

# AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS



## AGENTS OF THE NEW AGE

by Martin Morse Wooster

The New Age movement in America is hardly new. As the journalist Jay Kinney notes in an entertaining anthology, *The Fringes of Reason* (a "Whole Earth Catalog" to New Age practices), "nearly every spiritual or cultural phenomenon associated with the term dates back at least several centuries." The first channelers, for example, were members of the Fox family of Hydeville, New York, who in 1848 achieved national renown by communicating with the dead (most notably with a "Mr. Splitfoot"). The first Indian gurus came to the U.S. in 1893 as part of the Chicago World's Fair. And the first journal to identify itself with the New Age—the *New Age Magazine*—published its premiere issue in 1914.

But it was not until the rise of the counterculture in the 1960s that the New Age movement took an interest in politics, although it adopted a slightly different attitude from that of its half-brothers and -sisters on the New Left. For the New Left, politics was life. For the New Agers, politics is therapy. It is their quest to connect with "the newly rediscovered spiritual side of things," as one New Ager puts it, that has brought them flocking to environmental, feminist, and peace groups.

Which greet them, not surprisingly, with open arms. Fully a third of the listings in the 1989 *Guide to New Age Living* are political, including twenty-five environmental groups, twenty-four peace outfits, thirty-five "social justice" organizations (among them the Institute for Policy Studies, self-described in the *Guide* as an "unbiased center for scholars and activists"), twenty-three antihunger groups, and five animal-rights groups. (By way of comparison, the *Guide* lists thirty-nine spas and ashrams and a mere fourteen suppliers of vegetarian pet food.) And at the "Heart-to-Heart Festival," which I recently attended in Washington, there

was likewise a heavy proportion of left-wing groups with their own display booths: the National Peace Institute, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals, the Christic Institute, and many more.

Other booths at the festival were harder to characterize. One woman offered proof that AIDS could be cured by ingesting large quantities of watercress; the New Vrindaban Community of West Virginia sold *The Joy of No Sex* ("50,000 copies in print"); the Global Cooperation Project, combining the intellectual candlepower of Jimmy Carter, Peter Gabriel, Barbara Jordan, Ken Kesey, and Ben Kingsley, asked those attending the festival to organize "creative groups" to "brainstorm positive ideas about a better world." (Among the positive ideas *already submitted* by previous creative groups: "Harmony, trust, respect, understanding, cooperation, and ice cream every day." These ideas, the project guaranteed, would be donated to the United Nations. I can't think of a more worthy depository.)

Rama Vernon, director of the Center for Soviet-American Dialogue, was the featured speaker at the first "Heart-to-Heart" session I attended. At one time, Vernon led a typical New Age life, meditating daily, avoiding the world. But then in 1984 she went to the Soviet Union. She was standing in Red Square, she said, watching Soviet soldiers do the goosestep, when "I came face to face with my programmed preconceptions of the Evil Empire. As I watched the soldiers marching, my knees trembled with fear. And I asked: 'Where is this fear coming from?' . . . I saw that my fear was primordial, rooted in the inner society."

Returning to the U.S., Vernon set herself up in business as a New Age travel agent, taking nearly a thousand truth-seekers on twenty-nine missions to the Soviet Union over the past five years. On her tours she has met with "healers, psychics, underwater communicators, refuseniks, and dissidents." In Russian schools she has sung works

by Joan Baez and Pete Seeger—"the Soviets' great heroes," she called them—and her two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Mira, has been interviewed on Soviet television.

But the high point of her life, she said, was when she met with Mikhail Gorbachev at a "worldwide ceremony of peace" in 1987. Franciscan and Buddhist monks chanted; American Indians presented a peace pipe. And Gorbachev spoke. "There was a space between his thoughts," she said. "And those spaces filled the room, so that there was a tide of consciousness sweeping the room." She even held Gorbachev's hand; and as she did so, "I could feel that there is a great light in the world—and it's coming out of Russia!"

Vernon invited us to become "citizen diplomats" by signing up for her next "transformational journey" to "bond" with the "truly kind, giving, loving, zestful, warm-hearted, spiritual" Soviets. All of the arrangements inside the Soviet Union—visits with healers, psychics, "mystical artists," and people who swim in Gorky Park in January, along with a tour of the Kiev-Pechery monastery (which holds "the remains of monks whose mummies still emanate spiritual energy")—would be handled by Intourist. Cost: less than \$3,000 (\$2,995).

Vernon was followed by Marilyn Ferguson, a perky pixie mysteriously encased in what seemed to be a baby-blue quilt. Author of the New Age blockbuster *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, Ferguson has for the past six years been working on a new book she calls *The New Common Sense: Secrets of the Visionary Life*. She wouldn't explain what her book is about, but through her research she has compiled a large number of uplifting quotations, most of which she read to the audience. She cited Thoreau, Emerson (a New Age favorite), Thomas Paine, William James, Thomas Edison, Paul Newman, her cleaning lady, and inspirational passages from *Reader's Digest*. "I seem to be quoting a lot today," she said. "I can't help myself."

Stripped of its New Age rhetoric,

much of Ferguson's talk was quite reasonable: "The next level of joy" after personal fulfillment, she said, could best be reached by people working together to perform charitable acts, and she denied that Washington had all the answers to America's problems. "Although it's important to have responsible government, it really truly is the reaching out of all of us that makes a difference. . . . There are going to be hundreds of thousands of solutions, not one solution."

As she spoke, her phrases began to mingle with others in my mind: "The reaching out of all of us . . . a kinder, gentler nation . . . thousands of solutions . . . a thousand points of light . . ." Was Marilyn Ferguson a Republican, I wondered, or was George Bush a New Ager?

"He sounds very New Age to me," Ferguson said cheerfully.

The next morning, I attended a session featuring Ed Winchester, who has spent most of his life as an accountant for the Pentagon. A few years ago, he enrolled in a course on New Age ideas, sponsored by the Air Force. He was quickly converted, and committed himself to solving the problems of national defense through yoga. He enlisted several of his co-workers to create, by means of meditation, a "Peace Shield" that would eventually convert hawks through a "Spiritual Defense Initiative."

Winchester has become something of a New Age megastar. Dozens of newspapers, including the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, have made him the subject of profiles ("PENTAGON PSYCHICS BUILDING PEACE SHIELD AROUND USA," screamed the tabloid *National Examiner*). Swamis and gurus from all over have made Winchester's office a regular stop on their worldwide tours. Sri Chinmoy, a Bangladeshi best known for his annual peace meditations at the UN, visited Winchester and composed a ballad in his honor.

Pentagon! Pentagon! Pentagon!

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America's sovereign victory horn.  
Himalayan military leadership.  
You shatter the world's indolence-sleep.  
Pentagon! Pentagon! Pentagon!  
Earth's brightest, bravest, Power Dawn.

Winchester claims that his meditators are responsible for the "break-through in the reunification process" between North and South Korea. He also accepts credit for exposing the procurement scandals last year through meditation.

What accounts for the mysterious power of these Pentagon meditators? In his talk, Winchester tried to explain. As befits a good bureaucrat, he had a chart. And as befits the work of a good bureaucrat, the chart didn't make much sense. The average Pentagon worker, he said, starts his career with a flat "awareness baseline." Meditation, however, causes the bureaucrat's mind to leap into the "field of Universal C," C being the "coherence factor," a "measure of spiritual force," that produces the "Peace Shield effect." When he enters the Universal C, the meditating bureaucrat—or "spiritual warrior"—"has no

consciousness." (This is a complaint that has been made against Pentagon bureaucrats for years.) "Some of this," Winchester said with a shrug, "may sound like nonsense."

The day's closing speaker was Dennis Weaver, the star of "Gunsmoke," "McCloud," "Gentle Ben," and other television shows. He was introduced by his wife, Geri, who explained that Weaver had recently been building his dream house; located in the plains of Colorado, it is made exclusively from garbage. "He's got an architect called the 'Prince of Trash,'" she said, "and he's going to stack old tires up like bricks and *stucco* it with old aluminum cans!" She finished her introduction with a look into the future—"If I don't show up next year, it's because Dennis is going to arrange to send me out on a UFO and not bring me back!"—and then Weaver himself bounded onto the stage.

A trim, fit man in his fifties, he wore a sky-blue shirt with red and purple panels that made him look like a New Age jockey. But he was a jockey with lots to say. He boldly

came out *for* love and *against* greed. "We're like snowflakes, you know," Weaver said, "all different, but we come out of the same snowbank. Love—you know, that's really the answer to every problem on the face of the earth."

He went on in this vein for some time. The audience was deeply moved. Then the floor was opened up for questions.

"Why did you decide to work for Greenpeace?"

"I supported Greenpeace because there was an urging within me to heal the planet. A lot of people say the earth is dying, that rain forests are being destroyed. The planet isn't dying. It's *reacting* to what we have perpetrated. What would you do if someone poured acid rain on your head? You'd react—and that's what's happening with the planet. You see more earthquakes and tornadoes."

"Do you think the New Age will ever take place?"

"We're in a shift of consciousness," Weaver said. "We have a change in the reality around us, which is always

motivated by a need. . . . Look back a hundred years, we had no radios, no televisions, no compact discs, no acid rain, and we *never* had these environmental problems."

There were a few more questions along these lines, in answer to which Weaver revealed that he was a vegetarian and had been practicing yoga since 1959 (when America still knew him as the humble Chester on "Gunsmoke").

Then came the clincher.

"Any chance of a political campaign?"

Weaver paused, and gave the audience a beatific smile. The crowd egged him on. "If Ronald Reagan can do it," someone called out, "you can do it!"

"*Who knows* what's in my life?" he said. "I don't think I'm going to have that urge, but I don't want to limit myself."

It was the best "maybe yes, maybe no" answer I'd ever heard at a Washington conference—final proof, as if any were needed, that politics and the New Age are meant for each other. □

## THE TALKIES



## POETRY IN MOTION

by Bruce Bawer

**D**ead Poets Society is the kind of movie you want to like. Set in 1959, it's about a group of sensitive, intelligent, teenaged boys at the hundred-year-old Welton School, "the best preparatory school in the United States," whose enthusiastic young English teacher, John Keating (Robin Williams), teaches them not just to appreciate but to *love* poetry. How, you ask? Here's how: on the first day of classes, he steers them into a corridor lined with photographs of earlier Welton graduating classes, and has one of the boys read aloud the first lines of the Robert Herrick poem "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time" ("Gather ye rosebuds while ye may, / Old time is still a-flying . . ."). "We are food for worms, lads!" Keating declares dramatically, and bids his charges look closely at the faces of the Welton students of a century ago—innocent, hopeful faces not unlike their

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own. "These boys are now fertilizing daffodils," whispers Keating (himself a Welton alumnus) as the camera examines one of the old photographs in extreme close-up. "Seize the day, boys! Make your lives extraordinary!"

What does all this have to do with poetry? Why, everything, of course. "We don't read and write poetry because it's cute," Keating tells the boys, "we read and write poetry because we're human, and humans feel passion." Passion—that's the ticket! He feeds them a purely Romantic conception of things: the poet as savage, as redskin. No Alexander Pope on *this* reading list! Keating's hero is Whitman, and he scrawls on the blackboard the famous line from "Song of Myself": "I sound my barbaric yawp over the roofs of the world." Before long, he's got his pupils sounding their own yawps; and when the most unassertive boy in the class, Todd Anderson (Ethan Hawke), proves to be too bashful to compose and read aloud a poem of his own,

Keating drags him in front of the class and agitates him into inventing one on the spot. The poem isn't very good, needless to say, but it's peeled straight from the gut, and (as Keating makes clear) that's what counts.

For he certainly doesn't teach his students any other criteria for great poetry (not on screen, at least): there's no class discussion here, no exegesis, no *explication de texte*. Instead he conducts unorthodox exercises: during one class period, he has the boys take turns standing on his desk (so that they can see things from a different perspective); during another, he leads them into a courtyard to try out various idiosyncratic ways of walking (so that they can learn not to be conformists). Throughout these peculiarly conceived lessons, poetry itself is reduced to the role which Philistines have always accorded it, that of rudimentary Source of Inspiration: Keating—hovering busily over his bemused, acquiescent, and increasingly adoring boys like a neu-

rotically possessive mother—tosses off isolated lines from great writers as if they were fortune-cookie maxims or desk-calendar Thoughts for the Day. Thoreau, he exclaims, wrote that "most men lead lives of quiet desperation": don't let that happen to you! He has a boy recite the closing lines of Tennyson's "Ulysses," with their description of "heroic hearts, / Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will / To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield." The lesson is plain: strive, seek, find, don't yield. Seize the day!

**P**atently, director Peter Weir (whose previous films include *Gallipoli*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock*, and *Witness*) and screenwriter Tom Schulman want us to love Keating. To this end, they load the dice grotesquely against the opposition—i.e., the other adults in the movie. First, they give Welton an unbelievably cold and intractable old headmaster