



On Saving the World

In the late 1990s, I lived in Oregon and worked for my county in a new youth drug and alcohol prevention program that coordinated the efforts of many different agencies. A few months into the job, I attended a prevention conference, and in one of the workshops, we were asked to introduce ourselves and explain why we were there. Most people said things like, “My boss sent me,” or “I want to learn more about being racially sensitive,” things like that. I stood up and bluntly said, “I’m here because I want to save the world.”

A long moment of uncomfortable silence and blank stares greeted this. The facilitator said, “Isn’t that nice,” her condescending tone unmistakable, then moved on. Even in a group of teachers and social workers, my statement smacked of naïve 1960s hippie-style idealism, or worse—embarrassing 1980s New Age-style utopian blather.

Back when the New Age first appeared on the cultural radar, many a New Age writer waxed rhapsodic over what a New Age of harmony would look like. War and hunger and disease would be a distant memory, the air would be bright and clean, birds would sing in abundant trees, and people would hop in their solar-fueled

cars and head off to perform meaningful jobs wearing blissful smiles of inner peace.

Now let's compare that with reality in 2009: The nightly news shows us death tolls from bombs (many of them ours) exploding all over the Middle East and Europe, experts setting the odds on terrorists exploding nuclear devices here in America, as well as the acute suffering of refugees from famines and wars and disease. Here in the U.S., people are losing their jobs, losing their homes, and living in their cars, while entire cities run dry of gas and our government is bailing out Wall Street to avoid complete economic collapse. Meanwhile, we are absorbing one climactic catastrophe after the next—freak storms and yearly hundred-year floods and wildfires and hurricanes—while ice shelves the size of Long Island collapse into oceans with vast dead zones of floating garbage.

No wonder people like me who prattle on about saving the world get blank stares and condescension.

Idealism, writes Todd Gitlin in his wonderful book, *Letters to a Young Activist*, can actually shield the status quo by appearing so “exotic” that it renounces any hope of serious influence and “leaves center stage to the tough guys of realism.”

He's absolutely right. Yet at the same time, it is only very tough and hard realism that allows us to recognize that if we do not change the course of society, it is going to collapse in on us and kill us all—or at least make life so miserable and desperate and marginal that it won't be worth living. Those who don't recognize that are the true, out-of-touch dreamers.

Of course, from the universe's perspective, this might all be a moot point.

Shiva's dance

As I near the end of this book, I realize that I have been writing on the assumption that most idealists care deeply about changing

the course of events—that we very much *want* to save the world. I've also been writing on the even bigger assumption that we have some kind of choice in the matter. The latter assumption especially may have no basis in reality.

Many spiritual teachers are quick to point out that we have no permanent right to existence, and that the universe may decide the human experiment was a spectacular failure and should probably be allowed to self-destruct. After all, from the view of the Absolute, we are just one cycle out of an infinite many in the continuous rising and falling of being unfolding.

Eastern cosmology in particular is based on the knowledge that reality *depends* on the fluctuation between creation and destruction, the on-off pulsation between life and death. This idea is personified by the Hindu god Shiva, who continually destroys and recreates the physical universe with his dance. This concept of the universal dynamic of fluctuation is why, back in the 1970s, the marvelous Alan Watts glossed over the possibility of nuclear disaster as a silly “fascination with doom.” He said the proper spiritual attitude toward a fiery end should be, “Why bother about that? Because if it happens, it's just another fluctuation.”

Yet this openness to disaster is not as fatalistic as it sounds. As Watts continues, “If you realize that it doesn't really matter if the whole human race blows itself up, then there's a chance you won't do it.” A fascination with our impending doom makes us panicky, he added, and it is the people who are in a panic who are most likely to “push the button.” In other words, only by embracing our fate do we gain the ability to change it. (Perhaps this is why the dancing Shiva is not only known as the “Great Destroyer,” but also the “Bringer of Happiness.”)

Today, with terrorism and global warming added to the nuclear threat, we have even more reason to expect that a cataclysmic end may be unavoidable. And so we find popular teachers like Ken Wilber and Deepak Chopra engaging in a dialogue in which they both acknowledge that from the Absolute perspective,

it doesn't matter in the least whether we figure out how to save ourselves or not. And yet, they are also quick to add that from the Absolute perspective, we finally see how much saving ourselves really *does* matter on the Relative Plane. After all, the entire reason the Absolute gives birth to the Relative is to discover what we will make of it.

True, we may make hash of it, and as Watts and Wilber would both say, "That's fine." Destruction will engulf us once more, and from those ashes, the Absolute will create us relative creatures once more, and presumably again and again until we get it right. Until we learn to cherish the opportunity granted to us on the relative plane, the opportunity to taste, to touch, to feel, and to reach out to each other in love.

I believe the Absolute spins the beautiful world into existence, and then evolves us here to find out whether we will care enough about ourselves and each other to save it. Ultimately, the outcome does not matter, yet ultimately, that is what we are here to do.

This has ever been the paradox of the human condition: We are both grounded in the unchanging Absolute, yet draw breath from the ever-changing Relative.

From the Absolute perspective, we do not have a choice in the world's fate, while from the Relative perspective, the choice is always ours, and always important. So I shall go back and rest on the assumption of the Relative, that it *is* in our power to save the world, through the only medium that can heal the rift between Absolute and Relative—through love. I am also going to rest on the assumption that we idealists care deeply about making it happen.

Indeed, if we want our children and grandchildren to have a chance at life as we understand it, we are going to have to *insist* on saving the world, no matter how much condescension we encounter, "using the language of healing and relatedness without embarrassment," in the words of Peter Block.

Yet, Gitlin is surely right in that we must also be careful to ground this language in reality. "Resist the temptation to think

you are ushering in an earthly paradise," he warns. "Fantasies of an ideal realm will not do. The place to stand must always be solid, substantial, right here at hand."

So then, realistically speaking, what would a New Age and a saved world actually look like?

How A Paradigm Change Works

My all-time favorite analogy of how a new paradigm can help us solve our tangled mess of complicated and seemingly impossible to solve issues like global warming and health care and public education comes from a book called *Society's Breakthrough!* by Jim Rough. He begins with the familiar example of the three blind men who come across an elephant. The first blind man comes into contact with the elephant's legs and declares an elephant similar to a tree trunk. The second blind man gets hold of the tail and decides an elephant is like a rope. The third blind man puts his hands on the trunk and believes an elephant to be like a snake. From here, Rough continues:

Pretend for a minute that the elephant is restless, causing problems for each of the men. The tree-like legs are stepping all over the vegetables in the garden; the rope-like tail is whipping the blind man in the face; the snake-like trunk is destroying the nearby bush. Not understanding the whole system, each man then works hard to solve his particular problem. One tries to turn the legs into posts, by heaping dirt around them. Another attempts to cut off the rope-tail. The third squirts poison at the snake-trunk to protect himself. The elephant, of course, doesn't benefit from any of these actions, nor do the men.

Of course, as Rough points out, this is exactly how our old paradigm politics approaches our problems today, “as though they are separate and as though we could use methods of control to fix them.” But if we were to start looking at these problems from the perspective of a holistic new paradigm, we could then see the whole system, the whole elephant so to speak, and then “respond intelligently.”

We might, for example, put a pile of food nearby to compel the elephant to simply move to a better spot. And say the elephant did indeed move away. Our seemingly separate and overwhelming problems would be solved almost effortlessly, all on their own. But as Rough adds, such a simple whole system answer would likely be resisted by the blind men. “Even though each may care deeply about the problem he addresses and wants it solved, the narrowness of his perspective may cause him to believe the new solution is irrelevant and resist it. What value could there be, they might all exclaim, in putting a pile of hay nearby? After all, each is an expert in his field of study and all agree there is no value to this new idea.”

Watch Congress in action on CSPAN for awhile, and you will certainly see some blind men and women, our old paradigm legislators, railing against whole system solutions—the only solutions that will work—as nonsense. But as long as we stay in the context of the old paradigm, our societal problems and threats to the future will remain impossibly difficult to solve. The only way to respond intelligently to issues like global warming and health care and public education is to make the leap to a new, holistic perspective.

Choosing the future

Back in the 1980s, I confess I was one of those who believed that awareness was building throughout the whole of the population.

I believed this growing awareness would, at any moment, build to the critical point that would allow us to see ourselves in each other, allow us to lay down our weapons and begin caring for each other, allow peace and prosperity to reign—and solar-fueled cars to zip along the highways. In other words, this awareness would allow us to save the world without too much effort on our part.

It was not such a crazy notion; after all, I was only 20 years old and in my short lifetime, society had advanced in huge stunning leaps—with civil rights and the peace movement and the women's movement and men walking about on the moon. What reason did I have to expect that all that progress, however chaotic, would come to a screeching halt?

Now that I have a better grasp on history, and a better understanding of the dialectic of progress, I understand why there hasn't been many stunning leaps of late. (The exception: Electing our first black president in 2008 was about as stunning as it gets.) I still believe that human beings are meant to evolve in awareness, and that this will happen on its own, in fits and starts as it always has. The problem, of course, is that the normal pace of evolving awareness is lagging behind the pace of societal breakdown from the failures of the old paradigm. Human consciousness is not evolving nearly as fast as the planet is degenerating in its ability to sustain us.

Clearly, we long ago sailed past our chance to create utopia, and now it is simply a matter of surviving long enough to fight another day. This might be one of our first critical junctures in history where it could go either way, (the dawning of the nuclear age being the very first), but this is certainly not our last critical juncture. Life on this increasingly crowded planet will likely always be teetering on the brink of disaster—and the efforts of idealists will always be our only hope of keeping us all from crashing over the edge.

And whatever a real New Age might look like, we're certainly not going to get there in one glorious moment. There will be no magic tipping point when we will finally be able sit back with a

“Whew! Mission accomplished.” Rather, every moment will continue to be critical, and I imagine a New Age-saved world will look very much like the world today.

The news will still be full of stories of violence and bombs exploding, stories of Third World countries struggling to pull themselves up from chaos to order, and stories of terrible weather as the climate absorbs the damage done over the past two hundred years. Our politicians will still do epic battle in Washington, police will still arrest criminals, people will still go to church and grope their way toward God, and our children will still go to school and be under too much influence from Hollywood and the celebrity culture.

In a realistic New Age, most of our problems will not disappear. But there will be subtle differences. You might not be able to put your finger on it, but the panicked bite of the times will be gone. Instead of inching closer to disaster, we will be inching away from it, and you will start to see glimpses of it here and there. A story about soldiers coming home and the lessening of anti-American sentiment around the world. A story about crime rates falling now that we have a new focus on restorative justice and rehabilitation. A story about high school dropout rates falling and college enrollments going up because tax dollars that used to go prisons are now going to public schools. A story about unemployment being at its lowest point in thirty years thanks to the explosion in green jobs and the alternative fuels industry.

You may also notice a few new spiritual centers popping up in your town, and some of your friends trying out meditation or yoga, and seeming less stressed. Another friend might invite you to do some volunteer work with her at a homeless shelter one night a week. Your drive to work will suddenly seem faster because more companies are encouraging their employees to telecommute. And then one day you will see it—a cute little solar-fueled car zipping by...

Or maybe it won't look like that at all. Who knows how a New Age will really unfold? And does it matter? Ultimately, the New Age is not something we can predict for tomorrow, it is a choice we make today, "a choice we live into," says Peter Block. The place to stand is right here at hand, today, solid and substantial. Saving the world must become a way of life we choose today, not envision for tomorrow. It must become a way of understanding oneself in relation to the world today, and every day.

Still, I have not addressed the question of *how* the New Age can change the world. What makes me or any New Ager so sure that idealism holds the means to a better-world end?

Paradigms, old and new

One thing, and one thing only, defines the meaning of your life, forms the basis for your decisions, and guides your contribution to the choices made by your society. And that one thing is your philosophy about reality, your metaphysics. It is your set of beliefs about why you are here on this planet and what you're supposed to accomplish while you are here.

We all have a philosophy, there's no way around it. And that philosophy determines what we do with our hours and days, how we spend our money, how we vote, how we support this issue or that, how loudly or quietly we support it, how responsible we feel for each other, how likely we are to get involved.

And as true as this is on the individual level, it is even more true on the collective level. Our collective philosophy gives us the basis for collective policy decisions, lets us know whether or not we should go to war or cut down trees or invest in schools or regulate markets or rehabilitate criminals.

Today, our collective philosophy in America is largely determined by the longstanding paradigms of authoritarian dualism and capitalistic materialism. Most people would agree that the

policy decisions coming from these two paradigms have not been healthy for people *or* planet. (Not exactly true, the old paradigm works fabulously for the rich, but even they won't be able to escape the effects of global warming or nuclear disaster.)

With the old paradigms failing us so spectacularly, we are clearly in urgent need of a new paradigm to guide us to better choices for self, society, and planet. "For this we know about the mysterious ways of the paradigm," writes Professor Michael Nagler. "No alternative, no shift. No matter how outmoded the old paradigm has become, no matter how dangerous, there must be an alternative before one can abandon it."

The New Age provides a fully formed alternative—an idealistic paradigm that has been tested throughout many centuries of spiritual practice, and has been sharpened and refined in these last decades of scientific advance and study. This paradigm provides us with a new, commonsense way of approaching problems in which our unity, interdependence, and the well-being of the whole point us to obvious solutions.

For decades now, idealistic writers of every stripe, from many different fields, have been arguing and begging and pleading for a wider adoption of this paradigm. Yet the truth is, we don't *all* have to become idealists in order to save the world. Most people, in fact, are not ready to embrace the idealistic paradigm, for as we know from our map of spiritual development, we can't get to Stage Four idealism without first evolving from Stage One chaos to Stage Two order to Stage Three skepticism.

So we don't need just one world-saving paradigm, we need the structures of a number of increasingly evolved paradigms that allow movement up the spiral of growth through all the stages. Which means our problem is not that there aren't enough idealists (although more would certainly be better); our problem is that we idealists are so invisible, so isolated, so lost from each other, that the paradigm we champion has become inaccessible.

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Barack Obama is not the answerBLOG
**Looking for
the New Age**

I thank all the gods and goddesses that Barack Obama is now our president and not another conservative. I believe he represents our one slim hope of turning our Titanic-nation away from the melting iceberg that looms before us. Yet at the same time, his election increases the danger for us, as he himself admits. His election makes it easy to believe the bulk of the work is now going to be done for us.

Someone said to me today, The New Age is already here, see look, there's a black man in the White House, the world has changed. The tired old ways are crumbling, she said. A new paradigm is no longer an ideal that we need to name and talk about, she said, because it is already "a living, breathing way of being."

I first wanted to weep. And then to ask, what world are you living in? (As it turns out, she lives in the luxe world of Santa Barbara, California, where the New Age does indeed live and breathe in fine health.)

Not that I don't marvel at how far we've come. I do believe in celebrating the good news, and focusing on the strides we have made toward the positive. Oh, how I believe in that. But I also know that good news can lull us, can make us feel finished, can hypnotize us into a trance of complacency.

The old paradigm—including corporate control of our way of life—is not crumbling nearly as fast as we think. True, it is more transparently ineffective than ever, but that doesn't mean it is slumping off in defeat. There are way more people working to rescue it than there are people working to construct a new paradigm. Barack Obama himself is trying to shore up the structures of the old paradigm with his Wall Street bailout plans, with his new stimulus bill.

We cannot rest just because Obama is in the White House. He is stuck working within the context of the old paradigm as

much as any of us, and he will stay stuck unless we the people create a new context for him. This is the moment to get in gear, identify with each other, connect to each other, talk to each other, start building social capital. We need to consistently and ardently articulate a new paradigm all over the land today, and every day. Until we truly begin to long for it. Until we start picking up the phone and writing letters and emails to our representatives to insist on it. Until we find ourselves going out the door to start working for it.

You are pretty hard on yourself, and on the New Age community, said another friend who read part of this book. I know why she said that. The New Age has trained us to be so very gentle with ourselves, we become alarmed at any kind of self-criticism.

Stop beating yourself up! we cry. Yet if any group of people needs a good hard shaking out of apathy, it is we idealists, who dream so beautifully, yet in these last few decades, act so infrequently.

History has shown us again how change is won, and it is always through tough, persistent and even life-risking work against astronomical odds. It is work not just privately discussed, but publicly insisted upon in every corner. Look at the revolutionaries who founded this nation. Look at the abolitionists who ended slavery. Look at the workers who faced down exploitive corporations to win labor rights. Look at the suffragettes who won the vote for women. Look at the civil rights workers who ended segregation. Look at the peace marchers who helped end the war in Vietnam. They stood up, they spoke out, they fought, and they never gave up.

Yes we have come so very far. It takes one's breath away really. But there is still so far to go. The evolutionary journey is not finished—and it is our turn to take over the work. We have to shake off the trance of thinking change happens on its own. Or that Obama is going to take care of it for us.

Opening up the spiral

As the most public and popular form of Stage Four idealism available to us over the last forty years, the New Age long formed a vital bridge between Stages Three and Five. Unfortunately, the New Age as a recognizable, cohesive movement dropped off the cultural radar, was kicked to the side, and as I've argued in these pages, our spiritual evolution has suffered as a result. Most of us who grew into Stage Four have bogged down here, year after year, decade after decade.

The fact is, without a strong and vital New Age movement, the spiral breaks down and our evolution remains unfinished. Those ready to grow from Stage Three skepticism are unable to find a well-marked and respected path toward idealism, and they either stagger off on an uncertain hunt for it hidden in pockets of the culture, or more likely, they stay unsatisfied in Stage Three. Meanwhile, those of us in Stage Four have no solid structure beneath us to support growth and movement, and no particular philosophy to point the way beyond to Stage Five integralism. We are alone, isolated, stuck—and blocking the spiral for all others trying to find their way.

It seems clear that without New Age-style idealism to provide a prominent alternative paradigm, we *all* end up stuck, no matter which stage of the spiral currently dictates our worldview. In my opinion, bringing the New Age back not only *can* save the world, it may, in fact, be the *only* way to save the world—by giving us the means to unstick ourselves and restart our collective evolution.

You can help rebuild a strong and proud New Age by declaring yourself a part of it. In identifying with the movement, and living by its principles, you can create a connection in the social field that will strengthen around you and support your growth and that of many others. In identifying with the New Age, you can help restore a most vital piece of infrastructure on the spiral of development which holds the flow of all of humanity.

I invite you to join me in risking condescension, and start speaking in “the language of healing and relatedness without embarrassment.” I invite you stand up in front of the room and say, “I’m New Age, and I’m here to save the world.”