they often squinch their faces in confusion or annoyance. They are the ones that live in places like Santa Cruz, California, or Ashland, Oregon, and have jobs like “Reiki healer” or “yoga instructor,” and as far as they can tell, the movement is doing just fine, thank you very much. And in those places, they are right, spiritual idealism thrives, unnamed and unspecified, and is well integrated within their local culture. Thanks to Oprah and her New Age-y focus on spiritual matters, they can even see bits and pieces of it gaining traction in the mainstream.

However, I suspect my friends are mistaking their local view for the world at large. The view outside of our far-flung liberal communities is much, much different. True, a new paradigm holds sway on movie sets and in yoga studios and alternative medicine clinics and new green start-ups and a number of wonderful, forward-thinking organizations. But start moving away from the coast, and one rarely stumbles across any signs of it. The old paradigm still holds sway across the land, is still firmly entrenched in school rooms and corporate boardrooms, in religious chambers and legislative chambers. The old paradigm still makes public policy and builds formidable obstacles to all our good intentions. And whatever cracks we might be able to perceive in the old structures, the fact remains, the old paradigm today threatens the future like never before.

Our collective evolution, which seemed to be advancing in great leaps a few decades ago, has clearly stalled. The old paradigm will not, and cannot, go away until more of us understand and embrace a well-defined alternative paradigm. The problem is, the new paradigm is anything but well-defined and is, in fact, widely *misunderstood*. The problem is, the new paradigm no longer even has a name.

“It is hard to focus attention on the nameless,” wrote William James, the famous philosopher-psychologist. Without a label to represent them, the ideas that exist so vibrantly in our hearts and

in our personal pursuits exist barely at all in the popular culture we all share. In my opinion, we spiritual idealists need to bring back the New Age label so that the world will be better able to embrace a new paradigm.

It could be that I am choosing the wrong battle. It could be that in my stubbornness, I will find that in holding up my banner with “New Age” printed in bold purple letters, few others will care to join me, let alone pay me any attention. But I will, at least, have saved myself from being another lonely “other,” stripped of designation and cast adrift on a sea of vague and nameless spirituality. And if nothing else, I will hopefully discover a few others who see the world the same way and might enjoy sharing a conversation.

I am a New Ager and proud of it. In these pages I explain what it means to me, and what I believe it once meant to others. I explore what may have happened to cause the label’s demise, and why I believe it can still hold vital meaning and value for us today. Most important, I ask you to consider the implications of reviving the movement and its label so that it may help us continue to grow in our unfinished evolution.