Since 1994, my project has been to explore the socially instilled rhetorical strategies that individuals choose to employ in the everyday contexts of their lives. One way I have sought to do this is through the collection of folk beliefs associated with an impending apocalypse. Apocalyptic communication is excellent for this research because it presents, based on the influence of Hal Lindsey and other popular writers and evangelist, a well defined American discourse know loosely as "Dispensationalism" (Lindsey 1970 and 1994; Wojcik 1997).
I have argued that Internet communities who engage in this discourse actually debate, in a continuous cycle, the same issues which form easily identifiable narrative sets (Howard 1997 and 1998b). In Christian discourses such as these, there are repeating patterns that can usefully considered as rhetorical techniques being employed by individuals without formal training in rhetoric.¹

In the case of many Protestant millennialists in 1994, I found a rhetoric of open debate which included the desire to entertain different millennial possibilities (Howard 1997). While for other individuals, such as the Heaven’s Gate group, I have found a flat rejection of debate based on a deep conviction that Truth had already been “revealed” to that group or its leaders (Howard 1998a). Revelatory Truth is a truth known wholly and immediately. Negotiated truth, on the other hand, is pursued through open dialogue among individuals. It is the formulation and reformulation of beliefs based on new influence sources. While experience can act as a final authority, negotiation can only support truth if the negotiating parties are willing to continue communication. Developing out of informal electronic expression, apocalyptic debaters utilize both of these complex folk rhetorical techniques—often simultaneously.

In 1996, I decided to more directly participate in the on-line millennial discourse. To this end, I built The Millennial Information Exchange World-Wide-Web site. This site provides a publicly accessible forum in which anyone can read and post their ideas. I updated and added this e-mail list archive: the mietalk forum.

¹ My definition of “folk rhetoric” is based on Don Yoder’s definition of “folk religion” (and Leonard Norman Primiano’s useful extension of that definition). Folk rhetoric is comprised of rhetorical techniques which are learned outside of institutionally instilled rhetorical discourses (Primiano 1995 and Yoder 1974). Folk rhetoric is learned, as William Bascom noted in his third and fourth functions of folklore (and Barre Toelken further explored), informally through social exchange (Bascom in Dundes ed. 1965; Toelken 1996).
This web-site is really just a way for me to participate in the community. My actual dissertation work is, partially, encoded onto two CD-ROMs. Since the summer of 1999, I have been systematically, downloading and saving web-sites, e-mailing questionnaires, and engaging in e-mail discourse with millennial web-site builders. This late summer and fall I have been traveling to interview these web-site builders in person, transcribing the interviews, and including them in the archive. This archive is already massive: over 200 complete web-sites, some 50,000 e-mails, survey responses, and interview transcripts totaling nearly 1.2 gigabytes for some 32,000 individual files. From my current position of total immersion in this data, this paper will explore my original hypothesis against just a tiny bit of my archived material.

In this short paper, I will argue that everyday millennial American discourse is animated and polarized by a reoccurring tension between truth as known through individual experience and truth as pursued through pluralistic negotiation. Further, I argue that Internet communication encourages, by the nature of the medium, negotiative over experiential rhetorical strategies.
Figure three represents "AlphathroughOmega.com"—Gerry and Sue's web-site. Gerry is an employee of Intel and his wife, Sue, is a homemaker. I interviewed them together over breakfast near the Intel headquarters in Hillsboro, Oregon on October 5, 1999. Although Gerry is a skilled computer technician, he is also skilled at casting out demons.

God has led Gerry to present a fairly typical Protestant Christian Endtimes scenario on his web-site. Further, God asked Gerry to keep his web-site fairly simple. Gerry uses no graphics, the default gray background, and relies primarily on colored text to make his points. In figure four, on the front page of his web-site, he has listed typical topics for Endtimes debaters under the names: "End Times Studies," "Doctrinal Errors In The Churches," "Open Letter to Satanists and Occultists," and so on.
Through the link, "End Times Studies" we find a series of pages that outline a standard chronology of events associated with the Endtimes. These pages include descriptions of the "Tribulation Period" where anti-Christ takes control of the European Union and persecutes Christians during a massive Third World War.
In addition to using some standard topics, Gerry and Sue use a standard argumentative style in which a Bible quote is presented and then followed by a correct interpretation which Gerry has come to through God's direct guidance. On this page in figure five, "REVELATION 3:10" is the passage quoted. Gerry here discusses the "Rapture" which is a common Dispensationalist Protestant belief that the good Christians will be lifted, living bodies and all in some scenarios, out of the world at the beginning, middle, or end of the Great Tribulation Period—depending on your position in the ongoing debate about just when the Rapture will occur.

From this page, it is clear that Gerry is on the "Post-Tribulation" side of this Endtimes debate issue. While acknowledging that his view is different from other individuals, Gerry is not interested in exploring the possibility that he might be wrong because his knowledge is result of direct experience with God.
Gerry and Sue are also involved in the "spiritual warfare" movement. They both have a long relationship with demons. Gerry showed me his “Warlock” tattoo as proof he was ”into the occult.” In fact, he was so deeply involved that he became possessed by a demonic spirit. This occurred before Gerry met Sue and while he was in the Navy. His personality changed. He became distant and emotionless, and he gained minor supernatural powers: mind-reading, seeing the future, and partial control of the weather. Because of these powers, he got quite a reputation aboard ship.

One night, having trouble sleeping, Gerry went to a part of the living quarters where there was enough light to read. There, he met another sailor.

He saw my tattoo, and he asked me about it. He says: ‘Warlock?’ He says: ‘So you’re the guy I’ve heard so much about!’ I looked at him a second and said, “OK.” He says: “Well, how do you think you can do the things you do?” I knew the truth but I wasn’t gonna tell him. So I said I was using my mind to control a greater outside force. He says: “Well. I’m a Christian.” And I knew it. I could feel it. Its . . . its really weird ‘cos people from other religions would come up and try to convert me and I would just laugh at them and walk away. But when there’s a true Christian, I could feel it! Without them even saying anything. And he looked at me and he says: ‘God’s given me the ability to tell when a person’s possessed.’ He looked at me, and something shrank into a cold hard knot in my chest and started moving around like it was trying to hide. And I . . . I just totally flipped out and took off! But it got me thinking about what I was doing, and such like ‘at.
And that was when God told me. He said: ‘Now. Decide who you want to follow.’ And he has since told me if I was to continue to follow Satan, I would be dead.

Both Gerry and Sue have been subject to earthly manifestations of demon attacks in the well known forms of fog, sense of presence, temperature drops, and other sensory phenomenon. Their belief in demons is based on these personal experiences. God too, speaks directly to Gerry, "decide who you want to follow,"

Gerry also accepts such authority in others. This is clear from the acceptance that his fellow sailor has been "given the ability to tell when a person is possessed" by God.

Dramatic spiritual beliefs animate Gerry and Sue's daily lives: from wrong turns into demonically controlled parking lots to apartment neighbors attracting demonic attacks through their occult rituals. Gerry and Sue have become the objects of demonic assault as a result of Gerry's turning away from the powers of Satan. From this wealth of direct personal experience, they offer advice and help for others on their web-pages. Thus the short how-to section in figure seven on "hedges" or the practice of spiritually cordoning off demonic forces.

It is clear that Gerry and Sue present a typical scenario for the Endtimes. Their arguments against pre-Tribulation Rapture further indicate they are aware of and participate in the Protestant discursive community of Endtimes debate. Like many Endtimes debaters, Gerry feels his very words, as he writes them for the web, are directed by a special personal relationship with God. He knows that relationship exists because of his personal experiences of God, angels, and demonic forces. He presents a prime example of an individual operating in a world of experiential
rhetoric heavily relying on personal experience narratives in his appeals to authority both in person and on-line. However, his site is relatively unknown.

On the other end of the spectrum, Lambert Dolphin’s site presents an example of highly negotiative rhetoric, and his site is extraordinarily popular. I have been in e-mail contact with Lambert since 1994—and his site is a little bit older than that. I finally managed to interview him face-to-face in August. Though it is not totally millennial, his site is one of largest independent Christian sites on the web: 69.9 megs for some 1449 files.
Lambert is probably the best known amateur evangelist in the online Endtimes community. This is certainly because his site is so large and has been around for so long. But it is also because of his resume, which you can see in figure nine. It includes a long list of credits accumulated from a career of sound and light wave research at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California. Lambert is a retired physicist, and this fact lends power to his on-line authority.
The bulk of his material is in "Lambert's Library." He told me the reason he first put up the site:

I started just filing things on my web-site . . . and it became handy to find things there and that motivated me to write a little bit more deliberately for the web-site specifically. So the e-mail comes in and finds what I have to say interesting and worthwhile or it generates comments so I think it is worthwhile.

Instead of focusing on the transmission of knowledge as do Gerry and Sue, Lambert considers his web-site "worthwhile" because it "generates comments."
The "library" includes materials and articles he has collected and developed for use in his lectures, Bible study groups, and Sunday school programs—many of these materials are eschatological. In figure eleven you can see there are so many eschatological links, I couldn’t fit them all onto the computer screen.
One of these links, leads to his "time-line" from 1997. It presents a fairly standard Dispensationalist series of events for the Endtimes. Note that the only date Lambert places on his time-line of Biblical events is "1997"—representing "the present" or the last time he updated the graph. Unlike some Dispensationalists, this timeline offers no predictive value because Lambert's understanding of Christian eschatology can offer no date setting nor concrete evidence of who will be anti-Christ and so-forth—and, as Lambert says: "In fact, its probably perfectly acceptable to have equivalent models and use the one that you feel most comfortable with—or the one that fits best to your circumstances."

While this makes Lambert an extreme example of an Endtimes debater using heavily negotiative rhetoric, it is still not cut and dry as one might think. Lambert, Gerry, and Sue, have had similar conversion experiences which include a strong sensation of euphoric joy brought on by prayer and sometimes lasting for days or weeks afterward. For Lambert, this experience plays central role in his spiritual belief system. Lambert describes his "re-birth" experience in the following terms:

"There was this feeling of being washed, and clean, and guilt going away, and this sense of peace of mind about the future, and hope, and then this new excitement."

This experience was not like Gerry’s personal experiences where he has direct aural or visual contact with the divine. Nor did it offer Lambert any final or direct Truth from God of
anything more than his Grace itself. Instead, Lambert insists on replicability of experimental trials: "And then I can go compare notes with other people who have had an experience like mine, and does their experience seem similar—and then I asked, 'Is this the real thing?'" I asked him if he was able to "scientifically" verify his experience. He responded: "Is it verifiable? Not scientifically verifiable, but is it experientially verifiable." And thus my term use of the term "experiential." Even while a spiritual pluralist, at the level of quiet personal knowledge, Lambert too relies on his direct experience of the divine.

CASE 3: Marilyn Agee

The pairing of Gerry and Sue versus Lambert offers the extremes of negotiative and experiential based belief. However, most millennial believers tend toward the center of this continuum. In so doing, they exhibit much more complex rhetorical behaviors. One such case is Marilyn Agee. Figure thirteen is the front page of her web-site: "Bible Prophecy Corner."
Agee is a well known web-site builder and author. Her three books have sold more than 90,000 copies. She gained particular notoriety when she was forced to recant her prediction that the Tribulation would begin on Pentecost 1998. Now she believes that the Tribulation will begin on Pentecost 2000 or 2001. In September 1999, I interviewed her and her husband near their home in Riverside, California.

The typical appeals Marilyn uses are experiential in character, but, over all, her on-line persona contains a strongly negotiative twist. Discussing with me how she claims such powerful knowledge of the divine, she stated that she spent seven years reading “everything man had written about the Bible” but was disappointed with their lack of understanding:

I wanted to know the hard things. So I just opened my Bible, and put my hands on it, and I said, "Lord you'll have to show me." The next seven years I learned so fast I could hardly keep up with it.
Based on this divine infusion of understanding, Agee commonly makes rhetorical claims to authority based on her personal experience through study. On her biographical page, in figure fifteen, she states: "I am a Baptist believer who has been studying the Bible as deep as I can go for over 38 years." This "depth" comes by way of being "led by God" in her studies.
Despite this experiential authority, the bulk of her web-site is bluntly negotiative. The main section, some 13 megs in size, is devoted to what she calls the "Pro and Con Index" which is represented in figure sixteen. This "index" contains over 400 individual pages. Each page contains her personal debates with an individual who has e-mailed her with questions or disagreements. She has posted these exchanges for us all to review and comment on. Still, her responses to these debaters are divinely inspired. In fact, all her discourse, starting with her first publication, seems to have been inspired by divine direction:

So I'd been typing all day, and I grabbed my Bible by the back of it and I just pounced down across the bed. And I said: "Why am I doing all this work for anyway?" The next thing I knew, I'm looking at my Bible—about an inch from my face and Jeremiah 50 verse 2 has rectangle of light on it. Everything else looks gray. I could have read it if I wanted to, it wasn't that dark, but it looked gray—and this verse had light on it, saying: "Publish and conceal not."

And, as it turns out, Marilyn often shares this story with people she is debating, and, when she does this, it serves to divinely authorize her arguments.

In October of 1999, I drove to Helena, Montana and interviewed Jane and John who know Marilyn’s claims of inspired authority well. Together, Jane and John comprise the on-line personality know as the "Watcher." Since 1993, they have built and maintained one of the most
visually appealing and influential Endtimes web-sites. They have been featured on Strange Universe, an A&E documentary, and even had Ted Koppel comment negatively on their work during the aftermath of the Heaven's Gate suicides. Their case is particularly interesting for our discussion today because, as it turns out, Watcher e-mailed with Marilyn for long time—but, in the end, their relationship soured.

Like Lambert, Gerry, and Sue, Jane and John have both had conversion experiences similar to Lambert's which have led to their Christian beliefs. They both consider themselves, as do Sue, Gerry, and Lambert, "born again." However, John and Jane solidly believed in the UFO phenomenon before they became strong Christians. John was a fallen away Catholic, and Jane was practicing Wicca.

The reason we put the web-site up was because we wanted to combat this cognitive dissonance that's set up by the fact that UFOs exist AND there's a Gospel. Then we wanted to point out that the Bible does clearly define what's exactly happening and what will happen and outlines what UFO's are. Then there's this idea that there's actually monuments on another planet—and that blows most peoples' minds!

This work has resulted in some 4 megs about monuments on Mars, UFO technology, government conspiracy, The X Files, and much much more.
While I interviewed the watcher couple, I mentioned this page I found on their web-site where they specifically refute Agee’s assertion that there two Raptures. Apparently, a few years ago Marilyn e-mailed Jane when she found the Watcher site. Soon, Jane, John, and Marilyn were debating Endtimes topics much as all three had done and still do with other people on the Internet all the time. However, this relationship fizzled over a passage in Second Thessalonians where it seems to state that humans will live to see the anti-Christ in power. From Jane and John’s perspective, this means that there will be no pre-Tribulation Rapture, but Agee disagrees—arguing, somewhat idiosyncratically, that there will be a two phased Rapture. Again, this is part of the Pre, Mid, or Post Trib debate, the most common Endtimes issue-exchange. Discussing their discussions with Marilyn, Jane said:

We just tried so hard to say, "Marilyn, what does this passage in scripture mean then? How can you interpret it any other way, because its in black and white, the Greek means this." And, she won’t look at it because it hurts too bad. It’s a very painful thing to think.
Behind me here, is Watcher's response to Marilyn and then Marilyn's response to that response as it appears in "Pro+Con 223" on Marilyn's web-site.

While Jane was ready to move on or reconsider Marilyn's two Rapture assertion saying, "what does this passage mean then?"—Marilyn refused to continue the debate and negotiation ended. In fact, Marilyn refuses to return Jane or John's e-mails to this day. From my analysis, this is not surprising. While the "Pro and Con Index" seems to present a desire to negotiate, the rhetoric that Marilyn uses is closed because of its basis in a personal authority of experience.
All this is not to say that Watcher does not also have their own sense of experiential authority. However, both do reject most claims to direct aural or visual experience of God—including Agee's highlighted passage directing her to publish. John called it "mildly neurotic." He is a psychologist. Commenting on Gerry and Sue's experiences with demons and possession, both Jane and John agreed that such beliefs are dangerously rooted in "superstition" and myth. Such superstitions are a demonic tactic to lead humans away from Christ as they describe on this page represented in figure twenty. Speaking of Gerry's experience of possession and getting rid of demons, John stated:

He's tricked! It serves a huge point because all it is, is a red heron. The forces that they're playing with are all the same. Their [the demons'] agenda is only one: to get man away from the truth. So. If you can get them to think, ya know—to play good cop/bad cop that's SUPER effective.

Jane and John limit valid direct experience of deity to conversion experiences similar to that which they themselves have had. This belief has to do with their interpretation of the word "angel" as Hebrew for messenger. More importantly, John, as a psychologist, discounts Agee's experience as mildly delusional. As a Christian, Gerry's experiences are all demonic and dangerous. For Watcher, the only valid experience of deity is the entering of the Holy Spirit into their consciousnesses—the born again experience which is neither aural or visual. Although this places Watcher in the experiential frame, their interpretations are not divinely led. They are adept
at debating on the Internet, with each other, and with me. They even alter their opinions to suite new facts as their web-site develops. Their understanding of the divine is, as John put it, "dynamic." They are clearly more negotiative than Marilyn, so they are more likely to debate her after she has given up on them.

But both Marilyn and Watcher are very popular Internet Endtimes figures. Although Marilyn can successfully interact with people on the Internet, she can still maintain a belief that her divine guidance in scriptural study produces fundamentally superior interpretations. And, although, Watcher can cling to a dogmatic rejection of all divine experience different from their own, they can engage in negotiative debate almost indefinitely.

I have been arguing, on the most basic level, that everyday millennial American discourse is animated and polarized by a reoccurring tension between truth as arrived at through individual experience and truth as pursued through pluralistic negotiation. Further, I have argued that the Internet itself encourages negotiative rhetorical techniques. I still hold these hypotheses to be true—but my understanding of them has deepened and been complicated by the data I am collecting. While Marilyn is unumbly certain of her experienced truths, she argues on the Internet in what, at first, appears to be in a highly negotiative style. However, when faced with an equally certain debater, her ability to communicate seems to cease.

While Watcher is saddened at the loss of their friend, they both asserted to me specifically that "Marilyn is saved." That is: even if she is dogmatic and wrong, she is a real Christian and, though she will go through the Tribulation with everybody else, she will be saved in the end. About that, there is no doubt. How do they know? All three of them, as well as Gerry and Lambert too, share one thing: they are "born-again," and that refers to a particular spiritual experience which has, as Lambert said, "experientially verifiable" characteristics. For Watcher and Lambert, this seems to be the only sort of authorizing divine experience. For Marilyn, it’s one of a few. For Gerry and Sue, it is one of many.

Well into the coming year, I will be interviewing more web-site builders, non-Internet Endtimes believers, and adding post-1999 versions of the web-sites to the archive. Collecting more examples of beliefs based on various levels of divine experience, I expect to be able to offer further insights into the wide range of revelatory folk rhetorics—and, in the process, continue to define that most basic experience among many Christian Endtimes believers—spiritual rebirth.

Works Cited


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2 Although I do not know if Jane and John know this, Marilyn did say that, although "born again," she has not had a specific single rebirth experience. I assume, though, that Jane and John interpret her claims to rebirth to refer to conversion experiences similar to those they have had and are familiar with in others.

