

The Fluid Center: An Awe-based Challenge to Humanity

Kirk J. Schneider, Ph.D.

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This article raises two basic questions: What is humanistic psychology's relevance to post 9/11/2001? and Can that relevance be practically applied to daily life? To address these questions, the author elaborates a humanistic concept that he calls the "fluid center." The fluid center is an "awe-based" consciousness exemplified by playful constraint, humble daring, and reverent adventurousness. Whereas 9/11 represented the triumph of personal and interpersonal polarization (e.g., arrogance, humiliation), the fluid center, by contrast, represents the opportunity for personal and interpersonal revitalization (e.g., openness, dialogue). To illustrate this position, the author proposes two social visions that draw on the fluid center: awe-based education and awe-based vocation. He concludes that not only can such alternatives modify institutional settings; they can radically transform lives.

Introduction

The blow to American prestige, innocence, and conviction on September 11th,

2001 raises key questions for humanistic psychology and the humanistic movement. If some people were skeptical of humanistic psychology's social and global relevance before September 11th, they may now have cause to be dismissive. How, for example, can the time-honored humanistic precepts of warmth, empathy, and genuineness, reach suicide bombers, dispossessed refugees, and starving children? What do sincere invitations to dialogue mean to anthrax manufacturers, enraged clerics, and resentful mobs? In the age-old clash of cultural heritages, where is the place for human potential?

These are not trivial controversies--and they will try the patience of us all, but they will especially challenge those who have supported and worked hard to implement humanistic causes. Yet I, for one, am not ready to simply discard these steadfast efforts, and certainly not for some square-jawed cynicism! On the contrary, we need to call upon the humanistic visionary tradition as never before in the coming years, and to the degree we neglect it, we neglect hope.

What is the humanistic visionary tradition? First let us dispel what it is not. It is not simply American "do goodism," or optimistic individualism, or capricious libertinism; it is not synonymous with the New Age or, as some positive psychologists are wont to assert, the appraising of crystals. By contrast, it is a dynamic and evolving heritage—a supple heritage--that encompasses Greek, Renaissance, and Romantic lineages. Today, these lineages intertwine with existential, transpersonal, and constructivist theorizing and converge upon one overarching concern—What does it mean to be fully experientially human; and how does that understanding illuminate the vital or fulfilled life? (Schneider, Bugental, & Pierson, 2001).

In the interest of the latter, I propose the following: the blasting of the Pentagon and World Trade Towers echoes a wider, more insidious phenomenon: the blasting of

human souls. This blasting has been taking place perennially and it gets perennially overlooked. The blasting to which I refer is the shunting of human aspiration, the bashing of human integrity, and the stanching of human vitality. It is the stunting of human freedom, and conversely, the accentuating of human arrogance. It is a floodtide that knows no bounds; it bleeds into the streets as well as the suites; the steel girders as well as the ivory towers.

The blasting of which I speak is an existential blasting; a blasting of revenge and of desperation, a blasting by little people who aspire to become big people, and a blasting by big people who deny that they are little people, and on the cycle spins. So long as there is destitution, desperation, and impotence in this world, there will be vain attempts at reversal—greatness, glory, and omnipotence. So long as people are polarized, they will court further polarization. In this paper, I want to suggest that our core polarization is between our smallness (fragility, limitedness), and our greatness (resiliency, expansiveness), and that both must be acknowledged for us to thrive (Schneider, 1999). The repeated problem is that people cut off either of these potentialities. They become trapped, fixated, and estranged. They swing from pole to pole and miss the vibrancy between the poles. How then, are we to redress these perennial pitfalls; what will help humanity to become whole?

Let me suggest three ways—which all lead down the same basic path: by bringing awe, carnival, and what I call the fluid center into our consciousness.

By *awe* I mean the cultivation of the basic human capacity for the thrill and anxiety of living--or more formally, the cultivation of the capacity for humility and boldness, reverence and wonder before creation (e.g., this is the *mysterium et fascinans*

that Rudolf Otto (1923/1958) speaks of to describe the numinous; it is the capacity to be *moved*.

By *carnival*, I mean the importation of a sense of play, multi-dimensionality, and contrariety into our lives—but all within a relatively safe, supportive, and structured context. The idea here is that, ironically, the more we can play with the various “parts” of ourselves, the more deeply we can come to know ourselves—the parts of ourselves that genuinely matter.

Finally, by the *fluid center*, I mean the cultivation of all these dimensions—elasticity, pausefulness: the richest possible range of experience within the most suitable parameters of support. (Or any sphere of consciousness which has as its concern the widest possible relations to existence).

These are the same ideas that I believe Nietzsche was getting at with his “passionate people who become masters of their passion” (cited in Kaufmann, 1968, p. 280); or Malinowski with his “freedom” as the “acceptance of the chains which suit” one; and Ortega with his aspirations to a “vital design” (cited in May, 1981, pp. 83 & 93). If it doesn’t have paradox, if it doesn’t have contradiction, the philosopher Phillip Hallie, once intimated, “it isn’t a powerful human feeling” (cited in Moyers, 1988).

I want to suggest that there are two pivotal settings where American and indeed contemporary Western culture lack this sense of the paradoxical, the awesome, the carnivalesque, and the fluidly centered—school and work.

On the pages to follow, I will describe two humanistic social proposals that address the aforementioned settings. While these proposals are hypothetical and somewhat crudely drawn, they provide a crucial window, I believe, on trenchant, humanity-wide reform.

Toward an Awe-Based Educational Curriculum

In a stunningly neglected treatise, Ernest Becker (1967) sets forth an equally stunning educational proposal: the “alienation curriculum.” The alienation curriculum is Becker’s strategy to engage students, to animate their educational experience. In a nutshell, the curriculum teaches students how various cultures down through history have handled alienation. The curriculum inquires, in effect, how have various societies estranged (e.g., humiliated, aggrandized; polarized, fetishized) their populaces throughout history, and second, to what extent do such practices relate to students' current lives? While there are many salutary dimensions to this curriculum—and it would no doubt benefit students immensely—I would like to propose a broader and more affirming curriculum that I believe would have even greater salutary effects.

Drawing from Becker’s proposal, then, I will now set forth an idea to enhance and complement the movement toward a fluid center at work, at home, and in places of worship. This proposal is for an awe-based educational curriculum

Again, awe is defined as the capacity for the thrill and anxiety of living (the capacity to be *moved*); it is further defined as the realization of the humbling and emboldening sides of living; not as separate poles but together as integrated “wholes” of experience. In a nutshell, awe comprises an *integrated* sensibility of discovery, adventure, and boldness melded to and in the context of safety, structure, and support. Awe mitigates against alienation (polarization)—either in the form of hyper-humility (humiliation) or hyper-boldness (arrogance).

How then, might we initiate an awe curriculum? I propose that we begin with a cohort of middle school students studying history. (Note that elementary school students could also be given some form of this curriculum. The issue is not so much the form of

the curriculum as the infusion of the curriculum with a spirit of awe; and while this spirit does not preclude more technical kinds of training [e.g., reading, writing, arithmetic], these technologies are employed in the service of, or as an adjunct to, awe-based inquiry. It is only in later years, as students are ready to specialize, that such skills as math and science would be focused upon as separate domains). The question to students could be, how have given cultures throughout history affirmed or suppressed a sense of awe (humility and wonder), and what does that affirmation or suppression imply for students' current lives? For example, students could study a range of historical epochs, from the Neolithic, Egyptian, Hebrew, Greco-Roman, Early Christian, Medieval, Renaissance, Enlightenment-Romanticist, and industrial-technological to the non-Western (e.g., Eastern and African) contexts.

Beginning with the cultures of the Near and Middle East (e.g., Babylon, Greece, Egypt), students might then be asked to look at some sample traditions and how and whether they foster awe. Students might be asked to consider, for example, these cultures' relationship to land and nature; their religious systems--pantheism, goddess worship, mystery cults; their architecture—palaces, marketplaces, sacred sites; their art, literature, and philosophy; their forms of government; their transitions from agrarianism to urbanism and pantheism to monotheism. But also let us not neglect to alert students to the disease and pestilence in these societies; fatigue and overwork (where the average life-span is in the 20s; the 60s if one is elite); slavery (if any), elitism, and barbarity. Let us encourage students to reflect on the societies' structure of authority—e.g., collective vs. individualist; elite vs. communal--and their concept of personal autonomy.

Next, we would ask students how these awe-inspiring (humbling and emboldening) and awe-deflating (humiliating and aggrandizing) episodes relate to their

present lives, their present worlds? In what ways might they adopt/draw upon these discoveries to enhance or reform their worlds? Some possible discussion items include: What is the potential role of nature and natural environments on students' present sensibilities? What is the current significance of feminist spiritual principles (nurturance, egalitarianism)? What is the place of the sense of the sacred vs. formal religion today? What is the present role of aesthetics in architecture? What are the various forms of slavery (compulsion, addiction) in today's lifestyles—what of contemporary forms of elitism and barbarity? What is the relevance of individual vs. collective authority, autonomy vs. community today?

Other discussion areas could include the decadence of Rome; political rebellion and the institutional church in early Christianity; chivalry and sexuality during the Middle Ages; rationality vs. religion during the Renaissance and so on.

In sum, the awe curriculum is an ideal or mooring point; it does not have to be adopted in its entirety or literally, as I have presented it. There are many small ways that teachers can begin—and, indeed, are beginning—to adopt an awe curriculum in their current repertoire of courses. Among these are, 1) by asking students about the relevance of a given subject--e.g., English literature, astronomy, social science--to their current lives, their visions of a future world, and their hopes, dreams, or visions of making an impact on that future world; or 2) by introducing “awe,” the thrill and anxiety, humility and wonder of living, as a concept, and by relating that concept to a given subject area—e.g., how American fiction illustrates awe, and what that awe evokes in students' lives; or how various parts of the sciences, e.g., mathematics, life-sciences, anthropology, inspire awe, and what this inspiration implies for students' environmental, social, or spiritual concerns. There are many creative avenues to explore.

Awe-Based Work Programs

The class and income disparities in the world, particularly America, are grievous—as many readers are aware. This is a condition where in 1999, 19% of American children live in poverty (the worst rate in the developed world); where in 1992, the average American executive made 419 times what the average factory worker made; and where the top 2.7% of wage earners made as much as the bottom 100 million (Intelligence Report, Fall, 1999). It's a world where a camp counselor can and often does earn more than a frontline mental health worker at a home for disturbed children (personal communication, Sebastian Earl, 1999), or an information technologist makes several times the salary of a social worker, or a professional basketball player makes 100 times the wages of a teacher.

We profess to desire an engaged and invigorated populace. We say we want an informed and unified citizenry. We advertise our yen for physically and emotionally healthy children; youth who are committed to the values of work and brotherly love. Despite the rhetoric, however, we have a very puzzling way of demonstrating our concerns. How is it, for example, that our economic system is virtually tailor-made to subvert our alleged values; and how is it that our morals, relationships, and lifestyles are for all intents and purposes contrary to our pronouncements? .

The question is, can conventional notions of success be converted into visionary notions—can “enrichment” mean capacity for humility, reverence, and wonder—awe--before creation?

While the first step toward such a transformation has already been suggested with an awe-based educational curriculum, presently, I will outline an awe-based work

proposal. What if we could pass the following legislation?—(Indulge my fantasies for a moment!): All non-employer income earners in the top 2% of the American adult population and all American employers whose combined yearly individual income also exceeds the top 2% of wage earners would be offered a choice—either invest in (tax reduced) awe-based, socially responsible benefit programs or pay steep and sustained government taxes (which will in turn fulfill the same purpose). The socially responsible investment plan would roughly comprise two components—a comprehensive, universal health plan and for the employed, twice weekly (one hour respectively) mental and physical well-being programs. The health plan would be partially subsidized by the government (from the general tax fund and the top 2% of employer and nonemployer income earners) and the well-being programs would be funded solely by the top 2% of employer income earners (or if agreed upon in advance, by an entire company). The health plan would provide generous mental and physical health benefits determined by both federal and regional authorities.

How would we get such a program implemented? First, I believe that many people—*employees in particular*—would welcome such an idea (especially if clearly articulated). Second, although many employers would balk at the expenditure of such a program, they would soon realize that they are all on the same playing field and that if they want to remain in the game they have to find a way to play—and play it well. While cost-shifting (e.g., passing on expenditure costs to consumers) could be a problem, I believe that it would remain manageable because all employers in this bracket would be in the same situation, and therefore would have to keep their prices competitive. Finally, although there would likely be some suppression of incentive to become a top wage earner, employer, and entrepreneur in the light of our proposal—especially among more

materialistic types, there are three issues that I believe would mitigate this problem: one, everyone would be in the same boat, as previously mentioned, so jealousy, extravagant expectations etc. would, by implication, be delimited; second, people would soon find that there would still be room for healthy profit and wage earnings in spite of and perhaps even *in light of* the increased social consciousness at a given work-setting (e.g., because of the greater social relevance of that setting's structure and product line); and last but not least, most, if not all, prospective workers will have undergone the awe-based educational training I alluded to earlier—and would therefore be inclined to value rather than to discount a vocational analogue of the latter.

One final note by way of context, like the awe-based educational curriculum, awe-based vocation does not have to be a “one size fits all” proposition. There are many incremental ways to implement awe-based vocation, including but not exhausted by informal social gatherings (such as might be convened at the lunch hour), in which colleagues confer with one another about the state of their jobs, their lives on the job, and the lives they affect. Workers could also agree to hire a consultant or mediator to facilitate their dialogue on these or related subjects, or to consult with management about the implications of their discussions. There might be informal arrangements for yoga, Tai Chi, or meditation classes at the jobsite; or there might be provisions for personal counseling, and/or growth experience through outreach to services in the surrounding community. Any or all of these can be “awe” informing.

That said, I will now proceed with a description of the well-being programs outlined above. While these descriptions are more formal, and in some ways more hypothetical than the partial applications just discussed, they are not, in my view, out of reach. They are a basis for system-wide reform.

Drawing from the envisioned mandate, then, the well-being programs would be administered by a committee comprising the employer, mental and physical health providers (e.g., psychologists, psychiatrists, general practice physicians, holistic health practitioners), and employees. The programs would be voluntary and scheduled at consistent times during eight hour work days. The mental well-being program could entail a wide variety of offerings, from topics of psychological and philosophical interest to those concerning spirituality and multiculturalism. The purpose of the mental well-being programs would be to promote reflection on, and where appropriate, corrective action concerning the impact of work on employees' and employers' lives. Although such reflection and corrective action would be confined to work issues, they could address a wide variety of concerns. For example, the program might take the form of a discussion hour in which employers and employees consider the environmental relevance of their products; it could also take the form of a reflection about the need to restore pride, craftsmanship, and innovation at the worksite; it could also entail conflict mediation seminars, or forums about social values. The mental well-being programs would need to fulfill four basic criteria. They would need to be 1) independently facilitated, 2) voluntary and non-discriminatory (e.g., protected from employer retaliation), 3) relevant to the work setting and 4) acceptable to an employer/employee well-being committee. (For issues that fall outside these categories, other healthcare/organizational services may be necessitated). Finally, the well-being committee would, through one of its elected representatives, have a permanent seat on the respective company's board.

The physical well-being programs would also consist of a variety of offerings and would be administered by a physical well-being committee. The committee would

consist of the employer, an elected body of employees and a physical health expert of their choice. Activities could range from workout regimens to massage and sauna to yoga and stress reduction exercises. There could also be provisions for a variety of programs on holistic health, exercise, nutrition, and alternative medicines. The on-staff health provider would help to monitor and if necessary medically advise all participants.

In addition to the above programs, there could be provisions for a range of alternative activities during the mental and physical well-being hours, from nature walks to outdoor retreats to communal projects (such as consumer satisfaction surveys). Those who choose not to partake in such activities would also have a variety of options from which to choose--from relaxing and recreating to continuing work.

Second, in order to maximize the integration of work and personal activity four-day workweeks would be implemented. Such a period is essential for reflection, loved ones, and recreation. It also structures time for those who wish to partake in civic activities.

While it is true that about 12 hours would be subtracted from the conventional workweek, the 12 hours that would replace them should be more than enough to make up for such a loss, in fact they should form the bedrock for a revolutionary new form of living. For in these 12 hours people would be encouraged to reflect deeply on their jobs, their lives and the lives of those about them. The fruits of such engagement should be manifold—from enhancement of the work environment to humanization of the social terrain, and from improved vocational motivation to elevated social and moral sensitivity. The services resulting from such a transformation should also be markedly improved. There should be more services, for example, that address people's core values—such as environmentally supportive transportation programs, life-enhancing architectural

arrangements, and health-affirming agricultural yields. There should be marked improvements in mental and physical health, education, and rehabilitation programs. There should be more and better medical services—with a wider range of treatment alternatives (for example, low cost, year long psychotherapy).

There should be pervasive improvements in recreational facilities, entertainment, and sporting events. There should be dramatically fewer overpaid executives, entertainers, and athletes, and markedly increased affordability of products and services. For example, to the extent that products become more meaningful to people, they will buy them more, which eventually should lower prices; and to the degree that entrepreneurial wealth is returned to the system that supports it, the quality and affordability of that system should also commensurately rise.

Finally, the well-being programs open up unprecedented opportunities for specialists in human service—from psychologists to physicians, philosophers to artisans, and counselors to healers. While some may decry the ferocity of that transformation, I and many others would argue that it is just the counterweight necessitated today, as technician models for living encroach upon the cultural landscape.

Awe-based prioritization should not eliminate the former technician model; it should not erase the significant and hard-won gains of industrialization--controlling diseases, mass producing food, expediting information—such a call would be sheer folly and I don't believe many of the people urging humanistic change would seriously entertain it. However, an awe-based reform should bring is a deepening, a sensitizing, and a widening of our day-to-day view. It should instill the fluidity in the inert centeredness, and the flesh, bone, and heart in the pale plurality of our culture.

From this point of view, it is essential that we maintain (as Becker (1967) echoing Robert Maynard Hutchins put it) The Great Conversation—and not just in the ivory tower but in the streets and suites as well. The well-being proposal releases unprecedented creative energies for individual and social expression—but (and this is key) within the existing structures of a disciplined and committed workforce. The range of possibilities arising from the well-being forums will be rich; for not only will various companies opt for diverse presentations, but various Great Conversations within those presentations, will impact company policymaking. Put another way, The Great Conversation should lead to a continually evolving network of ideas, expressions, and sensibilities, which should result, in turn, in an ever-growing sphere of personal and vocational enhancement. Just imagine a fellow returning home from work after an exhilarating discussion about the moral import of his product line that could impact thousands of unknowing customers, not to mention the integrity of the salesman himself. Think how this state would affect his relationship with his wife, his children, his sense of life?

The convergence of an awe-based, meaning-based, and reflection-based pause in the middle of peoples' workday complemented by a parallel developmental and educational experience should have pervasive and synergistic effects on the entire ways we perceive, engage, and live out our respective days.

Postscript

Amid the talk of security, and “smoking them out,” and shopping as viable responses to the 9/11 tragedy, the question looms: What will be America's long-term reply to those it has enraged? In this article, I have presented two potential answers to this conundrum—awe-based education and awe-based vocation.

If we are to have a chance at global solidarity, then we will need a palpable change in our relations to both people and capital. We will need to complement such relations with a new set of conditions. Among these conditions will be the routine availability of interpersonal exchange—the sharing of joys and sorrows, hopes and estrangements—and not just in homes or barrooms, but in offices and classrooms, embassies and legislatures. We will need to model what social experiments have already demonstrated--that when people can assemble together, share experiences, and learn about each other's intimate lives, they can become more tolerant of one another, and more appreciative of one another's humanity (e.g., see Rogers, 1986; Bar-On, 1993; Montuori & Purser, 2001; and Schneider, 2003, 2004).

Is there a more urgent time for America to provide such models; or for humanists to propose them?

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KIRK J. SCHNEIDER, Ph.D., is a licensed psychologist and leading spokesperson for contemporary humanistic psychology. He is president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute and an adjunct faculty member at Saybrook Graduate School and the California Institute of Integral Studies. He is also a Fellow of the American Psychological Association. Dr. Schneider has published over 70 articles and chapters and has authored or edited five books, *The Paradoxical Self: Toward an Understanding of Our Contradictory Nature, Horror and the Holy: Wisdom-teachings of the Monster Tale, The Psychology of Existence: An Integrative, Clinical Perspective* (with Rollo May), *The Handbook of Humanistic Psychology: Leading Edges in Theory, Research and Practice* (with J. Bugental and F. Pierson), and *Rediscovery of Awe.* Dr. Schneider is the 2004 recipient of the Rollo May award for “outstanding and independent pursuit of new frontiers in humanistic psychology” from the Humanistic Psychology Division of the American Psychological Association. In the fall of 2005, Dr. Schneider will assume the editorship of the Journal of Humanistic Psychology.

