

Spirituality and the Awakening Self

A conversation with David and his publicist, Sara McMillan

Sara: Some of us are still digesting your last book -*Soulful Spirituality*-and suddenly another one appears on the scene! I wonder if you see this latest one as something entirely new or as an extension of what you did in *Soulful Spirituality* or your other recent books?

David: I suspect that anyone who has been reading my books will have seen this coming and won't be surprised in the least. They will certainly be familiar with my interest in the intersect of psychology and spirituality and they will know that the organizing framework that I bring to that interest has long been transformation. In any of my recent books they will have heard me often talk of the notion of becoming. But, as far back as *Psychotherapy and the Spiritual Quest* (1988) my focus has been the role of spirituality in human actualization. I have also often focused on the important role of awakening and awareness as the core of spirituality. So, all the ingredients have been there. It was simply time for a much fuller exploration of how these things go together.

Sara: Something else that I have sensed to be lurking in the background of your recent books that I notice comes to the foreground in this one is the contribution of the mystics to this question of human becoming.

David: That's very true.

Sara: When did you first get interested in the mystics and in their contribution to human development?

David: I started reading Thomas Merton in my twenties and to this day he remains my favourite Christian mystic. Merton stirred my spirit but boggled my mind. I couldn't contain him or the vision he presented but also couldn't, at least for long, fail to notice the way he spoke to deep longings within me. I felt drawn to the journey he described but wasn't ready to personally make it my own for many years. But long before I started on that journey myself, it was obvious to me that the mystics -Christian and otherwise -had critical relevance to psychology. In fact, psychology felt dreadfully truncated when it failed to include contemplative insights. In many ways it would be true to say that I have been working on this book for 30 years. That long ago I wrote an outline of a book on the implicit developmental map of the mystics. The only problem was, at the time, I had only engaged with the mystics as an intellectual exercise. It took much longer for me to be ready to make the contemplative journey my own but it was only after doing so that I was ready to write this book.

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Sara: In the Preface you describe this book as drawing from the insights of perennial philosophy, evolutionary theology, comparative spirituality and developmental psychology. That's quite an ambitious task and it makes the book sound pretty academic. Who is your intended audience and how will this book work for readers of your past books?

David: While it is fair to describe this book as involving a lot of big ideas, its tone and style are far from academic. When I say that the ideas it presents are big I mean that the concepts it discusses cannot be reduced to simple definitions; no encounter with the mystery of our being can be. However, this book is just as accessible as any of my recent ones. It is a bit longer and it certainly isn't a quick read. But, if you seek an understanding of the possibilities of the personal transformation that is involved in authentic human awakening, then this is definitely the book for you.

Sara: What would be the most comparable books on the market, things that those who will be most interested in this new book might well have read?

David: Author's like Richard Rohr, James Hillman, Gerald May, and Thomas Moore, all address similar issues from somewhat similar perspectives. Ken Wilber's *Integral Spirituality* is perhaps closest to this book as he, like me, has long been interested in the way in which the insights of the mystics can inform our understanding of human psychology and spirituality. However, his book does not situate this understanding within Christian spirituality and theology, something that is very central to what I do in *Spirituality and the Awakening Self*.

Sara: What would you say is the most important insight you draw from the Christian mystics in this book?

David: The mystics offer us a number of valuable gifts that I think are tremendously important to contemporary Christians. Among the most valuable of them 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, and teach a way of unifying a divided consciousness. But perhaps more basic than any of these is their understanding of the fact that all of life is returning to God. Life, as 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 out flowing life of God. The map of human developmental possibilities sketched by the mystics is a

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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 transformational journey of not just a single awakening but of a life lived increasingly awake and fully conscious. Or, put in language I use in this book, it is a map of the expansion of consciousness.

Sara: That sounds interesting, but is it practical? How is this book relevant to those of us modern individuals who have never felt the same attraction to the mystics that you have?

David: 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 in the flow of the river of transformational becoming that I would call the Life of God.

Sara: I am beginning to see what you mean by big concepts! What do you mean by transformation?

David: Transformation is a term that in common usage simply implies change. Sometimes the bar is set rather low and the change might be quite small. Someone, for example, might speak of a spa treatment as having been transformational. They probably mean that it was refreshing. At a slightly more profound level, another person might speak of having lost a lot of weight as transformational. By this, they might mean that they feel like a new person. My use of the concept of transformation is quite specific. By transformation I mean an enduring expansion of consciousness that expresses itself in four ways: increased awareness, a broader, more inclusive identity, a larger framework for meaning-making –(how we understand and make sense of our self, others, God and the world), and a reorganization of personality that results in a changed way of being in the world. The core of this book is an exploration of how this happens, why we tend to avoid it, and how we can facilitate it in ourselves and in our communities.

Sara: What is the relationship between transformation and growth?

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David: Growth is hard plodding work. There are no short cuts and what we avoid dealing with will always hold us back. Small steps of growth usually occur within a single line of development. But the lines converge as we move up them so eventually growth in our emotional functioning, moral development or self regulation will begin to spill over into other closely related lines of development. When it does, this enhances our readiness for transformational shifts of consciousness by raising the platform on which we stand and from which we view the world. Transformation is a movement between the major platforms. It isn't just a slightly larger perspective but a whole new view, a whole new platform on which we stand and engage the world. Growth is incremental but transformation is more like a quantum leap forward or a major paradigm shift. The big shifts of transformation are best seen after the fact. The new and larger platform we suddenly find ourselves standing on isn't something we have built ourselves or achieved through our efforts. It is a gift that we were able to receive by being ready to take the risk of letting go of old ways of seeing and living. Our growth prepares us for it but can never produce it. It is what Christians call a grace.

Sara: This really is a book of big ideas, isn't it?

David: Yes, it certainly is. My intention is to help readers see how vast a horizon lies ahead of us, a horizon that we are unable to see when we settle for the plodding work of growth. Those who no longer seek growth have, of course, an even more truncated horizon -a horizon consisting simply of either survival or maximizing pleasure. But, those who seek growth -and I think it safe to assume that most of those who have been reading my books are within that group -often get bogged down with our self-improvement projects. We tire of trying to be a better Christians, or even better human beings. Our call is to something much bigger than self-improvement. The flow of the river of life is pulling us toward becoming not just better but more. It's a call to become and be a new being. It's a call to know and be our true self-in-God.

Sara: Now that's more familiar.

David: Yes, the concept of the true self is something I have written of in recent books but in this one I place it in a developmental framework. The concept is the same; it's just my focus that is slightly different. Because, after all, if I didn't have something new to say, I wouldn't really have a reason to write another book, would I?

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Sara: No, you wouldn't. But, you have also brought us back to my opening question so perhaps this is a good time to wrap this up. Anything else you would like to add before we do?

David: Nothing more than to thank you for the conversation and express the hope that my readers will again feel themselves drawn into this conversation when they read the book.

Sara: I think they will. In fact, that reminds me of another thing I really liked about this book and that is the questions and answers you included at the end of each chapter. Many of these questions anticipated my own and I expect readers will find the same. So, thank you for again offering yourself in dialogue – both here and in the book.