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AWAKENED ALIENS

Crafting the Self on the Spiritual Path

Men do change, and change comes like a little wind that ruffles the curtains at dawn, and it comes like the stealthy perfume of wildflowers hidden in the grass. Change may be announced by a small ache, so that you think you're catching cold. Or you may feel a faint disgust for something you loved yesterday.

—JOHN STEINBECK, *Sweet Thursday*, 1954, pp. 14–15

WHEN PETER SUED THE US GOVERNMENT under the Freedom of Information Act, he was trying to achieve disclosure. Disclosure is the idea that the US government knows that extraterrestrials (ETs) are real and their ships have been visiting Earth for many years and, sooner or later, they will reveal this to the public. At a 2012 Ascension conference I attended in Sedona about the transformations expected in December, disclosure was described as a necessary part of ascension. The existence of ETs, and their ongoing involvement in human affairs, was essential to spiritual evolution. Disclosure is the revealing of “truth,” the moment of certainty over doubt, when questions will be answered, and the seekers will be no longer seeking. It is, in many ways, spirituality’s Rapture. It marks the end of the stigmatization of spirituality and the beginning of the new paradigm, when their beliefs change from “conspiracy theory” to “truth.” This movement has already

happened for those involved in spirituality, at a moment characterized as “awakening.” The spiritual path often begins with an awakening when the light of spirituality is perceived and one awakens to the “truth.” Yet the truth has always been there, waiting to be uncovered.

When the self is incarnated into the particular physical form of a given lifetime, its true nature is unknown yet predetermined. It must be discovered through awakening, which crafts a sense of self that is at once radically different from the cultural norm but at the same time who one “really is” and “always was.” The disjuncture between these senses of self is most acute among those who self-identify as “starseeds.” Starseeds are ETs; they are aliens. Specifically, they are human bodies with alien consciousness. Those who self-identify as starseeds reject a sense of self culturally produced from an amalgamation of biogenetic and socioeconomic characteristics and instead embrace a composite self, with both terrestrial and cosmic elements. In cosmologies of spirituality, aliens are beings from different planets or dimensions; however, these beings are not ontologically separate from humans. Reincarnation and multiverses are central cosmological concepts in spirituality that unify human and alien. Both humans and aliens are incarnations of souls in different physical states. My interlocutors would talk about previous incarnations of their soul on Venus, for example, or as a being in the seventh dimension. Aliens are the same as humans, just with different physical manifestations or, to put it in the idiom of spirituality, different levels of density of vibration. Starseeds are a particular subset in that they describe how they were born in a human body, a dense third-dimensional form of corporeality, but then a “seed” was planted inside their consciousness that developed, at different points for different individuals, into an awakened alien.

Starseeds collapse the alienness of aliens, offering revealing insights into the continuities and discontinuities of the spiritual path. Conceptually, aliens are discontinuous with humans; to be alien is to be not human. Since the mid-twentieth century, the term has come to denote extraterrestrials. Following reports of unidentified flying objects in the sky and mysterious crash sites in the New Mexico desert, a florid popular discourse has flowered around stories of abductions, cattle mutilations, and flying saucers.¹ Elements of this discourse combined with older theosophical ideas about ascended masters from other planets offering spiritual insights in a proliferation of what scholars call UFO religions.² UFO religions are often brought under the sociological category of “new age” and are also closely related to

channeling. Channelers receive messages from a range of non-corporeal entities, including ETs as well as angels, spirits, and ascended masters.³ For channelers, aliens are another contactable being in their repertoire.⁴ In Sedona, I observed Amateo Ra, who defined himself as a starseed, channel his higher self from Sirius in the future. The entity he channeled existed on another planet, in a higher dimension, in the future, but was also a version of himself: “the highest self energy of Amateo, the future essence of Amateo, a Sirian frequency being, transmitting a Sirian energy.” This collapses the distinction between alien and human, and moves the discourse of ETs and UFOs from strange beings coming in oddly shaped ships to abduct and harm humans to aliens being a part of humans. Being a starseed involves drawing continuities between human and non-human, present and future, self and other.

At the same time, spiritual awakening as an alien is a profoundly disruptive experience, separating people from kin groups, jobs, and “mainstream” thinking. This chapter is about aliens but also alienation. The basic definition of alienation is a process through which somebody or something becomes alien to something else.⁵ The Comaroffs linked fantastical tales of zombies, witches, and alien invaders to discourses of immigration and labor deregulation under neoliberal capitalism in South Africa through the concept of alienation.⁶ For my interlocutors in Sedona, the process of awakening was inextricably linked to alienation from the norms, expectations, and ideals that they associated with “mainstream” American society. Awakening is a rupture, a discontinuity, but it is also a realization, a revelation of something that was always there, a continuity. Aliens are stigmatized others, but in calling themselves aliens, my interlocutors were able to realize something they saw as approaching a more “authentic” identity. They became who they “really were,” in the sense that the true nature of the self is alien. It is the materialist norms that limit the self to the physical body and the social categories applied to those bodies that were, from the perspective of starseeds, unreal or a lie. They demonstrated a “will to be otherwise,” a volitional adoption of a new identity that confers a minority status.⁷ It erupted out of their previous life experience creating new possibilities but also new constraints. Becoming aliens meant adopting a stigmatized status; however, this was often a response to a pre-existing feeling of alienation. Awakening was a separation but also an overcoming of separation, a realization of the true nature of the self through crafting a radically discontinuous identity.



FIGURE 15. The Center for the New Age store included a separate UFO Center offering UFO-spotting tours at night.

AWAKENINGS: CONVERSION AND CHANGE

At the age of forty in 2008, Mynzah had what he described as a kundalini awakening.⁸ After smoking marijuana for the first time in ten years, he began to feel odd, and listened to the songs “Lateralus” and “Third Eye” by the progressive rock band Tool. He described feeling a burning sensation in his lower back and then saw two snakes going up his spine from the base. As they ascended, areas of his spine lit up. He would later describe this as his chakras activating. This feeling developed into an out-of-body experience, where he experienced himself looking down at his body. He perceived two “blue beings” that cohabited his body with him that he would later acknowledge as part of him, what he called his “Mer Ka Ba.”⁹ He traveled to another

dimension, then came back and saw an arc of energy going out over him and a huge eye, charged with “pure energy.”¹⁰ He said it was like a light was turned on inside him, he could “see in the dark.”

The next day he looked up the image he had seen on Google and found the exact same thing depicted under the title “kundalini awakening.” He looked up kundalini awakening on the internet and it described what had happened to him the previous night. He claimed it was not a conscious choice to be awakened. However, it was intentional on another level, it was prearranged and part of his reason for being in this dimension at this time. Following this awakening, he changed his life completely. He gave up his possessions, left his job at the Department of Education, sold his car, and moved to Sedona. He said he was “called” there, having never heard of the place before his guides told him about it. His guides were spiritual beings that lived on a ship in Earth’s upper atmosphere, whose guidance he heard as a voice. One was the soul that animated his physical body before he “walked in,” when the starseed consciousness entered his human body at age four, called Jaliel, who had been one of his guides throughout his incarnations. The moment when he entered his physical body and Jaliel left it, he called a “soul exchange,” and believed that his skin darkened after this event.¹¹ Mynzah considered himself “reborn,” and he wore ankh rings to symbolize this.

Mynzah described himself as a Pleiadian walk-in and starseed. He explained this by describing the planet as a plant that grows and is harvested. Starseeds are planted on this planet to raise their own consciousness and that of others, to aid ascension to the fifth dimension, and thereby get closer to the divine.¹² He used the word “God” to describe divinity, and said that we are all God, we are all part of the same divine essence. However, we have forgotten this in the third dimension. The experience of the third dimension is separation, but this was a choice made by God to separate for no other reason than “because we could.”

Mynzah’s soul originated in Maya, the sun in the Pleiades system. When this soul “walked in” when he was four years old, he suddenly became aware of his surroundings and family in a new way. The person whom he called “mom” was not really his mother, she was someone else. She was only the mother to his physical body, not to his soul. He knew he was not from here, he was from somewhere else. He became depressed by this realization. He felt abandoned in a reality he did not like: “There was no one here like me, no one who thought like me, no one who saw what I did, and no one who knew what I knew.”¹³ He told his cousin about this experience, but no one else in his family, as he did not trust adults, including adults in his own

family. He pushed it away as he grew up; comparing himself to a gay person in the closet, he forgot there was a closet, and went back to “sleep” to fit in. His mother raised him in the Baptist church. Even as a child, he thought of what he heard in church as “lies.” On some level he felt that hell did not exist, animals had souls, and reincarnation was real even though the pastor said the opposite in church. However, fitting in meant accepting their “lies” rather than holding to his own intuitive “truth.”

Mynzah received messages from his Star Family, the other souls he was related to in the universe. He did not call himself a prophet, but a “friend with a message.”¹⁴ He told me there were many other starseeds in Sedona; they worked together on a higher level, not physically in the third dimension. He stressed that they were not a club or a “cult.” They worked in a city of energy, or a “light city” above Sedona that vibrated on a different frequency invisible to 3D senses. There were also many ships orbiting Earth, and his soul was in one such ship. His physical body was a projection in the 3D while his spiritual essence was in a higher dimension, completing his mission aboard a starship.

Mynzah explicitly called what happened to him, both to me and in his online autobiography, an “awakening.” He symbolized this in terms of a light turning on that enabled him to see in the dark, which gave him extra powers of perception he did not have before. Awakening is a central image in the history and narratives of conversion in American religion, particularly evangelical Protestantism. The “Great Awakening” in the 1730s–1740s among Protestant colonialists was just one of the periodic revivals that stimulated religious fervor and dramatic conversions.¹⁵ Mynzah’s image of a light turning on to pierce the darkness recalled the final lyrics of the eighteenth-century Christian hymn “Amazing Grace”: “Was blind, but now I see.” This song drew upon the sudden conversion of its author, John Newton, after near-death in a storm and was featured extensively in the “Second Great Awakening” in the early nineteenth century.¹⁶ Being raised American Baptist, it is highly likely that Mynzah was familiar with this song and related figurations of conversion. In his work on spiritual autobiographies of the evangelical awakening of early modern Methodists in England, D. Bruce Hindmarsh described a “U-shaped pattern of conversion” that replicated in microcosm the biblical cycle of Creation, Fall, Redemption, new Creation.¹⁷ The emphasis in evangelical awakening narratives was on discontinuity. The old was discarded for the sake of the new, the sinner was reborn into a godly life.

Equally, the spiritual awakening was a rupture in Mynzah’s life path. It

marked a transition from being a person concerned with his material conditions to being one concerned with his spiritual evolution. The epitome of this process was giving up his job and possessions, again something that recalled the revivalists who forsook their old lives to follow or become itinerant preachers.¹⁸ However, the important difference is that the evangelical awakenings occurred within the structure of an organized religion, one that many in the community were equally enthused about. Mynzah's awakening was endogenous, responding not to the words of a preacher but to a casual social occasion where he smoked marijuana. He had to search out a community of like-minded people afterward, which he found through an internet search engine. His spiritual awakening can be likened more to the process of becoming a shaman as described cross-culturally than conversion to an organized religion such as Christianity.¹⁹ It was individual, disruptive of kin relations, economic status, and mental health; an isolating experience that transformed his sense of self from that of an ordinary human to an alien inhabiting a human body.

In the anthropology of Christianity, conversion is often depicted as a Damascene moment; abrupt, disruptive, and transformative.²⁰ Anthropologist Matthew Engelke warned against overstating the discourse on discontinuity in anthropological studies of conversion. First in his analysis of Masowe apostolic conversion, he used the Comaroffs' idea of a "long conversation" of transitioning to a new religious adherence, one that is always incomplete, a state of becoming.²¹ Again in his work on British secular humanism, Engelke attended to the ways that the narrative of a complete break with the past can be a discursive strategy. For humanists it could be a way of setting themselves against what they perceive as their other, organized religion, in particular Christianity.²² Engelke framed the conversion (if it can indeed be named as such) to secular humanism as a process of realization: his interlocutors read works describing humanism and realized this was how they already thought.²³ Erin F. Johnston used a similar interpretation of the conversion narratives of Pagans in the United States; learning about Paganism was interpreted as a realization that that was the way they had always been themselves, especially the attitude to nature.²⁴

This focus on realization as opposed to transformation echoes anthropologist Tanya Luhrmann's discussion of the adoption of ritual magic practices by English middle-class professionals as "interpretive drift," a process she described as slow and steady.²⁵ Continuity was present in Mynzah's narrative. He spoke about the significance of his childhood experiences as a walk-in, which he then forgot and pushed away as he came to under-

stand their stigmatized status in society and to his family in particular. In his narrative retelling, he was always a walk-in, but only as an adult was he able to realize this fully. It was through his kundalini awakening that he was able to embrace that which he had always been, crafting his awakened self as alien as his “true self.” His portrayal of the kundalini awakening as a singularly disruptive event should not be understated, however; as with Engelke’s secular humanists, it was a way of framing what he no longer was. Awakening as a starseed involved more than just converting to a different religion. It was a sense of being a totally different type of being, one that was not fully human, nor entirely present on Earth. It was an ontological shift as well as interpretive drift; a realization of what he was already, yet also a radical change in the way he was living his life.

WE ARE ONE: KINSHIP AND FAMILY AFTER AWAKENINGS

The woman introduced as Sierra Neblina was tall, over six feet. Thick wavy brown hair tumbled to her shoulders, and she looked around at the audience with an assured gaze. “The entity known as Sierra is not here,” she said. “Commander Ananda is here today, from the Galactic Council.” Commander Ananda was an ambassador to Earth aboard a lightship serving the Galactic Federation of Light. He was 1500 years old, but 70 years ago he heeded the call of Gaia and chose to be incarnated as a “conscious soul” in a human body called Sierra Neblina. He described giving his final commands to his crew, entering a small pod, and flying down a chute to Earth, where he transformed into a point of light outside the atmosphere. There he studied the “soul group” or family that he would be born into. Then he was reborn as Sierra Neblina, a woman of Cherokee and Irish descent, who at the time she was speaking at this conference appeared to be in her forties or fifties. In order to keep certain “codes” active, Sierra was conscious of Commander Ananda from the time of her incarnation. This meant the density of the human physical body would not get in the way of their mission, which was to expose the hybridization program of the government that was using humans with Native American blood as hosts to birth human-alien, or “galactic” as they preferred, hybrids. So from incarnation Sierra was part-human and part-galactic.

Sierra’s childhood was ruptured by abuse, something she blamed on her

mother's repeated abductions by the government. The trauma fractured her mother's psyche and she re-inflicted the suffering onto her children. Sierra was also abducted and carried a hybrid to term that was then taken by the government. The government was in league with a race of aliens called Zetas, who needed the hybrids to rebuild their race. They wanted "Native American bloodlines" because Native Americans were connected to the Pleiades. This program was halted in the 1990s, an effort in which Sierra took part. Now she ran a program called TWIN to help those still struggling with their experiences, other lightworkers, starseeds, and walk-ins. She defined herself as a "braided walk-in," a human body with a galactic consciousness she had been aware of since birth. Sierra and Commander Ananda inhabited the same body, their consciousnesses intertwined; sometimes Sierra spoke and sometimes it was Commander Ananda. As a result of this, she had abilities since her youth that had been engineered in the womb. She was a higher vibrational consciousness in dense human form, trained and ready to help wherever she was needed. As part of her mission she had been a sniper in the US Marines, the first woman in frontline combat as part of Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf War.

Sierra was speaking as part of the 2012 Ascension conference, hosted by the internet site and blog radio show the Golden Age of Gaia, mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. Since she therefore had a measure of renown in spirituality-focused internet circles, I googled her and found that a site dedicated to exposing what it called "new age frauds" had taken steps to debunk her identity by adding public records of her military service, as a member of the military police in Colorado, and her birth name, Shannon Marie Hare.²⁶ Members of the forum denounced her as a con artist, narcissist, and fake.

Names grant the power to both fix identity and detach from it.²⁷ Shannon Marie Hare became Sierra Neblina, who was an incarnation of Commander Ananda. Each of her roles had a different name. Sierra Neblina was the name she used in everyday life; Commander Ananda was part of her consciousness; Shannon Marie Hare was the name on her birth certificate. To debunkers on the internet, the existence of her legal name proved her a fraud; from their perspective, her identity was fixed by legal document. The creation of her new identity as Sierra Neblina was an act of detachment, separating her from her existence as an ordinary human. Renaming herself erased her social history. However, this social history persisted in the form of legal documents, which by some were given more weight; the legal name was the "true" name that revealed the "real" identity of a person.

Commander Ananda was another named entity, one that existed in the same physical body at the same time as Sierra but only sometimes used her voice. He was a change that she announced with an illocutionary speech act.²⁸ A walk-in is analogous to a spirit that possesses a human host, in that they inhabit the same body but have different identities. Mynzah's was called Jaiel. Naming spirits is an important, if not definitive act, in their realization for the practice of spirit possession cross-culturally, such as in Madagascar as studied by anthropologist Michael Lambek.²⁹ Since the body is the same, the name becomes crucial in separating the human from the spirit. Lambek questioned whether without a name a spirit can even have an identity. As with awakening, the process is one of realization as well as transformation, a process of continuous becoming that is manifested by naming.

Lambek remarked on how personal names are mostly given by others; indeed, he suggests parenthetically that "If anyone knows of an ethnographic case where people routinely name themselves I would be glad to hear about it."³⁰ Sedona seems like such a case. New arrivals began to change rapidly, often adopting different styles of dress and a new name. New names were adopted as part of their spiritual path, a new name to reflect the new direction their life had taken. Names were often evocative of the life they now wished to lead, such as Wild Spirit or White Dove. Many people continued to use their given names; it was not necessary or required in any way to think up a new name to "prove" commitment to the spiritual path. It depended on inclination and personal experiences. Some continued to evolve their name with their spiritual path, again depending on how they felt, so Mynzah RavenCrow became Mynzah Atum and then Mynzah Osiris while I knew him, each new name being adopted with no more fanfare than changing it on his Facebook profile. Interestingly, when Facebook changed its policy to require profiles with legal names, Mynzah separated his into a public persona page called "Mynzah" and another under his legal name.

Despite the acceptance of self-naming in Sedona, there was still a certain amount of cynicism about "Sedona names." People who had been there longer would often roll their eyes at the sound of another's fanciful new name and call it a "Sedona name," a name they had just adopted upon moving there. To counter this, they would claim an alternative ancestry to their own unusual name, pointing out that it was not a "Sedona name." Buttercup (see chapter four) explained how her name came from the surname her parents had selected for the family because neither wanted to adopt the other's given surname. ThreeTrees claimed his name was the result of a vision quest. Both emphatically denied that theirs were Sedona names. Rarely were the

invented names also their legal names; they were names adopted and used in common speech only. This facet of identity was flexible on the interpersonal level; however, their legal identities remained fixed on a bureaucratic level as part of state surveillance of citizens.³¹ I asked Mynzah what name appeared on his military pension check, and he said it was his legal name. Lambek suggested there is no freedom of identity because names are given by others, not the self, and fixed by the state. Self-selected Sedona names faced opposition from other Sedonans, the regulations of social media corporations, and anti-new age “debunking” websites.

The flexibility of identity that many tried to exercise on their spiritual path was tempered by and sometimes in tension with the demands of the market-oriented bureaucratic state in which they lived. They called themselves what they wanted, but the state had a different name for them, unless they took the step of legally changing their name as Sierra Neblina did. This option did not seem popular, perhaps because it was costly, but more importantly it would have again fixed them to a specific name rather than leaving them free to call themselves what they felt like in the moment. The demands of the society they lived in placed constraints on the freedom of their spiritual expression. Anthropologists Barbara Bodenhorn and Gabriele vom Bruck examined the multifarious ways that naming acts to both conceal and reveal identity, operating not simply as assignation but also “discovery, divination, recognition, or inheritance.”³² Names entangle persons in social matrices. In Sedona, this took the particular contour of a spiritual path; a name announced its beginning, but that same name could be used to level accusations of fraud. Granting oneself a new name on the spiritual path was a way of controlling representation of the self, but this was always under negotiation and subject to competing views from peers in Sedona, the wider internet community involved in spirituality, and the state.

Naming is of course central to kinship. In the United States, typically a person's name is given by its biological parents at birth.³³ Changing one's birth name and family name is a way to “decenter” biological kin.³⁴ Spiritual awakenings often distanced people from their biological kin and drew them closer to a new formulation of family. Sierra Neblina talked about viewing her new family from space, calling them a “soul group.” Unbeknownst to me at the time I saw Sierra speak, I had met others in Sedona who identified as being part of her soul group. I met Alan through the Arizona Conscious Communications email list, on which he had advertised himself as a shaman, life coach, death coach, lightworker, and web designer. A white man in his late fifties, with short black hair, he had moved to Sedona in January

2012. He told me he started on the spiritual path when he met his “sister,” Rebecca, at a Landmark education conference he was running for a private firm, where he was responsible for organizing seminars teaching work effectiveness.³⁵ Rebecca was his sister by choice. His blood relations, his sister, brother, and two children, had not spoken to him for between five and ten years. He described Rebecca and he as coming from the same “soul pod,” which meant the same as what Sierra called “soul group.” Another term was “soul family,” a group of souls who are reincarnated together and have deep karmic connections. Alan and Rebecca ran a business together and lived together in Sedona; indeed, his reason for coming to Sedona was because she moved there.

Prior to his awakening, he was a multi-millionaire business consultant in Portland, Oregon. Originally from Seattle, he had attended college in Portland and stayed there to develop his career. A self-described “hatchet man,” he was responsible for firing staff from companies in trouble and fixing their problems. He had an expansive \$6 million house, his wife was a member of the country club, and their two kids got everything they wanted. He had a list of things he wanted and when he would get them by. Then he got it all by the age of forty-four and thought, what now? He was not happy or satisfied with having everything he had thought he wanted. He needed to change. First he admitted he was gay. This led to a messy divorce where his wife got everything, and some things were even burned and destroyed. His children no longer spoke to him because they blamed him for taking their comfortable life away from them. Leaving with only a duffel bag and his baby book, he started again as a publisher of a gay-friendly business directory in Colorado, where he met Rebecca. They ran a business together in Sedona helping souls transition to their next incarnation, a practice they called “death coaching.”

Rebecca was a registered nurse and had worked for many years in care homes and hospices. She referred to Alan as her “brother.” Rebecca had been married to Sierra Neblina. She described Sierra as a student of hers, but she had stopped teaching her because Sierra stopped following her truth. Sierra had since broken up with her, but Rebecca told me that she knew they were still together when she listened to Sierra’s spirit rather than her conscious being. Her conscious being spoke from ego, whereas her spirit spoke from source. Sierra had “a lot to work through” in this lifetime, according to Rebecca, but they had had many lifetimes together. They were “soul mates,” and in each incarnation they had lessons to learn through their relationship. So they both were and were not married, she told me with a smile. They

were married in the sense that they were soul mates, partners through many incarnations who would always find each other in each new lifetime and go through what they had to learn this time. But they were not married in the legal, third-dimensional sense, nor were they, at the time of the interview, in a romantic relationship.

After a period of several months without seeing any of them, I bumped into Rebecca at one of the grocery stores in Sedona, and she told me Alan had moved out and would no longer speak to her. She did not know why. Resignedly, she said it was time, though; he was meant to stay with her for two weeks and ended up staying fourteen months. The business was her sole responsibility at the moment; she was still trying to set everything up, and doing her job as a registered nurse at the same time. So Alan was no longer Rebecca's "brother"; he had left Sedona and moved on. According to his Facebook page, he next became a life coach in San Diego. He did not reply to any of my messages asking why he had left Sedona. Sierra left the Golden Age of Gaia and started her own endeavor, an internet radio station called Galactic U. Later she returned to Colorado to continue working in the medical marijuana industry.

When I asked people I knew in Sedona systematically about their "soul family," the common answer was that this referred to people on the same spiritual path as they were. Sometimes they referred to this as their "Sedona family," meaning specifically the other spiritual people living in Sedona, or their "galactic family," if the interlocutor focused their spiritual path on aliens. What became clear to me was that those involved in spirituality figured their relations with others on a spiritual path in kinship terms, as family. This was perhaps simply because they felt closer to people who had the spiritual path in common. It was a way of recognizing common beliefs and group membership. However, there was more to it, as it was often the case that going on the spiritual path involved rejection by or of their biological family. On the one hand, they were seen as weird, strange, ridiculous, even mentally ill by their families. On the other hand, there was a sense from some of my interlocutors that they did not want to associate with people who were not on a spiritual path because that lowered their vibration. Sometimes, leaving their family was formulated as a necessary part of being on the spiritual path. Others found that their families eventually came to terms with the change.

Spiritual brothers and sisters, soul family, are types of elective kin, who are chosen rather than biologically related. The classic work on American kinship by anthropologist David Schneider formulated kin relations as orga-

nized by symbols of “blood” and “law.”³⁶ Blood relations had primacy in kinship networks because they were supposed to be the ties that bind for life, whereas relations by law were significant but based on codes of conduct and therefore lacking the same permanence. Numerous studies have subsequently revised the applicability of Schneider’s formulation to the whole of “American kinship.”³⁷ Kath Weston analyzed the kin networks of people who self-identify as gay or lesbian in San Francisco, looking at the way kin terms are reorganized in response to coming out, which can distance or break down relations with biological family.³⁸ Close friends, partners, and ex-partners became kin, often using the terms “brother” and “sister” to denote intimate bonds of interdependence and solidarity. Kin terms were also used to signify membership in a community, although Weston questioned the uniformity of “the gay community.”³⁹ Soul family can be seen in a similar way, signifying close relations that have sprung up in place of strong connections with biological kin and symbolizing spiritual like-mindedness and identity that are still framed on a structure of biological kinship.

Soul family can also be likened to membership of religious communities; for example, Puritans called each other “brother” and “sister.”⁴⁰ This is perhaps more of a general feature of closely bonded communities that oppose their intimate interconnections to those with outsiders; for example, Mynzah also referred to his fellow Marines as his “brothers.” There was a further cosmological implication in the term “soul family,” though. Fenella Cannell discussed how Mormons believe their families chose each other before birth, challenging Schneider’s characterization of the “American family” as based on “blood” and “law” as a Protestant majority idea that ignored the historical contingency of the terms and how different religious groups constructed them differently.⁴¹ For Mormons, all families existed before birth in the prior world, even adopted families, and chose each other on the Great Tree. Similarly, the soul family was a group of souls born into this incarnation together. They existed prior to this life together and chose each other. Sierra Neblina used the image of being a light hovering above Earth and viewing her soul family. “Soul pod” extended the plant metaphor of a group of seeds growing separately from a single source.

Sometimes the image of a contract was used. Alan talked about signing a contract with Rebecca prior to incarnation that they would be together throughout their lifetimes. The soul family could include other souls who were incarnated as humans, such as Alan and Rebecca, or souls incarnated as human and their guides, such as Mynzah and Jaliel, or humans and aliens, such as Sierra and Commander Ananda. These relationships were figured as

kin relations, but they were not so much chosen as preordained. Sometimes these relationships could be biologically connected as well, such as Mynzah's twin daughters whom he identified as fellow starseeds from Venus. The changes that occurred with a spiritual awakening had extensive ramifications for kinship. Biological kin were distanced, and new kin relations were established, figured as spiritual. Kin relations could be between humans, aliens, and other entities with different vibrational frequencies. The symbols of "soul" and "seeds" were as significant as "blood" and "law."

Although ideally "soul family" was an inclusive term and seemed to offer the opportunity for any who also followed the spiritual path to have the closeness of kin relations, there were limitations to the concept of soul family in practice. This can be seen in the case of Alan, who left Sedona and stopped talking to Rebecca, just as his relations with his biological family had once broken down. Although Rebecca considered herself "married" to Sierra on a soul level, on a personal level their relationship had broken down because Sierra was not "living her truth." This suggests that in practice soul families were predicated on social codes of conduct rather than bonds that would last many incarnations. There were gaps between the daily experience of family and the ideological construction of what the ideal family should look like.⁴² Margaret K. Nelson argued that family is not simply a structure that exists *sui generis* but a performative act: people "do" family. In the case of soul families, what is figured as a preordained and even transcendent kinship relation is in practice dependent on the performative actions of the persons involved.

People involved in spirituality are often cast as "seekers."⁴³ My interlocutors in Sedona did seem to fit this characterization, as they moved frequently between groups, workshops, conferences, trainings, channelings, and classes. But it seems that perhaps what they were searching for, more than God, was family. They did not fit with their natal families anymore, particularly the starseeds, or they had rejected their family for other, personal reasons. The "nuclear family" as described by Schneider has been radically altered in the United States by broader social shifts including economic mobility, changing gender norms, and increasing life expectancy, to the extent that Janet Carsten suggests that the ideal of a stable, traditional family unit was a "minor historical blip" in the mid-twentieth century.⁴⁴ Within a more mobile economy the family unit can be a negatively valenced form of dependency; however, its dispersal can mean the loss of a crucial support network.⁴⁵ Seekers in spirituality searched for an alternative that was more accepting than their biological families, but that still offered a loving, pro-

tective force. However, soul families seemed to rest on fragile ground, and things fell apart: the groups splintered, friends fell out, your sister was no longer your sister, was she ever so? Soul family provided a weak replacement for a kinship system undergoing extensive reorganization caused by social forces much broader than the particular lives caught up in it. The result of this reorganization was often a sense of belonging nowhere, a loneliness, seeking for someone like them but finding no one, a feeling of alienation.

ALIEN NATION: RACE AND CLASS

Ethnically mixed, Mynzah's father was Blackfeet, white, and black, and his mother was Cherokee, French, and Spanish. On his birth certificate, it was written "Native American" for his mother and "Negro" for his father. I asked him if he described himself as Native American and he said no, since he was only part Native American and he did not want to mislead people into thinking he grew up on a reservation. During his childhood, his father had been a heroin addict and alcoholic, who was frequently in trouble with the police. His parents divorced when he was nine, which prompted a move from East Palo Alto in the San Francisco Bay area to Exeter, in Central California. On his first day of school in Exeter, the other students called him a racial slur. Exeter was a predominantly white community, in which he was one of only a handful of black residents. Later on he did make friends at that school. He emphasized to me that he wanted to be seen for who he was, not his skin color. The two were, by implication, separated for him. On visits back to East Palo Alto, a predominantly black community, he found he was no longer accepted there because he spoke in a way that was identified as "white."

Personally, he did not identify as black or mixed race or even as a person; he said he was from another planet entirely. Being human was a matter of playing a certain role to him, and difference was a performance, as if people were merely characters in a play or a reality television show.⁴⁶ In his essence, which he labeled his soul, he was neither black nor white, nor even a boy as opposed to a girl, he was a "walk-in," something else entirely. Yet over time he understood himself as a boy and that that was said to be different from girls. Gender equality continued to be an important principle for him. He told me that women needed to be empowered and stand up to men, whereas men needed to embrace the feminine and "get off the throne." As a

child, he witnessed the physical abuse of his mother by her then-boyfriend, which upset him so much that during one incident he turned a garden hose on them. The domestic violence was not limited to that relationship. His mother beat him after her divorce from his father, at one point accidentally breaking his arm. His grandmother and his great-aunt also periodically hit him as a form of physical punishment. The lesson he learned from this experience was that those who say they love you hurt you. He described himself as a feminine child, very sensitive, who cried at everything, particularly fighting. However, he changed as an adolescent; he began to get into trouble himself, trying heroin and crack cocaine.

After leaving high school, he joined the US Marine Corps in order to get his life back on track. Looking back, he was critical of the institution, commenting that the Marines trained young men to kill, which was not their natural disposition. However, at the time he was an enthusiastic recruit. When he was discharged over an administrative error at the start of the Gulf War, he felt guilty because he was “deserting his brothers.” Now he felt sorry for them because it was bad for the soul to be in the military. Following his discharge, he became a police officer in a sheriff’s department in central California. Later he became a school counselor, helping kids before they got into jail, and then a bureaucrat in the Department of Education, helping poor families with claims. He had a BA in management and organization development, and an unfinished MA in business and education, with an emphasis on school counseling from Fresno Pacific University. During this period of his life, he was trying to be a “good American citizen.”⁴⁷ He was committed to supporting and working for “the system,” until his awakening abruptly broke him out. It is relevant that both Mynzah and Sierra Neblina had military connections. The US military figures widely in alien mythology as participating in, benefiting from, and covering up contact with ETs.⁴⁸ The highly complex technological apparatus of the US military filled American skies with strangely shaped crafts, spurring tales of UFOs, especially in the Southwest, which has been used as a vast proving ground for military equipment from the 1940s atomic tests onward. It is not incidental that Mynzah followed participation in the military with a spiritual path centered on being an alien.

Mynzah told me that when he was in the Marines, and his subsequent careers, he was following what he called “the American dream.” He defined this dream as going to college, getting a job, owning a house, getting married, having children, then the children achieving all those things but better, in a constant cycle of the same material things getting bigger and more

expensive each time. But then he realized it was only a program to keep us in line and controlled, to stop us thinking for ourselves. He called it freedom *from* choice, just following what we had been told to do and to want. He preferred Timothy Leary's dictum instead: "think for yourself; question authority."

Spirituality is not an anti-capitalist or anti-modernity political "movement" in any sense of the term. It does, however, seem to involve a reorientation in relation to certain organizing social constructions. Race and class, even gender, were seen as third-dimensional concepts. The true self, which was a frequency of energy and not a form of physical mass, did not have these characteristics. Following the spiritual path granted the opportunity to overcome or discard race and class. Mynzah explicitly rejected identifying his true self as a black man, or a person of color, or as middle class. He sought to transcend these categories. Unlike Amelia in chapter one, rather than finding spirituality after losing everything, Mynzah gave up his hard-earned middle-class life in order to go on his spiritual path. He inverted the meaning of the American dream from what he had been taught; it was not a route to freedom but a means of control.

There is a difficulty talking about race and class in America because of the widespread denial that a rigid structure of socioeconomic class exists.⁴⁹ Class structures are meant to belong to the hierarchical Old World; in America, meritocratic individualism reigns, and so class is no longer relevant. Anyone who works hard can "bootstrap" themselves to success. This does not mean that there is not an awareness of social and economic inequalities in America, it means that those inequalities tend to be framed as the result of personal choice or failure, or the result of racial disparities. An interesting recent change in class discourse in the United States is the emergence of a reified "white working class," most often referenced in relation to the outcome of the 2016 election.⁵⁰

Echoing these discursive notes, Mynzah mentioned that his mother's boyfriend was a farmworker and that his family was poor in relation to the white families in the community; however, he focused on this as a racial issue rather than a class dynamic. Class was only mentioned explicitly by two people in the two years I was in the field. Donna, a black woman writer and probiotics salesperson, described three "cultures" in Sedona: the upper class who could live where they wanted, the middle class who were glad to be living there, and those who were "just happy to be here, and wouldn't be anywhere else." Significantly, she did not label this group lower or working class. The other was a white male spiritual tour guide who styled himself

“Mr. Sedona,” who told me that there was a marked wealth polarization in Sedona, people were either very rich or very poor, and that I was sitting with Sedona’s “middle class”—him and his business partner. In suggesting this structure, “Mr. Sedona” was reproducing a discourse of the squeezed middle class in America. Economic inequalities were becoming so extreme under neoliberal policies, especially after the financial crisis, that the middle class was disappearing.⁵¹

In her history of the English working class, Selina Todd indexes class in two ways: as a relationship “based on inequalities of power” and as a self-identification.⁵² Class is a relative marker of identity constructed through perceptions of self and other. In Donna’s scheme there was a clear gradation based on inequality; the upper class could do what they wanted, and the middle class was grateful if they got it. The lower or working class remained unnamed, identified only through a platitude, an empty space filled with the discursive silence on American class. This silence is magnified by a spatial absence. The working class was isolated and separated from the middle class and upper class in “urban villages” of ethnic enclaves in the United States.⁵³ Sedona was an enclave compared to the surrounding towns. The higher rents and house prices meant service workers, many of whom were Latina/o, lived in Cottonwood, Cornville, or Camp Verde, and commuted to Sedona for work.⁵⁴ This situation has been exacerbated by the lifting of regulations limiting short-term rentals, freeing up landlords to participate in websites such as Airbnb for a higher profit than renting to lower-income tenants.⁵⁵ As a result, many of my interlocutors have subsequently moved out of Sedona to the surrounding towns or moved out of the area altogether due to the lack of affordable housing. Class was harder to see in Sedona because the price of the land, inflated due to the tourist industry, created a homogeneity in terms of race and class, and most of the long-term residents were white and middle or upper class. The value of owning land in Sedona was so high that some of the “super rich” owned property there, including the late Arizona senator John McCain, actor Sharon Stone, and the estate of Walt Disney.⁵⁶

The poor moved on; as “Mr. Sedona” explained to me, they came with dreams of following their spiritual path in Sedona and could not make it so had to leave. There were very few services available to support lower-income people, particularly those who struggled to find housing. I met Vincent, a starseed from Sirius, in a coffee shop one day, when he interrupted a conversation I was having with a well-known local musician. Vincent was homeless, and I took him to breakfast once every week or so. He had previously worked for the federal government and the Peace Corps but had contracted

HIV, developed AIDS, and by the time I knew him, suffered from AIDS-related cognitive dementia. He bounced from cheap rentals to motels to shelters run in Cottonwood by Catholic Charities and other groups. He did not stay in Sedona often, as the police there quickly moved him on if they found him. He told me he manifested an invisibility cloak to protect himself from them, but it did not always work. As “Mr. Sedona” said, there was a polarization of wealth in Sedona. Those at the bottom end simply vanished from view.

However, poverty was often framed as a choice. Vincent consistently spoke of himself as manifesting exactly what he wanted. When his invisibility cloak did not work, it was because he really wanted the police to find him and give him a warm shelter for the night in a jail cell. When I asked if he wouldn’t rather have a house, he would often say that would mean he would not have been where he was, and wherever he was, that was where he was meant to be. The ideology of providence in spirituality masked social inequalities, and everything that happened was what was meant to happen. Those who had to leave were “spit out” by the energy. This combined with individualism to create a double bind. The individual created reality as they wanted, so everything that happened to them was both preordained and their choice. If you were homeless, suffering, and dying on the street, then that was exactly what you had chosen to happen in this incarnation. There was little sense of class consciousness or joining together to address widespread socioeconomic inequalities and advocate for change. Personal suffering was instead a direct route to cosmic alignment with the energy of the universe.

Class remains difficult to acknowledge; it runs against strong beliefs in “meritocratic individualism.”⁵⁷ Class is also subsumed by discourses on race and ethnicity.⁵⁸ Race is seen as self-evident and natural. It holds a much more potent historical visibility in the United States than class, due to the legacy of slavery.⁵⁹ However, Sherry Ortner argues that race is intimately intertwined with class. White Americans who might be seen as working class due to income or employment status define themselves as middle class because to be lower class is to be an ethnic minority.⁶⁰ Issues of race and class are then assumed to be significant only to those groups marked as part of the “underclass.” Being white and middle class is “normal” and therefore unremarkable. This relegates poverty to being an issue for racial others and blinds white Americans in particular to their own privileged status.

Mynzah dwelled upon how his ethnicity marked him out as different and the effects this had upon his life. He used alien mythology as an alternative to the racial discourse of America. He was not black or white, he was not

even human but Pleiadian. This is literal alienation; he recreated his identity as that of an alien. He did not fit in with black people or white people, and so instead saw himself as from another planet, and interpreted the darkening of his skin at age four as a sign of soul exchange. Alienation has a complicated genealogy as a term, but to return to the basic definition given at the outset of this chapter, of the process through which somebody or something becomes alien to something else, Mynzah's awakening can be seen through this lens. He was excluded from the white community in Exeter for being black, he was excluded from the black community in East Palo Alto for talking white. He became alienated along racial lines from both groups. He was also in a family situation of pervasive domestic violence. He then described his experience of having an alien consciousness "walk in" at age four and realizing that his mom was not really his mother. He became alienated from his mother. His career as a Marine, police officer, and bureaucrat was his attempt to "fit in" and be a "good American citizen." This ended with his awakening when he perceived this system as controlling and authoritarian. He became alienated from the state.

Sociologist Richard Sennett suggested alienation could be a sane response to social conditions of inequality.⁶¹ Reflecting on Mynzah's narrative, his realization of alienness comes in progressive stages, capped off by a transformative awakening that responded to processes of social and political alienation. The philosophical literature on alienation is rich, so any selection naturally excludes many productive alternatives, but to make sense of this process of alienation I turn to Hegel, who used two German terms for alienation: *Entäußerung* and *Entfremdung*.⁶² In Marx's work on alienation, these two terms were used interchangeably and with substantively the same meaning, but in Hegel's the meaning was different and, in this case, illustrative.⁶³ *Entäußerung* is a giving up, externalization, or realization. For Hegel, alienation was inevitable because of the self-externalization of labor, where a concept within the head is made external and therefore separate from its producer. This realizes the product of labor but also necessitates a separation from its creator. *Entfremdung* is alienation, disaffection, estrangement. Hegel also talked about alienation in political terms, in which the citizen is alienated from the state through assigning their natural rights to it in exchange for its protection. In Mynzah's narrative of becoming an alien, these two processes of alienation were at work. The first of *Entfremdung*, estrangement from his family, his race, and the state, that is, becoming alien. The second of *Entäußerung*, realization and externalization of what he always was, that is, making himself alien.

Seeing himself as an alien, or starseed, therefore became an act of liberation, of defiance. If there was no one here like him, if he did not belong, then he could find himself elsewhere, beyond the confines of this planet and its social and economic inequalities. If people were racist to him, he transcended race. If his job controlled him, he gave it up. Being an alien therefore meant being more than human. It meant being able to free himself from the restrictive structures in which he was caught. Vincent's reimagining of homelessness as what he was meant to be doing can also be seen as liberating in this way. Rather than as some form of false consciousness, he was transcending the idea that he should feel bad because of the situation he was in. His soul was from Sirius, and his mission on this planet was to live the life of Vincent and experience all that entailed, raising the vibration of everyone he met. He was not in a subjugated socioeconomic position; on the contrary, he was on a mission of a higher order. Mynzah too reframed his life to that of a higher calling. The act of declaring oneself an alien can be a powerful way of overcoming social and economic alienation.

However, Sennett follows his suggestion that alienation could be a sign of sanity with the reflection that American workers' feelings of alienation often resulted in individuation and internalization of blame for the structural forces they suffered.⁶⁴ It was a way of dividing the self that created calm by separating the work-self from the "real self" and thereby obviating the inequalities of class from affecting who they "really" were. Mynzah's shift from good American citizen to awakened alien likewise resulted in a divided self, locating the solution to the problems he suffered in his perception of himself, not in the conditions that caused the problems in the first place. Yet I argue that the sense of self he crafted was more than divided; it was composite, because he fused the separated parts together to allow for a feeling of transcendence beyond the social conditions that limited him. The overcoming of social constructions of race and class is a central aim of the spiritual path, allowing for culture to be discarded and left behind as third-dimensional, as the path leads beyond the self through a portal to the universe.

DO WHAT YOU LOVE: WORK AND JOBS ON THE SPIRITUAL PATH

In early March 2013, I attended a starseed conference at the Sedona Public Library. Its featured speakers I mostly knew already from numerous

events, conferences, and workshops in Sedona. It began with what Randell Standswithbear, an aging white musician who claimed Cherokee ancestry, called a “hug it out” session with your “star family.” To the sounds of Sister Sledge’s disco hit “We Are Family,” the audience of around thirty people got up and embraced each other joyfully. I stayed in my seat writing on my iPad, and most people ignored me. A middle-aged white woman with glitter lightly dusted over her face and a sickly sweet tone of voice came over to me, saying her name was Tina. She said I was hiding my light, but I could let it shine, I did not have to be small anymore. Holding my shoulder and arm, she said I was among family here.

This framing as family seemed odd to me. I had paid \$90 to sit in the public library, listening to music, channelings, and speeches, and the room was surrounded with tables where the speakers offered their wares for sale. It seemed closer to a corporate conference than a gathering of kin. But one of the speakers came from a very specific community that I was also a part of; she had completed a PhD in social anthropology at the London School of Economics.⁶⁵ Elizabeth had been a diplomat with a career in the State Department, but now she was speaking at this conference about “starseed diplomacy” in the Sedona Public Library. Having been forced out of the foreign service on account of her age, although she complained bitterly that there was no legal age limit for the civil service, she looked for ways to continue diplomacy despite the forces that tried to stop her from being a diplomat. She found this through starseed radio, where she could spread the messages she felt were important. Her awareness that she was a starseed came through a gradual process of reflecting on visions she had had while in the field and the feeling that she had had “something on [her] shoulder” looking after her when she was in war zones. We are all citizen-diplomats and starseed diplomats, she claimed, and we could all send out the messages we felt were important through the internet and social media, and that is diplomacy.

Being a starseed granted Elizabeth a new way of framing her career as a diplomat following what had clearly been an acrimonious ending with the civil service. Others speaking at the conference had also found ways to develop their self-identity as aliens into a means of supporting themselves financially. Krista Raisa channeled the Orion Council during the conference. I had met and interviewed her previously in Sedona. She ran a YouTube channel, Instagram feed, and Etsy store, where she uploaded videos of her channeling, sold products she made, promoted products that she got paid to market online, and gave advice and feedback to her subscribers.⁶⁶

Many of her videos were psychological and relationship advice coupled with talk about aliens.⁶⁷ She had also published nine e-books of her channeled messages, and with her partner, Ra Arcturus, sold a metal necklace called a Sa-Ra key for \$155 that aligned the chakras and raised vibrations.⁶⁸ Krista identified as a Pleiadian, whereas Ra identified as an Arcturan. They were “good aliens,” meaning they were here to help Earth in the war between dark and light, surrounding Earth in their ships. Ra described the *Star Wars* movies and the *Star Trek* television series as “downloaded” or channeled messages. The key they sold helped people who were “blocked” from awareness of the good aliens open up and receive their messages. They described the physical body as separate from the soul. The soul was in another part of the galaxy, but it was connected to and controlling the body. Interestingly, Krista and Ra both identified as biracial or mixed race, and their backgrounds involved living outside the United States. Krista self-defined as Finnish American and lived in Finland during her adolescence, while Ra said only that he grew up in Germany. Both were in their mid-twenties. Krista also had an apparently harmonious relationship with her parents, who both feature on her YouTube videos, offering spiritual insights of their own. There seemed to be less problem for Krista identifying as a starseed than for Mynzah or Sierra; perhaps because of her age, it caused less disruption in her family. She also did not leave an established career to follow her spiritual path but incorporated it into her working life from the outset.

When asked his occupation, Mynzah called himself a “server of the collective or the divine”; he was here to serve. More concretely, he was an artist and he performed readings and healings. His income came from these activities and his military pension, and he said he did not need much to live on. He did not own a car; he considered it too expensive, dangerous, and damaging to the earth, and he did not want to pay for gas and give money to oil companies. He performed readings with cards—tarot, oracle, and Mayan zodiac. The latter was done online with a program. He mainly did distance readings, using a person’s full name and date of birth. He then emailed them a reading. The primary mode of contact with his clients was online: he had a website, a Facebook page, a Pinterest page, and a YouTube channel. Generally, he would only work with a person once; he would try to help them, but he did not want them dependent on him, nor did he want to keep taking their money. He did not have a schedule of fees for services as many readers did in Sedona; he would only ask for a “love offering,” which could be anything they wanted to give, from nothing to cash or trade of goods or services.

Many of my interlocutors expressed a desire to live without money so

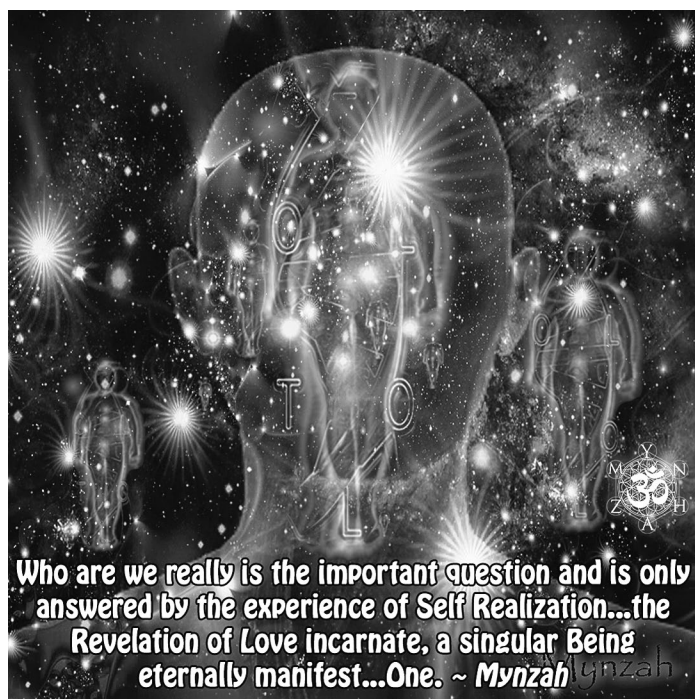


FIGURE 16. Digital art by Mynzah, turned into a meme, shared on his website and Facebook pages. © Mynzah

they could pursue their spiritual path without distraction. However, in America you must have a job. Social welfare is limited. There are fewer relief programs for the poor in the United States as a result of neoliberal policies shrinking the welfare state.⁶⁹ More than this, having a job is central to the construction of identity for most Americans: it is an organizing principle of the normative valuation of self.⁷⁰ A job means independence and financial security. Having a job is closely tied to notions of self-worth, and losing a job can subvert this because work has a moral value. Within this context, intentionally giving up a job to follow a spiritual path is a rebellious act. Mynzah rejected his career of working in “the system,” where he made sufficient money to support himself and held positions of social authority, and instead got rid of his possessions and moved to Sedona. Krista and Ra tried from the start of their working lives to earn money in a way consonant with their spiritual paths. Like many others who came to Sedona, they were drawn by the community of like-minded people and what was termed the energy of the place. But they still had to earn a living. Economic instability was a fac-

tor in many of my interlocutors' lives. They mostly lived on low incomes; earning between a few hundred and two thousand dollars a month was the norm. They tended to rent rooms in the houses of wealthier Sedona residents; people involved in spirituality were very rarely homeowners. It was common for new arrivals in Sedona to live in their car or camp in the forest or beside the creek until they found somewhere to live. Those who did have economic stability were ones who maintained their employment outside their spiritual path, such as Peter in the previous chapter, who worked as an attorney. Making a living as a starseed involved pursuing multiple different revenue sources, including offering readings, running a YouTube channel or hosting an internet radio show, and selling products online and as a vendor at the frequent spirituality-focused conferences held in Sedona.

Running a YouTube channel earns money by becoming what's called a "partner," regularly uploading videos that receive thousands of views and hosting advertising for which they earn a proportion of the advertising revenue.⁷¹ The business model based on sharing content appealed to starseeds because they could work from home while the wider community of people interested in UFOs and starseeds online provided a large and growing audience for their videos, far beyond the size of following they could attract in their physical surroundings. Making money as a starseed thus was part of the larger "gig economy" that enshrined the principle of short-termism in labor relations.⁷² The gig economy grew particularly after the financial crisis of 2008, when workers were "contractors" rather than "employees" and performed temporary, fixed-term, contract-based service tasks with little more connection to their employer than a consumer had with a brand.⁷³ In this new economic form, labor protections are minimal, payment oscillates, and work is increasingly commodified. It is a direct result of the withdrawal of labor regulation in neoliberalism. Younger people are more likely to be involved in the gig economy than older people. On this point it is significant that Mynzah had a military pension and Elizabeth had a work-related pension to provide reliable financial support. The new economy also allowed for a greater degree of religious individuation than in congregational religions; as practitioners, starseeds were not dependent on a local community, nor did they need to maintain a physical building. Since they found their audience online, they could remain disconnected from others involved in spirituality in Sedona because they interacted with and received financial support from a much larger, dispersed network on the internet.

Economic instability was rarely framed as a problem, however. Many phrased their instability as an asset. They were free to follow their path,

unfettered by responsibilities. There was a sense that it was better being against the system and embracing the instability that ensued than being trapped in a nine-to-five that did not allow time for their spiritual exploration. It was framed as a choice. Instead of being restricted to a specific career path as a means for survival, they were free to create their life as they chose, a choice that was at the same time preordained by the soul contract they had worked out before this incarnation. Mynzah turned against his previous jobs in authoritarian institutions, something he explicitly called a rejection of the American dream. Krista and Ra did not mention this ideal; they had little expectation of continuing and increasing economic security or prosperity. For them, work was temporary and instrumental, each piece part of a larger composite that provided support. However fragile patchwork income was, they interpreted it as freedom from institutional control. The digital platforms that made this possible created a space for new social imaginaries, potentially offering a way to transcend alienation.

In the works of both Hegel and Marx, alienation was thought through primarily in terms of labor.⁷⁴ For Hegel, all labor was alienated, and this was a necessary principle of its existence due to self-externalization; the product of labor cannot exist without separation from its creator. However, for Marx this was a historical condition of capitalism and as such not inevitable. The specific configurations of the market system and commodity production in capitalism, particularly in terms of private property and the division of labor, resulted in the alienation of the worker from both the products of labor and the means of production, which were controlled by the capitalists.⁷⁵ This meant that transforming the political economic system can end alienation, and of course in Marx's theory this meant the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism and the establishment of communism. Marx's formulation of alienation was taken up by Frankfurt School philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who extended the theory of alienation beyond the division of labor to the whole of modern society, particularly manifested in mass media, the "culture industry," and political leadership, in which they saw alienation as increasing the risk of authoritarianism. The constant search for work and pleasure by consumers, who were no longer producers, buffeted by the manipulations of media, dominated by technology, was a sign of "the compulsive character of a society alienated from itself."⁷⁶

Do the forms of work employed by starseeds following their spiritual paths offer a route beyond the alienation of labor? Mynzah's employment was self-directed and he retained control over its products. He sold his own art, readings, and writings online. His diversity of occupations echoed what

Marx was proposing as the ideal in pure communism when the division of labor had ended and individuals were no longer subjected to a single task. However, Mynzah still had to alienate his products from himself by selling them in a market system in order to earn money to survive. More importantly, his earnings from these endeavors varied greatly, and his stable means of support was still his military pension. He was therefore primarily supported by the remittance he gained from “the system” he deplored as authoritarian and controlling.

Hosting a YouTube channel seems to be the embodiment of Horkheimer and Adorno’s culture industry, representing everyday life as entertainment, making life indistinguishable from its media representation, and earning a precarious living from this commodification of life itself. Living everyday life as an alien may seem a far cry from the flat, reduplicative media representations Adorno and Horkheimer decried, but this ignores how banal much of the starseed material is. Beyond the seeming sensationalism of claiming to be from the Pleiades or Sirius, the average video uploaded by my starseed interlocutors was tediously mundane: how to tell your “true” friends from your “fake” friends, “giveaways” of products, how to deal with people who dislike you or lower your vibration. This is not to judge the content of those videos so much as to say their purpose seemed to be to give people advice on how to live their daily lives as starseeds. And of course, the revenue from these videos came from hosting advertising for a range of entirely third-dimensional products. Being an alien was not so much a transcendent action but yet another form of lifestyle branding, another product to sell by workers who not only consume but were consumed.

All of which goes to suggest that rather than liberating themselves from labor alienation, my starseed interlocutors were caught between dependence on state welfare or employment-related benefits and the precarious unregulated short-term gig economy, which offered little economic security and few labor rights. In Marxist terms, they did not own the means of production, which still belonged to Google and the other online platforms they used. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s terms, they were engaging in the meaningless facsimile reproduction of culture for the sake of consumption, all the while creating more benefits for the corporations that hosted their endeavors than for themselves. While following their spiritual path meant rejecting traditional employment, such jobs were in increasingly short supply in the new economy. They were perhaps rejecting something that was not on offer in the first place. They were also taking the self-transformation that has always been at the heart of spirituality beyond an emotional, psychological

process into an economic process. The reified self that transcends dimensions and exists simultaneously on Earth and in ships in orbit is also monetizable. Who they are and how they earn money have fused so that the real self and the worker self are no longer separable, they are one.

DISCLOSURE: REALIZATION/TRANSFORMATION

Starseeds believed themselves in possession of a truth most others could not see, the existence of extraterrestrials and their ongoing involvement in this planet's affairs. Awakening opened their eyes; they could see the light. It was a personal journey of transformation but also a realization; this is how things always were, they just did not see it before. Someday, soon, my interlocutors hoped, disclosure would occur. Awakening on a mass scale would follow. The light would come on for everyone; all eyes open, everyone awakens. Disclosure provides a frame for thinking through continuities and discontinuities on the spiritual path. It was a new revelation of something that was already the case. A transformative disjuncture that comes through a realization of something already existing. It is both continuous, a reality that already existed, and discontinuous, radically different from what was assumed to be reality prior to disclosure.

Awakening as an alien prior to disclosure is a personal journey that led my interlocutors into a stigmatized identity; separating from their kin, quitting their jobs, feeling out of place in the third-dimensional world. Mynzah felt out of place during a childhood in which he experienced racial exclusion, domestic violence, and family breakdown. If being human meant enduring such things, better to be an alien. In these circumstances, alienation could seem like the sane response to social inequality. But does calling oneself an alien really offer liberation from alienation? To take just the example of race in Mynzah's case, while for him being an alien from the Pleiades meant being neither black nor white, the wider discourse of "races" of aliens reproduced American discourses of race as a natural, biogenetic "fact." The most common alien races mentioned by my interlocutors were Nordics, Greys, Zetas, and Reptilians. Nordics were fair skinned, with blue eyes, beautiful, tall, and strong, a replication of the Aryan fantasies of white supremacists. Reptilians were the "evil" aliens, dark skinned, serpentine, aggressive, and acquisitive, a mixture of Christian demonology with stereotypes of malicious dark-skinned others.⁷⁷ The Zetas and Greys were said to

create “hybrids” by searching for specific “bloodlines”; in Sierra Neblina’s story it was Cherokee, a reinforcement of material-semiotics of “blood” as an immutable biogenetic substance that determined identity and attributes much as in racist fears of miscegenation. Native Americans reappear throughout the tales of starseeds, such as Sierra Neblina, as a romanticized other used to endow spirituality. To what extent is liberation from alienating social constructions of race really possible in this frame?

Moreover, equating seeing oneself as an alien with social and economic alienation glosses over an important point: in spirituality, aliens and humans are in fact the same. Both are entities in the universe of equivalent essence—they are both composed of energy—but with different vibrational frequencies. Starseeds are human bodies with alien, or as they would say galactic, souls. The human body exists in the third dimension while the soul is somewhere else, in a different galaxy or onboard a ship. The soul is akin to a drone operator, maneuvering the physical form at a distance. This is called bilocation and has a rich history in esotericism as part of astral projection beliefs and practices.⁷⁸ The difference between humans and aliens is one of spiritual development: aliens are more advanced spiritually (except Reptilians) and starseeds are more advanced spiritually than third-dimensionally bound humans. It is a difference in degree, not of substance. Humans become aliens and aliens become human, depending on the view taken. Difference is therefore an illusion of perspective. Disclosure reveals this universally. Alien and human are simply different energetic frequencies of the universe, but they are both part of the universe and as such the same. There is no difference, no separation, no alienation, only oneness. The difference between alien and human is therefore collapsed, and what seems at first to be a radical discontinuity is in fact a seamless continuity.

This collapsing of distinctions into a continuous energetic flow undermines much of the potential critique of the American political system. In 2017, I got in touch with Mynzah because he had been very quiet online for the past year and this seemed strange for someone who made a portion of his earnings through internet marketplaces. He let me know he had recently returned from Boulder, Colorado, to Sedona with his musician/conservationist girlfriend, but they were living in Cottonwood, as they could no longer afford Sedona rental prices. I asked directly if his diminished online presence was a result of the increasingly poisonous discourse on social media since the 2016 presidential election. He denied it and told me that he did not get involved in politics, and it did not matter to him who was president. Reality is controlled, not by the government, but by

Divine Order, which included Donald Trump. There were no coincidences or mistakes; everything that occurred was all part of our evolution: “I don’t see this reality as ‘real,’ it is a dream state . . . a micro within the macro.” His only concern was to keep his self healthy, happy, and balanced. He did not take on negativity by getting involved in politics, religion, or anything that divides instead of unites. He did not have a problem with Trump or current politics in the United States. While he said he would like to see more uniting on Earth instead of dividing, what was happening was part of the plan as well as part of the illusion. I found it surprising coming from someone who so strongly rejected authoritarianism in American state institutions that he would shrug off what seemed to me like a dangerous and dramatic lurch toward authoritarianism in the presidency. But his position recalled Vincent’s on being homeless: whatever happened was meant to be, it was all preordained, as we had chosen it to be. The only thing to do, therefore, was take care of the self.