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Awakening Experience

HOW DO TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCES gain religious significance?

My father had his first mental breakdown when I was four years old. Psychologists later diagnosed him as paranoid schizophrenic. Although I did not inherit his disease, I inherited his fear. Taking risks became a daunting task, and courage remained elusive. As a successful high school basketball coach, my father normally related well within our East Tennessee community. But, the disease created fears in his mind that affected his relationship with family and friends, and with the activities he loved. Over the next few years, as he suffered more episodes of paranoia and rage, I coped by slowly walling myself off from the chaos and real emotional danger I experienced from his outbursts.

When I attended high school, I won a state mathematics competition. I had never been particularly good at math before high school but was attracted to the clean, crisp precision and abstract reasoning of algebra—every problem had one right answer, and finding it was a well-defined goal. Algebra was complex enough to be challenging, and I enjoyed the satisfaction of coming up with the right answer. I did not like the stigma of being a math whiz in a farming and mining community and downplayed my accomplishments. However, I was also aware of the benefits: recognition from peers and teachers, freedom to choose my coursework, special attention from the community, my picture in the local newspaper, and eventually a full academic scholarship to college—taking a rare academic route out of Appalachia.

In college at University of Miami, I discovered that math was too abstract, impractical, (and hard), so I went into computer science. Artificial intelligence had fascinated me since I first heard of it, and I loved the complexity and challenge of understanding and modeling human

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thought. I pursued that challenge into graduate school: learning psychology, linguistics, software development, and more mathematics. I struggled to integrate the abstract, theoretical foundations of what I studied with a desire to be more practical and apply what I learned to realistic problems. Although I enjoyed the intellectual challenges, I also needed to feel grounded, perhaps because I had grown up on a farm, or perhaps because my painful experiences growing up and my way of coping as a child left me isolated from real emotional depth. I also became discouraged by the progress in modeling human thought with the linear, mechanistic computational process, and became aware of the incredible physical and emotional drain of sitting in front of the computer for hours each day. My desire to use my skills to help others was growing, and I did not see how my current career path would lead me to that goal.

I attended church, and that helped. I grew up in Southern Baptist churches—the only grandson of a Baptist minister. As I moved out of the South for school and work, I wandered through different churches and denominations, and looked to the church and God for stability. I attended Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Episcopal, and nondenominational churches, which spanned a conservative to liberal political spectrum. Although still Baptist, I appreciated the hospitality at other churches and called some of them home. Community in a church, whether I belonged to one for four years or visited for one day, would often encourage my spirit and help me feel whole. With few exceptions, the open and accepting relationships of the churches I visited generally attracted me and made me aware of the warmth lacking in my academic experiences.

I sampled a variety of denominations, but I still retained my Baptist beliefs: believing in an unmediated relationship with a personal God, believing in the sanctity of the Word as revealed through Scriptures, and trusting in Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. As I wandered from place to place, I continued to work out my relationship with God—growing in my understanding of my faith by seeing God through the different lenses of the different denominations. I read the Scriptures to grow in strength and understanding—not a dry, literal reading but an enlivened reading: what the Word behind the words says to me here and now.

I had a naïve faith and a logical mind. Eventually, something would have to give.

Awakening and Wandering

During the fall of my second year of graduate school in computer science at the University of Michigan, I audited a graduate course in mathematical logic. The classroom was on the central campus, and I took a bus from the north campus where my other classes were held. One day a couple weeks into the course, as I hurried across the mall near the middle of the central campus to get to class, I passed by the fountain on the plaza, noticed the flowers around the fountain, and felt struck by an amazing awareness of the world.

The flowers became crisper. The colors and shapes became sharper and the details of the petals stood out—their individual shapes, arrangement, and variations. I had been oblivious to those kinds of details in the world before. Even if I had occasionally stopped before to look at flowers, I had never noticed their petals. The flowers stood still in the air, solid (as if the rest of the world could disappear and those flowers would remain), sitting there in space. At first I only noticed the flowers; then, when I looked around at birds and shrubs, everything had that same property of solidity and permanence—beyond its mere existence in time and space. I saw the world more clearly and also saw a constancy beyond my surface vision.¹

That day confused me. I noticed the flowers and felt amazed and overwhelmed. Then, I continued on to class. I sat listening to the lecture and taking notes, but my thoughts were distracted and kept returning to my experience by the fountain. That day started as an ordinary day, just as any other ordinary day; and the fact that my awakening occurred in an ordinary time and place made the awakening itself extraordinary and has changed all ordinary days since then to potentially extraordinary ones. When I left class, I kept wondering what had happened. Over the next few days, I noticed nature more and soon decided to stay in town one day after class to wander the campus and look at the world more closely.

I began to wander the campus noticing what else I might have missed, and continued to return to campus regularly in what became my wandering practice. These wanderings increased my awareness and started me on a path of attending to internal promptings that moved me toward freedom and healing. Later, these internal promptings became subtle movements of awareness and discernment and guided my major life decisions, but

1. Literary critic and Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky describes one's increased vividness of perception as seeing the "stoniness of the stone," which defamiliarizes one's habitual response.

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initially I followed them in simple ways: wandering around noticing the world with newly opened eyes.

In response to my awakening experience, I began exploring the world. I walked around the campus after class, hung out where people congregated, visited used bookstores, ate Middle Eastern food for lunch, walked down busy sidewalks looking at people, sat and watched people walk by. I became more aware of the world that surrounded me and made an effort to experience myself within it. At first I noticed the sights: the shoes that people wore as they walked by, the way the birds jumped around on the concrete, the clarity of the air, the shades of color in the trees, the texture of the grass. Later I noticed sounds: birds singing, people walking, the different sounds cars made as they drove by.

When I walked through campus, I became aware of my connection to the world. I followed the connection by beginning to explore the world around me. As I learned to explore the world, I faced fears of leaving a linear, logical path as I went. And in exploring the world, I learned about myself and opened myself to the healing possibilities in nature. By following the awareness of the world that I began discovering that fall day, I found a beauty in nature and a new, more intuitive way to explore the world led by the relationships and patterns that attracted me.

Following that intuitive path, I learned to let my feelings guide me while becoming aware of their context and source, and I discovered a way to live my life beyond naïve faith and logical reasoning. My intuition gave me a more direct sense and empirical basis for unconscious decisions that bypassed my habitual analytical reasoning. Leaving the narrow path of mathematical logic for a world of intuition led me to discover a part of myself I did not know existed: I could notice and respond with feeling to my experiences of beauty in the world. I began a path of surrendering my fear and embracing life. Learning that other dimensions of my self existed led me to see the world a new way and for me was a step closer to getting in touch with my soul.

When I became aware of the physical beauty of the world, I felt attracted to it. Nature warmed my heart, and I followed the warmth to explore the world. (In a similar way, children trying to find something are told they are getting either warmer or colder as they either approach or distance themselves from it.) For me, the awareness of warmth toward nature was interior. I felt freer and happier as I wandered around Ann Arbor seeing and hearing the world and opening my heart to it. I learned to enjoy the experience of walking and sitting and watching and listening.

I found a beauty and a glow to the people and objects when I really noticed them. When I really paid attention and was aware only of watching without judgment, I discovered a sense of peace and stillness. Later, I learned that the stillness and vitality of reality I perceived indicates an awareness of the holy perceived in the common and everyday world. William Blake describes the shift of perception in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: “If the doors of perception were cleansed every thing would appear to man as it is, Infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things thro’ narrow chinks of his cavern.”² I gained a glimpse of the Infinite beyond my narrow perceptions.

Something happened to me that I can now confidently call a religious experience. I characterize that day as a religious experience, not because of the particular events, but because of their consequences. That day became religious, not because of what I experienced in those few minutes, but because those few minutes began to change how I experience the world and live my life.

Noticing Fear

By the time I had reached my midtwenties, my perceptions of the world had become narrow and dull. Henry David Thoreau writes in *Walden*:

When we consider what, to use the words of the catechism, is the chief end of man, and what are the true necessities and means of life, it appears as if men had deliberately chosen the common mode of living because they preferred it to any other. Yet honestly they think there is no choice left . . .

But man’s capacities have never been measured; nor are we to judge of what he can do by any precedents, so little has been tried. Whatever have been they failures hitherto, “be not afflicted, my child, for who shall assign to thee what thou hast left undone?”³

Thoreau identifies the “common mode of living” that we appear to choose, and for me, one reason I could not even see other alternatives was a pervasive, habituated, and unrecognized sense of fear.

As I wandered, I realized that fear had prevented me from noticing and exploring before: fear of the unknown, fear of not knowing, fear of failure, fear of rejection, fear of awkwardly standing out. I had looked at

2. Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

3. Thoreau, *Walden*, 7–9.

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the world in terms of what I needed: the world sometimes provided what I needed and sometimes did not. I had not learned to simply be a part of nature—without expectation, goal, or judgment.⁴ Although the academic world around me was full of relatively black-and-white categories of right and wrong, success and failure, and the known and unknown, I now saw a new possibility of simple existence as part of the world.

I became more aware of the fear that had previously kept me isolated, unaware, and focused on my security, self-protection, and ego maintenance. I had been afraid to explore because I was afraid of being hurt and did not realize that the only true dangers were in my mind. I was afraid of the unknown; and although I was in a setting where I gained confidence and understanding in academic knowledge, the knowledge of the real world still frightened me. The real world was full of pain and suffering, and my academic world was safer. But the real world now had beauty and life and passion, and I had seen that, and I left the safety of the academic world behind. Of course, wandering the daytime streets of the small college town of Ann Arbor, Michigan, was not physically a death-defying risk. But as I brought my fears to the surface, I learned from taking even small risks in my fear-focused life that I could enter into a life of courageous faith and of healing practice. Because of an increased awareness of my ingrained fears, I did not need physical danger to face my fears and grow in faith.

My fear of becoming more present to the world around me was enough fear to overcome. I could go into a new restaurant with friends easily, but if I were to wander into a similar place, feeling vulnerable with old, nonspecific fears on the surface, the experience could be healing and free apparently unrelated limitations. I was afraid to explore and to have no idea what I was doing around people I did not know. I was also likely afraid of taking on the irrational behavior I had perceived in my dad's mental illness. I did not know what caused schizophrenia; I only knew I did not want it. At the time my intuitive wandering seemed the opposite of rational behavior (because I had no purpose). Only later did I learn that letting my emotions ground the values in my thought is fundamental to rationality.⁵

A journey begins with one step, and although I did not know what was on the journey or how long it would last, I believed it led to life.

I became more aware of a desire to wander and to explore. As I explored, I became aware of an intuitive sense that I learned to follow. I

4. By "nature," I refer to everything that materially exists, including humanity.

5. Damasio, *Descartes' Error*.

believed the desire to wander came from God, and the intuitive sense was my own. I also believed that if I learned to listen to that internal sense, God could later use my listening to guide me.⁶ For a while that sense led me from joy to joy, then it began to lead me to face my fears: entering into unfamiliar situations that made me uncomfortable, encouraging me to wander further and longer instead of doing what I had planned, moving me into situations of possible conflict, even in the presence of anxiety. The wandering brought my fears to the surface.

At the same time, I faced my fears with compassion toward myself. I was too confused about what was going on to judge myself, and the beauty of nature I was learning to see felt open and expansive. I did not thirst after the exhilaration of ignoring my fears, which sometimes comes when successfully accomplishing something that terrifies me (e.g., skiing for the first time down a challenging slope, diving off a high platform into the water, or standing on the edge of a high cliff). I simply become aware of my fear and followed my intuition. As I reflect, I realize that I took action to feel my fears more fully—to become more aware of them and not to ignore them. I gave myself freedom to consider a new way to explore my faith.

The contemporary scholar of Christian spirituality Philip Sheldrake writes of wandering and distinguishes between the theology of the “King David” school that reflects the experience of coming into possession of a promised land; and the “Moses” school of thinking, which is sharply aware of the temptation to settle down and become fixed in one’s way. I had been following a “King David” path but needed to wander in the desert. A spirituality of change includes transitions from places of relative stability that acknowledges the continual change and development in every aspect of human life and experience.⁷

Christians have been called “people of the way,” and Irish Christians drew upon Celtic awareness of the sea as a symbol of spiritual displacement, where one could always be “on the way,” even setting out in a boat without a rudder. Other Irish pilgrims would leave homeland, friends, and

6. For an ethnographic analysis of how this listening develops in an evangelical context, see Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back*. With my evangelical background, I had a sense of the benefits of disciplined listening in biblical exemplars, and wondered if a more sensitive intuition could serve as a foundation for prayerful action (e.g., Gen 22:11–13; 1 Sam 3:10; Acts 22:17–18).

7. Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 110, 13, 22. See also Bridges, *The Way of Transition*. Wandering in the desert with Moses is a theologically significant metaphor, though with my evangelical background, the call by Jesus that his disciples leave their old lives to follow him was personally more significant (e.g., Matt 8:21–22; 16:24–25; Mark 10:28–31).

other relative stabilities to set out for the unknown with a desire to totally trust in God. For these wanderers, the outer journey was a symbol of their inner journey in seeking “the place of our resurrection” and harmony with the sacred.⁸ By surrendering what they held dear, they sought to ascetically root out inferior, nonspiritual desires.⁹

My commitment to wandering was not as strong as that of the Celtic pilgrims, and I did not root out all my inferior desires, but I did manage to surface some self-limiting desires for stability and predictability, and facing their genesis in fear led to a deeper desire for a more beautiful life.

Desire for Healing

By following the promptings that led me to take the risk of facing my fears and anxieties, I entered into healing. There was no innate, greater healing walking down one sidewalk instead of another but by placing my fears on the surface and acting based on an internal prompting instead of fear-ingrained habits, I was disrupting my habits and learning to trust in the face of fear. I was learning to explore and wander “aimlessly” without worrying about what other people thought of me. I thought I needed to be more directed to be successful and accepted, and surrendering my attachment to direction allowed me to begin learning a new way of being directed: intuitions reflected upon in wisdom and acted upon in faith (a way I continue to learn every day).

For me, faith requires following an intuitive sense and purifying my will of ingrained fears and other limitations that disturb my ability to decide and act in accordance with what I ultimately value. Since I live in an analytical world, that path leads deeper into my heart, past my fears, and toward my soul. Fear-based action often leads to emotional death from a cycle of causing what one fears. Facing the fear breaks the cycle, allows healing to enter, and leads to life. At that time, it did not matter which sidewalk I walked down: it mattered that I did not let fear dictate which sidewalk it was; and more fundamental was that I did not let fear prevent me from wandering the sidewalks.

8. Sheldrake, *Befriending Our Desires*, 122–23.

9. Saint Columbanus, a sixth-century Irish wanderer, preached: “It is the end of the road that travelers look for and desire, and because we are travelers and pilgrims through this world, it is the road’s end, that is of our lives, that we should be thinking about.” In 891 CE, Irish monks landed in England (and spoke to the king) after they had set out in a boat without a rudder (*ibid.*, 110, 22–23). Saint Columbanus quote as cited by Sheldrake (*ibid.*, 123).

My intuition led me to gather more information about the world in which I lived. To assimilate my experience at the fountain, I needed to understand that experience and where it led. Previously my mind had been focused on a more limited perception of the world. Then I gained an increased awareness of the world through my senses of seeing and hearing. I also gained a new awareness of my emotions. I became aware of fear, anxiety, and other feelings; I became aware of their existence, the forms they took, and how they affected my behavior. In wandering “aimlessly,” I set aside my other perceptions, habits, judgments, and rituals to allow my new sense to develop: where did I feel like walking?

Wandering and exploring the inanimate town of Ann Arbor also helped me to wander and explore my own inner world. I was exploring my *own* desire to explore. Inanimate creation provided a place I could wander in the world of faith and fear. Wandering provided an unhindered framework in which to discover my desire to explore and the fears that had affected it. In a less crowded, more ancient time, I could have learned these lessons wandering around the desert, possibly facing more physical—less emotional—fears. But today I learned them wandering city streets.

The contemporary scholar of spirituality Brett Webb-Mitchell writes about pilgrimage as sacred travel that echoes questions of the heart, and walking and movement utilize the religious imagination and embody contemplation within a soulful journey. Pilgrims often have a geographic destination, such as Jerusalem, but hope to reach an analogous—but often less known—spiritual destination on the journey. Medieval labyrinths simulate a journey to the Holy Land on a small scale and enable the walker to draw close to the heart of God while spiraling in toward the center of the labyrinth. Other pilgrims intentionally have no destination and wander from one holy place to another to take care of their spiritual life and imitate the itinerant ministry of Jesus and his disciples.¹⁰

I had no destination in wandering Ann Arbor. It seemed important that I had no goal. It would be years before I could relax and wander on a journey to a particular place. My movements while exploring became separated from my assumptions about a destination, and I learned a skill that proved valuable for later geographic, professional, and spiritual journeys with unknown destinations. I needed to unlearn old habits that narrowed my awareness before I could gain new tendencies in decision making.

When I was a small boy growing up on a farm, we had a large wooded area on one side of our house. Sometimes I would go out and play in the

10. Webb-Mitchell, *School of the Pilgrim*, 11–17.

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woods. I enjoyed playing in the leaves underneath the large oak, maple, cedar, and walnut trees. I used to wander around our farm with my dog and explore. I explored the fields, the woods, and the barn. Unfortunately, I also explored the road to a family friend's house two miles away and a neighbor's field with a mad bull in it. Then I learned about fear and danger. Over the years, I learned other fears; and eventually my desire to explore the physical world was blocked and restricted. I could not move about freely in a new situation: my fear always had to be overcome.

I instead learned to explore an intellectual world. That desire and ability appeared more valuable to society, but my fears remained. The feminist theologian Wendy Farley writes of the passion of terror and the distortion it creates in one's life, even in the absence of fear or other emotional response: One can passively avoid a hypersensitive expectation of harm and substitute socially acceptable behaviors instead of authentic living.¹¹ For me, exploring Ann Arbor reconnected me to my childlike desire to explore the world and helped me to face the fears I had embodied as I grew up.

After my experience at the Michigan fountain, I continued to walk around Ann Arbor. I wandered the sidewalks, and I wandered the parks. There is a botanical garden on the outskirts of town, and one day I went to explore there. I wandered the trails and through the trees and wildlife and over streams. I wandered the two-mile paths through the woods and felt alive. I felt refreshed and less afraid. Some days I would go wander the botanical garden, solitary with nature.¹² Other days I would return to wander around Central Campus with strangers and urban structures. I saw green grass, stately trees, hurrying people, and laughing students. I wandered into concert halls, bookstores, and ethnic restaurants. I looked into the eyes of some who walked by and listened to them talk and laugh and yell and cry. I spent three years wandering the campus. Long after that course in mathematical logic was over, I would bus or drive into the central part of campus to further explore the experience of that one fall day.

My struggle to overcome ingrained fears and to explore internal and geographic places led to a more coherent and unified understanding of God as Creator, to a deeper awareness of myself and to a broader recognition of Nature that includes every aspect of humanity and God's presence. In the next chapter, I reflect upon those three dimensions of religious

11. Farley, *The Wounding and Healing of Desire*, 58–60.

12. Although my evangelical background had not educated me on the significance of beauty in nature as a means for learning about God, I later discovered biblical passages that could have guided my journey (e.g., Gen 1:31; 2:15; Job 12:7–10; Ps 19:1–4).

insight into God, my soul, and Nature, and later in the book, I reflect upon how that insight affected my social relationships.

Summary

My father's schizophrenia instilled in me habits of fear that restricted my life until a religious awakening experience at a fountain at the University of Michigan initiated a wandering practice through which I faced those fearful patterns and learned an intuitive way of decision making. The new practice of intuitive wandering brought habituated fears to the surface and released in me a desire for healing and spiritual growth.

Additional Material

To facilitate the book's use for further study and small group settings, I include some reflection questions, exercises, and further reading at the end of each chapter.

Questions

When have you encountered an increased awareness of the world?

How did you interpret that shift of awareness?

In what ways did that experience change your perceptions, behaviors, and values?

What practices increase your awareness of yourself within your internal, natural, and social world?

Exercise

Take three minutes to sit and notice the world.¹³ What do you see, hear, smell, taste, and feel by touch? What thoughts, feelings, desires, and possible decisions arise?

13. I suggest time periods that I believe work for someone without a meditative practice (and total one hour for all exercises in the book), but some individuals may wish to take longer.

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Further Reading

- Farley, Wendy. *The Wounding and Healing of Desire: Weaving Heaven and Earth*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005. Farley examines the role of desire in Christian meditative and mystical traditions in her feminist theological memoir.
- Lane, Belden C. *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes: Exploring Desert and Mountain Spirituality*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. Lane integrates personal experience, historical figures, and theological reflection in a Christian spirituality of experience in desert-mountain landscapes.
- Merton, Thomas. *The Seven Storey Mountain*. New York: Harcourt, 1948. In his autobiography, Merton reflects upon his religious conversion to Catholicism and decision to become a Trappist monk.
- Taylor, Jill Bolte. *My Stroke of Insight: A Brain Scientist's Personal Journey*. New York: Viking, 2008. Taylor, a neuroscientist, reflects on her experience of a massive stroke and recovery.