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### Awakening to an Awe-Based Psychology

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## Awakening to an Awe-Based Psychology

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This article is adapted from my opening keynote address to the First International Existential Psychology Conference in Nanjing, China on April 2nd, 2010. The article begins with an overview of the history and current trends within Western (and to some extent Eastern) existential psychology. Existential–integrative psychology and the spiritual dimension of awe are proposed as two contemporary edges of those trends. Although existential–integrative psychology emphasizes cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary openness, the dimension of awe stresses the *puzzled apprehension* and *appreciative wonder* of that openness. In the second part of the article, this awe-based and integrative approach is compared and contrasted with time-honored Eastern approaches. It is proposed that although the Eastern approaches appear to emphasize the harmony (or acceptance) of being, and the Western approaches stress the mystery (or adventure) of being, the joining of worldviews holds a remarkable opportunity for a synthesis.

It has been just over 100 years since a pioneering group of European psychoanalysts, led by Sigmund Freud, made a pilgrimage to Clark University in the United States to introduce their craft. The American reception was mixed at first—skeptical, hesitant; yet also profoundly intrigued about a new possible merger between two formerly distant psychological worldviews. In the ensuing years, the two worldviews, the American and the European, did indeed merge and combine with one another—and a new Western depth psychology was forged.

This psychology, which combined American practicality with European introspectiveness, grew and endured many highs and lows over the century it was developed. Sometimes it enjoyed wild popularity, as in the 1940s and '50s, when it seemed that everyone who was rich had weekly, and sometimes daily, appointments with their psychoanalysts! This was also a time when the Viennese psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1963) and the American psychologist Rollo May (1958)—both former psychoanalysts—were developing an *existentially* oriented psychoanalysis. This psychoanalysis emphasized the present more than the past, a person's relationship to being, not merely his or her family or biological circumstances, and his or her quest for meaning not merely adaptation to life. By the 1970s and '80s, these depth psychologies suffered great blows, such as when short-term, cognitive–behavioral psychology arose like a great sea-serpent, and filled in the mental health needs of those who could not afford depth therapy or just as often rewarded those who simply wanted to profit from quick fixes and simple patch ups. Yet these psychologies did not necessarily help people address deeper questions about how to live a

fulfilled and meaningful life. To this day, cognitive–behavioral therapy has largely overshadowed, and in many cases replaced, the intimate, long-term journey that depth psychology promoted.

But despite all the ups and downs since the psychoanalysts landed on American shores, one point in my mind strikes clear: Today we are on the brink of a new depth psychology revolution, and a big part of that revolution is beginning right here, right now, in the heart of Nanjing. For, today, we have a new chance for an expanded *existential* depth psychology—a *spiritually oriented, multicultural, and integrative* existential depth psychology. This is a psychology informed not only by Freud and his followers, but by those like Frankl and May who sought to address the larger questions of how to live a life of vitality, not merely a life of functionality or adjustment to the average. And for this revolution, this expansion, to fully flower, we need the East. We need to mark, right here and right now, not a renewed merger between America and Europe, but a new *expansion* between Western psychology and the East. Although there have been hints of this exchange in the past—for example, by existential philosophers such as Martin Heidegger (Craig, 2009) and Martin Buber (Friedman, 1991), it can now come into its full flowering.

What might this expansion look like? Allow me to outline some of the likely elements. First, as noted earlier, such an expansion will be integrative. In my own Existential–Integrative model (Schneider, 2008), this means openness to a variety of therapeutic approaches within an overarching existential or depth context.<sup>1</sup> By existential or depth context, I mean a context that emphasizes *presence*—the holding and illuminating of significant themes that emerge both within a patient, and between a patient and therapist. Therefore, such an existential–integrative stance draws from a range of treatment modalities—from the medical to the cognitive–behavioral, and from the psychoanalytic to the interpersonal, but ever within a highly attentive relational context. This context helps therapists to clarify what is needed in the living moment with a client, not merely what is dictated from a formula or book. (I think here of the remarkable therapy described by my colleagues, Mark Yang and Zheng Jia Ren—or “Jia Jia”—at the recent earthquake site of Sichuan province. In this work, many treatments were tried but the ones that were effective associated with a highly attentive, that is, present, therapist, who could connect with victims in accord with their unique needs—which, indeed, as I describe later, fits strongly with the most recent research on therapy effectiveness.)

The expanded East–West approach will also be multicultural, meaning that it will open to peoples’ racial, ethnic, and environmental heritages, alongside their fundamental humanity. It will reach out to people within those heritages, attempt to learn from them, and incorporate that learning into its applications (Hoffman, 2009).

Finally, the expanded East–West approach will illuminate the emerging spiritual dimension of existential psychology. This spiritual dimension has been sadly neglected, in my view, both by those who claim to know but are really quite ignorant of existential thought, and by those within existential thought who deny its value. Let me state this as clearly as I can. It is time to reawaken the spiritual dimension of existential thought. This dimension has a profound legacy through scholars as diverse as May, Frankl, Ernest Becker, Martin Buber, Paul Tillich, and William James. And correspondingly, as I understand it, through Eastern scholars, from

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<sup>1</sup>For an elaboration on the existential–integrative approach to psychotherapy, see Schneider and May (1995), Schneider (2008, 2010) and Schneider and Krug (2010).

Guatama Buddha (Burt, 1955) to Lu Xun (1981, 1982a, 1982b; Wang, 2009), and Lao Tzu (Mitchell, 1988) to Chuang Tzu (2004). For my own part, the cultivation of the sensibility of *awe* is a major task of contemporary existential–spiritual psychology (Schneider, 2004, 2009). For me, the sense of awe, which is the humility and wonder—*amazement*—toward existence, is a potential bridge, not only between Eastern and Western philosophies, but between peoples of all races and creeds throughout the world. This is because, put simply, the sense of awe appears to be a foundational human experience that, in large part, defines the human experience. I go so far as to say that the sense of awe—which embraces a mixture of “puzzled apprehension” with profound “appreciative wonder” (Pearsall, 2007, p. 31) should be added to the traditional *givens* of the human condition. Now Irvin Yalom (1980), whom some of you know, has portrayed these givens as “ultimate concerns and inescapable parts” (p. 8) of the human experience. These givens are, according to Yalom, *freedom, death, aloneness*, and the challenge for *meaning* in a meaningless universe. But I contend that, comprehensive as they are, there is something missing from this group, and that something is awe. Awe is as fundamental, it seems to me, as any of the other givens, and even brings a depth and richness of life experience not quite captured by the other givens. Although you might question whether awe is already captured by the identification of meaning as a central given, I don’t believe this is quite the case. *Meaning* implies a structural aspect to our experience—as in “this conference holds great meaning for me,” or “my family is deeply meaningful”—but *awe*, in some sense, transcends structure and meaning—it is preconceptual and even goes beyond meaning as a sense of importance. Awe is more than a sense of importance; it is a sense of the *sacred*. Whereas meaning—and even meaninglessness—have a kind of cerebral quality, awe encompasses one’s whole bodily experience. If we are going to speak about ultimate concerns, then we have to speak in the great 20th century theologian Paul Tillich’s (1952) terms of a whole-bodied experience—a total experience—of life, and this is what awe brings more than the polarity of meaning and meaninglessness in my view. Indeed, the sense of awe would seem to be both a predecessor, as well as successor, to the polarity of meaning. At some level, this conference is meaningful precisely because it connects to the awesome dimensions of my and others lives; my family is meaningful to me precisely because it links with the puzzlements of space and time from which it emerged. A full-bodied experience of meaning is preceded by, and leads to, awe!

Note, further, that until existential psychology more explicitly embraces awe in its understanding of human experience, it will fail to grasp much of what drives both the secular and religious worlds. It will also fail to bring this sensibility to the assistance and healing of clients; for it is not just meaning that people so desperately seek in their secular and religious lives, but intensity, embodiment, and thrill. It is the lift of participating in something much larger than themselves or even their language can express. And that participation is central to what I mean by awe. (Do you think, for example, that it is just meaning that brings people by the droves to temples and cultural ceremonies? Do you think that millions flocked to the recent film *Avatar*, or to your wondrous Olympic spectacle in 2008, just because it gave them more meaning? Think again. Or better yet, feel again!)

Therefore, I propose expanding the ultimate concern of the challenge for meaning in a meaningless universe to the challenge for meaning and awe in an *unknown* universe (because we don’t know whether or not it is meaningless). I also propose that we add the element of awe to our exploration of therapeutic healing and to the emerging contextual factors that have been found to be helpful in therapeutic healing—among them, empathy, therapeutic alliance, and

hope (Schneider & Krug, 2010). To imbue a therapeutic encounter with a sense of awe means at least three things—being attuned to the passing nature of time and life and how that impacts one’s present connection with a client; being open to the unknown and possibilities of discovery with your client—or put another way, approaching your client with a sense of surprise or wonder; and being attuned to the background of vastness within which you and your client are situated, both within yourselves (as in the many layers of memory and feeling that you possess) and surrounding yourselves (as in the vast ranges of existence that both dwarf and elevate you as participants). Consider, for example, what is happening right here and now, between us. Are we just sitting here having an ordinary conversation in an ordinary building? I think not: We’re sitting here having an ordinary conversation in an ordinary building that rests on a gigantic ball that is whirling around the sun at 67,000 miles per hour, which is situated in a galaxy that is hurtling through space at 1.3 million miles an hour, surging toward a destination that is completely unknown.

Hence, each of these existential or awe-based dimensions can help support the healing, the great ventures and risks—that lead to an enlargement of consciousness. Each can help both therapist and client become more present to these ventures and risks, and thereby the cosmic scale within which they are both situated.

Finally, let me close with some thoughts about what Eastern and Western worldviews can bring to a future awe-based inquiry. I believe, first of all, that both Eastern and Western existential approaches offer something distinctive to the contemporary psychological world—we both take *being*, or the *self-cosmic relation* seriously. So what does “taking being seriously” actually mean? Well, the first thing I think it means was put masterfully by your own Lao Tzu when he wrote that “the Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao” and the “name that can be named is not the eternal name” (Mitchell, 1988, p. 1). Now this is very close to our own perspective, when philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard (1843/1954) and Paul Tillich (1952) noted that the conceptual and finite are not the ultimate problems, but infinity or the groundlessness of being are. So the question for our respective traditions is not so much the area of our study, which we both agree is being, but how we approach that area, and here is where our conversation gets juicy! For example, whereas Western existentialism (as expressed, say, through Kierkegaard and Nietzsche) appears to stress the mystery of being, Eastern existentialism (as expressed through Buddhism and Taoism), appears to emphasize the harmony of being. Or to put this point slightly differently, whereas Western existentialism accents the struggle and adventure of expanding consciousness, Eastern existentialism accents the acceptance and equanimity of expanding consciousness (Schneider & Tong, 2009).

(I am reminded here of my recent venture into the Forbidden City in Beijing. What struck me immediately is that, right there in the heart of China, so to speak, were a series of halls representing harmony. There was the “Hall of Complete Harmony,” the “Hall of Supreme Harmony,” the “Hall of Preserving Harmony,” and the “Hall of Central Harmony”—all gathered as if to drive home one overarching point: “We take harmonization very seriously in China!”)

Hence, what, then, do these time-honored perspectives from both East and West imply for effective psychotherapy? What do they mean in terms of helping people address profound loss, or abrupt life-change? When and with what degree of press do we invite people to struggle with these issues, or to move toward some kind of easeful nonattachment? One anecdote that may give us insight into this question is the deathbed interview with the noted American anthropologist, Ernest Becker. As Becker, the Pulitzer Prize winning author of *Denial of Death*, lay dying

of cancer at the tender age of 49, Sam Keen of *Psychology Today* magazine asked him a poignant question (Keen, 1974, p.78): “You have thought as hard about death as anybody I know. And now, as it were . . . you are doing your empirical research. . . . And somehow I would like to ask you what you can add now that you are closer to [the] experience?” Becker paused for a moment and said, in effect: Well, I take solace in giving myself over when there is nothing left, to the tremendous creative energies of the universe, to be used for purposes we don’t know—and to be used for such purposes, even if we feel misused at times, is one of the most fulfilling sensations that one can experience.

Now I view this anecdote as a superb example of what the West can offer the East and the East can offer the West. Becker illustrates harmony when he speaks of “giving himself over,” but he elucidates mystery and struggle, when he speaks of giving himself over “when there is nothing left,” implying that he’s not just letting himself be used but that he has also maximally used himself, drawn on his own powers, and grappled with his own questions. He implies equanimity when he speaks of cosmic unification, but equally, he implies thrill, drama, and adventure when he speaks of the ultimate inscrutability of that unification. Hence, it seems to me that Becker, in some sense, embraced the best of both worlds at his death—the one firmly planted in his earthly capacities, and the other trustingly appropriated to being.

Thus, it is precisely here, I believe, that the fertile terrain of Eastern and Western consciousness resides. It is precisely here that mystery and harmony, adventure and acceptance, dance with one another, play upon each other’s possibilities for a rich and fulfilling life, and point the way to a healing partnership.

Let us celebrate that partnership then, right here in the heart of Nanjing, and usher depth psychology into a new era!

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