An Esoteric Quest for Inner America

Exploring the History and Renewal of the American Soul

August 24–28, 2009, Phoenicia, New York, just outside of Woodstock


Co-sponsored with Lapis Magazine Online and The Lumen Foundation

www.EsotericQuest.org
Join us for the Open Center’s eighth Esoteric Quest, this time on the home soil of America.

At this historic moment of American crisis and renewal, we stand before the prospect of a deeply moving rebirth of the authentic American spirit. What lies at the heart of this spirit, and how has it been expressed through the centuries? This conference aims to strengthen our ability to understand and love the Inner America of the indigenous peoples, the early colonists, the founding fathers, the Transcendentalists, and the Twentieth Century spiritual and esoteric thinkers, writers, and artists whose legacy continues to influence modern times.

Upstate New York is home to the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, whose deep attunement to the soul of the land and the laws of peace and governance impressed the writers of the Constitution. In the 19th century this area was a hotbed of spiritual innovation known as The Burned Over District. It was the birthplace of numerous forms of unorthodox inner inquiry including the early spiritualists and feminists, the Oneida community, and the Hudson River school of painters.

The Transcendentalism of Emerson, Whitman, and Thoreau uplifted the difficult and dangerous epoch of the Civil War. And remarkable figures emerged such as the African-American student of magic, Paschal Beverly Randolph, and later Madame Blavatsky herself founded the Theosophical Society in New York City in 1875. In the 20th century Martin Luther King’s profound spirituality enhanced the great gift of the Black Church as a powerful generator of soul, courage, and compassion. And many American artists were influenced by spiritual and esoteric philosophy, from Saul Bellow to Elvis. The latter part of the century was filled with a mystical explosion as Buddhist, Sufi, Shamanic, and many other paths found common ground in a new, holistic culture.

This conference will examine and celebrate the life-enhancing spiritual impulses that emerge powerfully in America: the creative meeting of all cultures and spiritual paths; the natural American generosity of spirit; the “Yes We Can” attitude of optimism and self-belief; and the bedrock commitment to the virtue of equality. At a time when hope is high for a new American Renaissance, please join us for this exploration and celebration of the deepest and best in the soul of this country.

—Ralph White, New York Open Center, Conference Director

Christopher Bamford is the editorial director of Steenbergs and Lindisfarne Press. He is the author of An Endless Trace: The Passionate Pursuit of Wisdom in the West, and has written numerous introductions to the works of Rudolf Steiner. Most recently, he co-authored Green Hermeticism: Alchemy and Ecology.

Brian Cunyno is an independent researcher. He has been studying and experimenting with alchemical procedures for 35 years. He is the author of The Weiser’s Concise Guide to Alchemy.

John Patrick Devaney is the author of Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian and Sex Magician and, with Josephine Godwin and Christopher Chanl, The Hermetic Brotherhood of Luxor. He has published extensively on the early history of Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophy.

Richard Goldfarb, Ph.D., is the author of nine books, including studies of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Greek philosophy and culture. These include The Spiritual Teachings of Ralph Waldo Emerson and The Essential Transcendentalists. In 2003, for the bicentennial of Emerson’s birth, he organized two programs at Faneuil Hall in Boston.

Josefnyn Godwin, Ph.D., was educated at Cambridge and Cornell Universities and has taught at Colgate University since 1971. He has written, edited and translated numerous books on music, esotericism and intellectual history including Harmonies of Heaven and Earth and The Theosophical Enlightenment.

Judy Gorman has performed in over ten countries and forty-eight of these United States at clubs, universities, festivals, and peace and justice events here and abroad. She has recently released The Rising of Us All — 18 songs of peace and justice, work and women, struggle and celebration.

Mitch Horowitz is the editor-in-chief of Tarcher/Penguin in New York and the author of the forthcoming Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysterion Shaped Our Nation which has been called “a fascinating book” by Ken Burns and a “sparkling, down-to-earth, and often deeply touching account” by Jacob Needleman.

Wiliam Hunt is the author of the two collections of poetry: Of the Map that Changes and Oceano and Corridors of Orpheus. His work has appeared in Poetry, Tier Quarterly, The New Yorker, The Nation, Paris Review, Sasamagundi, and elsewhere. He teaches English literature and creative writing, and lives in Western Massachusetts.

Freida Jacobs is a former Onondaga clan mother who has been a leader in her community for more than 30 years. She serves as a bridge between her culture and educational institutions in central New York, and has written on the discipline and use of the Good Mind.

Jay Kinney was formerly the publisher and editor in chief of Gnosis: A Journal of the Western Inner Traditions. He was the recipient of the 2005 Albert G. Mackey Award for Excellence in Masonic Research, conferred by the Scottish Rite Research Society. His forthcoming book is The Masonic Esogna.

Larry Mamiya, Ph.D., is the Fashall Davis Professor of Religion and African Studies at Vassar College. He is the co-author with C. Eric Lincoln of the classic study The Black Church in the African American Experience: A former community organizer in Harlem, he was a minister to young adults in San Francisco during the Haight Ashbury counter culture.

Barbara Novak, Afschalpid Professor of Art History Emerita at Bardan College and Columbia University, is the author of the trilogy American Painting of the Nineteenth Century, Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting from 1825-75, and Voyages of the Self: Paths, Parallels and Patterns in American Art and Literature.

Bruce Novak, Ph.D., has taught philosophy, humanities, and education at the University of Chicago and Northern Illinois University. He organized the recent conference “Reclaiming the Wisdom Tradition for Education” (www.wisdomorg) and is currently working on two books: Personal Studies: Literacy for Love and Wisdom, and The Opening of the American Heart.

Nancy Jewel Poes is a co-founder of Rudolf Steiner College with Carl Stegmann, author of The Other America. She has developed the anthroposophical perspective on the spiritual mission of America for over 30 years. She is also a national consultant on death and dying.

Chanda Rule has sung alongside acclaimed musicians Mino Caud, John Benitez, India, Angela Bobill, and has also opened for Amil Larrieux. She has toured Russia, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy singing and leading workshops on the African roots of Gospel. Her debut album, “Like Water,” was released in January 2005.

Louis Saalgau is the author of Master of the Mysteries: The Life of Manly P. Hall. He is a senior staff writer at the Los Angeles Times where he covers religion, politics, the environment, law enforcement, and race relations. He is also current president of the L.A. chapter of Latino Journalists of California Association.

Robert A.F. Thurman, Ph.D., is Professor of Indo-Tibetan Studies at Columbia University, President of Tibet House US, a popular lecturer on Tibetan Buddhism, and translator of many philosophical treatises and sutras. He is also the author of numerous books including the national bestseller Inner Revolution: Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Real Happiness, and Anger (the fifth book from a series on the Seven Deadly Sins).

Gioia Tiptonelli is one of the founders of the current world wide revival of the art of storytelling and was given the Women’s National Book Award for her lifelong work in the oral tradition. She recently completed a novel on New York immigrant life in the early 20th century.

Arthur Versluis, Ph.D., is the author of The Esoteric Foundations of the American Renaissance and many other books including Magic and Mysticism. He is a professor in the College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State University and edited the online journal Esoterica.

Sally Roesch Wagner, Ph.D., is a feminist, pioneer, activist, and author of several books including Sisters in Spirit: Handshenonsence (Browns) Influence on Early American Feminism. She is a founder of one of the nation’s first women’s studies programs and appeared in Ken Burns’ documentary One Woman, One Vote. She is executive director of the Marita Joelyn Gage Foundation.
Three Iroquois Lessons Offered Toward Peace
Freida Jacques
The Onondaga are one of the Six Nations of the Haudenosaunee or Iroquois People whose land covers large areas of Upstate New York. In this talk, a former Turtle clan mother of the Onondaga Nation conveys important values from her culture that could benefit America at this point in time. Thanksgiving, respect for life, and carefully considering the lives of future generations on earth are among them.

Colonial America: Seeds of American Spirituality and Esotericism
Christopher Bamford
As the seed is, so is the tree. This talk will focus on the varied impulses, traditions, and currents at play in the Colonies. It will tell of a rich field formed by heterodox European religious traditions (Puritans, Anabaptists, Moravians, Huguenots, Quakers, and others), as well as esoteric groups and practitioners (alchemists, Hermeticists, Behmenists, Rosicrucians, and Freemasons). By focusing on certain key figures such as Roger Williams, John Woolman, and Johannes Kelpius, we will see how the seeds of a new esotericism and spirituality were planted.

Upstate Cauldron
Joscelyn Godwin, Ph.D.
During the first century of American independence, Upstate New York was a hotbed of spiritual and utopian movements. Freed from European tradition and New England rigidity, cult leaders and illuminates found fertile ground as the frontier moved westward. Out of the “Burned-Over District” came Mormonism, Spiritualism, and a host of ephemeral groups with odd beliefs and bizarre practices.

The All-Seeing Eye in America: Freemasonry’s Role in American History
Jay Kinney
Several prominent Founding Fathers were Freemasons and the legend of a Masonic influence in American origins is a popular belief. But how true is the legend? What role did Masonry really play in the American Revolution and how did Masonry impact the new republic as the 19th century progressed? Is there an esoteric core to “the Craft,” as some allege? This talk will pay particular attention to the Freemasonic experience in America, where a unique set of circumstances have produced a most paradoxical result: a secret society for the common man.

The Esoteric American Renaissance
Arthur Versluis, Ph.D.
Most people are familiar with the well-known names of the American Renaissance: Dickinson, Emerson, Hawthorne, Poe, and Thoreau, for instance. But few are aware of just how much these authors’ works were infused by esoteric currents and practices. Alchemy, folklore, and Platonicism all intermingled to create what we now know as the American Renaissance, but which really represents the first literary, philosophical, and religious flowering of the United States. Could such a time come again?

For more information please see www.EsotericQuest.org
The Spiritual Mission of America
Nancy Jewel Poer

It is not hard to see America’s will to empire and materialism. But her spiritual mission lies in the ideals of true freedom in her founding documents and those who have understood what it means to live them. The gathering of people in America is representative of the entire world in the centuries of scientific and social awakening and has high purposes. These are ultimately the recognition that, beyond narrow nationalism and the bondage of common blood, we are universal citizens, brothers and sisters in the spirit.

The Legacy of the Black Church and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Struggle for the Soul of America
Larry Mamiya, Ph.D.

The election of President Barack Obama presents an opportunity to examine the two major spiritual influences on him — the values of the Black Church and the social justice legacy of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the civil rights movement. This talk considers why African Americans have higher levels of religiosity and commitment. It also explores the spiritual foundations of Dr. King’s life: his relationship to Gandhi’s nonviolence and his Christian realism. Implications will be drawn for the continuing struggle for America’s soul.

Master of the Mysteries:
The Life of Manly P. Hall
Louis Sahagun

In 1919, a Canadian teenager with a sixth grade education arrived by train in the sleepy pueblo of Los Angeles. Manly Palmer Hall went on to become one of the 20th century’s most prolific authors and speakers on ancient philosophies, mysticism, and magic — and a confidant of entertainment and industry leaders. In this talk, we will explore the life and times of this esoteric figurehead, providing an inside view of the birth of a vibrant American subculture.

The Pursuit of Real Happiness:
The Soul of America and the Buddha Dharma
Robert Thurman, Ph.D.

In Inner Revolution, Robert Thurman argues that America, in its soul, ideals, and dreams (now being resuscitated by President Obama), beautifully intersects with the social revolutionary movement that arose in Shakyamuni Buddha’s enlightenment and came down to us through history in the enlightenments of millions of Buddhists. In this talk, he expands on how the pursuit of real happiness could manifest in America in this century.

Afternoon Activities

The Zen Mountain Monastery
Each afternoon we will have the opportunity to visit nearby places of spiritual significance. Located on 230 acres of forest preserve, the Zen Mountain Monastery, the main house of the Mountains and Rivers Order, is one of the West’s most respected Zen Buddhist monasteries and training centers. Since its inception in 1980, Zen Mountain Monastery has provided a place of serenity, beauty and profound teachings.

The Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery
Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery was built through the blessings and inspiration of His Holiness, The Dalai Lama, in response to the supplication of students in the West who yearned for an authentic place for study and practice. Here, the teachings and practices of the “whispered lineage” are preserved in their purity and made available to Western students who wish to learn about and practice Tibetan Buddhism.

Visit to Woodstock
The town of Woodstock is famous for lending its name to the Woodstock Festival, actually held at Yasgur’s dairy farm in Bethel, New York. The town itself remains one of the most engaging centers of alternative culture in America, filled with appealing cafes, bookstores, and art galleries, and an atmosphere of mellow, imaginative charm. Its many spiritually conscious inhabitants always make a visit to Woodstock a memorable and sweet experience.

Afternoons at Menla
The Menla Mountain Retreat Center is located in a beautiful, secluded, wooded valley permeated by tranquility. Each afternoon there will be time to relax and enjoy nature. There are also opportunities to experience bodywork, practice meditation, swim, hike, or deepen connections with Quest participants.

For more information please see www.EsotericQuest.org
Sophia and the Mysteries of Community in 19th Century America
Christopher Bamford
Perhaps America’s most revolutionary contribution to esotericism came through the communitarian movement, which drew upon many spiritual currents—Christianity, Transcendentalism, Swedenborgianism, Fourierism, Spiritualism—to name only a few—to create a new Sophianic understanding of both the divine and what it means to be human. This workshop will examine many different manifestations including Mother Anne Lee and the Shakers, Robert Owen and New Harmony, John Humphrey Noyes and the Oneida Community, and Thomas Lake Harris and his community at Wassac.

Immigrants All
Joscelyn Godwin, Ph.D.
Joscelyn Godwin, himself an immigrant, invites participants to describe and discuss their own relationship to the worlds of their ancestors. What are they glad that they or their families brought from there, and glad to be free from? Does America offer spiritual possibilities of its own, or is it a political and sentimental mirage, cut off from Tradition? What inherited assumptions affect the way we answer these questions?

The Doctor, The Adept, and the Quest for the Philosopher’s Stone
Brian Cotnoir
In the 1660’s, word spread through London that an adept, Eirenaeus Philalethes, had made the philosopher’s stone. The publication describing this work, Secrets Reveal’d: An Open Entrance to the Closed Palace of the King, was handled by a young Harvard educated doctor from New England—George Starkey. When Dr. Starkey came to England, he became Robert Boyle’s teacher in the chymical arts. Only recently was it discovered that the adept and the doctor were one and the same. This workshop will trace this remarkable man’s life, the reasons for his double life, as well as examine and decipher parts of his Secrets Reveal’d.

Transcendentalism, Silence, and Sublimity in American Landscape Painting 1825-75
The Spiritual Context
Barbara Novak
This workshop examines the search for God in nature and ideas of silence and sublimity as seen in the paintings of the Hudson River School. It will deal primarily with Thomas Cole and Frederick Church who lived and worked in the Catskills, but will also include two other key Hudson River artists and the New England Luminists. The landscapes of the period will be considered in the spiritual context of the age as they connect to the thinking of Emerson and Thoreau and to American Indian and East Indian concepts.

Walt Whitman’s Democratic Vistas and the Creation of a Spiritual Democracy
Bruce Novak, Ph.D.
Cornel West has called Walt Whitman’s 1871 treatise Democratic Vistas a greater work than his epic Leaves of Grass. We will explore together why this is so by tracing the development of the democratic idea, as Whitman did, from a stage of “political foundation rights,” through a stage of “material prosperity,” leading up to its true founding in “a sublime and serious Religious Democracy,” the advent of which we may right now be witnessing.

Paschal Beverly Randolph: A 19th Century African American Esotericist
John Patrick Deveney
Paschal Beverly Randolph (1825-1875) was a 19th century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and sex magician. It is a revelation to realize the poverty of what preceded Randolph and his monumental achievement in transforming occultism and spiritualism from antiquarian bookishness to the pursuit of individual spiritual growth here and now through practical spiritual techniques. The history of western and especially American spirituality since Randolph’s death might be seen as the working out of his ideas on realizing our own divine nature.

In Blavatsky’s Shadow: America’s Unsung Mages
Jay Kinney
The prominent role played by Madame Blavatsky in the occult revival of the late 19th century has tended to obscure the significant contributions made by lesser known figures. We will take a good look at two such people, the esoteric Masons Albert Pike and Albert G. Mackey, whose work in Masonic circles helped lay the groundwork for the spread of esotericism and the perennial philosophy.

Reading Esoteric Dimensions of American Literature
Arthur Versluis, Ph.D.
We will work through some esoteric dimensions of major literary works—in particular, writings by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Emily Dickinson, but also a few others. Clearly, one can read such works on a surface level, but one soon discovers that they have multiple levels. At the same time, it is not uncommon for these authors to offer us an “open esotericism,” in which the more esoteric dimensions of their work are hidden in plain sight.

For more information please see www.EsotericQuest.org
The Spiritual Background of Saul Bellow’s Writing
William Hunt
The work of Saul Bellow is often noted for inventive narratives that range over the American scene and character. However, a paucity of published critical attention has been directed to reckoning the depth of Bellow’s involvement with the spiritual lives of urban Americans. Poet William Hunt, who was a friend and participant with Bellow in the study of Rudolf Steiner’s work for twenty years, will discuss how Bellow’s late fiction mirrors the esoteric issues of morality raised by both Anthroposophy and Bellow’s own background as a student of Kabbalah.

Esoteric Los Angeles
Louis Sahagun
The turn of the last century in Los Angeles was a time when many civic and business leaders, judges, architects, and entertainment industry figures were members of Masonic lodges or esoteric schools whose Neoclassical temples were among the most imposing buildings on the Southern California landscape. In the 1950s and 60s, Manly P. Hall’s Hollywood compound, among others, attracted a new generation of seekers from surprisingly diverse fields including the actor Burl Ives, California Governor Goodwin Knight, and the one and only Elvis.

Occult America: The Secret History of How Mysticism Shaped Our Nation
Mitch Horowitz
America possesses an esoteric tradition that is largely unknown yet permeates our culture. Beginning in the late 17th century, influences from Spiritualism, Freemasonry, New Thought, Transcendentalism, Mesmerism, and a host of philosophies and occult traditions have shaped America in unexpected ways. Drawing on his forthcoming book, Occult America, Mitch Horowitz reveals the metaphysical influences beneath our national life, exploring figures ranging from Mary Todd Lincoln to Henry A. Wallace, Frederick Douglass to Marcus Garvey, Joseph Smith to Colonel Henry Steel Olcott.

The America Story
Nancy Jewel Poer
Our vast and beautiful land is peopled with diverse, innovative citizens with inherent vitality and good will. But we need a greater awareness of the responsibilities that go with great freedom. This visual presentation includes a broad view of turning points in American history and the nation’s many heroic individuals as they shine with inspiring light while facing the nation’s powerful darkness.

Note: Inner America is a theme bursting with vitality so please see: www.EsotericQuest.org for updates

Evening Activities

Wade in the Water
An Evening of Gospel Music performed by Chanda Rule
Led by singer/songwriter and international performer Chanda Rule, Wade in the Water melds spirituals, blues, and gospel, taking listeners on a musical journey from the southern-most parts of Mississippi to the slick streets of Northern urban metros, and back again. The songs, lyrics, and arrangements connect the dots of the history of African American spiritual music, drawing a smooth line from early Negro Spirituals to contemporary gospel.

Blessings at the Threshold, Elizabeth Street, New York City, 1905
An Evening of Stories told by Gioia Timpanelli
This is an evening of stories and back stories of Sicilian and Jewish Immigrants working in the garment industry in New York City in 1905. Coming out of great necessity, the immigrants from Sicily and Russia in 1905 came with few material goods but with their cultures intact. This evening will include some folk tales and spiritual stories about Saints and Holy Fools.

The Songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger
An Evening of Folk Music performed by Judy Gorman
As America reawakens to social justice and equality as core values, its great folk music tradition conveys countless stories of struggle and triumph in this cause. Woody Guthrie may be our greatest songwriter of the people’s America and Pete Seeger is his worthy heir. This rousing evening takes us into the heart and soul of the America of the common man and woman.
Post-Conference Journey


Upstate New York, to many people's amazement, is filled with fascinating sites of deep spiritual and esoteric significance. The ancient land of the Six Nations Iroquois Confederacy, its reputation in the 19th Century as the Burned Over District derived from the waves of evangelical fervor that swept across the state. It was also the birthplace of American Feminism, Spiritualism, and the utopian Oneida Community. Today it is still home to alternative communities and to biodynamic farms and centers of holistic learning, and is a vast, beautiful, and culturally vital part of America.

We begin our journey by visiting Bethel Woods Cultural Center, site of the legendary Woodstock Festival in 1969 that captured the love-centered spirit of a generation. From there we travel to Ithaca to the Moosewood Café, a seminal force in the world of natural foods. We will spend the night near Seneca Falls where the first Women’s Rights Convention met in 1848 and Marjorie Roth will speak to us by the intertwined stories of Spiritualism and early Feminism. The next morning we will gather at the former home of Matilda Gage, and Jeanne Shenandoah of the Onondaga Nation and Sally Roesch Wagner will speak on the influence of the Iroquois culture on the pioneering feminists. We go on to the Oneida Community where utopian free love and gender equality flourished in the mid-19th Century. Our last two nights will be spent at a Thesosophical Retreat Center, from which we will journey to the enchanting Hawthorne Valley where we will learn how the legacy of the great esoteric philosopher Rudolf Steiner lives on in a vibrant biodynamic farm, Waldorf school, research center and nearby Camphill Village. On our last full day we travel to the Abode of the Message, the Sufi community in New Lebanon where Pir Zia Inayat Khan will speak to us on his sense of Inner America. Our final morning concludes at Olana, exquisite home of the Hudson River painter Frederick Church. The sublime and epic vista that unfolds before us as the Valley stretches toward the Catskills provides a perfect spot to conclude our Quest.

Price: $985 per person for accommodations in a double room, $1095 for a single room. This cost includes accommodations for the nights of August 28–31, all meals, travel in a luxury coach and entrance fees to sites.

People not attending the conference at Menla are welcome to join us for this post-conference journey. Please see www.EsotericQuest.org or call Andrea Lomanto at 212.219.2527 ext. 101 for more details.
Program Highlights

Three Iroquois Lessons Offered Toward Peace
Freida Jacques

Colonial America:
Seeds of American Spirituality and Esotericism
Christopher Bamford

Immigrants All
Joselyn Godwin, Ph.D.

The Esoteric American Renaissance
Arthur Versluis, Ph.D.

The All-Seeing Eye in America:
Freemasonry’s Role in American History
Jay Kinney

Ralph Waldo Emerson:
The Seer of Concord and Father of Transcendentalism
Richard Geldard, Ph.D.

Dead Women Do Tell Tales
Sally Roesch Wagner, Ph.D.

The Legacy of the Black Church and Martin Luther King, Jr. in the Struggle for the Soul of America
Larry Mamiya, Ph.D.

The Pursuit of Real Happiness:
The Soul of America and the Buddha Dharma
Robert Thurman, Ph.D.

Evenings of Gospel, The Songs of Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger, and Stories from Elizabeth Street, New York City, 1905

Plus a Post-Conference Journey: Esoteric Upstate New York and the Hudson Valley:
Iroquois Nations, Feminists, Utopians and 21st Century Esotericists