

# Channeling in the New Age

**"DON'T TOUCH THAT DIAL!" THE NEW AGE PRACTICE OF CHANNELING** copyright 1988 by Eric Pement. Nov. 28, 1988. They close their eyes and lips. For a minute or two, sitting with quiet focus, they breathe in great volumes of air, sucking up strength for a momentous journey. Suddenly, another personality takes over and an alien voice speaks. Channeling has become one of the paramount landmarks of the New Age movement, eclipsing herbal cures, mundane astrology, and flotation tanks. Now an integral part of the Aquarian scene, channelers seem to have multiplied geometrically in the past fifteen years. Trying to monitor this wave is an incredible task. Its influence is propagated through multiple avenues -- radio and TV interviews, private channeling sessions, cassette distribution, videotape sales and rentals, newsletters, magazines, mass seminars, conferences, and an endless stream of channeled literature. (They don't call it "automatic writing" for nothing.) Net profits on all this have been estimated at from 100 to 400 million dollars annually. [1]

Exactly what is it? Jon Klimo, author of a sympathetic yet thorough survey of channeling, says it "is a phenomenon in which otherwise ordinary people seem to let themselves be taken over by, or in other ways receive messages from, another personality who uses them as a conduit, medium, or channel for the communication -- hence the term MEDIUM or CHANNEL." [2] One of the more popular channelers is J.Z. (Judy Zebra) Knight. She channels Ramtha, also known as "the Ram," supposedly a 35,000-year-old being from Atlantis who invented the practice of war. I like Martin Gardner's summary of Ramtha's story: "Slowly he came to realize that he himself was part of the God he hated. After 63 OBEs [out-of-body experiences], his body vibrating faster than light, he became one with the wind. On the side of Mount Indus, in Tibet, free of weight, he ascended into the Seventh Heaven, where he and God became one. He is now part of an 'unseen brotherhood' of superbeings who love us and hear our prayers." [3]

Ramtha has made Knight a millionairess several times over; she, in turn, has had Ramtha's name copyrighted to prevent anyone else from channeling him. Penny Torres and Jach Pursel are the two most popular rivals to J.Z. Knight. Penny channels Mafu, "a highly evolved being from the seventh dimension, last seen on earth when he incarnated as a leper in first-century Pompeii." [4]

Mafu, like Ramtha, speaks with a Slavic accent. Meanwhile, Jach Pursel channels Lazaris, a "group being" from beyond time and space who has (have?) never been embodied in our dimension. Lazaris speaks with a lisp. The range of "entities" supposedly being channeled today is virtually unlimited. SPIRIT SPEAKS, a bimonthly magazine from California, is a READER'S DIGEST of messages from various channeled entities. Some of its regular contributors include Dong How Li (a Tibetan monk last incarnated 2600 years ago), Gabriel (an angel), Dr. Peebles (a Scottish physician from the 1800s), and Zoosh ("a non-physical being from Alpha Centauri").

An excellent survey of the channeling scene (from a Christian perspective) is provided in a recent book by John Ankerberg and John Weldon. They note that the personalities being channeled "claim to be various aspects of the human mind or the 'collective' mind of humanity . . . They also claim to be the Holy Spirit, troubled ghosts, the spirits of animals and plants (dolphins, trees, flowers), multiple human personalities, the inhabitants of mythical cultures (Atlanteans, Lemurians), and even a possible alien computer that exists in the future. Critics, realizing that some people are claiming to channel dolphins, others the spirits of fruits and vegetables and still others computers from the future, have come to conclude the sanity of the nation is at risk." [5]

**HISTORICAL AND BIBLICAL BACKGROUND** Channeling activity, understood in its wider sense to include spirit possession in general, can be traced back to the earliest times and civilizations. The acceptance of animism (the belief that spirits are present in all of nature, including plants, inert objects, and seasons) or the practice of ancestor veneration have provided primitive cultures with sufficient groundwork for the rise of spiritism. Certainly, spirit mediumship, as well as attempts at spirit-control, can be seen in shamanism (the activities of the tribal witchdoctor, magician, or healer in controlling the forces/spirits of nature). Channeling can be traced back to the ancient religions of Egypt, India, and the Near East; thus, we should pay special attention to the Biblical injunctions on this topic. The commandments given to Moses after the Exodus from Egypt (about 1400 B.C.) expressly forbid communication with "spirit mediums" (Lev. 19:31) [6], or going to one who "inquires of the dead" (Deut. 18:11).

Mosaic law prescribed the death penalty both for the medium and for the person who sought out the medium for advice (Lev. 20:6, 27). Indeed, one of the chief reasons that King Saul, the first king of Israel, was slain was for "going to one who had a familiar spirit, to inquire of it" (1 Chron. 10:13). Seven hundred years after Mt. Sinai, in the days of Isaiah, the prohibition still remained. Those who sought information from "mediums and wizards" were to be answered brusquely: "Should not a people seek their God instead? Should they seek to the dead on behalf of the living?" (Isa. 8:19) In New Testament times, possession and control by discarnate spirits were accepted realities. The actions of Jesus in casting out "demons" and "unclean spirits" are mentioned repeatedly in the New Testament (Matt. 8:28ff, 9:32ff, 12:22ff, 17:14ff, etc.). Jesus likewise commissioned his apostles to cast out demons (Matt. 10:1) and gave this authority to others not numbered among the Twelve (Luke 10:17). The early church continued to conduct exorcisms (Acts 8:7, 19:12). An interesting incident regarding a channeler appears in the sixteenth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles. While Paul and Silas were evangelizing in Philippi, a city of western Greece, they were persistently followed by a slave girl "with a spirit of divination" (Acts 16:16). The Greek text literally reads a "python spirit" [Gk. PNEUMA PUTHONA], a reference to an entity named The Python, which inhabited the high priestess of the temple of Apollo at Delphi. (Remember hearing about "the oracle of Delphi" in school? That was her.) "The Python" or "python spirit" later became a generic term for a discarnate entity which predicted the future. The apostle Paul finally "turned and said to the spirit, 'I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.' And he came out that very hour." (Acts 16:18) It bears noting that this spirit of divination evidently could provide some genuine information (verse 16). This was not a natural ability, nor was the woman using methods of fraud or "cold reading," because when Paul cast out the spirit, she lost her powers and the ability to make money for her owners (v. 19). If the woman had been drawing upon a natural talent or using a swindle technique, she should still have been able to earn money by deception, as previously. In any case, this was not a power the Lord wanted in her life, and through the authority of Jesus Christ it was cast out.

**CHANNELING IN MAJOR RELIGIONS** For centuries, among monotheistic cultures spirit communication was usually limited to spirits of divine origin (God, Jesus, one of the angels, etc.). Muhammad claimed multiple encounters with the angel Gabriel, whose messages are preserved in the Qur'an. In the Middle Ages, Roman Catholic mystics were permitted visions and appearances of Jesus or the Virgin Mary. Emmanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772), the brilliant metallurgist, inventor and scientist of the eighteenth century, abandoned his career for spiritism. Claiming to be in contact with angels, he wrote prodigious treatises and commentaries based on these visions and communications, and founded a major cultic movement influential among European and American intellectuals. In nineteenth-century America several cults, such as the Mormons and the Shakers, claimed communion with angels or spirits of the dead. Mary Baker Eddy often attempted to distinguish Christian Science (which she founded) from spiritualism. Yet she herself acted as a trance channeler briefly before "discovering" Christian Science (1866). In "The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science", Georgine Milmine describes the experiences of Mary Baker Patterson (who later became Mrs. Eddy). Mary Baker Patterson channeled the spirit of her dead brother Albert in 1864 (or claimed to, anyway). Milmine's book reproduces a photograph of automatic writing, purportedly from Albert, in Mary's hand. [7] Two years later, in the company of other spiritualists, Mrs. Patterson [Eddy] acted as a trance medium, this time claiming to channel only the spirits of the Apostles and of Jesus Christ. [8]

The channeling floodgates opened in this country in the mid- nineteenth century with the advent of spiritualism, the attempt to communicate with spirits of the dead. Historians almost universally trace the origin of the spiritualist movement to 1848 in Hydesville, New York, with the Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate. Margaret was 14 and Kate was 11 when they first heard the sounds of knocking, furniture being moved, and other sounds in various rooms of their home, in late 1847. [9] At these times, their beds would vibrate and shake without any reason. The children were terrified and Mrs. Fox's hair turned white through this ordeal. [10] On the night of March 31, 1848, 12-year-old Kate challenged these unseen powers to repeat the snaps of her fingers, which they did. Each number of snaps would be followed by the same number of raps, and thus the girls began to communicate with the spirits. News spread rapidly, and the family home was visited by interested writers and curiosity seekers. The sisters began to hold seances, communicating with the spirits by means of a simple code. In mid-April, Kate's parents sent her away to live with her older sister Leah in Rochester, N.Y., hoping to quell the disruption it had caused the family. (The spirits were usually more active in Kate's presence.) The rappings immediately spread to Leah's house, and Leah also became a believer. The first message the Fox sisters received was this: "Dear friends, you must proclaim these truths to the world. This is the dawning of a new era, and you must not try to conceal it any longer. When you do your duty, God will protect you and good spirits will watch over you." [11]

Fascination with spiritualism spread like wildfire, and within 30 years there were tens of thousands of spiritualists in the U.S., England, and across Europe, and national organizations were formed. In 1855 the first national spiritualist newspaper was issued in England; in 1866 a national conference was held in Rhode Island, where resolutions were passed that citizens should abandon all Christian ordinances and worship and close down all Sunday schools. In 1870, Sir William Crookes, famed British scientist who invented the Crookes tube (forerunner of the modern picture tube), called on the nation's scientists to investigate spiritualism. Seeking to contact his dead daughter, Crookes was convinced of spiritualism's validity. Queen Victoria consulted several mediums, hoping to speak with her late husband Prince Albert, who died in 1861. Seances were held at the White House under Lincoln's presidency. British prime minister William E. Gladstone, Canadian prime minister MacKenzie King, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (creator of Sherlock Holmes) were all converts to spiritualism. Famed magician and escape artist Harry Houdini tried to prevent Conan Doyle from being duped by crank mediums, but Doyle remained convinced that the spiritualists had true supernatural powers. He believed spiritualism was "a new revelation" to mankind. "Christianity must be modified by this new revelation," Doyle wrote, referring to spiritualism and psychic phenomena generally. "One can see no justice in a vicarious sacrifice, nor in the God who could be placated by such means. Above all, many cannot understand such expressions as the 'redemption from sin,' 'cleansed by the blood of the Lamb,' and so forth." [12]

Houdini's 1924 autobiography, "Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits", is a fascinating account of the origins and numerous frauds connected with nineteenth-century spiritualism. After over thirty years of research, he wrote, "I have accumulated one of the largest libraries in the world on psychic phenomena, Spiritualism, magic, witchcraft, demonology, evil spirits, etc., some of the material going as far back as 1489, . . . but nothing I ever read concerning the so-called Spiritualistic phenomena has impressed me as being genuine." [13] It was not Houdini, however, who struck the greatest blow against spiritualism. A shattering revelation had come a generation earlier, from Margaret and Kate Fox themselves. Forty years after the Fox sisters told the world of the spirit rappings, both confessed they were frauds. On October 21, 1888, 54-year-old Margaret Fox gave a public confession at the New York Academy of Music, before an audience of over two thousand people. Standing in her stocking feet on a small pine table on the stage, she produced loud, distinct raps which could be heard throughout the building. Her sister likewise gave consent. That same year, she told a crowd, "I am here tonight, as one of the founders of Spiritualism, to denounce it as absolute falsehood . . . the most wicked blasphemy the world has ever known." [14] One year later, they changed their minds, and both recanted their previous confessions! They claimed the spirit manifestations had always been genuine, and they had never tricked anyone with false knocks or raps, retracting all they had said in 1888. The Fox sisters had become alcoholics in the 1860s, and fellow spiritualists claimed their confessions had been bought off. The last years of their lives were spent in drunkenness, and their public speech now contained little more than profanity. Both died as alcoholics, Kate in 1892 and Margaret in 1893, both cursing God as they died. [15]

**CHANNELING IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY** Spiritualism by no means disappeared with the death of the Fox sisters. In fact, it diversified into spiritualist sects which could be rationalistic (strongly anti-Christian), average (mildly anti-Christian), and strongly religious, complete with sacraments and baptism. The spiritualist movement also provided the impetus for the study of psychic research and parapsychology. The early quarter of the twentieth century witnessed the epiphany of a few shining stars in the astral firmament. Two of these were channeled books, the other was

the so-called "sleeping prophet," Edgar Cayce (1877-1945). Cayce was raised in rural Kentucky. His parents were Campbellites. He claimed to see "little people" as a child. The turning point in his life occurred in 1901, at the age of 24. Cayce had been suffering from a chronic case of laryngitis and voice loss after contracting a cold a year earlier. In desperation, he turned to a hypnotist, Al Layne. After Cayce had entered a deep trance, Layne asked him to diagnose the cause of his hoarseness. "Immediately the fateful words came forth: 'Yes, we can see the body.' The voice diagnosed the problem as insufficient circulation. Layne gave a suggestion that the body cure itself. Cayce's neck grew pink, then bright red. Twenty minutes later, it became normal again. Layne told Cayce to wake up, and when he did, his voice had returned." [16] So goes the story in the Cayce biographies. Cayce's life was changed permanently. News of this story spread, and Cayce's neighbors asked him to diagnose their diseases for them. Cayce learned how to put himself in a trance state fairly quickly, and after he appeared to fall asleep, the voice would take over and prescribe various unorthodox cures which always seemed to work. Eventually, the questioners began to ask him about spiritual matters, and from then on Cayce channeled metaphysical "truths," promoting reincarnation, monism, astrology, gnosticism, Atlantis, mediumship, etc. Cayce's followers were devoted to these "readings," and over 14,000 trance sessions have been transcribed, cataloged, and indexed since his death. This material forms a vast body of occult reference material which has been used for decades.

Equally potent has been "The Aquarian Gospel of Jesus the Christ", published in 1907, channeled through Levi Dowling, who was purportedly empowered to read the "Akashic Records" (a scribal form of the Universal Mind, containing all the history of the universe). Levi's "Aquarian Gospel" has provided a mythical history of the life of Christ picked up by many cults and New Age devotees. It describes a reincarnated Jesus, who attained Christ consciousness after visiting Egypt, Greece, and India, during the so-called "silent years" before his public ministry in Palestine. [17] For a book supposedly transcribed from the Akashic records, "The Aquarian Gospel" is riddled with error, beginning from its first verse. It says "Herod Antipas was ruler of Jerusalem" when Jesus was born. That should have been Herod the Great, not Herod Antipas. It has Jesus visiting Lahore in Pakistan (31.1); Lahore didn't historically exist until 600 years later. It shows Jesus visiting magicians in Persepolis (39.1); Persepolis was destroyed by Alexander the Great in 330 B.C. and was never rebuilt. Nonetheless, this book has been adopted by many unwitting readers as "proof" of a secret occult past for Jesus Christ.

"The Urantia Book" was also obtained through trance channeling. Its unknown author served as a medium for dozens of extraterrestrial intelligences, beginning in the early 1900s. ("Urantia" is the name these space beings give to the planet earth.) Ironically, it was a Seventh-day Adventist minister and physician, who had spent over a decade debunking and refuting spiritualism, who was ultimately responsible for the publication of the Urantia papers. Dr. William Sadler finally found a channeler he couldn't expose as a fraud, whose entities were utterly inexplicable. Beginning in 1923, Dr. Sadler invited a group of friends, informally known as The Forum, to examine and question these intelligences, which were rapidly becoming more numerous. The channeler began producing automatic writing in response to their questions, and eleven years later these papers were completed. The entities asked Dr. Sadler, by now a true believer, that the work be published, though it wasn't until 1955 that the 2100-page volume made it into print. [18] The "Urantia Book" has influenced thousands of people, and is fully consistent with New Age ideology.

**THE ADVENT OF MODERN CHANNELING** It would be hard to say just where "modern" channeling practices should be dated from, but I'm inclined to point to the Seth material, channeled through the late Jane Roberts (died 1984). Jane, a housewife and would-be writer, first encountered "Seth" through a spontaneous experience in September 1963. Jane said "a fantastic avalanche of radical, new ideas burst into my head with tremendous force," not unlike an LSD trip. [19] Jane transmitted this material for over twenty years and, like most channeled writing, it is amazingly consistent with New Age philosophy (reality is a construct of our minds, etc.).

Jane Roberts was the first contemporary channeler to gain widespread acceptance in the 1970s, and since then the volume of channelers and channeled writings has fallen on our society like a deluge. How does channeling fit in the larger picture? We interviewed Joel Bjorling, author of a forthcoming bibliography on channeling. Since he's up to his eyeballs in studying channeled writings, we asked him how contemporary channeling differs from its nineteenth-century predecessor. He pointed out that in terms of content (i.e., what is taught), both have the same philosophy and share a common root. The outward phenomenon is also similar -- in both cases, a disembodied entity speaks through the channeler, usually in a trance state. One difference this author has observed is that the spiritualist movement focused on seances (dim lights, formal invocations, etc.) and supernatural manifestations -- table lifting, "direct voice" phenomena, ectoplasm, materialized writing or faces, etc.

By contrast, today's channelers do everything under bright lights, usually on stage, and the only visible event is when an alien personality takes them over. The channelers usually don't exhibit the powers or physical phenomena, such as levitation, that were present in spiritualism. (This may be due to the development of infrared photography, but that's another matter.) The basic themes have also differed. In spiritualism, the emphasis was on "proof of survival" after death, and the public largely sought reassurance that their deceased loved ones were happy in the Great Beyond. In modern channeling, the focus is on "higher intelligences" who have come to teach us Truth, showing us how to alter reality and achieve self-fulfillment. Modern channeling centers around certain themes: (1) we are all God(s), (2) there is no death, (3) reality is a product of the mind, (4) prosperity is our right and "we can have it all," and (5) we must preserve the earth from nuclear or ecological catastrophe. This last point is especially prevalent among UFO contactees, who communicate telepathically with various "space brothers" (their term). The UFOs generally warn that continued testing of nuclear weapons will disturb the earth's rotation or cause some kind of interplanetary disaster. The space brothers are also concerned about environmental pollution on our own planet. Despite the differences between the two movements, both spiritualists and channelers are agreed that the traditional Christian concept of God is false.

Consider the following statement: "Agreement [among channelers] can be said to exist on one point only, namely, that the historic Christian doctrine respecting the nature and character of the Deity is an imposition, the fabric of an artificial scholastic philosophy, and contradicted by sound reason as well as by the unanimous testimony of the spirit

world. It is certainly a remarkable fact that on this point the higher intelligences are strangely unanimous and emphatic in their statements, and all spiritualists are agreed." [20] Though this observation seems strikingly contemporary, it was actually written over 80 years ago, in an analysis of the spiritualist movement. We believe the parallels are too close to be coincidental.

**CONCLUDING REMARKS** Is all channeling Satanic? In the direct sense, no. Many channelers are not communicating with any spirit, but are simply hucksters who have "learned the rap" and are capitalizing on the current fascination with discarnate intelligences. J.Z. Knight may be one such person -- former followers testify to having seen her practice Ramtha's mannerisms, speech patterns, and accent. Personally, I have adopted Occam's Razor when dealing with most supernatural claims. Named after William of Occam, this principle of logic states that when several explanations or solutions to a problem are possible, the simplest is to be preferred to the more complex. As he phrased it, "Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity." William was undoubtedly using "entities" as a synonym for explanations, but in this context I find the phraseology excruciatingly apropos.

Some channelers may not be intentional fakers, but self-deceived instead. I have known individuals who couldn't tell the difference between their own wayward thoughts and the voice of God. Stream-of-consciousness musings and personal urges have been mistaken by some for divine revelation. Self-deception of this sort can range all the way to outright mental illness. I also don't discount the possibility that some trance channeling may arise from a one's own unconscious self-will. For instance, a voice which claims to be Sushi from Napaj, a deity of great power and pomp, may simply spring from the inner fantasies of the unregenerate mind. Those who believe in man's depravity should consider that man's own evil heart may well be the source of the channelers' vulgar pronouncements. Yet we cannot deny the reality of the spiritual realm. Both Scripture and experience show that certain phenomena can only be accounted for by demonic spirits. History records intrusions of the demonic throughout all times and cultures, and we have no less an authority than the Lord Jesus Christ himself who testifies to the reality of this fact -- and to his own power to save men from the powers of darkness. In the preceding discussion, though Satan need not be the immediate source of a channeled message, he may be the remote cause behind it.

Jesus called Satan "a liar and the father of it" (John 8:44) and Satan's parentage to occult sin is sure even though it may not be immediate. On one level, whether channeling is "real" or "faked" is immaterial; the person who seeks after "mediums and spiritists to prostitute himself by following them" will be alienated from the presence of God and subject to judgment (Lev. 20:6). A man may forfeit his soul for counterfeit money just as surely as for "real" money. But the effect of each loss will be the same, regardless of the currency used. And in like manner, ultimately it's not the medium of exchange which matters but the consequences of the transaction.

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