



THE *COMMON GROUND* INTERVIEW

THE ZEITGEIST ACCORDING TO JEAN HOUSTON

The Zeit Is Getting Geistier

{ BY ROB SIDON AND CARRIE GROSSMAN }

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r. Jean Houston is one of the foremost visionary thinkers and doers of our time. Long regarded as one of the principal founders of the Human Potential Movement, she is noted for her ability to combine a deep knowledge of history, culture, new science, and spirituality into a humorous interdisciplinary perspective. The prolific author of 26 books including her latest, *The Wizard of Us*, based on the archetypes of *The Wizard of Oz*, her lifetime passion is to encourage the inherent possibilities, visions, and capacities that lie within each of us.

Born in 1937, the precocious daughter of Jack and Mary Houston, Jean cultivated a roster of friendships that reads like a “who’s who” of international thought leaders from the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Common Ground: You’re known as a change agent. As we cross the 2012 threshold, how do you characterize the Zeitgeist?

Jean Houston: Indeed, the Zeit is getting geistier. We are certainly at a threshold where we are having to deal with the great issues of “grow or die,” “evolve or perish.”

Part of my passion is the philosophy of history, watching these great cycles shift radically. Things that used to take 100 years are now happening in just a few. Today looks nothing like tomorrow, and tomorrow looks nothing like yesterday. We are in the most accelerated time that’s ever been, both in terms of our own lives but also as a social structure. So what we do makes a profound difference.

How do we prepare for this level of acceleration?

By deciding to work together. We cannot regress to old ethnic, tribal, or national structures. We really have to work as a whole. We are all in this together. This is my particular passion: training ourselves to be adequate stewards of this most critical time in human history. There appears to be an emergence of world civilization with high individuation over the next 50 years.

So what is your work?

My work is as a change agent, a midwife of souls, or maybe as an evocateur of possibilities. My work is to develop the spectrum of human capacity. In light of difficult change, one finds

that as people come to attempt more of themselves on sensory, physical, psychological, narrative, ethical and spiritual levels, they tend to see things from a much different perspective.

My passion has been along the lines of the Renaissance of Spirit. I really believe that we are in a time of a very probable new renaissance. As a student of the various Renaissances from the Tang Dynasty to ancient Greece, and especially the European Renaissance, we find that what shifted was a whole perspective. Look at what happened after Leonardo da Vinci’s monograph—engines and machines were created. Music changed from pre-Renaissance into polyphony. Paintings changed; we had perspective. When Michelangelo created the Duomo, a whole new perspective in architecture emerged. Telescopes and microscopes provided perspective on both the vast heavens and the tremendously small.

Now we’re in a similar Renaissance time. We have the cosmology sensibility. We realize that we are not all living in the universe, but the universe lives in us. That we are a universe in miniature. And what we’ve done is harvested from the genius and the spirituality and the psychology of so many different cultures something we never had before. Margaret Mead said to me many years ago, “Jean, go out and harvest the human potential.”

You are 75 now; you came of age in the ’60s. What parallels are there to this era?

That era had a kind of acceleration because of the visionary vegetable.

The visionary vegetable?

[Laughs] The psychedelics. My husband and I were on the front page of the *New York Times* legitimately exploring the human potential with the help of the psychedelics, and then we stopped when we could no longer do it legally—then creating all kinds of non-drug ways of exploring the capacity.

What’s your message to readers who might be tempted to experiment with psychedelics?

When you dance with the unfolding of the human psyche, it’s something that can be both fulfilling and hellish. I just find that by exploring it without drugs you can go much further and deeper. So I’m not a friend of drugs. My



Jean (left) with Margaret Mead in 1974

husband and I published a book long ago called *Mind Games* to help people ascend without drugs—to develop capacities that they could really work with versus just a one-time experience. John Lennon, as you may know, bought a great many copies and named a hit song after it.

You worked with John Lennon?

No, no, no. I met him once, but I did not work with him.

You worked with many interesting people. Care to name drop?

Yes I have. Well, Joe Campbell, certainly. Margaret Mead, who lived with us off and on the last years of her life; she decided I was her second daughter. Aldous Huxley. Yes, I’ve known a great many of these people, many of whom were born in the 19th century. I don’t know if you ever read my autobiography, which is a funny book, but I was blessed. I grew up in show business, so meeting famous people was just what we did. I was deeply interested in these great minds, so I would go talk to them. They found me a precocious young girl, and they talked to me. I remember Arnold Toynbee in his den, talking about history patterns. In my 18th and 19th year I wrote a book on Toynbee’s *Study in History*, comparing it to St. Augustine’s *City of God*.



Jean with her father,
Jack Houston

You just finished a series of extensive TV interviews with Oprah Winfrey; how was that?

Lots of fun. I deeply enjoyed her questions and insights. She's winsome and witty and worldly and very wise, very simpatico—a remarkable woman. I felt that we made a deep connection. She's a great, great woman.

We learned from your business manager that you were a dedicated Girl Scout.

Yes, I was.

Is this work you do an extension of being a good Girl Scout?

You can't really reduce—*either/or* is never true. It's always *and . . . and . . . and much more*. I grew up all over the country, going to almost 20 schools before I was 12. My dad was a writer for George Burns and Gracie Allen and those kinds of shows. I met many kinds of people in many different circumstances. And being hybrid—my father was from an old famous American family, the Houstons from Texas. My mother was first-generation Sicilian. So to have those two very different cultural realities was extremely important. Then I did a lot of theater and Off Broadway, and at the same time I was going to graduate school and working very early in psychedelic research, then the Human Potential Movement.

The Girl Scouts—that's looking for a tick. I never look for a tick, except on my dog. Mine has more to do with having been blessed with wide exposure and to being mathematically stupid and theologically precocious.



Posing at 5 years old

Your PhDs are in two separate areas, psychology and world religions. Intellectually, what's your first love?

My first love was probably history, the patterns of history—but also comedy. My father was a funny man. Growing up in a house where the ironic and the absurd were always served for breakfast had you looking beneath the surface of everything. That's the nature of comedy. In the great jokes, hidden and diverse worlds are thrown together to make a new reality. That's why comedians are hugely intelligent.

With Oprah you talked about how life is a pressure cooker for many people and how people have a deep, nameless yearning to find a calling.

Many people feel this amorphous call as if the Hound of Heaven is going on and on saying, "Get on with it, get on with it." I find this to be universal and not simply a North American phenomenon. I think we are in an Axial Age just as in the sixth and fifth centuries BC when within a very short period, you had Lao Tzu and Confucius and Zoroaster and Buddha and Pythagoras. These were exceptional people, but now this exceptionalism has been democratized in such a way that many people are waking up to a call. Many people want a specificity.

In this new renaissance of spirit, where we truly have turned the page on human history, it is the earth herself that is requiring of us not just an inner development but an outer manifest expression. This can take the form of new projects, writing, community building. Let's face it, we are the neurons of the planet or the cancer of the planet. I think the planet herself is giving us a huge stimulus to wake up to who and what we are. Because if we don't, we are pretty much finished, I think.

What to do?

I have a simple exercise to help people discover their calling that you do every day. You take a piece of paper and divide it into three columns. On top of the first column you ask, What do I want of the universe? That is part of the call. Then use stream of consciousness and write it down. In the second column, What does the universe want from me? In the third, What do the universe and I want together? After a while the answers start to get deeper and deeper and deeper, and there's a kind of clicking so that you know yourself as an organism of the environment. *[Laughs]* Not just an encapsulated bag of skin dragging around a dreary little ego.

What else might we glean from this exercise?

The realization that you contain many personae. That you can develop them like an orchestral maestro. We begin working from that perspective. As in the Renaissance when multiple perspectives shifted, so do we with our many personae and undeveloped talents. Somehow we have lived up to now, but it's as if we have been living in a spectacular garden with rich fruits and vegetables but insist on eating bugs on the ground. We live in the kingdom and the kingdom lives in us, but how do we wake up to that fact?

The pressure to conform seems to keep us from our calling.

Sometimes I glimpse at what happens in the movies and on TV. In many cases, the heroes are metamorphic, requiring different bodies, whether they become part spiders or iron people. Or people compete in talent shows to obtain orders of excellence, or they get lost in order to overcome a survival situation. These are tales of personal transcendence, aren't they? These are part of the mythic structures of our new reality—that we are trying to metamorphose ourselves by finding images that are the allure of our new becoming. It is time to tap into this potential [laughs], not to spin spiderwebs from our belly buttons but to wake up.

In your new book, *The Wizard of Us*, you discuss how Dorothy met the disempowered parts of herself in *The Wizard of Oz* and the importance for us to face our negative self-concepts and shadows, our victim consciousness. But how to avoid getting stuck there?

Well, it helps not get a PhD in one's own pathology. [Laughs] Because people really do get fascinated with their own pathology—going over and over with deeper and deeper trenches, literally trenches in the brain. It can occupy the whole real estate.

And we schedule weekly sessions to defend our dissertations.

Most psychotherapy is very useful and hopeful and brilliant, so we need to use it not just to go over the same old stuff, but to investigate the largess of our humanity. If you can become fascinated by the plenum of all that you contain, then you do not have to stay so stuck. There's no question that it takes a lot of work—whether it's through spiritual processes or deep meditation or contemplative life, or by exploring the unawakened sense of presence that has been cut off since childhood.

One of my exercises is to get in touch with this deeper guidance system, which I call the *entelechy*. For example, the *entelechy* of an acorn is to be an oak tree; the *entelechy* of a baby is to be a grown-up human being. The *entelechy* of each of us is to unlock our capacities for greater flowing and being-ness. We are, in a sense, the fetuses of our higher selves.

And collectively?

We have our first Genesis, but then we have a second Genesis. Of course, ultimately, this spiritual oneness in which we are all contained merges with the great oneness of reality, whether you call it God or the Universe or whatever.

I find with the hundreds of thousands of people I've worked with, that all people will grow. We are in a big growth cycle, where we will grow or go mad. We will rise to the occasion that the greatest work of art is the work of ourselves. We are creating and re-creating ourselves, but always in alignment with the social need. It cannot be apart from that.

The power of loving—what does that mean to you?

The power of love is the power that likely called the universe to be. Take the final lines of Dante's *Divine Comedy*: “the love that moves the sun and all the stars.” It is that love that causes the molecules to bond, the atoms to bond, the organ systems, the reality itself, the sun and the moon and the stars to bond, and the great sensation of things coming together—it is the lure that we are the wanting magnets for each other. Yet it's more than that. When we look upon this essential nature of bonding and feel real compassion not just for ourselves but to suffer, to be with someone during their trials. The “with-ness,” or as I like to say, the “suchness of we,” is the essence of love. This is what will bring us through to a larger level of reality.

Love is there at every moment, whether it's a simple smile to someone that you see or whether it's reaching out and helping a child in their education or whether it's finding time and space to really *be* with each other in ways in which we deeply listen and hear and are there for each other. Whether it is your wonder and astonishment before a great tree or whether you are there simply to hold the hand of another who is going through a crisis. Then suddenly, it drills into your heart and you are no longer, as I say, an encapsulated bag of skin. You have leaky margins. You are diaphanous to each other.

You use the expression “radical empathy.”

Radical empathy is one form—that is the leaky margins. Joe Campbell once said to me, “The future myth is about the whole planet and that we're all in it together.”

We're talking about love, compassion, and radical empathy, which are typically the realm of the feminine. Were we to ask Joseph Campbell about the difference between the hero's journey and the heroine's journey, how might he respond?

We used to have long chats about this, and because he was looking at over 220 different aspects of it, he thought he had looked mostly at the hero's journey. He felt that somebody,

a woman probably, had to start talking about the heroine's journey. In the heroine's journey, process is more important than product.

The relationships between people aren't very important in the hero's journey, at least at the initial stages. The hero is a fairly lonely person, battling his own toxicity and going from one great struggle to the next. Whereas in the heroine's journey, it may not be so much a struggle as it is a partnership and a relationship. Although Joe Campbell did say that the endpoint of the hero's journey was compassion. So the hero goes through it all only to get to the place where the woman is already at. [Laughs]

In the *Wizard of Oz*, Dorothy is not alone. She immediately has friends, allies, associates, relationships. Dorothy is shocked and horrified that her house has fallen on the witch and killed her. Everybody else is happy. It's very different. The heroine is not there for herself, but for everybody at the same time. That's the great difference between the two journeys.

Do you suggest that this current era of transformation is a leap into the great feminine?

I think the most important event of the last 50, 60, 100 years is the rise of women, slowly but surely, and often with terrible backlash, but still rising to full partnership with men in the domain of human affairs. And this will continue to change everything deeply, in governance, games, spirituality, and entertainment, to name a few. We have extraordinary women leading the way like Hillary Clinton, whom I used to know quite well.

You worked with her.

I was part of the team that helped her write the book called *It Takes a Village to Raise a Child*.

At one stage there was strong backlash in the press about your relationship with Hillary Clinton; might you tell the story?

It's now far away, and my life is so much richer. I don't like to dwell on it, but at one point I was helping her with the writing of this book, and I said to Hillary, “Come on, you need to focus. Who would you talk to? Who would you want to ask about children?” She said Eleanor Roosevelt, whom she admired immensely. And I, of course, as a young person had known Mrs. Roosevelt. In fact, my father used to write jokes when FDR was president. I had known Eleanor Roosevelt as a 16-year-old when I was president of my high school and she was gathering young leaders in the New York City area to get us interested in the United Nations and international work. She once said to me [imitating Eleanor Roosevelt's accent], “My dear, I



Jean in Ashland, Oregon



Teaching in India, 1981

rather suspect you'll have a most interesting career. But remember, my dear, a woman is just like a tea bag. [Laughs] You put her in hot water, and she just gets stronger."

Hillary really loved and admired Mrs. Roosevelt, so I said, "Imagine a conversation with Mrs. Roosevelt. What do you think she would say about making a better world for children?"

That's all there was to it. People got wind of the fact that we had been doing this kind of talking and said we were holding a séance, which never happened. I've never been to a séance.

Recently, we interviewed Edgar Mitchell, the astronaut who walked on the moon and had a Samadhi experience in outer space. Didn't you debrief him upon his return?

He described it in detail, seeing the earth as this extraordinary blue and green and silver planet floating in the womb of the cosmos. He felt such wistfulness for what the world could be. When you're out there you don't see tribes and nations and warring; you see the great living planet. So he went up there essentially an astronaut and he came back a psychonaut, devoted to inner space and to the mission of

creating mankind in such a way as to be worthy of the stewardship that is upon us. So he created the Institute of Noetic Sciences in the Bay Area, which is devoted to the exploration of human capacity. That's where I do my seminars. He is a great man who continues in his development and thoughts.

Your father was quite a hero to you.

Well, he was a great friend, and we had a sort of "Jean and Jack Show." We would pull these stunts all over the place. My father was a superb ventriloquist, and I remember when I was five years old that I was the straight man and he would sort of throw his voice into a garbage can. This was in Hollywood. And I would talk to the garbage can, saying, "Who's going to win the race at Santa Anita today?" That's a famous racetrack. He would throw his voice into the garbage can: "It's High Horse in the third race." "And who's running in the fourth race?" He'd answer again, and people would gather around and look into the garbage can, and then they would run off to Santa Anita to place bets. We did really stupid stuff like that all the time.

Once I gave a commencement address at one of the universities in California. There were thousands of people there. I worked so

hard on the speech. When I finished it at 28 minutes, my father was making a cut sign on his throat: "Cut, cut." As a radio man, he would never go more than 20 minutes, but I went on. My father was very disturbed by it. Finally, I ended and got a standing ovation. Then, at the moment the last applause ended, my father in a rather high voice shouted from the audience, "Your ears must be happy when your mouth finally goes to sleep."

He said that in front of everybody?

In front of everybody. He did this sort of thing all the time. People would get mad at him, but I always thought he was hilariously funny.

You just turned 75. Any epiphany?

Well, I'm working harder than ever. I have the life of a 35-year-old professional woman. I've been 160,000 miles this year traveling. It's like nothing has given up; it just gets more and more intense.

Any final message to Common Ground readers?

We are the faithful servants of the process of an evolving humanity. [Laughs] That's probably not what you're looking for. 🐾