

**Interview on *Spirituality and the Awakening Self* by Bryan Dyer,
of Brazos Press.**

Bryan: David, perhaps you could start by describing the focus of *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*. What was your goal in writing this book?

David: I wrote this book because I am concerned that Christians too easily settle for too little. We may talk of transformation – in fact, the concept seems to be becoming increasingly common in discussions of Christian spirituality – but too easily we confuse it with growth. We miss the fact that the goal of Christian spirituality is not simply a spiritual tune-up but a transformation that is so radical that it profoundly alters our identity and consciousness. The goal is union with God and the self that begins this journey with the first act of awakening that we typically call conversion is hardly recognizable in relation to the self that we become as we experience the full fruits of this transformational journey.

My interest in transformation has been at the core of almost everything I have written in the last 35 years. The central organizing framework of all my work at the boundary of psychology and spirituality has been the possibility of becoming more fully human and more deeply and integrally our unique self-in-Christ. But if we look carefully at this journey what we discover is that there is quite a difference between the small incremental steps of growth with which we are somewhat familiar and the more quantum changes in identity and consciousness that we may on occasion notice in the rear view mirror. Experience never makes these major shifts in the platform from which we view the world and relate to God inevitable. In fact, we are hard-wired to resist deep change, seeking instead to preserve the internal status quo that I would describe as our normal state of consciousness. But deep change is possible and my goal in this book is to present a relatively comprehensive psychological and spiritual understanding of how this happens.

I call it the journey of the awakening self. To describe it as a journey is to note that a first step – no matter how dramatic – never completes a journey. Awakening, and staying awake, lies right at the core of any spiritual journey and Christian spirituality is no exception. But Christian theology gives us a map of this journey that I don't think we have, to this point, done a good enough job of unpacking. That is what I provide in this book – an unpacking of the map of the journey into God that is at the core of human awakening and becoming whole and holy.

I realize that's quite an ambitious task. I guess that is why some have described this book as my magnum opus. But that doesn't mean that it is dense or academic. I would say that it is as accessible and non-technical as any of my books. But it does present something that I don't believe has until now been available in any book on Christian spirituality – namely, a carefully examination of both the contours of the journey as we move toward what Christian theology has historically described as union with God and the psychospiritual dynamics of that journey.

Bryan: One unique aspect of this book is your incorporation of Christian mysticism in your discussion of the transformational journey. Why did you feel this so important? What can we learn from this tradition?

David: The mystics provide our most helpful understanding of the map of the journey into God. That is why they are so central to what I am doing in this book. Easily misunderstood and usually marginalized, the mystics offer us a number of valuable gifts that I think are tremendously important to contemporary Christians. This is why Karl Rahner argues that “Tomorrow’s devout person will either be a mystic—someone who has experienced something—or else they will not be devout at all.”

The Christian mystics offer us a number of immensely valuable gifts. Central among these, I would suggest, is that they encourage us to trust in the darkness rather than simply try to eliminate it, they remind us of the importance of the alignment of head and heart in the process of transformation, and teach a way of unifying a divided consciousness. But perhaps more basic than any of these is the understanding offered by the mystics of the fact that all of life is returning to God. Life, they point out, is the continuous outflow of the very life of God – a flow that if we follow it, returns us to our Source, the Ground of our Being. All human becoming involves, therefore, a fuller engagement with this outflowing life of God. The map of human developmental possibilities sketched by the mystics is a map that includes possibilities that developmental psychologists could never imagine because it maps our journey toward union with God. It is a map that shows us the contours of a life that is lived increasingly awake and fully conscious. Or, put in language I use in this book, it is a map of the expansion of consciousness.

You may wonder, however, if what the mystics have to offer is practical. Actually, it is profoundly practical. It is relevant to anyone who seeks to become more than they are and who is open to authentic transformation, not merely the small incremental steps of growth. Once mysticism is demystified what we discover is that, unlike theologians, mystics are not interested in ideas

and concepts but real life. This is why they serve as such helpful guides for anyone seeking to live fully immersed in the flow of the river of transformational becoming that I would call the Life of God.

Bryan: You discuss the role that community can play in an individual's spiritual journey. What are some helpful ways that a community can encourage its members' journey? How can a community hinder one's journey?

David: This is a tremendously important question because no one makes this transformational journey alone. Our communities – familial and spiritual – either support or impede transformation. Tragically, too often they impede it. Communities that support transformation in their members are communities that are themselves open to transformation. Rather than trying to preserve what they have always been, they embrace change and have learned to continuously evolve. They know that the most basic lesson of life is that things that are brittle are either dying or have died whereas that which is flexible is that which is growing. Communities that find a way to stay molten help their adherents and members also stay molten. But sadly, individuals and organizations that may begin in a molten state quickly cool down and ossify.

Transformational communities embrace diversity as a way of honouring otherness. They recognize that the other is a face of the self and a face of the Ultimate Other. This is the motive for the hospitality to diversity and otherness that they offer. They make no demands that everyone be the same. In fact, they recognize that their strength lies in diversity. The broader the range of diversities that are welcomed, the healthier the community and the more capable it is of supporting transformation.

But the transformational journey will often require that we move from one primary support community to another. This doesn't represent a failure of the community we leave; it simply represents a reality that seldom can one spiritual community meet all our needs as we follow the path of authentic transformation. A truly transformational community will always, therefore, be one that encourages seeking rather than self-contented finding. Questions – all questions – will always be welcome because these communities are continuously open to further change and evolution. This is what allows them to support, rather than fear, the same sort of change and evolution in people.

There is no single thing that could make a bigger positive change in the growth and development of persons than an increase in the number of communities that understand that the first rule of care is to offer support without constraint. This is the lesson that parents must learn and it is equally true of couples and

communities. Good parents learn to celebrate when their children are ready to move beyond the family and healthy communities should be prepared to do the same. Human coherence is enhanced when we are able to live within social groups for a considerable period of time but this only happens when communities learn the rhythm of holding, releasing and then staying involved until we are well embedded in the next community. This allows us to move beyond old communities of belonging but still remain attached to them.

Separation from old places of belonging is always grievous because it involves separation from old meanings and previously significant relationships. This always carries with it an extremely high price tag. In order to genuinely move beyond old places of belonging it is essential that we integrate that place of belonging into our self, not simply try and leave it behind. This integration requires the support of those we hopefully remain connected to, even as our transformation and continuing growth often demand that we shift our primary context of belonging to another community. Communities that can support people before, during and after their transitions can help their members both grieve the losses and celebrate the gains that are part of the human spiritual journey.

Bryan: You say that the first rule of care is to support without constraint. Can you say anything more about this?

David: If we are honest we have to acknowledge that this is often much harder than it looks. It is so easy to relate to others in terms of our own needs. Both communities and individuals both do this. Although they don't always realize it, communities often "need" their members to stay within the shared worldview that holds the group together and this is often built around a shared level of consciousness. When this is the case, the community will act to keep people within its framework for understanding and relating to the world (its level of consciousness) and those actions will be ones of constraint, not simply holding. But individuals do the same. We may think that we care for another person but the measure of that care will be reflected in how willing we are to help them grow in ways that we haven't grown and move within themselves to places we have never explored nor inhabited. This takes a great deal of courage and trust, not just in the individual but more importantly in the Spirit and in the human capacity to follow the Spirit on a journey that is not always mediated by those who provide their care and support. This is hard, but it is the true measure of love. True love is love for the person in terms of who they may become, not simply who they are. This is true unconditional love; it is visionary, trusting love that seeks to support but never constrain.

Bryan: Finally, I wonder if you have anything brief by way of a comment on the understanding of the spiritual journey as primarily involving growth in Christ-likeness.

David: If Christ-likeness is not reduced to behaviour but involves taking on both the mind and heart of Christ – not just the behaviour of Jesus – this describes exactly what I think the journey involves. But it cannot simply be a matter of conformity. We must understand that the Christ-in-me will always look different from the Christ-in-you. Also, we need to be clear to distinguish this from a journey of increasing sinless perfection. Nor is taking on the heart and mind of Christ the same as adopting a set of beliefs. Taking on the heart and mind of Christ involves experiencing and responding to one's self, the world and God through the heart and mind of God. This is what it means to become the new creature in Christ that we are.