

The 2012/Aliens/Consciousness Movement: a potential New-Age Tea Party?

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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I'm gaga for Gaia, which I don't expect many modern consumers to relate to. So it's harder for me to point a finger at anyone believing in scientifically unproven ideas. But I draw a line between spiritual experiences and claims such as "aliens are among us and are here to raise humanity's consciousness because it's 2012."

Such were my biases when I covered the New Living Expo in San Francisco, Calif., April 27-29 this year at the massive Concourse Exhibition Center.

It was a convivial big-tent experience of happy, positive beings, with a dash of sound, radical activism. A boost of interest no doubt materialized from this year's being the Mayan Calendar's stopping point, bringing on fear for some and for others greater faith in a blossoming of cosmic consciousness.

The San Francisco Weekly describes The New Living Expo, formerly known as the Whole Life Expo, as "a signature event in the Bay Area. It brings together pioneering speakers, lecturers, and exhibitors specializing in health, healing, relationships, higher consciousness, and sustainable living." Many of those attracted to such a convergence may, however, be seekers of feel-good writing and talking rather than rigorous inquiry as a basis for changing the real world.

The question for some attendees must have been whether the folks back home could really get behind much of the vision or message of the Expo. To consider one representative speaker, Laura Eisenhower, the greatgranddaughter of Dwight David Eisenhower, she was billed as a Cosmic Mythologist, Global Alchemist and Clairvoyant Healer. We all might do well to be somewhat open about such matters. But when Eisenhower kept saying in her talk that she was repeatedly invited to Mars, and she refers to the "lizard-being elite" of non-humans secretly running the world, with no-one in the audience batting an eye, how can her other, more activist-oriented statements and self-help advice become palatable for a larger audience?

Truth be told, people are for the most part so scared in today's crisis-ridden world, they need to find "an answer" to believe in and dwell on a happy outcome. Petrocollapse and climate disaster are for wrong-thinking negativists, according to many New Agers as well as more conventional types infused with patriotism, faith in technology and fundamentalist monotheistic religion. While climate change and peak oil are somewhat understood by many today, these facts are often gently and gaily swept aside by 2012 New Agers because, as one told me, peak oilers' concerns over resource limits are "a reflection of (my) negative generation" (I'm pushing 60), and "global warming is not such a big deal because the whole universe is warming anyway."

Disagreement over irrationality or happy-thoughts is a deal breaker, but not for most of the mainstream when most are content to get along as bill-paying spectator-sport fans and bar-hopping TGIF revelers. To bring up among 2012 New Agers such inconvenient news as melting ice caps is to commit the sin of "manifesting" what we should not want. So George Harrison's stinging singing on Think For Yourself comes to my mind, "About the good things that we can have if we close our eyes."

Today's New Agers mirror to some extent the common Tea Party/Republican denial of human-caused global warming and any limits on critical resources. But almost all progressives -- most liberals and almost all radical leftists -- have dipped into the magic pool of post-organized religion, unconventional beliefs. For example, paganism verges on being alive and well, but the celebrants don't go for the "Mars" and "Lizard-being" stuff or even the 2012 Mayan "prophecy" of their "end-of-the-world" calendar. (In reality, that calendar happens to stop at the end of a cycle. That's a cycle, meaning a beginning of another cycle starts in 2012, and is not the end of time.)

Some big-name New Agers, including Greg Braden ("we can each live to 900 years old") and Terry Cole-Whittaker ("The Three Steps of Divine Magic"), gave the thousands of attendees confirmation that there are others like them whose minds are (appallingly?) open. Yet, to be fair, there is much truth in both the body of evidence they cite as well as in more information being sought. After all, the Calvinistic and guilt-ridden mindset devised to keep people dumbed down has been widely questioned since the consciousness-raised 1960s. The New Age movement was an outgrowth of the '60s, particularly as the Me Generation's penchant for "self-improvement" overtook the ebbing peace movement and the faded, radical/hippie rebellion against "plastic society."

Accumulating esoteric knowledge, enjoying special water and vegan food, and benefiting from the healing touch from body workers, are eminently fine attributes of a conscious lifestyle. The vendors at the New Living Expo offered many uplifting products and services. Some warned of "dirty electricity" and sold gadgets to cancel it out, while others offered bee stings as medicine. While many of the booths were informational or advocacy-oriented, and many of the talks attracted all walks of life, this whole crowd is mostly into consuming -- more consciously, but not in order to pursue low-consumptive, simple living. A diet of therapeutic consultations, luxury garments and crystal jewelry, organic wines, New Age books and videos is mainly for the rich.

As distinct from the hundreds of millions of oblivious consumers who have no requirement to refrain from using fossil fuels, such as by generating plastic trash, the New Ager and the radically aware feel compelled to look for the truth and take some action. But this subset of society is for all intents and purposes a massively consuming crowd.

Many of them feel special for having enlightened tastes and interests. It's a good thing they do, in many ways, as they stumble upon the need to cut back on stress, avoid radiation, and question government propaganda. Yet, the imperative to continue to make money and enjoy their consuming is so strong that they block life-changing action such as going car-free.

Why do Twenty-Twelve New Agers sow disinformation -- "You can not only stop aging but also reverse it" -- when they could limit themselves to a consensus on proven facts? An answer came to me from another plane, channeled from a more cynical dimension:

People are becoming more desperate. They are ruled by shit. They will not long tolerate absurd injustices such as privatized or paved landscapes of inaccessibility where they cannot grow free food.

The unnatural way of living brought on by overcrowding and industrialization is disintegrating. But people want an easy way out. Some go for New Age fantasies of painless liberation involving high-tech consuming.

How much the New Agers are active in social-justice or environmental campaigns depends on the New Ager or the activist. There were several in attendance at the New Living Expo, attracted in part by John Perkins and Bill Ayers. Perkins wrote *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*, and Ayers is well-known for radical and militant anti-war strategies dating from the 1960s' Students for a Democratic Society. Now he's a talented lecturer quoting Martin Luther King, Jr. and pointing out that Detroit has depopulated and become a bicycle economy.

These presentations indicate that the average New Living attendee is often a wild mix: likely concerned about pollution or overpopulation, while maintaining that positive thinking and the wisdom of ancients or aliens can deliver us all from negative forces such as fresh water shortage -- because it's 2012. And, if you're not Apocalyptic, didn't the ancient

Mayans foresee a New Age now beginning?

Some of the ideas overlap with those held by hard-core ecological activists who stay away from things like New Living Expos. "The Rights of Nature" legislative movement was present at this last Expo, even if some proponents believe in multiple, benign planets reachable through our future space ships. This does not quite lend itself to taking utmost care of our one and only Mother Earth.

A potpourri of diverse, contradictory ideas and pseudo-science is to be expected from our experimental society. When it surfaces in educated circles, it is regarded usually as entertainment during socializing. A New Ager's education is usually self-education when matters of quantum physics are touched upon as proof for interesting assertions. This tendency works for those enjoying their charismatic roles promoting a version of New Age philosophy. Greg Braden, for example, provides cool information on the serenity and compassion of elderly Tibetan nuns, whom he has photographed during his awesome adventures to intriguing lands. His kind of dynamic presentation and mix of facts helps convince members of a paying audience that the normal lifespan of a human can and should be "900 years."

Questions for the Father of New Living Expo

The owner of the New Living Expo, Ken Kaufman, formerly produced the Whole Life Expo which was for years a "green" gathering for technology and sustainable living -- the two must go together, to most attendees. I wanted his perspective on this movement he facilitates, so I spoke with him briefly about his April Expo. In the end we could not do an interview, when he said he could not wrap his mind around my questions. He said he had faith that my report would be perfect. It is exactly that positive attitude that brings together the conscious, new-living citizenry, and I was grateful for the press accommodation. The questions for Ken:

Would you agree that your "big tent" includes or unites diverse and even contradictory beliefs and agendas that comprise a movement?

What is this movement? Is this movement just the normal effort by individuals to search for truth in our chaotic, fast-changing times?

Do some of the more "out there" ideas or claims, whether from speakers or exhibitors at gatherings such as the New Living Expo, undermine or negate much of the more "reasonable" and scientific thinking that mainstream people probably would agree with?

What do you see as the major influence on the larger population: (A) the rise in consciousness and awareness of truths that fine minds have shared for decades and centuries, as exemplified by many of the New Living Expo's speakers, or the (B) dire, threatening forces that also tend to unite concerned citizens who have lost most of their faith in government, corporations and established religions?

Does "green consuming" allow people to temporarily seek comfort more than truth, that allows them to stand aside while activists are outnumbered in their campaigns to save the planet and confront a police state?

Are you disturbed by the rampant reliance on technology in the past several decades, with its petroleum/plastic infrastructure, for pursuing never-ending consuming as society hits physical resource limits?

Do you believe there is a techno-fix for our problems today, and that we do not face an intractable overpopulation of humans already?

I might attend again next year, assuming 2013 indeed arrives. But I should come with more money to buy cool stuff (which is not so cool) and hear a few interesting speakers (more cool). The entertainment at the 2012 Expo was the open-tuning guitarist Scott Huccaby, with whom I once shared a stage. He has been full-on with his New Age music while my disbanded Depavers since then have dabbled in all manner of activism including depaving, at the expense of promoting our music and psyching ourselves up for 2012. Hopefully Depaver Jan or the Depavers will resurface, doing a Gaga for Gaia Tour to reclaim Earth for nature-children and new-age lovers.

Bigger than eco-rock could be the emergence of a strong 2012-oriented alien-believing movement, for a time perhaps. It is a subset of the intelligentsia that cannot be denied. But, for the movement to grow and win wide support, any participants of a more scientific bent would have to help their brethren back off on simplistic notions and magical thinking. If the big tent now enveloping the New Agers/2012 enthusiasts can gain cohesiveness and political purpose, the movement could become the next Tea Party-type phenomenon. The tea, however, might be psychedelic tea. Somehow, esoteric believers could come together and start to influence politicians such as in the Green Party. Or, a religious movement can be the end result, that places Gaia -- all life in its cosmic interconnectedness -- above modern consumer society.

Meanwhile most New Agers are into the "abundance" and "prosperity" mindset, helpful for getting ahead with a conscience. Lisa Nichols is a motivational speaker whose talk at the New Living Expo was titled "Destined for Greatness." She comes across, as almost all of the speakers, as accomplished, slick, and deserving of adulation. But when "you can have it all" (prosperity and a hip lifestyle) comes before healing Earth, then readers of Culture Change or Truthout or Alternet start to wonder who is gonna fight the excesses of the "1%" or oppose the government's covering up Fukushima's full impact and the lingering damage from BP's Gulf of Mexico disaster? Nichols wrote on a poster for her audience that being rich and comfortable are related and worthy of pursuit. This struck me as too self-centered for our challenging times, when community must again come first.

No doubt the New Age/2012 movement has kinks in it, but you couldn't find a nicer bunch of caring people who want to participate fully in the Universe, as befitting healthy goddesses and hip dudes. Few of them are Black or Latino, but Asian-descent people are well represented. They all deserve to have their very Californian free-for-all of ideas, beliefs and techniques.

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Further reading:

NewLivingExpo.com

See the trailer for the movie 2012, a documentary by Daniel Pinchbeck who spoke at the New Living Expo in April 2012: 2012 trailer. Richard Register of Ecocity Builders appears in it

Perkins, John, Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2004, San Francisco, California. See johnperkins.org (see book-signing photo below)

Converge - the movie, tracking the 2012 movement with an activist bent. Sail Transport Network's Jan Lundberg was interviewed in San Francisco for the film, at New Living Expo on April 28, 2012 (see photo of Justin Lipson, filmmaker, below).