



STATEMENT DN020

A Summary Critique: The Celestine Prophecy

Any aspiring novelist who has yearned to see his or her labor of love sitting atop the *New York Times's* bestseller list can now take heart: if *The Celestine Prophecy* can boast of umpteen weeks in that exalted position, then even the most humble effort has a chance at enjoying huge success. For this novel (coily subtitled “An Adventure”) is little more than a 246-page New Age catechism, stupendously inept as fiction but somehow captivating to an enthusiastic cadre who have devoured it and passed it along to their friends. Oddly enough, author James Redfield did not originally set out to write fiction, at least in the literal sense. A youth counselor in Alabama with a sociology degree from Auburn University, Redfield undertook a search for post-1960s enlightenment, which led from the pages of Alan Watts and Teilhard de Chardin to the psychic “power spots” of Sedona, Arizona. There he “accessed his higher self,” sucked up some cosmic energy, and experienced a miraculous healing (of a sprained ankle). But after attempting to synthesize his personal vision of psychology, physics, and mysticism into a user-friendly book, he found the end result “not much fun to read” (Alan Atkinson, “The Celestine Prophet,” in *New Age Journal*, July/August 1994, p. 65). So he concocted a makeshift story about a search for a long-lost manuscript (which happens to contain all of his words of wisdom), added some good guys and bad guys, and then sought a publisher. Not surprisingly, no one showed the slightest interest.

Undaunted, Redfield printed 3,000 copies, extracted a gushing endorsement from death-and-dying expert Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (who appears to have become increasingly addled since her plunge into spiritism years ago), and passed out samples far and wide. Apparently starved for fiction that reinforces their beliefs, New Age enthusiasts found the book enthralling, and their word of mouth moved 100,000 copies within a year. At that point a sales representative for Warner Books recognized the potential for a harmonic convergence at the cash register, and before long the little novel became a hot property. But after trudging only a few pages into Redfield’s atrocious storytelling, it becomes abundantly clear that no one at Time-Warner would have used this book as a doorstop, let alone sought to publish and market it, without a big pile of receipts already in the bank.

The Celestine Prophecy is told in First person, with the “I” of the story never identified as to name, age, race, or background. Presumably, this ambiguity was meant to add universality to the protagonist’s search for spiritual truth. Its net effect, however, is to create a cipher who serves only to wander from one highly contrived encounter to another.

The “adventure” is launched when our hero receives a phone call from a beautiful, long-lost friend. She doesn’t want a romantic rendezvous, but instead asks for a few minutes to tell him about a mysterious Peruvian manuscript that is chock full of profound thoughts. Without further ado — by page 4, to be exact — Redfield dives into the first of a multitude of lectures to his readers masquerading as conversation between his characters. Having noted that this ancient scripture (said to have been written in 800 B.C.) predicts a “massive transformation in human society” in the late twentieth century, the friend waxes eloquent over a cup of coffee:

She looked embarrassed for a moment, then with force said, “...it’s a kind of renaissance in consciousness, occurring very slowly. It’s not religious in nature, but it is spiritual. We’re discovering something new about human life on this planet, about what our existence means, and...this knowledge will alter human culture dramatically.”

After several more enthralling paragraphs, the protagonist suddenly decides to hightail it for Peru to search for the Manuscript, or at least discover the content of its Nine Insights. (Capitalization is used throughout for Really Important Stuff.) With no specific destination in mind, he conveniently meets a succession of explorers, seekers, researchers, and open-minded priests, who always happen to provide just what he needs to know. These encounters,

CRI, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271
Phone (704) 887-8200 and Fax (704) 887-8299

by the way, are not to be construed as mere coincidence, but as “synchronistic events” with cosmic significance. They read, however, like the blatant contrivances of a first-time author — which, in fact, they are.

The Insights, revealed more or less at the rate of one per chapter, blend well-worn New Age cosmology with the author’s view of interpersonal and societal relationships. The first two Insights explain that we are experiencing a global restlessness that is prodding us to seek deeper spiritual truth. Having spent hundreds of years smothered under church authority, and hundreds more attaining scientific knowledge and material wealth, the human race is now ready to press on to bigger and better things.

The next three Insights trot out Universal Energy, the New Age substitute for a personal deity, which supposedly flows in us and through us and, in fact, *is* us (and everything else). This is the perfect god for the secular mystic: impersonal, capable of being manipulated, and lacking any moral compass other than the ultimate goal of self-actualization.

As the story continues, our hero visits a research complex reminiscent of the Findhorn Garden in Scotland, in which enlightened workers grow exuberant plants through meditative attention to the energy fields surrounding them. Here he begins to see energy fields himself, and discovers how one person’s manipulative behavior can literally sap another’s energy. But never fear: human conflict will evaporate if each of us can have a mystical experience of oneness with the universe, such as that experienced by *Celestine’s* narrator on a mountaintop:

I perceived everything to be somehow part of me. As I sat on the peak of the mountain looking out at the landscape falling away from me in all directions, it felt exactly as if what I had always known as my physical body was only the head of a much larger body consisting of everything else I could see. I experienced the entire universe looking out on itself through my eyes...(p. 98)

The vision continues with a mystical recap of the flow of evolution from hydrogen to human, and a revelation that this impersonal force is now pushing us onward and upward in a big way. The next Insights, however, warn that our progress may be hindered by unproductive coping mechanisms (generated by childhood trauma) known as “control dramas.” (This is pretty hip phraseology for a 2,800-year-old manuscript.) Once we understand and deal with this baggage, we may then seek to discover our “basic life question.” In doing so we must scrupulously attend to any and all dreams, hunches, intuitions, and coincidences, since these will guide us on our evolutionary path. Furthermore, we can assist others on their paths by helping them understand their own control dramas, and by unselfishly projecting some of our own energy into them.

Finally comes the Biggie, the Ninth Insight — the prophecy identified with the book’s title — which is revealed dramatically at a spot known as the Celestine ruins. The bottom line: Spiritual enlightenment will accelerate. Technology will take over humdrum labor. Ancient forests, which are a vortex for cosmic energy, will thrive. Our market economy, and the whole concept of employment, will be replaced. Instead, we will only pay those who give us spiritual insight. (This is a convenient notion for the author, who at the book’s conclusion offers, for \$49.95, a personal audiotope “aimed at helping you understand your particular control issues and discover your most inspired, personal mission.” Operators are waiting.) Finally, we will evolve to the point where we transform into “beings of light,” suddenly becoming invisible to those who are still “vibrating at a lower level.”

Interspersed with this overbearing Author’s Message is some literary danger and intrigue, generated by those who desire to suppress the Insights, and will stop at nothing to do so. And who would possess such a dastardly agenda? Could it be...Satan? No, predictably for a New Age novel, it’s the hierarchy of the church, with the Peruvian military serving as its muscle. A supremely unenlightened priest, Father Sebastian, explains why:

“The Manuscript is a curse. It would undermine our basic structure of spiritual authority. It would entice people to think they are in control of their spiritual destiny. It would undermine the discipline needed to bring everyone on the planet into the church...” (p. 237)

Redfield, as might be expected, hasn’t done enough homework to understand what a conservative priest, or any informed Christian, might find objectionable in the self-deifying mysticism of his Manuscript. So instead of an interesting adversary, he has created a robed redneck on a power trip. In doing so he has also exposed a pervasive and condescending attitude in the New Age movement: anyone who doesn’t buy this world view is an unenlightened hindrance to global progress.

The fact that large numbers of people are apparently ignoring the vast literary deficiencies of *The Celestine Prophecy* and finding meaning in its mushy metaphysics is at best disappointing and at worst rather alarming. Evidently, even the most unskilled presentation of New Age thinking in story form has filled a spiritual vacuum for thousands of readers.

Unfortunately, the message of this novel and its self-glorifying “Insights” is much like the original temptation offered to the human race: “You shall be like God, and you will not die.” Believing this pair of lies produced devastating consequences the first time around, and will continue to do so today. To be sure, anyone who is convinced that he or she is “one with the universe,” or a god, or for that matter God Himself, will have little interest in submitting to the true Creator of the universe, or accepting the idea that He died on his or her behalf.

For those who are consumed with suspense over the outcome of the story, our protagonist — after a few narrow escapes (written with the narrative drive of a refrigerator maintenance manual) — exits Peru with a Great Commission to spread the Nine Insights into all the world. But wait! At the last moment there’s word of a Tenth Insight, which we’ll undoubtedly hear about in (groan) the upcoming sequel. Stay tuned.

—Paul C. Reisser, M.D.

Paul C. Reisser, M.D., a family physician in Southern California, has co-authored four books including *New Age Medicine*. He is a member of the Physicians’ Resource Council for Focus on the Family, and serves as medical commentator for the syndicated radio program, “Family News in Focus.”