Chapter 2

Awakening to Wonder

Enchanted Worlds

Every few weeks Dave posts pictures from his latest hike on Facebook. Often with friends, sometimes alone, he regularly turns to the outdoors, especially national parks, where he finds himself amid spectacular beauty. His photos can offer striking panoramas of hills and valleys, lakes and fields. He can also zero in on particular plants, especially in bloom, and animals, especially birds. Always energized by being in nature, Dave finds the experience brings more than physical conditioning. He seeks, and regularly feels, a connection to something genuine, something larger than himself. A turn in the path offers an unexpected new vista. Even if he has been there before, he still finds something new, some new perspective. Dave likes seeing things he has never seen, or glimpsing them from new angles, with shade and clouds unlike a previous visit. Above all he returns feeling connected beyond himself. Dubious about religion, and especially religious institutions, he embraces spirituality, yet hesitates to define it too narrowly. Perhaps without knowing it, Dave stands on the threshold of faith.

Pam also ventures into nature, but not as adventurously as hiking trails in remote areas. A skilled photographer, she is more apt to visit a local park or nearby beach, usually with several lenses and filters for her camera. She has acute vision, and particular skill at quickly framing an appealing scene. The brief, feeding pause of a hummingbird will not escape her. Strolling robins and even boastful crows catch her fancy. Nature's interactions bring endless fascination. Her close-up studies circulate quickly on social media. The pictures often are striking. Pam likes going out on her own, how and when the mood strikes her. She admits that it strikes often.

Now that she is retired, Linda stays closer to home, but with no less appreciation and equally elaborate results. In warm weather her garden overflows with luscious vegetables and fruit. Friends encourage her to open a stand on a nearby corner but she shrugs and laughs. Her tomatoes and squash, cucumbers and berries, wind up in elaborate recipes for various guests, always drawing rave reviews. An invitation to her home is coveted. Her sense of nature includes sampling as well as admiring. She likes to experiment in the kitchen with different combinations, always using freshly grown foods and matching them with fine wines. In the process she convenes people and fosters warm conversations. The feeling of connection is shared and rich. Nature's bounty has solidified friendships.

The human fascination with nature is timeless. On June 3, 1805, the explorer Meriwether Lewis recorded the latest view of nature he and his party had discovered. Referring to his colleague, William Clark, Lewis noted:

> Capt. C & myself strolled out to the top of the heights in the fork of these rivers from whence we had an extensive and most inchanting (sic) view; the country in every direction around us

> was one vast plain in which innumerable herds of Buffalow (sic) were seen attended by their shepherds the wolves.[19]

Why do so many people seek occasions to be in contact with nature? For some of us being outdoors involves hunting and fishing, or sailing, or rowing, or hiking, or skiing. Some love to camp and a few even dare to explore caves, often in remote locations. For others of us the outdoors means cultivating and growing, usually right on our own property. Still others seek to find precious moments of interaction that they might capture as still and video photography. For them nature is less to be mastered than to be admired. Nature's appeal is practically universal, and to say some product or experience is "natural" is to attest to its authenticity and its quality.

Something Spiritual

Nature represents more than a respite from daily routines and more even than discovery and exploration. We are more apt to speak of "spirituality" in relation to nature than in any other setting. Even people who resist religion find themselves drawn to speak of spirituality when the natural world is invoked, including the natural order beyond our own planet. The astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has observed that "when I say spiritual, I'm referring to a feeling you would have that connects you to the universe in a way that it may defy simple vocabulary."[20]

> There are places and moments in which one is so completely alone that one sees the world entire.
>
> —Attributed to Jules Renard

Tyson's point is crucial for us. "Spirituality" is often thought to be confined to our inner selves, our thoughts and feelings, our clear intentions, and our struggles for clarity and purpose. But Tyson, like people who hike, photograph, and garden, locates spirituality on a different plane. Spirituality is not ourselves alone. As we explored in chapter 1, spirituality comes alive when it points us beyond ourselves and toward vital connections. The liveliness of such connections, and our need for them, are never more apparent than in nature, even in a backyard or nearby park.

No wonder that particular places, especially at certain times of the year, become laden with memories and meanings. A particular stretch of coast or turn in a beach, a certain hill or mountain, a valley, a bend in a river, a point in a park, all can become, well, sacred. They have the quality of the "numinous," meaning they bring significance to aspects of our lives and awaken a sense of connecting to something basic, deeper, more authentic, truly whole. In such places, at such moments, perhaps with someone significant in our lives, we have found lasting insight and purpose. The place becomes laden with that meaning. To return there is to return to a notable time in life. We recapture the feeling, and we feel the wonder of the moment again. We recover clarity and purpose and worth in such places.

Nature is one of life's key bridges to the spiritual. Particular places and moments open up broad meaning. So we seek to return, even to create regular participation in such places. We find, over and over, that to truly be, we must be somewhere. For reasons we find difficult to put into words, a certain scene captures us in ways that other scenes cannot. Somehow we feel at home, feel both free and joined, find ourselves and feel ourselves found. John has a difficult time describing why saltwater fishing captivates him, but it does. Something about the waves and the water, and a limitless horizon enthrall him. The day is better if he catches fish, but that is never the whole point. The act of being on

the water touches him. On land he is always eager to return to the waves. Even bad weather enlivens him and energizes the descriptions his family expects.

Not every fishing trip ends with safe returns and happy accounts. In *The Perfect Storm*, author Sebastian Junger recounts the story of the *Andrea Gail*, a New England fishing vessel that vanished in 1991 when caught in a storm of freak intensity. The story gained wide notice as a movie as well as a book. It drove home the variety of human encounters with nature. Serenity can turn dramatically to violence and danger. Nature is the setting for powerful aspects of the human spiritual journey, in part because both good and evil are dramatized there. When we venture outdoors, we presume to know what we will find, and that is part of the joy as well as the risk. We always find that surprising realities await.[21]

In 1854 the noted writer Henry David Thoreau published his memoir of two years spent living alone near Walden Pond in Massachusetts. It was nearly ten years after he first went there, but the reflections were vivid and powerful. His time in nature had solidified deep convictions.

> I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary.[22]

The experience linked Thoreau to various religious and spiritual traditions. He noted that he had read Hindu scriptures, for instance. But the purpose was not simply to connect to religious

tradition, though that may have been something of a by-product. Rather he reported a sense of awakening, of elevating his life, as all people could elevate theirs, "by conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue . . . . but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do." Thoreau had discovered that he could recast his own life. To do so, he had to turn outward as well as inward. When he did, he saw the world and himself anew.

> Earth's crammed with heaven,
> And every common bush, afire with God.
>
> —Elizabeth Barrett Browning,
> "Aurora Leigh"

Like many others then and now, Thoreau experienced a sense that nature is sacred, and that being human means we share in it. That is, nature is to be venerated because there we find goodness and purpose from beyond ourselves. There is discovery of a greater reality, a "higher power," offering us a feeling of completion. The feeling awakens us because we begin to see what we have never glimpsed, like explorers in uncharted land. In a spiritual sense, the land has been there all along, like mountain trails or paths in public parks we have never followed. The land awaits our visit. In that sense we discover it.

Like such byways, our own lives await eye-opening discovery. This is nature's symbolic appeal. It represents our lives, complex landscapes never genuinely plumbed, much less ever truly appreciated. How we treat nature reflects how we treat ourselves and the people to whom we are linked. Our preoccupations can

distract us from looking deeply. Our fears may convince us that what we would see may disappoint or even harm us. But there is no spirituality, and no whole self, without daring to look deeply. The benefit outweighs the cost. There is no greater benefit than awakening and seeing, perhaps for the first time.

Visions of Faith

Because it is tangible and vivid, nature readily triggers feelings of connection beyond ourselves. Limitless vistas, changing scenes, and the bounty of life in its variations alert us to realities we had not imagined. The celebrated photographer Ansel Adams observed that some who step into nature "impose the domination of their own thought and spirit. Others come before reality more tenderly and a photograph to them is an instrument of love and revelation."[23]

The essence of faith is making choices that lead to a life of significance. We must choose to be in nature, exposing ourselves to its whims. Nevertheless our own agendas and assumptions easily dominate our awareness of what we find. The choice to be alert and open produces a strikingly different outcome. We can realize that we are seeing realities we have overlooked, even if we had reached the same spot on a prior visit. We can also begin to see possibility and promise in nature that can awaken us to a life we have not yet lived. We see what has been there all along. We awaken to it and feel at home in it. There is something profound before us and we have awakened to it.

If the natural world readily evokes spirituality, a key aspect is sight or, more lyrically, vision. In this respect spirituality is the beginning of the pathway toward faith, and spirituality is evoked powerfully in nature. There we begin to see, and not abstractly. We feel tangibly drawn into what we glimpse. Asked what they feel

amid their explorations, Dave and Pam, Linda and John use similar words. Wonder. Beauty. Awe. Serenity. Purpose. Connection. Their words echo Thoreau, though their stays in nature are never so extended.

Nature becomes an analogy for each of them. It is more than escape. The vision they have acquired outdoors translates into their lives indoors. They "see" more deeply into work as well as recreation. Mundane tasks become pieces of a larger whole. There is greater possibility in life for them; they are able to take creative, beneficial control of their lives. They "see" more deeply also into family and friends, often with as much gratitude as insight. They are more likely to become specific about what really matters in life, and they are more inclined to care actively about the struggles of other people. What were once brief glimpses of life, as if looking from beyond it amid one's preoccupations, has become more of a vision and a connection. They feel a part of what they experience. That feeling represents an awakening. They begin to see; they have vision.

For centuries people have experienced visions, often in nature, and have understood them as pathways to sacred reality. In 1437, a philosopher and Catholic cleric named Nicholas of Cusa experienced something of a vision while onboard a ship sailing across the Mediterranean. Noting that at the horizon, sea and sky met, he realized that sacred reality, or God, must be both transcendent or beyond nature, and immersed in it. In other words, what we experience in nature points beyond, to greater reality, yet grounds our lives in vital connections to the natural order.

Nicholas of Cusa would have another vision that was striking for his age. Perhaps from his shipboard experience, he concluded that earth and all creation are not static. The natural world, and our planet itself, are in motion, constant motion. To find the sacred, or God, we must also be in motion. Refusing to stand still, we must see life as activity, and we must become part of that

dynamism. Then we open ourselves to sacred reality. Without saying it in quite this way, Nicholas posed the idea that faith is rooted in vital connection to the world around us.[24]

If there is a crisis of faith today, and this would not be the first such time in human history, it is a crisis of connection. Countless people today only feel connected—to nature, to other people, and to institutions—in fragile ways, if at all. The idea of discovering that each of us is linked to deeper reality, in fact that we can see through nature to that reality, gives us pause. Such a discovery and the reality to which it points seem dubious.

> The world is so empty if one thinks only of mountains, rivers & cities; but to know someone who thinks and feels with us, and who, though distant, is close to us in spirit, this makes the earth for us an inhabited garden.
>
> —Attributed to Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

If there are connections to be built, many people assume, they can only be tangible, even empirical. Deeper reality, it is widely presumed, is not waiting to be discovered, it can only be built by dogged human effort. Accordingly, if there is faith to be found, we must find it within ourselves, many people affirm. At stake is our personal freedom, our right to design life as we choose, or so it is widely and profoundly felt. Spirituality, to the extent that we emphasize its importance for our lives, is welcome. Religion presumably would tell us what to think and what to do. Many people reject all religions because they appear to emphasize order and control.

But like the accounts of Nicholas of Cusa, visions of various sorts clutter human history, and make the boundary between

religion and spirituality a fuzzy one. It is not easy to say that human experience of greater reality, however it is posed, is either purely spiritual or religious. Visions sit at an important intersection. They push one toward patterns of meaning that prompt particular actions and even entire ways of life. One's understanding and relation to the world and to other people deepen. One seeks to ground one's experience and often one finds guidance in religious tradition as well as spiritual precedent.

The reality is that religion does not dictate or confine: it frames and empowers an experience by explaining it in terms of precedent. The vision gives rise to activity, uniting people who have shared the experience. In that sense, a vision, or what people report they have seen, especially in relation to nature, is inherently true. It is confirmed by the fact that people claim it and act on the basis of it.

Of course, visions, and human behavior resulting from them, have varied dramatically. In 1931, on a hillside in the Basque area of northern Spain, children reported that they had seen a vision of the Virgin Mary. The hill, near the town of Ezquioga, quickly became a pilgrimage site. A social movement arose, defying the opposition of religious as well as political authorities. More than one million people visited the site before such visits were proscribed. The "truth" of the vision was not limited to whether or not the Virgin Mary literally appeared there. The "truth" lay in the power of the place and the experience to stir human hearts, to link people in common cause, and to prompt concerted action. The truth of the experience was such that political and religious institutions perceived a threat and acted to squelch it.[25]

The outbreak of religious visions on a Basque hilltop reveals much about spirituality and religion, as well as visions in nature. The Spanish episode demonstrates that such visions have freed people to see life as whole, to feel themselves affirmed, and to see themselves in vital connection beyond their individual selves.

Such visions readily challenge existing categories of religious belief and practice as posed by institutions. We often find that institutional presumption wilts in the face of such spiritual immediacy and connection. The lesson should not be lost on us: faith is based in vital connection beyond ourselves.

Moments of Awakening

How do such connections arise? How do they relate to the sorts of visions we depict? We have spoken broadly of "awakening," a term that refers to a new and life-changing awareness which could not be planned or anticipated. Such an awakening could arise from one's first glimpse of a place one has never been, as Lewis and Clark repeatedly experienced on their historic expedition. But awakenings as we understand them also represent seeing familiar places and situations and people in entirely new ways. The place one has seen before, and the people in it, reveal new dimensions of reality that capture one's attention differently, for the first time.

What becomes paramount in an awakening is that the newly seen reality is not viewed casually or from a distance. What one glimpses is immediate, compelling, personal. There is a powerful sense of being drawn into the vision, of participating in it. Such a turn in one's life could not have been anticipated. With a vision that compels participation, an empowering sense of clarity unfolds. Vision means understanding, and understanding of this sort reshapes how one sees the rest of life, including oneself. There can even be a powerful, moral compulsion: the vision has such power that one feels one's life remade by it. There can also be an urgent feeling of responsibility to live according to what one has seen and felt. "Vision" becomes a broad idea, uniting sights, feelings, convictions, memories, priorities, norms, and intentions.

> Once the soul awakens, the search begins and you can never go back. From then on, you are inflamed with a special longing that will never again let you linger in the lowlands of complacency and partial fulfillment.
>
> —John O'Donohue,
> *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*

We speak of awakenings, but such moments sound suspiciously like what has been called "conversion." Reference to conversion brings to the surface images of the least appealing aspects of religion. Conversion suggests a decisive change from a past that one rejects as one embraces a set of religious teachings and practices. Buttressed by images of religious extremism and sectarianism, conversion seems to imply compulsion, the rejection of uncertainty, submission to authoritarian influences, and hostility toward all outside one's like-minded group.

Conversion also suggests hysteria and actions taken that defy reason and common sense, even ordinary morality. A person who has been converted seems to have been influenced, even manipulated, perhaps against one's will. In the popular mind, conversion is the surrender, and maybe the abuse, of one's self. It is likely to occur as a group phenomenon where peer pressure is difficult to resist. In the wake of conversion there appears to be little room for questioning or further exploration. The convert seemingly must submit like a recruit in military boot camp. There is no room for doubt or reconsideration. The answers to life's questions have been found and need only be held firmly.[26]

The proliferation of religious cults and fundamentalist groups appears to confirm this popular image of conversion. The history of religious revivals also appears to justify viewing conversion as akin to hysteria fostered by personal vulnerability and used by

unscrupulous authority figures. There is enough evidence, historically and in the present, that conversion is shrouded in unappealing imagery.

In fact, genuine instances of conversion throughout religious history closely resemble what we have called "awakening." Such experiences have indeed been compelled or used for unsavory purposes in some circumstances. But that is hardly the norm. More often conversion has represented the opening of a new pathway in life where none had been perceived; one's life heads in an unforeseen direction by previously unknown means. Thus, late in the fourth century, a young man sitting in a garden heard a child's voice where no child could be seen. As a result, this young man, named Augustine, picked up a nearby Christian Bible. Randomly he turned to Romans 13, verses 13–14. There he read words encouraging him to set aside the wanton life he had led and to live in a righteous way.

The young man became Christian and after this moment in a garden, in 386 CE, he would become one of Christianity's greatest leaders. To later generations he would be known as St. Augustine. In that light it has been tempting to view his conversion and subsequent life as a matter of spiritual certainty and religious obedience. From a distance his moment in the garden seemingly erased all doubt and any room for questions and revisions. Augustine himself seems to confirm this idea in his autobiography, *The Confessions*. The certainty and zeal of the convert shine through his words and confirm our suspicions.[27]

Over the centuries since his life, Augustine has been depicted as a foremost early Christian leader and thinker. He has been described, and could readily be understood, as polemical and inflexible, even an example of intolerance. Certainly he faced an array of religious and political opponents, against whom he maintained strong theological opinions. But a careful reading of his life adds another dimension. Like any person of faith, his life was

a journey along which circumstances forced him to make choices and to act on them. Rarely could Augustine simply proclaim ideals and enforce them directly. Complex situations forced him to respond in ways that were tested. At times his ability to live faithfully was unclear, even strained. His faith did not waver; but it was shaped and reshaped in life's maelstrom.

> Men go abroad to wonder
> at the heights of mountains,
> at the huge waves of the sea,
> at the long courses of the rivers,
> at the vast compass of the ocean,
> at the circular motions of the stars, and
> they pass by themselves without wondering.
>
> —Saint Augustine

Centuries later, another man, also a budding author, awakened to the life of faith, though hardly in a garden in the ancient world. An American, Thomas Stearns Eliot lived in England because of his work. There he found more of a home than he expected. In 1927, Eliot found the Christian faith and the Church of England. Already known as T. S. Eliot, he outlined this awakening to faith in "Ash Wednesday," a characteristically allusory and intricate poem, published in 1930. There Eliot traced his movement beyond exile from himself and from the world. The right time and the right life are not where we imagine, he had realized. Instead we must surrender precious illusions and move toward what we begin to see within and around us.

In "Ash Wednesday," Eliot describes a fountain that springs up and a bird that begins to sing. There is a dawning sense of call to redeem time, to shed falsehood, to care generally. There

is a sense of place for us, if we sit still to discover it. Separation can be overcome, he urges, using the imagery of a river's flow and of the sea's grandeur. Eliot writes as if committing a prayer to paper. Yet there is celebration, even exuberance. Life may be "this brief transit where the dreams cross/The dreamcrossed twilight between birth and dying." But in our brief time there is the possibility of choosing and awakening to lasting significance. Eliot makes the prospect of faith vivid and tangible.[28]

The experience of awakening to faith can evoke a high degree of certainty. It is natural to conclude that we have truly grasped what is certain, its truth and import appear evident. But regardless of the degree of certainty about newly found faith, once we have experienced such an awakening we must move ahead into uncertain and often uncontrollable life circumstances. Even firm confidence that one has found truth does not shield one from future challenges or uncertainties. Even with the most vigorous conviction, one must face life's contingencies. The experience of awakening—or conversion, for essentially they are the same—does not answer all questions or resolve all uncertainties. But one likely feels drawn to follow where this new path leads. What one finds along the way remains to be seen. Further vision awaits.

What Does It Mean?

Wonder is the basis of faith. We are especially struck by wonder in the midst of nature. There words such as "sacred" seem especially appropriate. The natural world awakens us to what is authentic, real. At the same time the natural world points beyond itself and invites us to an experience of discovery. In part, nature brings wonder to many of life's moments, infusing the mundane with points of meaning. In part the wonder of nature connects us to wider worlds, including people and places. We acquire feelings

of connection to larger reality that transcends yet permeates us. Often that larger reality is called "God."

David Brooks has observed that faith is not "a simple holding of belief, or a confidence in things unseen; in real life, faith is unpredictable and ever-changing." Faith dawns in wonder that senses reality beneath life's surface. The "business of faith," as Brooks names it, is "being attentive every day." This entails using "sensations of holiness to inspire concrete habits, moral practices and practical ways of living well." Brooks means that faith is not a steady state, a rock to which we cling for security. Nor is faith a matter of right or wrong, of who is worthy and who fails the test. Quite the opposite, faith "is change. It is restless, growing." Within daily life there is ever-fresh possibility, benefit to be discovered and then to be shared. Being a genuine part of the wonder around us is a constant opportunity and challenge.[29]

But what do such moments of wonder mean? More pointedly, does our intrigue with wonder represent undue focus on ourselves? The question must be pressed. There have long been assertions that narcissism is prominent, perhaps even the defining feature of American life. By some accounts there is now an epidemic of narcissism, especially among young adults. The obvious signs are grandiosity, entitlement, and self-centeredness. At a deep level, the narcissistic personality is prone to seek, or assume, celebrity status and imagined, impending success. In a nutshell, narcissism is an inflated view of the self, excluding the perceptions and sensitivities of other people and their circumstances. One's self and one's gratification dominate.

There may be widespread evidence of narcissism and many of us may be susceptible to it. But two factors must be considered. First, narcissism, albeit prominent, can sound like a luxury to a different group of people. Countless people live with pain and hurt. Untold numbers carry not over-inflated views of themselves, but under-inflated views. Narcissism is countered by people who

wrestle with depression, withdrawal, and defeatism. They may also be locked within themselves. But they act out of very different perceptions. Survival, not the next conquest, defines their challenge. Second, faith does not entail going within ourselves to ratify our lives as they are. Faith opens up both new perceptions of the world, and encouragement to connect outside ourselves in life-giving ways. Our individual selves have incredible, inherent worth. But we are incomplete without the ongoing experience of connection to others in true mutuality. Such connection is forged by awakening to transcendence, the dawn of conviction that we find wholeness when we are led by a power beyond our grasp, to a life we had not thought possible. By faith we perceive that this power calling us forth is the source and dynamism of all creation.

> It's what we trust in but don't yet see that keeps us going.
>
> —2 Corinthians 5:7,
> The Message

But isn't this just a way of identifying a psychological mechanism within us, and not a defining power without? Aren't we depicting a dynamic more insidious than narcissism? For centuries there have been claims that religion is psychological projection devised for individual assurance, perhaps drawn from primitive views of nature and otherwise natural forces. Some avowed atheists have concluded that religion has been a tool for subjugation, a justification of unjust social relations, benefitting a few at the expense of the many. In that sense religion could be depicted as social narcissism. Undue glorification of societies and those who rule them forms an unfortunate, historic pattern.

Might faith, based in wonder and connection outside ourselves, be a matter of projection, however elaborate? Have our biological selves devised such moments of experience and the categories we use to explain them? Such questions are not so easily or conclusively addressed. They force us to move from observing the world, and hesitating to commit ourselves, to reaching a decision, a commitment about who we are and what we actually believe. Faith is ultimately an unavoidable question. By asking whether it is a matter of projection, we realize that we must answer the question: is faith in our imaginations just a matter of hallucination?

The noted neurologist and author Oliver Sacks has addressed this question substantively. Amassing medical case studies, often of rare and bizarre instances, Sacks presses the issue. He also cites historical evidence. For centuries people have had "apparitions" or sightings that mimic reality but are not there as they imagine them to be. Perceptions born of mental process are used to frame the external world. Now, with advances in neuroscience and in the treatment of obviously aberrant perceptions, the subject of mental process and its reference points has opened up. Interestingly, fresh insights have not simply consigned hallucinations and human visions generally to the realm of the imagination. Neither true perceptions of the world, nor dreams and fantasies of it, hallucinations form "a unique and special category of consciousness and mental life." They can be taken neither literally nor as madness.[30]

The coincidence of religious convictions with mental and physical experiences is apparent. Sacks cites the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, who had seizures that produced ecstatic and transcendent feelings. In his writing Dostoevsky depicted characters who found serenity and hope amid intense moments of internal light. Such times became revelations of direct truth because they were the presence of God, he felt. Sacks doesn't endorse such a view but he is struck by it. There may be a biological basis of religious

experience. But that begs the question of "the value, the meaning, the 'function' of such emotions, or of the narratives and beliefs we may construct on their basis." In other words, biology alone does not answer the question of faith. Biology may be the mechanism but it is not the meaning. The question of faith remains before us, a crossroads of whether and how to believe in our minds and in our lives.

But does it all have a valid reference, or is it a matter of projection? Is there God or not? At the end of *Hallucinations*, Sacks offers a poignant thought:

> Thus the primal, animal sense of "the other," which may have evolved for the detection of threat, can take on a lofty, even transcendent function in human beings. As a biological basis for religious passion and conviction, where the "other," the "presence," becomes the person of God.[31]

Faith is grounded less in belief than in relatedness to the "other," that is, to the world and people outside ourselves. In times of genuine wonder, we can awaken to the reality around us, and seek connection to it, just as we can discover nature and our relation to it. We can feel a larger sense of reality that is beyond yet within us. We can also feel compelled to continue to awaken, to follow this reality and even to have our lives transformed in light of it. The truth of the reality beyond us surfaces in the life that we feel drawn to build because of it.

"What if these things are true?" A man named John Newton asked himself this question repeatedly nearly three hundred years ago. He was English and went to sea as a young man. There he quickly developed nautical skills and would rise to become a ship's

captain. There he also continued a struggle between a search for faith and a morally questionable life. Then, when Newton was still a young man of twenty-three, in 1748, his ship was caught in a violent storm and was disabled. Newton's survival and that of his shipmates was in doubt. Somehow they stayed afloat; though some of the crew was lost, Newton survived. His life spared against all odds became an answer to the question that had haunted Newton. "These things," namely the reality of faith in the ultimate power called God, were true.

> I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be,
> I am not what I hope to be in another world;
> but still I am not what I once used to be,
> and by the grace of God I am what I am.
>
> —John Newton

He swore off his dissolute lifestyle. Eventually he gave up the sea and became a priest of the Church of England. Soon he became known for hymns he authored, some of which reflected the faith he had found, and the awakening that prompted it. Among the many hymns for which Newton became known and that remain current, one has been especially notable:

> Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
> That saved a wretch like me!
> I once was lost, but now am found,
> Was blind, but now I see.

The power of Newton's transformation, and the vision it prompted, are apparent. They remain compelling. The extent of Newton's legacy is attested by generations of people seeking

faith who have resonated with his struggle, his encounter with the power of nature, and the lasting faith that resulted. Looking back, it seems appropriate to speak of Newton's conversion as decisive, complete, and confident. There appears to be little room for doubt that faith awakened whole and decisively remade his life.[32]

In fact, after the initial, inner struggle, and even after the storm that he cited as the turning point, Newton's passage to faith was incomplete. Conversion in the history of religious life is never total or accomplished at once. Even if faith blossoms and never fades, it is made whole in subsequent stages. Together these later steps have been known as sanctification, or growth in holiness. Newfound assurance will be tested in the maelstrom of life's challenges. What it means to live as a person of faith will be sorted out in practical terms. One's relatedness to the world changes. One's priorities shift as old patterns of behavior give way to new ones. A new person is being born.

Sanctification is the process of living as a genuinely faithful person. Faith remains incomplete if held merely as a matter of personal feeling or a list of personal beliefs. It is incomplete if only one moment is cherished and not subsequent stages. Faith is proven by how the awakened person revises relations to other people and to the wider world. The reality that faith is more than feeling is verified. Sanctification entails morality or standards of behavior, but it cannot turn legalistic or prohibitive; sanctification concerns the life to be embraced, not simply the life to be renounced. Faith concerns who we become, not who we cease to be.

For John Newton this meant an eventual rejection of slavery and the slave trade, in which he had participated as a sea captain. Later in life he joined the emerging abolition movement. He did not live to see England abolish slavery, which occurred by an act of Parliament in 1833. But he awakened to the moral urgency of

abolition and in that regard he continued the journey of faith. Indeed, faith must ever be a journey, its ramifications never fully grasped, its effect on our lives always awaiting further discovery. At times such journeys are wanderings. But as we awaken they become pilgrimages, and we become pilgrims.

A Question to Consider What have been your moments of "awakening to wonder," and how have they created a new and life-changing awareness within you?

A Thing You Can Do Consider the one or two choices you can make today that will lead to a life of greater significance.