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# Sacred selves: An ethnographic study of narratives and community practices at a spiritual center

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Sacred Selves: An Ethnographic Study of Narratives and Community Practices at a  
Spiritual Center

by

Sean E. Currie

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to Deborah and Soren for giving me their unwavering love, support, and patience throughout the creation of this thesis.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I am deeply grateful to Maggie Kusenbach for her guidance throughout the research process as well as the tremendous amount of time, insight, and attention to detail she invested toward making this thesis a success. I would also like to express my sincere thanks to Jim Cavendish and Danny Jorgensen for their invaluable support and advice during this project. I am thankful to Doni Loseke, Maralee Mayberry, Pat Greene, and Joan Jacobs for their sincere interest in my success at the university. My work on this thesis has been an exciting, challenging, and enlightening experience. It was made possible by the owners and members of the Spirit Grove, who graciously welcomed me into their community. This thesis presents my research from a social scientific perspective; while it does not support claims to religious truth, it certainly does not deny them.

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**Sacred Selves: An Ethnographic Study of Narratives and Community Practices at a  
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**ABSTRACT**

Many scholars have examined the religious phenomenon known as the New Age Movement, resulting in a large body of literature on the subject. Despite this abundance of prior research, only a small number of studies conducted in the United States investigate what it means to be a “New Ager” from the perspective of the members. In order to contribute to the academic understanding of New Age identities and communities, I conducted an ethnographic study of an alternative spiritual center in the Tampa Bay area, here called the Spirit Grove. My research includes over fifty hours of participant observations, ten in-depth interviews, and an analysis of documents collected at the center. My findings indicate that Spirit Grove members typically follow a career trajectory consisting of five stages. After they become members of the community, practitioners tend to interpret their journey as a spiritual discovery. Next, I identify and describe five community practices that are performed at the center, including discovering the self, healing the self, embracing diversity, creating order, and finding proof. In the conclusion, I discuss the larger implications of this study, including its limitations and possibilities for future research.



## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

We walk through the front doorway out onto the lawn. Martha, a minister at the center, instructs us to put our hands to our sides and to move them out and away from our body, palms facing down. In a semi-circle arrangement, all twenty-five of us slowly walk toward the first (and, reputedly, most powerful) psychic vortex area, which is in front of a live oak. When we reach the vortex area, many people begin to “feel around” by turning in circles or walking around the area, with their palms facing down and hands out, in an attempt to “pick up” on the vortex. Martha then has us form a large circle around the area where the vortex is supposed to be, which ends up being a diameter of about 30 feet. She asks if anyone would like to step inside the circle so they may receive the healing energy from both the vortex and the channeled energy from us. Four people step inside and continue to hold their hands out with their palms facing downwards. Martha tells us to extend our arms in front of us with our palms facing the people in the circle. She instructs us to close our eyes and “beam” positive healing energy to them from our hands. I notice Cassie across from me during this activity; she has her hands outstretched above her in a “v” like pattern, deviating from Martha’s instructions. Her eyes are also open and she seems to be concentrating on the people in the circle intently, as she does not blink during this. Everyone else appears to have their eyes closed, and I now close my eyes as well. After about five minutes of “beaming” our energy to the people in the circle, Martha tells us to chant “Aums” during our next three collective exhales. After each of our next three inhaleds, we collectively chant “Aum” in a long and resonant tone. The monotone chorus of our voices creates a haunting sound. After we finish the chants, Doris, the cantor, sings by herself with no musical accompaniment. When she finishes, we applaud her and Martha concludes the sermon, telling us to go when and as we please. (Fieldnotes 20)

I wrote the above fieldnotes after attending my tenth Sunday “celebration service” at the spiritual center where I conducted my research. This “vortex episode” is a key event because it captures many of the community practices that I discuss in this study, particularly how members engage in collective healing and find “proof” of the spiritual

realm. It is also important because it marked a significant shift in my fieldwork. As I discuss in Chapter 6, the day before this event, at a “psychic fair,” one of the owners of the Spirit Grove, Karen, introduced me to several individuals as a “member of their community.” The next day, by participating in the vortex episode, I felt like I became even more involved in my role as a member. I realized that I was gaining an insider’s understanding. Many spiritual practices that I previously regarded as extraordinary were now becoming familiar and “normal” to me.

Despite its location on the religious periphery, the New Age phenomenon is significant because of its unique influence upon mainstream Western culture. For instance, celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey frequently promote New Age authors and ideas which are consumed by millions of people. The New Age Movement is also significant in its global and political views. Its adherents see humans as being interconnected; they appropriate religious beliefs and practices from many different cultures, combining them into a detraditionalized whole, eliminating political, national, and ideological boundaries. Therefore, because the New Age Movement embodies particular characteristics of modernity (Heelas 1996:4), it is an important topic of sociological study.

Roof (1999) found – in a longitudinal study on the contemporary religious environment in the United States – that fourteen percent of Americans identify as “metaphysical believers and seekers.” McIlwaine (2001:16) interprets Roof’s (1999) reference to “metaphysical believers and seekers” to include New Age beliefs and practices. Speculating on this connection, McIlwaine (2001:16) writes:

A number of factors lead me to wonder if the New Age Movement is one of the places in social space that exiles from the mainline have clustered. Studying the New Age Movement, then, could give us clues about what is going on outside the mainline churches – something much understudied.

Thus, by studying how the New Age Movement grows and changes, scholars may, in turn, gain understanding into the changes occurring within the religious mainstream.

The New Age Movement has been studied by many social scientists and scholars of religion, resulting in a vast academic body of knowledge on the subject. The topics covered within these studies include, but are not limited to, research on the social characteristics of New Age adherents (Possamai 2000, 2005; Rose 1998; York 1995), exegetic and hermeneutical analyses of New Age beliefs and practices (Basil 1988; Boehinger 2004; Hanegraaf 1996; Lewis and Melton 1992), the history of the New Age Movement (Basil 1988; Hanegraaf 1996, 1999; Heelas 1996; Jenkins 2000; Kyle 1995; Lewis 2004; Melton 1986; Pike 2004; Suttcliffe 2003; York 1995), case studies of various New Age groups (Kuhling 1998; Lewis 2003, 2004; van Otterloo 1999), and examinations of the New Age Movement's impact upon mainstream culture (Albanese 2000; Bainbridge 2004; Campbell 2008; Lewis and Melton 1992; Robbins 1988). Despite the abundance of prior research on the New Age Movement – not including studies in other languages (see Kemp 2004) – only a relatively small number of existing studies provide examinations and reports of what it means to be a “New Ager” from the perspectives of the devotees (Bloch 1997, 1998; Coco and Woodward 2007; Corrywright 2003; Jorgensen 1982, 1992; McIlwaine 2001; Suttcliffe 2000, 2003; Possamai 2000, 2002, 2005; Prince and Riches 2000; Tucker 2002; Wood 1999). Heelas (1996:7) suggests that “very few New Age organizations or activities – their teachings and their

practices – have been studied by way of sustained participant observation.” Moreover, much of the English-language research that uses a qualitative methodology is based on fieldwork and interviews conducted outside the United States, such as in the United Kingdom and Australia. Thus, there appears to be a need for more qualitative studies of New Age practitioners in the United States. In an effort to address this lacuna, I conducted an exploratory ethnographic study at a New Age spiritual center in the Tampa Bay area in Florida which I have called the Spirit Grove.

In this thesis, I examine how members of the Spirit Grove interpret their spiritual careers; I also analyze their community practices. I begin by discussing the literature on these topics, including the career concept in sociology. In the methods section, I describe the fieldwork and interviews I conducted, discuss how I analyzed my data, and reflect upon issues and insights I experienced as a researcher. Following this, I introduce the setting of this community and examine its social structure, noting a discernable hierarchy that exists in this otherwise egalitarian group. Further, in two separate chapters, I analyze my research findings and discuss how they relate to the literature. My findings indicate that Spirit Grove members typically follow a career trajectory consisting of five stages. I also identify and describe five community practices that are performed at the center, including discovering the self, healing the self, embracing diversity, creating order, and finding proof. In the conclusion, I discuss the larger implications of this study, including its limitations and possibilities for future research.

## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

In this chapter, I discuss scholarly research that has been conducted on the New Age Movement and related topics. In the first part, I examine how researchers have defined the concept “New Age.” I here review the concept of identity and how it pertains to New Age adherents. I also analyze how researchers have contributed to an understanding of New Age communities by examining, for instance, how individuals operate within them and how they are structured. Second, I explain the “career” concept in sociology and how it applies to the community I studied. In this part, I also provide a brief overview of the literature on conversion to new religious movements. Lastly, I conclude the chapter by discussing the mandate and research goals of this study.

### *The New Age Movement*

What is “New Age?” A primary difficulty with studying the New Age phenomenon lies in defining it. Dawson (2006:191) states:

The [New Age] movement . . . is united by a common stress on the sacredness of the self and on various ‘spiritual’ processes of self-discovery that have either been invented or recovered from numerous traditional and usually pre-modern or marginalized cultures of the world.

In this sense, New Age spirituality is linked with following the inner path of spiritual self-development. Such a spiritual transformation supposedly has the potential of causing drastic (generally positive) change in individuals’ lives as well as in the world. In

another definition, Sutcliffe (2003:29) states that “the term ‘New Age’ lacks predictable content and fixed referents” by stressing that “it is always interpreted vernacularly.” Therefore, a concise, standard definition of the ‘New Age’ seems to be impossible without limiting its complexity.

Another scholar, Van Hove (1999:116), suggests that “as a consequence of its complexity, sociologists and social scientists in general seldom agree on precisely what constitutes the central features of the New Age and how it should be defined.” Hanegraaf (1996:522) is arguably the only New Age scholar who has attempted to provide an explicit and concise definition of New Age:

The New Age movement is the cultic milieu having become conscious of itself, in the later 1970s, as constituting a more or less unified movement. All manifestations of this movement are characterized by a popular western culture criticism expressed in terms of a secularized esotericism.

Thus, the inability of scholars to come to an agreement on what “New Age” is seems to confirm the eclectic and complex nature of the New Age Movement.

Even the history of the term “New Age” is shrouded in myth and misconception. Bochinger (2004:21) discusses where “New Age” originated and explains its original, intended meaning:

It was probably William Blake, the Romantic poet and copperplate engraver, who coined the term. He used it in 1804 in the sense of a “New Church” as depicted by the alleged ghost-watcher, Emmanuel Swedenborg. New Age is, therefore, used to express the expectation that there will be a new, alternative form of religion after Christianity.

“New Age” was popularized in the 1920s and 1930s by Alice Bailey – a Theosophist, British writer, United States immigrant, and spirit channeler (Jenkins 2000:87). Given the complex and varied events surrounding the history of the New Age Movement, it is

not surprising that New Agers have multiple perceptions of its origins.

Indeed, one of most distinguishing characteristics of New Age thought is its eclecticism. With eclecticism comes a diffuseness entailing that “there are few clear divisions and boundaries, few organizations, but rather a milieu in which people acquire, absorb, and learn a variety of beliefs and practices that they combine into their own pockets of culture” (Bruce 1996:200). “New Age” has thus become an umbrella term which covers a wide variety of beliefs, practices, and lifestyles. It includes esoteric and mystical beliefs that are borrowed from conventional religions such as Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, and Taoism. It also incorporates elements of religion from indigenous cultures – e.g., Native Americans in North America or Aboriginals in Australia (Possamai 2002). Further, New Age spirituality has appropriated the pre-Christian traditions of ancient Celtic, Germanic, and Nordic cultures in addition to postmodern encounter groups, self-help seminars, and secular and spiritual therapeutic practices. And while Neo-Pagan and Wiccan religions are sometimes associated with the New Age Movement, they represent only a small facet of the totality of New Age beliefs and practices. Thus, the New Age seems to be a movement which draws upon a wide variety of religious traditions, yet, in this process, it has ultimately been detraditionalized due to its pluralistic orientation.

Studying the New Age Movement comparatively with other new religions is problematic because it lacks a central, charismatic authority figure. The New Age Movement is modernist in orientation, meaning that it does not remove its adherents from the world into a controlled, commune-like setting where members have exclusive

commitments – which (Dawson 2006:11) describes as being indicative of a “traditional cult.” Rather, modernist religions like the New Age tend to be “non-communal and open to segmented and plural communities” (Dawson 2006:11). Pike (2004:ix) elaborates on the problems associated with studying New Age religions comparatively:

They are fluid networks of individuals, organizations, books, and Web sites. They have been difficult to study, however, because they do not have founding texts or leaders but rather are highly decentralized, antiauthoritarian, and personalized, even though some small communities within the broader religious movements may focus around charismatic leaders and create authoritarian structures.

Even using the term “New Age” has become problematic, prompting many researchers to use alternate terms when referring to the movement’s practitioners. For example, in their ethnographic study of the British New Age “Mecca,” Glastonbury (a small town in Somerset, England), anthropologists Prince and Riches (2000), found that some people in this community had reservations about being referred to as a “New Ager.” Prince and Riches (2000:52) state that “not everybody in the Alternative Community in Glastonbury would permit themselves to be described by the term – around one in ten seemed definitely to spurn such a self-definition.” This created a problem with linking the observed practices of practitioners with the New Age Movement. The authors found that even though some of the people rejected the label “New Ager” they still subscribed to what appeared to be New Age beliefs.

Thus, the New Age identity is both a label and a set of meanings. It is possible for people to reject the label “New Age” as an identity yet still hold beliefs that are associated with this identity. New Agers, due to the highly eclectic nature of their belief system, seem to be destined to find problems with any cultural or organizational



construction of their religious identity. Therefore, it appears that New Agers can only satisfactorily identify themselves with regard to their spirituality on an individual, personal level rather than a collective one.

In sum, despite the varying definitions scholars have constructed for New Age spirituality, there is one salient feature that stands out among them: eclecticism. New Agers appropriate many religious traditions and alternative spiritualities in their personalized blend of spirituality. Since there is no overseeing authority, one may fashion one's beliefs and practices according to personal preferences. This eclecticism extends beyond beliefs into the overall structure of the movement. There are no formal organizations or national representations.

How, then, is New Age spirituality a collective movement? Since New Age spirituality is so eclectic and its adherents are so individualistic, how do they work together to form and maintain a community? At first sight, it seems quite paradoxical for individuals who hold highly individualistic religious beliefs to embrace a community environment for their religious practices. One answer lies in a cultural structure that binds them into a cohesive whole: the cultic milieu. Campbell (1972:121, author's emphasis) explains that because the cultic milieu is "much broader, deeper, and historically based than the contemporary movement known as *the* underground, it includes all deviant belief systems and their associated practices." Also, the cultic milieu is not just a resulting phenomenon of the 1960s counterculture, but it is an enduring part of every documented society (Kaplan and Löw 2002:4). Thus, by its own nature, the cultic milieu is in contraposition to mainstream society; it supports a deviant culture.

What, then, holds the cultic milieu together? Kaplan and Lööw (2002:4) maintain that individuals or “seekers” in the cultic milieu are united by a mutual rejection of the traditional beliefs and values of their societies. Such seekers are understood as “people who move from group to group or practitioner to practitioner looking for wisdom, enlightenment, and self-knowledge and thereby consume esoteric or occult goods and services” (Jorgensen 1992:65). Overall, aside from its emphasis on seekership, the cultic milieu provides a very diverse and tolerant environment that allows members of non-conventional spiritual communities to express their own individuality while simultaneously being able to take part in an association of like-minded people who exchange spiritual ideas and goods.

### *Career and Conversion*

As I previously discussed, New Agers are seekers. Seekership implies mobility between spiritual communities. Seekers’ transitions and experiences within these communities may be understood as a kind of career trajectory. Hughes (1958:63) defines the sociological concept of career as “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meanings of his various attitudes, actions, and the things which happen to him.” In other words, the career is a conceptual framework that describes how individuals make sense of their life course.

According to Barley (1989:49) there is an objective and a subjective aspect to one’s career. At the objective level, the career refers to “those institutional forms of participation characteristic of some social world: a stream of more or less identifiable

positions, offices, statuses, and situations that served as landmarks for gauging a person's movement through the social milieu" (Barley 1989:49). Therefore, the objective career is defined by the official roles one occupies throughout one's life. In contrast, the subjective career is focused on "the individual's experience of the career's unfolding" (Barley 1989:49). Thus, the subjective career is constructed by the interpretations that individuals give to their careers, which allows them to explain where they currently are and how they got there. It enables individuals to "align themselves with the events of their biographies" (Barley 1989:49). This latter conception of the career is strongly reminiscent of Hughes' (1958) ideas, as discussed above.

In my analysis, I refer to Hughes' (1958) and Barley's (1989) concept of the subjective career in examining the narratives told by members of the Spirit Grove. These stories include *post hoc* interpretations of their life events leading up to their discovery of the center.

With regard to New Age adherents, a significant part of their spiritual career involves the point where they "converted" to their present beliefs or found a community of fellow practitioners. Lofland and Stark's (1965) conversion model maintains that there are seven conditions that must occur in order for a prospective recruit to convert into a non-active, "verbal convert" and then into an active, "total convert." However, Lofland (1978) states that the conversion model was not intended for use beyond his study of the Unification Church. Rather Lofland (1978) asserts that it was meant to be an example of how one might construct a model for a specific movement. Drawing upon Lofland and Stark's (1965) model, I created a five-step model that is uniquely suited to

the spiritual career narratives told by many Spirit Grove members (see Chapter 5). This model is not intended to be generalizable to other spiritual communities.

“Conversion,” however, may not be an accurate term to describe this process of transition. According to Travisano (1970:601), conversion implies “a radical re-organization of identity, meaning, life.” Another scholar, York (1995:16), discusses a more appropriate term that is also used by Travisano: alternation. “Alternation” entails a less extreme conversion process that compliments individuals’ preexisting world views (York 1995:16). Likewise, Possamai (2000:372) states that this concept accommodates New Age seekers’ tendency to shift to one spiritual community and then leave it after a time. Therefore, since the depth of commitment and permanency associated with a conversion cannot generally be found among New Age seekership, I prefer using the term “alternation” to describe the process by which they join spiritual communities. In sum, my review of the career and conversion literature yielded useful conceptualizations that aided my data analysis during this study.

### *Research Questions*

In my review of the literature, I had identified two questions as important. At the beginning of my research, my first question was: what does it mean to be a member of the Spirit Grove community? The second question I pursued was: how is this community structured? Through participant observation and in-depth interviewing, I sought an understanding of what it means to be a member of this community and how it is organized. I also endeavored to gain an understanding of the Spirit Grove members’

definitions of their spirituality from their own perspectives. In other words, what does “New Age” mean to them? Do they feel that this term applies to their beliefs? If not, with which term or terms do they prefer to use instead? Originally, I focused on these two questions during my interviews with participants and in observations.

However, during the course of my study, my research questions shifted somewhat. Approximately halfway through my observations at the center, I transitioned from focusing on participants’ beliefs to paying more attention to practices of the community. In other words, I began to concentrate more on what people did at the center than what they believed. This shift was due to my recognition of collective practices that were characteristic of the Spirit Grove community.

Another shift in focus occurred while I analyzed the data. During my analysis of the interview transcripts as well as many of the experiences I recorded in my fieldnotes, I began to realize patterns in the narratives I had collected. Therefore, my question on practitioners’ identities shifted to a more dynamic and practical focus on how people became members over time.

It is these two themes – the community’s spiritual narrative and practices – that I focus on in the analytical sections of my thesis. In the next section, I discuss the research methods I used in conducting my study.

### **CHAPTER 3: METHODS**

In this chapter, I discuss how I received access to my research site, the Spirit Grove community. I then describe the methods of data collection I used – participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis. Next, I explain how I analyzed the data. In the final segment of this chapter, I reflect upon several methodological insights I gained during the research process.

#### *Access*

I have a longstanding academic interest in religion, particularly new and marginal religious movements, and I thus wanted to study a group that practiced alternative spirituality for my thesis project. I knew about a state-wide Pagan gathering that took place once a year in northern Florida, yet I did not know of any local groups or communities in the Tampa Bay area. In the process of locating potential research sites, I discovered the Spirit Grove through an international website that serves as a source of news and networking for “witches and pagans of the world.” By using a reference tool on this website, I was able to access links to the various events that were taking place in Florida, and I came across an advertisement for a psychic fair at the Spirit Grove in the Tampa Bay area. I called the owners to find out more about the fair and their center. Intrigued by their answers, I decided to attend the psychic fair to explore the center and to determine whether it would be an appropriate research site.

In early February 2008, at the psychic fair, I met with the two owners, Karen and Cassie (a mother and daughter), in person and told them that I am a sociology graduate student interested in studying alternative religions and that I was interested in conducting an ethnographic study of their center. The owners consented and seemed quite enthusiastic about the idea. They provided me with a current schedule of events at the center and told me about some of the upcoming events for next month. I informed them that I would not be able to start conducting my research until the end of spring or beginning of summer. According to Karen and Cassie, the summer was an ideal time for me to conduct research at the Spirit Grove, since they had planned an abundance of workshops and events because people would have more free time to spend at the center.

In May 2008, I obtained formal consent from the owners to conduct my study at the Spirit Grove. I included their written agreement along with my application to the Institutional Review Board (IRB). In late May, my study received IRB approval and I began in-depth investigation a month later. All my research took place between June 2008 and November 2008 at the Spirit Grove. "Spirit Grove" is a pseudonym. All names of people mentioned in this thesis are also pseudonyms. This was done in order to preserve the anonymity of both the community and the individuals within it.

### *Methods and Data*

In this section I discuss several methods that I used to collect the data for this study. I chose to conduct participant observations because my research questions address issues that were best investigated through my immersion into the lived experiences of members

of the Spirit Grove. Further, I conducted semi-structured interviews, during which I used a prepared interview schedule. This permitted me to carry out the interviews in a consistent format, but also in a natural, conversational style. Using an interview schedule also allowed me to obtain a deeper understanding of particular issues that I would not be able to adequately address through participant observation and informal conversations with members. Lastly, I collected documents (various pamphlets, brochures, and flyers that were disseminated to members at the center) and analyzed them as well. Combined, these three methods greatly facilitated my investigation of the center.

*Participant Observation.* I conducted 28 field visits totaling over 50 hours of participant observations, resulting in 114 single-spaced pages of fieldnotes. My observations involved attending Sunday services and various other classes, all of which are listed in appendix A. I attended the “non-denominational” Sunday church service, held at 10:30 a.m., 17 times. At first, I attended more discussion-oriented classes, such as “New Thought Explorations” and “Practical Spirituality” in order to become familiar with the beliefs and ideas that circulate within the center. Later, I focused on attending classes that involved spiritual practices in a more hands-on format, such as “Yoga for Non-Pretzel People,” drumming circles, and candle therapy classes.

Instead of going into the field with a preconceived notion of how the community might be structured, I attempted to refrain from imposing any previous theoretical knowledge upon this site, instead building theory from the ground up (Charmaz 2001:335). Furthermore, I felt it was important to employ the concepts used by the study participants so that the members’ meanings would be preserved in the research, much like



how the term “esoteric community” was used by Jorgensen (1992) to describe – in members’ own terms – a segment of the cultic milieu he was studying.

During my observations, I decided not to take “jottings” (Emerson et al 1995: 17-38) or scratch notes due to the nature of the setting. I believe that doing so would not have been conducive towards my acceptance into the community. Making periodic notes while immersed in a small, intimate, participatory environment might have distracted me and fellow participants. Moreover, it may have compromised my ability to gain their trust. Therefore, I always waited until I was removed from the setting before I recorded my observations. This usually occurred directly after attending an event or class at the center, as I would type up my fieldnotes on a computer as soon as I got home.

Interestingly, the more observations I conducted, especially at the church services, the shorter my fieldnotes became. At first, I attempted to recall every detail of what happened during each event, yet later I began to narrow down my fieldnotes to particularly noteworthy incidents. I found that, early on, I centered my fieldnotes almost too much on the beliefs and philosophies that were discussed during the sermons and in classes. Therefore, I later focused more strongly on observable practices in order to balance out my earlier observations.

Since “the world of everyday life as viewed from the standpoint of insiders is the fundamental reality to be described by participant observation” (Jorgensen 1989:14), directly involving myself and taking an active part in the community was a crucial part of my ability to provide an emic description of the Spirit Grove. In my notes, I concentrated on how members make sense of their interactions and surroundings, yet

moreover I also focused on my own thoughts and feelings about my involvement in the setting. I thus located myself within the context of my fieldwork, taking note of my own emotions and thoughts during my time there, since “these emotional dynamics and cognitive concerns are intertwined in the lived experience of doing fieldwork” (Ibarra and Kusenbach 2001:415). Thus, I used my own thoughts and experiences as valid data in my fieldnotes.

Furthermore, since “ethnographic fieldwork cannot be accomplished without attention to the roles of the researcher” (Coffey 1999:23), I documented how I negotiated and constructed ethnographic selfhood in the process of my fieldwork. By this, I mean I was attentive to how I presented myself and how I was perceived at the center. I also guarded against “becoming over-familiar” (Coffey 1999:24). In other words, by being mindful of myself in the field, I was able to observe, participate, and gain an understanding of what it is like to be a member of this community while maintaining my role as a researcher at the same time.

*Interviewing.* I conducted ten in-depth recorded interviews with members, totaling twenty hours and 190 single-spaced pages of transcripts. These interviews were conducted with owners, ministers, teachers, and practitioners of the Spirit Grove (see appendix B for an overview of interviewee characteristics). I used a prepared interview guideline (see appendix C), which allowed me to ask a fixed set of questions, yet also further explore topics of interest according to the direction the interview was taking according to the personality of the interviewee.

I sampled the interviewees in a manner that aimed at obtaining a diverse representation of the center. I thus interviewed six individuals who were regular members. The other four had more official roles, such as owning the center, being part of the ministry, or teaching a least one class there. One of the six practitioners I interviewed, Lena, was in the process of becoming a minister at the center. I was thus able to obtain the perspective of an individual who was moving through the hierarchy of roles within the community.

Women comprise most of the members and official at the Spirit Grove. Many times, I was the only man present during a class or a Sunday service. Therefore, due to the sparse presence of men at the center, I interviewed only one man and nine women. As shown in Appendix B, the age of participants ranged from 23 to 56 years. All but one interviewee (Jaden, an African American woman) are Caucasian. The education level among participants ranged from high school to a completed master's degree. Four of the interviewees were single; the other six were either married or in a relationship. All these characteristics of interviewees are roughly representative of Spirit Grove members at large.

*Document Analysis.* Lastly, I collected documents, including pamphlets distributed for the Sunday services, workbooks for the various meetings and seminars, postings on the center's website, emails regarding upcoming events, and similar materials to further augment my understanding of the setting and to add background information. Interestingly, I found that the personality of each minister clearly shows in the Sunday sermon programs that they create and distribute to attendees. While most of the classes I

attended did not involve the dissemination of documents, a notable exception was the candle therapy class where I was given a spiral-bound workbook with information relevant to what we were being taught in the class. In addition, on two separate occasions, I asked ministers for their sermon notes after they had led a Sunday celebration service. Referring back to these documents allowed me to gain a detailed understanding of beliefs and practices from the ministers' perspective.

### *Analysis*

By triangulating these methods – participant observation, interviewing, and document analysis – I investigated the complexities of meaning that emerged from my site. Using triangulation also helped establish external validity to my interpretations. Thus, by comparing the data from my fieldnotes, interviews, and documents, I corroborated the reliability of my findings. I now discuss the techniques I used in analyzing my data sets and in developing the final draft of this study.

In the analysis of my fieldnotes and interviews, I employed “coding” (Emerson et al 1995:143) to categorize specific items, and “memoing” to elaborate on my insights during this process. I used ATLAS.ti – a computer-aided qualitative data analysis program – when coding and memoing. This allowed me to be very thorough in my analysis. For example, the program allows users to fit many codes within a small margin, as opposed to the limits that come with writing down codes by hand. I created conceptual categories during the initial “open coding” process and then later grouped them into focused codes. Composing memos helped me to explore the data even further,

as “memo-writing spurs you to start digging into implicit, unstated, and condensed meanings” (Charmaz 1995:40). From these memos, I began to generate theoretical ideas that aided my writing of early drafts.

Using document analysis, I searched for themes that were prevalent throughout the pamphlets, booklets, and flyers. I particularly looked for themes relating to spiritual practices and identity narratives. I then compared the themes I gained from analyzing documents with the themes found in my fieldnotes and interviews.

I began generating theoretical ideas during the final phase of analyzing and interpreting my data. My theoretical investigations primarily involved “sensitizing concepts” and employing “grounded theory.” According to Jorgensen (1989:112-113), the process of sensitizing concepts involves investigating whether or not the concepts generated from the research effectively apply to the empirical world – thus, the data I collected. For example, I made sure the conclusions I generated were consistent with the fieldnotes, interviews, and documents I analyzed. By using grounded theory (Charmaz 2001:335), I allowed my analysis to be driven by the data itself. My empirical and theoretical observations, then, were “grounded” in the sense that they emerged inductively and not from existing theoretical constructs.

The analysis and interpretation of ethnographic data is a highly inductive and laborious process that involves several steps. I found that these steps are not linear, as I often returned to the data or thematic codes in order to revise or refine my emerging ideas. Thus, my overall analysis continued through several cycles.

### *Methodological Insights*

In this section, I discuss two methodological insights I gained as a result of my research at the Spirit Grove. The first is the importance of the role of the researcher in the field setting. The second is negotiating honesty and deception.

*Researcher Role.* Immersion is one of the most significant goals that researchers strive for when entering a field site. Being mindful of one's role as a researcher is important when establishing trust and gaining acceptance by those in the host community. Being open about my intentions from the very start of my research helped prevent members' suspicions of me later on in the research process. This aided my immersion into the community, as members gave me a certain identity and had me "figured out." For example, the individuals at my site occasionally commented to me how funny it is that I told them I came to the center to do research, because, in actuality, the universe brought me there for a reason, just like everyone else who comes there, and that I am no different from other members. They perceive my stated intentions to do research as just a legitimization for why I *really* was there: to become part of their community. From this, I have learned that insiders interpret the researcher's presence within the site not in terms of the researcher's agenda, but from their own worldview.

My gender is also an important aspect of my role as a researcher because it has an independent meaning at the center that is outside of my control. Most members of the community are women in their 40s and 50s, so I was privy to conversations about the patriarchal and dogmatic structure of mainstream churches. Nearly everyone I have spoken with mentioned this at one point or another. However, I wonder how my gender

affected my ability to gain the position of an insider at the Spirit Grove. How many conversations was I not privy to because I was a man? Did being a man partially alienate me from the field? Conversely, my status as a father (to my newborn son) may have endeared me to them as a “family man.” Also, my age may have placed me into a “son” role with some members, since I am young enough to be their son. Nonetheless, my presence at the center as a man seemed to be regarded positively, as I recall a minister once remarked that the increasing attendance of men at the center is good, as it confirms that the “New Age of human consciousness is upon us.”

When developing rapport with participants, researchers should not only strive to understand how they are perceived within the host setting; they should acknowledge their own feelings as well. Being able to comprehend one’s presence within the site from the perspective of insiders requires that one suspend what one “thinks” about the site. Consequently, one must often negotiate many different feelings during one’s research. For instance, during the vortex episode, as illustrated at the beginning of Chapter 1, I became aware of the liminal state I had entered into – that is, simultaneously being an outsider and insider. While walking toward the vortex with everyone else, I started to feel a genuine sense of belonging in the community. At the same time, I soliloquized as to why I was participating, as I felt somewhat uncomfortable performing my “search” for the vortex because I did not believe it existed. However, I found that the more I participated in similar events as those, the less uncomfortable I became. Their practices became familiar to me.

The researcher, at the onset of studying a new setting, is perhaps better off playing the role of a novice if he or she is to be successful in understanding what is going on there. However, the more one is involved in one's research site, the more familiar one will likely be with the setting. While this allows the researcher to gain a deeper insight into the setting as an insider, it also reduces the researcher's ability to see the setting as an outsider. Thus, I found my fieldnotes from the first few weeks of observation to be invaluable, as they allowed me to reflect upon the data as an outsider. After nineteen weeks of fieldwork at the Spirit Grove, I was steeped in the perspective of the insider and could no longer see the community from the outside. I had become familiar, although not over-familiar.

*Honesty and Deception.* I also found that I had to negotiate telling the truth or lying to members about my feelings. During my observations at my site, a few individuals (usually the owners) would occasionally ask me about what I had found so far. Not wanting to commit to anything I might say then, I would tell them things that they already knew about themselves, such as their focus on individuality and self-spirituality, their eclectic appropriation of various religious traditions, and their philosophy of compatibilism (a seemingly paradoxical synthesis of free will and determinism).

I sometimes wonder what my fieldwork experiences would have been like if I had been completely honest with them about my day-to-day findings while immersed in the setting. Since the data collection process in participant observation is one that involves a continuous inner dialogue with oneself – in which today's observations may contradict



my findings from yesterday's – sharing that information with those in the community while one is still conducting the research would seem to only prove detrimental to one's research. And what purpose would it serve to tell them anyway? As in everyday life, we do not share all of our soliloquies and inner monologues with those around us, so the same should hold for the research setting as well. Thus, a certain modicum of non-disclosure seems to be a necessary component in the participation of everyday life as well as in research.

In this chapter, I presented the methodological component of my study. I discussed the manner in which I gained access to the Spirit Grove and the methods of data collection I used at the site. I also discussed how I analyzed my data and some of the methodological insights I discovered throughout the course of my research. I found that being reflexive about relationships in one's research site is important in ensuring the successful initiation and continuity of one's fieldwork. In the next chapter, I describe the main features of the Spirit Grove community, including how it is structured.

## **CHAPTER 4: SETTING**

In this chapter, I discuss the physical setting, activities, and some of the characteristics of the Spirit Grove community. The Spirit Grove is unique in the Tampa Bay area, since there does not seem to be a spiritual community like it in the area aside from various Wiccan and Pagan groups.

### *Place*

The center is situated in an upscale, middle-class area of single family homes, often built around lakes, and upon land that used to be orange groves. The center is set on a large, wooded plot of land away from the main road. It is accessible from the main road by a driveway, where two small signs driven into the ground near the road indicate its presence. Grass-grid cement pavers comprise the long driveway, which forks around a large live oak before leading to the parking lot of the center. The parking spaces, which accommodate approximately ten to fifteen vehicles, are designated by wooden railroad ties placed at the western perimeter of the front yard. A bench, seating three people, faces a large live oak tree at the western portion of the yard next to the parking lot. A three-foot bronze statue of Kwan-Yen, the Chinese goddess of mercy, stands in front of the tree, facing the bench. A screened-in, medium-sized in-ground pool lies at the east side of the house. Numerous plants grow around the wooden deck that is attached to the back of the house – the main entrance to the center. The house is a large, two-story home

with two rooms and a bathroom upstairs and five rooms downstairs, as well as a kitchen and second bathroom. All of the floors in the house are hardwood.

The entrance to the center is facilitated by a handicapped accessible ramp leading up to two wooden double doors with push-bars instead of doorknobs. Entering through the doors leads directly to the first room, which is the gift shop. A large wooden desk sits against the opposite wall, facing the front doors. Atop the desk are the cash register, a computer LCD screen, and an assortment of items, such as stones and crystals, jewelry, medallions, as well as a stand holding schedules of the events held at the center.

To the right of this main gift shop room lies another room containing items for sale, such as incense, tarot cards, books, essential oils and fragrances, statuary – mainly reflecting Buddhist and Hindu religious symbolisms – and plaques, music CDs of various New Age artists, and New Age-themed greeting cards, which are displayed on tables, shelves, and stands. (The room behind the entrance room contains a large table with a wide assortment of stands and platforms with several stones, crystals, and jewelry on them.)

On the south wall are several racks with display clothing, most of which are women's clothing, such as dresses and blouses, all of which look loose and flowing. Bookshelves line the north and west walls, which are filled with books on spirituality, such as *The Celestine Prophecies* and *The Essence of Now*. A large, publically accessible bathroom is visible to the west of this room.

To the left of the entrance room is the kitchen area. To the north is a hallway leading to the front door and a wooden staircase leading upstairs. To the east is another

room, which is used for the Sunday celebration services. To the north of the Sunday service room is a smaller room with a brick fireplace. This was the room originally used for the Sunday services before it was moved to the larger room to the south, since the increase in attendance required more space.

The wooden staircase leads to a hallway, to the right of which is the “yellow room,” which is used for classes. This room is painted yellow, per its name, and has a futon and an armchair with a coffee table. Several folding chairs are put away in the closet; they are used for the various classes held there.

The second, smaller bathroom is accessible from the upstairs hallway. To the west of the bathroom is a bedroom, which is not used for classes. This is the only room in the house that does not fulfill a function for the Spirit Grove as a spiritual center. Otherwise, both the upstairs and downstairs levels, as well as outside areas, are used for various events.

Next, I describe the history of the Spirit Grove. In the following selection from her interview, Cassie describes how the Spirit Grove came to be:

My Mom and I went on a trip to Lilydale, New York, which is a community of psychics. And one of her friends suggested that maybe we start a...so it was a smoothie shop and then it became a smoothie shop with crystals in it, and then it became a crystal shop, and then it was a metaphysical center, and so, um, probably, I'd say in 2002 . . . we decided to get a house. The realtor told us it was zoned properly for business. It was not. And we had to do about two years of construction work, you know, moving through the bureaucracy of the county to be able to open this place. So, finally, we opened this place in April 2005. And I can't believe we bought this house in November of 2002. So this has been like six years that I've been doing this, trying to move this dream along.

Cassie explains that starting the center was an arduous endeavor which took several years

to accomplish. Even though Cassie and Karen bought the house in 2002 and started the center in 2005, they only established their ministry in January of 2008 with a handful of members. During the gap between purchasing the house and starting the center, the owners experienced several setbacks with meeting city and county codes which required many investments. Nonetheless, the Spirit Grove community has slowly grown ever since it officially opened. I witnessed the center grow during my time there from June 2008 to November 2008. For instance, the weekly Sunday services grew from approximately ten to fifteen members in June 2008 to twenty to twenty-five members in November 2008. Although this may still seem like a small group, the service had to be moved to a larger room at the center in order to accommodate the larger number of attendees. The classes held at the center currently range from approximately twenty people for a drum circle to only two people, including the teacher, for a spirituality discussion group. At the time of this writing, the Spirit Grove is continuing to grow. While the center was once closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, it is now open seven days a week, allowing the owners to host more classes, services, and events.

### *Activities*

A wide array of activities at the center include weekly, biweekly, monthly, and occasional or one-time events (see appendix A for a complete listing). They are led by various teachers, which include the owners, psychics, and other “experts.” At least two classes are held at the center every day, but on some days, four or five classes are offered, with Yoga being the most frequent one. Some classes meet upstairs and some meet

downstairs. Often, there are different classes being held at the same times upstairs and downstairs.

Since the center has a gift shop, it draws a significant amount of people who consume spiritual goods, but do not attend any services or classes. This aspect of the center strongly resembles an “audience cult” format, whereas the therapist-client orientation of many of the classes offered suggests a “client cult” format as discussed by Stark and Bainbridge (1985).

The center makes no profit from the Sunday services. All profits come from retail sales in the gift shop and from a share of the teachers’ profits when they hold classes or offer services. Fees are charged for participation in all classes, yet not for the Sunday service. However, sometimes teachers take “love donations” which implies that the fees are not mandatory but generally encouraged.

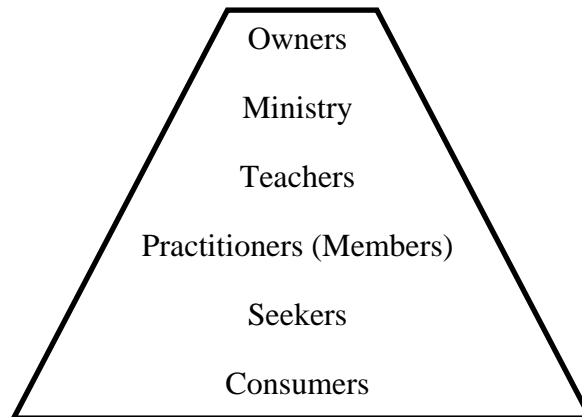
Many of the classes that are held at the center focus on healing oneself of the negativity experienced in daily life. Other classes are educational in that they teach participants various spiritual tools and techniques, such as astrology and candle therapy. Some classes are discussion oriented, such as “Practical Spirituality” and “New Thought Explorations.” More physically involved classes are also offered, such as a healing drum circle, yoga, Tai Chi, and belly dancing. Also held at the center periodically are psychic fairs, guest appearances from authors in the New Age community, Wicca classes, and full moon circles.

### *Profile and Social Structure*

According to the owners, the Spirit Grove has approximately one hundred regularly attending members, with approximately ninety percent of them being women. Rose's (1996) quantitative study on the social characteristics of the New Age Movement reveals that women outnumber men from 70 percent to 30 percent. Thus, compared to the New Age Movement overall, the membership of the Spirit Grove is more heavily female. The age of members ranges from early 20s to late 60s and early 70s, with the most common age in the 40s and 50s. Most of the members at the center are White, middle-class, and have at least a high school education. Many members have associates and bachelor's degrees, and a few have master's degrees. My interviewees (see Appendix B) are thus roughly representative of the Spirit Grove community members.

There is a discernable hierarchical organization of the roles of those in the community. In Figure 4.1, I outline this structure. The lowest strata, consumers,

**Figure 4.1: Hierarchical Structure of Roles within the Spirit Grove Community**



constitutes the largest number of all people who come to the center. Consumers are typically gift shop customers only; they enter to purchase various goods, such as incense, candles, crystals, etc. Cassie, the co-owner, explained in her interview:

We have a just kind of a shopping group, you know, not really like wanting to get too much involved, but just kind of wanting to see the things and maybe they like crystals and they want to get crystals, but they're not necessarily...they don't want to become entrenched in the lifestyle.

The more a consumer frequents the gift shop, the more likely that person is to sample a class. Therefore, consumers are always potential seekers and practitioners. Next, seekers are individuals who actively explore religious solutions to their problems (Dawson 2006:80). Seekers attend particular classes when they are offered, yet have no real commitment to the center and do not participate in other events. In contrast, regular attendees of church services, classes, or other events could be called practitioners.

Next, teachers are the recognized experts in the community. They lead various courses and are responsible for providing the diverse array of offerings that characterizes the Spirit Grove. They may or may not have any other involvement in the community in terms of attending church services or other classes. Further, the ministry is composed of teachers who have received their ministerial license. These individuals underwent some form of formalized spiritual training pertinent to the beliefs and practices found at the Spirit Grove. There are no national or regional seminaries under which they operate.

Currently, there are five ministers that make up the ministry of the church. Each minister conducts the Sunday service on a rotational basis. Together, the ministry covers an assortment of different religious and spiritual beliefs and practices. Lastly, the owners



are responsible for managing the center, including making decisions on what activities to offer. The owners hold a unique position at the center, as they have the most authority and responsibility, yet they personally offer or lead only a small amount of services.

No official membership is available for people who wish to join this community; there are no card-carrying members. Jane, a minister, referred to the center as a “memberless church,” which seems an appropriate description since there are no official requirements or expectations for people to attend church or classes. One may attend whatever events one wants, provided one is able to pay for them. Everyone who shows up and participates will be a member after a point in time. However, the Spirit Grove offers a training program to interested individuals who desire to embark on a trajectory toward becoming a minister. During my research at the center, there was one individual, Lena, who was in training for the ministry.

In this chapter, I described the physical setting of the Spirit Grove, noting its inner and outer features and I briefly described how the owners started the center. The activities include classes, services, and events held weekly, biweekly, monthly, and occasionally (see Appendix A), most of which require a fee in order for one to attend. There is a loose hierarchy at the center, which I described in more detail. In the next two chapters, I describe the major findings of my research at the Spirit Grove.

## **CHAPTER 5: THE SPIRITUAL NARRATIVE**

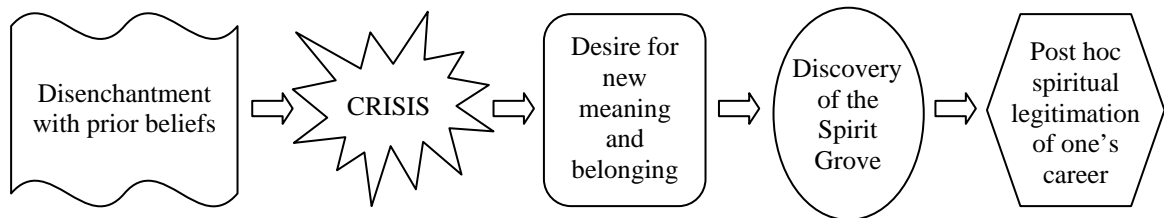
In this chapter, I introduce the sociological concept of career and apply it to the narratives told by Spirit Grove members. I describe the spiritual career as a dynamic process consisting of five stages: (1) disenchantment with prior beliefs, (2) crisis, (3) desiring new meaning and belonging, (4) discovery of the Spirit Grove, and (5) post hoc spiritual legitimization of this journey. I also discuss the concept of conversion and its relevance to the spiritual career.

The concept of career plays an important role in my analysis of the Spirit Grove, since “in order to understand people’s thoughts, feelings, and actions we need to inquire into how they arrive at definitions of the situations in their lives” (Karp 1996:75). Hughes’ (1958:63) definition of career is very useful; he defines it as “the moving perspective in which the person sees his life as a whole and interprets the meanings of his various attitudes, actions, and the things which happen to him.” Based on Hughes (1958), I define the spiritual career as a kind of life trajectory. It is an interpretation of the changes, developments, and transitions that occur in one’s spiritual life. Accordingly, I look at how participants become members of the Spirit Grove community by examining how they construct and interpret their careers in a spiritual perspective.

It is important to emphasize that people do not usually find the Spirit Grove at the start of their spiritual journey. Likewise, finding the Spirit Grove is not necessarily an endpoint; it may not be the conclusion to a member’s spiritual career – future changes in

one's beliefs and community memberships are possible. Most individuals come to the center after having tried other paths first. Often, they failed to find a spiritual community where they belong. Figure 5.1 illustrates the spiritual career that is typical of Spirit Grove practitioners.

**Figure 5.1: Spiritual Career of Typical Spirit Grove Practitioners**



The first necessary stage is for members to experience difficulties, struggles, or feelings of disillusionment with their prior religious beliefs or communities to which they belonged. This disenchantment could be a recent occurrence or a longstanding issue. I will give several examples to better illustrate this stage.

Rebecca, for instance, became disillusioned by church tithes twice. The first time she became disillusioned was when her Jewish temple made it a requirement that members tithe a certain percentage of their yearly salary. She then left the temple and, some time later, started attending a Unitarian church. In addition to her problems with the Unitarian church being “too Christian,” she again had to deal with financial matters pertaining to her religious community. In her interview she explained that the church had made plans to build a new building and began asking for more money from their congregants:

They built a building and then they wanted more money. I understand that they need the money, but then I decided that I wasn't going to do this again. You had to sign a piece of paper and say that you were going to give and then you would get a bill every month. And I said, "Naah, that's just not right."

Thus, for Rebecca, both the temple's and church's focus on capitalism and materialism tainted her spiritual commitment. This caused Rebecca to reconsider membership in those communities and eventually leave.

Barbara, recalls the difficulties she experienced after she realized her Presbyterian church could no longer provide her the fulfillment she needed:

I've tried avoiding religion and spirituality probably because I thought it was just causing me too much confusion and pain, but in the end, I really had to be among it. I had to be enmeshed in it because the absence of it just doesn't fit me. There came a time when I was going to the Presbyterian church here in town that, even pulling...you know, having my boyfriend drop me off...we were pulling up in the parking lot and I was so confused about religion...I wouldn't say lost, but that's not a good word...I was floundering so much. I would start crying in the parking lot about going into there. And he's like, "Why are we taking you to this place that makes you so unhappy?" And that went probably for, off and on, for the last four of five months of the nine that I went there. Because I felt torn in so many directions; things didn't make sense, and putting religion onto it just kind of...putting that template over the things that already didn't make sense, trying to explain them with religion made them feel more painful. I was pushing away all religion and everything, and it took me that to realize that I needed it in my life. I simply had to find a more open-minded path.

Barbara needed religion and spirituality in her life, but was not able to find fulfillment through conventional religious communities since they lacked openness and receptivity to new ideas. She realized that she needed to search for a community that would better suit her beliefs.

Next, after experiencing some disenchantment with their beliefs, practitioners typically experienced a life crisis that was not spiritual in nature. Some examples of

these crises include the death of a family member, financial difficulty (i.e., bankruptcy), a severe medical condition (i.e., cancer), divorce or ending a relationship, substance abuse (i.e., alcoholism), loss of a job, the onset of depression, and relocation. This crisis is a central component of Spirit Grove members' past lives. Several members I spoke with before and after classes and Sunday services told stories about how their prior beliefs did not work for them and how they experienced a crisis some time after this realization.

For example, in an interview, Sharon, a regular member, makes reference to her struggle with her prior beliefs and the crisis which followed:

I got forced to go to church as a child. I didn't feel like I was getting anything out of it other than believing in God and praying. So later on in my life, I tried the Baptist Church, which wasn't good. I felt they were very judgmental and very cliquish. Then I arrived at a crossroads in my personal life. Things just weren't working for me.

Sharon experienced long-term difficulties with her prior religious beliefs and communities. She then arrived at a "crossroads" or crisis point in her life. At that point, she realized that things were not working for her and that she needed a change.

Brenda, a new member, experienced a crisis after relocating to Tampa; she felt especially isolated. She then sought out a community in which she could meet with others and practice her spirituality. Another seeker, Richard, told me in a conversation that he left his fundamentalist church because their beliefs no longer made sense to him and that he had become interested in non-dogmatic spirituality. Shortly before coming to the Spirit Grove, he had a divorce and his bank foreclosed on his home. And Lena informed me that she had been largely confined to her house due to her cancer treatment. The experience of these crises is often followed by the third stage in the spiritual career.

Third, while experiencing a crisis, members then begin to desire new meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives; at some point, they begin searching elsewhere. This marks the next phase in practitioners' spiritual careers. For example, after she left the Unitarian church, Rebecca went for a period without being a part of any religious community, which she describes in the following as being a very difficult time in her life:

I went through three years of just absolute hell...nowhere to go, really...no support to really turn to in terms of really getting out of your own life and knowing there is something more, or something better within yourself, or outside of yourself, whatever it was.

Rebecca's story shows that, even though she desired new meaning and belonging, she went a period in her life without it. She left her church and experienced a three-year period where she was not part of any religious community. Even though she wanted to have spiritual meaning and a sense of belonging in her life, she could not find a community that offered those things.

For many members, the desire for new meaning and belonging caused them to seek out a new community in which to practice their beliefs. Barbara, for example, decided that she needed to "find a more open-minded path" in order to fulfill her needs because she "had to be enmeshed in religion because the absence of it just doesn't fit me." After relocating, Brenda needed to find a community that would accept her and where she would practice her spirituality. Following Richard's divorce and house's foreclosure, he sought out a place where he could learn more about his new spiritual path.

Thus, while experiencing crises following their disillusionment with their prior beliefs, these individuals felt the need to search outside of the mainstream religions and

move into the non-conventional cultural periphery – the cultic milieu – in order to find a religious community that would be rewarding for them.

The fourth stage in practitioners' spiritual careers is when they discover the Spirit Grove. I found that most people reported discovering the center either by driving by the driveway entrance (where their sign is displayed), through advertisements in local health, wellness, and alternative spirituality magazines, or online. Sharon, for example, saw one of their advertisements in a wellness magazine she picked up while shopping at a local health food store. She was already interested in alternative spirituality and meditation, so the advertisement caught her attention when she was perusing the magazine. Similarly, David discovered the center through an ad he saw in a local magazine while looking for crystals for spiritual purposes. Rebecca, however, was introduced to the Spirit Grove by a neighbor who was already a member. After talking with her friend about their new beliefs and the center, she then started attending Sunday services. Rebecca said that she did this without any prior exposure beyond the conversations with her neighbor.

Others went to the Spirit Grove to browse the gift shop or to take a class, such as meditation or discussion group. After these initial experiences, members reported becoming further involved with the center by attending more classes, frequenting the center more often, and, for some, even becoming teachers and ministers. While some people stay at the center, such as my interviewees and many additional practitioners with whom I spoke, other people never return after their first or first few visits. However, when individuals become more deeply involved in the community – meaning that they become practitioners – they tend to re-interpret their discovery of the center in a spiritual

way. It is to this last phase that I now turn.

The last stage of the practitioner's spiritual career is distinguished by a shift in how individuals interpret their journey. After becoming members of the Spirit Grove community, many practitioners look back upon their spiritual career and interpret their discovery of the Spirit Grove as being divinely guided. Members of this community often construct a post hoc spiritual narrative explaining how they were actually "guided" to the center, instead of their discovery being a chance event due to a social relationship. To many members, it is not by mere accident or coincidence that they have discovered the center. Rather, they retroactively attribute a cosmic significance to their discovery of the Spirit Grove.

For instance, Lena tells the following story about the day she decided to visit the center:

I drove past here all the time to go to the health food store, and one day, somethin' was just tellin' me to stop in here. And so I stopped in and they just happened to be holding that practical spirituality discussion group, and, um, I came in and I joined the group and we talked and I was just like "Wow. This is really cool."

Barbara describes a similar experience in her interview:

I thought, "Well, I have all this time. It's Wednesday, let's go check them out." So I came up and I talked to Karen – oh my gosh – for probably an hour, and we just chatted and she told me about the services and all this stuff. And it was a friendly, advice-filled conversation and I just told her that I had always driven by and one day I just decided to go in. It was strange.

Both Lena's and Barbara's accounts describe their decision to visit the Spirit Grove as an unplanned and spontaneous event. Lena clearly explains that there was an external influence that "something" suggested she go; Barbara seems bewildered as to what



persuaded her to stop by: “it was strange.” Thus, for both of them, an outside influence guided them to the center.

Some members even describe how they were led to the center more than once. In her interview, Sharon, a regular member, attributes spiritual guidance as the reason why she came back to the Spirit Grove after it temporarily closed:

*Sharon:* I came to a meditation, and I was excited about this new path. I had done a lot of reading, getting all this information. It was exciting.

*Me:* And then you went to the meditation. So then what happened?

*Sharon:* And shortly thereafter, they closed to renovate due to problems with the county, so I was at home and raising my children and was happy with that. And then I came back...divinely guided.

Thus, for Sharon, the reason why she returned to the center was not only because it excited her and that she enjoyed going, it was also due to the influence of an exterior, spiritual agency.

Karen, the owner, corroborates these legitimations, explaining that she believes people come to the Spirit Grove not by their own agency, but through divine intervention:

The only thing we did was advertise our center and our products in one of the magazines and then *people came*. It's just like they do now. You can see, we don't have any real presence into the community. We've got two little signs out in front, and people come. They come when they need it. They find it. I don't know how, it's just that they do. I have no idea how. People come by here all the time. (Imitates someone else's voice) “I drive by here every single day! I didn't know this place was here! Whoa!” God brings them here. We don't do anything.

Karen sees herself as only having a very minimal role in how people discover the center. Rather, she attributes agency to the center. Thus, each of account seems

to tell the story of how they found the Spirit Grove as being a reversed discovery. They did not find the center; the center, or a divine entity found them.

All of the above accounts remove individual agency from members. Individuals come to the Spirit Grove because “God decided they should be there.” Similarly, the owners, Karen and Cassie, describe that they purchased the property because they felt they were “spiritually guided” to do so.

Sharon even explains that the Spirit Grove owners’ decision to buy the house was not of their own choice, but according to a larger, divine plan:

I think Karen and Cassie were somehow picked for this and it came to them. They were somehow divinely picked for this. So there will be more [centers similar to the Spirit Grove]. I think there are angels and saints and ascended masters all around us and all over the place. They’re setting us up for more love and joy on this planet.

Sharon’s account explains that she feels as if the owners were divinely chosen to create a community. According to her, the Spirit Grove is but one of many spiritual centers that will be established throughout the world by divine beings who will guide people to start them. She utilizes a post hoc spiritual narrative not only to interpret her own spiritual career, but to describe the origin of the owners of the center as well.

Constructing post hoc spiritual narratives lets members legitimate how and why they discovered the center. They interpret their life path as being spiritually significant and that they were externally guided by a divine force to seek out the Spirit Grove. Discovering the Spirit Grove provides members a way in which they introduce new spiritual meaning into their lives.

Lastly, several members, as well as the owners, even legitimated my own

presence at the center as being divinely guided. The fact that I came there to do research, they felt, was just an excuse for me to hang out at the center and eventually become a part of the community. In their view, I was “led” to the Spirit Grove; I did not decide to go there on my own. Thus, these spiritual legitimations may be used by members to explain anyone’s presence in their community within the parameters of their worldview.

The spiritual career is essentially a narrative used to construct a meaningful sense of identity for practitioners. However, what seems like personal narratives told by individuals could be viewed as an “organizational narrative” (Loseke 2008). Loseke (2008:669) explains:

Organizational narratives of identity are created by the organizers and workers in ongoing organizations, programs, and groups designed for people who evaluate themselves, or who have been evaluated by others, as having troubled identities in need of repair.

The Spirit Grove, then, has created an organizational narrative which focuses on repairing the self; it communicates to members that they are in need of such healing. (I will soon discuss this in more detail in Chapter 6.) Since what people define as real is “real in its consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928), the existence of an organizational narrative influences how individuals interpret their careers once they decide to become a member of the community. Hence, the organizational narrative informs individuals’ personal narratives. In Chapter 2, I asked if “New Agers” can only satisfactorily identify themselves with regard to their spirituality on an individual, personal level. Given the results of my analyses, this does not seem to be the case. Indeed, it seems that they adopt an organizational narrative – the spiritual career – when constructing their new identity.

Discovering the Spirit Grove was an important stage in practitioners' spiritual careers, as they found a community where they could obtain new meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives. In many cases, this process would normally be defined as a conversion experience. However, for practitioners of New Age spirituality, the term "conversion" does not accurately describe that experience. Since conversion implies "a radical re-organization of identity, meaning, life" (Travisano 1970:601), it does not adequately describe what Spirit Grove practitioners experienced. As I will discuss in Chapter 6, members embrace diversity among one another at the center; they may hold differing beliefs and appropriate spiritual practices from a wide variety of religious traditions and innovations. Their goal is not to have uniformity of belief among members, but everyone seeking their "personal truths."

"Alternation" seems to play a significant role in the spiritual career of practitioners at the Spirit Grove. Their narratives illustrate the alternation process described by Possamai (2000), Travisano (1970), and York (1995). Alternation, then, is a much better concept, since it entails a less extreme conversion process that compliments individuals' preexisting world views (York 1995:16). Spirit Grove members do not usually experience a drastic, life-changing moment when they discover the center. The alternation process is a more gradual conversion, in that individuals do not immediately make firm commitments within spiritual communities; they often remain more fluid and ephemeral.

Since, after experiencing a crisis, members began seeking new meaning and a sense of belonging with others, they were open to new ideas and growth. When they find

the Spirit Grove – a community in which seekers are mobile – they, much like in Possamai's (2000:372) study, "might visit one or many groups or simply stop 'seeking' for a while." This is because alternation entails continuous mobility and that members do not radically change their beliefs and practices. Rather, they maintain a loosely structured community where they may enter and leave freely without making firm commitments.

"Alternation" adequately describes the relationship between seekers and practitioners at the center. Seekers sample one or two classes and then move on to other religious communities to suit their needs. Practitioners are seekers who, after attending a number of classes or events, develop a bond with the community and decide to stay and commit to the center, thus becoming members.

According to my interviewees' narratives, they had transitioned at some point to from being seekers to being full members. This marks members' transition to focusing their commitment in this particular Bund, which, according to Heatherington (1994:2) is:

An elective form of sociation, in which the main characteristics are that it is small scale, spatially proximate and maintained through the affectual solidarity its members have for one another in pursuit of a particular set of shared beliefs.

Thus, the Spirit Grove community, as a "Bund," seems to promote alternation, since it is open to the public and draws many seekers who are not committed members of the community, but who rather partake in particular services and may move on to other religious and spiritual communities. Often, I met individuals at Sunday services and classes that I never saw again during my regular attendance at the center. For those individuals who stay, the appeal of belonging to a cohesive group may cause them to stop

seeking and become consistent attendees, thus, embarking upon a new phase in their career at the Spirit Grove by becoming practitioners.

In this chapter, I examined how the spiritual career of the typical Spirit Grove practitioner unfolds. I deconstructed each step of the career process and analyzed the narratives told by my informants which illustrate this trajectory. In the first stage of practitioners' spiritual careers, they report experiencing problems with their prior beliefs. Then, at some point, they experience a crisis in their lives that causes them to search for new meaning in their lives and sometimes to seek a sense of belonging in a new community. During some point after this, practitioners discover the Spirit Grove. They attend classes and services and became members of the community. Once they find the Spirit Grove – a place where they may practice their spirituality with accepting, tolerant, and like-minded others – they adopt the organizational narrative and they spiritually legitimate their discovery of the Spirit Grove.

## **CHAPTER 6: COMMUNITY PRACTICES**

In this chapter, I examine five practices that pertain to the Spirit Grove: (1) discovering the real self, (2) healing the self, (3) encouraging diversity, (4) boundaries and rules, and (5) manifestations of the spiritual world. I conclude this chapter by discussing my findings within the context of the academic literature on these issues.

### *Discovering the Real Self*

To be a denizen of the Spirit Grove means that one believes that each person owns an essential identity – a “real self.” Turner (1976) identifies two ways individuals accept evidence of their “real selves.” The first is through an “institutional” locus, where the real self is seen as something that is accomplished or arrived at. From an institutional locus, the real self is revealed through the deliberate pursuit of institutionalized goals (Turner 1976:991). The second means of accepting the real self, according to Turner (1976), is through the “impulsive” locus, where the true self is seen as something to be discovered. In this sense, the real self “is revealed only when inhibitions are lowered or abandoned” (Turner 1976:993). Thus, according to Turner’s (1976) study, Spirit Grove members would be classified as “impulsive.” One spiritual practice in the community is to uncover who one really is underneath all their self-created problems and illusions, and what they allow the external world to impose upon them. Members use various spiritual technologies – from yoga and meditation to candle burning and drumming – to uncover

the real self which they have ignored and stifled in the past.

For example, during one Sunday celebration service, Doris, the cantor, offered a “testimony” of a “real self” realization she recently experienced:

Doris tells us how she had a vision recently where she saw her inner “real self.” She says that when she saw her inner self, it was absolutely beautiful in appearance and in spirit. At the time, she was experiencing a personal trouble, and she was seeking guidance from within. She then received a message from her inner self, which she repeated aloud (the actual words are printed in the program). After she tells us her story, we begin a meditation chant where we sing the communication she received.

Doris received a message from her real self during a time of personal crisis. This is very much like, if not actually, glossolalia, since the words are not of any particular language, but are “divinely inspired” by Doris. This essential “real self” is a being who has complete control over his or her life and who is sacred and “divinely empowered.”

Affirmations to one’s real self, such as the following passage, are regularly recited by congregants during the close of the Sunday services:

I am God-Goddess.  
I am love.  
I am creator.  
I am divine.  
I am glorious.  
I am beautiful.  
I am all that is.  
Holy is my being.  
My universe begins and ends with me.  
All is perfect with my creations.  
Amen, and so it is.

This passage is often printed in the Sunday service program, and is an epitomizing statement of the Spirit Grove’s members’ identity narrative.

Individuals at the center endorse an essentialized conception of the self, in that



one has to peel through layers of socialization and indoctrination to reach the core person of which one “really” is. As shown in the preceding affirmation, positive and empowering qualities are inherent in the real self. One does not only feel and express love, one *is* love. One does not worship or aspire to emulate a god or goddess, one *is* God-Goddess.

During a spiritual discussion group, Karen (who led the discussion) explained what each of us being God-Goddess means:

Now your body, in physical manifestation, you are God incarnate. Now when you say you’re God-Goddess, it’s hard for people to take that in. Your body is just a manifestation of the bigger manifestation. You are God and you have manifested this body, and so you have created a separate entity so you can experience this reality; your body is a tool.

Karen mentions that it is difficult for people to conceive of themselves as being a divine entity. Hence, one of members’ main spiritual goals is to overcome their egos and allow their “true divinity” or real self to surface. In this sense, they are discovering a new sacred self. Thus, a vital component in discovering the real self for members of the Spirit Grove is recognizing that they are “God-Goddess.”

Since most people have difficulty thinking of themselves as God-Goddess, individuals who come to the Spirit Grove often must unlearn their prior religious indoctrination. Jane, a veteran minister who recently joined the center’s ministry, spoke with me after a class one afternoon about new members, and how many must go through this unlearning process. I recalled the conversation later that evening in my fieldnotes:

Jane says that she thinks some people who initially come in here can only relate to God on a transcendent level because that’s the way they’ve been taught to believe. By coming to the center, they will eventually see that God is inside them and everyone and everything else in the world. She

thinks that's why they offer prayers to God and treat God as an exterior entity sometimes in the services.

Saying that there is a correct way to think about God implies that there is a favored belief that the ministry communicates to individuals who come here. That God is within you – that you are God-Goddess – seems to be a central tenet among the ministry at the center. However, not all of those in the congregation tend to believe that, especially newer members. Therefore, they are regarded as being in a transitory stage (i.e., in a conversion period) where a significant part of discovering the real self is discovering that God is immanent rather than transcendent.

According to Mason-Schrock (1996:177), “the true self is a powerful fiction,” and that “people in Western cultures can feel bereft, incomplete, and confused without this construct.” A significant portion of Spirit Grove practitioners’ spiritual work involves discovering the real self, therefore it could be because they feel something is missing or wrong in their lives. Perhaps this may explain why members feel they need to heal themselves. Further, Mason-Schrock (1996:177) argues, “people invoke the notion of a ‘true self’ or ‘real self’ when they believe they are acting consistently with closely held values – that is, when they are acting ‘authentically.’” Given that Spirit Grove members conceive of the real self as being God-Goddess or the “universal life-force,” then acting authentically means acting as a divine being. In the next section, I will show how practitioners practice “healing the self.”

### *Healing the Self*

As listed in Appendix A, many of the classes and services offered at the Spirit Grove

focus on repairing one's own or another's damaged self. The seeker or practitioner may choose from a variety of methods in which to seek such healing. The notion that one needs to heal a wounded or damaged self is a prominent idea at the Spirit Grove. This is understandable, since individuals tend to discover the center after experiencing a life crisis. The services and classes offered by the center take on a self-help format where practitioners engage in a collective act of self-affirmation and spiritual healing, such as energy channeling or Reiki. These practices often take the form of guided meditations that focus on healing events where all members share their healing energy with one another, usually involving physical contact.

An excellent example of such practices is the group healing activity described above in the vortex episode. Not only did we focus the healing session on several particular members during that event, but we created a reciprocal format where each person in the room was both healing and being healed by another. The techniques used to heal others were typically through touch, "beaming," that is, sending out "energy" from a distance, and music.

The physical contact that is shared among members, such as putting our hands on the shoulders of the person in front of us, seems to create a more intimate and comfortable environment for each person there. Physical contact reminds us that we are embodied selves and not just spiritual beings trapped in a fleshly shell. Consequently, the body serves an important role in the healing process, in that members' selves may be healed through physical contact (e.g., group healing sessions) and physical activity (e.g., yoga or dance).

Even at a drumming circle, there was a healing session afterwards, which involved directing our “energy” to a woman seeking healing while a Reiki master performed healing work on her:

Samuel, a Reiki master, traces special symbols in the air above certain areas of the woman’s body while Diane, a practitioner, lays flat on the massage table. Without touching her, he uses his hands, holding them over her in some places, such as the forehead and the abdominal area. Looking very intense and focused, he draws counterclockwise spiral-like symbols above her forehead and abdomen, appearing to draw something out of her body. Soon after doing this, he switches direction, using clockwise spiral symbols to infuse her with positive energy after draining out the negative. Hannah, the drum-circle leader, periodically points the end of her djembe toward Diane’s body while playing along with us, directing a flow of sound and energy toward her.

Members also use non-physical healing practices during classes and services that are often linked with spiritual messages. The following fieldnote excerpt is from a Sunday service led by Jeffrey, a guest minister and acknowledged psychic at the center:

Jeffrey tells us about the year 2012 and how it signals a time of great spiritual awakening and transformation for humanity. He talks about how we need to get over and fix our spiritual blocks, such as dealing with emotional issues that keep one from healing spiritually. He emphasizes that one has to accept oneself fully and to love all parts of oneself – even the things we don’t like about ourselves.

Jeffrey’s sermon about 2012 gives a sense of urgency to the idea of healing one’s self and the need for self-acceptance. Members in this community often learn about the importance of healing through lectures and sermons such as Jeffrey’s.

In sum, healing at the Spirit Grove takes place in many ways, through physical contact and through non-physical “energy work” and intellectual learning. Self-healing, then, was a prevalent theme among the various classes, services, and events held there. Church sermons consistently focused on self-healing and various exercises in order to let

go of unwanted, negative energy. Practitioners assemble in order to “fix” or heal each others’ selves. Yet this implies that there is a damaged self currently in need of help.

I found it interesting that there was an assumption by teachers and ministers that, if one showed up, then one must be in need of healing. Thus, the self – as conceived of at the center – is constantly being wounded or damaged. Irvine (2000), in her study of members of a Codependents Anonymous self-help group, finds that merely attending a meeting is enough to qualify one as being co-dependent. To the group, one’s attendance at a meeting is enough to merit one’s codependence. Similarly, coming to the Spirit Grove is proof enough to members that one is need of healing. Thus, there exists a tension between discovering the divine, “real self” and healing one’s current self. One’s healing never seems to be finished, even though the goal is to have a full realization that one is already perfect.

### *Encouraging Diversity*

“New Age” has become a popular term to describe the highly individualistic and eclectic form of spirituality practiced at the Spirit Grove. However, many members do not like the term “New Age” and do not use it when describing their beliefs and practices. In fact, they do not use any formal label to describe themselves as a collectivity other than that they are connected with the universe (i.e., “we are God-Goddess”). During my research, I rarely heard anyone refer to themselves as belonging to a religion or spiritual system. The only time I witnessed someone referring to herself as belonging to a particular religion was during Jane’s Sunday sermon, where she talked about “New

Thought” as being *her* religion. It was not assumed or expected that others share her religious affiliation. This is one example illustrating that, at the Spirit Grove, labels are largely irrelevant.

The community’s encouragement of diversity is a feature that many members find attractive. Brenda, a new member of the community who recently relocated to Tampa from out-of-state, explained to me in an informal conversation after a church service what it is about the Spirit Grove that she likes so much:

The only places in Brenda’s small town where she could go and share spiritual experiences with people were in traditional churches, which always sought to dogmatically tell her what is right and wrong and how to act and think about herself and the world. Members were always reminded that they were Christians and that they had to accept certain things about the bible. Brenda says that it was too rigid and close-minded. Since no one really tries to affix a label on her here, it makes her feel free and accepted. She doesn’t have to live up to anyone else’s standards anymore. “We’re all *one* here. It’s so nice,” she told me.

The fluidity and tolerance regarding different beliefs at the Spirit Grove strongly appeals to Brenda and makes her feel free and connected with others. She feels united with fellow members who follow their own individualized spiritual paths. The lack of dogma, or forceful messages imparted to individuals at the center was a major part of her desire to become a member.

In another example, Gwendolyn, a spirited woman in her 70s, further explained to me what makes the Spirit Grove a diverse community:

Gwendolyn, explains that “we are everything and nothing here, so there’s no point in trying to put ourselves in a particular mold and call ourselves this or that, New Age or whatever.” She says that this place is like a buffet where “you can have a little bit of this and whole lot of that one day, and then have something completely different another day.” She tells me that this is one of the greatest things about the Spirit Grove.

According to Gwendolyn, individuals at the center cannot be labeled since they are so inclusive and eclectic. She explains that the “buffet-style religion” practiced at the Spirit Grove allows members to pick and choose meanings and practices. In order to create a non-confrontational environment, members take a non-critical stance toward one another’s beliefs. This is indicative of religious individualization, since, according to Luckmann (1967:99) “once religion is defined as a ‘private affair,’ the individual may choose from the assortment of ‘ultimate’ meanings as he sees fit – guided only by the preferences that are determined by his social biography.” Thus, in religious individualism, individuals create what ultimately works for them, instead of adhering to an established doctrine. Gwendolyn’s comments illustrate this practice well.

Why would individuals who are on a personal, self-styled path towards enlightenment seek out other people with whom to practice and discuss their spirituality? At first glance, it seems paradoxical that such individualists would want to get together as a community. But the Spirit Grove has created a setting where individuals professing expertise on alternative spiritual practices make their knowledge and wisdom available through seminars and classes. Although everyone is on their own path, mutual collaboration between individuals allows for a beneficial exchange of ideas, goods, and services that augment one another’s spiritual journey without any force or pressure.

In sum, members encourage and embrace diversity, maximizing the cohesion between individuals at the center in their “shared rejection of the paradigms, the orthodoxies, of their societies” (Kaplan and 2002:4). Thus, members of the Spirit Grove focus on finding their own spiritual truth, rather than accepting established doctrine. This

pluralistic orientation to spiritual knowledge, as opposed to a uniquely legitimate one, along with deviating from conventional religions, places the Spirit Grove's organizational structure firmly into the category of a cult, according to Wallis' (1976) typology. Further, the Spirit Grove fits two of Stark and Bainbridge's (1985) three cult typologies. First, it is an audience cult, since many New Age "adherents" simply consume New Age ideas and goods, giving the movement no formal or lasting organization. Second, it is a client cult in that New Age centers, such as the Spirit Grove, host teachers who offer various services, much resembling the relationship between a therapist and a client. However, it does not resemble a cult movement because it is not highly organized and since New Age communities typically allow members to move in and out of other religious communities and do not require exclusive memberships.

### *Creating Order*

While there is a great amount of openness and freedom among members of the Spirit Grove, it is not a chaotic environment. There are acceptable and unacceptable levels of spiritual contents and performances at the Spirit Grove. In fact, one can be "too New Age." In the following, I give several examples of how order is created through sanctions and agreements.

Jane, a new minister at the center, explained to me what is meant by being "too New Age":

And my thoughts on the Spirit Grove are...one of the reasons why I like them is because they're really not too New Age-ish. You know, like a lot of the New Age stores...well, first of all, they say they're a New Age



store, and then they have all these psychic fairs and they have all the psychics and the laying on hands. The Spirit Grove doesn't do that.

Jane's comments indicate that there are spiritual practices that she would rather not host at the Spirit Grove. This seems to imply that a measure of moderation is preferred amongst some members of the center's upper hierarchy. Thus, there is a limit to the range and intensity of members' practices at the Spirit Grove.

Contrary to Jane's assertion, the Spirit Grove does have monthly psychic fairs which involve psychics performing various divinatory readings for customers. However, I have not witnessed any psychics performing the laying-on of hands or spirit channeling. Jane seems to classify such practices as being more extreme, and thus undesirable services.

The Spirit Grove seems to be a home for a moderate form of spirituality. The most popular and most frequently offered classes at the center involve physical activity, such as Yoga, Tai Chi, or Belly Dancing. The center offers a wealth of other "moderate" classes, such as "Yoga for Non-Pretzel People," which implies that some varieties of yoga are too extreme and not suited for the Spirit Grove clientele. It is little surprise that more intense forms of spiritual practice are not offered, as the center seems to fill a niche which draws people interested in, and attracted to, "moderate" spiritual practices. Thus, while the Spirit Grove encourages diversity and tolerance among members' practices, the emphasis on moderation regulates the extent of those practices in the community.

Next, I move from discussing inadequate contents to rules about style and performance. Members that have a higher position in the community's hierarchy tend to be more expressive, intense, and active in their participation in group spiritual activities.

Those who occupy positions of authority within the community structure have a certain level of expectations by regular members to meet. Holding a higher position within the community hierarchy may also provide the teachers, ministers, and owners with more confidence in expressing themselves than a regular practitioner.

For example, in the vortex episode in Chapter 1, while all participants had their eyes closed and arms stretched out in front of them while sending their healing energy, Cassie deviated from the group, keeping her eyes open and raising her arms up high. Since she is the co-owner of the center, her position within the community is respected. Even though she may deviate from the collective practices of regular members, I never witnessed an instance where she was confronted regarding her actions. Thus, members appear to accept Cassie's moments of acting in a manner of her own choosing.

Moving on to another example of creating order, there is a constructed notion of what is "normal" and deviant behavior at the center. I witnessed people openly talking about hearing voices and receiving communications from angels, spirits, faeries, and even the deceased. The individuals telling these accounts were almost always regarded with respect – their claims were unchallenged and more or less accepted by others. However, on the other hand, I was privy to several instances where members regarded certain other people as being "crazy" if they did not conform to unspoken standards of what constitutes normality or sanity there.

For instance, during classes or Sunday services, there were times when certain people were regarded as being "crazy" due to their behavior, such as asking too many questions, being too emotional, or voicing aloud opinions about the materials being

discussed in a class. Such an instance occurred during a church service where I noticed that a man was in attendance that I had not previously seen:

Throughout the service, I notice that a tall (6'3" or so) man in his mid-to-late twenties sitting in a folding chair near the corner by the kitchen who keeps getting up and wandering around the house during the service. He has oily, black, curly hair, a black concert t-shirt, blue jeans, and tattoos down both of his arms which are visible past his short sleeves. He has a deep and loud voice which resonates very audibly during the spoken and sung parts that we participate in during the service. He often makes offhand comments (such as "Mmhhh" affirmations) when people are talking. I notice that Cassie gets a wide look in her eyes whenever these incidents occur. I recall her telling me that was this "crazy guy" who is going to start coming to the services. Judging by her reaction, I wonder if this is him.

After the service, Cassie confirmed my suspicion that this was, indeed, the man she mentioned prior to the service. As I could tell by labels and nonverbal sanctions, he acted in a way that evidently violated norms of expected behavior during a church service. Church services at the Spirit Grove are regularly filled with singing and voicing aloud testimonials to one's spiritual experiences; these acts are performed during established portions of the service. Thus, there is a sense of "normal" behavior that is expected of individuals at the center. Failing to conform to these norms, despite being in an accepting and tolerant environment, marks one as deviant or "crazy." Even with the heavy emphasis on highly personalized spiritual paths and belief systems, there still remains visible in labels and sanctions a demarcation between "normal" and deviant people at the center. Thus, members have created rules on how to be spiritual at the Spirit Grove.

Another theme of order and moderation I observed at the center involved the owners' decisions on what to sell and what not to sell in the gift shop. During her

interview, I asked Karen if there is anything that she would not sell in her gift shop. She explains:

I would not bring in a lot of the...I don't bring in the, uh, sexual stuff. You know, even the Tantric sexual stuff, books and that sort of thing, just because it's personal. You know, what you do in your own home life, I don't care about. But I don't want that to be reflected on us. So, if I were to bring that sort of stuff in, then I'd give the extremists ammunition. I don't want to have to be guarded. I don't want to have to be scrutinized.

Karen prefers not to carry merchandise with sexual content in order to avoid being stigmatized and ridiculed by certain antagonistic outsiders – whom she calls “extremists.” Since she has experienced a history with neighbors causing problems and taking down the center’s signs by the road, Karen tries to avoid conflict with them. Therefore, while the boundaries regarding spiritual contents and practices may be fluid in this community, striving for moderation, and not appearing to be extreme, seem to be the underlying aims.

Overall, the boundaries and rules informally established at the Spirit Grove tell much about the individuals who constitute its membership. Since moderation is a prevalent theme at the center, from the goods sold in the gift shop to the types of classes and spiritual practices held at the center, it may be inferred that there are certain people who would feel welcome and others that would feel unwelcome at the center. Thus, the owners and ministry have created a standard of normalcy for the community. Even though they are accepting of many otherwise abnormal spiritual beliefs and practices, these individuals are moderate in some ways.

Given that the main demographic of the center are White women in their 40s and 50s who are middle-class, it is conceivable that conceptions of normality and abnormality would be different than if the community was comprised of working-class Black men in

their 20s. Thus, the informal boundaries and rules for what are considered normal or deviant behaviors at the center seems to be determined by the cultural and subcultural values and experiences of typical members of the community.

### *Finding Proof*

Evidence of the supernatural is often discovered at the Spirit Grove by members with acknowledged expertise – namely, the teachers and ministers. This “proof” reveals to individuals in the community that the spiritual realm is real and tangible, and may be apprehended with the senses. Such evidence situates members’ spiritual beliefs in the physical world.

For instance, during a psychic fair, I witnessed two instances of such supernatural evidence. In the following fieldnotes excerpt, I describe how a psychic detected my own supposed supernatural ability at a psychic fair:

Morgan, a psychic, is in the kitchen along with Lena and Karen. He is a light-skinned, freckled man in his early-to-mid 40s, with graying blonde hair cut short and parted to the side. He is wearing a white t-shirt and blue jeans. When Karen introduces me to him, he steps to the side so he is directly in front of me and begins staring very intently at something far above my head near the ceiling. His facial expression is one of surprise and wonder, as his mouth is agape and his eyes are wide open and fixed on a single point. He says, “Wow, *what is that?*” Confused, I smile and look at him and Karen with my eyebrows raised.

Morgan says to me, “What is this here?” and points to an area several feet above my head. “It’s like this spike of energy; I’ve never seen anything like that before. Are you psychic?”

“No, but I have done tarot and rune readings before.”

Karen interjects, “You’re a psychic if you do readings; so yes, Sean’s a psychic.”

Morgan claimed he could see things I did not have the faculties to perceive. He made the invisible visible. Belief in his psychic ability and expertise is already established in this community, as customers pay him for psychic readings. His reading of my aura was not challenged by anyone while I was there. In fact, Karen corroborated Morgan's psychic assessment of me even after I denied being psychic. How I defined myself to them seemed irrelevant because they possess an authoritative position within the hierarchy of the community. They may make knowledge claims about what spiritual properties may be present and who possesses spiritual aptitude.

Other noteworthy instances where "proof" of the spiritual realm was "shown" happened during a Sunday service I attended. As previously mentioned, a "psychic vortex" (a "hot spot" of psychic energy) is claimed to exist in two areas outside the center in the yard. I first learned about the vortex through Lena at the psychic fair, who informed me that Cassie pointed it out to her. During the last half of the church service, Martha tells us that we are moving the service outside to the vortex (see the opening fieldnotes of this thesis). Gathering around the "vortex" and spiritually healing the individuals inside the circle manifests the vortex in a physical space. I observed most, if not all, members making efforts to locate the vortex. No one said they could not find it. Even after the service was over, several individuals remained in the area to "feel out" the vortex. The vortex episode shows how the intangible can be made tangible. This is one of the key practices at the center. It shows members that the supernatural realm exists.

Even the center itself has been conceived as a spiritual manifestation with its own life. Karen, the senior owner, sees the center as a living entity that takes care of itself and

keeps undesirable people away from it. Cassie, the junior owner, believes she has a special connection with psychic energy that pervades the area according to her:

I found out...and I had always kind of had this resonance that, you know, especially with, like, the vortexes and the things...the land itself has its own energy that has been here for a very long time. And that has nothing to do with me. And I have seen people come in and have their own things that have nothing to do with me, but have something to do with the place itself.

Thus, for Cassie, it is not the center that is a spiritual manifestation, but the land itself.

Conceiving the center as something that is beyond their control absolves Karen and Cassie from assuming responsibility for what happens there. These instances show how powerfully spiritual claims are made among members at the Spirit Grove.

The plausibility of manifestations of the spiritual world is legitimated by established “experts” at the center. If the owners, Cassie or Karen, or members of the ministry reported to the congregation that they could not “feel” or locate the vortex, the plausibility and “visibility” of the vortex would most likely be put into question.

Claiming that a spiritual current is present on the grounds of the Spirit Grove sacralizes the center. This feature then exists independently of the agency of its members and has become a sacred space. In this sense, the land, and by extension, the center becomes a spiritual entity in-and-of itself to members of the community.

Finding “proof” of the spiritual world at the center is a way in which members ward off the inherent precariousness of their belief systems. Many of their spiritual practices, such as psychic or spiritual healing, are not widely accepted in mainstream society. Therefore, internal maintenance structures need to be in place in order to justify their beliefs. Berger’s (1967) concept of the process of legitimation fulfills this necessity.

Legitimations are also “answers to any questions about the ‘why’ of institutional arrangements” (Berger 1967:29). Thus, the Spirit Grove community, as a microsocial religious institution, has created physical manifestations of their spiritual beliefs and practices which, then, establishes a kind of “burden of proof” for members. Not only do they practice their beliefs in the abstract (e.g., through prayers), but their spirituality is knowable through the physical world as well. These manifestations of the spiritual world allow customers, seekers, and new practitioners to be socialized into the community’s spiritual beliefs and practices. Thus, if an individual has a question or issue about the legitimacy of the spiritual practices at the center, they may be shown the “evidence” either by being exposed to physical manifestations, such as the vortex, or to the legitimated expertise of teachers and ministers offering spiritual confirmations (e.g., Morgan’s ability to read my aura).

Legitimations, such as the spiritual manifestations at the Spirit Grove also remind the members of answers to life’s uncertainties. Sometimes legitimations need to be repeated. Finding “proof” of the spiritual realm needs to occur for members of the Spirit Grove. These legitimations need to be in place during periods of crises in people’s lives, as it is during these periods when the barriers between order (meaning) and chaos (meaninglessness) become questionable. Berger (1967) sees a very important relationship between legitimation and religion. He states that “religion has been the historically most widespread and effective instrumentality of legitimation” (Berger 1967:32). Since legitimations serve to maintain the nomos or meaningful world order, they are most efficient when they “hide, as much as possible, their *constructed* character”



(Berger 1967:33, author's emphasis). According to Berger (1967), religious legitimations impose upon social institutions "an ultimately valid ontological status, that is, by *locating* them within a sacred and cosmic frame of reference (p. 33, author's emphasis). Placing social institutions – again, in a microsocial sense, the Spirit Grove – in this perspective causes them to be seen as originating from the divine arrangement of the cosmos. Since the purpose of legitimation is to maintain the socially constructed world – a reality that is defined collectively by humans – legitimating it in a religious or spiritual context sacralizes it. Thus, in a religiously legitimated society, social institutions and the social order take on the character of being sacred since these things are thought to derive from a divine source. The spiritual practices at the Spirit Grove that "create" these manifestations, then, are located within a cosmic frame of reference and "the entire universe is seen as being humanly significant" (Berger 1967:28). Hence, the function of religious legitimations is fulfilled best when those legitimations are understood as being divinely-ordained and part of the sacred order of the cosmos. In this sense, members see the Spirit Grove taking on the appearance of being linked together with the divine.

In this chapter, I discussed five community practices that I found in my analysis of the Spirit Grove's community. First, the notion of the real self assures members that there is something essential to each individual beyond their own socializations. Members work on overcoming their egos and becoming their "real self." Second, members practice self healing at the center on a regular basis, presuming that each individual is damaged in some ways and in need of being fixed. Third, the Spirit Grove is

characterized by embracing diversity and promoting acceptance of different viewpoints and spiritual practices among members. Fourth, while there is a great amount of openness, it is not a chaotic environment. Thus, members of the center create order by encouraging acceptable contents and displays and sanctioning “deviant” and inappropriate ones. Lastly, finding proof entails constructing legitimations in order to convince members in the community that the spiritual realm is real and tangible and that the center is indeed a sacred place. Finding proof of the spiritual world is a way in which members ward off the inherent precariousness of their belief systems.

## **CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION**

In the first chapter of this thesis, I described the New Age Movement as a religious phenomenon that deserves to be studied because it embodies particular aspects of modernity, may give scholars further insight into the changes – specifically, religious individualism (Luckmann 1967; McGuire 2002) – that are occurring within the religious mainstream, and appears to be understudied qualitatively in the United States. In Chapter 2, I reviewed the literature pertinent to the New Age Movement and my research concepts. In Chapter 3, I discussed the methods I used in my study, along with some of the insights I gained from my research. In Chapter 4, I described the setting for my study, noting its physical features, activities, and its profile and social structure. In Chapter 5, I discussed the five-step spiritual career of typical members of the Spirit Grove. I noted that members do not convert to the center, but rather they alternate. Finally, in Chapter 6, I examined five community practices that I identified throughout the course of my research at the Spirit Grove: discovering the real self, healing the self, embracing diversity, creating order, and finding proof.

Many of my findings corroborate the findings other studies of New Age communities. For instance, the beliefs and practices of members at the center were comparable to those described in Suttcliffe's (2003) study on the Findhorn community and Prince and Riches' (2000) Glastonbury study. In most cases, Spirit Grove members' spiritual beliefs and sense of a real, divine self is in direct conformity with the

descriptions of New Age spirituality as discussed by Heelas (1996) and Possamai (2005). The structure of the community is also comparable with other studies. Like Jorgensen's (1982, 1992) findings, I found that there exist identifiable roles among members of the community; some occupy positions of more authority (e.g., ministers and teachers) than others (e.g., seekers and practitioners). I also found that, while the Spirit Grove does operate within the cultic milieu, it, much like in Possamai's (2000) study, also acts as a Bund, in that a significant cohesiveness in the community comes from affective ties that are forged with others during class, services, and events.

The career concept was especially useful in this study. I employed the concept of career to describe the spiritual life path of Spirit Grove members prior to their discovery of the center. By using the concept of the spiritual career, I believe that scholars can gain a better understanding of the history and biography of practitioners within new religious communities. While the concept of career was originally used in studies on the sociology of work, it has been adequately appropriated in the sociology of religion. I expect that this frame will be used in future studies, especially of religious movements where individuals follow a transient and mutable trajectory.

The process of alternation rather than conversion, in my study emphasized an appropriate concept when examining how "New Agers" transition from one religious community to another. Given that people alternate into self-styled religion and New Age spiritualities, I believe that the stricter concept of conversion will become less useful in describing the transitions people make in their spiritual lives.

My study has several limitations. First, I concede that the small amount of

interviews I conducted may have limited my study. Interviewing more members of the center – which would, ideally, include customers and seekers who have only visited the center once or twice – might have allowed me to obtain a more varied set of narratives. And certainly, finding ways of interviewing individuals even before their first visit to the Spirit Grove would be especially helpful in understanding the spiritual career of practitioners before they have the chance of adopting the organizational narrative. This would allow me to pinpoint which moment members begin to construct post hoc spiritual narratives after discovering the center. Interviewing early customers and would also permit me to obtain information from people who may not stay interested in the Spirit Grove and thus leave the center at some point. This will also facilitate a better understanding of the people who actually stay.

Another limitation is that I did not focus on social class or race in my study. Since the New Age religion is primarily practiced by White, middle-class women, studying minority persons within the New Age milieu, including men, might reveal important information. Corrywright (2003) disclaims negative depictions of the milieu based on these variables, such as it being exclusionary or elitist, but does not analyze their significance. Bruce (2002:88-89) offers insight into the sociological significance of these variables, but does not commit a full analysis of them. Thus, an investigation into this direction is needed in future research.

We need to know more about why the New Age Movement is primarily made up of Whites. Why are there so few Blacks or Latinos who practice New Age spirituality? Why have women dominated the movement? Why is the middle-class overrepresented?

Why is there a lack of working class and poor “New Agers?” Investigating the significance of race, gender, and social class within the New Age Movement could provide important insights into the nature of this religion.

Not only is studying New Age communities important, scholars also need to know how they influence and are influenced by conventional religions. Hence, learning about mainstream religion and its connections with new or marginal religions will also facilitate a better understanding of the rise of New Age spirituality. Houtman and Aupers (2007) have argued that too much attention has been given to the study of the processes of religious decline. Thus, more research needs to be conducted on the rise of new religious movements outside of the conventional Christian realm of society. By understanding why and how people leave mainstream churches and enter New Age spirituality centers, a more complete understanding of the entire religious scene in our culture may be obtained.

Lastly, more cross-cultural comparisons of alternative spiritual communities need to be conducted. Only by building an international, as well as interdisciplinary, body of research may scholars develop a comprehensive and representative understanding of the New Age phenomenon. We need to study the New Age Movement as a global phenomenon in order to understand how New Agers negotiate living in societies with established world religions that have long-standing traditions and orthodoxies. Thus, more studies need to be conducted on New Age communities in various parts of the world in order to properly document how the New Age Movement is spreading and transforming.

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## **APPENDICES**

## APPENDIX A: CLASSES, SERVICES, AND EVENTS HELD AT THE SPIRIT GROVE IN 2008

(Listings in bold indicate that I attended the event, followed by the number of attendances)

### TWICE OR MORE A WEEK:

Satsang: Meeting with Truth

**Yoga for Non-Pretzel People (1)**

### WEEKLY:

**Candle Therapy (2)**

Course in Miracles Study Group

Life Makeover Workshop

Meditation

Mystical Circle for Women

**Practical Spirituality Discussion (3)**

Psychic Development

Spiritual Belly Dance

**Sunday Celebration Service (17)**

Tai Chi for Health and Harmony

Tarot for Beginners

Weight Loss Program

Wicca 101

Wicca 201

Women's Spiritual Strength Training

Yoga (Beginner's Hatha)

Yoga (Fusion)

Yoga (Kundalini)

Yoga (Nidra)

Yoga (Slow Flow)

### BIWEEKLY:

Adi Shakti Dance Experience

**New Thought Explorations (2)**

### MONTHLY:

Byron Katie Study Group

**Drumming Circle (1)**

Full Moon Meditation

**Full Moon Ritual (1)**

New Moon Ceremony

**Psychic Fair (1)**

Reconnective Healing Share

### YEARLY:

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service

Day of the Dead: Messages from Spirit

Thanksgiving Dinner

### ONE TIME EVENTS:

Community Yard Sale

EFT Personal Coaching Session

Potluck Picnic: Breast Cancer Fundraiser

The Secret of Money

Timing Your Life with Astrology

Visit from Tim Ward, Author

## APPENDIX B: OVERVIEW OF INTERVIEWEES

Name	Gender	Age	Race or Ethnicity	Education	Marital/ Household Status	Religious Background	Self- Reported Religious Identity	Role
Karen	Female	56	Caucasian	High School Diploma	Widowed, Single	Presbyterian	“Spiritual”	Owner
Cassie	Female	28	Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Single	Presbyterian	“New Age Hippie”	Owner
Jane	Female	54	Caucasian	Bachelor’s Degree	Married	Presbyterian, Religious Science	New Thought	Minister
David	Male	34	Caucasian	Associate’s Degree	Single	Catholic	Advaita Vedanta (Hinduism)	Teacher
Lena	Female	43	Caucasian	Some College	Married	Baptist Mormon	“Spiritual”	Practitioner, Minister-in- training
Sharon	Female	54	Caucasian	High School Diploma	Married	Catholic	“Love”	Practitioner
Rebecca	Female	50	Caucasian	Master’s Degree	Married	Atheist, Judaism, Unitarianism	“New Age Lite”	Practitioner
Jaden	Female	32	African American	Bachelor’s Degree	Single	Baptist, Atheist, Religious Science	“Hippie Spirituality”	Practitioner
Wendy	Female	26	Caucasian	Master’s Degree	In a Relationship	None	Wiccan	Practitioner
Barbara	Female	23	Caucasian	High School Diploma	In a Relationship	Presbyterian, Baptist	“Open- Mindedly Spiritual”	Practitioner



## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

### Biography

1. Tell me a little about yourself. Where were you born? How did you grow up?
2. What kind of religious services did you attend when you were growing up?
3. How long have you lived in Tampa? Do you have a partner/family? Where do you work?

### Current Personal Beliefs

4. Could you describe your spiritual journey to me? Official memberships?
5. What religion(s) or spiritual practice(s) do you identify with?
  - a. How important are these beliefs and practices to you?
6. How do your beliefs and spiritual practices affect your daily life? Please walk me through any spiritual practices or rituals you might engage in on a regular basis.
  - a. Have you attended or conducted any baptism, marriage, funeral services, etc. in accordance with your religious/spiritual beliefs? Please describe.
7. What does the term “New Age” mean to you?
  - a. Would you use this term to describe your personal beliefs? If not, what other term do you prefer?
8. Where else in your daily life do you see connections to your religious/spiritual beliefs?
  - a. Do you discuss your beliefs with family members or friends?
  - b. Do your friends tend to share these beliefs?
  - c. How significant are your religious/spiritual beliefs at work?

## **APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE (CONTINUED)**

### Activities at the Center

9. How did you find the Spirit Grove? How did you get involved?
  - a. What kinds of events and classes do you participate in? How often? Any special events?
  - b. Are you planning to attend future events at the Center? If so, which ones?
10. Do you consider yourself to be a member of this community? How so?
11. Do your friends come to the center? How many people do you know here? Is there a special connection or relationship that you share with the people here?
12. How would you describe the religious/spiritual beliefs of the people who come to the Spirit Grove?

### Additional Questions

13. Where do you see yourself in the future, spiritually and in everyday life?
14. What is your: (1) age, (2) race, (3) education, (4) marital/household status?
15. Is there anything I haven't asked or mentioned that you would like to tell me about?
16. Do you have any questions for me?