

Chapter I

*Introduction**

Quietly, irrevocably, something enormous has happened to Western man. His outlook on life and the world has changed so radically that in the perspective of history the twentieth century is likely to rank with the fourth century, which witnessed the triumph of Christianity, and the seventeenth, which signaled the dawn of modern science — as one of the very few that have instigated genuinely new epochs in human thought. In this change, which is still in process, we of the current generation are playing a crucial but as yet not widely recognized part.

Huston Smith

Subtly, unmistakably, and irreversibly, our civilization is undergoing an astounding shift. Our whole outlook on life, our understanding of the world and the infinite, the way we connect to one another and to the world are all changing profoundly. So profoundly that many people feel that our age may come to be known the “second axial age,” where the future of world civilization diverges so sharply from what has been that nothing will remain unaffected.¹

This world shift touches on many things: how we relate to each other, how we work and do business, how we gov-

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ern ourselves, how we spend our free time, how we heal and how we die. Many of these changes center on the development of a fundamentally new form of spirituality—focused on the personal, experiential and transcendental. This new form of spirituality is being developed not by some solitary religious seer or within some shadowy monastic cells. Instead, unlike any previous religious revolution, it is being developed by a huge, far reaching yet largely disorganized body of ordinary people all over the world, and especially in North America. It is populist, so far disorganized and enormous, as we will see. We call this the Grassroots Spirituality Movement.

Though many have observed the recent fascination with spirituality, the depth and significance of this movement is not widely noted. Neither the size, breadth nor importance of what is going on has been generally grasped. This is typical: journalists of the 1950s were, at best, dimly cognizant of what was going on in black church basements all over the South. Even when the first marches began, few recognized the enormity of the social and political changes—led by Martin Luther King, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Fanny Lou Harner and Raymond Abernathy—then afoot.²

Yet the growth of spirituality may be of even greater significance than was that civil rights movement. For its shudders may potentially impact every corner and subculture of our civilization.

Signs of this buzzing, disconnected eruption of Grassroots Spirituality are everywhere:

- Between a third and a half of Americans believe that they have had a spiritual experience that has had a significant impact on their lives.³
- 23% of U.S. Citizens say they regularly do yoga, meditation or other stress reducing exercises.⁴

- 59% of Americans in 2001 described themselves as both religious and spiritual while 20% view themselves as solely spiritual. Of those, 80% say that spirituality influences every aspect of their lives, while only 42% of those describing themselves as religious describe it as central to their lives.⁵
- Roughly 40% who call themselves religious are not members of any particular church, mosque or synagogue.⁶
- 12% have had a personal experience of a great spiritual figure — God, Jesus, Mary, Elijah or Buddha — has appeared to them. This equates to 22 million Americans who feel that they have had some direct contact with the ultimate.⁷
- 41% of Americans have experienced something they describe as miraculous, a physical or emotional healing, or a healing of a broken relationship or the like.⁸
- 1,158,850 people are registered members of the spiritually-oriented Alcoholics Anonymous. It is estimated that more than 5 million souls are currently active in some 12 step group—ALANON, overeaters anonymous, sexaholics anonymous, and so on.⁹
- There are approximately three million active small spiritual groups in America, according to Robert Wuthnow. Approximately 70 million Americans, some 40%, are currently involved in one or more of them. Another 8 million have been involved within the past three years. (These figures do not include all the children's and teenagers' groups.) If this number were spread out evenly over the country, in a typical town of 50,000, there would be at least 600 small groups; in a city of two million, 25,000!¹⁰
- Over the past two decades many of the non-fiction books that have remained the longest on the New York

Times Bestseller list — *The Road Less Traveled*, *Care of the Soul*, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* — are about spirituality. Their sales have reached millions. When American newsweeklies put something about spirituality on the cover, their newsstand sales have gone up substantially.¹¹

Though as we will see participants in this movement are found in great numbers within many traditional churches and synagogues, this spiritual movement is burgeoning mostly on the margins of mainstream, popular culture and traditional church hierarchies. It is growing not in science labs, parish naves or university classrooms, but rather in living rooms, church basements, Yoga centers, nature walks, meditation rooms and coffee shops all over the nation and world. It is at heart populist, devoid of leadership or overarching organization. And it has the potential to change the face of American society and our planet's civilization.

Dissatisfied with narrow, dogmatic religious views, and frustrated with strictly rationalistic worldviews and life goals, this new Grassroots Spirituality Movement is attempting to integrate consciousness, soul, and spirit into our societal dialogues. Slowly it is weaving these into our understandings of the nature and purpose of life and reality, into our workday and family lives, into our global politics, and into our future.

From the perspective of centuries, a sea change of this breadth and magnitude may be unstoppable. But, as Huston Smith notes, we of the present generation have a choice. If we are among those who feel that this new kind of spirituality is worth fostering, we can aid its growth and speed its maturation. Or we can just sit on our hands and let this potentially valuable cultural movement continue to develop in a disorganized and amorphous way for decades or centuries.

If we work intelligently, thoughtfully and in concert, we whose lives are shaped by and dedicated to these new principles enjoy an enormous and exciting opportunity to nurture, enhance and channel this burgeoning wave and help bring our culture to greater and more profound peace. Though Grassroots Spirituality is unquestionably lively already, we may be able to enhance and help guide its growth, and help it soak into the channels and rivulets of our society. We cannot cause the changes that are afoot. But we can help them mature.

If we don't do our jobs well, we will have lost an incredible opportunity to infuse our civilization with these more spiritual and open minded values. If we do live up to the challenge of supporting, legitimating and enhancing this phenomenon, we have the opportunity to sculpt and give birth to a new, holistic and far more deeply humane way to think, see and live. It can be one element of our learning to live together on our small, small planet.

The choice is ours.

Notes – Chapter I

- [1] Ewert Cousins, *Christ of the Twenty First Century* (Rockport, Mass: Element Books, 1996), p. 9.
- [2] Cf. Norman Lear, The Search for E Pluribus Unum, speech to the National Press Club, Dec. 9, 1993.
- [3] Gallup Pole, *Emerging Trends*, Vol. 19, #7, Sept. 1997, p. 3; Princeton Survey Research Associates, 1994. See also David Hay, *Religious Experience Today: Studying the Facts* (Lon: Mowbray, 1990), p. 79
- [4] Hart and Teeter Research companies for NBC News/ Wall Street Journal, June 1996; quoted in Duane Elgin, *Global Consciousness Change: Indicators of an Emerging Paradigm*, p. 15. This is confirmed by a study by Barna, 1994. See George Barna, *The Index of Leading Spiritual Indicators* (Dallas: Word, 1996), p. 63.
- [5] Spirituality and Health, Spring 2001, as reported in *Religion Watch, March 2001*. Poll done by Blum and Weprin.
- [6] Egon Mayer, ed, *The American Religious Identification Survey, 2001*, reported in *USA Today*, Monday Dec. 24, 2001, 1D.
- [7] "The Epidemiology of Spirituality," a report given by George Gallup, Jr., at the Spirituality and Healing in Medicine II Conference, Harvard Medical School, 1996, p. 3.
- [8] *Ibid*, p. 2.
- [9] Alcoholics Anonymous Pamphlet, 1997.
- [10] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey* (NY: Free Press, 1994), pp. 46, 48, 55.
- [11] According to T. George Harris, publisher of *Psychology Today*, presentation to *Fetzer Institute*, Sept. 1997.