

*astrological-cultural-spiritual-political
views & commentary...*

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THE HERBST NEWSLETTER



Thoughts, dates, & reminders about our lives as members of the craziest species on this lovely planet. Like a message in a bottle washing up on the sandy shores of consciousness...

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Dear friends,

This month's newsletter returns to a subject I write about often, the interpenetration of reality and illusion, this time in the arena of spirituality. The commentary is more personal than much of my public writing, because this seems to be a more personal time. The past two years have left us collectively frayed and close to exhaustion. Like trees dropping their leaves as winter approaches, we have to prune back, going inside to essentialize the strength of our roots. Though customized to my particular experience, I hope this commentary will reflect some of your own thoughts and feelings.

THE GAME OF SPIRIT

Many people of my generation came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, when the "New Age" of alternative culture and spirituality were revolutionary ideals. We were young, of course, with the zeal and naivete so characteristic of youth. I'm not sure I ever thought we would change the world for the better, but I did hope that we might give voice to some renewed sanity.

Little did I know then that the blend of eastern and western spiritual traditions we hoped to distill would be overshadowed by a stunning revival of fundamentalist Christianity. More to the point of the essay, however, is my ignorance of another, more predictable development that would occur: Our radical ideals were slowly absorbed, diluted, and tarnished by the evolving juggernaut of the consumer marketplace.

In short, I didn't understand in my youth the extent to which American culture was (and is) hooked on illusions and images in preference to realities. America is by no means alone in this, of course; every culture promotes its own mythology through ritual propaganda, much of which rings hollow. But America has perfected the use of beautiful images in ways that pre-technological societies never could, by fusing art, commerce, and consumer culture into a single entity. By wedding seductive imagery to marketing, we have reduced aesthetics to a form of collective pornography.

The engines of post-modern commerce are brilliant at creating a kind of shell game, where an endless array of products and services are marketed to consumers in increasingly alluring and sophisticated

packages—as if our every need and desire can and will be fulfilled, including needs and desires that are synthetic and altogether artificial.

Little is sacrosanct anymore besides profit. Everything is now a commodity to be sold. Anything that can be commercialized will be, including spirituality. Too much of what is offered up as sacred is actually profane, particularly at the level of mass culture. Discerning the difference between substance and form is increasingly difficult.

In fact, the marketing of spirit is no different from any other business endeavor. Pro sports, automobiles, movies or television, plumbing supplies, financial planning, pharmaceutical medicines, and now, even spirituality—all these are fair game in the pantheon of commerce, and each is hawked to a gullible public with similar methods. Make the product or service appear as glamorous as possible. Link it to images of perfect happiness and fulfillment. Tie it to special status or privilege. Imply that it will completely solve certain of life's vexing problems. And then advertise like crazy.

But commerce is not spirituality. Marketing is not spirituality. Selling books and readings and seminars and workshops and psychic fairs is not spirituality. All those activities are part of the game of spirit.

When I use the phrase—the “game” of spirit—I do not mean to denigrate practitioners in the arena of spirituality who use the tools of marketing and self-promotion to try to earn a decent living plying their trades (and thus avoid having to work meaningless straight jobs in the corporate world just to pay the bills). Nor do I look down on their customers, who buy the books and attend the workshops, seminars, and psychic fairs. The yearning for more meaningful or transcendent experience that motivates all these people is usually quite heartfelt.

In many ways, commerce itself is a great thing, a wonderful boon to humanity. The interchange of goods and services does indeed produce wealth and can even promote social harmony and peace. Over the past 50 years, however, and especially through the concentrated power of huge corporations, the commercial marketplace in America has accelerated and expanded to invade every nook and cranny of our lives. In this, a delicate balance has been obscured. The always uncertain boundaries between the sacred and the secular have been erased as each morphed into the other.

This development is more worrisome where spirit is concerned because spirituality is particularly vulnerable to glamour. Our aspiration to the divine is fraught with deceptions. Lovely images and comforting philosophies distract us from the hard work of authentic growth. Humans are easily hypnotized by magic and mysticism, the longing for quick fixes and instant realizations that promise to transform our lives for the better and shield us from life's harshness. Sadly, most of these are illusions, mere sleight of hand. The ancient admonition applies now more than ever: “If you see the Buddha on the road, kill Him, for he is not the true Buddha.”

Having said all this, am I merely the pot calling the kettle black? This monthly newsletter is, after all, marketing for the client services I provide, namely, the astrological sessions that make up the bulk of income in my modest livelihood. Like many practitioners of such services, I struggle with the problem of “real” versus “fake” spirituality. That's why I return to this issue time and again in my writing.

Fame, wealth, or cultural status cannot be trusted to guarantee spiritual authority. Those who achieve success and recognition do inevitably move up in the social pecking order of the spiritual game. Their high visibility may provide inspiration to a mass audience, but the very success such people enjoy exposes them to greater ego seductions that can impede their spiritual progress. They may come to believe their own press clippings or cynically pursue power behind a holier-than-thou facade. In extreme cases, these seductions lead to scandalous downfalls. Is anyone truly surprised when celebrities fall from grace? When we stray from the path of humility for too long, humiliation may step in to take its place. All of us have feet of clay. The higher the pedestal, the greater the potential fall.

Lest I appear as a total cynic, let me state also that there are many human beings on this planet—small in percentages, but large in numbers—who embody extraordinary awareness, breathtaking intelligence, and

profound sensitivity. They are the shining hearts and minds who, for one reason or another, offer their gifts as a beacon to illuminate the way ahead for the rest of us.

In ancient occult traditions, spiritual mastery was often kept hidden from public view. A seemingly ordinary village blacksmith or lowly cobbler might turn out to be a Sufi adept, recognizable only to those few able to see through the disguise. In Tibetan Buddhism, a bodhisattva immersed in the discipline of universal compassion for all beings might do so quietly, without fanfare, and far from the limelight.

The modern world is different, of course. But now as in the past, popularity and social status have little if anything to do with transcendent inner development, for consciousness is not a beauty contest. Purity of heart is not related to ambition or success. And just calling something “spiritual” does not make it so, most of all when that label is applied through commercial self-promotion.

So, in the marketplace of spirituality, be careful. All that glitters is not gold, and many of the emperors have no clothes. Among those in the public sphere to whom we turn for guidance, experience counts, as does excellence, but the trappings of spirituality, however glamorous, may prove disappointing in the long run.

Even the language of the spiritual has become marketing fodder. I no longer speak in overtly spiritual terms as much as I did decades ago. Yes, on occasion I still use words such as “enlightenment,” “epiphany,” or “satori,” but here in my mid-50s I am much more likely to write about toughing it out on the long, slow road to maturity or the unending challenge to become a more authentic human being. The lessons of life, both gentle and hard, have scaled back my hopes and expectations toward more modest proportions, another case where less is more. For me, spirituality has become distinctly unglamorous. Homely truths are preferable to beautiful illusions.

On the path toward real awakening, certain rules still apply. In the words of the old Zen koan: “Chop wood and carry water.” Live as simply as possible. Approach the small tasks of life with attention and reverence, and maintain humility about the larger unresolved issues. Be awake to small breakthroughs when the ineffable subtlety of the divine emerges from between the cracks. Maintain discipline, but relax into spirit.

Though we can prepare ourselves as best we know how, we can’t finally buy or earn the blessings of spirituality. We receive spirit when and as it comes to us.



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