



JOURNEY TO THE SACRED

Writing
TO AWAKEN

LESSON 6: THE PURPOSE OF WONDER

Language can be used toward many ends, from narrative enjoyment to factual investigation, from lyrical adornment to penetrating personal inquiry. For some, recording what happened is enough; while for others, the motor for writing is to understand *why* what happened matters; *what* deeper truths the events of our lives point us toward; *which* connections and wisdom can be drawn from the patterns we discern in our own pages.

Those of us who write for personal insight are aiming for epiphanies, the revelation of existential patterns—the big *aha*. We write and many of us tend to live for those breakthrough moments when illusion itself is pared away, if only for a moment, revealing essential truths in new and startling ways. Epiphany is defined as “a sudden, intuitive perception of or insight into the reality or essential meaning of something (usually initiated) by some simple, homely, or commonplace occurrence or experience.” As writers, it is useful to remember that epiphanies tend to happen where life and death meet in our lives and work; at those points where our minds are cracked open by reality and forced to take in the larger view.

The importance of epiphany, awe, and wonder cannot be overstated, though many people pay short shrift to the necessity of these higher emotions.

Evolutionary psychologists now understand that, far from being occasional thrills, these openings into insight and wisdom have been critical survival tools for mortal beings struggling to keep body and soul together on a brutal, and possibly godless planet. We’re told that the emotion of awe occurs when two conditions are met. First, a person perceives something either physically vast like

the Milky Way, conceptually vast like a grand theory, or socially vast such as great fame or power. Then, this vast new thing *cannot be accommodated by the person's existing mental structures*.

This is how awe affects the brain. When we stop to wonder, our minds are changed cognitively. In this awe-opened space, new meanings, perceptions, capacities, dreams, possibilities, powers, and insights are born in us. We discover that we are able to draw new mental maps of the world and imagine new ways forward in our lives. Suddenly, our most ordinary moments become qualitatively different. That's why James Joyce defines epiphany in his novel *Stephen Hero* as the “sudden recognition of the significance of trivial things.” When our perception is changed so is the world.

Awe is the alarm clock nature installed to awaken us to wonder. A mountain climber who'd been part of the first team to scale Mount Everest described such a life changing moment. Returning from the peak, the hiker paused on a high pass to admire the stupendous view. As he turned around, he saw a small blue flower in the snow. “I don't know how to describe what happened,” he reported later. “Everything opened up and flowed together and made some strange kind of sense, and I was at complete peace. I have no idea how long I stood there. It could have been minutes or hours. Time melted. But when I came down, my life was different.”

Psychologist Abraham Maslow, who first coined the term “peak experience,” discovered that these blue flower moments are happening every day but few of us pause to pay attention. The workaday minds needs a slap or a climax – an epiphany or overwhelm, to stop it in its habituated tracks. When this happens,

peak experience leads to what is known as B cognition (the B stands for being). Unlike our routine D cognition (the D stands for deprivation), B cognition fills us with wonder. Where D cognition concerns itself with gains and losses, pushing, measuring, judging, and separateness, B cognition causes us to feel whole, expansive, unified, compassionate, curious, and open; to savor the lives we have rather than focusing on all that we're missing.

We need both forms of cognition, of course. But in a culture that emphasizes D values such as ambition, status, wealth, conquest, competition, and self-improvement, B aspirations like honor, truth, sacredness, beauty, compassion, imagination, intimacy, and authenticity are too easily overlooked. The Greeks counseled that Zeus endowed humans with two primary faculties: the longing for fairness and justice and the capacity for reverence and awe. That's because these faculties correspond to two different modes of thought, which the ancients called mythos and logos. Logos (or D cognition) represents our ordinary way of seeing the world; the deductive, logical thinking that makes systems work and locomotives run on time. But there are things that logic cannot do. Logic cannot assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles; nor can it move the heart to love, lay the ground for sacred things, strengthen faith, or open the mind to mystery. Logos cannot feed the imagination or provide a vision of ourselves beyond what we have known before.

For that, the ancients turned to mythos, most often in the form of archetypal stories that "made no pretensions to historical accuracy but should rather be seen as an early form of psychology," as Karen Armstrong said recently. Mythic thinking allows us to ponder life's deepest questions through a larger aperture, to reinterpret our struggles against a bigger backdrop. We learn to maintain an

attitude of wonder even in the crush of life's difficulties – when we come to realize our capacity for wonder, peak experience, B cognition, and mythic thinking, our perception is expanded enormously. Without losing our efficacy and clarity in the world, we gain an eternal perspective that sheds insight on the details of our mundane lives, lending meaning and beauty to our existence and returning us to the sacred.

Good luck with this final exercise – it is meant to leave you with an opened heart.

Please try this exercise: Describe a moment of pure wonder, an epiphany that took you by surprise and changed you. Draw the scene as deeply as possible, and then move to your inner changes, and what extraordinary knowledge, feeling, or wisdom was revealed in this moment. Did this revelation change your awareness in any lasting way? If so, describe the ramifications of this insight. If not, describe how the power of it was lost, and how you may sabotage the higher tier of your emotional spectrum.

Next, think of a place where you feel stuck in your life (financial, romantic, health related, political, domestic, sexual, and so on). With as much feeling as possible, delve deeply into the most frightening aspects of this challenge, including the spinoff stories and negative predictions you created in your imagination.

Finally, consider this same challenge using mythic thinking. In the myth of your own archetypal journey, what wisdom purpose might this challenge serve? If you see the challenge as a dragon or demon to be slain in attaining some desired end, how might that alter your approach to this challenge, and what might the desired end be for you? When we reframe our issues in this way, set our banal worries

against a backdrop of heroic proportion, surprising shifts in attitude and life strategy can spontaneously occur. Practice doing this with other life issues, and notice how your awareness is changed.

The sacred comes from seeing through opposites to the big picture. That is why I call it the *third position*. When we take the third position, sacredness is everywhere.