

Sacred Destinations: Chautauqua Center for Consciousness

Heartland Healing

Body ~ Mind ~ Spirit

Magazine

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FREE

the **POWER** *of* **THOUGHT**

FROM JEDI TO JESUS

FR. JUSTIN BELITZ

COURSE IN MIRACLES

**MICHAEL BECKWITH
INTERVIEW**

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Sacred Destinations: Chautauqua — Tradition of the Summer Assembly continues

by Brad Olsen



The word Chautauqua, hard as it is to say or spell, holds several distinct meanings. As a Seneca Indian word it likely translated as “bag tied in the middle” based on the shape of the lake of the same name, but there are other Seneca translations so nobody really knows for certain. As a Methodist summer camp with the original purpose of educating Sunday school teachers, the Chautauqua Institution evolved into a campus for learning, the arts, philosophical discussion, music concerts, and a recreation-lover’s paradise.

More than a resort or spa, coming to Chautauqua (pronounced Sha-talk-wa) is about lifetime education and personal growth. Sister institutions continue to operate in Ohio and Colorado. Since its founding in the 19th century by Protestant leaders, it has always maintained the importance of openness by including all the Protestant faiths. The Institution fully integrated Catholics and Jews in the 20th century, and the push now is to include Muslims, Orthodox Christians, Buddhist and Hindu leaders in the 21st century.

The history

All these people would take a chautauqua to come here. Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* instructed his son as they traveled across America on their own chautauqua. A “Traveling Chautauqua” toured across America from 1904 to 1933, setting up a weekly learning and cultural events in large and small towns alike. Even Elvis



Presley played the role of a Traveling Chautauqua manager in his 1969 film *Trouble with Girls*.

Native Americans utilized the 18-mile (29-km) glacial-carved Chautauqua Lake for 10,000 years as a strategic portage between Lake Erie and the river systems that feed into the Ohio and Mississippi River valleys. Indian mounds and campsites once scattered around the lake. It didn’t take long before the new European settlers discovered the beauty of Chautauqua Lake.

Pastor John Vincent and inventor Lewis Miller started the Chautauqua Institution in 1874 with tents on the lakeshore under a cathedral-like canopy of stately trees. U.S. President Grant arrived the following year and the first Victorian home was constructed for his visit. When the regal Athenaeum Hotel was constructed in 1881, the Chautauqua Institution expe-

rienced a building boom of Victorian-era structures. Different Christian denominations added their own homes to the village, and private homes continue to dominate the nearly 800 acres (320 ha) of Institution grounds. Within a few decades the village spread across the lakefront and up the hill for several city blocks, sprinkled with civic buildings, halls, amphitheaters, and centers for the various arts.

For nine weeks each year, from late June through late August, the Chautauqua Institution comes alive for an extraordinary blend of programming in the arts, education, philosophy, and recreation. Car travel is discouraged so most visitors walk or bicycle around the pedestrian-friendly village on their way to catch a concert or listen to a lecture. Each week centers on a separate theme, ranging from global warming to how the modern media

impacts the general population. Guests can purchase a daily or weekly pass, or one for the whole season. During the two months of summer events the Chautauqua Institution has the same population density as Manhattan.

Ghost in the machine?

In the Chautauqua spirit of “summer assembly,” another group of inspired free thinkers began their own community called Lily Dale in 1879, only 15 miles (24 km) away from Chautauqua. Pass through “The City of Light” front gate and you will enter the “World’s Largest Center of Spiritualism.” Lily Dale Assembly members are Spiritualists, those who believe that spirits of the deceased survive bodily death and can communicate with the living, usually via a medium by means of messages, or paranormal physical effects.

Spiritualism began in 1848 inside the Fox House of Hydesville, N.Y., a small cot-

Sacred Destinations: Chautauqua — Tradition of the Summer Assembly continues

tage transported to Lily Dale in 1915, only to burn down 40 years later. It was a pilgrimage destination for trained mediums and lay adherents of Spiritualism alike. And while the old steam engine trains no longer transport passengers to Cassadaga, Lily Dale continues its summer program of special events.

Visitors to Lily Dale are attracted primarily to the daily healing and message services, as well as to meet with a medium or attend the various workshops and lectures. A healing service at Lily Dale is basically a time to meet with energy healers in a community setting. Participants sit in pews and await a turn to sit with a trained “healer” who surrounds them with energy using their hands. It should be noted that the healers do not actually touch the “sitter.” A message service is very similar to a regular church service with hymns, prayers, and a sermon (or lecture) with the addition of a time for “messages.”

More than matter matters

The summer assemblies of Chautauqua and Lily Dale were the product of 19th



century Industrial Revolution rethinking by those who wished to develop a new meaning to life. Both locations have survived by changing with the times and keeping with the basic concept that learning lasts an entire lifetime.

Where Chautauqua attracts United States Presidents, Supreme Court justices and captains of industry, Lily Dale hosts those who wish to meet with a medium or attend lectures on the subject of UFOs, chakras, or alternative healing methods. Prominent guests to Lily Dale included Arthur Conan Doyle, Susan B. Anthony, Harry Houdini, Mae West, Deepak Chopra, and Wayne Dyer. For the past few years Buddhist monks of Tibet’s Loseling Temple have come to perform a Mandala Ceremony.

What is most impressive of the two surviving summer assemblies of Chautauqua County is the sheer numbers of events per season they both offer.

The Chautauqua Institution offers approximately 2,000 unique events in a mere 65 days. It would be impossible to experience even a fraction of

all the events that are offered. Both summer assemblies hold the basic premise that their events be open to people of all faiths or belief systems. At Chautauqua the “four pillars” are art, recreation, religion, and education with each featuring a wide array of related activities to choose from during the season.

Lily Dale is a smaller community and hosts a smaller summer assembly, but offers a well-balanced schedule of alternative speakers and varied events such as sweat lodges, astrology roundtables, yoga, reiki, astral travel, meditation, and other New Age coursework. The concept of learning in community and reading circles live on at both locations. Although still retaining a strong Christian foundation, the Chautauqua Institution is a community renowned for the performing arts and a resource for the discussion of important issues of our time. One 2007 lecture in the Hall of Philosophy is entitled “Are the Sacred Texts Sacred? The Atheist Challenge” — proving that Chautauqua remains a bastion of tolerance, truth, and the open discourse of challenging ideas.

Getting to Chautauqua and Lily Dale

The nonprofit Chautauqua Institution and Lily Dale Assembly are both located in the southwestern

corner of New York state. Chautauqua is easily located along Highway 394, 15 miles (24 km) north of Jamestown, which features a regional airport. Lily Dale is near the town of Cassadaga, just off Highway 60. Both communities are located about one hour south of Buffalo, N.Y.; three hours north of Pittsburgh,

Penn.; three hours east of Cleveland, Ohio; four hours south of Toronto, Ont.; and eight hours west of New York City. Gate tickets are required at both locations for seasonal activities, but they are both free to enter during the off

season. Also worth seeing is the unusual Panama Rocks scenic park, located about 10 miles (16 km) south of Chautauqua on Route 10. Chautauqua winter residents number only 400, as compared to the 150,000 attendees during peak season from late June to late August. Consider staying at the century-old Spencer Hotel any time of the year when planning a visit to the Chautauqua Institution. ☰

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