

Patheos Book Club – Spirituality and the Awakening Self
An interview with Dr. David G. Benner

What inspired you to write this book, at this time?

I write for discovery, not primarily communication. I wrote this book as a response to things I have been reading and thinking about a lot in recent years. All of these things are related to the concept a transformation – a concept that is trivialized in most contemporary Christian uses of the term where it has become a cliché but which gets profound treatment in writers such as Ken Wilber, James Loder, and Robert Kegan. It also is the implicit background of most of the mystics, one of whom I am always reading and thinking about at any point in time.

Who is your ideal reader, and what conversations do you hope this book inspires?

My ideal reader is someone who engages me with openness and reflective space in heart and head. Openness combined with pondering allows the Spirit access to our depths and this is where transformation happens. And transformation is the core of my calling, hence, the hope behind everything I write.

In your first chapter, you say that most of us go through life as sleepwalkers. What do you mean by that, and what do you see at the biggest challenges to our awakening?

By sleepwalking I mean a state of unawareness. It's living on automatic pilot – reacting rather than acting, responding without noticing. Tragically, this is the default way of living for most of us, most of the time. This is the reason that all great spiritual teachers always start by challenging others to awaken. And Jesus was no exception. What keeps us from awakening? Of the many things, I'd suggest that the main reason is our fear of truly living our life with presence. Nothing is more vitalizing but it does make demands that keep us clinging to the small safe corners into which we curl up and doze our way through life. The fear of being truly alive is at the core of all addictive dynamics and behaviors so sleepwalking our way through life is really just another way we seek to distance ourselves from that fear. Ultimately, however, every choice that takes us away from life is a choice of death. This is why choosing life is choosing God and choosing God is always choosing life.

In your Preface to the book you say, "Transformation is not simply change ... it is a movement toward wholeness." Can you explain the difference?

There are lots of ways in which we can change – even in our inner life, not merely our outer – that fall far short of transformation. Even growth is

not necessarily transformational, although it is generally supportive of it. Transformation is the unfolding of self. It is the moth becoming a caterpillar. Human transformation is not the sum of many small steps of change. It involves a profound reorganization of the very core of self that results in becoming a new person. Much deeper than behavior, transformation is revealed in a shift in identity and consciousness – that is, in how we understand our self and our relationship to everything that we perceive as being beyond our self, and what we experience as the normal background awareness of our existence.

You draw heavily upon Christian mystics to provide the framework for your understanding of the process of transformation. What is your definition of mysticism? And is it biblical?

Let me reverse the order of your questions to reflect how my understanding of mysticism grows out of Christian history and revelation. Christian mystics are part of a continuous lineage that goes back to the teachings of the New Testament which promises transformation to those who are in Christ. This lineage starts with Jesus who clearly knew and taught that this mystical transformational hope was based in his life in his Father. Jesus was describing his spirituality when he said that he and his Father were one (John 10:30), his prayer for the world being that we too might know the union with the Father that he knew (John 17:21). Unquestionably this was a mystical spirituality. The Epistles present the same picture. Peter describes the mystical possibility of union with God as participating in the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4) and Paul speaks of the life of “Christ who lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). These possibilities of experiencing a union of the human spirit and the Spirit of God are teachings that became central themes in the writings of later Christian mystics.

So, what do I mean by characterizing this New Testament spirituality as mystical? Mysticism is *not* the pursuit of esoteric experience. Christian mysticism is participation in the transformational journey toward union with God in love. Mystics are those who long for this knowing of union with God and who make themselves available to the grace that can uniquely make it possible.

Why does the possibility of “union with God/becoming one with God” make many Christians nervous or afraid?

Humans fear nothing as much as loss of control and this is the great fear that is activated by the journey into God. For if there is one thing that becomes clear on this journey it is that while the boundaries between me and God may become fuzzy as we make it, I am not God and I must, therefore, surrender the illusion of being in control – even being capable of being in control. The quest for control and the quest for a knowing of our union with and in Christ

are diametrically opposed.

You say that one of your favorite medieval mystics is Julian of Norwich. What was it about her journey that you find so compelling?

What I am most drawn to in Julian is her honesty about the depths of her longings, the pain of her seeking, and the persistence of her suffering. Unfulfilled longings are hard for any of us to face. But Julian dared to not only acknowledge them but she trusted God enough to lean into them. She did the same with her suffering and with her seeking. By embracing these unchosen and instinctively unwelcome parts of her existence in openness before God she was able to come to an astounding awareness. In her own words, "By this I was taught to understand that our soul's continual seeking pleases God greatly; for we can do no more than seek, suffer, and trust, and it is worked in the soul by the Holy Spirit." What she came to know, not simply believe, was that when a soul fastens itself to God in trust, God is served and we are on a path to wholeness.

If the journey of transformation involves being ever more awake to the present moment, what practices might you suggest to help us remain open to such moments? And what might call us back when we find ourselves falling asleep?

Practices that can help us remain awake were the focus of my last book, *Soulful Spirituality*. There I explore the ways of living our spiritual life that ensure that we become fully human and deeply alive rather than use our spiritual life as an escape from our humanity. But being fully alive is obviously being awake so it is the same practices that ensure both. These start with an embrace of reality. St. Anthony said that the way to ascend to God is to descend into our own reality. This really must always be the starting point of any awakening. But human reality is embodied so an embrace of the body and all that goes with it must also be part of our core spiritual practice. In fact, our bodies give us continuous invitations to awaken. All we have to do is notice, all we have to do is learn to be present to our experience. Apart from presence to ourselves we can never hope to be present to the Ultimate Presence that is most truly and deeply our source and destiny.

What was the hardest thing about writing this book? What chapter was the easiest to write?

The hardest part of this book was not the writing but the thinking I had to do before I actually got started writing. As I said, I write for discovery, but because this book involved mapping the journey of human unfolding, I spent a year of just thinking about this before a word got written. During this year I reflected deeply on the transformational journeys of those I have

been blessed to be able to accompany in relationships of psychotherapy and spiritual guidance. I say reflected because my intent wasn't analysis but observation – observation of patterns and critical moments of transition. And my reflection wasn't simply casual, something in the background. I probably averaged 15 – 20 hours a week for about 15 months working this through and discovering the framework for unfolding that I use to organize the book. After this, the writing came quite easily, but this book is unique among everything I have written to this point in terms of how much prior thought I had to give to the issues before actually writing it. The easiest chapter was, by far, the chapter I entitled "Learning from the Christian Mystics." This wrote itself because I have been learning from them for so long.

What other books and authors are you reading that are inspiring or informing your work and life currently?

I am continuously reading and rereading the mystics because they feed me in ways that no one else does. At the moment I happen to be rereading Meister Eckhart but he is an acquired taste and I am not recommending that those listening in on our conversation rush out and buy one of his books. Beyond that I am also reading *Religion for Atheists* by Alain de Botton and *Sacred Economics* by Charles Eisenstein – both providing good grist for the mill of my soul.

Often, the best book ideas come while you're writing a book. Have you started the next one?

Next books for me always flow from the closing chapter or epilogue of the previous one. And yes, this process is underway so stay tuned to see where it leads!