

An Interview

With Rev. Susan Hamilton

Rev. Susan Hamilton, D. Min., served for fifteen years as pastor of Parkside Community United Church of Christ, a multicultural congregation in Sacramento, California. Then in February 2011, she was appointed Dean of Sancta Sophia Seminary in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. Dr. Hamilton earned a bachelor's degree in psychology from California State University. She received her ministerial certificate from Sancta Sophia and was ordained in the Light of Christ Community Church in 1992. Hamilton earned Master of Divinity and Doctor of Ministry degrees from San Francisco Theological Seminary.

Dr. Hamilton's doctoral dissertation developed into her recent book *Seeking Sophia: 33 Lessons for Discovering the Divine Feminine*. Its stated purpose is to provide a curriculum to lead church people to understand the presence of the Divine Feminine in Hebrew and Christian Scriptures and to increase their awareness of the universality of Sophia in creation and creativity.

Esoteric Quarterly: You left the pastoral ministry to return to academia. Can you share some insights into what motivated that career change?

Susan Hamilton: I see synchronicity as a clear working of the Spirit. Three things came together in this career change. First, there comes a time in a pastor's tenure when he or she has taken the congregation as far as it can go, and it is best for both to grow in new directions. While my ministry was successful and flourishing in Sacramento, it was time for me to move on—

heart wrenching as it was. Second, the opportunity arose for me to become Dean at Sancta Sophia Seminary, my alma mater, and it felt "right." There was a part of me that long ago sensed that I could be involved as one of the next generation to carry the work forward. The third synchronistic component related to my mother, who had devotedly served the seminary for 27 years and was aging. Moving to Oklahoma to be near her during the last years of her life was additional motivation for change. Little did I know that my mother would make her transition one year after I arrived.

EQ: Who were your most important mentors as a student at Sancta Sophia and later at San Francisco Theological Seminary? In what ways did they influence you?

SH: During the early and mid-90's when I was a student, there were the five wise women of the Village; founder, Carol Parrish, Grace Bradley, Marjorie Stuth, Sally Brown, and my mother, Betty Carper. They were recognized as being the pillars of the institution and community. Mature spiritually and chronologically, these women guided students with firm hands gloved with grace. So many of us were molded and shaped by their wisdom, wit, and living example.

At San Francisco Theological Seminary, I was astounded that a traditional seminary could be so accepting of what others considered heresy! Since SFTS was a member of the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, my enrollment afforded me the opportunity to attend classes at any of the

other eight seminaries on “Holy Hill” as it was called. This ecumenical broad consortium provided me a rich and diverse spiritual community that nurtured my education and spiritual formation. Specific professors were instructional in their field of specialty; Dr. James Noel and Dr. Jana Childers refined my skills in “preaching” while Hana Matt expanded my education and appreciation of mysticism in the world religions.

EQ: Were Alice Bailey, the Theosophical writers like Annie Besant and Geoffrey Hodson, and great writers in the western esoteric tradition important to you?

SH: When I was directed by Spirit (through a mystical experience) to attend Sancta Sophia, I knew nothing of the esoteric traditions. Despite my mother’s own deep involvement, she did not share these teachings with me. She wanted me to follow my own path through my involvement in mainline Christianity. Admittedly, I struggled at first with some of the concepts presented in Bailey’s and Besant’s writings as they did not “fit” with traditional doctrine. However, I had always raised questions which my pastors could not answer, so the more I read of the Ancient Wisdom the more it made sense to me. My Soul recognized the Truth even while my personality strove to find biblical validation. The Ageless Wisdom has its own systematic theology which answers such questions as: What is the nature of God? How was the world created? What is the relationship of humans to the Divine? And how do we explain evil and suffering in the world? Each culture in each era has sought to find the answers to these questions and has structured and shaped their spiritual practices and doctrines accordingly. The esoteric traditions, however, present the “larger picture” of creation and humanity’s evolutionary process. The teachings are called ageless be-

cause they contain the timeless truths of all sacred writings. Yet I also believe there are contemporary writers and teachers who are revealing wisdom that is as valuable as Bailey, Besant and Hodson.

EQ: Much has been written about esoteric Christianity, but there have been few signs that the major western or Eastern Orthodox denominations have embraced its tenets. Do you think esoteric Christianity is destined to remain focused in fringe denominations like the Unity Church and the Liberal Catholic Church?

SH: I would be hard-pressed to describe anyone’s destiny, let alone the entirety of Esoteric Christianity! However, orthodoxy is once again being given an opportunity to change. As in the past, the acceptance of new teachings (esoteric or otherwise), will most likely still be a challenge to all spiritual leaders. Some will “understand” and some, not ready for the new, may cling instead to the known and therefore, to more comfortable tenets and theology. There is an increased acceptance of reincarnation as a viable spiritual concept, and metaphysical interpretations are fairly common in some progressive Christian congregations. Full esoteric interpretations are still considered “heresy” by western denominations. By definition, heresy opposes and challenges orthodoxy, yet we have seen how today’s heresy becomes tomorrow’s orthodoxy. So, with the change from the Piscean to Aquarian era, we may see a radical evolution of all forms of spirituality and religion. Those of us in the esoteric community may find ourselves equally as challenged by new truths as are those in major western Christianity and Eastern Orthodox groups.

EQ: The Divine Feminine Sophia evidently has meant much to you, and you have helped promote awareness of her in

your writings and teachings. How do you view Sophia—as compared, say, with Mary the mother of Jesus or the Buddhist Kwan Yin—as a guiding principle for the Aquarian Age?

SH: Sophia is the current *nom du jour* for the Divine Feminine in western Christianity. She has gone by many names in various cultures before: Isis, Shekina, Maat, Quan Yin, Mary, Pachemama, a plethora of Hindu goddesses, and many more. While always present, the recognition of Her importance has paralleled the dawning of the Aquarian Age. The astrological glyph for Aquarius is the two wavy lines of water. Turned on end, they represent the two equal poles of masculine and feminine energy; a key component of the Aquarian Age. In the esoteric teachings, we have the axiom “As above, so below” so we see the balanced masculine and feminine divine energies being manifested (recognized and valued) on the earth as evidence of the incoming Aquarian influences. The return of the Sacred Feminine in the United States has coincided with the women’s movement which began in force in the 1970’s. Feminist theologians and biblical scholars challenged the orthodox patriarchy and laid the foundation in traditional Christianity for the acceptance of God as feminine *and* masculine. She (Sophia) is being welcomed and honored, and I would venture to say “restored,” to Her rightful place.

All serious seekers naturally find themselves out of step with some orthodoxy or another. Questions are met with everything from suspicious glances to, at worst, direct punishment. As we develop spiritually, we eventually outgrow any and all “congregations.” And if we settle into one, it is the one which offends us the least.

EQ: In a liturgy for Advent, you wrote: “*The Holy Mother and the Holy Father live within us.*” Can you be precise in explaining what that means?

SH: I am drawing on the Jungian concepts of the anima and animus in our psyche as well as theological principles. We each have masculine and feminine energies and capabilities within us, just as we have positive and negative energies in our body systems and cellular structure. Extrapolating from the physical to the metaphysical and spiritual, we have the divine feminine and divine masculine within us. Judeo-Christian scriptures hold that we are created after the image of God. Therefore, we contain the mother and the father within us. Our spiritual work is to balance ourselves, to bring the polarities into harmony, right relation, and right use. We are to develop the Divine Masculine and the Divine Feminine potential within ourselves, to become like Christ-Sophia, to harmonize love-wisdom.

EQ: You have written some elegant poetry. Did you start composing poetry when you were a child? Do you feel that poetry offers a way to express esoteric insights that might otherwise be impossible?

SH: I confess that my poetry is unbidden and unpredictable. There have been times of great pain in my life in which the best way to express my feelings was through poetic language. Likewise, feelings of relief and joy have been expressed poetically. Poetry is a creative expression. It is the result of one of Sophia’s creative muses at

work! The writers of spiritual poetry are often mystics such as Hildegard of Bingen, Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich. The world of the mystic can be difficult to describe and is often best articulated through poetic words. However, poetry is only one medium of expressing esoteric insights. I know great painters of inspiring visual art; others who write moving music of the song of the Soul; still others who offer spell-binding dance; and there are those who drum to connect with and express their unique relationship with the Divine.

EQ: You were raised in the United Methodist Church, spent some time as a Southern Baptist and Presbyterian, and finally came to the United Church of Christ. Did you encounter any theological or other road bumps along the way? Did you feel impulses towards esoteric Christianity early in this spiritual journey?

SH: Yes, of course! All of us encounter these bumps along the way. Certainly, no one on the spiritual journey progresses without challenges to their beliefs, their stability, their relationships, or their sense of sanity. That is the nature of the path. My journey through eclectic ecumenism is not unique. Others have taken circuitous routes on their spiritual journey as well. All serious seekers naturally find themselves out of step with some orthodoxy or another. Questions are met with everything from suspicious glances to, at worst, direct punishment. As we develop spiritually, we eventually outgrow any and all “congregations.” And if we settle into one, it is the one which offends us the least. As I shared earlier, the questions I raised as a youth in the Southern Baptist church, and the ones I raised in the United Methodist Church as an adult, were not welcomed and went unanswered by the clergy. I wanted to know more; I sought *gnosis*. Was that an esoteric impulse? In a

way, I suppose it was. No one offered me the support to find the answers within, nor could they lead me into the mystery, for they did not know how.

EQ: What form do you think organized religion will take over the next century or two, and what will be its relationship to esoteric studies and practice?

SH: Would that I had a crystal ball to see centuries into the future. What I see happening now; despite the polarization we find between the extremes of fundamentalist religion and secular atheism is a sincere desire on the part of the next generation for genuine spiritual connection to the Divine. The youth of today, as far as I can tell, want it “real.” By that I mean that they are not satisfied with simply learning doctrine. What they accept are the teachings they can validate through personal spiritual experiences and live by to help to create a better world. They are not interested solely in mental experience, nor simply an emotional experience, or a social justice application—they want all three. If the teaching, preaching and “worship” does not connect in all three arenas and provide them with a transcendental encounter, they will sniff it out as inadequate. The youth of today want to be part of creating and leading the collective evolution. Group work—another hallmark of the Aquarian Age—is what they seek. Leadership is essential and yet paying attention to the voices of everyone is equally important.

There will always be a need for “churches” of some kind, since the corporate experience of worship, learning, and serving is a basic requirement for humanity. However, the churches of the future will not look like the churches of the 1950s; they will need to change as society changes and develops. Indeed, this is already taking place. For example, spirituality and

mysticism have become mainstream in some progressive congregations.

But the transformation does not end there. The esoteric community will also need to change. To be relevant to present and future generations, our congregations, esoteric organizations and study groups will need to blend their heady intellectual teachings and mental body disciplines with a heart-centered compassion. If we are to be effective with the youth of today, we will need to find a way to engage in tangible ways with the evolutionary process of humanity. The elitist stance taken by some esoteric Christians that allows them to focus solely on their own spiritual development or soul-infusion is not enough. While it is true that this work impacts the consciousness and development of all humanity, there is more we can do to be of service. Further engaging and connecting our empathetic heart and physical body *with* our mental body aspirations will make us more whole and balanced and “real” to the youth.

I see a future in which esotericism and traditional western religions can interface well. Because mysticism has become more widely accepted in Christian, Hebrew, and Islamic expressions, we esoterics now have greater common ground for discussion, and we are in a position to offer guidance and direction to aspiring mystics. That work has already begun, as evidenced by the recent students enrolled at Sancta Sophia who were involved in traditional Christian churches and were finding language to bridge their two worlds. The systematic theology of esoteric theosophy will likely still be challenging to any other faith’s cosmology.

EQ: What do you consider your greatest accomplishment on your spiritual path thus far?

SH: I feel satisfaction as I recall my years of pastoral ministry and the growth I was privileged to witness in the lives of members at Parkside Community Church. Serving as the Dean of Sancta Sophia, brief as it was, also gives me a sense of accomplishment. However, the work that warms my heart with a realization that “yes, you’ve done a holy work” are the times I’ve gently helped to open someone up to a new understanding; the times when I’ve been a loving and listening presence with someone who is emotionally or spiritually hurting; and the times I’ve led a playful, creative, and joyful worship service from which people left smiling with the love of God and each other.

EQ: What advice would you give your students and other young people embarking on careers in the ministry?

SH: The classic advice to those embarking on careers in ministry, which many of my colleagues would corroborate, is: “If you can do *anything* else but the ministry, do it!” Ministry is very hard work, unless one is doing it as a hobby while having a full-time career in some other area. The ministry demands a great deal of energy with very little reward or adequate pay. Think of being a teacher or home caregiver or daycare provider or all three combined. At the same time, if one is called, then one is called. Despite the hard work, low pay, and long hours, there are those sacred moments of privilege, as I noted earlier, when one feels that they are standing upon holy ground. It is those sacred moments that re-energize a person called to ministry, and they know their “yes” answer to God was the right one.

EQ: Sancta Sophia’s demise must have been a terrible blow to you—as it was to the many other people associated with the seminary. Do you think there will be opportunities for other institutions to offer

similar programs in the foreseeable future?

SH: Closing the seminary was not what I came there to do. And yet, if we accept the teachings that all is in divine right order, and the universe is unfolding as it should, and nothing is ever wasted, and that we are doing exactly what we are supposed to be doing at any given minute—,then I guess I did come to close the seminary, heart-breaking as it was.

I've spoken to some of our graduates recently who are considering forming their own schools with colleagues nearby, and I'm excited about their potential. Fr. John Dominic Crossan, a progressive Christian theologian, describes the difference between John the Baptist and Jesus. He likens John the Baptist to a monopoly and Jesus to a franchise. John the Baptist had a monopoly on his work because none of his students set up baptizing stations along the rivers or lakes. Everyone came to John for baptism. When he was beheaded his movement died, and his followers dispersed. When Jesus led his disciples, he empowered them to do as he did so that when he died the work carried on in multiple locations—like a franchise. Perhaps

this will be the description of Sancta Sophia in the future; her graduates will establish franchises in their local areas to carry on the work.

EQ: Is there anything else you would like to tell readers of *The Esoteric Quarterly*?

SH: Briefly, I would like to say something about the future of Sparrow Hawk Village, the church, and the seminary. At this point, we are open to Spirit's guidance. The world is different than it was then 30-plus years ago when the Village was founded. The era into which we have been called will demand something different from us in terms of education and service. Members of our community are working together and with renewed energy and unity to redefine our future. We are in dialogue with groups who are interested in spiritual and sustainable living, holistic healing, and true communal life. And we have readied and sold a number of new wooded lots to people who want to be a part of the Village and its possibilities for the future. We invite others to join us in this adventure.

EQ: We very much appreciate your taking the time for this interview. We wish you every blessing for the future!

Book Reviews

The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers, by George M. Young, Oxford University Press, 2012.

The Russian Cosmists, by George M. Young, is an enriching and comprehensive contribution to an area about which most Western scholars and esotericists are singularly ill-informed. Not only its scope but the depth of his analysis is a testimony to the author's decades-long engagement with his subject.

Young is keen to immediately disclaim any personal endorsement of the material he presents, insisting that many of these ideas in the wrong hands can be dangerous and are for "mature audiences only." With that warning in hand, the reader is immersed in an engaging historical and cultural appraisal of a fascinating intellectual, philosophical, scientific and spiritual landscape largely unknown in the West. Cosmism was a submerged tradition in Soviet Russia as well, though since the demise of Communism (which some of its proponents idealistically endorsed only to fall victim to it themselves) it is being embraced with a nationalistic fervor as an example of a distinctly original Russian tradition.

While Western esotericists will clearly be familiar with the work of Madame Blavatsky or the Roerichs, how many have honestly heard of Nikolai Fedorov, the reluctant guru to the likes of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Pasternak in his *Doctor Zhivago*? Not to mention the likes of Vernadsky, phenomenally gifted as a linguist and one of the great figures of Western science who was also one of the first scientists to state that science proves what mystics and poets have long experienced, or Tsiolkovsky, the inventor of rocket science who believed in channeling, or the Russian Orthodox philosophers and polymaths Solovyov, Bulgakov, Florensky, Berdyaev? And there are many more.

Nikolai Fedorov (1829-1903) is at the cornerstone of this whole movement and so he is the cornerstone of this book. Young provides the

historical setting, showing Fedorov's links to the Russian tradition of spiritual sages who combined Russian Orthodox beliefs with shamanistic or yogic practices and equally his links to Russia's abiding fascination with the esoteric and the occult. In fact, esoteric teachings underlie much of cosmist thought even though they are mostly unacknowledged.

Some readers of the *Esoteric Quarterly* may be familiar with the figure of the Siberian sage, Anastasia, whom Young does not include in his survey. What they may not realize is how deeply embedded she is in this very Russian tradition, which combines science, technology, art, the social order, religion and spirituality—and touches on everything in between. Readers of Anastasia will be familiar with her concepts of kinship, her shamanistic siddhic powers (such as regulating her body temperature), her belief in the power of the Word and in directing matter through thought, her involvement in technology and science. Anastasia hearkens back to a Russian Vedic Golden Age of kinship with all life, and forward to an active evolution that embraces the full potential of "Man" (*chelovek*), with Russia taking on the role of spiritual wayshower for the rest of the world as the place where this paradise is to be first realized: all of these are very Fedorovian and cosmist ideas as we shall see.

What strikes one from the outset is the very Russian nature of Cosmism, which also gives it its challenging and, at times, disturbing originality. Fedorov was one of many Russians who believed in Russia's special spiritual Destiny at the intersection and confluence of East and West, showing a Third Way, echoing back to Moscow's supposed role as the Third (and final) Rome with Russia taking its place at the center of a universal Christianity. This mission led the Cosmists to all kinds of speculations as to how this destiny and the ideal society it was to engender were to be achieved, ranging from benevolent autocracy (a favorite of Fedorov's) to the willing surrender of the individual to the communal good. Given that Russia does not

generally share western evaluations of the rights of the individual as inalterably above the collective, the subjugation of the individual's interests to the "common good" or to a benevolent autocratic government becomes a viable alternative. The fact that this scenario does not sound quite so alarming to many Russians is something which a study such as this helps to clarify. For instance, the book helps us to understand what is meant by a surrender of individuality to society at large. What is crucial to cosmist thought is the lack of separation between disciplines or between areas of human experience. Thus, the political cannot be separated from the spiritual. *Rodstvo*—kinship—is at the heart of Fedorov's thought, and it is a concept that remains at the heart of Russian culture. *Rodstvo* is what links us to "the other" in a sacrosanct and unbreakable chain. Our prime responsibility is to this link, this kinship, which ultimately we experience with all of humanity and the entire natural world. Fedorov aspires to a perfect brotherhood which would obliterate the need or the desire for equality or for a self-serving definition of freedom through the recognition of oneself as part of the greater whole. In essence, this is like looking for an ideal fusion with the will of God. The Cosmists see another way in which this can be achieved, and that is through finding one's rightful place within the greater whole. The ultimate model for this is the Holy Trinity in which the Three are One and yet Three, neither separated nor fused. In fact, much cosmist thinking, most notably that of Florensky (whose extraordinary accomplishments made him a Russian Leonardo), eschews the "either/or" model of thought in favor of "both/and." For Florensky truth is both something and its negation, the thing and its other, and his new paradigm of discontinuity in mathematics and in reason is being borne out by the paradoxes of the new physics.

The upshot is that Western sacred cows such as progress, freedom, equality, diversity and democracy are dismantled in favor of an alternative worldview of kinship, brotherhood and connection to the All. Young's research helps us to appreciate the extent of the challenge of this alternative worldview, as well as giving us a greater understanding of the nature of Russian politics, in itself a valuable contribution for anybody seeking to engage with Russia on a cultural

or political level. Once we get past the initial shock of the challenge we are jolted into a more nuanced understanding of our own values and ideas. However, the question cannot help but be raised as to the extent to which such a mindset made Russia fertile ground for being taken over by the Communists who appeared to express a similar ideology and operational model for society. The very real question remains as to whether the experience of Communism means that such a model does not work.

The second striking factor about Cosmism is the number of fields of human endeavor and experience, which most of the Russian Cosmists sought to explore, to contribute to and integrate into a truly cosmic vision. These men were not only "jacks of all trades;" they were masters of most. Science, art, philosophy, religions are not approached as distinct fields but seen in relation to each other and the whole. The Cosmists offer an alternative that is the very opposite of the increasingly narrow specializations and empiricism of the West. Theirs is a truly multidisciplinary phenomenon looking for a totality of vision and a new unity of art, science, philosophy and spirituality.

The third and possibly most important point is that, disparate as these thinkers are, they share a belief in the continued active and self-directed evolution and perfectibility of the human being. This gives rise to an implicit optimism about the future which is a refreshing alternative to the doom and gloom scenarios of environmental degradation. While the Cosmist thinkers acknowledge the extent of the problem, they also assume that human beings are capable of and have the responsibility to solve any problem they have caused. This is not a disembodied solution – technological advances are very much part of the picture. Paradise itself is not disembodied or sought in a different dimension—it includes matter as well as spirit, albeit an increasingly spiritualized matter, for the Cosmists seek nothing less than the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God on earth. Not surprisingly, the recognition and experience of Sophia as the underlying truth of reality and as an aspect of the Holy Trinity, becomes of prime importance to some of the Cosmists, notwithstanding Fedorov's own strictly patriarchal

thought in which eros is an exclusively negative force (inspiring Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*). In fact, it is just possible that it is the inclusion of the Divine Feminine principle itself in their thought which could save the Cosmists from the totalitarian interpretations they invite.

Going further, many Cosmists believe in the evolution of a new form of humanity in its ascension to a higher mode of functioning. This leads to discussions of increasing longevity (no longer such an extreme idea), curing aging, using machines as extensions of limbs, regenerating organs, and ultimately, attaining immortality. Once again, many of these ideas are beginning to sound less extreme thanks to technological advances, with technological enhancements of bodily functions through machines already taking place, while even scientific immortalism is being discussed in more mainstream publications, to say nothing of the Cosmists' dreams of space travel and the colonization of the cosmos. Some of their pronouncements are bold to the point of ludicrousness – Fedorov's Common Task after all is the physical resurrection of the fathers by the sons going back all the way to Adam—yet who knows which of their imaginings and visions are destined to be manifested as part of our reality?

The book is rich in extracts and quotations and provides a wealth of challenging perspectives for esotericists, cultural and religious philosophers, and historians. Make no mistake—these thinkers offer a different way of approaching both material and spiritual issues, not that they would mostly adhere with that distinction in any case. Thus Fedorov himself, for all his endorsement of technology, states clearly that it must be allied to spiritual development if we are not to end up in a machine regulated hell. Science and art must both be linked to spirituality if evolution is to take place.

The Cosmists' big achievement is also to bring esoteric topics into the mainstream – they simply

view them as attainable concretely in this world and research them in a scientific way. In fact, there is ongoing research in Russia into psychic powers, telepathic communication (enhanced by the Kozyrev Mirror), the aether, time travel and the like, all of which fits well with Russia's continuing obsession with the esoteric and the occult.

This book is in itself exhaustive of cosmist thought, but can also be used as a launching pad into the writings of any of the thinkers whose work is examined. Its material is enough to tempt anyone seriously interested in the future evolution of humanity. In addition, the Cosmists challenge models of the future and of future government and society, they challenge human capability and the necessity of death, and they provide alternative models for a functioning harmonious society. They are also responsible for transforming knowledge hidden in alchemy and archaic occult traditions into respectable theology and science bringing it into conventional thought, akin to the work of Deepak Chopra, who brings ancient Vedic knowledge into the mainstream.

The "Russianness" of Cosmist thought should no longer be a barrier to discovering and appreciating its bountiful offerings. And this book is a very valuable introduction to this rich and largely unknown tradition, which needs to be discovered and engaged with.

Young makes an important point at the close of his book: "Perhaps the most important contribution the Russian Cosmists have made to modern intellectual life, however, is to offer a centered, directed, positive vision in a largely uncentered, rudderless, negative time." (p.241) For this alone, the Russian Cosmists are worth discovering.

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***Quiet Horizon: Releasing Ideology and Embracing Self-Knowledge*, by Greg Jemsek.** Trafford Publishing Co., 2011, 322 pages. List price US\$24.95. Available in hardcover and paperback from online and other booksellers.

The author's experience with the cult of Ananda Margra (the Path of Bliss) in the 1970s, led him to analyze the attraction of restrictive ideologies, not only religious ideologies, but also political and social systems of belief. He wondered why people would be willing to give up their intellectual freedom and unquestioningly accept the dogma of the ideology.

Jemsek refers to ideological conversion as a "swoon," and he says it is as intoxicating as falling in love. It engenders a willingness to believe that the secrets of life will be made clear as long as the dictates of the organization are religiously followed.

In the author's case, his susceptibility to the ideology of Ananda Margra was increased due to his lifelong desire to re-enter the "golden world" he discovered during a mystical experience in his youth. He also points to the "narcissistic damage" he experienced as a youth and his desire to belong to a loving family of like-minded people. He was impressed by the forcefulness exhibited by a group of committed and organized people who seemed to have a handle on spiritual transformation. However, conversion was required in order to achieve this promised transformation.

The conversion process takes place on what Jemsek calls a "persuasion continuum." Calcification is the first tipping point on this continuum, where theories turn into certainties, and belief overrides direct personal experience. The door to open-mindedness slams shut. The second tipping point is when the ideology is wholeheartedly embraced. Then the third tipping point is the descent into fundamentalism, absolute certainty, a prohibition of dissent, and the acceptance of rules to explain every aspect of existence. Critical thinking is completely closed off.

While recognizing that ideologies contain valuable lessons, the author says that their dark side is their insistence that everyone must subscribe to the ideology or else be doomed. Jemsek wonders whether some sort of psychological dynamic was present in U.S. society that fueled the high

conversion rate of so many people to both eastern religions and to fundamentalist Christian groups. He saw that this wholesale buying into a religious ideology in the 1970s was similar to the rebirth of materialism in the 1980s, which is still with us today. The pursuit of self-knowledge turned into the pursuit of prosperity.

Jemsek explains that ideologies must spring from meta-narratives—grand persuasive story lines embedded in a society's self-identity, the assumptions they cherish—because persuasion is easier when people have taken certain ideas for granted all their lives. We buy into particular beliefs from the moment we are born into a specific cultural milieu. Through repetition, meta-narratives eventually lead to unconscious acceptance. Events are interpreted in such a way that they seem to confirm these ideas. Ideologies pick up on these belief systems and use them to persuade others of their authenticity.

The author gives as an example the Protestant Reformation and Puritanism. Puritanism, along with its religious descendants of today, was so successful in imposing its interpretation of the Reformation meta-narrative on U.S. society because people were (and continue to be) capable of accepting the idea of surrendering their personal sovereignty in exchange for the abstract promise of salvation. Another example in U.S. society is the frontier meta-narrative with its ideas of limitless possibilities, individualism, and the self-made man.

From this discussion of meta-narratives and their influence on humanity's willingness to accept ideologies, the author next discusses themes that are relevant to the individual process of seeking meaning. Jemsek admits that he conflated the experience of intense transcendent moments with the idea of transformation. Eventually, he realized they are two separate things, and that what he really needed was transformation rather than rediscovering that transcendent golden world of his youth. Transformation, he says, requires having the strength to act upon the human knowing each person already possesses. It also requires resisting the temptation of ideological visions of the world, especially when these visions are associated with intense or uplifting moments or compelling meta-narratives.

To accomplish transformation, ideologies would have us believe that we need to give up the personality and adopt an identity that is in accord with the ideology's belief system. To counter this assertion, he cites Ken Wilber's "pre-trans fallacy," which is the belief that we have to ditch the personality before it has even had a chance to establish and get to know itself, thus avoiding the difficult work of learning to be fully in the world, warts and all, no matter that identity is ultimately illusory.

The discovery of one's personal identity is a necessary first step to transformation, according to Jemsek, and it must be done in a mindful way, in ordinary everyday environments, under ordinary circumstances. He admits that ordinary living is much grittier than the pursuit of transcendent experiences, and people usually prefer to look for an easier, more interesting path. Nevertheless, coming to terms with limits is how a person moves from a malfunctioning narcissism to a healthy self-confidence. And one must also develop self-compassion and give up puritanical notions of needing to be perfect.

To develop an authentic identity, all ideas need to be weighed against something reliable in oneself. Jemsek asserts that sustaining a mindful presence provides all the self-knowledge a person needs. Beliefs give us focus and conviction, the author says, but they constrict our perspective of the wider world, and although a narrow focus may be necessary to get anything done, sometimes the shortsightedness causes one to do the opposite of what was intended.

Jemsek asks if there is a way to be empowered by belief without being a slave to it, and his answer is that it is impossible within an ideological

system. What's important, he says, is to be able to embrace uncertainty, believe in the uncertainty of life, and allow identity to emerge rather than adopting it to cover up the cleavages in our persona. His signposts to healthy empowerment and transformation are: building a solid identity, relating to others authentically, being willing to meet the world in the present moment.

Jemsek states that we must be mindfully present to pursue self-knowledge. Accessing the detached witness begins through exercising the personal will and having enough confidence in the solidity of one's identity to be willing to create a distance from it so that it can be perceived. We access broader levels of awareness through the witness, he says, and sustaining that awareness broadens and deepens our experience of the world.

According to the author, authentic relationships are based on a willingness to be vulnerable, a curiosity about others and the courage to disagree. We interrupt the gradual descent into ideological thinking by witnessing one's life with greater mindfulness. With this work, we can become a force in the world to expose the danger of ideology. This is important work in a world where, as Jemsek points out, it is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain trustworthy, in-depth dialog in public arenas.

The Quiet Horizon, Jemsek says, is the present moment, and he invites readers to take the necessary steps to wake up from their personal conversion swoon.

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