

society and particularly the media responded to her story and interpreted it. Her straightforward writing style and the clear structure of the book make it accessible to a general audience. It is a book that can offer a great insight to people who are in the field of psychotherapy, psychology and psychiatry and that can provide the ground for further thought of how classifying one's experience under the construct of a diagnosis might exclude meaning and subjectivity and therefore, personal agency. Clearly, from an existential perspective the book can be interesting to read as it constantly revolves around a number of fundamentally existential concepts and explicitly touches upon the notions of freedom, responsibility and meaning. It also encourages the reader to ponder upon how the concept of trauma can be a part of human development. Lastly, the book can remind one that the complexity of human nature lies precisely in the fact that there is no objective truth regarding the way we make sense of our experiences.

Zoe Apostolidou

Awakening to Awe: Personal Stories of Profound Transformation

Kirk J. Schneider (2009). Lanham, MD (USA): Jason Aronson.

Kirk Schneider's book, *Awakening to Awe*, moved me by its celebration of life. Too often, cynical outlooks dominate conversations about what it means to be human. This book revitalizes the dialogue because it is so open to the wonder of being alive.

Dr. Schneider is a pioneer in the application of awe-based consciousness to existential-humanistic psychotherapy. In this book, he explores the nature and power of awe through his theoretical and therapeutic stance as well as through interviews of people transformed by their experience of awe.

He emphasizes the importance of living life with reverence, respect, humility, wonder, inclusiveness, and uncertainty, yet also with faith and trust. This is a very bold way to live as his stance advocates living one's life by being open to its mystery and magnificence while simultaneously taking responsibility to live the life that is authentically your own.

The people Dr. Schneider interviewed represent a range of stories demonstrating qualities and experiences of awe. Three examples are:

A woman who grew up with a schizophrenic father in the 1950s and coped with her maelstrom of feelings by opening to the grandeur and danger of nature and by cultivating a strong sense of compassion. She used the realizations gleaned from her experience to become an avid sailor and to develop a thriving career as a professor of psychology who values the importance of the full range of human nature.

An ex-gang member who listened to a stirring from his soul after witnessing the assassination of his younger brother. This stirring

encompassed a surrender to a Higher Power and a realization that life is an amazing, unpredictable adventure. He used that experience to become a youth educator providing violence prevention work for elementary school students in an awe-based cultural curriculum.

A professor, who is a Stage 3 cancer survivor and has had heart disease, discovered that by engaging with his chronic illness with an attitude of awe, he also experiences chronic vitality. Awe for this man is a communion and an intimacy into dialogue and participation with the wonders and tempests of existence. He embodies how to embrace the joy and wonder of living within the context of physical suffering and decay.

I feel this book, in conjunction with Dr. Schneider's *Rediscovery of Awe*, is ground-breaking. Dr. Schneider's emphasis on awe-based consciousness derives from his personal philosophy of enchanted agnosticism. I believe the exploration of awe-based consciousness can catalyze a reemergence of a contemporary existential-spiritual movement in much the same way that Abraham Maslow's exploration of self-actualization catalyzed the human potential movement.

Existential philosophers and psychotherapists have long been at odds about spirituality. On one side of the debate, Soren Kierkegaard emphasized being authentic to your religious values and Paul Tillich (1952 pp155-190) emphasized that the holy is a '*God-Beyond-God*'. On the other side, Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Irvin Yalom all emphasize that we are thrown into being and there is no God to save us, thus we need to make meaning for ourselves. While Camus, Sartre, and Yalom come from an atheistic perspective, they all acknowledge that life is an unknown in which both beauty and horror can happen.

Since a core component of existentialist theory is questioning the meaning of life and not coming up with ultimate answers, both sides of the argument bear examination. The common thread between the two is that in order to live the most fulfilled life as a human being, it is essential to be open to the unknown, the wonder, and the mystery of life in order to take optimal responsibility for ourselves in how we live.

One perception of existential philosophy is that there is nothing more to life than what you experience in the immediate moment. This outlook can be perceived as pessimistic and gloomy. Dr. Schneider emphasizes the spiritual dimension of existence by highlighting it under the symbol of awe. The spiritual dimension celebrates that there is always something more, whether you call this mystery, awe, wonder, God, Higher-Power, or daimon. Bringing awe into the equation emphasizes that our experience also transcends the immediate moment. Our human experience is always evolving. We are always both being and becoming. This can allow for a more positive and hopeful perspective.

In Dr. Schneider's exploration of awe he emphasizes how awe connotes an openness to life as it is, with its mystery, with its depth, with its pain and joy. It can be 'awe-some' or 'awe-ful'. It is an invitation to value life as it is. Awe is a meta level which invites us to fully engage in life without knowing how it is going to unfold, even as we intend to impact life as we move towards a specific goal. This implies that spiritual presence is an important part of existence.

Although the book is directed toward a more general audience, it also supports the existential-humanistic psychotherapist to embrace an awe-based dimension of life in working with clients. This allows the therapist to not be conflicted if they are spiritually oriented. It reminds me of the question I asked Rollo May at a conference I attended at the beginning of my career as an existential-humanistic psychotherapist. I asked if one could be both existential and spiritual. He responded that it was essential to be both, and that even atheistic existentialists like Camus and Sartre were spiritual. Having an openness to life with its mystery, from ecstasy to tragedy, is spiritual whether you call it that or not.

I very much value Schneider taking a chapter to explore the qualities which need to be cultivated for awe to awaken in our everyday life. These qualities are transiency, unknowing, surprise, vastness, intricacy, sentiment, and solitude. The embracing of these qualities supports a grounded understanding and experiencing of awe as it applies to daily life. Similarly, Schneider takes a chapter to explore the general conditions favorable for the cultivation of an awe-based society. The conditions for this are presence, freedom, courage, and appreciation. Schneider describes a specific application he's initiating to bring awe into politics in California. He calls it the Experiential Democracy Project. Thus, I appreciated this book not only for its thorough examination of awe but also for its clear call to take action with an awe-based attitude informing us individually and collectively.

Some of the interviews are rambling and thus were at times hard to follow. I presume this was due to the use of the actual transcripts of the interviews with limited editing. Also, some interviews didn't strike a strong chord in me. However, I also know, given how the experience of awe is unique to each of us, these same interviews may strike a strong chord in others.

I very much value this book and encourage both professionals and the general public to read it with an awe-based attitude. If you are not sure what an awe-based attitude means before you read it, you will by the time you are finished.

References

Schneider, K. (2004). *Rediscovery of Awe: Splendor, Mystery, and the Fluid Center of Life*. St. Paul: Paragon House.