

# “We need a spiritual revolution”

A conversation with Daniel Pinchbeck

Anu Bonobo

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This conversation between writers Anu Bonobo & Daniel Pinchbeck—author of *2012: The Return of Quetzacoatl* (2006) and *Breaking Open the Head* (2002) (and co-founder of RealitySandwich.com)—transpired over email in February 2007. Pinchbeck’s latest book *2012* is just out in paperback: a critical assessment of Pinchbeck’s work by Cookie Orlando follows this interview.

**Anu:** What would you say to a person who knew Daniel before you broke open your head and heard from Quetzacoatl—especially if s/he suggested you’d “gone New Age” on us, trading the fanciful fantasy for the rigorous intellectualism of your past?

**Daniel:** I don't have the slightest doubt that I am far more "rigorous" in my thinking (or what you term "intellectualism") than I was in my earlier incarnation as a New York journalist and lit mag editor. In fact, what I suspect that I have accomplished in the last years, above all, was a critically important task of thinking—a philosophical mission. In the introduction to *Breaking Open the Head*, I quote the French philosopher Lyotard: "Being prepared to think what thought is not prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking." That is exactly what I have done.

My best and oldest friends know that I have always been a skeptic and rationalist, with no interest in "New Age" fuzziness. Psychedelics were the best path for me, because they had an objective and empirical correlate — you experience an immediate transformation of consciousness due to the activity of a chemical agent. It would have been much more difficult for me, personally, to trust the slower and subtler modulations of interior states caused by meditation.

**Anu:** But in a sense, don't you think the whole idea of 2012, of a major shift, of unprecedented and epochal social and spiritual transformation is in fact what the "New Age" was supposed to be about all along? Or do you share the idea that New Age can only be seen as pejorative, as in fuzzy thinking peddled along with trinkets by thoughtless hucksters?

**Daniel:** Yes, the New Age has pointed toward a new age. However, the thinking behind it has tended to be fuzzy and narcissistic. I think my work brings a harder edge, a crystallization, to ideas formerly considered New Age. Quetzalcoatl as a symbol represents the meeting of bird and snake—Heaven and Earth, spirit and matter, and the integration of mystical, intuitive wisdom with rational, empirical knowledge systems. That is the difficult feat that must be completed to bring a new form of consciousness into being. The whole "spiritual abundance" mentality of The Secret, Chopra, etc. has created an unappealing culture based on "spiritual materialism"—we should be thinking sufficiency, not abundance.

**Anu:** If we want to borrow some words from your book, breakthrough instead of breakdown, don't we hold out some hope that we'll get out of the prison cell and, as your book and a Joni Mitchell lyric implies, back to the garden?

**Daniel:** I don't think it is about going "back to the garden" but forward to a new state of being that will be the garden but at a higher octave of realization. I see the psychic evolution as crucially important, pointing toward a more psychic state of being—we may do global psychic works to put the climate system back together, like the Hopi raindance on a mega-scale.

**Anu:** Do you "believe" in 2012? Or is your work more in the realm of a speculative mythology of the future?

**Daniel:** I don't "believe" in 2012—or in anything really. I consider "belief" to be the enemy of knowledge — or, as Carl Jung said, "I believe only what I know." As I write in the introduction to 2012, my work offers a thought experiment and hypothesis. My hypothesis proposes that indigenous knowledge systems have a validity that has been entirely missed by our modern rational-empirical mode of cognition, which we have come to consider the only valid form of knowing. European culture forfeited the intuitive and mystical forms of knowing and being in the race to construct material and technological civilization.

We went out of our way to exterminate the witches and to destroy any vestiges of shamanic authority because these posed a threat to our value system and paradigm. For the same reason, psychedelics—the visionary sacraments of indigenous cultures around the world—were demonized, and subjected to various forms of repression, both legal and cultural, including ridicule. As I note in *Breaking Open the Head*, repression does not just repress something — it represses the memory of why that repression was necessary in the first place.

From the research on my first book, I learned through direct experiential investigation that the shamanic knowledge system had legitimacy and validity, that there were other dimensions and realms of consciousness which had a bearing upon this one. I experienced numerous occult episodes, extraordinary synchronicities, telepathic confirmations, and I also recorded many stories from other people that confirmed these types of events.

Once I had recognized that the shamanic reality had validity, I was forced to accept that our civilization had enormous gaps in its knowledge system, and that we would need to understand what we had lost. I was forced, logically and rationally, to take indigenous knowledge systems seriously. Therefore, I had to pay careful attention to the prophecies that many tribal cultures, such as the Hopi, are holding about this current time.

The Classical Maya represented the full flowering of Mesoamerican civilization. From the Toltecs to the Mayans, more than a thousand years was spent in constructing a model of time and space that took into account accurate

astronomical measurements, and recognized harmonic and synchronistic cycles in our development. I offer the hypothesis that the Maya were “wizard scientists” who used non-ordinary states, psychic energy concentrated in ritual, and astronomy to construct a thorough cosmology, that included a careful prediction of when a shift in “World Ages” would take place.

We don’t know what they knew about this shift in “World Ages”—they calculated it, but didn’t predict what was to come, as far as we know. My work on 2012 supports the thesis that they were positing a planetary transformation, a massive shift in human consciousness, and the movement into a new realization of being on the Earth. I have backed up this thesis by exploring the work of many Western and European thinkers, including Jean Gebser, Rudolf Steiner, Carl Jung, Walter Benjamin, Heidegger, and F. David Peat.

**Anu:** Are people preparing for 2012 like they did for Y2K?

**Daniel:** I hope not. I never had the slightest interest in Y2K. It felt like an obvious scam. However, it did at least indicate how over-dependent we are on artificial technology with no relation to the biosphere.

If we were intelligent and possessed of foresight, we would be preparing for an imminent transition that could, in its immediate effects, be quite traumatic, perhaps cataclysmic. We would be storing food and fuel, creating strong local communities, investing in off-the-grid energy systems, developing barter systems and local currencies to take us off the economic grid, and growing our own food using permaculture and organic methods.

Just some facts and figures: Within 30 years, 25% of all mammalian species will be extinct. Within 40 years, there will be no tropical forests left on the Earth and ocean fisheries will entirely collapse. The human sperm count has been declining one percent a year for the last 50 years due to hormone-disrupting chemicals such as plastics and pesticides. Climate change continues to spike—spring flowers bloomed in December in Central Park.

Unless there is a massive ecological U-turn and a parallel transformation of human consciousness and human practices within the next few years, it is quite possible that we will not continue on this planet. At the moment, humanity is like a person in a locked room who has a limited amount of oxygen left—all of our psychic energy should be going to make a few air holes!

The progressive, Left, ecological, and liberal intelligentsia are going to have to find a way to collaborate, to overcome the individuation crisis that keeps us in our separate boxes. We need to find a way to use the media to spread a new planetary paradigm, and I also personally believe that we need a spiritual revolution in this country—a return to the Transcendentalist impulse of Emerson. Despite its increasing financial collapse, the US still controls the planetary media, the mass-cultural dream machine, so a complete turn-around in the message we are beaming across the planet could change everything very quickly.

**Anu:** By invoking Y2k, I wasn’t necessarily just thinking about a consumer frenzy geared towards stockpiling and hoarding. In your conclusion to 2012, though, you do suggest specific kinds of grassroots infrastructure that might sprout up before the shit hits the fan—such as “localized organic food production, alternative energy, conflict-resolution projects, complementary currencies, and so on.”

I mean, some people went rural and joined intentional communities just before 2000. And some stayed. So if people begin to behave more cooperatively and live more sustainable lives in the years between now and then, perhaps energized by their own visions concerning 2012, wouldn’t that be a form of preparation worth promoting?

**Daniel:** Yes. There is that grassroots level and then the system and support structures also need to be transformed. I have proposed that sophisticated social networks designed for knowledge sharing and resource sharing and precise use of limited resources could be important for this, in a transition.

**Anu:** What do you think about the Millennial impulse and apocalyptic worrying in general—about the second coming of Christ and the *Left Behind* series, peak oil, global warming, The Revolution?

**Daniel:** My hypothesis is that this time is the Apocalypse—but that term has the literal meaning of “uncovering, revealing.” It is a time when all is revealed, uncovered, so that all can be known. In “2012”, I explore the Jungian perspective on the Apocalypse—Jung’s follower Edinger calls it the momentous event of “the coming of the Self” into conscious realization.

In a strange and unfortunate sense, the Fundamentalists recognize this time for what it is—but they have an atavistic relationship to the “God Image,” and to the archetypal process of the “Second Coming.” Christ didn’t “save our souls” through the Crucifixion—he provided a model of action for us to internalize and to follow, if we would care to save our own souls. Each of us has to do the very difficult work of incarnating the Self on our own. This is

the last thing that the Ego wants—it will have us do almost anything to avoid this work or stop it from happening. However, you discover it is a much better situation when the Ego finally gives up to allow for the archetypal process to take place. The Fundamentalists are still relating to the God-image as a jealous tyrant, and not incarnating the God-image, comprising light and dark, within their own being. Bush and Cheney, etc., do not want to integrate their shadow material, so they project it further and further. Our whole culture is based on denial of the shadow and projection of it.

Peak Oil, Global Warming—they are unavoidable byproducts of the end game of the Capitalist ego trip.

As for The Revolution, I feel that any violent struggle will end in tragedy and defeat. I think that a mass subliminal shift in awareness is already taking place, and we might have a situation that is much more like the fall of the Berlin Wall, which was predicted by nobody. The humans under the thumb of that system had evolved beyond it, and nothing could stop that shift in consciousness. When we embody a positive understanding of the transformational process and offer that out to others, we help people overcome their own fear and resistance.

**Anu:** How would you frame the relationship between political struggle and psychedelic mysticism?

**Daniel:** I think the new element that will prove successful in the next few years is the integration of political and ecological activism with the spiritual vision that has been nurtured in many ways and by many people since the end of the 1960s. The exponential growth of interest in yoga and meditation is critically important, but only if those yogis and meditators can now reintegrate the knowledge they have gained into the politics of our present time, bringing a new resonance and frequency of consciousness into the age-old struggle for justice and peace.

**Anu:** In a recent column you suggested the following: “If some elements of the 1960s are returning, they are doing so without the oppositional anger of the past. The open hand, offering friendship and reconciliation, has replaced the raised-fist symbol of old-style activism.” Do you really think this is true, especially among the poor of the global south? It seems like radicals in places like Mexico, Venezuela, and Argentina have actually chosen to mix the “old-style” as you call it with many visionary elements exemplified by the Zapatistas among others. What’s your take on the need to mix this metaphor based on the context and what’s being contested?

**Daniel:** When I expressed that, I was really thinking of the US, where violent protests immediately feed the prison-industrial system with bigger budgets for newer and more horrific weapons, and also engender new anti-constitutional laws. For the most part, we are still in a slightly different situation than those protesters in the global south, whose rebellion is often based on literal survivalist needs. There is a point beyond which you cannot push people any further—but as long as you have enough cheap calories to go around, as in the US up to now, it is very difficult to reach that point.

I feel we are at a tremendous moment, where a huge change in consciousness could spread like wildfire throughout many levels of US society, and expressions of extremist violence could backfire on activists, as they have in the past. I would like to see progressives learn new lessons of collaboration, and also turn their attention to utilizing the media and Internet social networks in a far more sophisticated and targeted manner. By the way, I have heard that the Zapatistas plot their actions according to the traditional Mayan Calendar.

**Anu:** Some people are frightened by the prospect of a major shift, and others are empowered by it. Some suggest we’ll see fascism, and others envision an unfathomable outbreak of freedom. Are you betting on freedom?

**Daniel:** We may get both for a while. I am reading Chris Hedges’ *American Fascists*. He believes the Dominionist Right is planning a takeover when another major crisis or series of crises hits. A phase of authoritarian madness may happen or not, but ultimately I do see freedom as the most compelling and plausible outcome.

**Anu:** Your book and people it cites suggest that the species has outgrown the nation state, invoking concepts like “spiritual anarchy,” synarchy, non-hierarchical organization generally, and other overlapping visionary and utopian alternatives. This is what I’ve been looking for, planning for, and consciously trying to instigate for most of my adult life. But based on both the overwhelming hegemony of capitalism and its elites and the frustrating discord within our own communities of dissent, on most days I’m not too optimistic. Why do you invoke these alternatives at the end of your book and how do you view them?

**Daniel:** A new realization of consciousness would naturally create new forms of social organization. The language we have is an inheritance that is probably inadequate. There is no doubt that Capitalism is unsustainable even in the short term now—so either we devour the planet and reach species burn-out, or we move into a sustainable model that will naturally incorporate elements of tribal culture—as indigenous people have created models of

sustainability, and also non-hierarchic social organizations, social design based on fractals, communal decision-making structures that work, systems of subsistence agriculture that don't poison the land, effective ceremonies for visionary and psychic purposes, etc. I see a global retribalization as the way to go, if we don't want to go.



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<https://www.fifthestate.org/archive/376-halloween-2007/need-spiritual-revolution>  
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