

Full Text Of Daniel Wood's Interview With Maurice Strong: The Wizard of Baca Grande

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The Wizard of Baca Grande

A story about a burning bush, Shirley MacLaine, Zen Monks, and mystic crystals.

A story about the biggest water deal ever.

A story of how a boy from Oak Lake Manitoba set out to change the world.

The Wizard of Baca Grande

Maurice Strong has gained more respect and influence than any other Canadian alive today. Now he's risking it on a bold experiment that could save us all from ourselves - or just blow up in his face. By Daniel Wood

These are the days of miracle and wonder and don't cry, baby, don't cry, don't cry - Paul Simon, "The Boy in the Bubble"

Highway 17 is a blue line on the map of southern Colorado that runs between nowhere and nowhere. It crosses the Rio Grande outside of Alamosa and cuts due north through the San Luis Valley, a bleak expanse of dust and sagebrush. The surrounding flatness is broken by the distant Sangre de Cristo - "Blood of Christ" - Mountains, which rise in 2,100-metre cliffs along the valley's eastern flank, 24 kilometres away. Other than that nothing. A rabbit dead on the two-lane asphalt. A high blue sky.

There's nothing to indicate, nothing except the words of my companion, 60-year-old Canadian Maurice Strong, that up ahead a few kilometres, past the obscure right turn marked "Crestone", past the Lazy U Ranch and its yard of derelict farm equipment, beyond Crestone itself, population 60, a village of God-fearing Baptists and a couple of recently arrived New Agers, up there in the aspen-covered foothills below towering Mt. Kit Carson, lies tangible evidence of a great-some would say preposterous- utopian dream. Its goal is nothing less than to alter, utterly, the history of the world.

The dream belongs to multi-millionaire Strong, who grew up in Oak Lake, Manitoba, dirt-pore, eating pigweed and dandelions for vegetables during the worst Depression times, and who decided one day in the early 1940s that he would make his mark on the world. Today, his resume reads like the lives of a dozen great men. At the age 25, he was vice-

president of Dome Petroleum. At 31, he became president of the Power Corporation of Canada. He went on to found and head CIDA (the Canadian International Development Assistance program) and later Petro-Canada. At the global level, where he's better known than in his own country, he is considered one of the world's leading environmentalists.

The dream also belongs to Strong's mystical, 48-year-old Danish-born wife, Hanne, whose visions have propelled the plan. Together, they have established in the Colorado desert a place they call the Baca, an international spiritual community which they hope will serve as a model for the way the world should be - and, they say, must be - if humankind is to survive.

It all started in 1978 when a mysterious man visited Hanne bearing a prophecy of the coming apocalypse. The dream grew amid omens that defy belief. It has been nourished by the Strong's' friends, such people as Rockefeller, Trudeau, the Dalai Lama, and Shirley MacLaine. And its future is now entwined with political realities as bizarre - and troublesome - as the prophecies and omens from which the dream began.

Needless to say, there are men out here on this high plain who do not line the sound of these things any more than those of previous generations liked the earlier dreamers who tried to occupy this place. In a region perennially poor, in a land barely tamed since vast herds of buffalo roamed here over a century ago, people with dreams can be seen as intruders and a threat to the way things are. If those people are rich, if they are foreigners, and if they are talking about global harmony and a **new world order** - well, it conjures up in the minds of many of the locals the kind of xenophobic suspicion that rural America sometimes feels toward strangers. And if these foreigners set out to establish within the morning shadows of the Sangre de Cristo peaks and international community of spiritual seekers - a sort of United Nations of religious beliefs - complete with monasteries and devotees of the Vedic mother goddess and amulet-carrying native American shamans and even Shirley MacLaine and her New Age followers, then such dreams can be seen as an affront to the Baptists and born-again evangelicals for whom Jesus Christ is the Answer. And if, again, these foreigners were to discover, quite to their surprise, that the enormous tract of land they've acquired to fulfil their plan happens to sit atop what could be the largest untapped reservoir of water in the U.S.A. - smack in the middle of the parched and booming south-west - and the couple, together with some partners, from a company to sell some of the billions of dollars' worth of new-found water to folks in Denver and downstream along the Rio Grande, envy and suspicion and bigotry can combine into a potent force.

And that is exactly what has happened. There have been strange rumors and public protests. There have been death threats. Mistrust and the water may jeopardize the dream.

The Strongs are the latest in a line of dreamers who have come to the San Luis Valley pursuing a vision. The Anazasi Indians and the Spanish conquistadors passed this way centuries ago on the trail to oblivion. In the 1880s, miners came, believing they'd found El Dorado in the veins of gold that ran into the grey quartzite along Cottonwood and Willow and Spanish creeks. But the gold ran out. The boom town of Crestone withered. Next came a scheme in the 1970s to build a giant retirement community, called Baca Grande after the nearby 57,760-hectare Baca Grant ranch. Thirty million dollars were sunk into roads and utilities to service the 10,000 lots. But only a few hundred settled. Few now remain.

In 1978, together with the other investors, Strong bought the Baca Grant - sight unseen - as part of a much larger land purchase. He and his wife walked the aspen-lined creeks and climbed among the 4,200-metre peaks above the Baca. They liked the solitude, the silences, the sunsets. They knew nothing about the hidden water. They couldn't have imagined what trouble it would bring.

One evening a gray-bearded stranger arrived uninvited at their townhouse. He introduced himself as Glen Anderson and told Hanne, "I've been waiting for you." He described to her the visions he had had while wandering in the nearby mountains. He saw that the leaders of all the world's religions would gather at the Baca. They'd build their temples and monasteries and churches, and political, educational, and corporate leaders would follow. Together, **he told Hanne, these people would give shape to a new planetary order which would evolve from the economic collapse and environmental catastrophes that would sweep the globe in the years ahead.**

Hanne grew up amid wealth and risk in wartime Copenhagen. Her mother worked in the Danish Resistance, helping to ferry European Jews out of Germany. And **Hanne knew from earliest childhood that she was different, that she had mystical abilities. She saw angels. She could recall past lives. Something made her feel she was once and Indian and that she should go to the U.S. to find her ancestral home.** After an education of industrial and interior design, she went to America.

And so when she heard Anderson telling her about his voices, **she took it as prophecy. She headed alone uphill into the mountains carrying an Indian pipe and a pouch of medicinal herbs and found a promontory above the Baca. For three days she stayed there, fasting, meditating, observing the land. It was no coincidence, she felt, that "The Old Man" - as she calls Anderson now - came to her. His message could not be ignored. She would - with her husband's support and his international connections - try to do what Anderson directed.**

When Strong heard this, he thought it outrageous. He called the plan grandiose and impractical. But then, these qualities had always been part of his attraction to her. She

wasn't afraid of thinking big. Hanne heard her husband's doubts and knew enough about the man to know that he, too, had had unrealistic dreams, that he had global visions, that he could be won over.

Strong grew up beside the railroad tracks that passed through Oak Lake, a town of 400 people, 56 kilometres west of Brandon. His father worked for the CPR until the Depression hit, then odd jobs until the war came. Maurice's school-teacher mother filled his mind with stories from history and images of the world beyond Manitoba, and he recalls watching with a mixture of sadness and thrill the passing freights covered with destitute people travelling someplace else. He longed to see the world. When the Second World War came - and life on the prairies gradually got better - he remembers asking his mother why it was the world worked that way. Why the suffering of the '30s? Why the war and economic recovery now? She told him it didn't have to be that way. She told him that, if he put his mind to it, he could change the world. You'd be surprised, she'd said, at how far you can go if you don't accept the limits, if you don't set any barriers for yourself.

Hanne knew these words, for her husband occasionally repeated them. She hoped that at the Baca the two of them, together, might - just might - be able to change the world.

If a visitor turns right at the Y intersection just outside Crestone, as I did many times during my stay, the road climbs into the forested hills overlooking the San Luis Vally, where the dreams of previous occupants are turning to dust. Circles of stones mark long-abandoned native sites from which attacks on the buffalo were launched. Collapsed cabins, rusting machinery, and mounded trailings piles indicate the deserted gold mines. And everywhere, spreading downhill onto the plain, an intricate network of crumbling roads attests to the scale of the retirement community's failure. Scattered across this landscape is evidence of the newest utopian settlement: an exquisite Catholic monastery for members of the monastic Carmelite order; a \$175,000 solar-powered Hindu temple; a strange, mustard-yellow tower called a ziggurat; a mud-caulked southwest Indian hogan; a subterranean Zen Buddhist centre complete with a computer and organic gardens; a house of thousands of crystals, another occupied by an 85-year-old native shaman, This is the Baca today. But today, I'm discovering, is only the beginning. For the Strongs, it is a lifetime project.

I find myself wondering what dedication, what idealism compels them toward such an unlikely dream. And the more i learn, the more aware I become that I've entered a world of illusions, where the surface conceals things unfathomable. I can't believe - though I would like to - the supernatural stories Hanne tells. I wonder how an aggressive and calculating businessman like Strong can also be a mystic. I can't figure out how Shirley MacLaine will affect the Baca when she moves in. And I can't get the water - the billions of dollars' worth of water - out of my mind.

I keep going over the conversation in which the Strongs described to me the very first words that passed between them. At the party in New York City over 20 years ago where they'd been introduced, Hanne, well aware of Strong's reputation, had said to her future husband, "Some people say you're a genius. And some people say you're a fake." Hanne laughed at the memory and laughed harder at her husband's rebuttal. Strong looked at me at that moment and said, "And she's still wondering!"

I get the impression that they enjoy this ambiguity, this flirtation between reality and illusion. I get the impression that the tables could have been turned, that Strong could have confronted Hanne: genius? or fake? The magus and the mystic, I tell myself. It's important to figure it all out. The answers matter. For, as the Strongs mention, they see the Baca as a paradigm for the entire planet and say that the fate of the earth is at stake.

When Strong left Oak Lake in 1943, having skipped four grades for his scholastic abilities and graduated at age 14, he carried with him an abiding sense of the world's injustices and a desire never again to be poor. He bought a ticket on a train out of town. For a while, adding five years to his age and darkening his pubescent mustache for effect, he worked with the merchant marine along the B.C. coast. He then became an apprentice fur trader in the High Arctic. He did a little prospecting. He lived among the Inuit. He wandered. on day in 1943, after a long rainy ride in an open coal car, he found himself back at Oak Lake, cold, lonely. He could see the lights in the window of his house, but something told him he could not go home again. He rode further on, stopping in Broadview, Saskatchewan. As he sat beside the tracks, a newspaper blew past. He caught it. On the front page he read that Churchill and Roosevelt had agreed that they would, after the war, form a new international organization dedicated to world justice and peace. It would be called the United Nations.

The concept hit him like a thunderbolt. "I knew at that moment," Strong told me, "I wanted to be part of it."

In the two decades that followed, he discovered that although his lack of university education prevented him from doing something of consequence at the international level, his shrewdness brought him success in money matters. He arrived in Alberta during the boom of the early '50s as a young financial analyst specializing in resource development. He befriended oil entrepreneur Jack Gallagher and later joined Dome Petroleum as its third employee. He met and married Pauline, his first wife, with whom he had four children. By investing in oil and gas properties and founding a series of resource-based companies, he earned his first million within a few years. He then moved on to the presidency of the Power Corporation of Canada, a leading energy-investment firm. Financial success, corporate connections, and power were his - and he hadn't turned 32.

But inside him, still unfulfilled, lay the seed planted by his mother - that he could do something to better the world. Then, in 1965, he was asked to meet Prime Minister Lester Pearson. The PM wanted to know if Strong was interested in bringing his managerial skills and his long-held international concerns to the organization now known as CIDA. Strong became director-general of External Aid, which put him in charge of all Canadian foreign aid. He left, willingly, a \$200,000-a-year job as a corporate executive for a \$27,000-a-year job as a civil servant. It didn't matter. He knew he would finally get to fulfil his dream of becoming involved with the United Nations.

From there, though his subsequent friendship with Pearson's successor, Pierre Trudeau, the millionaire energy entrepreneur-turned-international do-gooder found the cause that has come to dominate the past 20 years of his life. With the support of the Canadian government, he has participated in or directed practically every major environmental initiative that has come out of the United Nations from that time to this. He organized the first World Conference on the Environment in 1972. Then he moved to Kenya, where he established and headed the U.N. Environment Program. After that, he joined the World Commission on the Environment, which produced the epochal 1987 Brundtland Report, the incendiary that has ignited the present global "green" movement. Three months ago, **he was appointed secretary-general of the U.N.'s world conference on the environment and development to be held in Brazil in 1992. From such platforms, he has proposed a new economic order based on the redistribution of the developed world's industries and wealth to the Third World. He has called for a massive retooling of western economies away from short-sighted consumption and toward long-term conservation. On occasion, he has said that the one factor that may spare humanity from its environmental folly is a worldwide spiritual reawakening. He hopes the Baca can serve as a seed.**

"I believe the great frontier of the future is the frontier between the individual spirit and the Spirit, the cosmos," he confides to me on one of our many drives through the San Luis Valley. "At our highest moments, we feel a sense of unity with the cosmos. A lot of us have static, though. Our society runs on people feeling unfulfilled, unconnected. The process of atunement is the trick. It takes practice. I remember asking a monk in Sikkim, who'd just come out of three years, three months, and three days of silent meditation, how his efforts had benefitted the world. He asked me: 'Why isn't it as important to develop one's spiritual nature as, say, an athlete in the west developing his physical prowess or an intellectual developing his intellectual abilities?'"

Here is a man, I tell myself, who has fulfilled many, perhaps most, of his ambitions and dreams. He has made millions. He has sat at the table with many of the earth's most powerful people. He has tried - in a rational and political way - to change the world. And yet, he shared with Hanne a sense of the profound mystical possibilities that exist for

those who are prepared to retreat from the hubbub and listen to the moaning of the wind. The more questionable New Age practices - belief in things like crystals or omens - heaves to Hanne and her occult faith. His is a more sceptical mind.

Nevertheless, he confesses that a few years ago, while walking with the famed author and journalist Bill Moyers in the desert nearby, something strange, something inexplicable happened. According to Strong: "We'd been walking, talking, heading back to my parked car. Suddenly, this bush - some sagebrush - erupted in flames in front of us! It just burst into flames. I was astounded. Moyers was, too. A bush bursting into flames!" He shakes his head at the memory. He knows it sounds, well, flaky. But it did happen, he reassures me. It is the most impressive mystical experience he has had.

He is concerned, above all, about man's extinction. The words of Percy Shelley's ironic 19th-century poem *Ozymandias* - memorized in his youth - have seemed, of late, more and more like the epitaph of human civilization:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkles lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on the lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear -
"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sand stretch far away

Along the way during the past 20 years, not unnoticed in his home country, he agreed in 1976, at Pierre Trudeau's request, to set up and become CEO of Petro-Canada. The country was in the midst of the OPEC-induced oil crunch. Strong had energy-industry connections and well-known doubts about unfettered capitalism. He took the job. His old Alberta Oil Patch friends were aghast. Strong, an apparent free-enterprise pal, was helping the loathed Liberals nationalize parts of the country's oil and gas industries.

"I'm a maverick," says Strong, explaining his willingness to leave the international field for controversial corporate job. "I've always been regarded as a peculiar type. I've been in it, but not necessarily of it."

This observation, I soon discover, holds true for Strong's involvement in the Baca spiritual community: he is in it, but not necessarily of it. By nature, he is a philosophic and a little shy. He stammers at times. At the Baca, he affects the look of a westerner - cowboy hat, string tie, pointy boots. But his interests are primarily global. He travels endlessly, speaking on the need for environmental legislation in one place, attending a board meeting in a second, visiting influential friends along the way.

As Hanne says, explaining their unusual relationship, "Maurice is out there, trying to save the world. He's out there, speaking, his diplomacy, his global visions. But you've got to have examples. There have to be places where his ideas come to earth. His is the macro - the world. The Baca's the micro. If there's a glimmer of hope for the future, that's what this place is about."

Hanne prefers to remain in the couple's new adobe house that sits on the lowest slopes of the Sangre de Cristo foothills. The two-bedroom building, like the Baca itself, is a prototype for the future: the basement, a large cold cellar for storing vegetables, fruit, and Hanne's growing collection of seeds from rare and endangered plants; in the pantry, a mulching system with its compost-digesting earthworms; throughout the house, passive solar headings and triple-glazed windows. As well, the house is crammed with religious objects: African masks, sacred Nepalese stones, a half-dozen antique Tibetan wall-hangings called tankas. It was beneath one of these, I'm informed, that a visiting associate of the Dali Lama, the Ta Lama, died nine years ago while sitting cross-legged in deep medication. According to Tibetan custom, Hanne tells me, the dead lama was left untouched in an upright position for four days until his spirit had departed. When the body was finally moved, she adds, the attending doctor noted that it didn't smell and that it heard - and she put her fist against her chest - was still warm.

From the house and the nearby ranch headquarters, the Strong's oversee the religious community's development, the progress of which has not always been smooth. In 1979, at the Strong's invitation, the first groups moved to the Baca - the Aspen Institute and the Lindisfarne Association, a humanistic American think-tank and a spiritual society, respectively. Later, they withdrew in the face of the site's remoteness. Some of the locals were happy to see them go, for they imagined - in the presence of such visitors as Henry Kissinger, the World Bank's Robert McNamara, and the presidents of the organizations like IBM, Pan Am, and Harvard University - a clandestine, left-wing conspiracy to establish the Baca as the base for a world government. Rumors circulated for a while that Strong had a huge warehouse in Canada full of newly designed and minted currency, ready to issue when the "internationalist conspiracy" was initiated.

The truth is less grand. During the last decade, the Strong's have donated 600 hectares and about \$1 million to various religious groups to encourage them to settle in the Baca. As well, several wealthy friends of the Strong's, including Shirley MacLaine, plus 100 or so

other practitioners of New Age beliefs, have in the last few years purchased land or homes amid the widely scattered buildings of the traditional religions.

But it isn't until I see Hanne's map labelled "The valley of the Refuge of the World Truths", that I glimpse the Big Picture. We unroll it on the floor of her study, directly beneath the tanka where the lama died. "Here's where the Tibetan monastery's going to go," she says, pointing. "Here's where a rabbi from Israel's going to do a centre for the study of Jewish Mysticism. The Taoists are coming in 1990. So's a Sufi leader and his group. And here's Shirley MacLaine's place"

I look. They're all there, on the map. So are the names of a score more religious groups and humanistic associations that are slated for 1991 and beyond. "This is still an infant," she says, her voice motherly. "It's still a seed. It's a 20-, 30-, 40- year project. To bring the world's religions together - that's a very long road. To create an example of a new future - that, two takes time. But this place will have a key role in the future of mankind."

I want to believe her. I know, however, that fulling her determination are terrible fears that forces beyond her control may overwhelm both the Baca and the planet.

She eyes me, smiling at my scepticism. I comment on her conviction as she begins rerolling the map. "My only worry," she says, "is that the gurus and hucksters will come here and it becomes a sort of mecca. That's why I've hesitated so long about Shirley. I told her 'If you come here, it'll be overrun with crystal people.' But Shirley feels the Baca's the place for her. Her astrologer told her to move here. Some people say it'll become a 'spiritual supermarket'. I guess it'll be my job to protect it. The Baca's a place for the contemplative life. It's not a place for a quick fix"

However, I noticed, in the lower left-hand corner of the map, one more unmentioned thing: a tiny, long, and narrow rectangle drawn in blue, and the word Airport. The sun is almost setting. Its light blazes above the mountains of distant New Mexico and sets the rabbit brush beyond the windows aflame. Hanne invites me to join her in her daily ritual of singing the sun down. We go outside and stand side by side on the porch, facing east. She chants her mantra, and ancient Vedic text, she explains, that goes back to the dawn of civilization. I don't understand a word, but I know that Hanne feels it aligns her with natural forces. I stand there, mirroring Hanne, my arms raised before my face, palms turned from the sun, listening to her chant and thinking this: yes, we live in a self-centered and cynical age. The diseases of our times - the loneliness, the secret yearnings, the drugs, the materialism and money-hunger - are measures of the alienation we feel from the natural rhythms and the possibility of epiphanies that orders at other times have felt. And yet...and yet, I saw the word: Airport. Is the Baca really a grand spiritual experiment, or a clever real estate scheme for aging New Agers? And what will happen with the water?

In the earliest stages of the Baca project, many of the local people viewed the arrival of the Strongs and their worldly friends much as they would an outbreak of hoof-and-mouth disease. The place was called "Cult City" by kinder folk, and a centre of cannibalism, ritual deaths, and communism by those of a more fanciful mind. In time, according to Crestone's grey-haired historian and lifetime resident, Gladys Sisemore, most people have come to accept the newcomers. "You have to take the bitter with the sweet," she says as she sits crocheting, describing her reaction to the strangers she occasionally meets on Main Street. But practically no one in Crestone - practically no one, in fact across the entire San Luis Valley - has accommodated himself to plans to sell the water.

American Water Development associates, Alabama-born Buddy Whitlock, reminding valleys residents he's an environmentalist, that he has his home there, that he wouldn't jeopardize the region's ecosystem. He has reassured people that - if water is pumped out - its first use will be to revitalize the valley. But the ranchers, farmers, and local landowners remain unimpressed. They don't trust him.

They have formed a coalition, called Citizens for San Luis Valley Water, under the leadership of 52-year-old grain and cattle farmer Greg Gosar. "We know they've applied to put in 100 wells, pumping from 2,500 feet deep, We know they've already offered to sell 25,000 acre feet to Denver. People feel Maurice misled them. He said the water would be used at first to benefit the valley. The people here are at least 99 percent opposed to the water development. It's an affront to us. It will devastate the valley. It will depopulate it. There are people who are narrow-minded enough to resort to violence."

If the local people knew what was really going on behind the scenes between Strong and his financial partners, including wealthy Vancouver investment financier Sam Belzberg, they would be even more worried.

The fact is: Strong, as chairman of the board of American Water Development, has had a series of disagreements over his management of the Baca property in the last three years. Several other board members didn't like the idea of the spiritual community in the first place. But Strong was the largest individual investor. He'd cajoled them to go along with the scheme. However, when word circulated that Shirley MacLaine might move there, some of the Christian fundamentalists on the board and the hard-headed, bottom line-oriented Belzberg resisted. Belzberg feared that MacLaine could antagonize the locals. The conflict reached a head last year when Strong, under pressure from his board, removed 640 hectares for the spiritual community from the larger Baca Grant Ranch property and handed these to Hanne for her to control. He then donated his shares in American Water to a Michigan-based bio-energy research foundation and later quite the board, relinquishing any future influence over the water development plans.

Despite the imbroglio within American Water Development's board, the project continues. The company is moving ahead on its \$126-million proposal to drill the wells and construct a pipeline to serve Denver. The local coalition plans to fight every step along the way. The irony is that Strong, as a longtime spokesman for the water project, is still seen as a target for criticism and suspicion. Local people feel he betrayed them and is now trying to salvage things for himself and Hanne. In a poor desert region, you can - so the saying goes - mess with a man's wife perhaps, but you don't mess with his water. Strong would rather not talk - nor have me talk - about the recent death threats made against his friend and former business associate, Buddy Whitlock.

It is with this sobering perspective that I explore the territory of the utopian dream, trying to weigh the significance of the occasional passing pickup truck with a rifle slung in a rack across the rear window.

I stop and climb uphill to visit the Haidakhandi Universal Ashram, a Vedic temple that sits on a high bluff amid a pinon pine forest. It's impossible to overlook the adjacent 14-square-metre solar panel, which heats the stone floors within the ashram. In the future, says Ram Loti, a priestess of the temple, there'll be hydro-electric power from a small turbine in nearby Spanish Creek, high-tech toilets, and drip-water-fed organic gardens. But as of now, only three devotees live here. She gives me a glossy brochure that tells about future plans. I stop at the Carmelite Monastery, where eight Catholic monks - women and men, all fairly young - spend half their time in total seclusion. For \$35 a night, a visitor can stay in one of the hermitage's 10 small adobe bungalows, joining the monks - if he wishes - at meals and pray and labor.

I stop at the Crestone Mountain Zen Center, where a half-dozen students and Buddhist monks sit. The discussion turns to Shirley MacLaine. Randy Fox, a long-time student of Zen, acknowledges that the actress is a door for millions to a more spiritual world. But, he adds, "The spiritual path takes the whole life. It's not found in a weekend."

I also stop at some of the homes of the 100 or so New Agers who have in recent years been buying the properties of the initial Baca retirees. They have come of their own accord, unbidden and unassisted by the Stronges. They have spurned the trendiness of Taos, New Mexico, or Arizona's popular psychic centre, Sedona, where thousands arrive daily hoping to get their astrological charts read and to find their bliss. Nevertheless, at the Baca these days, psychic Dawn Taylor Carlson offers in-depth instruction in other-world communications. Semu Huaute, 85, gives instruction in native American shamanism and myths. At Barbra Vail's home, I am assaulted by crystals - thousands of them. They crowd porch railings, windowsills, shelves, and altars. They hang from Vail's neck and ears. She is thrilled to hear that MacLaine has decided to build nearby a New Age study centre where people can take short, week-long courses on the occult. Vail hopes to sell MacLaine one of the biggest crystals.

Toward evening, I arrive at the base of a sand dune toward the southern end of the Baca lands. Ahead of me, rising absurdly from the dune's crest, is the Islamic ziggurat, built by the Strong's' friend Najeeb Halaby, former chairman of Pan Am and the father of the Queen of Jordan. I ascend to the tower's top, where I notice weeds have begun to sprout. Around me: a vast emptiness. In my ears: an engulfing silence. Someplace to the north, I tell myself, one of the world's most famous actresses and a leading popularizer of things occult will soon settle. She will, inevitably, draw to this special place all the New Age star-chasers, Winnebago-bound celebrity hounds, and cynical journalists that Hanne fears will come. To the south, I know, another of the Strong's friends, Hisayoshi Ota, a 34-year-old architect and the son of a Japanese tycoon, lives the life of an American cowboy, running a herd of 1,400 buffalo on a ranch adjacent to the Baca. He has decided to forsake the pell-mell life of New York to join the Strong's in their spiritual quest. Below me, beneath the desert's dust: a sea of fresh water, hidden, untapped, unfathomable.

dreams and reality, dreams and reality, I think. But where does the truth lie? I wait for an answer, a portent, a voice. I know Hanne would hear something. But nothing. Just the faintest whisper of wind in the cottonwoods along the dry bed of Cottonwood Creek far below. Then, the lines from Strong's recitation of Ozymandias come back: "My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!" I pick at the peeling paint on the ziggurat. I wonder how long it will take for the roots of the weed to widen the tower's first, tiny cracks. Why should the latest dream to be dreamt here fare any better than those of the retirement community's developers and the gold miners and the Indian hunters and even the dreams of the wild buffalo themselves?

I leave the Baca with Strong, retracing our route of a week earlier. We pass the Lazy U Ranch and turn south on Highway 17. The desert slides by. Strong tells me he has often wished he could write. He has a novel he'd like to do. It's something he has been thinking about for a decade. It would be a cautionary tale about the future.

Each year, he explains as a background to the telling of the novel's plot, the World Economic Forum convenes in Davos, Switzerland. Over a thousand CEOs, prime ministers, finance ministers, and leading academics gather in February to attend meetings and set economic agendas for the year ahead. With this as a setting, he then says: "What if a small group of these world leaders were to conclude that the principal risk to the earth comes from the actions of the rich countries? And if the world is to survive, those rich countries would have to sign an agreement reducing their impact on the environment. Will they do it?" And Strong, driving as I take notes, looks at me. Then his eyes go back to the Highway 17. The man who founded the United Nations Environment Program and who wrote parts of the Brundtland Report and who in 1992 will try to get the world's leaders, meeting in Brazil, to sign just such an agreement, savors the questions hanging in the air. Will

they do it? Will the rich countries agree to reduce their impact on the environment? Will they agree to save the earth?

Strong resumes his story. "The group's conclusion is 'no'. The rich countries won't do it. They won't change. So, in order to save the planet, the group decides: isn't the only hope for the planet that the industrialized civilizations collapse? Isn't it our responsibility to bring that about?"

"This group of world leaders," he continues, "form a secret society to bring about an economic collapse. It's February. They're all at Davos. These aren't terrorists. They're world leaders. They have positioned themselves in the world's commodity and stock markets. They've engineered, using their access to stock exchanges and computers and gold supplies, a panic. Then, they prevent the world's stock markets from closing. They jam the gears. They hire mercenaries who hold the rest of the world leaders at Davos as hostages. The markets can't close. The rich countries..." And Strong makes a light motion with his fingers as if he were flicking a cigarette butt out the window.

I sit there spellbound. This is not any storyteller talking. This is Maurice Strong. He knows these world leaders. He is, in fact, co-chairman of the council of the World Economic Forum. He sits at the fulcrum of power. He is in a position to do it.

"I probably shouldn't be saying things like this," he says.

Highway 17 cuts straight across the desert, heading out of the land of dreams

When the truth is finally told, Maurice and Hanne Strong fear the world will come to this. No secret societies. No hostage-takings at Davos. But it will come to the same conclusion: the global economy, sapped by credit and debt loads and environmental disasters, will simply come unstuck. And nothing - not even the inspiration of the Baca - can save humankind from itself. They see the struggles and problems at the Baca as reflections of the problems assaulting the planet. They fear the Baca will be, at best, an oasis in the desert of the future - and at worst, a place where dreams die.

From:

[Full Text Of Daniel Wood's Interview With Maurice Strong: The Wizard of Baca Grande](#)