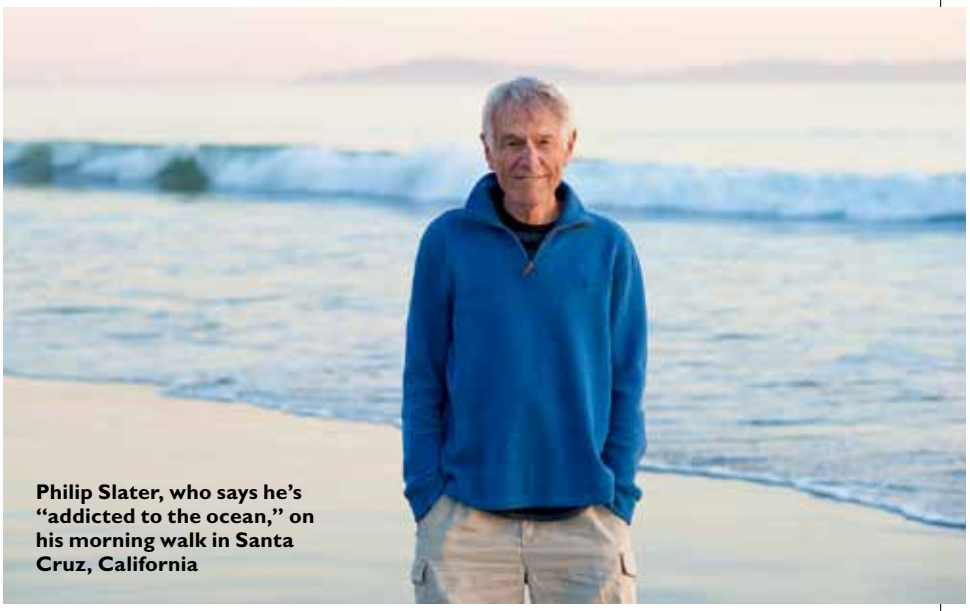
# The Sage of Tree Frog Lane

*Philip Slater has happily progressed from fame to obscurity.*



**Philip Slater, who says he's "addicted to the ocean," on his morning walk in Santa Cruz, California**

In 1970, his bestselling book, *The Pursuit of Loneliness,* made Philip Slater '50, Ph.D. '55, a famous author whose photo appeared in *Time* magazine. Subtitled "American Culture at the Breaking Point," the book developed a searing critique of American culture, describing many of its ills—violence, inequality, and worship of technology among them—as fallout of the national cult of individualism that fostered isolation, competition, and loss of community. The book made Slater an intellectual hero of the counterculture, then at its high-water mark.

One year later, at age 44, he disproved F. Scott Fitzgerald's claim that "there are no second acts in American lives." Slater had been a professor of sociology at Brandeis since 1961 and eventually chaired the department. But "the university disappointed me," he recalls. Academia wasn't the fount of brilliant ideas he had imagined, though he did enjoy his time there. He felt that "as a teacher, I wasn't that good at conveying content in lectures. I thought I could maintain myself by my writing, so I left. That was a mistaken assumption: it's been hard going financially."

Not that Slater the author (www.philipslater.com) hasn't been prolific. His 12 books include *The Glory of Hera: Greek Mythology and the Greek Family* (1968), *Earthwalk* (1974), *Wealth Addiction* (1980), *A Dream Deferred: America's Discontent and the Search for a New Democratic Ideal* (1991), and a novel, *How I Saved the World* (1985). His latest book, *The Chrysalis Effect: The Metamorphosis of Global Culture* (see sidebar), may be his most ambitious. He's also written 20 plays and acted in 30 in Santa Cruz, California, where he has lived for the past four decades, currently near a bird sanctuary on Tree Frog Lane.

"What I'm proudest of in my life," he says, "is that I have four bright, interesting, creative, and fun children who love each other and enjoy hanging out together." (Wendy, Scott, Stephanie, and Dashka, three from his first marriage and one from his third, now range in age from 49 to 64.) His fourth and current spouse is photographer Susan Helgeson. "It's been a very satisfying life, in nearly every way," he says.

Slater probably set out on the path to sociology and social criticism by growing up the son of a frustrated scholar. His father, John Elliot Slater, A.B. 1913, was president of a shipping company and chair of the New Haven Railroad, but "had an unfulfilled desire to be an academic," Slater recalls. "One reason I left the university is that I realized I was playing out his road not taken."

He attended public schools in Montclair, New Jersey, declining private school because "there were no girls there." After high school, with World War II still raging, he spent two years in the Merchant Marine and "foolishly married my high-school sweetheart," he says. Hence, his "extracurricular activities" at Harvard were being a husband and parent; he concentrated in government.

"My whole academic career was guided by choosing the path of least specialization," he says. "I did not like looking at the world through one lens—it seemed too limiting." In 1952, during graduate work in the field of social relations, he became one of the first people in North America to take LSD, years before Timothy Leary heard of psychedelics. This happened at Boston Psychopathic Hospital under the auspices of Harvard Medical School psychiatrist Robert W. Hyde, who became Slater's mentor: "a brilliant man, who had a kind of unfettered mind." Slater adds that, "if you take LSD and take it seriously, you never look at the world the same way again."

He taught at Harvard for six years as a lecturer and leader in the group-process course, Social Relations 120, before joining the Brandeis sociology faculty in 1961. "The department was very cohesive, very radical—in teaching methods, and so on," he recalls. "So we were hated by the rest of the university. It was one battle after another—constant harassment." He recalls an assistant professor who remarked, in a course on gender, that "every man should know how to cook a meal." The rumor soon circulated that the final exam in the course was cooking a meal.

The success of *Pursuit of Loneliness* led to some lucrative book advances, which convinced Slater he might support himself by

*Photograph by Susan Helgeson*

writing. After leaving Brandeis, he joined with Jacqueline Doyle of the Esalen Institute and former Brandeis colleague Morrie Schwartz (of *Tuesdays with Morrie* fame) to found Greenhouse, a personal growth center in Cambridge: "I was running all kinds of groups, [humanistic psychology pioneer] Carl Rogers was there, it was a very exciting time."

A serious romantic relationship drew him to Santa Cruz in 1975. The next fall, Slater's female companion returned to Cambridge to take a job, and "I found myself feeling abandoned," he recalls. Simultaneously, a publisher canceled a book contract with a $30,000 advance payment remaining, and even sued the author to recoup the original $30,000 installment. "I was here in a strange place with no job, no income, no girlfriend," he recalls. "It was one of the happiest times of my life." He joined a men's group that he continues to attend, 35 years later, and began stage acting, which he had never done.

Today Slater remains in Santa Cruz, where he walks on the beach every morning, explaining, "I am addicted to the ocean." Since 2007 he has taught at the San Francisco-based California Institute for Integral Studies, where he offers a required course for graduate students, "Self, Society, and Transformation." It's an online curriculum that also includes an intensive five-day residential session each semester—"very, very multidisciplinary, which is why I like it," he says. "What I love is that the students are all adults, mostly in their forties and fifties. They are very interesting people—open-minded, excited, motivated—who decided to get a Ph.D. They come from all over the world."

Most of the students know and admire

## The World According to Slater

**Philip Slater's book** *The Chrysalis Effect: The Metamorphosis of Global Culture* was published in 2008 by the smallish Sussex Academic Press. It appeared without any noticeable publicity in the United States and so far has flown under the radar. Yet it may stand as his magnum opus; it's a thought-provoking study that turns a long lens on human history, culture, economy, and social structures. Always adept at spotting patterns before others notice them, Slater here describes cultural styles that play out on a macroscopic, Toynbee-like level, while stitching these massive systems closely to the facts of daily life.

Many of today's jarring dislocations, he asserts, stem from the clash between the ancient system of control culture and a newer pattern: integrative culture. "Incivility and chaos arise when an old system is breaking down and a new one hasn't yet fully taken hold," he writes. The "chrysalis" of the title refers to the transitional state between one life form and the successor that grows out of it.

The ethos of control culture has dominated human societies for millennia, Slater writes, ever since the advent of agriculture: it embraces "a static vision of the universe, a deep dependence on authoritarian rule, a conviction that order was something that had to be imposed, and a preoccupation with combat." Integrative culture, in contrast, breaks down mental walls and boundaries and celebrates interdependence. "It has a dynamic vision of the universe, a democratic ethos, and sees order as something that evolves, as it does in Nature, from spontaneous interaction."

This conflict illuminates, for example, the endless wrangling of creationists and scientists. Creationists view the extraordinary complexity of life as something that "could only have come about as the conscious creation of a humanoid intelligence—some sort of über-authority—since it would be impossible for this sort of thing to evolve on its own." But scientists feel the creationists have it backwards: "[I]ntelligence springs from organizational complexity. Mind inheres in any cybernetic system capable of learning from trial and error and becoming self-correcting."

Control culture—identified with "authoritarianism, militarism, misogyny, proliferating walls, mental constriction, and rigid dualism"—clearly embraces male dominance as well. The controllers' world is crumbling, Slater argues, with the ascent of women, a development linked to integrative culture. Consequently, "Even though they still run the world, many men today express feelings of powerlessness. They're angry that women are invading previously all-male domains, and upset that women aren't as dependent on them as they used to be…modern men have been trained in macho skills over many years and at severe cost, only to discover that those skills are no longer of any use to anyone. Strutting, boasting, fighting, destroying, and killing just don't seem as important to the world as they used to."

Some men respond to their loss of prerogatives by "clinging to ever-shrinking definitions of masculinity," and Slater links this to the surge in male bodybuilding and steroid use. Other men, more identified with integrative culture, welcome the chance to spend more time taking care of their children, although "Mr. Moms" are often as unwelcome at park playgrounds as women firefighters can be in firehouses. "I've seen women intrude with astonishing arrogance and officiousness into the parenting styles of men who have been a child's primary caretaker since it was born," Slater writes. "Women, too, have trouble giving up old patterns."

War might be the institution that most fully epitomizes control culture, and Slater argues that the rise of integrative culture is making war obsolete. The burgeoning of global trade over the last 30 years means, for example, that "Almost anywhere we attack today we're attacking our own companies, our own products, our own creations, our own citizens."

Furthermore, in contrast to past centuries, war is no longer good for business. Except for a few war-related industries, prosecuting a war, or even winning one, is no longer an advantageous activity, he says: warfare is simply more costly now, and its rewards smaller and less certain. "War today is a symptom of backwardness," Slater writes. "While nations mired in poverty and fanaticism are busy making macho gestures and killing one another, Western Europe—once a luxuriant breeding ground of mutual slaughter—has a common market and currency." He notes that the sole exception to this trend is the United States, "primarily because for decades it's been able to wage wars on small, weak Third-World nations with little fear of retaliation. But the attacks of 9/11 made it clear that retaliation can come in nonmilitary forms."

Slater's books, as well. "The thing about being famous," he muses, "is that it's sort of sickening how some people respond to you. They'll say, 'Your book changed my life,' but then it becomes clear that they haven't read the book and don't have a clue what is in it. I've had people treat me as 'someone famous' and try to get on board in the crudest ways. Once, a woman said, 'I haven't read your book [*The Pursuit of Loneliness*] but I've been looking at you in this discussion and you look *lonely*.' " A pause. "Fortunately," he adds, "I've drifted into obscurity."

—CRAIG LAMBERT

## Vote Now

THIS SPRING, alumni can vote for five new Harvard Overseers and six new elected directors of the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA). Ballots, mailed out by April 1, must be received back in Cambridge by noon on May 24 to be counted. Results of the election will be announced at the HAA's annual meeting on May 30, on the afternoon of Commencement day. All Harvard degree-holders, except Corporation members and officers of instruction and government, may vote for Overseer candidates. The election for HAA directors is open to all Harvard degree-holders.

Candidates for Overseer may also be nominated by petition, that is, by obtaining a prescribed number of signatures from eligible degree holders. The deadline for all petitions for this year was February 1.

For Overseer (six-year term):

**Susan L. Carney** '73, J.D. '77, Hamden, Connecticut. Circuit Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit.

**Christopher B. Field** '75, Stanford, California. Director, department of global ecology, Carnegie Institution for Science; Melvin and Joan Lane chair in interdisciplinary environmental studies, Stanford University.

**Deanna Lee** '84, New York City. Chief communications and digital strategies officer, Carnegie Corporation of New York.

**Walter H. Morris** Jr. '73, M.B.A. '75, Potomac, Maryland. Retired principal, Ernst & Young LLP.

**Gilbert S. Omenn,** M.D. '65, Ann Arbor. Professor of internal medicine, human genetics, and public health and director of the Center for Computational Medicine and Bioinformatics, University of Michigan.

**Sanjay H. Patel** '83, A.M. '83, London. Managing partner and head of international private equity, Apollo Management International LLP.

**Ana Maria Salazar,** J.D. '89, Mexico City. Anchor, *ImagenNews/Living in Mexico/El Primer Café*; CEO, Grupo Salazar.

**Gwill York** '79, M.B.A. '84, Cambridge. Managing director and co-founder, Lighthouse Capital Partners.

For elected director (three-year term):

**Theodore "Ted" H. Ashford III** '86, Wilmington, Delaware. President, Ashford Capital Management.

**Richard R. Buery Jr.** '92, New York City. President and CEO, The Children's Aid Society.

**Patrick S. Chung** '96, J.D.-M.B.A. '04, Menlo Park, California. Partner, New Enterprise Associates.