



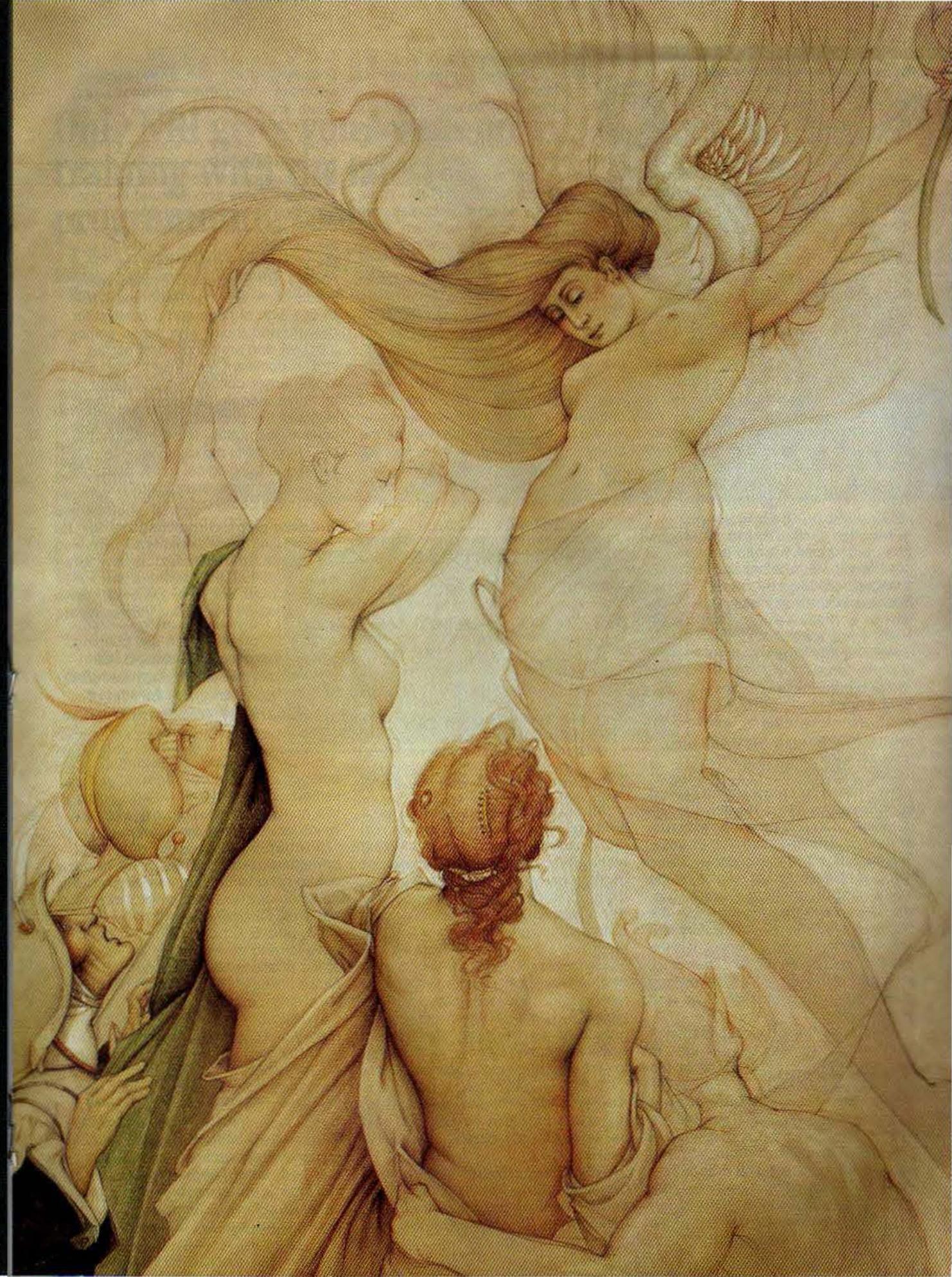
VISIONS OF COSMOPOLIS

ARTICLE BY ANTHONY MANSUETO

GREAT WHEELS OF LIGHT APPEAR OVER THE HIGH DESERT
AT NIGHT, SPINNING AGAINST THE STARRY SKY.

MESSENGERS FROM THE HEAVENS COME TO ORDINARY
PEOPLE, BEARING NEW WISDOM AND WARNINGS
OF COSMIC CATASTROPHE. MEN AND WOMEN ARE TAKEN
FROM THEIR BEDS AT NIGHT AND RETURN WITH
STORIES OF INTERCOURSE WITH STRANGE BEINGS, THEIR
BODIES SCARRED WITH CIRCLES AND TRIANGLES.

LIKE SO MANY ASPECTS OF OUR CULTURE, THE UFO IS THE
PAINTING BY MICHAEL PARKES



cause of controversy, a controversy which extends to the very existence of the object in question. Like God, the UFO divides our society into believers and nonbelievers, cautious hopefuls and equally cautious agnostics. But whether we believe in the UFO or not, its presence in our culture clearly has a great deal to tell us about ourselves—about where we are as a species and where we are going. This kind of cultural observation does not rule out the possibility that UFOs really *do* exist, nor does it require such existence. It merely asks what we can learn from the phenomenon regarding the current state of human civilization.

While the biological and metaphysical explanations vary and contradict one another, there seems to be at least one constant about our nature as human beings—and that is that we are not alone. We have a drive toward wholeness and completion which is apparent in everything we do. For instance, we join together in intimate union—and produce a new whole, the child. We live in groups because we can accomplish more together than a single individual ever could. Even our intellectual history is one of endless struggle to make what we know of the world fit into a larger pattern of significance.

But our desire for unity and completion is, perhaps, nowhere more clearly expressed than in our need for religious experience or understanding. Derived from the Latin *religio*, which means to reconnect, religion is the process by which we strive to link ourselves to the divine or cosmic order of things. Similarly, *salvare*, to save, originally meant to make whole. Salvation, the ultimate aim of religion, is the moment of reconnection—with God, with Christ, with the Universe, with the Sublime. It is a moment of mystery and reverence, terror and fulfillment. It is the experience of connection, touching, and becoming a part of something alien—something outside of us and very different.

Whatever the physical reality of UFOs and aliens may be, it is easy to see the religious dimensions of the phenomena. Carl Jung, as early as the 1950s, noted the resemblance of flying saucers to the *mandala*, an ancient symbol of wholeness and salvation. More recently, tales of abduction and alien encounters suggest that finding the Other—a being from beyond—connects these experiences to our underlying religious need for contact which

transcends the daily intercourse of human existence.

This said, it is necessary to point out how the symbolism surrounding the UFO phenomenon differs from other types of religious symbolism. At least in its original form, the UFO was a machine, a technological artifact. While the technology which it embodies may be far in advance of our own, it is, nonetheless, something which beings like ourselves might eventually be able to create. The UFO literature is full of stories of attempts by the government to "reverse engineer" UFO propulsion systems. If only we could get our hands on a piece of their equipment, then, well, with a little bit of Yankee ingenuity. . . . Similarly the aliens—even as their "otherness" has intensified over the years and they have manifested such paranormal powers as the ability to walk through walls, to levitate, and so on—have remained finite, humanoid beings who have real limitations and who, in some inscrutable

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way, seem to need us as much as we need them.

All this suggests that we humans are beginning to see ourselves as real participants in the process of creating unity and organization. Where older myths regarded humanity as the plaything of the gods, or as the essentially powerless subject of a transcendent divine sovereign, the myth which has emerged around the UFO treats humanity as a real partner in the creation of a cosmic society. The scientific and technological advances of the postwar period brought with them grave dangers to be sure. But they also made it possible, for the first time, for humanity to end its earthbound existence, to visit the heavens and return to tell of the journey, and to imagine someday, on our own efforts and through our own merits, to become citizens of the great heavenly city.

There have, however, been a number of distinct—and even mutually opposed—reactions to the mythic character of the UFO phenomenon. It is

possible to distinguish among these responses along three distinct axes. There are those who believe that the UFO comes to us, whether from another star system or another dimension, and those who regard it as merely a product of the collective psyche. There are those who interpret the phenomenon in language which is drawn from the scientific tradition, even as they stretch the limits of official science, and those who express open hostility to the scientific establishment. Finally, there are those who see in the UFO a sign of hope and a catalyst for growth, and those who sense something evil and profoundly destructive.

The dominant response to the UFO in the larger culture has been one of tentative, hopeful anticipation. Broad layers of the population either believe, or want desperately to believe, that the UFO represents the real presence of a superior technological force, probably from another star system, interaction with which is a catalyst for human social (and spiritual) progress.

This trend is connected to a fascination with the "new science," with unified field theories and complex systems theory, "holistic" biology and ecology—disciplines which are pushing us beyond the old worldview which regarded the universe as a system of externally related atoms, toward an understanding of the "relationality," holism, and self-organizing character of the universe. There is, at the same time, a desire to respect scientific norms, and to avoid explanations which lack scientific credibility.

Probably the clearest and most powerful expression of this vision came not from the UFO movement at all, but rather from Steven Spielberg, whose two films, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, and *E.T.* both articulated and gave form to powerful popular images of the phenomenon. In *Close Encounters*, a series of UFO sightings disrupts the stifling routine of small-town life and the loveless marriage of a utility company worker, drawing him and a newfound companion into the Wyoming wilderness for an encounter with benevolent aliens whose mother ship descends from the skies like a technological New Jerusalem. He is chosen over the best and the brightest to accompany the aliens on a journey into the heavens. The score by John Williams is a clear expression of the cultural myth at work in these films. Built around a series of complex and

often highly abstract variations on the theme from *Pinocchio*, it relies on a common cosmic connection echoed in the refrain, *When you wish upon a star/Makes no difference who you are.*

Moving out from this mythic center, there are two other trends which see the UFO as a sign, or at least an expression, of hope, but differ in their attitude toward official science—and thus in their willingness to regard the phenomenon as objectively real. On the one side are the secular, humanistic skeptics closely aligned with official science, such as the cosmological principles championed by Carl Sagan. These skeptics share the UFOlogists' quest for an inhabited universe, but regard UFOlogy as little better than a modern superstition. Contact, when it comes, will be in binary code and will be received by a large radio telescope operated by a consortium of universities. The message will be interpreted by an interdisciplinary team of scientists and conveyed to the secretary general of the United Nations.

The hard science approach here, however, is not devoid of a sense of awe at the vastness of the undertaking of establishing contact. Keith Thompson, while conducting research for his book, *Angels and Aliens*, visited with a

scientist working on the SETI project in the California desert. "He was a Harvard Ph.D.-type, cream of the crop," Thompson recalls, "and he sat there and told me with an almost religious kind of astonishment, how many channels they had open, and how much of the heavens they were searching."

At the other end of the spectrum are those who reject more or less completely, or are willing to ignore, the limits of official science. Rather, these believers borrow scientific concepts to explain social psychological phenomena. David Stupple, in an article published shortly after his untimely death in 1983, documented the continuities between the Theosophical movement and the UFO contactee and channeling cults which developed in the 1950s and 1960s. Not infrequently UFO groups in the theosophical tradition will see themselves as drawing out the implications of new developments in relativity and quantum mechanics. Much of what Charles Spiegel, currently director of the Unarius Educational Foundation, says—phrases such as "The universe is an inner-dimensional energy system," or "The mind is a giant computer running off of this system," or "We misunderstand the universe if we think only of the finite factors of the infinite

creative intelligence"—sounds surprisingly like popular accounts which treat the philosophical implications of the new physics.

The bibliographies of Unarius tracts are filled with references to Descartes, Spinoza, and Einstein. Indeed, Dr. Spiegel, who received his degree in psychic therapeutic science from the Unarius Academy of Science, wrote his doctoral dissertation on the political structure of the Interplanetary Confederation which had been transmitted to him by the chief scientist Alta of the planet Vixall. He informed me that his immediate predecessor, Unarius co-founder Ruth E. Norman, had recently made her "transition" to a nonatomic state where she functions as the archangel Uriel. One Unarius film depicts the trials of an aborigine contactee who suffers persecution at the hands of his tribe's high priest whose name, interestingly enough, just happens to be "Seti."

More recently, theosophical contactee and channeling cults have given way to New Age interpretations of the phenomenon which are less audaciously offensive to a scientifically trained audience, but perhaps even more profoundly at odds with the whole scientific enterprise than their theosophical predecessors. Ethnobotanist and psilocybin guru Terence McKenna writes in his book, *The Archaic Revival*, that "the UFO is an idea intended to confound science, because science has begun to threaten the existence of the planet. At this point a shock is necessary for the culture, a shock equivalent to the shock of the resurrection on Roman imperialism." This shock is being applied by the "overmind . . . a level of hierarchic control being exerted on the human species as a whole. . . . Our destiny is not ours to decide. It is in the hands of a weirdly democratic, ameboid, hyperintelligent superorganism that is called Everybody." Where the technophiles seek wholeness in a continuation of the scientific project of our own civilization, the New Age movement rejects the whole enterprise of rational knowledge and technocratic control in favor of a religion centered on the maxim "let go and let the UFO."

This theme of letting go has also found resonance among evangelically oriented abductees. Betty Andreasson Luca, the subject of several books by UFO investigator Raymond Fowler, told me that her abduction experiences had taught her "how real God is and how he is in control of all things." Even those abductees who regard their experience as a catalyst for growth report



"Forgive me, dear, for I know not what I do."

initial fear and resistance which they overcome only through what amounts to an act of religious submission to their captors. Whitley Strieber repeatedly challenges the right of his captors to abduct him and perform medical operations without his consent. Their reply: "We have the right." It is only after he has accepted this that he is able to come to terms with the experience and learn from it.

Not everyone, however, sees in the UFO a sign of hope. Once again the original, and perhaps definitive, perception in this regard comes from popular culture rather than the UFO movement itself. Ever since the publication of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* and Orson Welles' famous broadcast of the same, we have had a fascination with alien invasion. We are desperately afraid that we are being taken over by a force more powerful than ourselves, the motives and *modus operandi* of which are too complex to be apparent to merely human reason.

The notion that the phenomenon is somehow malevolent cuts across the lines between technophile and technophobe, and even across the lines between believer and nonbeliever. Visions of a technological New Jerusalem find their counterpart in an emerging coun-

termymyth of secret invasion by gray aliens from Zeta Reticuli, who are breeding hybrids in underground bases hidden beneath the mountains of New Mexico, Colorado, and Arizona. This countermyth has found resonance both among abductees who, far from feeling healed and challenged by their experiences, are more inclined to say that they have been raped and violated, and among political conspiracy theorists convinced there is a history of secret contact between the aliens and a secret government centered in a high-level group known as the MJ-12.

One partisan of the Reticulian invasion hypothesis is physicist John E. Brandenburg, who claims to have worked on directed energy weapons and other space defense projects. He says that the "Star Wars" program in which he served was actually intended as a defense against the Reticulian invasion. His prescription: "God, GUTS, and Guns." GUTS refers to the Grand Unified Theory of Science which he hopes will "allow us to control gravity with electromagnetism." He has also proposed a "Rainbow Declaration" which declares that "on all matters concerning extraterrestrial peoples," the nations of the earth "shall be as one."

The theme of political conspiracy,

however, is not confined to those who believe we are actually undergoing a secret alien invasion. William Cooper, author of *Behold the Pale Horse*, is a former naval intelligence officer who, like several former military intelligence and defense research personnel, claims to have been shown documents relating to government contact with extraterrestrials. Originally he, too, took the documents at face value. Gradually, however, he came to the conclusion that the phenomenon is one great big hoax, "exclusively of human origin . . . designed to bring into being One World government." The religious overtones of the phenomenon are all part of the plot. One World government requires a New Age One World religion. Mr. Cooper, whose answering machine informs callers that they have reached something called the "Intelligence Service," traces this conspiracy back to John Dewey who, according to Cooper, noted that the prospect of extraterrestrial invasion might serve to unify earth's warring nations. The conspiracy, so the argument goes, is promoted by a secret government which includes the Trilateral Commission, the Council on Foreign Relations, and other organizations.

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but they're indoctrinated to believe that it's wrong to question anything in the realm of religion. They seem to compartmentalize science and religion in their brain, and if you dare to introduce the two worlds together for examination side by side, you will get hostility and rage and the conversation will be abruptly terminated."

To Father Yanni, however, shouting down the devilish voice of skeptics like Nickell is the thing to do: He bounces out of his chair and leads the way back to the icon. "Here, look at this." He tears a tiny piece of brown paper from the back of the picture. It is saturated with oil. "Why would it be fraud? We don't ask people to pay money here. We tell people to go to their own church, don't come to ours. We are not merchants here. We give people the word of God."

By now others, including a gaggle of teenage girls with backpacks and expensive sneakers, have joined the ladies in the pews. As I watch them drink in the Madonna, it strikes me that I am witnessing a divine version of the much-publicized "search for the inner child." In the presence of the icon, the ultimate mother, compassionate and all-seeing, these worshipers could be "reparenting" themselves, releasing feelings of abandonment and abuse. In her presence, they cannot feel isolated or worthless or alone. By visiting here every day and putting her picture up in every room at home, these believers may be creating their own miracles of psychological and physical healing and rebirth.

"Why don't you write about the people," a man in Virginia said angrily. "That's the important thing." In a way, that angry parishioner is right. Whether the oil or the blood or the visions are miraculous or fraudulent, earthly or heavenly, the phenomenon is answering a deep human need for an intimate contact with the divine.

When Jung studied the phenomenon, for instance, he theorized that such collective visions were created when human fears or fantasies were projected from the unconscious in a powerfully concrete symbolic form. Jung believed that the visionaries themselves were often those least in touch with the contents of their unconscious, the least accepting of their deeper longings and fears. This may explain why, traditionally, so many of the Marian visionaries have been troubled, vulnerable peasant girls seeking

refuge in a divine mother.

But the same theory may also explain the emergence of modern-day visionaries: middle-class Americans who cannot reconcile the worldly, skeptical, scientific, conscious parts of their minds with their deeply emotional religious longings and fears. With no other outlet for the ecstatic or apocalyptic fantasies in their unconscious—fantasies shared by the whole community—symbolic projections erupt.

This less-than-holy nature of the Marian vision is a notion with which many devoted priests agree. "Personally you couldn't get me to walk across the street to see a weeping statue. I'm also not very impressed by some of the stigmatics around," opines Father Benedict Groeschel, director of the Office of Spiritual Development for the Archdiocese of New York and the author of *A Still, Small Voice* (Ignatius), the guide used by the bishop-appointed commission that investigated the apparition in Marlboro.

"One must remember that interest in this kind of thing relates to humble people's religion," Father Groeschel states. "We have to have respect for the religion of the ordinary, humble person who, in a naive way, seeks to have his faith affirmed through tangible phenomena. Many times people who are oppressed think of apocalyptic possibilities because they are better than the world in which they live. People must try to put aside this childlike spirituality. The great Christian mystics, for instance, were most concerned with personal religious experience, prayer, and the well-being of others. They were seldom impressed by this rather crude involvement in reports of extraordinary phenomena. Though some reports of miraculous phenomena are very impressive, they do not qualify for the highest level of spirituality."

Despite their seeming sophistication, adherents to this "simple people's" faith are decidedly middle class these days it seems, and scattered across the landscape of Suburbia, U.S.A. In this endless outpost of civilization as we know it, there's a collective longing for spirituality, and a sense that the old authorities are breaking down.

"I think there's a general disillusionment with institutions these days," said Sandra Zimdars-Swartz. "People are disillusioned with everything from the scientific establishment to the Roman Catholic Church. In times like these, people tend to seek reassurance. That's what seems to be happening at these apparition sites. And yes, people have a tendency to emphasize these experiences." □□

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Outwardly it might appear that this sort of negative reaction to the UFO phenomenon represents a kind of resurgent Yankee individualism that seems at odds with the religious unity incorporated in more positive versions. However, there is an underlying need even in these conspiracies to connect the individual experience to a larger whole. The conspiracy theorist searches for the pattern which will make his experience of the world a coherent whole. The intelligence officer, who maps out these secret networks, is the high priest of this peculiar antireligion. Salvation comes from knowledge of the conspiracy. Indeed, one often gets the sense that many conspiracy theorists actually hope that there *is* a secret government operating behind the scenes, holding together what often seems like an increasingly fractured and fragile social reality.

What are we to make of this complex range of responses to the UFO? When he first addressed the phenomenon in the 1950s, Jung wrote that the presence of the UFO signaled fundamental changes in our culture—the passing of one era and the beginning of another. This is indeed what is happening. Science is beginning to grasp the "relationality," holism, and purposeful self-organizing complexity of the universe. New technologies enable us to tap into the self-organizing dynamics of matter and to end our earthbound infancy and go out into the cosmos. New means of transportation and communication have drawn the planet together into one tightly knit, interdependent global civilization. The powerful images of holism and integration which lie at the heart of the UFO phenomenon serve as a testament that we are becoming real participants in the life of the cosmos.

Ed Conroy, author of *Report on Communion*, says that the UFO is "a mirror of individual and social psychology . . . people tend to get the UFO experience they deserve." A careful look in this mirror can tell us a lot—the ways in which we are growing and becoming whole, and the ways in which we are still fractured and even disintegrating. What do you see in those wheels of light over the high desert, spinning against the starry sky? A New Jerusalem? A pale horse which heralds apocalypse? Or the memory of very ancient dreams clothed in a technological symbolism which speaks of new tools with which to make all our dreams come true? □□