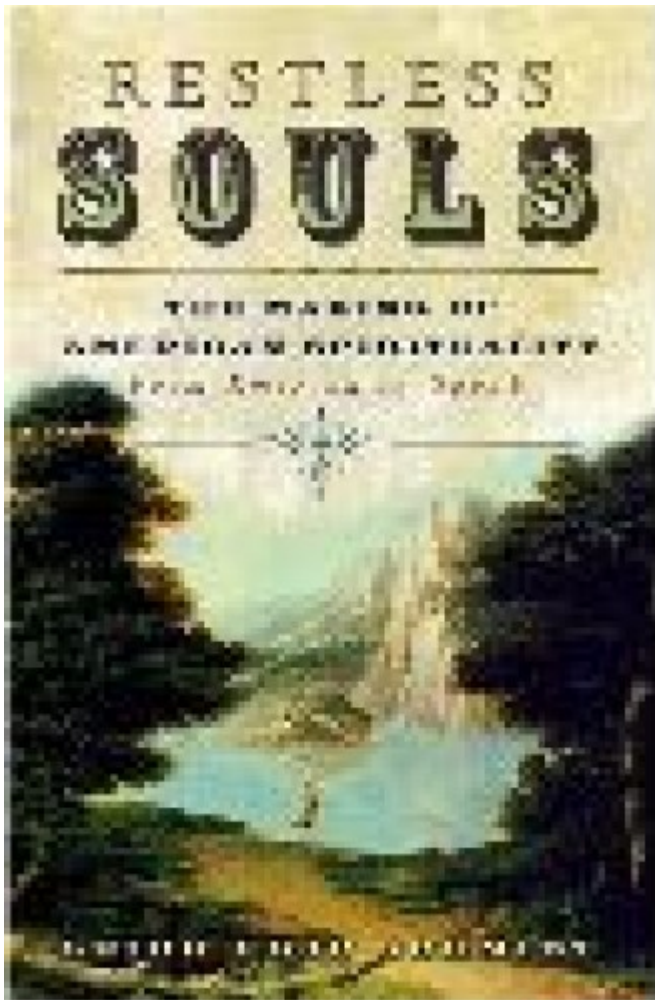


American souls

By [David Dark](#) in the [November 15, 2005](#) issue

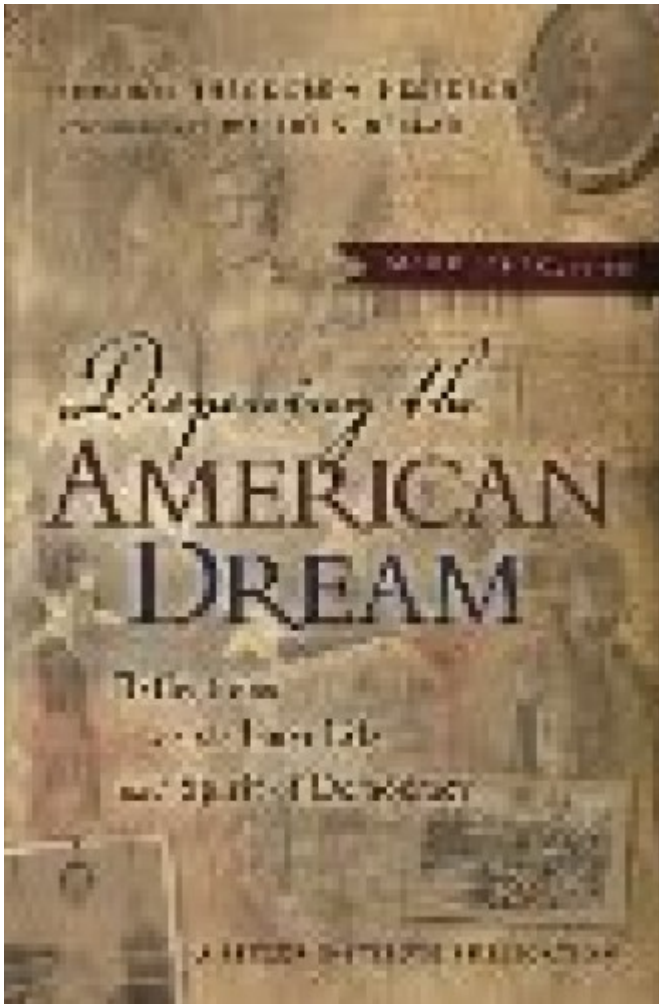
In Review



Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality

Leigh Eric Schmidt

HarperCollins



Deepening The American Dream: Reflections on the Inner Life and Spirit of Democracy

Mark Nepo, ed.
Jossey-Bass

To the point of feeling at least a little bit curmudgeonly, I find it increasingly difficult to disguise my unease with the word *spiritual*. I'll take it as a kind word when someone's trying to avoid the confusion or offense that might follow from describing someone as religious, and I'll happily affirm the spiritual as that which is irreducible, transcending our every attempt at compartmentalization. But I'm still unsure about what to do with talk of spiritual truths, principles and components, or with the question "How are you doing *spiritually*?" How's your unincarnate self lately? Is your astral projection holding up well?

Leigh Eric Schmidt, professor of religion at Princeton University, who offers a history of “American spirituality” in *Restless Souls*, well understands how goofy *spirituality* can get as a catchall marketing term with little or no content or conviction. He is also aware of that other best-selling term, studied closely by pollsters and well monopolized, in his view, by the religious right: *moral values*. For the prize of Most Tragically Unexamined Term in American Popular Discourse, I’m torn between *moral values* and *spirituality*, and Schmidt seems similarly conflicted.

Schmidt hopes to familiarize readers with the little-known history of America’s “spiritual left.” Apart from the dangers of anachronistically grouping eclectic voices into a culture of “seeker spirituality,” this kind of compilation can be a tricky business. Emerson, Thoreau and Whitman are never far from the discussion, and I was pleased to hear tell of John Chapman (later immortalized as Johnny Appleseed), whose affection for all creatures extended to a hornet that stung him repeatedly, and of the story behind such best sellers as Ralph Waldo Trine’s *In Tune with the Infinite* (“Dear everybody, I love you”), which had no rival saleswise till the appearance of Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*. But I couldn’t stop thinking of Garrison Keillor’s joke warning of the consequences of making a Unitarian angry: You risk the horror of discovering a large question mark burning on your front lawn. I confess that my favorite character in the book might be an anonymous student who crank-called Thomas R. Kelly (author of *A Testament of Devotion*) professing to be “the Inner Light.”

The likes of Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr. and Thomas Merton are proffered as patron saints of “religious liberals.” I found myself wondering about the narrowness of this particular spirituality (as well as of this liberalism) and about whether these figures would be pleased with how they’ve been categorized.

And what is it that keeps Hawthorne and Melville out of this assemblage? Did Orestes Brownson fall off the map when he went Roman? Wasn’t John Brown of the spiritual left, or were his confessions too specific? For all its talk of the needless divisions and quibbles over different beliefs, the Green Acre colony had difficulty maintaining the ties that bind once Sarah Farmer returned from Ottoman Syria thoroughly converted to the Baha’i faith.

As Schmidt notes, there’s a tension within the “eclecticism” of the self-avowedly open-minded tradition he seeks to trace. But when he observes that this tradition always seeks something “beyond belief,” I’m puzzled as to what other than belief

anyone can deal with this side of the eschaton. Our creeds, as I understand them, are all we have. It's only upon the occasion of open disagreement over what we believe thus far that a conversation (or a friendship) might develop.

One such conversation comes our way with *Deepening the American Dream*, which features essays by Jacob Needleman, Elaine Pagels, Parker Palmer and others. Editor Mark Nepo cites President Carter's 1979 statement about "moral malaise" as a prophetic word that has yet to be heeded on the popular level. Nepo offers these essays as a collection of wisdom from varied traditions for days that tempt us to hopelessness and despair. In a way reminiscent of the Iroquois custom of dream-walking, Nepo seeks to harness individual views on wisdom for a communal purpose. Throughout the book such resilient listening and gathering (hopeful, respectful collecting) is viewed as a deeply redemptive (and, at our best, deeply American) sensibility.

Carolyn T. Brown, who works at the Library of Congress, has an especially compelling testimony. As a black woman who grew up in the 1950s among a predominantly Jewish intellectual elite (with a number of unacknowledged cultural taboos), she has served on occasion as "a walking metaphor" for other people's needs and expectations. By her account, "marginality is an equal-opportunity employer."

Brown's take on history and culture is almost habitually deconstructionist. After finding a kindred spirit in the Chinese novelist Lu Xun, who sought to speak redemptively and truthfully to a culture of denial, Brown initiated an Islamic studies program with the aim of highlighting the human impact of globalization on Muslim societies throughout the world. She traces her own awakenings that led to her vocation of encouraging awakenings for other people, punctuating each recollection with the catchy refrain: "Chalk on the black board." Amen to that.

Another fine piece, titled "Breaking the Cultural Trance," comes from Robert Inchausti, professor of English at California Polytechnic State University. He notes that as an American he sometimes feels "like the heir of an eccentric genius who ignored his family in order to make millions in international finance." He understands that there's some vast reserve of freedom and soul somewhere in the depths of his American heritage, but it's as if it was all auctioned off years ago in exchange for power and superficial prestige.

Inchausti recounts an exchange with a Vietnamese student in his American literature course who copied out passages from Emerson and Whitman and came to view the literature as “one long lesson on how to free your mind.” He contrasts this with the educational experience of most native-born Americans, who “purposely narrow their consciousness to small, manageable matters” because they’re overwhelmed by “the multifaceted, multilayered incomprehensibility” of their own lives. What will free us from this bondage to a deathlike trance? Revelation, of course. And by Inchausti’s lights, a community of revelation is distinguished not by a commitment to something in the way of a navel-gazing inner life, but by an earthbound, ethically whole, hell-bent determination to see reality.

Among his agents of revelation are Helen Keller’s teacher Annie Sullivan (“teacher as prophet . . . education as revelation”), Thomas Merton and Inchausti’s own mentor, Brother Ed, who sought to overturn every form of feigned understanding in his students’ minds. Inchausti sees good teaching as an invitation to a reality-based community. If *that’s* American spirituality, I want in.

Inchausti also observes that a commitment to acknowledging what is revealed as we age will drive us to confess “the tentative and fictive nature of our own felt identities.” How best to respond to this gift of disillusionment is the subject of another essay, “From Cruelty to Compassion,” penned by the late Gerald May, author of *Addiction and Grace*. May was haunted by the Dalai Lama’s insistence that “although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way.” Interestingly, this statement challenged May’s psychiatry practice, which did not operate with the belief that our capacity for injustice and cruelty is in any way hardwired into our brains. The hard work to which the Dalai Lama alludes suggested otherwise.

May links addiction and violence to attachment: “Attachment makes fundamentalists of us all, self-righteously protecting our most treasured beliefs and images. Attachment is what blinds us to others’ points of view. It is the sustaining power behind racism, bigotry, and all other patterns of intolerance. Attachment fuels all our patterns of grasping, clinging, acquiring, and defending—everything that makes us cruel.” He calls upon readers to exercise a wider confession concerning our us/them tribalism and the ugly spirit that gets hold of our thought habits.

In this spirit (the confessional one, not the ugly one), Parker Palmer concludes the collection with “The Politics of the Brokenhearted,” a hard look at the way Americans

have become adversarial listeners and speakers on both sides of any and every issue, declaring war on anyone who can be made to represent the objects of our fear and hurt. Most notably, he talks about the way self-described religious liberals often bathe in their anger toward those broadly perceived as fundamentalist. With liberal Christianity on the decline, “we brokenhearted liberals now have a chance to identify with the experience of brokenheartedness that still characterizes critical segments of the fundamentalist community.”

This kind of lonely hearts club strikes me as the kind of religious (spiritual, if you like) expression that can be seen, touched and talked about—as the sort of thing Whitman called “cosmic democracy” and that Melville perhaps had in mind when he named humanity a “multiple, pilgrim species.” Palmer cites the Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan, who said, “God breaks the heart again and again and again until it stays open.”

In keeping with this sensibility, *Deepening the American Dream* communicates a determined and magnanimous solidarity to a fragmented age of confusion and escalating resentments. I’d hate to see it sequestered in the spirituality section of a library or bookstore as much as I hope it won’t be dismissed as another salvo in the culture wars. But of course the collection is political (in the multipartisan sense), a gesture of peace and goodwill that summons us to come together, freely confessing our heretofore unacknowledged animosities and willful mischaracterizations of other people’s positions. It’s a powerfully uplifting book that shines light in the direction of incarnate hope. That rare happening of people actually talking to each other. I highly recommend it.