

Author        Brian Wilson  
Category     Commissioned essays  
Date         January 20, 2019

## **John E. Fetzer: Michigan's Businessman Visionary**

By

Brian C. Wilson

*Michigan History Magazine*

Shortly before he died, John E. Fetzer said, "If they ever write about me, the title will probably be the 'Nine Lives of John E. Fetzer'." No idle boast, Fetzer indeed lived many lives. Headquartered for most of his life in Kalamazoo, John Fetzer was a pioneer broadcaster who helped bring the first radio station to the region in the late 1920s and parlayed that enterprise into a lucrative business career by expanding his holdings into television, recording, and then cable. In his day, though, Fetzer was best known not as a media mogul, but as the owner of the Detroit Tigers baseball team for almost 30 years, beginning in 1956. By the time he died in 1991, Fetzer had been listed in *Forbes* magazine as one of the 400 wealthiest people in the United States. Of his many lives, however, one is not well known: his life-long spiritual search. Fetzer attributed his business success in large part to his spiritual ideas and practices, but his quest for enlightenment is all the more significant because he used his wealth to institutionalize his vision in the Fetzer Institute, a Kalamazoo-based organization with a 500-year mission to bring spiritual transformation to the world.

John Earl Fetzer was the product of the kind of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century small-town life so prominent in the nostalgic memories of much midwestern fiction. Indeed,

many of the incidents in Fetzer's boyhood could have been lifted from the pages of Booth Tarkington or Hamlin Garland. He was born at home on March 25, 1901 in Decatur, an Indiana village of about 4,000 people. After his father's untimely death when he was two, John's mother Della opened a millinery shop and eventually relocated the family to nearby West Lafayette, where Fetzer spent a typical midwestern boyhood attending public schools, playing sandlot baseball, owning a mangy dog named Jack, and running with a tight-knit group of friends.

In 1911, sister Harriet met and married a telegrapher for the Wabash Railroad named Fred Ribble. Ribble taught Morse code to John and introduced him to the newly emerging field of radio. Although still in a primitive stage of development, the fact that one could receive voices and music out of thin air made radio something of an obsession with young John. He began to frequent the radio station and labs at nearby Purdue University, and while recovering from the Spanish flu in 1918, he spent hours studying his father's electrical engineering texts, which aided in his quest for the amateur radio license he received in 1919. After graduation from West Lafayette High School, Fetzer pursued further study in wireless classes at Purdue, allowing him to gain a commercial radio license in 1922.

At some point when Fetzer was a teenager, his mother Della converted to the Michigan-based apocalyptic sect, Seventh-day Adventism, and John followed her into the church. This decision yielded an unexpected opportunity to further his career in radio, as the president of the Adventist Emmanuel Missionary College (today's Andrew's University) invited John to come to Berrien Springs to study and to set up

the College's radio station, the first in southwest Michigan. Fetzer would be responsible for everything including programming, announcing, and technical maintenance at the station. By the spring of 1923, Fetzer calculated that WEMC, "the Radio Lighthouse," was reaching some 250,000 listeners. It was also here that Fetzer met and married Rhea Yeager in 1926; their marriage would last until her death sixty-two years later.

The late 1930s and '40s were a period of immense work for John E. Fetzer. In 1930, Fetzer bought the license for WEMC and moved the station to Kalamazoo, where it was christened WKZO. Radio had now become mainstream and competition between stations and networks was fierce. Despite his position as president of only one small outlet in a small midwestern town, Fetzer continued to fight his way forward. By 1940, WKZO was transmitting 18 hours a day and, in 1945, the Fetzer Broadcasting Company would win a license for WJEF in Grand Rapids, which eventually became West Michigan's first FM station.

Having expanded his radio operations into FM, Fetzer moved into television, with WKZO-TV3 going on the air in 1950. During this decade, Fetzer also branched off into the music business and into television production, but his most noteworthy business decision was to organize an eleven-man syndicate to purchase the Detroit Tigers baseball team, which he did in 1956. Over the next five years, he would buy out his partners, emerging as the sole owner of the Tigers by 1961. It was under Fetzer's watch that the Tigers won the World Series in 1968, the first time in twenty-three years, and only the third time in the history of the franchise.

By the 1970s, now in his 70s and a multimillionaire, John Fetzer decided to take a new path in life and focus more on philanthropy. The John E. Fetzer Foundation, which later would become the Fetzer Institute, had been established back in 1954 to give grants for “religious, charitable, scientific, library, or educational purposes.” Now, Fetzer felt the time was right to develop it into an institution of national, if not international, scope. However, to understand the direction in which Fetzer took his Foundation and the projects it initially funded, we first need to go back and explore the part spirituality played in Fetzer’s life.

Upon graduation from college, John Fetzer made a fateful decision: he left the Seventh-day Adventist Church and largely abandoned institutional Christianity. He turned instead to a lifetime exploration of a variety of metaphysical religions. Although something of a misnomer, “metaphysical religion” refers to those traditions based on a monistic rather than dualistic cosmology, that is, a belief that all is one, including God, as opposed to the radical separation of God and the cosmos that forms the basis for the Abrahamic traditions. In such monistic systems, the conception of God shifts from being transcendent and personal to immanent and impersonal, which tends to have major effects on the way one relates to the world. Despite Christian dominance, there has always been an undercurrent of monistic thinking in the West from ancient times to the present, especially in the United States.

Fetzer first encountered metaphysical religions on a 1934 trip to Indiana’s Camp Chesterfield, the most important Spiritualist camp in the Midwest. Here he encountered a range of mediums and psychics who held séances and practiced

spiritual healing and forms of divination such as astrology and the Ouija board. Just as importantly, Fetzer bought armloads of books at the camp's bookstore. These volumes detailed the spiritual philosophies of a variety of metaphysical traditions including Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, esoteric Freemasonry, Theosophy, and the mind-over-matter teachings of New Thought. The underlying metaphysical worldview of these traditions appealed greatly to Fetzer, and over the next several decades he would strive to develop his own unique understanding of it.

Key to Fetzer's emerging metaphysical worldview was the relationship between science and spirituality, and indeed, he was convinced that these were simply two sides of the same coin. As a radio pioneer, Fetzer was fascinated by radiated energies of all kinds, and his reading of the articles of the great electrical genius Nikola Tesla suggested to him that "energy waveforms" like radio indicated the existence of "more subtle" energies we can't yet measure. Up to his day, however, science had focused exclusively on the material world. It would only advance to the next level, Fetzer contended, if scientists recognized and studied scientifically the subtle and spiritual dimensions that complement the material dimensions of the cosmos.

And yet, Fetzer also believed that a spiritualized science was only part of the equation when it came to curing the world's ills. Growing alarmed at the country's social unrest during the 1960s, Fetzer wrote an essay entitled "America's Agony" in which he decried the pessimism and divisions bedeviling the country at that time. Perhaps surprisingly in light of his establishment bona fides, Fetzer's assessment of

the student unrest of the era was more than a little sympathetic. It was no wonder, Fetzer wrote, that students were revolting against “the establishment” since it represented to them nothing more than institutionalized war, poverty, depersonalization, overpopulation, environmental degradation, racism, and materialism. And while Fetzer felt that much student protest was misguided and divisive, such dissent nevertheless signaled to him a healthy and genuine “impatience with social structures, an impatience which portend[ed] change.” That this change would have to be at the level of spirit Fetzer had no doubt, and he looked forward to a coming period of global spiritual transformation. As Fetzer once put it in one of his writings, “Science and spiritual forces will unite under the aegis of Energy Intelligence,” “the earth will be resurrected, re-formed and raised into a higher dimension,” and “all the people of the world will unite to express the truths central to all major religions” in a “New Age spirituality.”

Throughout most of his spiritual quest, John Fetzer kept his metaphysical interests to himself, not only because he was a private man by nature, but also because he was afraid they might jeopardize his business success in religiously conservative west Michigan. Fetzer had a marked ability to compartmentalize his professional life from his spiritual life, an ability that served him well in his desire for professional respectability. However, by the 1970s he had begun the process of liquidating his businesses in order to endow his Foundation. He thus felt it was high time he became more open in terms of the public expression of his beliefs, despite the negative responses they would inevitably provoke. In 1974, for instance, Fetzer introduced Transcendental Meditation (TM) into the Detroit Tigers’ spring training.

Not all approved, of course, with one Michigan minister complaining that this practice of “disguised Hinduism” accounted for the Tigers’ losing season in 1974. Nevertheless, despite such criticisms, Fetzer believed it was his duty to take risks in the pursuit of the New Age, and he therefore forged ahead with his plans to develop his Foundation to serve his spiritual mission.

John Fetzer had long been interested in psychic phenomenon such as extrasensory perception (ESP), psychokinesis (PK), and the survival of personality after death, so when he decided in the 1970s to begin major funding of research, most of the projects had to do with parapsychology. Beginning with the work of J. B. Rhine at Duke University, parapsychology had achieved a modicum of academic respectability and held out the promise of proving the reality of spirit with some scientific rigor. So, after consulting with a number of parapsychologists such as Rhine himself, Fetzer began supporting, for example, research on reincarnation at the University of Virginia, and on PK at the Princeton Engineering Anomalies Research Lab. By the end of the decade, however, Fetzer had become frustrated with the pace of this research. This frustration, and the fact that his and his wife’s health was failing, shifted Fetzer’s priorities to an emerging form of holistic health practice called energy medicine. Energy medicine is based on the idea that subtle or spiritual energies can be harnessed to help treat human disease, whether physical, psychological, or spiritual in nature. To this end, Fetzer entered into partnerships with, among others, the Menninger Clinic of Topeka, Kansas, and the Association for Research and Enlightenment (ARE) Clinic of Phoenix, Arizona, to pursue a variety of energy medicine projects.

During his last decade, John Fetzer worked hard to perfect the organization of the Fetzer Institute, expanding its staff and putting its board on a professional footing. He also approved the creation of a beautiful rural campus just outside of Kalamazoo, the centerpiece of which is the Institute's administration building. The architecture of the building incorporates a number of spiritual symbols that were important to Fetzer, and it was specially designed to be a workplace conducive to calm and meditation. Seen from the air, the building is a two-story, 57,500 square-foot equilateral triangle. The triangle motif, symbolizing mind/body/spirit, is repeated throughout the building, which also incorporates a number of Egyptian, Masonic, and Jeffersonian symbols, in addition to rare crystals, polished granite and wood, a massive indoor waterfall to ionize the air, and a meditation room.

In the years following his death in 1991, the Fetzer Institute has grown and its programs have evolved and diversified. In the 1990s, the Institute continued the emphasis on the emerging field of holistic health, collaborating, for example, with the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to do rigorous empirical studies on the impact of spirituality on various facets of health and wellness. The Institute also supported holistic health education, including the popular PBS documentary series and book, *Healing and the Mind with Bill Moyers*; and at the local level, it provided seed money for the holistic health program at Western Michigan University. More recently, the Fetzer Institute has focused on the promotion of a practical spirituality for both individual health and social transformation, funding a wide range of programs exploring the "power of love and forgiveness" in "building the spiritual foundation for a loving world." And in addition to the Institute proper, the Fetzer Memorial Trust



works to preserve the legacy of John Fetzer's life and spiritual search, as well as to promote cutting-edge scientific research on the frontiers of physics and biology.

Michigan history is filled with businesspeople and entrepreneurs whose innovative ideas helped to revolutionize their industries while making themselves immensely wealthy. Among these luminaries must be included John E. Fetzer, whose intuitive grasp of the possibilities of media and big-league sports led him to make important advances within and across these two industries, all the while earning millions for himself. However, Fetzer's vision extended beyond his businesses, and the money, power, and influence that they brought were ultimately only a means to a larger, indeed cosmic, end. Fetzer often said, "money is energy," by which he meant that wealth was simply a tool to do work in the world, the quality of which depended on the depth of mission and commitment to service behind it. By the last decades of his life, Fetzer's spiritual seeking had led him to the understanding that his mission was nothing less than the spiritual transformation of the world and that all of his business success in media and sports was simply the means to create an institution to carry that dream forward. Today, the Fetzer Institute continues strong, growing and expanding on Fetzer's spiritual mission to the world, a tangible and lasting legacy of Michigan's remarkable businessman visionary.

**Brian C. Wilson**, author of *John E. Fetzer and the Quest for the New Age* (Wayne State University Press 2018), is a professor of Comparative Religion at Western Michigan University.