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Through the Lens of Awe

It often takes a tragedy—or shock—to awaken one to awe; the magnificence and mystery, thrill and anxiety of living.

By Kirk J. Schneider

My own "awe-wakening" began when I was about three years old, with the death of my seven year old brother. This awakening began, as awakenings often do, with the shattering side of awe—the side that rips one from one’s foundations. One day Kelly was here—joking, playing, loving--and the next he was gone, blasted. The loss of Kelly not only ripped my world, but the world of those who were closest to me, my parents. They too became remnants of their former selves, for a time at least.

Yet the upheaval of my brother’s death not only derailed life, it also rerouted it, and put it on a new set of rails. In a nutshell, I was both humbled, crushed, by my trauma, and yet at the same time, strangely opened and emboldened. I became both intensely aware of my (and everyone’s!) smallness in this tumultuous world, but also, and equally, of my (and everyone’s) potential for greatness, appreciation, and adventure in that very same cosmos. That very same chasm created in the wake of my brother’s death, could now also be seen as a repository, rich with the potential for renewal. The question, however, was how could I absorb this foundation-shaking knowledge? How could I get beyond the crush, and gradually re-energize my hope, will, and opportunity?

While my parents were integral to this slow process of regrouping, one critical component was an intensely personable therapist named Dr. S.

I was so young when I first met Dr. S that I only have the barest recollection as to who he was and what he was like. On the other hand, what I do remember has formed a profound and indelible awareness from which I have never disconnected. Dr. S. was a modest man; by all outward appearances, both ordinary and unfashionable. However, the moment I sat down with Dr. S. or would engage in some activity in his office, I felt enveloped by his warmth, understanding, and support. I recall that I felt free—as free as possible in those terrifying times—to broach any topic with Dr. S., and that he, in kind, felt free to explore my concerns. We engaged in therapeutic play, discussions about my home life, my parents, and my dreams. Dr. S. was a child psychoanalyst, but he seemed minimally analytic to me. What mainly stood out for me with Dr. S. was his quiet and disarming *presence*, the sense that anything could be, and quite probably would be, felt in that room, and that he was fully *there* to receive and encounter it.

Through Dr. S.’s vital support—and that of my parents, I learned, very

incrementally, to begin to embrace rather than retreat from my upended world; and as a result, I was able to immerse myself in a world of illimitable amazement. As the years have passed, I have drawn profoundly upon this initial engagement with awe. It has wound its way into my relationships, my philosophy, and my therapeutic practice; and most recently into my latest book, “Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life” (Paragon House, 2004).

Therapeutic Value of Awe

One of my chief findings, both as person and practitioner, is that awe is a key dimension of human fulfillment, beyond mere “happiness,” or “life-satisfaction.” The cultivation of awe, in other words, is the cultivation of the depth and profundity of living, the *appreciation* of living, in its many and wide expressions. The cultivation of awe—the humility and wonder, and thrill and anxiety of living—yields to the *capacity to be moved*: the capacity to have access to and be acutely *present* with whatever it is we engage. Hence, with Dr. S’s help, I was able to more fully experience, not just the harrowing sorrows and outrages of my young life, but also, and in light of those, the poignant hopes, mysteries, and sensitivities that attended. My encounter with the terror of the cosmos opened me up to its wonders, and eventually, through very arduous grappling, to my own ability to draw on and make meaning of those wonders against the backdrop of creation.

I now believe that to the extent we can remain conscious of our link to “the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos,” as the great anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Becker, put it, we can take solace that there is a replenishing beyond. This awareness of existing “under the aspect of eternity,” as another great philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, put it, can lift us out of our discontent, and temporarily at least, restore us to the enormity, and unbowed majesty, of our condition.

Awe then, holds a place for *both* our struggles--anxieties, terrors, forebodings—as well as our communions beyond those parochial battles. To be fulfilled, it seems to me, we need to engage both these dimensions of awe; we need to both engage ourselves, our own resources and abilities, and, at the very limit of that engagement, enable other powers, the very grandest powers, to lift and transform us for their wondrous purposes. Only then, can we really savor our condition in this life: the preciousness of the opportunity to live, and, also, by implication, the amazement of the possibility to exist, beyond and above anything that living can yield.

My months with Dr. S. helped me to appreciate just being; and through that appreciation, to find a freedom I had scarcely known. One of the key demonstrations of this was my growing capacity to revel in, and not merely tolerate, the strange, the mysterious, and even the exotic. For example, I have always delighted in roller coasters, and marveled before ocean waves. But “exhibit A” of my newfound capacity to savor, and not merely “buck up,” were those sci-fi TV shows of the early 60’s. Programs like “Twilight Zone,” “Outer Limits,” and “One Step Beyond,” and films like “Dracula” and

“Frankenstein,” provided the raw grist for my capacity to wonder at, linger over, and explore, that which I previously (in my pretherapy state) summarily rebuffed. The result was that I learned to play again, but also, and through intense presence, discovered how to transform that play. This transformation took place initially at the level of games and stories, but ultimately—arduously!—in terms of a life-long career.

Cultivating Awe in Four Stages

Drawing from the principles of my own therapy, I have developed four stages that lead to the cultivation of awe. These stages are relevant for any moral or ethical dilemma. So long as there is time, safety, and the willingness to internally explore (often in the presence of a supportive witness), they can be accessed in virtually any setting, from home to work to school and even to the realms of religion and government. All that is needed is the will to prioritize such ventures, and the imagination to implement them.

1. Appreciation

Appreciation is the whole-bodied immersion in or presence to the problem before one. Sally X, for example, has led a double life. On one hand she is passive and suppressed. When she stands in a grocery line and a woman cuts in front of her, she seethes in silence. When she is challenged by financial shortcomings, she becomes paralyzed and stewes in self-devaluation. On the other hand, Sally can become a tyrant. If she is at her emotional limit, she will lash out or drink until obnoxious.

Sally is "beside herself" about these problems and yet she feels helpless to change them. She feels helpless to address her fear of "standing out" and asserting herself in life. She feels like she has only two options--either cower and acquiesce or lash out and explode. Yet both are partializations of herself, of her larger capacity to live. Both reflect a shrunken capacity for awe, and for moving from a position of being daunted by life, to being engaged with, fascinated by, and at wonder toward life--and until one can experience the latter, one is ever entrapped.

In therapy, I invite Sally to stay present to the rivaling sides of herself--the side that shrinks back from (or, on the other hand, blindly rages at) life, and the side that yearns to break through these disabling stances, and that *wonders* about a different life.

Struggle

In the next phase of our work, Sally struggles with herself. Back and forth she wavers, between helpless passivity and budding empowerment, or between blind rage and conscious discernment. Gradually, and with many revisitations of her battle, Sally begins to develop a connection with herself, and with her fuller priorities. Decreasingly, is she caught by her first impulses, which mostly associated with early childhood trauma,

and increasingly, is she attuned to more substantive directions, such as the desire to stand up for and fulfill herself. She becomes bolder about making the most of her life, and about embracing the diverse and deepening experiences that life has to offer.

Responsibility

As Sally becomes more attuned to herself, it is not enough for her to simply be aware, she is now impelled to take action on that awareness--at home, with friends, and at her job. She realizes that there is so much more to her life than her shrunken reactions, and that she now must live out this "more" if she is to truly thrive. In turn, Sally acts more from the center of herself, rather than the periphery of old assumptions about herself. She finds it necessary to face, access, and express all that deeply matters, both within herself and to the world. She moves from being cornered by life to being engaged by and even fascinated with life, which in turn empowers her to choose, more or less, the life she desires to lead.

Relinquishment

Sally has gained much from her bold redefinitions of herself, but not all, and it is this "not all" that summons the fourth and final phase of Sally's awe-informed course--cosmic trust. As Ernest Becker said (and on his deathbed no less!), at some point we must all "give in," the question is when and how? For Sally, as for Becker, giving in to the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos, at the very limit of one's earthly powers, was one of the most exhilarating experiences that a person can know—and constituted her awe-informed faith, transcendence, and love.