

**AWAKENING TO AWE:  
PERSONAL STORIES OF PROFOUND TRANSFORMATION**

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**Dedication: To William James and Rollo May: Torchbearers for mystery**

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## PREFACE

How often do we hear young people today exclaim “that’s awesome!” Or “I’m in awe?” Or in another context, how often do we hear military authorities characterize their bombing operations in the quasi-apocalyptic terms “shock and awe?” A bit too often, I’m afraid. Yet the fact that “awe”--and its variants--is flooding our vocabulary is not an altogether menacing sign. Indeed it is perhaps a welcoming sign that beyond its casual usage, the fuller and deeper sensibility of “awe” is reemerging in our culture.

Despite this hope, the sensibility of awe has undergone many incarnations in humanity’s history. In ancient times, for example, awe was viewed quite narrowly as the sense of being daunted or overcome, particularly by nature. The experience of being daunted, as Rudolf Otto put it in his classic study of religion—*The Idea of the Holy*, was the primal experience of creation, and the primal experience of creation, he went on, was the seedbed for religion. On the other hand, in more recent years, the sensibility of awe has either been neglected, as was the case during the industrial revolution and rise of science, or in our contemporary age, embraced mainly for its exalting qualities, such as its capacity to thrill.

The truth, however, is that awe is neither a paralyzing jolt nor a “feel good” boost but a profound and complex *attitude*. This attitude, for those fortunate enough to harbor it, embraces *both* apprehension and thrill, humility and the grandeur of creation. Hence

when young people proclaim “awwwesome,” they often appear to glimpse but not necessarily embrace essential awe.

This book then provides a counterbalance to such one-sided—and hence devitalized—expressions of awe. Through both reflection and narrative this book shows how we can meld the best of our ancestral traditions, e.g., humility, depth, and formality, with the finest of our modernistic tendencies, e.g., boldness, spontaneity, and openness, to forge a renewed path for humanity.

In particular, this book highlights the nature and power of awe to transform lives. In this sense, it is akin to other self-help guides but with one major difference: the emphasis on people’s “living” stories. For example, readers will discover how awe transformed the life of an ex-gang member, Jim Hernandez, into a beloved and productive youth educator; an ex drug addict, Michael Cooper, into a communally conscious healer; and a sufferer of stage three cancer, E. Mark Stern, into a contemplative and spiritual seeker. The book will also inform readers about the challenges and joys of awe-based child-raising, education, humor, political activism, and aging. Drawing on the philosophy of my earlier work, the acclaimed *Rediscovery of Awe, Awakening to Awe* tells the down-to-earth stories of a quiet yet emerging movement. This movement requires neither religion nor formulas; pills nor wealth but an approach to life, natural and free to all.

That which I call “awe-based awakening” then is not simply an inheritance but must be realized and cultivated.

Below is a preview of the core conditions—both favorable and unfavorable—to the cultivation of awe-based awakening. This preview --based on the testimonies of contributors to the book—will give the reader a sampling of the remarkable insights to be revealed:

I Conditions that *favor* Awe-based awakening (or the humility and wonder—amazement--of living):

- A basic capacity to subsist
- The time to reflect
- A capacity to slow down
- A capacity to savor the moment
- A focus on what one loves
- A capacity to see the big picture
- An openness to the mystery of life and being
- An appreciation for the fact of life
- An appreciation of pain as a sometime teacher
- An appreciation of balance (e.g., between one’s fragility and resiliency)
- Contemplative time alone
- Contemplative time in natural or non-distracting settings
- Contemplative time with close friends or companions
- In-depth therapy or meditation
- An ability to stay present to and accept the evolving nature of conflict—e.g., to know that “this too shall pass”

- An ability to stay present to and accept the evolving nature of life
- An ability to give oneself over—discerningly--to the ultimately unknowable
- An ability to trust in the ultimately unknowable

II Conditions *unfavorable* to Awe-based awakening (or the humility and wonder—amazement--of living):

- Poverty and deprivation
- Haste
- Rigidity
- Dogma
- Gluttony
- Anarchy
- Self-inflation
- Self-deflation
- The preoccupation with money
- The preoccupation with status
- The preoccupation with consumerism
- A steady diet of junk food, pills, or alcohol
- A steady diet of mind-numbing TV
- An enthrallment with mechanization
- An enthrallment with simple answers
- A compulsion to think positively
- A compulsion to think negatively

- Fixation
- Coercion
- Reductionism
- Polarization

In closing, my deepest appreciation to all the brave souls who have graced this volume, and by so doing, graced life itself.