

# Michael Dowling's Spiritual Journey

## A Talk to The Commonwealth Center for Literary and Cultural Change at the University of Virginia

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John White, author of *The Meeting of Science and Spirit, Guidelines for a New Age*, says, "Something unprecedented and transforming is happening in the world. A higher form of consciousness is emerging: a Great Awakening to Ultimate Reality. Some call it the coming of the Age of Aquarius. Others speak of the consciousness revolution or the human potential movement. Others call it the New Age."

I became interested in New Age thinking in 1970, when in the midst of a job crisis and at the insistence of an acquaintance, I went to see a certain astrologer. I was relieved to find that she didn't have a black cat and pet spiders, and it was reassuring to hear her say that my life fit into an overall plan. I didn't necessarily believe in astrology, but I was drawn to it because I was looking for more reality beyond the limited physical world. The astrologer said I would be good at Silva Mind Control, so I enrolled in the next two-week course in my hometown of Boston. This launched my nine-year involvement in the New Age Movement.

Silva Mind Control (now known as The Silva Method) opened up a fascinating new world. During the next three years, I took introductory and graduate courses in parapsychology (ESP), visualization, and positive thinking. With varying degrees of precision, and once with an accuracy that startled me, I was able to mentally know verifiable information about people I had never met. Techniques such as positive thinking and mental imaging enabled me to succeed in certain endeavors as never before. Another Mind Control graduate I knew won \$1,000 in the lottery by playing a number that came into his mind while meditating. I was enticed by this kind of power.

But after three years, Silva Mind Control wasn't enough, and I joined some other Silva graduates who were involved in Erhard Seminars Training (now known as The Landmark Forum). EST, as it was called, was a blend of Zen, Gestalt, encounter, Carl Rogers, Scientology, ESP, and a few other things. The initial two-weekend training was impactful, and for the next six years I took advanced seminars and recruited others to do the same.

A goal of EST was to "get it," which meant attaining the realization that there is nothing more to "get" because each of us already has everything we need to be happy. This obviously wasn't true because I and all the other EST people I knew were constantly going from one New Age activity to another looking for something more. During this time, I consulted psychics, astrologers, and Tarot card readers; lived in a house with friends who practiced the Sufi religion; attended séances where people broke down in tears when the medium, supposedly in contact with their departed loved ones, gave them messages that were so specific and personal that no human could have made them up; devoured the writings of Edger Casey, Paramahansa Yogananda, Baba Ram Dass, and a host of other New Age gurus; studied A Course in Miracles, which was supposedly received psychically from Jesus; and engaged in a host of other pursuits.

### The Lure of the New Age

I was attracted to New Age thinking for several reasons. I'll briefly mention six.

**First, the New Age affirmed and demonstrated to me that life had a spiritual dimension.** As a boy I had regularly attended Christian churches, but much of the time they seemed lifeless and devoid of power. People often appeared to be going through the motions of a cultural ritual. At the time, I would probably have resonated with the statement below by John White, again from *The Meeting of Science and Spirit*:

"At present Christianity tends to demand blind faith, rote words, and mechanical behavior. This leaves people feeling empty and unfulfilled. But the cosmic calling we humans have will not be denied forever, despite the ignorance of religious institutions which, in effect, prohibit people from direct access to God. The Holy Spirit, the life force, will simply move on to create new forms of religious expression, leaving ruins called churches behind."

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I wanted more than the institutional church seemed to offer. The New Age exposed me to apparently supernatural experiences and the accumulated wisdom of Eastern religious traditions that made my previous Christian experience seem limited and lifeless.

**Second, the New Age promoted love and tolerance.** A popular New Age adage is that all paths lead to the top of the mountain, which is a way of saying that all religions are equally valid. What is truth for one person may not be truth for the next person, so we have no basis for judging others. This emphasis on tolerance caused me to see how my opinions and biases often cut me off from enjoying others and experiencing life. I remember thinking that the Orthodox Christians I knew were happy and nice enough, but they seemed rather narrow-minded, intolerant, and lacking in curiosity about the exciting things I was experiencing.

**Third, the New Age was self-empowering.** A prime teaching of EST was that each of us creates our own reality. I liked the sense of healthy responsibility and power over my own destiny this perspective gave me. I began to notice how I tended to blame other people or circumstances for my own failings. Like the characters in Somerset Maugham’s novel *The Razor’s Edge*, I saw that in life I usually got what I *really* wanted, even though it wasn’t always what I *thought* I wanted. This new attitude of taking full responsibility for my life created a sense of honesty, maturity, and empowerment. I was inspired by people like Florence Graves, editor of *New Age* magazine, who said that at the heart of New Age thinking is the “belief that we all have the power to effect deep changes—not only in our personal lives but also in the world.”

**Fourth, New Age philosophy gave me a goal in life.** I had worked in the business world and knew that materialism wouldn’t satisfy my deepest longings. The New Age supplied the new and seemingly better vision of self-realization. I looked forward to attaining my full human potential, so I would no longer be encumbered by fears, prejudices, and other human failings. This was a goal worth striving for.

**Fifth, New Age thinking was self-affirming.** Participants in EST were told, “You are perfect; you simply have barriers to your perfection.” In the New Age, sin is an illusion; good and evil are two sides of the same coin, the yin and yang of life. Our life’s work is to ascend to a higher level of consciousness, so we can truly be who we already are. Thanks to reincarnation, we don’t have to do this in one lifetime. This was good news for those plagued by self-doubt, which included just about all of us in EST.

**Sixth, the New Age provided a holistic view of life.** As a result of my psychic experiences, I had come to believe that all humanity is linked by a mysterious life force, and that perhaps we are linked with our environment as well. According to New Age guru Florence Graves, “. . . the best New Age thinking reflects the age-old yet eminently relevant belief that the health of the individual and that of society are fundamentally interrelated. This holistic world view is in alignment with such down-to-earth subjects as environmentalism, holistic health, women’s rights, social responsibility, and personal spirituality.” I liked this kind of thinking.

This holistic mindset was supported by philosopher/scientists like Capra, Talbot, and Davies, who popularized the notion that new advances in physics support New Age thinking about the design of life. They pointed out how matter and anti-matter in the physical realm seem to mirror the yin and yang of Eastern mysticism and to support the oneness of all things. Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity seem to demonstrate, among other things, the interdependence of observed and observer, the relativity of time and space, and the ever-evolving nature of reality. The fact that each part of a hologram, no matter how small, can reproduce the whole image when illuminated by laser light seems to parallel the New Age spiritual concept that each of us has all the potential of the universe within us. “The new physics,” says Paul Davies, scientist, philosopher, and winner of the Templeton Prize for Religion, “offers a surer path to God than religion.” Exciting stuff!

In summary, New Age thinking promoted many things that had great appeal to me: enlivened spirituality, love and tolerance, personal empowerment and responsibility, a meaningful life goal, self-affirmation, and a holistic worldview. I also applauded the positive contributions to society the New Age Movement was making in areas such as wellness, nutrition, and ecology.

## A Renewed Mind

Although the New Age was interesting and at times exciting, even after a number of years it did not satisfy my deepest longings. So, I intensified my search. In one seven-week period I participated in two gestalt therapy weekends, a two-week intensive encounter group experience, and a ten-day Buddhist meditation retreat. One night while I was walking alone during the two-week encounter group mentioned above, I had the first of three supernatural experiences that took place over a year and a half.

Space doesn't permit me to describe the details of these experiences. I will simply say that they caused me to come to my senses, much like the prodigal son "came to himself" in Jesus' well-known parable about the father and his two sons (Luke 15:11-32). After these experiences, my worldview underwent a seismic shift, and I sought to blend my New Age thinking with the Christian faith. At first, this seemed possible, just as two railroad tracks appear to converge in the distance. But the more I tried to meld my New Age beliefs with the Christian faith, the more these two paths diverged. The two thought systems, which seemed almost to blend in some areas, flatly contradicted each other in fundamental ways.

For example, in Matthew 10:34 Jesus is recorded as saying, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword." On the other hand, *The Course in Miracles* has Jesus saying in the first person singular that his disciples had misquoted him about bringing a sword, and that he had come only to bring peace and brotherhood. This is a remarkable example of the irreconcilable conflict between New Age thinking and Orthodox Christianity. The New Age says Jesus came to bring peace among all men regardless of their beliefs ("at-one-ment"), and Christianity says he came to bring reconciliation with God for those who put their faith in him alone (atonement).

To cite just one more of many possible examples, I would read in the Bible such passages as the following from Colossians 1:15-20:

"He (Christ) is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross."

These words directly contradicted what I was taught in the New Age. For example, below is another paragraph from *The Meeting of Science and Spirit*:

"The institutional Christian churches tell us that Jesus was the only Son of God, that he incarnated as a human in order to die on the Cross in a substitutionary act as a penalty for our sins, and thereby save the world. But that is a sad caricature, a pale reflection of the true story. It turns Jesus into a magical fairy-tale hero and Christianity into a cult of personality. As Ralph Waldo Emerson pointed out a century ago, Christendom has become a religion about Jesus rather than the religion of Jesus. The religion about Jesus puts him on a pedestal, regards him as Big Daddy in the Sky, and petitions him to be responsible for us. The religion of Jesus calls on every human being to take personal responsibility for growing to that same state of cosmic unity and wholeness which Jesus himself demonstrated. There is no substitute for personal responsibility. Jesus did not save people; he freed them – from the bondage of ego. The significance of incarnation and resurrection is not that Jesus was a human like us, but rather that we are gods like him."

The New Age had taught me to have open mind, but my tolerance had a limit. The New Age creed that "there are many paths to the top of the mountain" would not tolerate a religion that said, "There is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Like Jacob wrestling with the angel, my entire being was engaged in a battle that I could neither win nor end. Only in retrospect did I realize why this was so. To end the battle would have required my dying to self, and this was something I did not want to do. In fact, it was something I could not have done on my own even if I had wanted to.

Driven to explore every avenue, I scheduled a counseling session with the evangelism pastor of a Christian church. During the session, I found myself rather matter-of-factly blurting out, "I can't believe Jesus died for me." This pastor typically would answer my questions by directing me to a verse of Scripture. But this time he hesitated for what seemed like a full minute. Then he looked at me and said, "Well, did he?"

His question bypassed my mind and penetrated to the depths of my spirit, which knew the answer was "yes." With tears, I asked Jesus to be my Savior and Lord. In an instant, God graciously and supernaturally opened my eyes and transported me from one allegiance to another.

As I turned away from New Age spirituality, I began to realize that my attraction to the New Age had been motivated not by a desire for truth and enlightenment, as I had thought, but rather by a desire for power. I had not wanted to worship God; I had wanted to be god. This was not exactly the kind of self-realization I had been looking for. Instead of finding, I was found out.

Fundamentally, New Age spirituality is a repackaged form of ancient Gnosticism. This is the heresy that Paul was refuting when he wrote the passage in Colossians quoted above. Especially since the 1960s, a blend of Gnosticism and Eastern religions has infiltrated our culture. It profoundly influences the major issues of our day, including feminism, multiculturalism, an exaggerated emphasis on self-esteem, political correctness, homosexual rights, abortion rights, and one-world government. It is found in our movies, our literature, and our music. *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *The Shack*, *The Da Vinci Code*, and John Lennon's song *Imagine* (which idealizes a world with no countries, no religion, no heaven, and no hell) are just a few examples. Much of the controversy that we see in our country today is due to the clash between this false spirituality and Orthodox Christianity.

If New Age ideology is so erroneous, you might be wondering why I remained entrapped by it for so many years. There's an aphorism attributed to the Eastern mystics that says, "When a pickpocket meets a man, all he sees are his pockets." While I was immersed in New Age thinking, I tended to fit all of life into this frame. When God graciously opened my eyes, it was as if the curtain had been pulled back and the Wizard of Oz exposed. What I once regarded as wonderful was revealed as a dangerous deception.

That's my story. If I were still a New Ager, I would say that it's true for me, but it may not be true for others, and that's okay. But as a Christian, I believe it's true to such an extent that I've staked my life on it. As a matter of fact, I believe that the essentials of what I have said are true for all of us, whether we realize it or not, and that we all have staked our lives on it, whether we like it or not.