

S4-- "THE NEW CULTURAL WAR," ON JEAN HOUSTON AND HILLARY CLINTON, SF CHRONICLE, 6/96

Today's brouhaha over the First Lady's meetings with Jean Houston is only the latest skirmish in a new cultural war that has far deeper implications than the debate over school prayer or Hollywood values. The left/right cultural battle is largely over: conservatives and liberals alike have reaffirmed the family and condemned violence, drugs and teenage promiscuity.

But the new cultural war - pitting what sociologist Paul Ray calls 44 million "cultural creatives" against a curious coalition of liberal and conservative opinion-makers and traditional-minded citizens - is just beginning. The confluence of a new spirituality based on authentic spiritual experience rather than old-time religious beliefs, and a personal growth movement emphasizing honesty about personal feelings, is discomfiting traditionalists of left and right.

Pat Buchanan and Katherine Graham, Bob Woodward and George Will, William Kristol and Jeff Greenfield, Newt Gingrich and Richard Gephardt, may disagree on the role of government. But they share a common disdain for people who seek to "get in touch with their feelings", listen to their inner voices, meditate or do yoga or, like Jean Houston, practice visualization and other techniques to expand their thinking beyond conventional norms.

Hillary Clinton is taken seriously, whether loved or hated, when she sticks to politics. But let her venture into the new spirituality or personal growth movement and she is made a national laughing-stock by a media and political elite uncomfortable with the expression of authentic personal feeling or the deeper existential issues which drive our lives.

This is unfortunate. The nation as a whole would benefit if our opinion-makers meditated more and pontificated less, spent more time in nature and less in offices, broadened the

national conversation beyond the mechanics of politics, and focused more on genuine feelings and less on polls and articulating the conventional wisdom. Continued media trivialization of the new spirituality makes politicians more reluctant to engage in the kind of personal exploration which leads to the inner peace, compassion and moral courage we so badly need in our leaders.

There is, of course, a great deal of flakiness in the new spirituality, including fake gurus who exploit their followers, assertions of fact that cannot be proved, and a lack of concern for the real-life suffering of the poor and dispossessed. The media provides a valuable function in exposing such excesses.

But its present treatment of the new spirituality and personal growth movement is going too far. Most of the new spirituality is no less valid than the assertions of traditional religions which are treated with such respect in the halls of Congress or pages of our national magazines. The Catholic communion wafer or Jewish phylacteries are no more provably sacred, after all, than crystals or a statue of the Buddha. It is unclear why the majority of Americans who believe in angels are not ridiculed, but a Jean Houston who talks with her dead father is. And whereas pederastic Catholic priests are considered a deviation from the norm, the misdeeds of New Age leaders are treated as if they were the rule.

The truth is that the new spirituality is, on the whole, one of the most positive developments in America today. It expresses a heartfelt desire by tens of millions of Americans for a more peaceful, loving, and honest society:

o At its best today's new spirituality focuses on what unites us, our common humanity, in stark contrast to a political/media machine that profits by exploiting

petty differences and heaping invective on political opponents. The new spirituality promotes a concern for the long-term and coming generations, as opposed to a politics and media characterized by permanent negative campaigns, two-year election cycles, and the kind of short-term thinking that destroys the ecosystem upon which life itself depends.

o Millions of Americans are finding that true happiness and joy can be found within, rather than in continuing to seek satisfaction from consumption and the uncertain material promises of an Industrial Society whose major institutions are crumbling around us.

o The success of books like The Celestine Prophecy bespeak a belief in human possibility that stands in stark contrast to the cynicism, pessimism and "fin de siecle" mentality of many of our opinion-makers.

o Growing interest in non-traditional health - featuring "unscientific" assertions about the connection between positive thinking and bodily health - reflects an understanding that traditional science and medicine no longer have all the answers to the deeper questions of our lives. It bespeaks a greater appreciation of the many mysteries of life that we are not given to understand.

o Vast numbers of Americans are demanding a far more honest discussion of real gender, family and sexual issues than is provided by traditional religious, media and political platitudes - as reflected in the ongoing popularity of TV and radio talk shows despite William Bennett's criticism.

And the new spirituality and personal growth movement is growing. While "cultural creatives" comprise only 25% of the overall population, they comprise a far higher percentage of baby-boomers. And as 77 million boomers increasingly confront their mortality in

coming decades, while today's seniors pass from the scene, the influence of the new spirituality will grow.

Let us hope that a free press remains a watchdog on the excesses of new age leaders and movements. But by trivializing people like Jean Houston, the media both dishonors the authentic spiritual experience of millions of Americans, and perpetuates the cynical, short-term, divisive and materialistic thinking which may well spell our doom. Eleanor Roosevelt, Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ would tell us no less, if we had but the wit and imagination to listen to them.

Fred Branfman directs "For Generations To Come", which seeks to develop a new politics based on existential and spiritual concerns.