

**THE  
CHANNELING  
ZONE**

**AMERICAN  
SPIRITUALITY  
IN AN  
ANXIOUS  
AGE**

**MICHAEL F. BROWN**

THE CHANNELIN

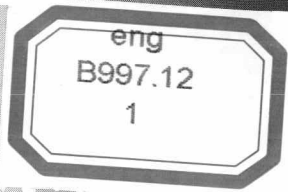
*American Spirituality in an Anxious Age*

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## PREFACE

During the winter of 1989, I was one of several visiting anthropologists at the School of American Research, an institute for advanced study in Santa Fe, New Mexico. The snug adobe house provided by the School offered a view of the Sangre de Cristo and Jemez Mountains and the great sweep of sky between them. Standing on the patio at night to watch the unfamiliar western stars wheel overhead, I sometimes heard drumming from the house of my neighbor—not an American Indian, as it turned out, but an Anglo woman who regularly performed all-night healing rituals for friends and clients. Her impromptu ceremonies served notice that I had landed in an epicenter of the New Age, a diffuse social movement of people committed to pushing the boundaries of the self and bringing spirituality into everyday life. Although the term New Age is shunned by some, it accurately conveys the optimism and perceived urgency of their quest.

Ethnographic curiosity overpowered discretion, and I began to attend spirituality workshops at the Santa Fe Public Library and several of the town's

personal-growth centers. Questions posed to people participating in these meetings evoked tales of vision quests and personal transformations that made the oral histories of the Amazonian Indians about whom I was then writing seem almost suburban by comparison. After several months of casual study, I began to take a more systematic look at the social and cultural dimensions of this flamboyant spiritual activity. Eventually my research interest narrowed to one of the most controversial expressions of alternative spirituality, channeling, which can be defined as the use of altered states of consciousness to contact spirits—or, as many of its practitioners say, to experience spiritual energy captured from other times and dimensions.

My journey into the world of channeling ultimately encompassed four years of episodic interviewing and approximately eight months of full-time research, including participation in workshops and weekend seminars. All told, I interviewed or observed forty practitioners of channeling and hundreds of ordinary people who attended channeling sessions for enlightenment or entertainment. Much of my fieldwork was conducted in the vicinity of Santa Fe, a town where urban cowboys from Houston belly up to the bar next to past-life regression therapists from Marin County. A mecca for artists and health-seekers since the early 1900s, Santa Fe is today one of the nation's foremost centers of alternative spirituality, much to the chagrin of the local American Indians and Hispanics, who find themselves pushed to the margins as the city experiences unprecedented growth. Like the smaller community of Sedona, Arizona, about 400 miles to the west, it has become a magnet for Americans in search of forms of spiritual understanding that they see as more authentic than those offered by mainstream religions.

For a broader perspective on channeling, I also explored my own backyard, western New England. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, New England and upstate New York spawned many movements of religious renewal, ranging from the Great Awakenings of the 1740s and early 1800s to the utopian communes of the Shakers and the Oneida Community. Today the wellspring of American spiritual innovation has moved farther west. Nevertheless, New England offers an abundance of channeling workshops and counseling services which, while less exuberant than their New Mexican counterparts, still attract a diverse clientele. My investigation also took me on short trips to Arizona, California, Florida, New York, and Virginia.

In the pages that follow, I offer an assessment of channeling that tacks between the views of its advocates and my own first-hand observations at a range of channeling events. The latter presented special difficulties. In intimate workshop settings where it would have been impossible to remain a bystander taking notes in the corner, I faced the choice of either pretending to participate or actually throwing myself into the channeling experience as best I could. The second course proved simpler and more forthright. Participant-observation ultimately offered glimpses of the world behind channeling's public face: subtle struggles over spiritual turf, tensions between autonomy and dependence, conflicting notions of gender, vexing issues of money, and a lively sense of humor often absent from channeling books and magazines.

After months of involvement in the world of spirit communication, I came to the conclusion that most practitioners of channeling—who as a rule refer to themselves as “channels” in

preference to the more familiar term “channelers”—are sincere in their beliefs and genuinely committed to spiritual growth as they understand it. Their commitment merits an analytical approach marked by the same combination of respect and detachment typically brought to research on the religions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Basic respect for others’ beliefs does not preclude reflection on the *implications* of those beliefs, however. Channeling rests on a series of assumptions about the historical trajectory of human beings, both as individuals and as members of a community. Some of these assumptions are admirable, others disturbing. Together they hold a mirror to our society as it is experienced by the growing number of people who seek meaning in New Age practices.

Although this book offers a comprehensive view of contemporary spirit communication, some variations on the theme have doubtless escaped my attention. Market pressures force professional channels to innovate and diversify. Their restlessly shifting interests led me on brief excursions into other areas of alternative spirituality, including shamanism, energy work, goddess-centered religion, and the imitation of American Indian rituals, some of which are documented here.

When I began this research, academic colleagues frequently asked, “Why are you studying this?” Many found my interest in channels baffling and in subtle ways contaminating; like others who have studied controversial groups, I was suspected of having gone native. In contrast, channels themselves viewed the project as a stage in my own spiritual growth. A few conjectured that I would follow the lead of other rogue academics who found Western science too restrictive and eventually abandoned university positions for new careers as freelance writers,

lecturers, or gurus. My loyalty to conventional methods of exposition may disappoint them.

They were right about one thing, however: many of my comfortable assumptions about shared understanding were shattered, probably never to be restored. I vividly recall documenting the life story of a bright and attractive woman whose spiritual path had brought her from Manhattan to New Mexico. She shared spellbinding tales of paranormal experiences and miracles that ranged from intergalactic voyages to an arduous apprenticeship with a Peruvian shaman. Although it was impossible to accept parts of her autobiography as literally true, I became convinced that her passionate sense of mission, which is shared by thousands of others engaged in similar religious explorations, could tell us something about the hopes and obsessions of our age. In the spirit of Alexis de Tocqueville's reflections on American democracy early in the nineteenth century, then, I have tried to illuminate a novel expression of American individualism and religiosity at the end of the twentieth.

The support of various institutions, friends, and loved ones made this work possible. Start-up funding was provided by Francis C. Oakley, then president of Williams College, who as a distinguished medieval historian might take satisfaction in knowing that his patronage represented a form of celestial intervention. In 1993, the School of American Research again offered me shelter in Santa Fe; I am especially grateful to the School's president, Douglas W. Schwartz, for his backing and encouragement. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, Inc., provided financial support at a critical point in my field research.

Many colleagues—far too many, unfortunately, to mention



by name—were kind enough to comment on individual chapters. Those who assessed drafts of the entire book include Jean Bacon, Sylvia Kennick Brown, Donna Chenail, Kai Erikson, Jim Howe, Bob Jackall, Bill Merrill, Molly Mullin, Francesca Polletta, Daniel Taub, Mark Taylor, Robin Waterfield, and Bob Woodbury. I am indebted to Joyce Seltzer, my editor at Harvard University Press, and to Gerard McCauley, my literary agent, for their support and wise counsel. My keen appreciation for the advice of these thoughtful readers in no way implicates them in the book's shortcomings.

Those who helped me navigate the spirit world were willing to remain anonymous, although some clearly would have preferred to receive credit for their ideas. While sympathetic to such concerns about intellectual property, I have honored the norms of contemporary social science by using pseudonyms and, in some cases, by relocating people to fictional places, thus preventing potential embarrassment to those who might regret certain confidences when they see them in print. When, as is often the case, spirits are closely identified with individual channels, I have invented new names for them as well. Only the identity of public figures remains unchanged. Among these are several celebrity channels whose controversial pronouncements have attracted national media attention.

Although I cannot thank my interlocutors by name, I trust that admiration for their infectious curiosity and gratitude for their openness are evident in the pages that follow. Some of them will disagree with my interpretations of channeling. Others may feel that the analysis focuses excessively on matters peripheral to spiritual growth. In reply, I would simply say that my goal has been to write a book that allows readers to reach conclusions quite different from my own.

My wife, Sylvia Kennick Brown, offered cheerful companionship on expeditions to channeling sessions and desert power-spots, where her sharp eye caught much that mine might have missed. She also endured stoically my habit of rising before dawn to wrestle with a writer's demons. For these indulgences, and many more, I owe her special thanks.

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## 1

# INTO THE CHANNELING ZONE

The worn rental tape yields a stippled video image of beige walls, potted palms, and two seated figures, a man and woman, deep in conversation. The woman, middle-aged and carefully groomed, responds to the man's questions. She gestures expressively as she speaks. Her restless hands, with their long, polished nails, resemble dancing starfish.

She is J. Z. Knight, arguably America's best-known practitioner of channeling. J. Z. became a celebrity by allowing her body to serve as a vehicle for Ramtha, The Enlightened One, an Atlantean warrior and deity whose voice emerges when she enters trance. Responding to a question about her life before Ramtha, J. Z. describes a world of suburban alienation in which nothing mattered more than dinner parties, hybrid roses, and her children's braces. In 1977 she was transformed by the sudden appearance of an enormous figure dressed in robes of light: Ramtha. There is no easy way to explain Ramtha's arrival at this time, J. Z. insists, because she had never heard of channeling or cults or even self-awareness. Ramtha appeared to her with steadily

greater frequency. He read her thoughts and allayed her fears about his presence. After these encounters, she says, "I no longer belonged at social functions talking about Dior gowns and yeast infections and who's having an affair with whom."

As J. Z. summarizes Ramtha's message, her voice quavers and tears well up in her eyes. "Ramtha," she says, "allows us the vision, the hope, the desire to become all that we can become, which is unlimited probability. He will be remembered for teaching us how to love again realistically." She brushes away tears as the interviewer thanks her for sharing these experiences. It appears that the interview is over. Then, in a move of striking intimacy, she leans toward the interviewer, resting her hand lightly on the arm of his chair. She looks directly at him. "But you know something? What does it take for a person to make a mark on the consciousness of all people? Does it take suffering? Sacrifice? Does it take laying down one's life? Or does it take the courage to *live* that life?" She sits back and gazes demurely at the carpet. Her voice drops a notch in intensity. "I rather think that it takes the courage to live it. And in this little moment that we share this together, Les, one day, down the road, that courage is going to be remembered." He nods his head. She gazes at her hands as he thanks her. The interview ends.

The scene shifts to a hotel ballroom. J. Z. sits on a dais in a large wicker throne, bird of paradise plants framing her frosted hair. She wears white slacks and a loose white tunic trimmed in brilliant magenta. Her dazzling smile fills the center of the screen. She answers questions posed by members of the audience. One asks what it's like to channel Ramtha. "I'm in a different time-flow when I leave this body, because when I channel, I physically die. My spirit and soul and the essence that is

J. Z. completely gives up the body." Another asks her why Ramtha chose her as his vehicle. "Why not?" J. Z. replies. The audience that fills the large ballroom laughs, then applauds enthusiastically.

J. Z. explains that the people producing the video want to film her as she opens herself to Ramtha, a transition that usually takes place in private. Saying farewell, she reminds the audience that simply by being there, by witnessing, they make an important contribution to humanity. She blesses them, then settles into a lotus position in the wicker chair. The grainy videotape spools on soundlessly, showing nothing but the woman in the chair. Waiting out the uncomfortable silence, a viewer is simultaneously present and absent, caught up in real-time communion yet able to freeze, reverse, or fast-forward events at will.

J. Z.'s head drops. She breathes heavily. The camera view cuts to her right hand: the long nails, a gold band with large diamonds. Her head begins to rock. Slowly she brings up her arms until they are braced rigidly on the arms of the chair. Her feet drop to the floor, and she rises stiffly, hands balled into fists. She stamps her right foot, then her left. Gruffly, she shouts "Indeed!" to one side of the ballroom, then the other. Each time, the audience responds, "Indeed." Her eyes open. She begins a series of geometric movements: bowing to the chair behind her, lifting her arms, profiling her body to the camera. She moves to a man sitting in a chair to her right, evidently her husband. "Beloved Jeffrey, indeed how be you?" Bending to his hands, she kisses them noisily. "Be you that which is termed as it were indeed pleased to be here?" The strong, angular body movements and twisted syntax signal that she is now Ramtha. "Shall we get on with that which is termed as it were indeed barraging the masses, eh?" Laughter ripples through the audience.

She wanders off the dais and begins to work the crowd as Ramtha. She greets the cameraman, pats the sound technician on the head, and trades repartee with the director, who tries to steer her back toward a section of the ballroom with better lighting. The audience is delighted. J. Z. walks down the rows of chairs, touching various people whom she addresses as “entity” or “beloved one.” The camera pans to a familiar face in the audience: Shirley MacLaine, the actress. People chuckle at Ramtha’s humor, yet there is a deferential glint in their eyes as they track J. Z.’s movements.

She roams to the middle of the room and stops in front of a gray-haired man. “All the way here from the great country of Texas. Is your house still in order?” “It’s still in order,” the man drawls. She leans over to gaze into his eyes. It is the same sudden intimacy that transfigured the interview earlier on the tape. She tenderly caresses his face. The man looks serious and slightly uncomfortable. She strokes the back of his head. She retreats a step, putting her hands on his shoulders and peering at his face. “You talked of that which is termed your beloved’s passing?” She takes hold of his hands. “There are that which is termed but a few things for you to do.” He purses his lips. Again she caresses his face. “I’m going to bring you great joy. I want you to know what that is. And once leave you, entity, I’m going to take you to where I am, straightaway.” “Great,” he says. She kisses his hands again. She steps backward, pauses. Looking at him still, she lifts a forefinger: “I send you a comforter.”<sup>1</sup>

For social critics, J. Z. Knight and her channeled deity, Ramtha, serve as icons of the New Age, a movement that one scholar of American religion has defined as a search for “the primal experience of transformation,” both of the self and of society.<sup>2</sup> The philosophy outlined by Knight in her workshops,

tapes, and videos is a volatile mixture of optimism and dark prophecy. The planet, Ramtha has said, will undergo apocalyptic changes—seismic and volcanic cataclysms, floods, and climatic shifts—that will propel us into a new era in which we can realize our true potential as gods. Although these predictions are taken seriously by some of Knight's followers, hundreds of whom have moved to the Pacific Northwest in search of places that Ramtha has deemed safe from catastrophe, most seem drawn to Knight's performances primarily by the promise of total self-fulfillment. When Knight experienced legal difficulties related to a bitter divorce in the early 1990s, the *New York Times* gave the story front-page coverage. Journalistic accounts detailed her financial empire, which was based on the millions that she earned from book sales and clients' fees, and speculated about whether Ramtha would be called to testify in court. In 1995 she again came to public attention when it was revealed that the Federal Aviation Administration paid \$1.4 million for sensitivity training classes administered by one of her disciples.<sup>3</sup>

Although J. Z. Knight's highly publicized troubles have led some of her devotees to seek spiritual wisdom elsewhere, the notion that channeling is in decline could hardly be more mistaken. Just as the number of people joining evangelical Christian congregations increased despite the scandals that enveloped prominent televangelists, so the controversy surrounding Knight has failed to slow the quiet spread of channeling techniques to individuals willing to experiment with them at home. Today, workshops that teach people how to contact their spirit guides and guardian angels are offered at personal-growth centers around the nation. Those unable to attend channeling classes can easily turn to mass-market books that offer coaching in the best way to contact helpful spirits. In the nation's urban areas, psychothera-



pists discreetly use channeling to treat their clients' emotional distress.

Channeling, in other words, has moved from the gilded ashrams of the West Coast to the living rooms and offices of the American heartland. On the way, it has shed some of its sensational qualities in favor of a more muted approach to personal insight. It is now a well-established form of religious exploration that is likely to be with us for a while. Its practitioners believe that they can use altered states of consciousness to connect to wisdom emanating from the collective unconscious or even from other planets, dimensions, or historical eras. They apply their insights to financial affairs, career issues, relationships, and the resolution of emotional problems.<sup>4</sup> As practiced today, channeling incorporates features of nineteenth-century American spiritualism and a number of more recent influences, including the personal recovery movement and woman-centered spirituality.

Credible estimates for the number of Americans involved in channeling are hard to come by. At the height of media interest in channeling in the mid-1980s, one authority declared that a thousand channels practiced in the Los Angeles area alone. Even if this figure is an exaggeration, a surprising number of people accept the plausibility of communication with spirits. A Gallup poll conducted in 1994 revealed that more than 25 percent of Americans claim to believe in reincarnation and the possibility of communication with the dead, a substantial increase from a similar poll taken only a few years before. A national survey conducted by *Time* in 1993 found that 69 percent of adults accept the existence of angels; nearly a third of these had "felt an angelic presence" in their lives. Books written by prominent channels, including Jane Roberts, Edgar Cayce, and Helen