

The new age is now

The next generation is looking for 'a better way' to live. We meet the glam spiritual activists peddling them love, forgiveness and inner healing

Ruby Warrington Published: 16 October 2011



Angel of New York: Gabrielle Bernstein, self-help's latest superstar (Sam Bassett)

The girls Gabrielle Bernstein meets at her lectures, book signings and coaching sessions are often a lot like her — stylish, straight-talking and switched on. They are also actively seeking “a better way” to experience life. The difference is that they are the

students and Bernstein is the teacher. “Typically, people come to me feeling really stuck,” the 31-year-old tells me in a gravelly New York drawl. “The common issue is a sense of not having a road map, not having an internal guidance system and being disconnected from their ‘spirituition’.”

In her second book, *Spirit Junkie: A Radical Road to Self-Love and Miracles*, Bernstein, a former PR girl and reformed drug addict (“Six years... One day at a time...” she tweeted to her 22,000 followers earlier this month), tells the story of her own journey out of the darkness and into a lighter, more loving way of being. Peddling forgiveness, the silencing of the ego and a life free from fear, it bears the hallmarks of the classic self-help genre — the difference is in the delivery. Her typical response if a bad boyfriend or difficult boss is blamed for your life not turning out the way you’d hoped? “If your happiness is based on external experience, then, my darling, you are f***ed.” And her tell-it-like-it-is tactics are attracting a new audience. “I bring in a lot of reformed cynics,” she tells me. “For whatever reason, the way I am translating the message makes it easy for them to digest.” Music to the ears of anybody who has got into kundalini yoga, but still has to run away before the “Sufi dance” at the end.

If an interest in anything remotely spiritual used to imply a penchant for patchouli and a rejection of

mainstream culture, then Bernstein represents a new generation of “change-makers and spiritual activists” — postmodern spiritualists (PMSs) — who say it doesn’t have to be that way. Why now? “There are tragedies happening in the world today that can be difficult to navigate, and as a result more people than ever are cracking open — in a good way.” She gives a husky chuckle and trots out the old Buddhist proverb: “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

And it seems us students are more than ready, for all sorts of new-age thinking is undergoing a radical makeover. It is no longer the preserve of hippies in hair shirts, angst-ridden teenagers and misfits looking for somewhere to belong: everything from astrology to energy healing is fashionable again. It’s out with the flowing robes and incense sticks, and in with Solange Azagury-Partridge’s Cosmic collection and mind-expanding sessions with the Psychic Sisters at their concession in Selfridges. Daisy Lowe makes no secret of her love for crystals and waxes spiritual about the Hoffman Process and her love of self-help books. You could call it the “Eat, Pray, Love effect” — Elizabeth Gilbert’s easy-to-digest tale of her own “spiritual enlightenment” having taken the concept more mass-market than ever.

Wendy Mandy is an acupuncturist-cum-shaman who has a hush-hush roster of celebrity clients — the fashion agent Camilla Lowther got Mandy to “sort out the energy” in her Notting Hill office. Bruce Parry, another figurehead for the PMS crew, calls her “the weather lady”, because she can make sure it doesn’t rain on your party. She now charges £120 an hour for her ministrations. As Style’s resident astrologer, Shelley von Strunckel, who has coined the term “mystical glamour” to describe this new mood, puts it: “Ten years ago, who even knew what a shaman was?”

“Some spiritual traditions have become fashionable through celebrity endorsement, such as kabbalah, which Madonna brought to people’s attention,” says Michelle Pilley, MD of the self-help publishing imprint Hay House. But she believes “a deeper trend is emerging — a leaning towards seeking a deeper understanding of our existence. We are seeing this yearning to establish spiritual foundations as an antidote to the crumbling of material security”.

Von Strunckel — currently cleaning up on the after-dinner-speaking circuit with her take on “Age of Aquarius” thinking, which points towards a toppling of outmoded hierarchical structures and a huge uptake in personal responsibility — points to the financial crash at the end of the past decade as a catalyst for this shift.

“It suddenly became clear that orthodox approaches to the way we live and do business weren’t working. Coming out the other side, people are disillusioned, and it’s only natural that there is a move towards more experimentation and exploration.” She also thinks that David Cameron’s “happiness index” represented a “tipping point” in terms of people really beginning to question the things that make us tick — both individually and as a society.

The New York jewellery designer Jules Kim is a friend and fan of Bernstein’s “positive energy and really healthy vibe”. “You have to be in touch with yourself spiritually these days to survive,” she says. “For your outer shell, your body, to be functioning, you have to find your own stability inside.”

Nick Jankel, a Cambridge-educated former marketing man turned “thinking man’s life coach”, has recently arrived back in Britain after two years in Los Angeles, which is considered the global mecca for all things PMS. “It’s still a bit woo-woo out there, even for me,” he confesses. Having spent the latter part of the Noughties trying to find ways to “put the hip into hippie” (see his One Life initiative with Radio 1, launched by Kelly Osbourne, which toured the nation preaching gratitude, meditation and manifestation), Jankel says that in the four months he has been back in this country, “I’ve noticed that there’s a lot less of the snarly cynicism about these topics”. Currently pitching ideas for TV shows and projects about “how to bridge the gap between personal change and social change”, his regular opening gambit is: “I want to do for self-development what Jamie Oliver has done for cooking. Why not make really understanding yourself the coolest thing in the world?”

When it comes to getting the message out there, Pilley says it’s all about “the language and the mode of delivery. We’re hearing a lot of the same perennial wisdom, but delivered in a way that makes the concepts relevant to a new generation”. Todd Savvas, a former fashion stylist who is now a psychic and spiritual teacher, agrees. Having recently bagged himself a slot on Australian breakfast television

promoting everything from how to deal with negative energy to basic feng shui, he points out that “many of the now-middle-aged new-agers didn’t want to be known by the masses, preferring to shy away from cities and big business”. Not so the new PMS set, who love nothing better than to pepper their Twitter timelines with daily feelgood mantras and bite-size Buddhist sound bites, not to mention regular plugs for whatever book, talk or theory they are peddling.

Yet isn’t it decidedly unspiritual to be concerned with popularity and material gain? When quizzed about her shameless self-promotion via various social-media platforms, Bernstein is unapologetic. “If you have something that’s going to serve the world, I pray for you to be fearless about marketing that work. Because, if you feel you have the keys to happiness, how dare you not share that?” Spoken like a true Generation Y entrepreneur.

Furthermore, Bernstein believes the internet has “evened the playing field” when it comes to the type of voices preaching the PMS message. “We all have the opportunity to be a leader, to be a teacher, if we choose,” she says. Cue the increasing numbers of “regular” women who are testing their own psychic and healing abilities. Anna Hunt, a former journalist who found her spiritual calling following a sabbatical from her job (and subsequent trip to Peru) in 2003, now offers guided healing sessions using the san pedro psychedelic cactus. She will publish her book, *Shaman in Stilettos*, next year. Georgia Coleridge (wife of Nicholas, the Condé Nast managing director), meanwhile, recently reinvented herself as an energy healer and ran a Psychic Protection seminar at the Daylesford Spa, in the Cotswolds, only yesterday.

Loulou Androlia, a 30-year-old lingerie designer, tarot reader and reiki practitioner, is developing her skills at the School of Psychic Studies, in London, where she says that she hasn’t encountered anyone she would describe as a “crazy spiritual person”. “But then,” she continues, “in my peer group, nobody thinks you’re a loon if you say you believe in angels or tarot cards.” Echoing Bernstein, she claims: “It’s all become more mainstream because people are looking for it.”