

**Emotion and Transcendence:
Effects of the Alternative Spiritual Movement of the 1970s**
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Framework of the 1970s

Among the many changing perspectives coming into view in America during the 1960s, notions of personal power were in an upheaval. As this decade came to an end, the protests of the years prior seemed yet to bear significant fruit. Amongst the sea of wins and losses, an entire generation of middle class “wealth” still felt confused and personally unfulfilled. Some people were lonely, some suicidal, some coming down off a decade of drug taking, looking to clean up and get straight. Among the rebellious political voices, an infusion of Eastern culture had begun during the 60s bringing with it a challenge to American social paradigms; this was new terrain for the young adult coming of age:

“Notwithstanding all the political turbulence, the Sixties were not simply about politics. Nor were they exclusively about experimenting with new lifestyles. What made the era unique was the combination of these two emphases. Personal transformation came to be wedded to political and social change as a rhetoric of liberation suffused the New Left and later counterculture. Only after 1968 or 1969 did the cultural and political components of the “Sixties experience” diverge. Thereafter, the political left came to be more exclusive and sectarian while elements of the counterculture...diffused through a wider public.” (1)

Among other things, the popularity of Spiritual Movements that came into prominence during the 1970s suggest that young Americans began to see that political change was not “enough”. Changing public policy was complicated and slow. Changing other people’s minds about what seems obvious (equal rights for all) could be frustrating. Ideas of utopian unity remained strong, but seemed yet unreachable on a large scale. Young members of American society began to seek what would unite them with others in an even more transcendent way...what could surpass even human rights? Perhaps this was a sense of inner peace, one that is not subject to the world’s failures and the broken promises of politicians. It certainly stemmed from a sense of despair at a world that seemed to move farther and farther away from the ideals put out by celebrated leaders of the ‘60s political and social movements whom were put in front as role models.

“America was in the seventh decade of the twentieth century and the more things changed, the more they seemed to stay the same. All of the kicking, struggling, and shouting of the Sixties seemed to have produced nothing but a lot of very blown-out strugglers. Richard

Nixon was still President. Tales of Watergate, the fuel crisis, and runaway inflation filled the newspapers. Social issues that had come under public scrutiny in the Sixties were no closer to being solved than they had been a decade ago. It was an easy time for men of conscience to give up in despair.” (2)

Certainly not every American at college age in 1970 gave up in despair or even cared about the success or failure of the ‘60s political/social movements. This was an era in which it was easy to be immersed in distraction: discos, gender-bending “shag” haircuts and a new liberal sexuality kept many young adults very busy. Plenty of young people at that time were “enjoying” the benefits of their parents white-collar jobs; with money and a new-found sense of freedom (after the culturally-liberating ‘60s) many teenagers and college-aged youth were just out to have a good time.

The Spiritual Rebellion

Claudia Fiorelli(3), who had just hit twenty years old at the start of the ‘70s decade, had a decidedly different idea of what a good time would be – it certainly wasn’t going out to a disco and wearing platform shoes.

Claudia was born in the Bronx, in 1952, to a family of second generation, hard-working Italian immigrants. They were devout Catholics and were able to send her to Catholic grammar school and a Convent High School. She was exceptionally bright and asked a lot of annoying questions to her authorities. Despite her dislike for conformity, she maintained excellent grades. Like many middle-class Americans at that time, her first stop on a road that would lead her away from her parent’s narrow ideas was college.

“The whole concept of college for me was a vehicle to get me out of the traditions of my household, which I felt were empty and without any conscious direction. Going to college was the only other alternative open to me, besides getting married, which did not seem important to me at the time.

...This time, the early 70s, I felt was a perfect storm of history. because you had all these baby boomer kids born to parents were able to “advance” their social standing more easily than ever before...we believed that we had the chance to really expand the horizons...of cultural thought.” (4)

The “perfect storm” that Claudia talks about, this particular framework of in American social history, posed a whole new series of questions to be asked; and suggested an re-examination of those questions yet unanswered. The college-aged social activist of the 60s, in committing themselves to a “higher” cause, one that would benefit society as a whole, gave their younger brothers and sisters the sense that a commitment to freedom of all kinds would be personally meaningful. Seeing yourself as a participant in a much larger picture in which you play a significant role empowered the ‘60s generation.

When notions of empowerment shifted, there was even less solid ground for a generation to stand on. How would the generation that followed these political activists contribute to something meaningful in their society? Now that you have marched for women's rights, why were women still excluded from the board rooms? Now that every American is granted the right to vote, why does our political process still seem unfair? Now that blacks can go to the same schools as whites, hasn't all the important work already been done?

In 1969, with images of Woodstock plastered all over the media, ideas of what freedom "looked like" began to become imprinted in the next generation of young American minds. These images weren't about Civil Rights, blacks receiving social justice or diplomatic victories. They seemed to be a call for self-expression, a vote of confidence for all sorts of social types that had once been marginalized (women and homosexuals especially). These images suggested a sense of personal fulfillment, rather than an objective goal where the personal is superseded into the greater social good.

"...The code of behavior evolved in the first half of the twentieth century had been permanently altered by the Sixties and nothing offered in its stead. The river's tent was broken. "Anything Goes" would be the new national anthem. Many were lost. (5)

When "Anything Goes"...

Claudia describes her own experience right before she managed to discover the alternative spiritual movement she later joined, then called the "Dawn Horse Communion" (6)

"It seemed like it was so clear that there was so much hypocrisy. During this time, there was also a lot of drug experimentation. I used LSD, marijuana, mescaline, as so many did at that time, and when I finally felt I could no longer do this anymore, it was not productive, I simply stopped, cold turkey, but the larger question of how to live my life with a sense of integrity to my individuality and my inner self still remained. When I stopped, I did it on my own, no outside help or therapy existed commonly at that time, and so I felt like the larger questions of my life remained unanswered...I was 21 years old, with very little experience behind me, traveling around the United States with my boyfriend Willie at that time. He was a Vietnam vet, very troubled, as many Vietnam vets were at the time, but everyone went to California. That's what you did at that time...everything was happening there...

"The hippie thing had already happened but society didn't seem like it was changing fast enough...I was looking for something. Even after I tried out a few different communes, briefly, I started to see that maybe this didn't work either, the whole utopian society thing wasn't real, and in terms of deeper meaning, I knew that religion didn't work, at least any of the traditional roads to "god"...didn't work...my intense experience with Catholicism gave me the sense that traditional roads to "divine" understanding were hypocritical and unnatural...

"There were a lot of people at that time getting into spiritual pursuits, *Est* was beginning,

Rajneesh had come here from India and had a huge following, Stephen Gaskin began *The Farm* community, lots of people like Rudi in NY were doing similar things...so I think there was a collective consciousness that we were going to change the world this way, that this was the next step to changing the world.

“I experimented with alternative ideas through Stephen Gaskin’s ‘Monday Night Class’ which was happening at that point in San Francisco (before *The Farm* was begun). I went to hear Werner Earhart (Est) speak there...this is what was happening at that time, there was all kinds of stuff like this going on, and you went and tried it out, it was like a smorgasbord of spiritual wannabes, all working out their own ideas about changing society. “ (7)

Claudia became particularly interested in the work that someone named Franklin Jones was doing in Los Angeles. Together with Willie, they attended a lecture on Jones’ ideas given by one of his students at the time. Eventually, a combination of his unique East/West cultural blend attracted Claudia to move to LA with Willie to explore this community with more intent.

“It just sounded like ‘wow, these people are doing something that I want to do’ without the drugs... I was very enthusiastic and I went to move to LA to find out more about it. ...there was at the time a small network of people in that group that would help you find work, a place to stay, stuff all that. They were very encouraging and very accommodating. That’s what I found at the beginning. Nothing too formal. There were only 30 people in this group at that time (now there are over 2000). It was a secular kind of involvement, we all had jobs and our own apartments or places to stay... Jones had written ‘The Knee of Listening’ and we would just get together and meditate, and I barely remember Jones being there with us at all.

“The point of this group was enlightenment. And Jones said he was enlightened...and it seemed like he could teach others to be that way too. He was a great speaker...he had an uncanny ability to speak extemporaneously for hours at a time, he was very well read in traditional Eastern religious texts, very intelligent and magnetic...I was impressed with the range of his knowledge and his confidence in explaining all this...looking back I actually never felt like he was going anywhere significant with it in the end though...

“There was no commune about this. This was actually one attractive part to me, since I had been visiting communes and saw how they didn’t really work, how they were simply recreating ‘normal’ society, with the same limitations, only different ones. This group didn’t even have a formal name when I became involved. Everyone had their separate place...it was ‘community’...not a commune...we were a community of like-minded people who want to help each other, do things for each other for the common good of all of us...” (8)

In 1972, the community that had begun to form around Franklin Jones was a distinctly different one from others on the scene at that time; it seemed to have all the best elements of social community without the formalities. Claudia had already severed relationships with her family a within a brief period of time, met and married Paul DeFederico, who had become a close friend to Franklin Jones. Claudia was 23 years old.

“By the time (Paul) had met Franklin Jones, he said he was on the verge of suicide and that what Jones said gave him a sense that his life was worth living. He became a part of the group at that point...we really loved each other.” (9)

Claudia still felt that her initial desire for enlightenment maintained her commitment to the spiritual group around Jones, but it was at this point that her emotional life became an important aspect of involvement. She saw that others around her had an enormous emotional commitment to Jones; though her emotional commitment was to Paul, she developed common bonds that were meaningful with other participants in the group, but never with Jones himself.

“I never equated the emotional high I might feel in meditation with being around Jones... In fact, I thought he was teaching us that these were not equal, and that we had to connect to a greater source, which was beyond...our normal emotional life of love, hate...discouragement to something that transcended these. I did equate the feelings of a...broad connection to others in meditation with...something spiritual. This was not exactly the same as the love I felt for Paul, or for my friends in the group, but it meant something to me...it kept me feeling like there was a reason to stay, after the ‘party’ period began.” (10)

The Alternative Spiritual movement used emotional bonds between participants in much the same way that political movements used them: to expand and solidify the continuance of the group.

“If emotions are intimately involved in the processes by which people come to join social movements, they are even more obvious in the ongoing activities of the movements. The richer a movement’s culturethe greater those pleasures. Most discussions of the solidarity-building functions of movement culture have concentrated on shared rhetoric and beliefs rather than on the emotions which accompany them. Each of the components for movement culture that Lofland (1996) sees as embodying participants’ beliefs - values, symbolic objects, stories, occasion, roles, and personae - also has an equally important emotional side, entailing joy, hope, enthusiasm, pride, and affective attachment to the group. These are crucial to sustaining movements. “ (11)

A Different Song/ The Same Melody

The ultimate purpose of the Alternative Spiritual movement was something that can be described as the Transcendent Experience (12). This might be loosely described as a kind of emotional experience but this is fundamentally inaccurate, especially with those that based their methods on Eastern ideas, as Jones’ group did. “Feeling good” about something was just not enough. In fact, the new paradigm of Eastern thought demanded a thorough examination of all emotions as well as a sense of “controlling” them, or at the very least not “identifying” with them in the ways that Westerners commonly do. One of the major paradigm shifts during this time was the idea that your ego, that emotional mechanism by which you enter the world, is an impediment to your own enlightenment. This is a highly simplified explanation, but what it meant cause enormous difficulties to Westerners who had begun to embrace this new idea.

The sense of elated “belonging” to something greater had grown away from the arena where “reality” is actually happening. You belonged to the “universe”, and finally no one was left out. If this could be described as the ultimate emotional experience in a group, it would be difficult to dissect it so that we could relate to it with a consistent emotional experience. This was different than what the generation before them acknowledged in their experiences of “oneness”:

“ ‘The group sang in one voice, each individual singing not for himself but for the group. Tears ran down many faces...As I sang...I knew better than ever before why I was going to Mississippi and what I am fighting for. It is for freedom _ the freedom to love. It is something that no one can have until everybody has it.’
In the vernacular of the movement, the volunteers had their first taste of ‘freedom high’...the volunteers were buoyed by that high.” (13)

Is this just the unreachable, ineffable human quest? Perhaps the “freedom high” of the ‘60s became the “god-high” of the ‘70s. But the “freedom to love”, in all its poetic possibilities still drove the bus. At the core of Claudia’s involvement with Franklin Jones was the unfulfilled desire to be free – to share a true (and not socially manufactured) aspect of herself with others, and for them to do the same. A noble pursuit perhaps, and misunderstood when compared to the “high” of the generation before. Examples of this “freedom high” had moved away from the “freedom to vote in an election” to something intangible in Claudia’s generation.

Foundations of Western thought are uncomfortable with the “intangible” and the undefined. These tangible ways of thinking were precisely what people like Claudia began to question. Looking for signs and clues on this road, the spiritual activists of the ‘70s went East in a hurry. The overwhelming majority of Eastern-thought influenced Alternative Spiritual movements during this time makes this obvious.

“Children born Carl, John, Joe, Donna and Doreen are now called Brahma Dass, Nagarjuna, Satya, Shanti, and Anandi. They grow their hair long or not at all, rise before dawn to meditate and parade through the streets of the inner city proclaiming their love for a foreign-born teacher and his God. Every middle class neighborhood has its future-lawyer-turned-disciple. There are not as many young Americans involved with Eastern spiritual trips as with heroin or downers, or with attending massive rock concerts but their number is growing. What Guru Maharaj-ji had failed to do in the Houston Astrodome some other teacher may yet accomplish – sieze the minds of a generation. (14)

How does this cultural mix-up communicate the intangible and how do we decipher the message? With fewer guideposts in this new world, this was difficult to figure out.

The End of Spiritual Innocence?

“And then there was the first ‘party’ in LA.. that was a really big turning point. I mean it was awful, appalling. (long pause) It was really awful. It was people drinking Jack Daniels all night and getting completely out of their minds and Jones acting like a lunatic...(long pause) I mean it was awful. That’s when Jones started with this sexual experimentation. (long pause) I mean, all this stuff came seemingly out of the blue. From the beginning for me, all through that first year, there wasn’t a hint, an iota of this. We were all living a quasi-ascetic lifestyle, fully functioning in the world and doing what people do, but also meditating together, being vegetarians. And then, there was this party and all hell broke loose. I hated it and I was appalled, that’s all I can say. (15)

Claudia is the owner of a business consulting firm in Boston, now in it’s 12th year. She easily makes decisions that affect many people, and generates the respect of her employees and colleagues. The Claudia who was “appalled” is clearly heard today. Her careful pacing while describing this particular point in her experience was palpable. The Claudia that remained in Jones’ group after being so disturbed is not easy for our present-day powerful Claudia to identify.

“You spend a lifetime of doing what people tell you to do, and then you rebel for a couple of years, but you forget how easy it is to succumb to someone else’s influence, especially at 23 years old...someone who is saying they know better than you and other people are agreeing...and your repulsion to whatever it is... is something YOU ‘should work on’...that’s the kind of stuff Jones would say...but I was also really young and had no place else to go. And Jones would say with a lot of authority that there were things we had to work on, like our inhibitions, and sexuality became be a big issue, how it ‘interfered’ with our spiritual lives. That’s where he would orchestrate a kind of orgy. And a couple of times people would have total meltdowns and would leave...and it was seen as a sign of weakness, you know, that’s how it was discussed later in the group, the fact that those people had to leave. Actually out of that entire first group, of around 30 people, only 2 people left during this party time, only 2 people claimed they ‘couldn’t take it’.

“...and you can’t come up with a simple reason why you don’t leave just like you can’t come up with a simple reason why you got there in the first place. You don’t leave because of self doubt...the feeling that says ‘this is nuts’, and then thoughts in your head that say ‘cmon now, you’ve got to work harder, you’ve got to overcome this, to understand this more...it’s YOUR shortcoming...that’s why you’re having a hard time.’ And there was no shortage of propaganda coming from the group to tell you that...the reason why you’re not ‘getting it’ is your fault. Your spiritual practice is not up to par, whatever that meant. And it didn’t have any meaning...there was no way to attain this goal in this group...Jones didn’t want any competition. It was a perfect setup. No matter how hard you tried, and how much money you gave, and how well you followed the rules, you still weren’t given the candy...you still were unenlightened. And after a while, you believe it. It’s your whole world and you believe it. And it doesn’t take too much time, after you’ve alienated from everyone you knew before you got in the group, and you have no money, and no where to go, it’s not easy to leave. How do you leave? What the hell do you do? (16)

The silences and pauses are self-imposed and I think relate to a larger societal issue. Shame is the emotion we might feel in any number of emotionally charged experiences – ashamed for doing something that someone else doesn't approve of, or something else doesn't approve of. That "someone" can even be in one's in our own mind, but the sense that we have done something "wrong" is evident. In *Passionate Politics*, a description of an interview with a Christian Right activist, the notion of shame in this context is illustrated:

"When Sally Humphries, who had just finished telling me about how she became 'born again,' became ashamed of what she had told me, worrying that it might signify that she is crazy, she implicated me as a participant in her 'private theater'. As a witness to the subject's shame I became a shaming agent myself." (17)

Does this shaming occur when a political activist discusses their role in helping to feed a village of starving children? Unless a particular activity that hurt someone else, or proved to be deceptive or misleading had occurred, I highly doubt it. The ones who helped emancipate the vote for blacks in the south perhaps were "ashamed" of their privilege and status in light of the people they were helping, but the activity itself they were engaged was not a reason to be ashamed.

It is difficult to imagine spirituality as a social cause, something that could be understood in a playing field of government and economics but it actually does provide the foundations of our experience of "reality", whether we think we are religious/spiritual or not. Perhaps the Catholic Church is no longer putting the Galileos of the world in prison because they have observed that the sun does NOT revolve around the earth, but our ideas about what we think God is, and how God might "work" create the social "technology" we find around us. Are our ideas about God so personal, or so unreachable, that we cannot admit to having them? Are they so invisible to us, and so unquestioned, that Claudia's experience is simply relegated to her ignorance? How could it be otherwise?

When Claudia finally left the Jones' community, which included leaving her marriage as well as any friends she had, she was alone. Out of the 9 years she remained involved, she spent 6 of them trying to "orchestrate her escape":

"..since I didn't have any money, I had to carefully orchestrate a way to be sent as a 'missionary' to the east coast; I totally had to manipulate and lie in order to be able to be sent away, to another place, so that I could orchestrate my escape. I did whatever I had to do to get out of there. It was exactly like I felt when I finally left my home and went away to college. the feeling was "I gotta get out of here...this is killing me". (18)

For some, these would seem to be insurmountable odds. Yet, there is no sense of pride when Claudia describes her independence and revelation. A sense of accomplishment is never con-

veyed. Society's judgment, the "shaming agent" overrides any new perspective on her experience. Even with success and with many years in-between, she seemed almost surprised to reveal what I saw as a pioneering characteristic of her behavior:

"...I realized that I did this because I had been demanding answers to aspects of life that many people simply disregarded. I was being really open...curious and the friends I had before I got into the group, well, they didn't know what questions to even ask in the first place! It's not that they weren't creative or even smart ...it was better and easier to say it was all beyond you...and this was an unreachable goal. I wasn't afraid to ask the really big questions and assume there could be a way to...work out the answer...(I) thought it was probably the next frontier for us as a society to...explore. I really thought this could be possible in our society and I wanted to try it out". (19)

Claudia, and so many others like her who didn't make the '70s look "glam" on TV, quietly began a revolution, and remain silent in their revolution to this day. At the core of their impulse was to attempt the Transcendent Experience within a social order, without political reasons and benefits to drive them on. At its root it was a questioning of the nature of reality, but this time not made by scientists and philosophers, as we had known in the past. Understanding or questioning our "divine" nature was no longer only within the jurisdiction of specific messengers, or those steeped in historic study.

It was the beginning of the democratization of religion and of spiritual thought that would eventually lead us to the chance to embrace another culture, and another cultural paradigm. Not having intermediaries such as priests, or of course, gurus, making our own way "with god" may seem treacherous. And perhaps it was a failed experiment in many ways. But Buckminster Fuller says "there are no failed experiments, just experiments with unexpected outcomes". The outcome of the "failed experiments" of people like Claudia may be surprisingly more important than we have ever considered.

In the decades following Claudia's experience, our sciences (especially our medical sciences) became more comfortable with the idea that the mind itself plays a crucial role in our physical lives, even in our health. (20) The most recent, cutting-edge scientific studies are exploring mind/matter connections with surprising documentation.

The experience that Claudia and others had at this time, while personal, became a broad pervasive one, an important undercurrent force that shifted our Western model of reality. The awareness and incorporation of many Eastern perspectives gave us what we considered a new way to view reality. Fritjov Capra, a physicist wrote "The Tao of Physics" in 1981, and compared the findings of our most groundbreaking sciences with the understanding of reality as it described in the "Tao Te Ching", an ancient Chinese text. He was at the forefront of

what is now considered important scientific work. Even though Claudia herself wasn't involved in such study, her experience, as well as thousands of others, permeated American lifestyles through the years that followed the '70s decade.

Being among the first to introduce a new perspective, one that challenges the established ones is hardly ever rewarded in society. The "failed experiments" and ultimate success of people like Claudia, everyday explorers of consciousness, were really the first messages back to the familiar shore. It's not surprising that they were unclear to everyone who was still sitting there. •

(1) p. 126, *Freedom Summer* by Doug McAdam, 1988 Oxford University Press

(2) p. 12, *The Spiritual Supermarket* by Robert Greenfield, 1975 E.F. Dutton

(3) Not her real name.

(4) From a taped interview with Claudia Fiorelli, April 29, 2006

(5) p. 12, *The Spiritual Supermarket* by Robert Greenfield, 1975 E.F. Dutton

(6) The present name of the group that Franklin Jones founded is called "Addidam" and the "Dawn Horse Communion" is now defunct.

(7) From a taped interview with Claudia Fiorelli, April 29, 2006

(8) Ibid

(9) Ibid

(10) Ibid

(11) p. 19, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*,

Edited by Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, Francesca Polletta, 2001 University of Chicago Press

(12) This is meant to be seen in a broad light. Being "relieved" of normal human concerns and thoughts for long enough to feel exhilarated, alive and connected to something outside oneself; larger than life. Through the years following the '70s Spiritual Movements, we have come to see that many activities may lead to "spiritual transcendence" – forms of this are experienced by great athletes, performers, even golfers I'm told!

(13) p. 72, *Freedom Summer* by Doug McAdam, 1988 Oxford University Press

(14) p. 270, *The Spiritual Supermarket* by Robert Greenfield, 1975 E.F. Dutton

(15) From a taped interview with Claudia Fiorelli, April 29, 2006

(16) Ibid

(17) p. 121, *Passionate Politics: Emotions and Social Movements*,

Edited by Jeff Goodwin, James Jasper, Francesca Polletta, 2001 University of Chicago Press

(18) From a taped interview with Claudia Fiorelli, April 29, 2006

(19) Ibid

(20) See "The Biology of Belief" by Dr. Bruce Lipton, 2005