

# On Spiritual Books and their Readers: A Review of *Radical Kabbalah*

Gafni, Marc. (2012). *Radical Kaballah 2 Volume Set*. Integral Publisher, LLC

Reviewed by Zachary Stein<sup>1</sup>

As a philosopher of education I worry about what people read, and that there are so many of them reading so much. The mass production and circulation of reading materials pre-dates television in demonstrating the breathtaking impact of industrialization on education. Since World War II, more books have been published than in the whole of prior human history, and more people read those books than have ever read anything before. From one perspective the *book* has been a triumph, allowing for profound changes in how people come to gain access to the knowledge they use to understand themselves and the world. But the book is a fundamentally flawed educational technology. For most of their existence books were so difficult to publish that only the most important were printed. This is no longer the case, which is why the design flaws inherent in the book are becoming more and more obvious.

Books are too authoritative, for one. There is no arguing with a book, let alone having it explain something some other way. Books are monovocal and monological, not to mention linear, un-dialectical, and non-dialogical. They are not good teachers because they simply tell you how it is. Even the best book cannot clarify itself, except in so far as it references other books. And, of course, books are notoriously prone to misinterpretation. Consider the mass hermeneutic turbulence produced by our contemporary overabundance of texts: with tens of thousands of books hitting the shelves each month and the overall literacy level stuck at around 8th grade, that's millions of misinterpretations a day, at least. This is especially problematic when it comes to spiritual books. These books are the top sellers, and given their popularity and the broad swaths of the public they attract, *who knows* how the ideas they express are fitting into the conceptual ecologies of readers. Ever since the spiritual counter culture started founding publishing houses in the 1960s, the American mind has been relentlessly disequibrated by an ever-expanding universe of discourse about the religious and spiritual.

Post-modern spiritual books and their readers are important because they are yet another indicator of major recent reconfigurations of religious authority in America. In 2010, I wrote a paper for the *Journal of Integral Theory and Practice*, called "On spiritual teachers and teachings" (Stein, 2010). In this paper I took a socio-philosophical look at the predicament of authority faced by 21st century spiritual teachers. I was concerned with characterizing the dynamics of teacherly authority and the varieties of educational configurations that surround what Habermas (2002 p. 52) has called "the new de-institutionalized forms of religiosity." I offered a set of nor-

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<sup>1</sup> **Zachary Stein**, Ed.M., Ed.D(c), is a doctoral candidate in the philosophy of education at Harvard University and Co-Founder of Lectica, Inc. He lives with his wife on the shores of Hammond Pond in the foothills of the Berkshires.  
zas456@mail.harvard.edu



mative distinctions intended to help clarify the value and validity of emerging spiritual teachings and teachers. That is, I offered some ideas about how to separate the "California clap trap" from the forms of religious language and practice that make a legitimate claim as "vehicles for possible truth contents" —again quoting Habermas (2008 p.152). After building a philosophical model for distinguishing between different types of religious educational configurations, I contrasted two educational organizations with illustratively different teachings and teacher-student authority dynamics. Andrew Cohen's EnlighteNext and Dr. Marc Gafni's Center for Integral Wisdom served as foils, allowing me to demonstrate the differences and similarities between these versions of 21st century religious educational authority. Part of the contrast consisted in their differing theoretical orientations, while another contrast centered around the dynamics of teacherly authority and teacherly practice.

A neglected theme in my discussion was the role of religious scholarship and scholarly lineage as an aspect of teacherly authority. That is, I failed to discuss the respective *books* related to each educational organization—and books have always been a critical component of all religious educational configurations. Gafni's books, especially his newest, *Radical Kabbalah* (2012) and *Your Unique Self* (2012a), are texts that belong in a fundamentally different scholarly discourse than most contemporary paperbacks sold by spiritual teachers. Many popular spiritual books, such as Cohen's (2011) *Evolutionary Enlightenment* (or any number of others, such as *The Power of Now* or those by Byron Katie) are texts that stand outside religious traditions and lineages. These are non-lineage texts, without scholarly depth or reference. They are not engaged with any particular religious tradition, although they may reference them and their authors may have practiced with teachers from traditions. It has been clear to me for some time that this divorce from lineage and tradition leads both to a new fangled form of post-modern guru worshiping (where personal charisma makes up for the poor quality of the text) and to a retreat into *ad hominem* arguments against specific teachings (where personal attacks take the place of reasoned debate). So it is that these books draw much of their power from their non-denominational character, their "spiritual but not religious" flavor, and the personal revelations and insights of their authors.

Gafni's books are both like this and not at all like this.

## **Beyond Popular or Academic: Mystical Hermeneutics and Ecstatic Scholarship**

On the one hand Gafni offers books that are post-traditional in that they speak to a broad swath of the public who are either not located at all or not exclusively identified within any particular spiritual or religious tradition. On the other hand they make fundamentally different moves than other books in the genre, moves that require an admirable breadth and depth of scholarship. These texts differentiate from the great traditions but they do not disassociate. Virtually all the other books in this genre fail to make this move and wind up disassociating from the great lineages without being able to generate any comparable source of breadth and depth. Gafni's books aspire to advance sophisticated scholarship in a specific religious tradition, reconfirming the relevance and power of rigorous scholarship, while moving beyond a merely academic impetus and impact.

To use a well-worn trope from Wilber's Integral Theory, Gafni's books *transcend but include* the rigors of academic scholarship and religious tradition. Whereas most spiritual books are not rigorous enough to pass as a dissertation project, Gafni's work is at the leading edge of a rigorous tradition of scholarship. The evaluative issues here cut both ways, as the standards of the academy are irrelevant to the motives and impact of many spiritual books. Yet, by transcending and including these standards, Gafni brings his work back into the marketplace of ideas and out of the minutia and irrelevance that can bog down academic writing. The ideas have a richness and profundity that is informed by a rare hybrid of profound scholarship and lineage mastery that comes from engaging and evolving a great tradition. Gafni's scholarship serves as a model, not only in articulating a new framework of spiritual thought which I will discuss below, but in creating a new genre of book that offers a distinct intellectual strategy for developing and delivering ideas. At the heart of this approach is a dimension of engagement with the traditions that has already been noticed by integral theorist Sean Esbjörn-Hargens (2012), who deployed Jeffery Kripal's terms in describing Gafni's work as a form of "mystical hermeneutics and ecstatic scholarship." This is a key observation, as Gafni is not only a significant third person scholar of his native tradition of Kabbalah, he is also an advanced first and second person adept within the tradition, possessed of realization received from the lineage.

In the Introduction to *Radical Kabbalah* Gafni tips his hand and reveals some of his complex agenda. He calls the book an esoteric transmission, which hides appropriately under the fig leaf of the academic structure and rigor of the work. This is the only section of the two volumes where Gafni drops the academic veneer:

I am in love with these teachings, awed by their subtlety and profundity, moved by their commitment and depth and enchanted by their possibility. In the book before you however, I have remained faithful to the academy in deploying the tools of scholarship, in seeking to uncover Rabbi Lainer's [the lineage master whose works are the focus of *Radical Kabbalah*] teaching exclusively, without entangling it, explicitly or subtly with my own. None the less the initiated reader must remember that this is an esoteric work, one which in understated tones, intends to lay down a revolutionary, evolutionary set of spiritual principles which will be recognized as such by those with a pure heart and a clarified self. (Gafni, 2012, p. li)

The casual reader passes over these sentences without much attention, but the more careful observer notes words like *initiated*, *clarified*, *transmission* and realizes that something not *less* but *more* rigorous than traditional scholarship is afoot. Gafni also describes his own approach to the text beyond the classic canons of scholarship:

In approaching the master and his text... I followed the three-stage path of textual reading implied by the Baal Shem Tov. First, in a state of what the Baal Shem calls *hahna'ah*, reverential submission to what one is learning, I read every passage again and again, praying that I might realize Lainer's deeper intention and receive his transmission. Second, I moved from submission to what the Baal Shem calls *havdalah*, separation. In this stage of *havdalah*, I deployed a method of analysis, which involved two basic steps. As I read, I made a list of key topics, words and texts in Lainer. I subsequently gathered every reference to that text, theme or image, searching for the underlying pattern. At the same time I

studied... many of the original Zoharic sources that would have influenced *Mei Hashiloah*, to get a sense of how he was reading the tradition, what he changed in his interpretation, and why. Eventually, stage two yielded to stage three, which the Baal Shem Tov calls *hamtakah*, sweetening. *Hamtakah* involves an erotic ‘non-dual’ merger with the text, which occurs when the reader and that which is read become one. It is at this stage that the deeper intention of the Lainer’s Torah became startlingly clear, delightful, and beautiful, and the entire teaching opened up with radical clarity and joy. (Gafni, 2012, p. 1)

This form of scholarship is both rigorous and mystical—producing a set of books that reward carefully and repeated study. But aside from their distinct position in the scholarly landscape, what is so important about these books, and why as a philosopher of education would I prefer to see them read over than others?

## Unique Self: Reclaiming the Personal and Democratizing Enlightenment

To my mind the core value of these books is that they reconfirm (in a compelling scholarly fashion) some of the most central ethical tenants of Western Civilization. Moreover, they do so by reminding us that the Judeo-Christian tradition contains a radical Enlightenment teaching, with a message about the collective Awakening of *everyone everywhere*. Gafni calls this the democratization of Enlightenment. This is a theological metaphysics justifying the reign of an Absolute Democracy, in which each must live so that all have the ability and dignity to be heard, known, and counted. The mystical core of the great democratic political revolutions can be found in the cipher of ancient texts, reinterpreted in each age, and again today, in order to enliven the struggle to create a world-order conducive to human liberation. As Habermas has stressed, there is currently no replacement for the world-disclosing power of religious language, especially in its capacity to give voice to the profound vulnerabilities, interdependencies, and potentialities of human social life.

The core theoretical innovation enabling the democratization of Enlightenment is what Gafni calls, *the reclaiming of the personal*. This idea is presented most clearly where he offers a comparison between two models of Self, his own model of Unique Self and Andrew Cohen’s Authentic Self or Evolutionary Self (a comparison undertaken in detail in Gafni’s forthcoming book *Two Models of Self and Why They Matter*). He notes that in classic Enlightenment teachings from the East the key move is from the personal to the impersonal. For example, Cohen’s community was for many years called the Impersonal Enlightenment Fellowship. This is the classic understanding of enlightenment, which finds expression in many Eastern schools of thought, including Buddhist and Advaita Vedanta. In Cohen’s book *Evolutionary Enlightenment*, for example, the word ‘personal’ is used dozens of times throughout the text, but always with a negative and pejorative connotation. The personal is not to be embraced; it is to be transcended. “Leave your story behind” has become virtually the clarion call of Enlightenment teaching in the Western adaption of most Eastern models.

Gafni (2012a, Ch. 7) points out that the conflation of the *personal* with the conditioned *personality* is a confusion that needs to be corrected. In Gafni’s model an essential distinction is posited between the personal before realization (of non-dual radically impersonal Emptiness or

God) and the personal that re-emerges after this realization. The former he terms separate self and the latter Unique Self. Unique Self is thus likened to a structure-stage of consciousness suggesting that to confuse the personal before realization with the personal that manifest post-realization is to fall into what Wilber terms a pre-trans fallacy. No less serious a mistake in Gafni's reading is to denigrate the personal in favor of an impersonal process, such as cosmic evolution, without distinguishing which level of the personal is being addressed. True enough, cosmic evolution (conceived as a panentheistic unfolding) is hierarchically beyond the pre-realization conditioned personality, but it doesn't efface the irreducible dignity of the post-realized personal, i.e. the Unique Self; in fact it find its expression in an infinite variety of uniquely personal forms. This is a lesson that cannot be stressed enough, especially in a context of discourse where an evolutionary ethic has emerged that turns a blind eye toward the tragedy of injustices that resulted from the enthusiasms of previous generations of evolutionary thinkers, from Dialectical Materialism to Eugenics.

Gafni's reclaiming of the personal is the ground of his non-dual humanism and sourced deep in the lineage upon which he draws. The following passage from the Introduction to *Radical Kabbalah* engages this point and is worth quoting at length:<sup>2</sup>

.....It is in this sense that we can begin to understand Lainer's provocative idea that the Torah was given by a Moses who is merged with God—not in the voice of God, but in the voice of Moses.... Lainer uses the Zoharic phrase 'The *Shekhinah* speaks through the voice of Moses' as a foundation for his position. This Zoharic phrase, describing the authorship of Deuteronomy, was understood in two very different ways. The theocentric understanding, reflected in most Hasidic works, is that Moses was so completely effaced that he became a kind of channel for the divine voice. For Lainer this is only the first instrumental level of enlightenment. The second possible understanding of the phrase 'the *Shekhinah* speaks through the voice of Moses', corresponding to the higher level of enlightenment in Lainer, is almost the opposite: Moses is not effaced, but is rather so completely present that his voice and the voice of the *Shekhinah* become one. Moses' unique persona, his voice and personality, incarnate the *Shekhinah*; through radical uniqueness, he participates in ontic unity with God....the *Shekhinah* speaking comes through the *intensification of individuality*, rather than through its effacement. Because the human is a part of God, the principle of acosmism does not negate but rather empowers the individual. The divine voice finds expression in the voice of the unique spirit, modeled by the prophet who manifests God's voice through the clear prism of his unique individuality. This is the core of Lainer's non-dual humanism. Lainer argues, both explicitly and implicitly, that the unique individual is the portal through which comes the revelation of the unmediated divine will, the new Torah that can override the law of Sinai. In various writings I have called this pivot in Lainer's thought 'sacred autobiography' or 'unique self.' (Gafni, 2012, p. liii-liv)

Now what is especially critical is that this capacity to "incarnate the *Shekhinah*" is understood in Gafni's writing, emergent from all of his sources, not as the domain of the elite but as an innate capacity available to every human being. He adduces relevant texts to overturn the dominant reading of Lainer's model as only referring to the elite and asserts, in Lainer's name, what he

<sup>2</sup> The term *Shekhinah* is one of the Hebrew names of God, connoting the Divine Presence in the world, often associated with the feminine or embodied existence of God.

terms “the democratization of Enlightenment.” Again, from the Introduction to *Radical Kabbalah*:

The goal of Lainer’s teaching is no less than the full democratization of enlightenment. He implicitly identifies and distinguishes between two forms of enlightened consciousness. The first is what we might call the instrumental level. At this stage of realization, the person is an instrument, like a flute or shofar, played by the divine. Images describing this stage of illumination were replete in the Hasidic teachings and writings which constituted Lainer’s intellectual framework. This is the level of utter surrender to the divine. As one internalizes this level and transcends it, one comes to another level, which Lainer associates with Temple energy and the Judah archetype. At this level, God does not move through the person as an external force animating and filling the person’s voice, but rather God is incarnate within the person, who achieves a radical identity with the divine. Lainer makes clear that this enlightenment is a possibility for every member of the community. Every human being has the potential of Moses. (Gafni, 2012, p.lii)

This teaching principle of democratization is a pivotal focus in the more popular and accessible companion to *Radical Kabbalah*, entitled *Your Unique Self*. It is the one the defining characteristics of Gafni’s work which seeks not only the evolution of the leading edge but the articulation of a world spirituality that can potentially become a shared spiritual language for large swaths of the mainstream. This language revolves around the idea of “higher individuation beyond ego,” tracing its roots to an enlightenment lineage which places *sacred autobiography* at the center of the awakening realization. Again from *Radical Kabbalah*:<sup>3</sup>

For Lainer, one who has become fully clarified becomes both the source of revelation and the incarnation of the *Shekhinah*.... Unlike most of the earlier sources, the kabbalist is not an empty vessel channeling the divine. Rather, the unique consciousness of the purified person, and even their unique unconscious, is divine. This implies that the *Shekhinah* that is one’s essence speaks *naturally* from within the enlightened individual. For Lainer, the self of the mystic becomes so conscious as to become transparent to his divine self. Erotic merger with the *Shekhinah* yields not the hermeneutics of sacred text but the hermeneutics of sacred autobiography. In this way, Lainer extends the erotic motif beyond traditional hermeneutics and applies it to reading the ‘text’ of the person’s unique self. This allows the individual to recover the personal revelation of divine will which is addressed uniquely to him. This revelation comes through the unmediated embrace of the *Shekhinah*, which is antinomian in a way in that is clearly different than any previous sources. Lainer’s incarnational *Shekhinah* theology is both empowering and limned with humanistic undertones.” (Gafni, 2012, p. xviii)

Or in a later passage:

Sacred autobiography...is itself a sacred text. It is the book of life. This is Lainer’s implicit reading of the old Kabbalistic teaching from Safed that every person has their own ‘letter

<sup>3</sup> I’m talking so often from the Introduction because it is in essence a 60 page summary of the whole work, and beyond this I found that the main body of the text is too closely reasoned and tightly linked up with primary sources to allow for an easy lifting of synoptic quotes.

in the Torah.' Sacred autobiography both interacts with and, occasionally, even trumps sacred text, superseding one's obligation to the written canon. The initiate will understand that, far from giving easy license to one's desires, this path requires extraordinary discipline. According to Lainer, one can only access this revelation through the identification and embrace of one's uniqueness. Lainer makes a strong distinction between the sense of specialness or uniqueness at an egoic level, which needs to be purified, and uniqueness at the enlightened level of Judah-consciousness, which is both the expression of and the path to full realization. This level of enlightenment may be achieved consistently or even just for a time in an individual's life. It is through the depths of one's unique individuality, one's unique self, rather than in the transcendence of individuality, that one hears the voice of the infinite God in the *lehishah*, the whisper of personal revelation.... (Gafni, 2012, p. lxiii)

This notion of Unique Self changes the fundamental way we think about Enlightenment. Gafni's overarching point is that what is commonly referred to as Enlightenment or Awakening is available to every human being. This move towards the democratization of enlightenment is a core structure not of Eastern but classic Judeo-Christian thought. Gafni points out that a failure to understand the true nature of Enlightenment has kept it from having its critically needed impact as a legitimate modern belief, which would serve as an evolutionary strange attractor for human motivation and aspiration. Gafni redefines Enlightenment in its most basic terms as *sanity*. Once you understand Enlightenment as sanity then the democratization of sanity (aka Enlightenment) becomes a self-evident requirement. What stands in the way is the incorrect conflation of uniqueness and separateness (or personal with personality) which moves Enlightenment teachers to reject uniqueness; this in turn moves the mainstream population, who intuit personal uniqueness to be a critical source of human dignity, to reject Enlightenment.

The importance of these contrasting views of Enlightenment was brought home most vividly for me in two passages from Rabbi Lainer. Gafni explains the context for the passage, which makes reference to a section of the Talmud in which Moses takes the first census of the tribe while it wanders in the wilderness: "The census of Israel in the desert is an affirmation of the radical uniqueness of every individual. *Mispar* [the Hebrew word for] 'number' is not a technical means of identification but rather a badge of each individual's metaphysical uniqueness. For Lainer, the census in the desert is not aimed at yielding population statistics, that is to say, the final number of the community; rather, it is focused on the act of numbering every individual as the revelation of their uniqueness. Lainer states:

The idea of "lifting up of the head" (taking census) is in accordance with the Talmud (bBer, 58a): 'One person's mind is not similar to another person's mind.' For God apportioned goodness and life to each one in particular, and no one is similar to anyone else. It is therefore written, 'Lift up the head.' That is, every person should be in the place belonging to them. (Gafni, 2012, p 7)

Again, Gafni contextualizes another passage from Lainer on the same theme: "Lainer moves from a language of providence... to a language of the mystique of participation. Uniqueness is rooted in an acosmic metaphysics in which the human being is not merely subject to divine providence but actually participates in divinity. The result of this ontology is the daring, yet obvious-

ly necessary, assertion made by Lainer that if one unique soul, *nefesh biferat*, were to be missing, then divinity itself would be lacking. Lainer interprets the phrase "this shall be the number" (Hos. 2:1) as meaning that:

Everyone will be needed, for from all of the people of Israel God's greatness can be seen. And if one person is missing... then "the goblet would be lacking wine" (Cant, 7:2). Just as when the portrait of the king is drawn on many thousands of tiles—if one of them is lost, the portrait of the king would be lacking. (Gafni, 2012, p. 22)

This image brings to mind contemporary montages in which hundreds of thousands of photos are combined via computer to make one face—the uniqueness of each face unquestionably maintained, while the overall pattern of a single face is also distinctly clear. This is a powerful, if simple, encapsulation of the *acosmic humanism* that is the central scholarly contribution of these books. The theme is encapsulated in the mystical idea that each individual has a unique letter in the Torah—that each person is a unique word in an endless sentence spoken by God, whose illocutionary goal is total self-expression.

These kinds of theological and philosophical arguments for inviolable uniqueness and individual dignity pile up until a fundamentally new image of divinity and awakening dawns on the reader. It is not through the extinguishing of personality or the self that awakening unfolds. The goal of spiritual practice is not to merge one's personal uniqueness into some vast impersonal process. Instead, the goal of the religiosity argued for by Gafni is to become, to borrow his nomenclature, "outrageously sane," to be so "*fully human*," so fully *yourself*, that you liberate the powers needed to actualize the stunning uniqueness of your life. That is, the goal is to lift up your head and be counted, to affirm your irreducible individual dignity, and be empowered to participate as only you can in the evolution of humanity.

## **Toward a New Language of Liberation and Social Emancipation**

This is all very different from lowering your head to look at your navel in meditation. Why be counted when you are really *nobody*? Why work to build a world that affirms the dignity of each and every person's *illusory* self? The radical teachings in Gafni's books expose the a-political, apathetic, and defeatist underbelly of so much of Western Buddhism, where the teaching of meditation is combined with affluence and liberal values to create an insular and self-affirming escape from the obligations of uniqueness. Who is left to stand up for the inviolable rights of individuals when everyone is sitting down, counting their breaths, and spending a small fortune on retreats from the world? There is no better ideological lubricant to grease our decline into a global corporate dystopia than a form of religiosity that denigrates the individual, promotes quiescence, and calls for a personal disappearance into some larger structure or process.

As early as the 1970's Habermas (1970 p. 27) identified Western Buddhism as a "sedative—an orientation that channels outwardly directed protest into apolitical paths...". Decades later, the critical theorist Žižek (2001) would announce even more provocatively that:

Western Buddhism is establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism...presenting itself as the remedy against the stressful tension of the capitalist dynam-



ics, allowing us to uncouple and retain inner peace...it actually functions as its perfect ideological supplement.... Rather than trying to cope with the accelerating rhythm of technological progress and social changes, one should rather renounce the very endeavor to retain control over what goes on, rejecting it as the expression of the modern logic of domination—one should instead, “let oneself go,” to drift along, while retaining an inner distance and indifference towards the mad dance of this accelerated process, a distance based on the insight that all this social and technological upheaval is ultimately just a non-substantial proliferation of semblances.... The “Western Buddhist” meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for to fully participate in the capitalist dynamic while retaining the appearance of mental sanity. (pp. 12-13)

The point here is not to critique Buddhism as a whole (some of my best friends are Buddhists) but rather just to point out that the most rapidly spreading religion in the Western world (Buddhism) is not a form of spirituality that has been leading its adherents to perpetrate disruptive social change in the name of social justice. The last time that happened on a large scale in this country it was a movement firmly rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition, under the leadership of a reverend with a dream about the dignity of each individual, the inviolability of human rights regardless of race, and the unique expression of humanity represented by African Americans. Today our enthusiasms for Eastern spiritual imports are leading us away from the discourse about individual rights and democracy leveraged so eloquently by Dr. King, which has served as the most powerful catalyst of social change in history. This language of liberation that is our heritage is being replaced by a language of liberation that is predominantly about the qualities of our own minds and emotional states and which includes the remarkable idea that by sitting for an hour a day on our \$90 buckwheat meditation cushion we are somehow helping to change the world. There is perhaps no more iconic representation of the new American post-modern spiritual landscape than a room full of homogenized white people sitting on sets of standardized cushions facing the wall.

In recent decades we have become increasingly homogenized and standardized, as individuals' lives have been forced into a matrix of techno-economic and political institutions of unprecedented reach and invasiveness. Counterintuitively, reported increases in individualism, narcissism, and entitlement reflect exactly these trends marking “the twilight of the individual.” The post-modern narcissist or entitled millennial are in fact suffering from radical doubt about their own self-worth and unbearable uncertainty about the value of their contributions to the world. As Kohut (1971) and other self-psychologists have taught us, the narcissistic personality is in fact an extremely fragile self-system, one almost totally dependent upon the affirmations of others. Conspicuous displays of self through social media, self-aggrandizing do-gooding, demands for special treatment and attention—these are not signs of the a self blown out of proportion, they are signs of a self desperate to be *seen*, a self needing to be *counted* among the worthy, needing to be *affirmed in its unique worth*.

The cure for the dysfunctions of post-modern identity formation is not a spiritual teaching that tells individuals to look through the illusions of their unique personal essence and beyond the unique time and place in which they live. In fact, the post-modern reader of spiritual books is already tenuously connected to their unique gifts (as opposed to the gifts the media leads them to wish they had) and the unique responsibilities of their time and place (as opposed to those di-

rected toward a world represented through social media). Most spiritual books offer a weak balm for the stinging anonymity and de-personalization of mass-customized lifestyles and post-historical consciousness. These books tell us that our particular personalities and places are to be devalued in favor of some abstract Universal (be it Evolution, Big-Mind, or The Great Perfection), leaving the reader confirmed in their suspicion that their unique life has no special value.

As a way of bringing this point home and as a kind of poetic closing it is worth quoting at length a teaching delivered by Gafni at Esalen Institute in 2012:

Your Unique Self is your irreducibly unique perspective which fosters your unique insight which creates your unique gift which engenders your unique responsibility to address the unique needs in your circle of intimacy and influence. Are you willing [as a seeker of Enlightenment] to play a larger game? Let me state the core premise clearly. We live in a world of outrageous pain. The only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love. Why can we not access the outrageous love necessary to engage in the evolutionary healing and transformation of ourselves and our reality? Because we shut our hearts to the unbearable pain of the world. Not merely because, as the classic Enlightenment teachers reprimand us, we are stuck in ego. Rather because the gap between our ability to feel and our ability to heal has become too great. It simply hurts too much. Through the virtues of the virtual media we are almost omniscient. We are aware today of a level of suffering that only God was aware of a hundred years ago. But unlike the classic vision of an omniscient but also omnipotent God, we are largely impotent to heal the suffering. Because the gap between our ability to feel and our ability to heal has become too great we shut our hearts and turn inwards in varying mixtures of overt narcissism and more subtle spiritual materialism in the form of soothing meditations and various pseudo-realizations of oneness and enlightenment. This is in marked distinction to the realization of Unique Self that closes the gap between the ability to feel and the ability to heal.... We now come back to our core premise. We live in a world of outrageous pain. The only response to outrageous pain is outrageous love. What does an outrageous lover do? She commits outrageous acts of love. Which outrageous acts of love? Those acts of love that are a function of her Unique Self. In this way the Enlightened Unique Self who is the incarnation of all that is, living in her as her and through her, intimately addresses the unique needs in her circle of intimacy and influence. In doing so she reclaims her potent power—the power of the *Shekhinah*—the power to heal and transform. The gap between the ability to feel and heal is closed. The heart opens once again and a sacred activism sourced in outrageous love perfumes all of reality. (Gafni, 2012b)

Gafni's work is a dramatic evolution of the languages of liberation that constitute the profound dignity of our Western traditions—languages of liberation that allow us to understand Enlightenment as a potent force for social transformation. This is why I argue for reading some books instead of others. It is in books that we find the images that catalyze our transformation and the words that we use to remind ourselves of who we are and what we are about. Gafni's books are unrivaled in their provision of a profoundly new language of liberation. These are teachings for our time, which is a time to practice spirituality in the world, fearlessly, with eyes open, and to participate in a planet needing to be transformed by the power justice and love. So I will do something out of character and say: *read these books*. You will be compelled by the rigor

and depth of the scholarship, while at the same time swooning from the depth of the ideas. Works like this come along once in a generation.

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