
Rediscovering Awe: A New Front in Humanistic Psychology, Psychotherapy, and Society

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ABSTRACT

This article is adapted from an invited address to the University of Laval, Quebec City, on April 7, 2006. The purpose of the article is to describe an emerging psychospiritual paradigm that veers between dogmatic fundamentalism and postmodern nihilism. This “depth” spirituality is based on a rediscovery of our native capacity for *awe*, and addresses the very fulcrum of our contemporary lives. It is a spirituality informed by the existential-theological tradition of Soren Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, Ernest Becker, and Rollo May, which welds the zeal and exaltation for religion with the scrupulosity and skepticism of science. Drawing from my recent book *Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life* (Schneider, 2004) as well as both film and literature, I explore the nature, power, and therapeutic implications of the spiritual capacity for awe.

RÉSUMÉ

Le présent article résume une conférence invitée présentée à l'Université Laval, dans la ville de Québec, le 7 avril 2006, ayant pour objet de décrire un paradigme psychospirituel émergent qui se situe entre le fondamentalisme dogmatique et le nihilisme postmoderne. Cette conception de la spiritualité dans sa profondeur est basée sur une redécouverte de la capacité innée de l'être humain à adopter une « attitude d'ouverture mêlée de crainte » (*awe*) au cœur même de notre vie contemporaine. La vision de la spiritualité intègre la tradition existentielle et théologique de Sören Kierkegaard, Paul Tillich, Ernest Becker, et Rollo May, unissant le zèle et l'exaltation pour la religion à la scrupulosité et le scepticisme de la science. Développée du dernier livre de l'auteur, intitulé *Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life* (Schneider, 2004), ainsi que de la littérature et du film, l'article explore la nature, la force, et les implications de cette capacité spirituelle humaine.

What if I told you that you are about to embark on a great adventure; that “*you* are about to experience the awe and mystery that stretches from the inner mind to The Outer Limits,” à la the science fiction television show from the early 1960s (Stefano, 1963)? But seriously, what if I told you that you are about to experience the terrors and wonders of the cosmos on this adventure; that you will be fully equipped for the journey; and that you will have about eight decades to proceed on it? Further, what if I told you that you will encounter many fascinating events, sensations, and relationships on this journey, and that every day you will have a chance to marvel at, be moved by, and imagine an entirely new way to live?

And—here’s the clincher—what if I told you that at the end of the eight decades there will be another, even more enigmatic and fascinating journey? Would you want to go? Would you do everything you could to savour the integrity of the entire trek? Would you want to kill, or rape, or devalue yourself or others in the face of this trek? Or stuff yourself with food, or drugs, or “reality” TV? Probably

not; at least if sane or sober. Yet this is precisely what we seem bent on doing in our western, industrialized enclave: to defy the awe of living—the humility and wonder, thrill and anxiety of living—and the capacity to be moved.

AWE IS OUR FUNDAMENTAL RELATIONSHIP TO MYSTERY

How is it that we lost our fundamental relationship to mystery—that we distort, pervert, and subvert that fundamental relationship? How is it that we take this exhilarating romp through space-time, and either become arrogant, presumptuous toward it, or on the other hand humiliated, crushed before it? The answer is psychological trauma—both individual and collective—that gives rise to defenses (“prophylaxes” against the terror of radical mystery, that fail to be worked through). Even culture as a whole, as Becker (1973) noted, can be viewed as a prophylaxis against terror; hence the need for routines, comforts, and presumptions to stave off that terror.

Yet once that protective bubble is torn, which it invariably is through natural or human-created trauma, we need some means of navigating that disruption, some means of reconnecting us with the *awe* (vs. terror) of that disruption, in order to find our way through it. The way through it is to embrace the bigger picture of life, which reconnects us to our humility and wonder.

Yet there are too few spaces for such reconnecting today, too few places to embrace the bigger picture of life. Although depth-experiential psychotherapy is one such place, one staging ground for the cultivation of awe. How many people are aware of it, let alone fund and support it?

We have a culture that increasingly represses mystery, and a culture that increasingly represses mystery also inhibits freedom. Think about it: in a culture that prizes sensationalism over sustained and reflective inquiry, easy answers—be they military, religious, or commercial—over discernment and struggle, and certitude over mindfulness and wonder, how can substantive freedom flourish (Fromm, 1965; May, 1981)? While there is freedom in our culture (as many of our politicians are only too eager to proclaim), this freedom is focused on buying products, solving immediate problems, and acquiring material goods. There is little freedom (time, support) to consider the implications of those attainments for a rewarding and meaningful life. There is little freedom, in other words, to suspend our resolution-mania, and dwell in the doubts, tangles, and uncertainties that lead to growth (May, 1981; Schneider, 2004). Are these not the same growthful processes we promote in therapy, yet find under increasing threat?

THE QUICK FIX VS. THE SLOW SIMMER: SUPPRESSIONS OF AWE

Today, we mask over mystery and crisis in two basic ways—amoral free-market consumerism and moralizing extremist religiosity. Amoral free-market consumerism accentuates three factors: speed, instant results, and neatness and packaging (or the efficiency model for living). (This model is also reflected by amoral scientism [or the religion-like faith in science] and strident postmodernism.)

Moralizing extremist religiosity, on the other hand, gives us strict guidelines for our lives; it dictates what we can think, say, or do. And yet, in a curious way, moralizing extremist religiosity and amoral, free-market consumerism converge on one of the greatest social seductions in history: the “quick-fix” model for living. The quick-fix model for living, whether consumerist or authoritarian, gives us instant answers and pat resolutions to our dilemmas. While the dilemmas themselves, whether personal or collective, barely get touched.

The “dry drunk” syndrome, a pattern that seems prevalent in certain influential quarters of the U.S. these days (Bisbort, 2003; van Wormer, 2007), fits exquisitely into this quick-fix, “cut and dried” mentality. Either you’re with us or against us, this mentality goes. Life is black or white, good or bad, while all the while, the opportunity for introspection, deep deliberation, and mindful action is spurned. Put another way, one of the cardinal features of the dry drunk is the capacity to solve problems simply, expediently, and militantly, but not with much forethought or depth—and hence, many of the challenges we face today, from warfare to zealotry, and from scapegoating to bald-faced commercialism. Could all this lead to yet another pattern—the “Nero Syndrome”—where our leaders and many of the people fiddle while Rome burns?

THE HAPPINESS CRAZE/HOAX

Happiness or well-being, as they are currently defined (by scales and surveys, particularly within positive psychology and Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy [CBT] circles), show some odd linkages (e.g., Alloy & Abramson, 1988; Keys & Lopez, 2002; Kiersky, 1998; Wallis, 2005). For example, emerging studies suggest that (a) people who score high on such scales may well harbour more positive illusions about life (e.g., less accuracy regarding reality) (Alloy & Abramson; Kiersky); and (b) may possess lower levels of psychological growth than people who are (mildly to moderately) depressed or recovered from depression. This latter point has been underscored by what has been termed the depressive realism effect (Alloy & Abramson; Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1995, 1996). Similar correlations have been found linking happiness with increases in racial prejudice (simplistic thinking) and decreases in the ability to self-reflect (Bodenhausen, Kramer, & Susser, 1994; Stambor, 2005, p. 13).

Correspondingly, approximately 80% of the U.S. population calls itself happy (Wallis, 2005, p. A1), and presumably a good percentage of those people score high (or would score high) on the well-being scales of positive psychologists. And yet:

1. Nearly one quarter of that U.S. population “believe[s] that using violence to get what they want is acceptable” (Rifkin, 2005, p. 32).
2. Nearly half “are more likely to believe that human nature is basically evil, and that one must belong to the one, true religion to lead the best, most meaningful life” (Galek, Flannelly, Weaver, & Vane, 2005, p. 27).
3. Fifty-nine percent of the U.S. population believe that the prophecies in the book of Revelations (such as the Rapture and a war with Islam in the final

- reckoning) are going to come true, and nearly a quarter believe that the Bible predicted the 9/11 attacks (Moyers, 2005).
4. Americans now spend more on gambling than on movies, DVDs, music, and books combined (Rifkin, p. 28).
 5. And 67% of U.S. men and 57% of U.S. women are overweight or obese (Payne, 2005, p. A-12).

In short, if scoring high on positive psychology scales, which often means enjoying lots of friends and family and frequently going to church, encompasses the oblivious couch potato as well as the fanatical ideologue, something is amiss.

We need a new definition of happiness that takes into account the nuances and openings of being depressed, vulnerable, and willing to question life vs. the jaded, canned, and self-deceiving way that aspects of cognitive psychology and much of our culture suggest as normal. Isn't this what our classic literature and depth studies impart to us? Consider Rollo May's (1981) distinction between happiness and the more invigorating (in his view) "joy":

Happiness depends generally on one's outer state; joy is an overflowing of inner energies and leads to awe and wonderment.... Happiness is the absence of discord; joy is the welcoming of discord as the basis of higher harmonies. Happiness is finding a system of rules which solve our problems; joy is taking the risk that is necessary to break new frontiers. (pp. 241–242)

Or consider James Hillman's remarkable statement: "The true revolution begins with the individual who can be true to his or her depression" (Hillman & Ventura, 1992, p. 98). How different these above views are from recent positive psychology writing, which defines mental health as the "absence" of pathology (Keys & Lopez, 2002, p. 48). What does that really mean: a pure, one-dimensional automaton?

FROM GIMMICKRY TO AWE

It's not a question of disavowing faith or happiness, it's a question of disavowing the hype and gimmickry, as Rollo May (2007) would put it, which attend and desecrate these virtues in our culture. Hence, giving up on the quick fix is possible but exceedingly difficult. It requires abiding presence—life in all its complexity.

A philosophy that respects life in all its complexity—and at the same time, glory—is what I call an Awe-Based Life philosophy. An Awe-Based Life philosophy is distinguished by what I call enchanted agnosticism (taking mystery seriously), the fluid centre (recognizing our place between our creatureliness and our godliness), and faith in the inscrutable (finding hope, trust in the vast unknown) (Schneider, 2004). To summarize: our task is to come to terms with and find a faith in the inscrutable, a trust in "the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos" (Becker, 1974, p. 78) despite the attendant uncertainty—and to know that there's no highway to heaven, no preset path. Such a realization, then, leads to acute awareness of personal responsibility—a *fluid centre*, where we can hold life's majesty but also realize that it is up to us to find meaning and direction within that majesty. This entire view can be further synopsisized by the great cultural anthropologist, Ernest Becker (1974), who, at his dying hour "[gave up

when there was] nothing left to the tremendous creative energies of the cosmos” (p. 78), and by doing so, found one of the greatest forms of solace that a person could fathom—the “solace of amazement” as opposed to the “solace of certainty” (Schneider, 2004, p. 154).

Another Awe-Based Life philosophy and “answer” to the meaning of life, according to Tillich (1963), is provided by Kierkegaard. Here is Tillich’s translation of that life-philosophy from Kierkegaard’s book-length essay, “Concluding Unscientific Postscript”:

“Truth is ... objective uncertainty, held fast, in the most personal, passionate experience. This is the truth, the highest truth attainable for the existing individual.”

This statement, which is Zen-like in its paradoxes, needs to be meditated upon to be unravelled. I think what Kierkegaard is saying is highly akin to what we practice in depth-experiential psychotherapy—namely, that it takes a whole-bodied (not merely intellectual) immersion in all the possible sides of a given dilemma (e.g., the personal, the social, the cosmic, etc.) to find the “truth” in one’s response to the dilemma. Further, I think he is saying that even after we find this so-called truth, we must still realize that it is partial—a “leap”—because no person can stand completely outside of him or herself and perceive with absolute certainty. And yet, it is this very comprehensiveness in our decision-making process, this leap, as Kierkegaard elaborates, that makes it “the highest truth attainable to the existing individual.”

In *Rediscovery of Awe* (Schneider, 2004), I detail some possible features of a Kierkegaardian notion of truth in the form of what I call an “Awe-Based Ethics.” These ethics reflect the depth-experiential process of optimal psychotherapy, and stress:

1. Appreciation and immersion in a given dilemma (or mystery).
2. Struggle with the rivaling sides of the dilemma (e.g., Kierkegaard’s “objective uncertainty”).
3. Responsibility or ability to respond to the salient features of the dilemma (e.g., Kierkegaard’s “held fast in the most personal passionate, experience”).
4. Being prepared to relinquish or “give over” one’s truth at the point of its threshold for viability (e.g., Kierkegaard’s “leap of faith”).

By opening to such vistas, psychology would provide a model, not just for optimal psychotherapy, but potentially, for world-wide social reform. In *Rediscovery of Awe* (Schneider, 2004), I detail some possible features of such a reform. Let me highlight a few of those here: awe-based education, awe-based vocation, and awe-based democracy.

Awe-based Education

The general principle of this reformation is the promotion of an educational system that immerses students in the awe of both theory and action. One potential application is an “awe-based” curriculum that challenges students to study the

promotion or suppression of awe by various cultures down through history (e.g., agrarian-neolithic, Greco-Roman, African, Asiatic, European, etc.), and engages them to grapple with the relevance of those findings to their own contemporary lives. This kind of curriculum would help set the tone for the love of study, while at the same time promoting a broadening and deepening of virtually any eventual specialization or craft.

To elaborate, this form of education is very similar to other calls for educational reform, such as that of the Inquiry Learning Action Group of the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of Calgary (Inquiry Learning Action Group, 2005), with, however, a few nuances of difference. For example, awe-based discovery focuses students directly on that which inspires (i.e., evokes awe) and that which devitalizes (i.e., evokes despair) in all the major epochs of human history. Such a format not only encourages personal encounters with the problems and possibilities of given moral dilemmas, it also immerses students in the wisdom-teachings of the past, and how best to apply those teachings to present challenges. The awe-based curriculum also combines critical-reflective inquiry with hands-on engagements with the arts, literature, field investigation, and so on. The emphasis of an awe-based curriculum is on holistic, rather than primarily verbal/analytical, discovery, and application.

Awe-based Work

This reform proposes a one-hour-a-week mental and physical well-being program designed to awaken a sense of passion and purpose about one's job. The program would be voluntary and administered by both management and employees. The mental well-being component, for example, could begin as a pilot project and entail a variety of holistic offerings: from group explorations of the meaning and impact of work for employees' lives to topical seminars on stress, holistic healing, spirituality, and multiculturalism. Facilitators could include psychologists, psychiatrists, counsellors, and holistic health practitioners; their collective concern, however, would be experiential-depth—the extent to which employees are assisted to immerse in and not just “report about” the topics that matter to them.

While the coordination of such an operation and the obstacles it would face would of necessity be formidable, its potential fruits, in my view, would be inestimable. Among these would be a salutary impact on just about every major sector of society, from the motivation, engagement, and even product quality of the work-setting, to the cascade effect these enhancements would bring to employees' home lives, relations with community, and outlook on life. Just a few paltry hours, in other words, could help to spark a revolution!

Awe-based Democracy

The idea here is to link an experiential component (above and beyond the conventional “rational” approach) to the proceedings of deliberative bodies, such as legislatures, diplomatic organizations, and ethics panels. This experiential component, moreover, would be facilitated by highly skilled depth-experiential

therapists. By “experiential component,” I mean the supplementation of both formal and informal deliberative processes with the following awe-based features: (a) an appreciation of the many-sidedness of a given dilemma; (b) a whole-bodied attunement to and encounter with that many-sidedness; and (c) a whole-bodied response to and discernment of that many-sidedness, leading to a substantive action in the world (see also Tillich’s [1967] notion of “listening love”). These experiential processes could be facilitated in small-group encounters of 2–5 legislators, where deliberations of moral import would go beyond the usual rhetorical level to a level of personal and intimate exchange. The results of such exchanges could then be passed on to the legislature at large for integration and complementation. Who knows what the ultimate impact of such a procedure would be on the body politic as a whole? Yet one point that does ring clear is that the democratic principles of openness, deliberation, and voting one’s conscience will all have been given their due.

These, then, are some glimmerings of a new pathway for psychology. They do not preclude standardized or conventional elements—in fact each of the reforms elucidated are likely to draw from those elements (Schneider, 2008). But the point is that they do not end with those elements. They encompass more, far more, and they draw on a far more vitalizing science.

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