

## Discourse six:

# Spirit and the Ecological Self

Most people are aware of ecology as a sociological imperative, but fewer are aware of how ecology and the exploration of human consciousness have come together. Contributions to our vision of human consciousness and Spirit experience are present in Deep Ecology, Creation Spirituality, and the type of Ecopsychology summarized in Theodore Roszak's book, *The Voice of the Earth*. All of these voices agree that merely helping human beings adjust to a form of society that is out of touch with nature is consigning people to a form of insanity. The full healing of our psyche entails rediscovering our place as part of the biosphere of planet Earth. Indeed, we humans are that aspect of the cosmos wherein the cosmos has become conscious of itself. Until we appropriate that we are the cosmos in its conscious emergence, we are not fully sane or human.

### Arne Naess and the Ecological Self

Arne Naess, the Norwegian philosopher, has formulated some fundamental questions that cannot be avoided by any ethical or ecological thinker who claims to be profound in his or her approach.

Deep ecology, as a life philosophy, might be considered to be a form of scientific humanism, but it is critical of the attitude toward nature present in typical scientific humanism. Deep ecology has asked deep questions about the "humanity" of viewing ourselves as lords over nature--the "humanity" of assuming that the Earth is valuable only as a useful resource for the human species.

Some have accused deep ecologists of not being "for humanity." A more fair assessment, however, would be that deep ecologists are **for** humanity in the context of being **for** the entire planet of which humanity is one part. Further, deep ecologists ask questions about the **quality** of the humanity we want to be. A humanity who identifies only with humanity is not as deep, they claim, as a humanity who identifies with the entire planet as our larger body.

The metaphor "deep" has worried some critics who have taken this to mean that anyone who does not agree in every way with what "deep" ecologists say is thereby being dubbed "shallow." But deep ecologists have responded to this criticism by saying that the real issue is the need to ask deeper questions in the light of the failures of existing philosophies (whether Marxist or capitalist, religious or secular) to serve as adequate guides to a humanity which is recklessly destroying the elemental, irreplaceable environments that support all life on this planet. We are in illusion, deep ecologists say, if we view planet Earth as simply our spaceship, a spaceship which we humans can understand and capably control to the end of serving our human needs. The spaceship view denies the actuality of our relationships with this planet. This view also ignores the extent of our ignorance about the unbelievably complex interactions of this planet. The planet has millions of life forms which we have not even named, much less explored. When we relate to this planet as our spaceship, we are also assuming that human control of the planet would be better for humanity than allowing the planet to control itself as it has for billions of years. We are also assuming that humans have, or soon will have, an adequate manner of knowing which human beings are wise enough to do the controlling.

This planet has produced and sustained humanity and is clearly capable of continuing to do so. But we now face this pressing question: is this planet capable of sustaining an unlimited use of this planet by an unlimited number of human beings? The answer to this question is obviously, “No.” Until our recent technological era, humanity’s footprint has been small compared to the vast resourcefulness of the planet. But now that footprint is large enough to affect, in major ways, every life system: the atmosphere, the waterways, the soils, the diversity of life forms. The planet is a limited reality. Surely an astute grade school student can figure out that an unlimited expansion in a finite space will become untenable.

But our current philosophies, according to deep ecologists, do not equip us to confront this plainly obvious ecological crisis. We must ask some deeper questions. Why is humanity unwilling to confront these limits and deal with them forthrightly? We have resolved the enormous difficulties of placing humans on the surface of the moon, why can’t we resolve the difficulties of creating a sustainable society of humans on the Earth? Why? Because our thinking is confined within obsolete mentalities which do not motivate us to envision, much less do, what must be done.

On these and other such topics, Arne Naess has contributed something fresh to the history of human thinking and to the “depth” of ecological thought. Consider this summary of his six points on “the ecological self.”

1. We tend to underestimate our *selves* because we confuse our *self* with the narrow ego.
2. As fully mature human beings, “we cannot help but identify our *self* with all living beings.”
3. Traditionally, we have defined maturity as movement from the ego to the *social self*, but we have left out nature. We need to define our *ecological self*.
4. “The meaning of life, and the joy we experience in living, is increased through increased self-realization.”
5. “Our self-realization is hindered if the self-realization of others, with whom we identify, is hindered.” “Others” means other life forms as well as other humans.
6. Ecological devastation “decreases the potential of joyful existence” for all humans and nonhumans.<sup>1</sup>

These tenets, Naess claims, shift our attention toward the subject of motivation, the motivation to do what needs to be done. Naess claims that we humans will not do the needed ecological action if we experience it as an arduous, inconvenient duty. We will save the planet when we are able with joy to do what is ecologically necessary.

I want to examine the wisdom in Naess’ tenets more closely. As infants, we human beings begin the process of self-identifying by identifying with our own bodies. This is a step beyond what we might describe as the selfless swim of the infant in oceanic sensation. Later the human child begins to become aware that he or she is not simply a body but is somebody in an inward sense. The awareness of ego or personhood becomes a deeper self-identification. I am not my body. I am not my mind. I am not my emotions. I am, I am, well, I am “me.”

Then Naess points out that we have also learned to see the mature “me” as something more expanded than an inwardly isolated self. We are relationships with others. We identify with other human beings. Our identification with them enables us to expand and enrich our self identification. It is not true that love is an energy that must be directed either

<sup>1</sup> Arne Naess, “Self Realization” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century* edited by George Sessions (Shambhala: 1995), page 125-6

toward our self or toward others. Rather, love of others and love of ourselves is one unified process. If we do not love others we do not love ourselves. If we do not love ourselves we do not love others. The joy of being human, that is, the joy of affirming our actual lives includes the affirmation of other humans. We identify with other humans. We feel their pain. We share their joy. We identify ourselves as beings who have these friends, these enemies, these family members, these group members. We are members of this community, this region, this nation. Most of us have learned to accept such identifications with our *social self*.

But Naess wants us to consider a still further expansion of self. He points out that we also quite readily empathize with the pain and joy of our animal companions. He tells of his own response to the agony of a flea that fell into a beaker of acid he was using. Those of us who have not suppressed our sensitivities, have had moving experiences with our pets or with the wild life around us--experiences that dramatize that we do indeed identify with these beings. Our relationships with them constitute part of who we are. Indeed, Naess insists, we are not fully being ourselves unless we are being our **ecological selves**. This ecological self identifies not only with the living beings we know personally, but also with the entire process of livingness on this planet. We can also identify with mountains, with rivers, with valleys, with plains--indeed with the entire planetary process. This is our planet. This is who we are: self-aware members of this wondrous spinning sphere.

The identification with nature described by Naess reminds me of Albert Schweitzer's challenge that we learn to identify with the "will to live" in every living being. I am also reminded of the nature relationships of typical tribal societies. In many Native American groups "all my relations" is a phrase that can mean not just my aunts and uncles and grandparents, but also the deer and buffalo and pheasants and corn plants and so on. Even if some of these relations are used for food, an identification with and respect for them continues. In some tribes, permission must be asked of the deer species to take some of its members for food. It is as if the tribal performer of such ritual hears the deer species say, "You may have some of my members if you will allow my species to thrive." The thoughtless slaying of the buffalo and other such acts performed by "civilized" Europeans are behaviors most Native American tribal people have experienced as violations, violations of their family life, violations of their own deep selfhood. The validity of such sensibilities is being supported by the creative thinking of Arne Naess and other deep ecologists.

Popular religious thought has taken it on the chin from most deep ecologists. Christians especially have been viewed as part of the enemy relative to the crucial concerns of these deep ecology breakthroughs. And indeed, it has been true that Christians, for the most part, have been "for humanity" in ways that are inconsistent with being "for the Earth as a whole." Deep ecologists have been particularly critical of the sort of otherworldliness that speaks of flying away from the natural life into a supernatural heaven. This tends to make being "more-than-natural" the purpose of human life. Also, the popular belief in a far-away Supreme Being who supports humans in their anti-naturalism has likewise provoked significant ire from deep ecologists.

Secular deep ecologists have been hard pressed to answer why people like St. Francis of Assisi, Albert Schweitzer, or Thomas Berry show up in the Christian family. This sort of thorough-going love for the natural world seems, at first, inconsistent with the main themes of the Christian heritage. But this inconsistency results from the fact that popular Christianity is deeply estranged from its own beginnings. In its pristine beginnings, Christianity was, like deep ecology, an expression of deep selfhood in profound tension with every ordinary egoism.

If, instead of our literal belief in a far-away Supreme Being, we see the transcendent or heavenly God of biblical imagery as a metaphorical expression, we can recover the word “God” as a devotional name directed toward that Infinite Presence each of us can feel behind the presence of each and every finite being. When we understand God to mean that Infinite Illumination shining through all the events and fabrics of the natural order, then we can understand why Christian heritage, at its best, has included a thorough-going love for the natural world.

Further, our relationship with this “God” can be seen as a still further expansion of the self. Experiencing the AWESOME WITHOUT issues in an AWE-FILLED SELF WITHIN. How does this expansion of the self relate to the expansion of the self which Naess is indicating with his term “the ecological self”? Like the ecological self, the Awe-filled self (Holy Spirit) means discovering that we are more than our narrow ego. The narrow ego is an underestimation of the human *self*.

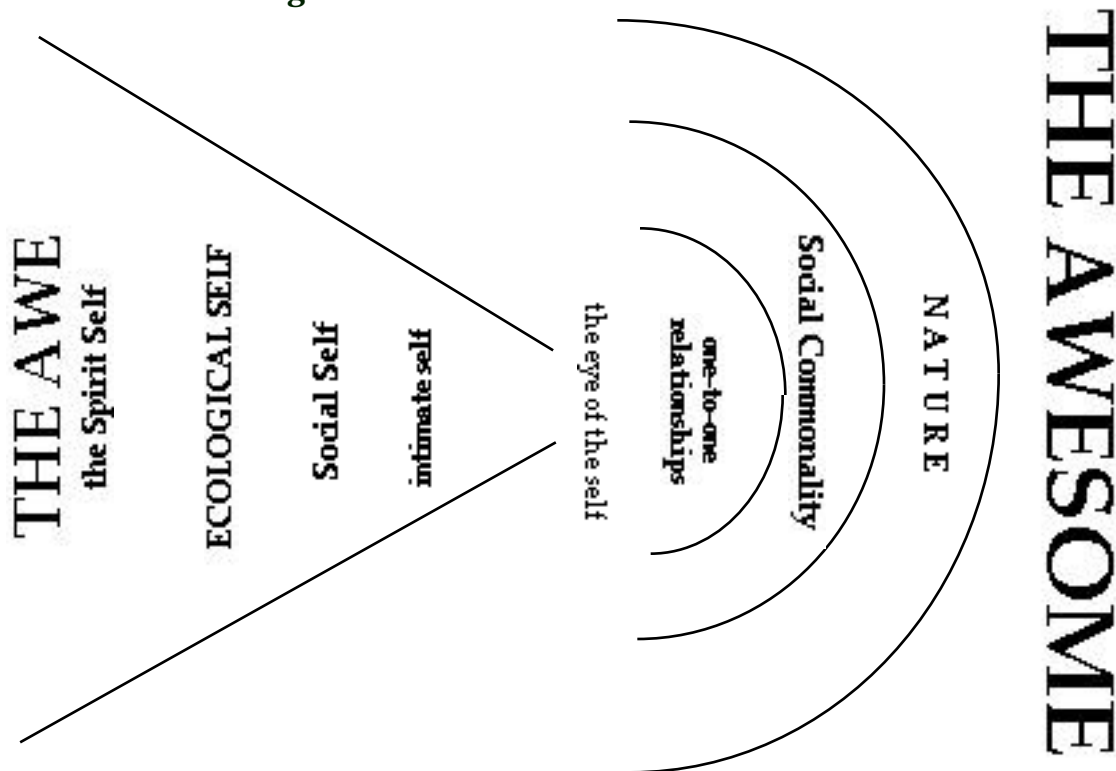
Indeed, the Spirit Self is an expansion of self that has even greater scope than the ecological self. The presence of Spirit Self does not deny the validity of the ecological self; it merely states that being human is even more than being our ecological self.

The following chart depicts these expansion of self. In the center of the chart are the words “**the eye of the self.**” I can picture myself as this eye looking outwardly at my expanding relationships and looking inwardly at my expanding self.

The first expansion beyond the infantile ego is the self that comes into being through **intimate one-to-one relationships** with other persons. This recognition that there are other “I” beings expands my sense of my own self. I have named this the **intimate self**.

Then with the discovery that I am part of a **social commonality**, a specific human culture, comes the inward awareness that I am a **social self**.

When I see all of **nature** as my own larger body, I discover within my inner being what Naess has called the “**ecological self.**”



Finally, when I experience the **AWESOME** that shines through every social and natural event, I discover within the wind of **AWE** blowing “Spirit Self.” This chart pictures the **AWE-SELF** or the Spirit Self is the most expanded of all selves. Because Spirit means relationship with the Infinite, Spirit is the **FINAL EXPANSION** of the self. So final is this expansion of self that Buddhist witnesses have called it the “no self.” Whether we are talking about “final expansion” or “self-less-ness” we are talking about the same experience.

But this **FINAL EXPANSION** does not do away with the finite aspects of the self. After the experience of **FINAL EXPANSION**, all the finite layers of the expanding self still persist as aspect of our lives. So how does the Spirit Self relate to all my lesser scopes of “self”?

Living in **AWE** spreads **AWE** to all the less-expanded aspects of being “me.” I, in all my self-expressions, become the **AWED ONE**. (Incidentally, the trilogy of **THE AWESOME**, **THE AWED ONES** and **THE AWE** provide a secular statement of the Christian Trinity.)

**AWE** before the **AWESOME** is the final scope of being myself because with these terms we are speaking of our Infinite relatedness. Such an understanding of “being myself” means dying to all my less expanded identifications. Religious philosophers have tended to point to finite selfhood with such terms as “ego” and “personality.” If the term “ego” means our identification with the finite process of our developing personality, then all these finite layers of self (intimate self, social self, ecological self) are layers of ego identification.. **AWE** means the death of the ego. But this is a strange death, for these finite layers of the ego-type-self continue as part of my life even though “I,” in my most expanded identification have become dead to ego. We might say that I, the **AWE**-filled one, am resurrected as a dead ego filled with **AWE**.

Yet **AWE** does not end the ego; **AWE** merely displaces the ego as the boundary of my self-identification. When living in **AWE**, I am in-but-not-of my ego. I am open to becoming a still more expanded ego. In fact, I am actively working to build a new ego-me that can express the **AWE** that has overtaken me

Our awareness of being this **AWE**-filled or Spirit-self provides a new context for defining what we mean by “ego.” My ego is not merely my earliest discoveries of being an inward someone who is more than my body. My ego is the composite of all my relationships with finite realities. My ego is my ever-changing, ever-expanding finite self. My ego is my personal self, my intimate self, my social self, and my ecological self in all the finite complexities of these many relationships. My ego is the present finite construction of selfhood that is facing the next challenge with the **AWESOME MYSTERIOUSNESS** which kills all finite constructions of selfhood and gives me back the freedom to reconstruct my ego in a still more expanded version of being myself. .

Let me illustrate this dynamic of **AWE** expanding the finite self: Suppose that I am, like typical members of my culture, caught up in being my personal ego plus some expansions in the direction of being my social self. Then suppose that Arne Naess or some other deep ecologist convinces me that I am more than my social self, that I am an ecological self, that I am a breadth and depth of selfhood that I am refusing to fully be. This confrontation with my ecological self creates **AWE**. Why? Because the ego I have been accustomed to being is being asked to die and a more expanded ego is being suggested to me. Whenever a particular ego-identity dies and the freedom to be a more expanded self appears, that is an **AWE** experience. This dynamic of death to ego and resurrection to newness of life is the Holy Spirit blowing through my life.

AWE can happen to us even before we have fully become our ecological self. AWE happens to us when we become our social self or a new version of our social self. AWE happens to us when we become our intimate self or a new version of our intimate self. AWE happens to us when we become our first self of intimacy or a new version of our self of intimacy. AWE is the dread and fascination and courage to die to whatever finite self we are and to become some new finite self we are not yet.

AWE is the final expansion of the self. But AWE is also the experience that there is no final expansion of the self. No matter how far we think we have expanded our self-identification, AWE is the experience of that “still further” which is still possible for us. So to fully identify with AWE as my true and complete Self means that I have given up having a secure self and opted for openness to perpetual change (that is, perpetual expansion) in my finite self-identifications.

When Buddhist teachings speak of being a “no-self,” these teachings are pointing us to the experience of being in AWE. All our finite selves are flux, not permanent stable entities. The “SELF” that witnesses all this flux of selves is the SELF-IN-AWE.

So what does living in AWE mean relative to an affirmation of what Naess is pointing to with the ecological self? It means a full and complete affirmation of what Naess is asking of us and of our culture. The AWE-filled self (Holy Spirit) supports us in identifying with all the living beings on our planet and with identifying with our entire planet. As a human being, I am indeed my planet's capacity to be aware of itself. Furthermore, I am my planet in its capacity to experience AWE. I am my planet viewing my cosmos all the way back to the BIG BANG and all the way forward to the FINAL RUN DOWN. I am my planet, taking joy in all those possibilities of being which are being wondrously provided in the LIVING NOW. I am my planet in its capacity to look beyond the BIG BANG and THE FINAL RUN DOWN to the MYSTERIOUS ALL POWERFULNESS BEYOND IT ALL. I am my planet in its capacity to look through the LIVING NOW to the AWESOMENESS which AWES me. I am my planet in its capacity for the JOY of HOLY SPIRIT.

These statements, or rather their burning realization in my own guts, are the foundation for a Christian (and perhaps also a Jewish and a Muslim) deep ecology. A Hindu and Buddhist deep ecology can also be established, but perhaps in a slightly different manner.

So, in conclusion, the ecological self is not precisely the same as the Spirit-Self. The ecological self is the largest scope of my finite nest of relationships. The Spirit-Self is our Infinite relatedness. Nevertheless, the ecological self is an important component in the contemporary manifestation of the Spirit-Self. The Spirit person sees that being the self-aware part of planet Earth is one crucial aspect of being filled with Spirit. And Spirit is not only detachment or non-clinging with regard to all the flow of passing finite processes, but Spirit is also compassion for all the same finite processes. And this Spirit compassion extends not only to our friends and enemies among the human community, but to all our friends and enemies in the entire natural realm. In this manner the Spirit person finds a deep collegiality with the secular deep ecologist. Further, the Spirit person beckons the secular deep ecologist to notice the Spirit reality that undergirds the ecological self and to notice also how this Spirit reality challenges us as ecological selves to expand still further.

## Discourse seven: **Awe and the Spirit Leader**

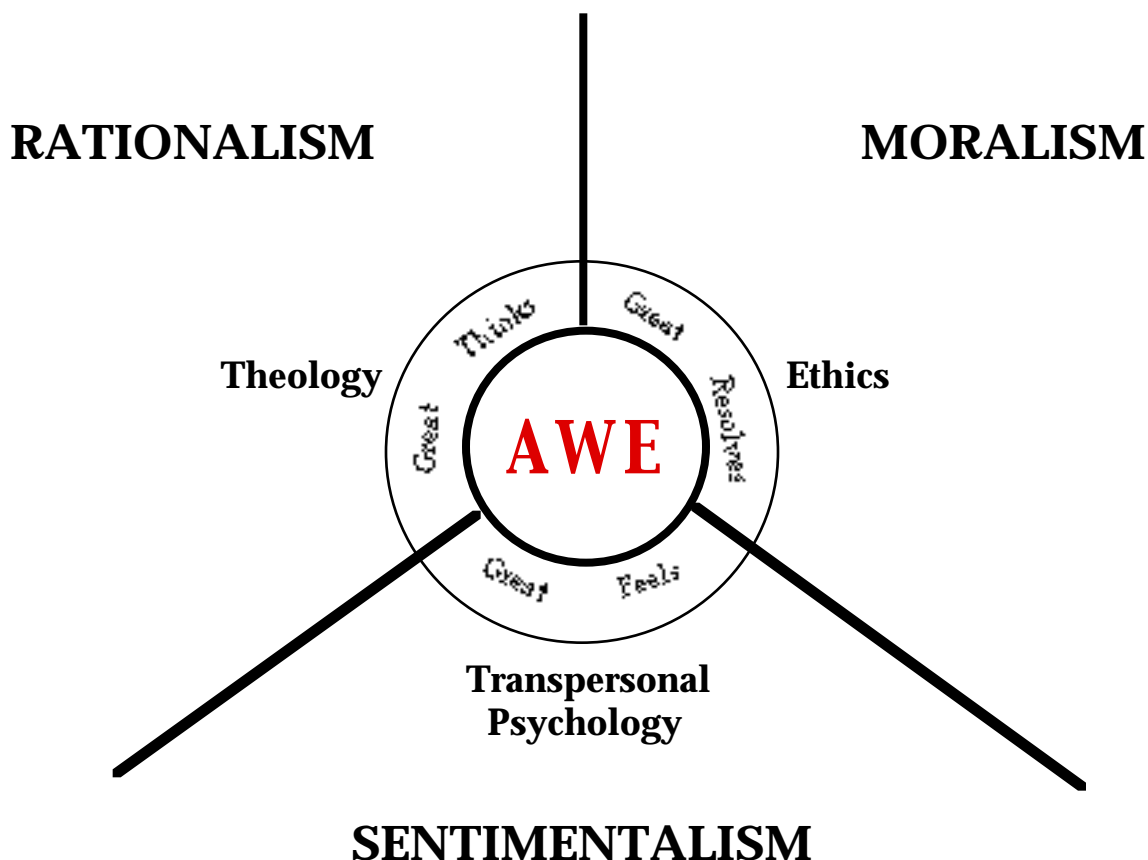
What does it mean to be a leader of other human beings in Spirit awareness, maturity, and practical living? I am intrigued that the ancient tribal shaman was not a political leader nor an elder but a leader of practices that nurtured the Spirit depths of human beings. In the long heritage of Spirit leaders we have seen gurus, sages, rabbis, levites, priests, pastors, monks, nuns, contemplatives, and many more formulations of this primordial role. In this discourse, I want to explore the essence of such leadership.

The Spirit leader is one who is in Awe and can occasion Awe in the lives of others. So what is Awe?

Awe is a relationship to the Awesome. And the Awesome is that Silent Infinite Presence that is streaming through each and every being and event.

In good Christian theology the willingness to be in Awe is called “Holy Spirit,” the Awed Ones are said to be “in Christ,” and the Awesome Otherness is pictured as our “Almighty Parent.” So understood, Awe is the central theme of contemporary Christian theology and practice. “Awe,” properly defined, is central to every religion. So again, what is Awe?

The following diagram provides a way to hold in mind the vastness of this complex question.



## The Bull's-Eye of Awe

On the above chart, **Awe** is placed in the center in order to indicate that Awe is the unifying experience that is manifest in various ways that move out from that center. Awe is a relationship with the Infinite; therefore Awe cannot be fully understood in terms of finite processes. Nevertheless, Awe manifests in the finite arenas of thinking, feeling, and ethical choices.

Awe is manifest as **Great Thinks** in the midst of our ordinary thinking.

Awe is manifest as **Great Feels** in the midst of our ordinary feelings.

Awe is manifest as **Great Resolves** in the midst of our ordinary choices.

All three of these aspects of Awe-manifestation are needed to fully understand Awe. Awe is not just an unusual feeling--the feeling of total dependence or the feelings of dread and fascination or the feelings of tranquility and joy. In addition to its feeling manifestations, Awe is also a blazing insight into the reality of our lives. And Awe is a resolve to be in Awe rather than to flee from Awe. When we flee from Awe, we do not actually experience Awe. Experiencing Awe requires the courage to see the Great Thinks and feel the Great Feels, however horrifying or demanding they may be. And our Great Resolves to be in Awe take on very specific ethical forms. To be in Awe means becoming in our actual behavior a person of freedom, compassion, equanimity, courage, creativity, flexibility, boldness, hopefulness, power, and other such terms used to describe the saint or warrior of Spirit living.

Closely allied with the concept of Great Thinks is **Theology** in the Christian, Jewish, and Moslem heritages. Great Thinks in the Buddhist heritage are usually called Dharma teachings. In all religious heritages we find Great Thinks in the form of religious teachings, stories, scriptures, traditions that hold insights into the Spirit dimension of our lives.

Closely allied with the concept of Great Resolves is **Ethics**. Religious ethics might be defined as an exploration into how Awe leads to action and how our most relevant challenges to action inspire Awe within us.

Closely allied with the concept of Great Feels is **Transpersonal Psychology**, if that term means a focus on understanding the feeling dimension of our states of consciousness when Awe or Spirit is transpiring in our lives.

I have also placed on the above "bull's-eye of Awe" chart the three great perversions of all religions: **rationalism**, **moralism**, and **sentimentalism**.

When we neglect Great Feels and Great Resolves, we reduce our religious expression to mere thinking. Thereby we lose Awe entirely, and our religious expression becomes **rationalism**.

When we neglect Great Thinks and Great Feels, we reduce our religious expression to mere moral actions. Thereby we lose Awe entirely, and our religious expression becomes **moralism**.

When we neglect Great Thinks and Great Resolves, we reduce our religious expression to mere feeling. Thereby we lose Awe entirely, and our religious expression becomes **sentimentalism**.



I will now examine how each of these three perversions are escapes from Awe and how the Spirit leader, (the shaman of Awe) must work with his or her appropriate theology, ethics, and transpersonal psychology to restore himself/herself and straying humanity to the bull's-eye of Awe.

## Overcoming Rationalism

Nikos Kazantzakis was very helpful to me at a certain point in my life. He made it clear to me with his poetry that religious teachings were not primarily persuasive rationalities. Rather, the effective religious teacher is bombarding his or her listeners (readers) with spins, stories, poems and provocations that might occasion the inward experience of Awe.

For example, here is Kazantzakis talking about the purpose of life. "Our body is a ship that sails on deep blue waters. What is our goal? To be shipwrecked! . . . suddenly, in a silent whirlpool, you will sink into the cataract of death, you and the whole world's galleon. Without hope, but with bravery, it is your duty to set your prow calmly toward the abyss."<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is a Great Think if these words assist you or me to experience the inward awareness that all things do indeed pass away. The stars pass away. The squirrels pass away. You and I pass away. These Great Thoughts are Awe-Thoughts if you or I do indeed feel the Great Feel component and do indeed resolve a Great Resolve to be the courage that embraces the reality indicated by these Great Thinks.

Here is another example: the Buddha was expressing a Great Think when he told us that the self we each think we are is just flux. The ego, the finite self, is part of what is passing away. We are not a permanent self, he insisted. We are flux. I can see this. I am not the self I once was. I am not the self I am yet to become. I am not even the self I think I am. All my identifiable finite selves are passing away. I do not have a substantial self. I am just flux. I am no-self. The purpose of life is to find our equanimity in the midst of the passing of all things including the passing of every "me" I thought was the real me. Finding this equanimity means being enlightened about being the being that I really am. I am "no-self" and that is the being I really am. Does this Great Think give you a sinking feeling and perhaps also a feeling of vastness? Such Great Feels go with this Great Think when you see this Great Think as valid insight into the actuality of your own being.

I have put the Buddha's teachings in my own words, and not every Buddhist would put it just this way. But perhaps my articulation of the Buddha's Great Think on this matter of "no-self" is sufficiently clear to give us a window into why the Buddha's teachings have inspired devotion (Great Resolves) in millions of people for thousands of years.

Let me also give a biblical example. "All our days go by under the shadow of thy wrath; our years die away like a murmur. Seventy years is the span of our life, eighty if our strength holds. The hurrying years are labor and sorrow, so quickly they pass and are forgotten. Who feels the power of thy anger, who feels thy wrath like those that revere thee? Teach us to count our days, that we may enter the gate of wisdom."<sup>3</sup>

Does this assemblage of poetic words inspire in you a Great Feel (perhaps somber alertness)? And do you sense in yourself any Great Resolve to actually count your days, to value each day, to see such valuing as an act of true wisdom? If so, then these words of the Psalmist are functioning for you as a Great Think. But if we reduce the Psalmist's poem into

<sup>2</sup> Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God* (Simon and Schuster:1960) page 59

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 90:9-12 *The New English Bible* (Cambridge University Press: 1971)

some sort of abstract doctrine or theory about something, then there is no Awe for us in these words. For example, this Psalmist is not trying to impress us with the theory that there exists a Supreme Being who has temper tantrums. "Wrath" is a poetic word that expresses the Psalmist's Great Feel about the passing of all things, especially the passing of our individual lives. Also this Psalmist is uttering a prayer for wisdom in line with another biblical Great Think: "The dread of God is the beginning of wisdom."

And "God"? This word, used properly, is also a Great Think. It means the Awesome Otherness taking away my precious life as well as sustaining it. And the word "God" is also a poetic word that means that Treasured Reality that is dependable enough to be worthy of my ultimate devotion. When we think of religious teachings as Great Thinks rather than philosophical or scientific statements we have a chance of experiencing their profound importance.

Notice that the Psalmist is not being mournfully glum, he is praying to further embody Great Resolve toward being at peace, at rest, tranquil in the midst of the passing of all things. Strange as it may seem, in the examples above both the Buddha and the Psalmist are saying, "I have found my Spirit center and hence the passing of all things has lost its sting."

But whether Awe is experienced as some sort of dreadful oblivion, fascinating fullness, or tranquil unperturbability, Awe is manifesting itself in some sort of Great Think, Great Feel, and Great Resolve. Rationalism in religion means the loss of Great Feels and Great Resolves and the reduction of Great Thinks to Awe-less mental forms.

An extreme example of rationalism is believing that Jesus was literally, factually born of a virgin woman, walked on water, and returned from the grave. This conservative Christian, anti-intellectual rationalism has been opposed by pro-intellectual, liberal Christians, but many liberal Christians replace conservative rationalism with a rationalism of their own. Liberal Christians are rationalists when they take interest in the historical facts alone and thereby abandon the old poetry and the Awe it was written to express. When liberal Christians do not translate the old poetry into new poems which communicate Awe to our times, we are left with nothing more than a liberal type of Awe-less rationalism. Rejecting conservative literalism is a crucial first step, but in and of itself it does not enable us to see the virgin birth, walking on water, and the resurrection of Jesus as Great Thinks that communicate Awe.

To see the virgin birth as a Great Think, we have to imagine how it is true that your or my or anyone's "conception" into Spirit personhood takes place only when the Infinite "penetrates" our finite, fleshly being and thereby establishes a relationship of parenthood with us. To see "walking on water" as a Great Think, we have to understand what it means for Peter and Mary and Lucy and Gene and you to step down from our safe boats and walk on the stormy waters of our own actual lives. And to see the resurrection of Jesus as a Great Think, we have to understand what it means for Paul and Elizabeth and Abigail and Gene and you to be crucified with Jesus and raised up with him to newness of life.

Good **theology** (or any good religious teaching) is that aspect of the practice of religion that snuggles up to that religion's **Great Thinks** and cuts through whatever **rationalisms** are clouding the Awe or enabling us to flee the Awe that these Great Thinks were created to express.

In this way, the effective Spirit leader must become a competent theologian.

## Overcoming Moralism

Every religious heritage has a body of basic moral teachings such as: “Thou shalt not kill,” or “Do no harm.” Morality is an inescapable part of our lives; basic moral teachings are guidelines for our serious consideration. Moralism comes in to play when one or more of these teachings is made absolute for any and all circumstances. The movie High Noon dramatizes why even the most basic moral teachings sometimes do not apply. In this Western movie a sheriff has taken off his guns and settled down with his Quaker and pacifist wife. But on the noon train, four renowned gunslingers whom this sheriff had put in jail are coming to settle the score. The sheriff decides to put on his guns and defend himself and his town from these four men. No one else in the town is willing to help him against these fast guns, so he faces them alone. He finally kills three of them and is about to be killed by the fourth one when a shot rings out hitting the fourth man in the back. The camera then shows us the smoking gun in the hand of the sheriff’s pacifist wife.

The Awe of overcoming moralism can be experienced when our life situations require of us responses that violate our most precious moral principles. One way of refusing to be in Awe is to find shelter in moral certitude. Perhaps we see the moralism in presuming certainty about appropriate behaviors with regard to dancing, dress, hair style, or sexual practices. We may see the moralism in claiming certainty that eating meat is wrong because it takes animal life. We may be aware that all life lives on other life and that it is impossible to be innocent of the killing that must take place in order for any of us to live. But do we see all of our blatant and/or subtle moralisms? Do we understand clearly that all of our ethical certitudes are finite--far, far short of an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil?

Moralism is a Spirit problem because it separates us from the full ambiguity of values present in every situation. In each situation we must decide never knowing for sure that we are doing the right thing or even the best thing. As indicated in the Eden myth of the book of Genesis, the knowledge of good and evil is forbidden to the human species. When we eat from the tree of moral certainty, we have committed an illusion. We have entered into the “original separation” from our actual situation--from that situation in which the Infinitely Awesome walks with us in the garden in the cool of the day. It is our moralism that forces Infinite Reality to cast us out of our native home and condemn us to dwell somewhere to the east of Eden.

Such reflections upon the essential and unavoidable ethical ignorance of the human species can fill us with Awe--perhaps feelings of dread--perhaps horror at the thought of **giving up forever all systems of belief that makes it possible to consider ourselves better than other people**. Perhaps we also feel overwhelmed with questions about how to pursue the practical living of our lives if our moral principles are not trustworthy to guide us. Awesome indeed is the challenge to live beyond any and all certain knowledge of good and evil.

When we are locked in our moralisms, the opposite of moralism seems to be license. We fear that if we give up our moralism we will fall into the reign of our compulsions and addictive behaviors or the sloth of thoughtless actions. But living from our home place of Awe before the Awesome is neither license nor moralism, it is the resolve to be in the place of Awe that we are actually in. Awe is a courageous act of freedom as well as the gift of authenticity given by the Infinitely Awesome. Freedom itself is one of the gifts being given. The free act to be freedom is Awe choosing to be in Awe. The free act to be freedom is the courage to be obedient to our actual situation--a situation in which we are free to choose our responses without any restrictions except that one restriction not to eat from the tree of ethical certainty.

We attempt to escape from the Awe of this elemental freedom in many, many subtle ways. These ways might be gestalted into these two types of moralistic ethics: **disestablishmentarian perfectionism** and **establishmentarian expediency**.

**Disestablishmentarian perfectionism** can be found among those who comprise every movement for vital social change. In the movement for black power in the sixties, there were those who drove themselves and others crazy with their blacker-than-you perfectionism. In the feminine movements we find those who manifest a similar perfectionism about the appropriate behaviors of the truly feminist woman. In the ecology movements, we can encounter persons who are more interested in being righteous by some new standards of simplified lifestyle than they are in actually doing what is required to save the planet from ecological disaster. This perfectionism crops up in every disestablishment movement. I have myself reveled in my disestablishmentarian participations and sometimes expressed gratitude that I was better than those others who were still trapped in their establishmentarian ways.

Perfectionism of any kind is an escape from the Awe of history because it is an **oversimplification** of the actual situation. Faced with the actual whole situation, we are all equally guilty. But if we simplify the challenge, then we can pretend to separate ourselves from the dismal herd and suppose ourselves righteous. Perfectionism also causes **dissension and division** among the forces for social change that need to be united in order to be effective. And finally, when we are passionate for perfect personhood, we become **isolated** from the wholeness of humanity and its historical imperatives.

**Establishmentarian expediency** can mean defending the illusions of the status quo, but in its nobler forms it means reforming the current fabrics to make them more effective. This can sometimes be a form of wholesome realism in comparison with disestablishmentarian perfectionism, but it is often another form of self-serving moralism. By "expediency," I mean doing minor repairs on the current social system--relieving symptoms rather than treating the disease, doing the easily possible rather than attempting the seemingly impossible. When lucid Afro-Americans rejected being "integrated into a burning house," they were rejecting establishmentarian repairs that did not deal with the basic attitudes of racism. Today, moralistic expediency is operating when we are open only to making minor reforms in how mega-corporations rule the world but are closed to the Awe-inspiring task of envisioning and constructing a viable replacement for an out-of-control economic system.

Expediency escapes the Awe by getting **lost in trivia**. This type of moralistic action also tends to become **burned out** from over and over slashing heads off the still living social dragon who simply grows back its evil heads. And thirdly, a thoroughgoing commitment to expediency will result in our having to make **compromises with evil** that are more deadly than our achievements of good.

Next, I want to point out that moralism lacks wisdom on the issue of human motivation. Moralism assumes that moral guilt and moral pride (and perhaps also the fear of punishment) are the motivating dynamics of history. The ethics of Awe, however, is rooted in a much deeper understanding of human motivation. Being in Awe is the motivation or passion to act from our own authenticity. It is our authentic core that has expressed itself in the classic Great Resolves of any good religious heritage: "Thou shalt not covet," "Love thy neighbor as thyself," "Love thy enemy." These are not morality; they are expressions of Awe. Being in Awe before the Awesome can manifest as a passion that leads to courage in the face of all intimidating circumstances, to the affirmation of all beings, to an enduring compassion, to an uncompulsive creativity, and to appropriate and happy sacrificial actions

on behalf of the actual turning points of the historical process.

Both rationalists and moralists puzzle over how their theologies can be related to their ethics; but when both rationalism and moralism have been overcome, that question is answered. Every state of Awe manifests in both a Great Think of theology and a Great Resolve of ethics. Each Great Resolve is a Great Think in action. And each Great Think is the insight foundation beneath some Great Resolve. Theology and ethics become united when both are rooted in the experience of Awe.

Vanguard action is always mysterious and filled with Awe. The deepest indictment of moralism is that it provides us with an escape from reality, an escape from Awe and the Awesome--an escape from being the Awed Ones. Good religious ethics is that aspect of the practice of religion that explores the Great Resolves present in all Awe-filled aliveness and thus cuts through whatever moralisms are assisting us in fleeing away from the potential Awe of our lives.

The effective Spirit leader is not only a theological poet of our experiences of Awe but also an Awe-ethicist who knows the difference between Awe-filled human responses and moralistic actions.

### **Overcoming Sentimentalism**

The Infinite Silence is like a shepherd to me  
I lack nothing.

*(my rephrasing of the opening lines of Psalm 23)*

I cannot read appropriately the 23rd Psalm unless I can sense the feeling expressed in this Psalm. This Psalm expresses a sober tranquility that is victorious even in valleys dark as death. With enemies all around, still my head is still bathed with anointing honor, my cup runs over. I dwell in the house of the Infinite no matter what is transpiring on the stage of my everyday life. This Great Feel of joyous unperturbability is part of the Awe that this Psalm was written to express.

We are not in Awe and we are not inspiring Awe if we do not feel the Awe, if we do not appropriate those Great Feels that are part of each and every Awe experience. This is a significant challenge to many members of Western culture who have overemphasized such things as rational control, playing-it-safe, politeness, and being "nice." We have to unlearn the suppression of our feelings in order to adequately experience and express our Awe.

Some conservative forms of Christian practice have, to some extent, learned this. The Pentecostal forms of Christianity have moderated the rigid rationalisms and moralisms of other fundamentalist groups. They have emphasized strong feelings in their religious practice. But Pentecostal Christianity tends to underemphasize rational clarity and ethical seriousness and thus they tip over into the third great perversion of religion: sentimentalism.

The popular forms of both conservative and liberal Christianity have manifest many forms of sentimentalism. Talk of God that does not begin with the dread of God is sentimental religion. Expectations that our lives are being personally cared for by some indulgent, magical, super-guardian is sentimental religion. Expectations that our ego, our developmental personality, is going to make it through the curtain of death and meet loved ones in the sky is sentimental religion. Also, the all-too-common belief that good religion is

a matter of being nice to one another and thus never confronting anyone with serious life-changing truth is likewise sentimental religion.

A huge swath of people in our contemporary culture have a strong appetite for sentimentality. Many books, such as the popular *Chicken Soup for the Soul* series, have been written to appeal to this appetite for sentimental material. Other popular books, like *The Celestine Prophecy*, further illustrate what I mean by sentimentality. Perhaps ninety percent of all popular religion is laced with sentimentality. Even the much adored and presumably channeled volumes entitled *A Course in Miracles* is a highly sophisticated version of sentimentalism. Such works are entrapping because they contain a certain measure of truth mingled with powerful sentimental escapes.

The central flaw of *A Course in Miracles* (and many other popular teachings) is its focus on love and its interpretation of love as a good feeling. The good feeling of love is contrasted with the bad feelings of dread or fear. The loving person is presumed to be emotionally happy and peaceful and contented. The traditional Christian teaching that “perfect love casts out all fear” is interpreted to mean that love (the greatest of all the virtues) is a sublime state of feeling in which no negative elements like fear or dread persist. This teaching tends to be entrapping because it combines certain elements of truth with an illusory yet widely felt longing for emotional contentment.

The presence of Spirit love in our lives does cast out fear in this way: the dread of Awesome Reality which is the beginning of all wisdom has been transformed into courage and affirmation in spite of the dread. But dread never entirely passes away. Dread and fear are wholesome and enduring parts of our lives. Dread is part of our quite normal experience of being finite. What is possible for humans is a different attitude toward being finite, including all its dreads and all its contentments. This new attitude includes the courage to be in dread or in contentment. This courageous relatedness is something very different from a replacement of our feelings of dread with some calmer feelings of contented love.

And Spirit love, as described in the lucid forms of most religious traditions, is something far different from emotional contentment. Spirit love may cause us to be persecuted. It may cause division with members of our own family whom we dearly love. Spirit love is not a feeling of any sort; rather, it is a strange and wondrous courage to affirm our entire lives including our enemies as well as our friends, our death as well as our birth, our Infinite Source as well as our Infinite Tomb. Spirit love is the compassion for all beings that exists when we have released our clinging to our finite lives and become identified with that depth being of ourselves which we might call our “Infinite relatedness.” Each and every aspect of Infinite relatedness is experienced by human beings as a state of Awe which is felt in the body. So Spirit love is felt, yet it is not a feeling; it is more than a feeling. Spirit love is a sobering and challenging reality, the possibility and the challenge to expend our lives in service to all persons, all societies of humanity, and all communities of nature.

The longing for a feel-good religion is an escape from Awe before the Awesome. The Awe from which we flee into sentimentalism is a dread-filled, sobering, and nevertheless joyous and wondrous Awe that includes the Great Resolves of Spirit freedom and Spirit compassion.

Shallow, feel-good religion is only half the problem. We can also be sentimental about never getting angry or never admitting fear or never breaking down in tears or never groaning our grief. A full-bodied feeling and expression of our actual emotions is not

sentimental. Rather our fear of emotional intensity is sentimentalism. It does not matter that such sentimentality masquerades as rational control. Our flight from emotional intensity is an effort to make life feel more calm and gentle and safe than it actually is. **Both the flight into syrupy feelings and the flight from emotional intensity are sentimentalism.**

Therefore, the effective religious Spirit leader needs to get in touch with his or her own actual feelings and make peace with the emotional life history of his or her own personality. The effective religious Spirit leader needs to care for his or her own emotional life as one crucial part of taking the journey toward Spirit maturity.

The vast majority of psychological maladies are in the category of emotional first-aid that can be easily administered by any relatively sane person who has learned some simple skills of listening and the Spirit wisdom to encourage true feelings to be expressed and honored. And such skills are needed, for even a small group of relatively awake adults will bring to its religious gatherings almost every emotional malady. If we are going to be Spirit leaders who inspire groups of ordinary humans to think Great Thinks and resolve Great Resolves, we must also be able to inspire them to feel Great Feels, and to distinguish those Great Feels of Awe from ordinary feelings and emotional maladies.

Good transpersonal psychology is that aspect of the practice of religion that masters the Great Feels of each Awe experience. By so doing we cut through whatever sentimentalisms are assisting us to flee the Awe of our authentic lives.

In this way, the effective Spirit leader must become a competent transpersonal therapist.

### **The Maturation of Spirit Leadership**

The journey toward Spirit maturity is never ending. Yet in whatever measure anyone is filled with Awe, that person is a potential Spirit leader. Spirit leadership simply means living your own Awe in word, style, and deed. Spirit leadership means inspiring Awe in another person. It means beckoning that other person to consent to be in Awe. It means an invitation to that other person to join the Awed Ones in the active drama of history.

Yet each person must embrace his or her own Awe. Awe is not a commodity we can pass out to whomever we choose. All Awe comes straight from the Awesome. Each Awed person is an autonomous being depending not upon some Spirit leader, but upon the Infinite Source of all Awe and exercising his or her own freedom to be in Awe. The Spirit leader, therefore, cannot force Awe upon another. The Spirit leader can only express and beckon. The actual entry into Awe must be left to the freedom of the other, for Awe is freedom, freedom in response to the Awesome. The Awesome, not the Spirit leader, is the true inspirer of all Awe.

Nevertheless, the Spirit leader, by being one of the Awed Ones, is a tool of the Awesome in the inspiration of Awe. Every Spirit leader (like Jesus, the Christ; like Siddhartha, the Buddha) can be a servant to others in the inspiration of Awe. And this mode of service, Spirit leadership, has its own journey of maturation. From very elemental beginnings, a Spirit leader can mature into a Spirit leader with great power and effectiveness.

So how is this maturity to be accomplished? “Accomplished” is not quite the right word, for Spirit maturity like Spirit itself can only be sought. Spirit is “given” not

“accomplished.” Nevertheless, through religious practices, we can become open to Spirit maturity. An effective **communal religious practice** places one in the presence of other Spirit leaders. This may be one other Spirit person, a small group of Spirit persons, or thousands. Awe-quality not numbers is the vital factor for promoting Spirit maturity. If Awe is being manifest, then the communal practice of religion is a primary means for occasioning Spirit maturity.

Also an effective **Solitary religious practice** can occasion Spirit maturity. Some sort of daily practice intentionally directed toward experiencing Spirit and toward deepening the commitment to be Spirit is that without which no powerful Spirit leader comes into being. The biography of Jesus (insofar as we can discern it through the expansive literature of the New Testament) contains no fact more clear than this: Jesus spent hours every day in some kind of prayer. And the Buddha invented a form of meditation which he continued to practice daily until his death. What sort of presumption has come over us when we think we do not need a solitary religious practice?

Thirdly, we often find that Spirit maturity is occasioned by **participating in the pivotal challenges** of our era. Each pivotal social challenge is at bottom an adventure into Awe. The wholehearted pursuit of ecological restoration, social justice, psychological reemergence or religious reconstruction reach into the Spirit deeps of our lives.

The maturation of Spirit leadership, the rebuilding of solitary and communal religion, and meeting the needs of our era turn out to be overlapping enterprises. They overlap at the bull’s-eye of Awe. These vast tasks are all parts of living our Awe-filled lives.