

# YES! Magazine Spring 2000: New Stories

## Cyber Consciousness

by Jean Houston

**Yes, the internet is booming. But is that good news or bad news? Many of us fear that life online will reduce us to virtual human beings — isolated, dehumanized adjuncts to machines — or that e-commerce will inspire yet another wave of consumerism. Others, like philosopher and cultural historian Jean Houston, see the internet as a place where a new species intelligence is being born.**

As my hands fly over the keyboard, the sunlight streaming through the window washes out the words on the computer screen but lingers for a minute on my hands. A memory rises of other sunlit hands. They belonged to a man I used to call Mr. Tayer, whom years later I discovered to be the great Jesuit paleontologist and mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He lived several blocks from me, and when I was in my mid-teens and he in his 70s, we took walks together occasionally with my fox terrier Champ in New York's Central Park.

I mention Teilhard here because, in the last few years, he has become the patron saint of a bevy of Internet theoreticians. I am remembering a time when Mr. Tayer lifted his hands with their long fingers up to the sun and spoke in his interesting French accent about what he called "the noosphere." For a moment, the light seemed to make his hands translucent. With his hands sweeping across the sky, he told me that the Earth had grown itself a new skin that encircled the planet. This new skin -the noosphere- was a vast thinking membrane and would one day be "the living unity of a single tissue that would contain all of our thoughts, our dreams, and even our experiences." It would be Mind at Large, the weaving of the consciousness of the planet, fueled by human awareness and quickening the human evolutionary journey.

"When will this be? I asked him, already anxious to find some Know-It-All place I could go to for help with my high school term papers.

He told me that it was already in place and had been since human beings became self-conscious. But in my lifetime, perhaps, this living membrane would grow in density and complexity, activating the human species to greater consciousness and responsiveness. His words became strange, grand, as luminous and illusive as the sun rays that seemed to provoke his reflections. He spoke of the immense and growing edifice of matter and ideas, of the phosphorescence of thought and the irresistible tide of intelligence and spirit that was bringing about a change of such planetary magnitude. He spoke of "noogenesis" the evolution of a new layer of life that was above the biosphere of Earth's living systems.

"But what about the trees and the rocks and the animals?" I asked, worriedly looking at Champ. "Aren't they important anymore?"

He answered that they were as important as ever, but were now incorporated into and crowned by the noosphere. They and we were all part of a cosmic evolutionary movement that was moving us toward metamorphosis into a whole new form. As this metamorphosis continued, we would leave our littleness behind. He spoke of the new electrical connections – radio, television and these new room-sized computers – as the outer forms of this inner change.

What seemed arcane speculation in the 1950s we now recognize to have been a prophetic vision of the globe-circling web of electronic information. The Net's high tech communion is spaceless and not bound by the usual categories of time. One can hook in from anywhere – a cafe in Paris, a basement in Beijing, 35,000 feet up flying over the Arctic, a boat in the Aegean, a cab in Kansas City. The Net makes one ubiquitous, allowing rapid travels through all of the known, as well as many of the unknown worlds. It is the matrix within which cultures meet and propagate in new fusions and peoples exchange their social DNA at a remarkable rate. From this mating, a whole new species is being born.

Teilhard's speculations in the 1950s were prescient to be sure, but the idea that a web of energy links all that is can be traced back further still. Almost two millennia ago, the second-century Buddhist Avatamska Sutra contains a mystical vision of the ultimate energetic net. As I have paraphrased the original: "In the heaven of Indra there is

said to be a network of pearls, so arranged that if you look at one you see all the others reflected in it, and if you move in to any part of it, you set off the sound of bells that ring through every part of the network, through every part of reality. In the same way, each person, each object in the world, is not merely itself, but involves every other person and object and, in fact, on one level is every other person and object."

The World Wide Web is a present-day incarnation of Indra's Net, a metascape of electrons, holographic in character, and, like its metaphysical parent, an interdependent matrix, the One and the many in an infinite dance.

#### Loosening the boundaries

Perceiving the interconnectedness of all beings during spiritual practice loosens the boundaries of one's reality to prepare for the realization of one's place in the cosmic dance. Traveling the energetic byways of the Internet leads to a similar stretching and loosening of the membranes that traditionally divide cultures, languages, sciences, religions, nations, races. Every time we log on, we participate in the creation of the global mind field. The planet is becoming self-conscious in all its parts through ourselves. Electronic circuitry has so wired the planet that within a few years, just about everything that the human race is doing or has ever thought about will be available at our fingertips, our hands at play on the keyboard enabling the human spirit to come at us in resonance waves.

Moreover, the Internet is remaking human culture. In the fourth millennium BC, sophisticated cultures grew up along the great rivers – the Nile, the Tigris-Euphrates, the Yangtze, the Ganges. Today, a new and very complex culture is growing up along the Internet's great river of electronic information. The Net world is a second universe, a kingdom in our midst, with sights and sounds, landscapes and knowledge-scapes, markets and amusements, romances and resources – many of which have never before been seen on Earth. It burgeons forth, this global Village of villages, gaining each hour more and more inhabitants, who live and move and have their being in a world which is nowhere and yet everywhere.

We who inhabit the Internet's virtual outposts are fast evolving into new kinds of beings, our neural system and sensory receptors extended through space and time. Psychologies that have endured for millennia are passing away in a few hundred months. In response, the human psyche itself is expanding – even, I believe, being remade. This dance of metamorphosis is reciprocal; the Internet is changing us, even as we refine the technology that extends its reach.

Shadows loom large of course. The embodiment and broadcasting of private images across the Internet has allowed for monsters to get out there, private deviance to have an audience, obscenity to flourish. The old-fashioned vices, electronically amplified, have never had it so good. Porn is ever present, e-gambling holds millions in thrall, and many ordinary folk lose their savings to the addictions of electronic commerce, cyber malls and auctions for things they never knew they wanted until they popped up like sirens on the Net.

Despite its shadows, the Internet nevertheless is our most promising road to transcendence. We are today in the early stage of being able to assume avatars. In Hindu thought, an avatar is a god or god force who has downloaded into a human body and consciousness in space and time. Thus, Prince Rama in the great Indian epic The Ramayana is the avatar of the creator god Vishnu, and his wife, Princess Sita, is the avatar of Vishnu's wife, Lakshmi, the goddess of abundance. In cyberspace, an avatar allows us to take on and be seen on the screen wearing a virtual body: Merlin or Wonder Woman, Queen Elizabeth or Joan of Arc, a creature with a thousand eyes or a fish with the head of a monkey. Such virtual identities are closer to impersonation than to incarnation, yet some people come to identify so closely with the avatar they wear that it becomes an extension of their human personality, allowing them to express feelings and points of view in poignant ways. A scientist who in actual life comes across as a "tough cookie" in the laboratory in the avatar world might wear an Earth head to express the powerful love she feels for all Gaia's creatures. The avatars of cyberspace allow us to try on the diversity which we contain and to interact with other avatars in virtual landscapes which bring the dreamworld onto the screen as a catalyst for the psychology of polyphrenia. With the help of the Internet, our inner palate will widen even as our outer experiences reflect the greater range of cultures and peoples we encounter at work, in our communities, and in our own families.

In times past people would wear the masks of the gods on ritual occasions. Then would they act as if they had a god's abilities and powers. Cyberspace has given us the opportunity to imitate our ancient brothers and sisters. We are learning to take on archetypal identities and experience the world in more powerful ways. We are growing a more fluid personal psychology, and with the input of the Internet, changing the way we think of ourselves.

As our new body-mind evolves, everything else is changing, too: our body image, how we think and use language, our relationships and our sense of community, the ways we work and create, even our view of the nature of reality itself. The Internet promises to bring about as great an evolutionary change as occurred when people stopped depending on the meandering of the hunt and settled down to agriculture and civilization.

Among the best of the new forms the Net is engendering are the virtual communities that the Net seems to spawn with a natural genius. Virtual communities, according to Howard Rheingold, are "social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on ... public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."

What is growing in this medium? Teaching-learning communities of every sort – people communicating with each other and discovering that the more you talk to others, the more they become worth talking to. Whereas in actual life, you probably do not ordinarily converse at length with the fireman, the policeman, the baker, or the librarian, on the Net you not only talk to them, you become friends. Villages of friends of all ages are emerging.

Amity is the name of the game, people serving each other, not only in engaged discourse, but often as angels of information. I find that even though I'm a compulsive reader of books in many areas, just the ideas I need for my research are more readily available from my friends in the virtual communities of which I am a member. Speeding across the electrons from the COSMOGEN list, for example, comes up-to-the-minute information on the epic of evolution and the inroads of complexity theory.

Surfing the Net immerses us in the making of realities, but with the added advantage of an immense workshop of coartists. One introduces a theme, then traces and develops it further, finds balances and counterpoints, contradictions and paradoxes, and finally, when the tension is greatest and mind is at the end of its tether, it all resolves – a net friend in Finland, a cyber-buddy in Moscow, a forgotten text uploaded from Madras, and with a grand crescendo, *molto allegro* the piece is transformed. Another wrinkle has been added to the Mind of the Maker.

Under this stimulus, then as now, psyche grows. The imaginal realms of inner space proliferate and spill over into the outer world into a renaissance of growth in science, art, music, literature, technology, education, governance and, above all, vision.

#### Cyber activists

What are we doing with this increased sense of inner connectivity? Many are channeling it outward into a revitalized engagement in social interaction and citizen-based democracy – high touch with the community as a whole. Groups of activists and social artists, unfettered and unafraid of government and traditional institutions, are creating alternative planetary information networks and empowering each other to use the information to make a difference. Growing organically and recreating communities where governments and industries have failed, these grassroots groups have become the most important social force in hundreds of years: a living body of networked, interactive organizations involving ordinary citizens in a planetary Great Council dedicated to exchanging, inventing, and adopting new ways to make a better society.

I think of Alan C. Shaw. A black man himself, he became deeply concerned with the problems of inner city Boston while a doctoral student at MIT's Media Lab. He called the computer-mediated communications center he created MUSIC – Multi-Sessions In Community. It was designed to help people stay in touch with each other so that they could work together to help their neighborhoods.

"One of the big problems in the bigger cities is the lack of connection with your next door neighbor," Shaw said in an interview. "Why is it that people who live right next to each other don't perform the kind of activities or create the organizations that defined the tightly knit communities of the past?"

One of the problems, Shaw continued, is that modern neighborhoods lack a commons, a town square or other shared space where everybody is available to everybody else. "Space like that is harder and harder to find," Shaw said. "Sometimes it might be taken over by gangs, or it might not be taken care of by the city. With computers you can form a virtual space, a cyberspace where people can come to meet and discuss things."

By putting computers in homes, Shaw gave people access to a new vital community activism. As a result, safe neighborhood initiatives have been taken, street lights fixed, a food co-op set up, youth training and employment programs created, and teenagers given apprenticeships in job training. The virtual town square of the cyber-village is transforming once hopeless neighborhoods into real communities, where opportunity is given and received, where people feel and act responsibly. Shaw's program and literally thousands of others speak for the Net's potential for radical democracy.

#### Going mythic on the net

Our technologies give us our frames of mind. The printing press and the print culture made us linear, somewhat abstracted, and fond of a certain uniformity and repeatability of things. We left the village commons where once we heard and squabbled over the news and took our newspapers to brood inside the house. But now, net technology is restoring us to the more ancient and organic principles of discontinuity, simultaneity, and multiple associations. We now look for flow patterns rather than serial cause-effect explanations. Resonance has become more important than relevance, and we are starting to believe that reality is a tissue of interrelated stories. Cyberspace is changing our worldview. Discreet forms break down, and everything is known to be linked.

#### Divine creativity

If the Internet is a product of divine creativity, even as we humans are, perhaps in some sense, it is a new life form, a silicon-based living being which may be one of our evolutionary descendants. And yet, the very biology of its biosystem is mystical in nature – a vast, nonlinear reality wherein, like Indra's Net, each node connects to every other. Its webbed world encompasses the accouterments traditionally assigned to the Mind of the Maker – circles, nets, infinite feedback loops, the endless flow of being and becoming, God's identity as that perfect sphere whose center is everywhere and whose circumference is nowhere. Add to this the Net's ever-unfolding pattern of novelty, and we have a living system, one which reflects the nature of life in all its iterations. It may seem to some heretical to view the Net as part of the continuum of the sacred, as well as the latest emergent construct of evolution in action. And yet, if the Divine Spirit is that force that through the green fuse drives the flower and my blood, then why not also the fruitful and fecund web?

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