Spirituality and the Awakening Self

The Sacred Journey of Transformation

David G. Benner, PhD
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David G. Benner, PhD
To Ed Plantinga,
for helping me stay awake

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Preface

The Journey of Human Becoming

Being human is a journey of becoming. At birth we humans are not yet what we have the capacity to fully become. Newborns may contain the possibilities for mature personhood, but they do not show any of the characteristics that psychologists have identified as markers of fully actualized humanity. Never present in childhood are such things as the capacity for nonpossessive love, a spirituality that makes life meaningful and suffering sufferable, and an identification with all humans, not simply those of one’s own tribe. Many other things could be specified and will be identified as we proceed, but even this partial list shows the magnitude of the task of achieving full-orbed personhood.

Although the journey of human becoming is lifelong, it is not simply a result of the passage of time. Time is necessary but not sufficient. Maturation may make human actualization possible, but full personhood comes only from a lifelong journey of becoming that, as we shall see, must be lived in a posture of openness, trust, willingness, and surrender.

Glimpses of the Evolving Self

Watch as the young child learns to trust that her mother is still there even though she may be out of sight. Piaget called this developmental
accomplishment the achievement of object constancy. It is a moment to celebrate, and parents usually do. But then watch as the cognitive skills of this same little girl continue to develop, and notice now how she suddenly seems secure within a first-person perspective on her world. She speaks as an “I” and organizes her experience around this “I.” The result is something that we could call an egocentric perspective on the world: this is a tremendously important moment of human becoming.

But the journey is far from over—even if we continue to follow just this single line of cognitive development and the way in which it provides a perspective from which the person views and relates to the world. Notice how a few years later she has hopefully added a second-person perspective to this egocentric way of relating to that which is beyond her own self. What we might call a sociocentric worldview now allows her to see things from the perspectives of others. A developing capacity for empathy allows her to adopt an alternate perspective and no longer be limited to the first-person point of view that earlier was such a developmental triumph.

The subsequent development of the capacity for reason ushers in another stage as, in adolescence, she now adds third-person perspectives and is capable of adopting a more truly world-centric orientation to that which is beyond her. And because we can only identify with what we can see in relationship to self, she is now able to feel herself to be integrally connected to the world, not just to her social or religious group or to her family or herself. Through this process her self is unfolding. The same is true for all of us. By a sequence of ever-expanding identifications, we become what we identify with, and if we trust the flow of this process, our small self becomes a larger and truer self.

There are other important steps in this cognitive and perspective-taking line, and many other important lines of development also shape the journey of the developing self. But let us look at just one more image from later in the journey of this hypothetical young woman. Suppose that she remains open to life and that this openness includes openness toward God. It may well be that when we next look into her life, we recognize something that others around her may not see, or at least not understand. They may notice her equanimity and nonjudgmental openness, and they may even describe her as a very spiritual woman. But if we take the time to get to know her, we may begin to notice how deeply her identity and consciousness are grounded in her
relationship to God. Yet relationship may not be exactly the right word
because she might talk more of an abiding sense of being in God and
God’s being in her. She might also talk about this leading to a sense
of being at one within herself and within God. Although we may not
understand exactly what she means, we might begin to suspect that
she is something of a mystic. In response to this suggestion, she might
laugh and say that she is no mystic. But when asked more about her
life, she might tell you, as the woman I am thinking about recently
told me, “It’s true: there is nothing I want more than to know God
deeply. But it’s also true that I am less and less clear about where the
boundaries between God and me—or God and anyone—begin or end.
Increasingly I see God in all people and all things—not contained in
any of these people or things but expressed in and through them all.
And increasingly I feel one with God and one with life—really, one
with all that is.”

This journey into a deeper consciousness of our being in God
will be our focus in this book. We can describe it as a journey of the
evolving or unfolding self because the self that begins this journey
is never the self that ends it. But we could also call it a journey of
an awakening self because awakening is the central dynamic of the
unfolding and evolving. The self that emerges during this journey is
larger, more enlightened, and more whole. This journey is one that all
humans are invited to make. It is the journey that defines our human-
ity, for it is a journey toward our source and toward our fulfillment. It
is a journey into what Christian theology has traditionally described
as union with God.

A Theology of Becoming

The source and ground of all existence lies in the constantly out-
pouring life of God. Moment by moment all creation is sustained
by God. Creation is not just something that happened in the past.
Though there may have been a beginning point, it was the beginning
of an active relationship that never stops—a relationship that exists
between God and every person and thing that exists. If this relation-
ship were suddenly to stop, we and everything else that is would
instantly cease to exist.

But it is not just all being that is grounded in God: so too is
all becoming. The universe is a place of creativity, becoming, and

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transformation because these are fundamental properties of the God who sustains it. All things are not only sustained by God; but all things are also being made new in Christ. All things are being liberated and restored—becoming more than they are, becoming all they were intended to be in their fullness in Christ.

The Spirit of God—the source of all generativity, all creativity, and all life—invites us to participate in the grand adventure of human becoming. Openness to becoming is openness to God. This is why the Christian mystics have so much to teach us. They show us that longing for the fullness of God demands openness to a radical form of transformation that we cannot control. It is something we can neither engineer nor accomplish. But it is something we can experience.

It is, however, alarmingly easy to fail to discern the ever-present nudges of the Spirit to become all we are meant to be. The culture of family and society and the rhythms of our lives lull us into a sleep of complacency within the small, safe places we have arranged for ourselves. Seekers settle for being finders, even when what is found is so much less than what their spirits call them toward. Being and becoming are both routinely sacrificed on the altar of doing. The gentle but persistent heartbeat of our deep longings to find our true place in God is gradually drowned out by the cacophony of superficial desires, and we are left with a small ego-self rather than an awakening self that is ever becoming in the Spirit.

Being Realistic about Deep Personal Change

There are many possible metaphors for this journey of becoming. I have already introduced the concepts of awakening, unfolding, and evolving. Other possible metaphors include rebirth (from death to life), integration (from fragmentation to wholeness), liberation (from captivity to freedom), unification (from separation to oneness), enlightenment (from blindness to seeing), and homecoming (returning from exile). All of these help us identify elements of the transformation of the self that are involved in this journey, and I will draw on each of them as we proceed.

Nevertheless, given how hard change of any sort is, we need to be realistic about these grand ideals of becoming, awakening, enlightenment, and transformation. Becoming is a luxury that evades
those whose lives are preoccupied with survival or basic coping. Until lower-level needs are dependably being met, talk of human unfolding remains nothing but meaningless chatter on the part of those who have the luxury of full bellies, a reasonable base of personal security, and idle time.

I am also quite aware of how easy it is to be cynical about the possibilities of deep personal change. After all, anyone who has ever tried to keep even the simplest New Year’s resolution knows the limits of self-improvement projects. If such things as stopping smoking, eating less, or exercising more are as notoriously difficult as most of us recognize them to be, what hope could there ever be for the sort of quantum leap in change that is implied by the concept of transformation?

Recall the familiar story of the frog and the scorpion. One day a scorpion decided it wanted to cross a river. The problem was that he couldn’t swim. Seeing a frog sitting on the bank, he asked the frog to carry him across the river on his back. The frog refused. “I don’t trust you,” he said. “I know how dangerous scorpions are. If I let you get on my back, you’ll sting me and kill me.” The scorpion answered, “But why would I do that? That would be stupid because if I sting you, then we’ll both drown.” “But how do I know you won’t just wait until we get to the other side and then kill me?” asked the frog. The scorpion had an answer for this question as well: “I would never do that because when we get to the other side, I will be so grateful for your help that I could never sting you.” The frog thought about these answers for a while and finally agreed to let the scorpion get on his back. He began swimming, gradually feeling safer and safer, and starting to even think that he had been foolish to have ever worried about the scorpion. But halfway across the river, suddenly the scorpion stung the frog. “You fool,” croaked the frog, “now we will both die! Why did you do that?” The scorpion answered, “Because I’m a scorpion. It is in my nature to sting.”

Personality is, by definition, highly stable, and profound changes in the organization and orientation of the self are quite rare. Most alterations are cosmetic and contextual. They are much more likely to involve dressing the scorpion up in some more fashionable clothes than changing its nature. Changes that we see are usually not much more than accommodations to tribal and cultural expectations, not radical reorganizations of the self from the inside out. Although we can see evolution of human consciousness over large periods of human
history, it is rarer to see genuine and significant changes in consciousness, identity, values, and ways of relating to self, others, and life after late adolescence or early adulthood.

However, after three decades of providing psychoanalytic psychotherapy and one decade of working with people who seek personal transformation through spiritual openness, contemplative stillness, and awareness, I would have to say that while deep and really meaningful changes in people are relatively rare, they are very possible. It is possible to experience a profound reorganization of the very foundations of our identity, values, meaning, and consciousness. It is possible for our whole perspective on life—on our self, on others, on the world, and on God—to shift dramatically. It is possible to awaken and move from blindness to seeing, from captivity to freedom, and from separation to oneness. It is possible for us to experience the emergence of our larger, truer self that we in reality are. These sorts of quantum shifts in the organization of our being are never something that simply result from things that happen to us. Nor are they simply the cumulative result of the small incremental steps of growth associated with our efforts at spiritual or psychological self-improvement. But when we respond to life and the continuous invitations of the Spirit to become more than we presently are, with consent and openness of heart and mind, it can be our experience—with or without external triggers.

These sorts of changes are deeply spiritual. Our spirituality either keeps us safely immune to such changes or facilitates them. But genuine transformation never happens without profound spiritual implications. Although personal transformation will be my primary focus, we will also see that ultimately transformation is not just a personal matter. Genuine transformation occurs only within a communal and interpersonal context. Often those communal contexts inhibit transformation, but they can facilitate it and always mediate it. We either open each other up to the transformational possibilities that we encounter in life or close each other down. Sadly, it seems to me that much of the emphasis on spiritual formation and transformation that exists in Christianity does the latter, as do the ways we relate to each other in Christian communities and churches. But I am convinced that we can experience transformational awakenings much more frequently and fully if our families, churches, and communities can learn to support them rather than fear or resist them.
Anyone who has influence over the lives of others is in a position to help make this happen—particularly those of us who are involved in any aspect of the nurture, care, formation, or reformation of others. Therapists, spiritual directors, clergy, religious workers and educators, parents, mentors, coaches, and others who are involved with the nurture of the inner life of persons—all these can do much more to help those they are encouraging to truly become all they can be. We can help people notice and respond to the moments in their journey that are pregnant with transformational possibilities. And we can help them attend and respond to their deep spiritual longings, longings that always point us beyond the safe way stations where we settle, onward to those places and ways of being that hold genuinely transformational possibilities for us and for the world.

**Becoming All We Can Be**

My interest in these possibilities of becoming all we can be has been at the center of my life’s work in psychology and spirituality. This was the interest that originally led me into training in clinical psychology and later in spiritual direction. I wrote an outline of this book in 1974, but I was far from ready to write it or, much more importantly, to experience it. The ground on which I stood was too small—theologically, spiritually, and psychologically. Of course, it was me who was too small. I was far too invested in the life of the mind and soul to make the journey of spirit for which I longed. I flirted with ideas but was not ready to respond to the deep call of the Spirit to my spirit that drove my interest in human unfolding and awakening. Over that time I wrote a number of books on psychology and spirituality in which transformation organized my approach to both but remained a secondary focus. In this book *transformation* moves from the background to the foreground.

This book also moves something else from the back stage of recent books to center stage: *mysticism*. This, I am convinced, is the branch of spirituality that has the most to contribute to an understanding and experience of transformation, awakening, and human becoming. All major religions have a mystical tradition, and if we are to experience the fullest unfolding of our self, it is essential that we learn to listen to what the mystics have to teach us. Mysticism uniquely supports the integration of insights of psychology and spirituality into
a framework for both understanding and nurturing the unfolding self. Without mysticism I am convinced that neither psychology nor spirituality have much worth saying about personal transformation or the further reaches of human becoming.

Psychology and spirituality are not, however, the only fields of study that offer important potential contributions to understanding human unfolding. In what follows, I will draw on insights from Perennial Philosophy; evolutionary theology; cultural anthropology; comparative spirituality; and clinical, developmental, and transpersonal psychology—placing all of this back within a Christian understanding. But before your eyes begin to glaze over, I should make clear that this will not be a dry academic exercise. The map I will be sketching of the awakening self is complex, and the ideas are big, but I will be repeatedly pausing to step back from these ideas so we can examine the difference they actually make in real life. My primary interest is in the spirituality of this unfolding, not the theory of it. Although I will have to lay out a fairly complex conceptual foundation for us to understand that spirituality, we will keep returning to the lived difference it can actually make.

It is the Christian mystics who will provide the overall framework for the synthesis I will offer and—although this might surprise you—it is they who will help us keep this practical. Mystics are interested in experience, not in theories. They are aware of a profound truth that most of the rest of us fail to appreciate. Mystics know that all of life is flowing toward God, and they have learned how to open themselves to this flow and participate in it. Life has a direction. It is returning to its source. The outflowing vitality and love of God that is life itself leads back toward God. This is the key to understanding the human journey and the key to understanding the transformational journey of human becoming. Transformation is not simply change. Nor is it reducible to maturation or self-improvement. Transformation is movement toward wholeness. It is an unfolding of the self that moves us toward being at one within our self and with God.

Christians affirm that everything that exists is being held this very moment in Christ, and that everything that exists is being made new in Christ. These mystical truths may be beyond our comprehension, but they are not beyond our potential experience. We may not understand these things, but we can know them. To that end I have written this book. I have written it with the Collect of the Fourth Sunday after Epiphany as my prayer:¹
Living God, in Christ you make all things new.

Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who is alive and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever.

Amen.

D. G. B.

Holy Cross Day

Victoria, British Columbia, Canada
Human Awakening

Many things keep us content with our small selves and block us from becoming all we can be. None, however, is more important than the fact that most of us go through life as sleepwalkers and, even after a moment of awakening, tend to quickly drift off once again into a sleep of self-preoccupied oblivion and of a mindless robot shuffling through a somnambulistic fog. This is the reason spiritual teachers have always taught the importance of awareness. Hasidic Jews tell a story of a young man who approached Reb Yerachmiel ben Yisrael one afternoon. “Rebbe,” the young man asked with great seriousness, “what is the way to God?” The rebbe looked up from his work and answered: “There is no way to God, for God is not other than here and now. The truth you seek is not hidden from you; you simply do not notice it. It is here for you if you will only awake.”

This is the truth that has been proclaimed by all the great Christian mystics across Christian history. And it is the truth taught from cover to cover of the Bible. In his Areopagus sermon, Paul declares that God “is not far from any of us, since it is in him that we live and move and exist” (Acts 17:27–28). God is closer than our next breath. Job even reminds us that not only is God the source of each breath, but each breath also is God’s breath (Job 27:3). How much more...
intimate could our relationship with God be? God is not absent. It is we who fail to notice divine presence. It’s all a matter of awareness.

Jesus also often urged his followers to awaken from their stupor and be attentive (Matt. 25:13; Luke 12:37). And he used the most dramatic of all possible metaphors to describe this ascent from unconsciousness. He described it as being “born again” (John 3:3–8 KJV).

A Fresh Start

All of us know something of the desire to wake up in the morning and be able to start the new day as a new person. We want to believe in the possibility of change—real change. We want a fresh start for our personal lives, and many wish it were possible for our communities, nations, the world, and the cosmos.

Saul undoubtedly started the day that was to be his fresh start without any idea of what awaited him as he headed off for Damascus. As the story is told in the Acts of the Apostles (Acts 9:1–19), Saul was a well-known and particularly aggressive persecutor of first-century Christians. The account of his spiritual awakening is immediately preceded by reference to his supportive presence at the stoning of Stephen, a Christian whose dedication to Jesus matched the opposition of Saul. Christians were living in fear of this man, who was famous for his hatred of them. What happened next was, therefore, as much a surprise to others as it was to Saul.

The details of the story are quite simple and straightforward. On the day in question, while going to Damascus to pick up authorization from the high priest for further arrests of any Christians he could find, Saul suddenly and inexplicably found himself surrounded by a heavenly light. Blinded, he fell to the ground. He then heard a voice addressing him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” Asking who addressed him, the voice answered: “I am Jesus, and you are persecuting me. Get up now and go into the city, and you will be told what you have to do.” Saul did just as he was told. He got up—still seeing nothing—and allowed himself to be led to Damascus by hand. There he waited for three days, eating and drinking nothing and still blind, until Ananias came to him and said, “Brother Saul, I have been sent by the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here so that you might recover your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.” Immediately, as though scales fell away from his eyes, he could see.
In that moment Saul ceased to exist and a new man, Paul, was born. The new man was as radically committed to the promotion of the church as the old man had once been committed to its destruction. The man who had come to the city to arrest Christians was transformed into a man who was to spend the rest of his life as the early church’s most tireless and fearless advocate.

I have worked on the reduction of ethnic hatred in the war zones associated with the collapse of the former Yugoslavia and know how difficult it is to make even small dents in entrenched patterns of prejudice and hostility, especially once they become established parts of identity. But this was no small dent. This was a dramatic re-formation of attitudes, values, character, and behavior. Obviously Saul needed a new name to accommodate the magnitude of these changes. He was a new man. Nothing less than the metaphor of being born again could adequately describe the significance of Saul’s awakening.

Christians have usually referred to this awakening as conversion. Although this is certainly an appropriate term, it casts the change in overly narrow religious terms. It implies that what is involved is essentially a change of religions, or the adoption of the beliefs and practices of a particular religion. Saul’s change involved much more than this. The biblical account of the story points us to the broader implications of the transformation by its focus on seeing. At the core of the experience was his movement from blindness to sight. But his blindness was far deeper than the temporary three-day absence of sight. What he had been blind to was the reality of and his relationship to Christ. When the scales fell off his eyes, what he saw was not just his surroundings but also the truth behind the words of those he had sought to silence—that Jesus was indeed the Light of the world.

Saul’s personal encounter with the Light was the core of his awakening, and his subsequent enlightenment was the central dynamic of the new man that he became. New life began to surge through parts of his self that had shriveled under the weight of hate and murderous zeal. Love began to seep into his soul. He didn’t simply switch causes and retain the same self: his mind and his heart were transformed, his spirit realigned, and his life reorganized.

Awakenings are not always this dramatic, nor do they always involve a recognizable encounter with the Divine. But when we offer our consent to the awakening that either external or internal circumstances may provide, those circumstances can be a gateway to a rebirth—not just in a theological sense but also in a psychological and spiritual
one. They can lead to dramatic new life that is grounded in profound changes in the self.

Losing Our Mind and Coming to Our Senses

We have recognized that Paul’s awakening was more a matter of seeing than simply a change of beliefs. But it is not just seeing that is involved in awakening. Awakening can come through any of the senses. Gestalt therapy is built entirely on this power of awakening. Fritz Perls, the founder of this approach to psychotherapy, calls it “awareness” and describes the way in which awareness draws us back into our bodies, in touch with our senses, and mobilizes us for action. He argues that in order to be truly alive, we must be aware of our impulses and yearnings, of the here and now, of our sensory experience, and of what he calls our unfinished business. Then and only then is real change possible.

Perls describes three levels of awareness: awareness of the self, awareness of the world, and awareness of the intervening fantasy between the self and the world. This intermediate world contains our prejudices and prejudgments through which we view our experiences of everything beyond us. Here we see the world through the labels we give things and the categories into which we jam them. But experiencing the world through categorization, bias, and prejudgment is not experiencing things as they actually are. It is experiencing our thoughts about the world rather than directly experiencing the world. The distance this provides from the raw reality of things as they truly are keeps us comfortable but out of touch with reality and unaware.

Anthony De Mello, the twentieth-century Christian mystic who has done so much to bring together the spiritual wisdom of East and West, describes this lack of awareness by means of a pithy aphorism. “Life,” he suggests, “is like heady wine. Everyone reads the label on the bottle. Hardly anyone tastes the wine.” Confusing the reading of labels with tasting and drinking the wine is responding to the world through this intermediate zone of thoughts, judgments, biases, and preconceptions. It is mistaking this comfortable place within our self for an authentic encounter with external reality. It is failing to recognize the difference between fantasy and raw experience.

Becoming aware of this intermediate zone empties it by drawing us into the present moment. Suddenly the world is present to us and
we are present to it. Suddenly we have moved from our mind to our senses, and through them, we are in more immediate and direct contact with what truly is. This is what Eckhart Tolle calls the power of the now. An embrace of the present moment can do something that nothing else can do: it can bring us into the only place where we truly are, the only place we can truly be alive, and the only place where we can truly meet God.

Sometimes, however, we choose to withdraw our attention from the present moment because it is unpleasant or threatening. We have two major options for this form of escape: we can escape to the past through nostalgic remembering and compulsive review, or to the future through anxious anticipation and obsessive rehearsals. Both involve an escape into the safety of our minds. They are, therefore, ways of staying asleep, or if we have had a momentary awakening, of quickly returning to sleep.

This is the reason why awakening and awareness are so vital to the spiritual life. From time to time we may awaken for brief moments of intense emotional experience, but then we quickly slip back into a tangled dreamworld of the intermediate zone between genuine awareness of our self and genuine awareness of the world. The invitation of the present moment is always to awaken, to respond rather than simply react, and to become full participants in our lives.

The Context of Awakenings and Awareness

Each moment of awareness is a small awakening, and each awakening—no matter how insignificant it might seem—can be a doorway to becoming. As an object of awareness, nothing is too small to empower such an awakening. Awareness of anything opens us to the transcendent. This is why awareness is so central to prayer. Douglas Steere describes prayer as “awakeness, attention, intense inward openness.” In his view, sin is anything that destroys this attentive wakefulness.

Let us look more closely at this sequence of events that surround awakening. Awareness is always preceded by a sensation. Sensations are invitations to engage with something in the present moment, something either in our inner world or in the external world. The traditional five senses—sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste—are the most familiar to us and are the most regular doorways to the present moment that we encounter. Each invites us to notice something. Each
is, therefore, an invitation to awareness. Awareness begins, therefore, as a response to a sensation.

The act of responding to the invitation of a sensation by noticing it (awareness) immediately sets in motion a chain of events and possibilities. The first is that it brings us back from our heads (where we escape whenever we are not present to the moment) to our bodies and to our vital energies that are grounded in them. We can only be alive in our bodies through our senses. And conversely, we cannot be engaged with our senses without being in touch with our bodies. However, as soon as we attend to a sensation—any sensation—we immediately experience the gift of mobilized energy. This energy will not always feel positive. But awareness always mobilizes energy that prepares us to respond to whatever we now notice. If we back away from this energy out of fear, we shut it down, cut off our access to our vitality, and go back to sleep. However, if we respond to whatever our attention has engaged, we allow the energy to awaken us.

Returning to the awakening of Paul, the sensations that invited attention were the blinding light and the voice addressing him. Even such a dramatic encounter as Paul experienced could have been easily ignored and regularly is ignored. But Paul responded to the sensation by offering attention rather than resistance. From a more theological perspective, we can say that he opened himself to God. He did this by submitting to those who told him where to go and waiting until God revealed what he should do next. This waiting was preparation
for response; the immediacy and lifelong persistence of his response attests to the magnitude of the vitalization that was associated with his awakening.

Invitations to Awaken

A great variety of experiences can serve as the messenger that brings us an invitation to awareness and offers us the potential of an awakening. Unfortunately, however, we usually evaluate these events negatively and, instead of welcoming them, do everything we can to ignore, minimize, or avoid them. In general, anything that produces significant internal conflict, a disruption of meaning and self-coherence, or a sense that our way of being in the world needs to change—any such thing has this potential to awaken us. Some of these emerge from the circumstances of our life. A divorce, major financial reversal, death of a spouse or child, natural catastrophe, or a business failure can all contain a hidden gift of a potential awakening. Many people speak of a significant and valued change to the course of their life following such unwelcome events. Sometimes these changes are limited to behavior or lifestyle, but deeper transformations of self are also possible when one moves beyond simply trying to get back to how things were before the crisis.

Near-Death Experiences

Near-death experiences have particular potency as a context for potential awakenings. Keith’s experience illustrates many of the common features of this phenomenon, including the spiritual awakening that sometimes accompanies it.

Keith was an experienced thirty-eight-year-old scuba diver when, on one fateful dive, he became separated from his dive buddy and trapped in a narrow passage of a network of caves they had been exploring. Already very low on air, his panicked thrashing and squirming quickly depleted his remaining air, and he soon lost consciousness and stopped breathing. Not long after this, his friend found him, immediately brought him to the surface, got him onto the dive boat, and began mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. After what seemed like an eternity but was probably only a few minutes, Keith suddenly began coughing, sputtering, and eventually breathing. His report of the experience emerged much more slowly.
At first he said nothing about it. Words seemed totally inadequate to describe what had happened in those few moments, and in a strange way he felt that it was too sacred to share with someone he knew could never understand it. This was an odd thought for him because he had no religious background and certainly did not think of himself as spiritual. However, as he began to talk about it with his wife, he told her that he felt like he was living in the first days of a brand new life. He told her that after immediate panic, he felt very calm as he drew what he knew would be his last few breaths. He noticed that he was viewing himself from some point outside his body. Slowly he noticed that the darkness of the underwater tomb in which he was trapped began to be filled with light and that he was passing through the darkness and rising toward this light. Watching from this vantage point outside his body, he saw his friend pulling him out of the cave and up toward the surface of the water. He wanted to tell him that it was OK, that everything was fine—actually, much better than fine. He felt total peace and was, therefore, somewhat annoyed by his friend’s efforts to resuscitate him. But he also knew that he faced a choice: he could return to life or stay in the place of bliss. It was, he said, very tempting to stay, but, thinking of his wife and young family, he chose life and began to breathe.

The Keith who walked away from that experience was indeed quite different from the Keith who went diving that morning. His wife expected the changes to fade when he returned to work. But even his coworkers noticed that he had changed. His greatly enhanced appreciation for life was understandable. Even Keith was surprised by his deeper compassion for others and the way this began to change his sense of purpose and meaning in life. He had experienced an awakening. It might not be enough to stay awake for the rest of his life, but he knew that he was a new person, and he knew that the trajectory of his life had changed.

Experiences such as Keith’s have been well documented and researched. Long-term spiritual changes often accompany near-death encounters such as Keith’s, and when they do, rather than diminish over time, they often increase. It seems that they are self-reinforcing. But this is just what you would expect with an awakening. One awakening invites openness and responsiveness to others. Nevertheless, just as an encounter with the Divine on a trip to Damascus did not guarantee awakening but simply provided an invitation to it, the same is true of near-death experiences. I have talked with people who have had a
significant near-death experience that left them shaken but unchanged. But this shouldn’t surprise us because just as we can sleep through an alarm clock or an earthquake, so too can we respond to any sort of crisis by ignoring the invitation to awaken that the moment may contain.

**Psychological Symptoms**

Invitations of another category are those annoying and always unwelcome psychological symptoms that most of us experience from time to time, things like depression, anxiety, or unusually high levels of anger or irritation. These symptoms can have a physiological basis, and this possibility should never be ignored. However, as existential, psychoanalytic, archetypal, and analytical therapists remind us, this does not mean that they do not also serve as the voice of the soul. Once again, therefore, they can function as messengers that carry an invitation to awaken from our somnambulistic state.

Although we are tempted to believe otherwise, ultimately there is no way to avoid the realities of the inner self. Eventually they will catch up with us. The truths of our inner life that we seek to ignore lurk on the edges of consciousness like troublesome dogs nipping at our heels. They also seep into relationships and behavior, dragging issues that remain unfinished from the past into the present and keeping us on an eternal treadmill of reacting to the unresolved aspects of our history. This may sound like bad news. Yet it also contains good news since this means that we regularly are afforded opportunities to deal with these internal saboteurs that sap our vitality and compromise our presence. Unfortunately, however, because those opportunities come to us in the form of symptoms and crises, only rarely do we offer them the hospitality that is necessary if we are to use them as an opportunity to awaken.

In addition to whatever other functions psychological symptoms may serve, they do bring us information about the state of our inner self. That nagging depression or low-level anxiety, or the ease with which we lose our temper or are tempted to despair—these are all messengers from our depths that have been sent into consciousness to tell each of us that all is not well in our soul. However, if we ignore or silence the messenger, or refuse to open the letter they bring and attend to the issue they are pointing us toward, we are doomed to allow the inner problem to worsen and simply postpone the crisis that is eventually awaiting each of us.
If we return to the invitation to awaken that Saul encountered that day on his way to Damascus, we likely first notice external circumstances that invite his awakening: the blinding light and voice. But a closer look at his story suggests the possibility of an inner struggle that may have been preparing him for this day. Let me paint a picture of what might well have been the inner world of Saul as he headed off to Damascus that day.

Since Augustine of Hippo, theologians have generally assumed that Saul suffered from a guilty conscience. Later describing himself as “chief among sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15), Paul was undoubtedly referring primarily to his preconversion behavior, which went as far as offering his supportive presence at the stoning of at least one Christian: Stephen. On the road to Damascus, the words addressed to Saul in his encounter with Jesus point to his inner conflict. This is particularly clear in the language of the King James Version where, after Saul asks who is addressing him, the text reads: “And the Lord said, I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks” (Acts 9:5). Without owning up to this inner conflict of kicking against pricks, it would have been impossible for Saul to respond to this moment’s invitation by awakening. And apparently that is just what he did. We hear no words of protest or self-defense. We see no expressions of anger. Instead, we see a remarkable period of quiet self-reflection as he spends the next several days in fasting and undoubtedly reflecting on his life while waiting for God’s further words to him.

Saul’s readiness to attend to rather than ignore this sense of guilt made his awakening possible. It was not enough for him to focus on the external events to which his physical senses drew his attention. Paying attention to his inner conflict engaged the depths of his soul, and this was essential if this encounter was to be an encounter of his spirit and the Spirit of God.

Dreams

But there is another very important and even more common place where we encounter the voice of the soul: in our dreams. Dreams form a part of the life of all of us, even a much larger part than most of us realize. Whether we feel that our nights are filled with dreams or that we never dream, we all spend approximately one-quarter of each night dreaming, thus an average of two hours of dreaming for every eight hours of sleep.
However, if the default response to symptoms is to repress them rather than listen to the message they bring from our depths, it is even easier to ignore and dismiss dreams as an important voice of the soul. After all, we are often told that dreams are simply random neurological activity that occurs when we are asleep—quite irrelevant to the daily life of nonsuperstitious modern and postmodern individuals. Yet this is far from the way premoderns viewed dreams. Before the eighteenth century, virtually everyone assumed that dreams had spiritual significance. The traditional Jewish understanding, for example, was that all dreams are given by God as a gift to the dreamer for the well-being of oneself or related others. This implies a relationship between the dreamer and God, but it also implies that the gift must be opened if it is to be of value. This is why the Jewish rabbis often compared dreams to a letter, maintaining that if it is to be of any value, it must, like a letter, be opened and read.

In appendix 1, I offer a more detailed discussion of how one can work with dreams to discern their spiritual and psychological significance as voices of the soul. Here let me simply say that if you are interested in receiving a dream with hospitality and opening it with prayerful attentiveness to the gift that it might contain, the most important principle in doing so is to avoid analyzing it. Rather, listen to it as you would listen to a story or a parable, asking, “What could this be telling me about the state of my inner world?” The assumption behind this question is that our dreams are usually about us, not about the other characters who may populate our dreams as stand-ins for parts of ourselves. So do not try to analyze the meaning of the story. Just listen to it with prayerful attention and ask, “Lord, what might you want to draw to my attention through this dream?”

To illustrate this, let me share the dream of a thirty-six-year-old single woman at a transitional point in her life. Anna was a librarian at a major research university and described herself as having a fulfilling life and a rich network of friends. However, over the past several years she said that she had become less satisfied with her work and increasingly wondered if she had settled for too small and comfortable a place for herself. She said that she had been wondering if she should go back to school and try something different. After beginning to explore several potential directions that attracted her, she sought help in reflecting on the decisions she faced. The night before our first meeting she had a dream. This is how she reported it to me:
Last night I had a dream that was a variation on one I have had several times over the last couple of years. I was a waitress in a wild-West saloon. The place was full of rough-living, foul-mouthed males. I was quite surprised to notice how comfortable I was with them because it is so unlike how I usually am and was certainly unlike the sort of life I actually live. But then I noticed how good so many of them were to me. Although they didn’t let each other see it, they were actually quite tender to me. But they liked it when I treated them rudely, and so that’s what I did. I was quite shocked to see how I was in the dream: I swore at them, I ignored the insults they hurled at me in good fun, and I dished insults back to them in a rather shocking form. Watching myself, I could see that I really liked the interaction. But it was so strange to be watching someone who looked like me and felt like me but was so different from me. The scene changes in each dream, but the basic elements remain the same.

I did not tell Anna what her dream meant. That is not something I would ever do. The dreamer is in the best position to discern any possible meaning that the dream may have. The job of anyone else who is listening in is simply to help maintain a reflective space that is safe, open, and free from reductionistic attempts to find the one true meaning of the dream. I encouraged her to simply listen to it as a story that might just have something to say to her about her life; I asked her what most struck her about the dream. She told me that it was herself—or better, the woman who looked like her and with whom she identified in the dream but who behaved very differently from her. After talking for a while about what differences she noticed and how she reacted to this woman, I asked her if she felt that there might be any invitations for her in the dream. After a few moments of reflection, she said, “I don’t think I want to be a bartender, but I wonder if the dream might point toward a less passive and less safe way of living.” I then asked her what this way of living might look like. She responded by telling me about a colleague at work whom she admired, a woman who seemed full of vitality and passion and who was prepared to take risks and live spontaneously. As she talked about this, I noticed how much more animated she became. The dream wasn’t about jobs: it was about her. It was an invitation to consider more vital and authentic ways of living her life.

Attending to dreams involves the same process as attending to psychological symptoms, to surprisingly strong reactions to a person or
situation, or to anything else arising from within one’s self. It involves receiving the experience with hospitality, not judgment, analysis, or an attempt to fix yourself or the experience. Offer the experience a reflective space and listen, watch, and be open to what emerges in that space and within you. This is the process of attending to a dream. It expresses your openness to fresh gifts of awareness and to the experience of an awakening. And because, from my perspective, all awareness and awakening is a gift of God, it is a brush with the Divine—an encounter of the same sort Saul experienced on his way to Damascus.

**Listening to Our Body**

For those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, our bodies offer us a continuous stream of invitations to awaken. This is why body awareness forms the foundation of all awareness. You can be no more aware of anything than you are of your body—and in case you are wondering, I am convinced that this limit on your awareness includes your awareness of God.

Every breath can be a doorway to awareness and awakening. This is why attending to one’s breath is such a foundational practice in all spiritual traditions. Its important place in Christian spirituality has often been overlooked; yet the foundation of breath prayer as a Christian practice is grounded in the creation story, which speaks of God forming humans from the dust of the earth but animating them with God’s own breath. Each breath we receive is a gift of God, drawing God into our very being. Attending to our breathing is, therefore, a prayerful way of opening our selves to God—an opening that can be an awakening.

Aging is another important source of body-based invitations to awakening. Because most people fear death and resist giving in to any signs of diminishment, we tend to view aging as the enemy of the vital life. Western culture strongly reinforces that message. However, aging is not the same as dying, nor is aging reducible to decay. George MacDonald reminds us that aging can be “the ripening, the swelling, of the fresh life within that withers and bursts the husk.” It always invites us to come alive in new ways. It invites us to let go of the life we had or might have hoped for so we can have the life that is awaiting us with new possibilities. It invites us to age well—to live well and to be well—so that others whose paths cross ours may have
the courage to do the same. It invites us to live as full participants in our life, not as spectators who unconsciously drift along. It invites us, therefore, to awaken.

Aging offers rich possibilities for transformation to those who are willing to receive each stage of life—really, each day of life—as a fresh gift of new possibilities of being. Paradoxically, aging offers the gift of well-being in our spirit and soul, even if that well-being is less and less present in our bodies. It is an invitation to learn that being well does not depend on physical realities. It is an invitation to a self that is at one in relation to itself and in relation to life, God, and the world. Receiving this gift is never the result of a single moment of awakening. But it is a gift that will never be received unless we learn to respond to aging with acceptance of life as it comes to us, not as we might arrange it if we were God.

**Conscious Love**

One final and immensely valuable source of continual invitations to awakening comes from journeying with other people in relationships of intentional love. Rather than regarding love as a feeling, John Welwood suggests that we should think of love as an action. He calls a commitment to love “conscious love” because it is something that we consciously choose to express and to which we open ourselves. What such love opens us to is awakening, because a commitment to journey with another in such a way calls forth who we really are. The more intimate the relationship, the more it will inevitably present us with opportunities to awaken. The most important of these invitations to awaken are associated with the tensions that necessarily form a part of any relationship. Our default response to these tensions is annoyance (fight) or defensiveness (flight). Awakening demands quite a different posture. It demands hospitality to the tension or conflict and presence to your self and the other.

Welwood suggests that conscious love also involves an expectation. Instead of looking to the relationship primarily for either gratification or shelter, “we would welcome its power to wake us up in the areas of life where we are asleep and where we avoid naked, direct contact with life. This approach puts us on a path. It commits us to movement and change, providing forward direction by showing us where we most need to grow. Embracing relationship as a path also gives us practice: learning to use each difficulty along the way as an...
opportunity to go further, to connect more deeply, not just with a partner, but with your own aliveness as well."

Conscious love is probably the most accessible of all means of awakening. It is available to anyone who is in any form of relationship. Such relationships do not need to be romantic or even ongoing—although the more ongoing and the more intense, the more opportunities for awakening the relationship will present. Cynthia Bourgeault suggests: “The bottom line is not the ‘who’ but the ‘how’: the direction of the energy flow. On a path of conscious love the energy is always radiating outward; it is never self-defended or congealed.” The how is a path of love. It is love that allows one to move from defensiveness to openness, and it is love that allows people in a relationship to stay present and open to each other when they otherwise would want to either attack or run and hide. It is love that allows partners to work their way through inner logjams that would otherwise normally take much longer to resolve.

Ken Wilber describes this sort of shared journey of intentional love when he writes of his relationship with his wife, Treya, as they approach the end of her five-year ordeal with cancer. He says, “We simply and directly served each other, exchanging self for the other and therefore glimpsing that eternal Spirit which transcends both self and the other, both ‘me’ and ‘mine.’” On this path, love is in the service of awakening, and awakening is in the service of love. The two become almost indistinguishable.

Dialogue and Reflection

“Awakening” is what I call this first stage of transformation. But naming this moment doesn’t really explain what happens, why it happens some times and not others, or why we seem to resist it and fall back asleep so easily after a momentary awakening. It also positions the act of awakening solely within the individual and doesn’t help us understand the communal context in which awakening—and staying awake—happens. These and many other related questions will be answered as we explore the big picture of the unfolding of the human self. But be prepared: the picture I will be presenting is big, and the concepts are big. However, I am convinced that nothing less can adequately frame the possibilities for the awakening and unfolding of the self that the mystics describe.
Before we get to that big picture, let us pause for a moment to consider some questions that I hope will help you reflect on the things we have discussed in this chapter. I draw these questions—and those with which I will end each of the following chapters—from ones asked when I have presented these ideas to colleagues or in public lectures. As you listen in on our interaction, perhaps you will hear some of your own questions and thoughts. Hopefully these little slices of conversation will help you open up reflective space and aid your engagement with what we are discussing.

1. I was interested to see how much emphasis you place on the body and the senses in awakening. Often awakening is presented primarily in terms of consciousness, and that is presented in more mental terms. Can you say anything more about this?

   I am glad that you noticed this because I think it is very important that we do not reduce awakening to a change of beliefs. Such changes can be evidence of an awakening but can easily occur in its absence. If awakening is to have the psychospiritual potency that is needed to change us in our totality, it cannot be simply a mental change. It must involve something deeper and broader than this. Spiritual awakening always involves the senses, and this leads us to our body and to the world beyond. Awakening moves us from the intermediate zone of thoughts, judgments, opinions, beliefs, and classification and slowly introduces us to a more direct and immediate encounter with that which is transcendent to us and exposes the small, comfortable realm in which we so comfortably live and sleep away our existence.

2. You said that any experience that produces significant internal turmoil, disruption of meaning and self-coherence, or a sense that your way of being in the world needs to change—any such experience has potential to awaken us. But I gather that the key word is “potential” because you then go on to illustrate how experience is not enough to guarantee awakening. What makes a person ready to awaken?

   In general terms, what makes us ready to awaken is sufficient openness in either mind or heart to allow our attention to be drawn to something we would normally dismiss. I describe
this as an openness of either mind or heart because either can express the necessary soul hospitality to pay attention and subsequently receive the gift of awakening. In upcoming chapters I will have much more to say about the dynamics of this awakening and the unfolding of the self that results, so hang on to those questions since they are important.

3. You also said something about every breath being a potential doorway to awareness, and every moment of awareness a doorway to awakening. Can it really be that simple?

Let me first say that awakening isn’t simple. What is simple is our part in it. Our role, as I have said, is more one of consent and willingness than striving to awaken or stay awake. You are not responsible for your own awakening. It isn’t something you need to achieve. But it is a gift that you can receive, and there are things you can do to increase that possibility. In any moment you can choose to pay attention. Paying attention to anything is a potential doorway to awakening because paying attention to anything is a doorway to the transcendent. This is why, over and over again, Jesus urged people to watch and to listen—in short, to pay attention. Once we pay attention to something, we are ready to be gripped by it and drawn into awareness and wakefulness. It can start right now. In fact, there is no time other than the present moment in which it can happen. All that is required is to be present to yourself in this moment, and as you do so, your wakefulness will increase. That is your part in the process, and that is why spiritual practices that center on awareness are so foundational to any genuine awakening and subsequent becoming.

4. Maybe I missed something, but I can’t help but wonder where Jesus is in all of this.

I believe that Jesus both reveals and leads us to the one he called Father, and through him, his Father can be known as our Father. So Jesus is tremendously relevant to this journey into God because Jesus shows us what is possible and leads us to the One who makes it possible. The way he shows us is reflected in his teachings but never reducible to a set of propositions. His way was a way of turning in openness and trust.
to the One who is continuously present to us even though we are generally unaware of that reality. The kingdom of God, he taught, is within (Luke 17:21). God, he implied, is not to be encountered through belief in propositions or certainty of convictions but in our depths as the One who is, everywhere and at all times, calling all people and all of creation to be more than it is in and through Christ. This God whom we encounter in Jesus is the source of all genuine human awakening and becoming. That may not satisfy you, but stay tuned, and let’s see if the role of God in all of this awakening and becoming doesn’t begin to become clearer as we proceed.