

Book Review

Eric Utne, *Far Out Man: Tales of Life in the Counterculture*, Random House, New York, 2020, 368 pp, ISBN 978-0812995282, price (hardback) £21.99, index.

Dancing with the Zeitgeist

Reviewed by **Christopher Schaefer**

In 1984 Eric Utne founded the *Utne Reader: The Best of the Alternative Press* in order to help the world become a 'little greener and a little kinder'. At the height of its popularity it had over 300,000 paid subscribers, and was a must-read for a generation of social activists, spiritual seekers, environmentalists and proponents of an emerging culture, a group which Paul Ray called the 'cultural creatives'.¹

In this fascinating memoir, Eric recounts his biographical journey, touching on themes and personalities many of us, if we are members of the boomer generation, experienced or felt connected to. The journey begins when he, as a confused teenager recently expelled from college, considers his options and ponders the advice of his step grandmother, the writer Brenda Ueland, to find his true center, to know himself. The search continues through avoiding the draft, getting high on LSD, exploring his Norwegian roots, and drifting until he finds Macrobiotics and Michio Kushi.

Moving to Boston, he manages the retail Erewhon store, meets Peggy Taylor, his wife to be, and they move to London to start a health food restaurant. Returning to Boston as a young father, Eric realizes that neither running a restaurant nor practicing Chinese medicine was

his future. He begins working at the *East West Journal* and then leaves to start the *New Age Journal* in 1974. In commenting on this time, Eric notes, 'I have no idea whether we were aiding in the enlightenment of any sentient beings, most especially our readers, but I do know that I had found my vocation, my calling'.² After conversations with Thomas Wolfe about the Third Great Awakening in American life and meeting Steward Brand of the Whole Earth Catalog, Eric links up with Bob Schwartz of the Tarrytown Conference Center and begins wrestling with the dilemmas of what he calls the Gandhi/Gatsby Syndrome, meaning the challenge and temptation of doing good while also trying to make big bucks. New York was alluring, but the breakup of his marriage and his own inner questioning led him back to his roots in Minnesota.

While in New York at the Tarrytown Center he had met Nina Rothschilds and they had developed a friendship. They stayed in touch, and 'Betty from Minnesota', as Nina had initially introduced herself, actually did join him in Minnesota, where they were to start *The Utne Reader* together.

Eric had always been a slow reader and had enjoyed magazines more than books, so he

thought, why not carry important, culture-bending articles from other magazines? His models for what the magazine could be were based on Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richards Almanack*, I.F. Stone's *Weekly* and the *Reader's Digest*. The magazine flourished beyond his wildest imagination.

Through his friendship with Robert Bly he joined the Mud Lake Men, exploring the newly developing Men's movement, and started the Neighborhood Salon Movement by putting his readers in touch with each other. He and Nina also helped to start and support the local Waldorf School which their three boys were to attend.

After twelve years as the pioneer and founder of the *Utne Reader*, Eric resigned from the magazine to spend a year as a stay-at-home dad and have a sabbatical. His walk-about leads him to a deep questioning of himself and the challenges of spiritual development, and ultimately to spending three years as a Waldorf class teacher, renewing his interest in Rudolf Steiner and Anthroposophy.

His journey continues; the writing is lively and the stories humorous and, at times, heart-wrenching, leading the reader to deeper self-reflection.

Embedded in the stories and experiences is an underground current of essential questions, questions which we all face as children of our time:

- What is the meaning and purpose of my life?
- How can I find my roots and achieve integrity?
- How do I connect spirit and matter?
- How can I become a better human being while contributing to a better world?
- What can be the meaning of hope in times of such human, social and environmental suffering?
- What role does friendship play in my process of becoming? And
- What is it to be an elder?

Read it, enjoy it and ponder your relationship to life's journey and the issues of our time, to your dance with the spirit of our time.

References

- 1 See Paul Ray, *The Cultural Creatives: How 50 Million People Are Changing the World*, Random House, New York, 2000, pp. 1–30.
- 2 Eric Utne, *Far Out Man: Tales of Life in the Counterculture*, Random House, New York, 2020, p. 104.

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