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THE POWER OF BELIEF

More than 10 years on, Rosamund Burton finds "The Celestine Prophecy" has more relevance than ever.

Like millions of others, I read "The Celestine Prophecy" in the mid 1990s and was inspired by its message. I remember everyone was talking about the book and its ideas. Its impact and widespread appeal were similar to "The Alchemist" by Paulo Coelho, published in 1988, and "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne more recently. Now, more than 10 years later, "The Celestine Prophecy" film has just been released in Australia on DVD, and the author is giving workshops in Sydney and Melbourne early next month. What he is doing and has to say today still has incredible relevance.

James Redfield was born in 1950 and grew up in rural Alabama. He was brought up in the tradition of the Methodist Church, which he describes as "loving and community orientated", but found he needed to move beyond its confines to find the answers to his questions about spirituality. While studying for a degree in sociology, he also studied Eastern philosophies including Taoism and Zen. Redfield then completed an MA in counselling and spent 15 years working as a therapist to abused adolescents.

During this period, he became involved in the human potential movement and used some of its ideas on intuition and psychic phenomena to help his clients. At the beginning of 1989, Redfield left his job to write full time and, for the next two years, wrote "The Celestine Prophecy", the adventure story with its vision of a new spiritual understanding emerging in the world today.

"A new spiritual awakening is occurring in human culture, an awakening brought about by a critical mass of individuals who experience their lives as a spiritual unfolding, a journey in which we are led forward by mysterious coincidences." This is the first of the nine insights in "The Celestine Prophecy".

"The reason that people are pursuing a deeper spirituality," Redfield explains when we speak on the telephone, "is that they are getting more feedback. They are getting more direct experience that the spiritual life is valid and there is a spiritual connection to life."

When I ask him to give me an example of a "direct experience" he talks about "meaningful coincidences -those times when we meet someone who is working in the very area we have thought of moving to, for example.

"It seems like we are being helped spiritually," Redfield explains, "that the divine in the world is acting out so that our lives are better and we have more fulfillment."

It is this awareness of coincidences and synchronicities that he is talking about in his one day workshops. He is also teaching how to develop a guiding intuition that informs our decision making and life choices so we can follow our higher calling and mission in life.

Redfield himself found that he was actually guided by a series of coincidences in writing "The Celestine Prophecy". Books would show up mysteriously, and he found himself encountering the exact sort of individuals he was attempting to describe.

Yet, when he began sending "The Celestine Prophecy" to publishers in 1992, the coincidences came to a halt. The publishers who were interested said it would take at least a year to release, and Redfield felt it was important to get it out immediately. Initially, he saw his lack of publishing opportunities as a failure, but then realised that it was this interpretation that was preventing the coincidences continuing to occur.

"When I realised what was happening," he recounts, "I snapped to attention and made more revisions to the book, emphasising this point."

Redfield is still a regular churchgoer, although he admits that does not mean every Sunday. He is also very interested in what other faiths have to offer, so often visits the places of worship of other religions and denominations. It was an intuitive decision that made him go to a Unity church one evening, where a woman called Salle Merrill happened to be giving a meditation class.

"We saw each other and started talking, and we were married six months later." Having decided to self publish "The Celestine Prophecy", Redfield and Merrill spent six months on the road, visiting small bookshops all over the United States and giving copies away. Of the first 3000 books they printed, they gave away 1500.

Redfield admits this was a very testing time for him, as he had no idea if the book was going to be accepted and recommended or not. But within six months, there were 100,000 copies of the book in print. Then Warner Books bought the rights and published the hardback edition in 1994. "The Celestine Prophecy" shot to number

one on the New York Times bestsellers list, and remained on the list for more than three years, being joined later by Redfield's second book, "The Tenth Insight".

In 1999, "The Secret of Shambhala: In Search of the Eleventh Insight", which is about faith, positive thinking and the power of prayer, and how these make our visions reality, was published. Worldwide sales of Redfield's books now exceed 20 million, and "The Celestine Prophecy" has sold more than 700,000 copies in Australia alone.

When I ask Redfield what he thinks of the latest book to make record sales in this genre - "The Secret" by Rhonda Byrne - he admits that he is a big fan and adds, "It's pure 11th insight stuff".

"It was wonderful to me to see "The Secret" come out and have so much clarity on this whole idea that we can create the world we want, and that there are laws of creation and manifestation," he says, But, he adds, there are more concepts we have to understand about how manifestation works, that we have to make sure that what we are intending comes from a higher self connection and not just from the desires of the ego.

One of the important messages of "The Celestine Prophecy" series is that part of our spiritual journey is to connect us with our higher calling and help us understand that each and every one of us is here to "deliver truth in some area of life". Often this is brought about through a challenge. When Redfield is asked what he has found particularly challenging in his life he says, "I had to really live and work to move from a kind of abstract idea of spirituality, an academic sort of grasping of all this, to bring it down to real life. I was aware that I wasn't doing that enough, which compelled me and drove me to work it out well enough to talk about it."

He has found that, in writing the books, he has moved from the idea to the reality of this and adds, "We all teach what is hardest for us."

Another challenge for Redfield and Merrill was the realisation, after Merrill had suffered four miscarriages, that they would not be able to have children. Redfield had two daughters from a previous relationship, but Merrill was faced with the reality that she could not have children of her own.

"That was difficult," says Redfield. "But like anything else, any of the other challenges in life, we just went back to the well, back to seek the divine mission that we are on and let that lead us into something better."

This couple has certainly been doing some significant work recently. They have been very much a part of the making of "The Celestine Prophecy" film. Merrill was the executive producer and Redfield was one of the three screenplay writers, as well as a producer. He is very excited by the film, and says, "I think it very much complements the book in terms of creating an understanding of how it feels to be pursuing a spiritual life."

He and Merrill have also initiated the Global Prayer Project. For more than a year now, they have brought together people all over the world every fortnight for an hour's prayer. The group prays that people involved in conflict will attain a greater spiritual awareness, and be able to move beyond the cycles of revenge and other factors that contribute to the conflict. Recently, their focus has been on the troubles in Kenya, with the war in Iraq also a primary concern. Redfield also talks about some of these conflicts, and their role in our spiritual evolution. He believes that humans have been expanding their consciousness since the beginning of civilisation. The challenge we are facing today, he says, is that extreme forces of various religions in the world are creating violence because they want everybody else to adhere to their spiritual viewpoint. The solution, he believes, is tolerance: "It is to begin to try to understand and accept the moderate view of every religion and support the moderate in every religion. If the moderates in every religion support each other, then the extremists will be pushed back. Their power will be taken away because the moderates within each religion will take the centre stage."

When this "founding father" is asked about how he feels spirituality and the self help industry is progressing today, he comments on the merging of spirituality and self help into the mainstream: how business books are likely to talk about a spiritual approach, or psychology books may discuss the important aspects of the transcendence of life. As a result, he believes there are not so many self help books out there as there used to be. "It's not because people aren't interested in it anymore," he adds, "but they are getting it from lots of different places and also in conversations with other people."

And this is what the book he is working on now, which he calls "The Twelfth Insight", is about - "doing it, living it and knowing it". Redfield sees "The Twelfth Insight" as integrating spirituality into our personal, everyday lives. Today, he thinks people are not so much interested in talking about the ideas, but rather talking about how they apply them to their daily lives.

His final words of inspiration are: "We have to let ourselves be guided. We have to explore all the chance events which happen in

our lives. If we do that, then our world can change dramatically. We are facing whatever challenge we might be facing and we can find a solution - a mystery which will show us a way that leads our lives to a better place."

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