



An excerpt from

GROWING INTO GOD

A Beginner's Guide to Christian Mysticism

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Chapter One: Awakening

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, "Follow me." ...Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." Nathanael said to him, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see." When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, "Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael asked him, "Where did you come to know me?" Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you." Nathanael replied, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" Jesus answered, "Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these." And he said to him, "Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." —John 1:43-57

In this passage from the Gospel of John, Jesus issues a call to his future disciples Philip and Nathanael. He calls them to follow him, and he gets Nathanael's attention with a very minor miracle: he knew what Nathanael was doing when Nathanael was alone. But he promises that if he comes with him, Nathanael will see much greater things.

Nathanael is not unique—this is something that happens to a lot of people, even today, perhaps it has even happened to you. It seems to be the way God works: he shows us just a little bit, enough to turn us from our intended course, and promises that if we will come with him, he will show us much, much more.

This is the essence of Awakening. It is a minor miracle—sometimes dramatic, sometimes subtle, but usually it is just enough to make us go, "Whoa! What was that?" and start us searching in a direction we might not have gone otherwise.

It is, in a sense, an experience of conversion, but not in the way we normally think about that word. For it is not a conversion to a set of doctrines or beliefs, but a conversion—a transformation, if you will—of one's very perception of Reality.

"You Must be Born Again"

The language of rebirth is useful, here. When we are born the first time it is into a world that revolves around ourselves. When we have an Awakening experience, we are born again, but this time into a world in which the locus of importance is not in the self, but

elsewhere—in fact, *everywhere*. Awakening is a momentary flash of insight in which we are granted a glimpse of the universe not as we have always seen it before, but as God sees it.

I remember when this happened to me. While I was in college, I was struggling mightily with the fundamentalist teachings I had grown up with, and was terrified that God would reject me. At the time I was reading a lot of Anglican poets, theologians, and mystics. So on the day when a friend of mine said, “Let’s go see what those Anglicans mean by ‘church,’” I was primed for the experience.

Primed, maybe, but not ready. What I experienced that day when my friend Mike and I entered St. Michael’s Episcopal Church changed me forever. First of all, I was blown away by the artwork. The Church of my childhood harbored a deep distrust of art or beauty, especially when it comes to adorning worship spaces. My jaw dropped when I encountered the gothic sanctuary, covered with tapestries, icons, and statuary. I was especially struck by the enormous, gory crucifix staring down at me in all its agony. I was mesmerized by it all, and deeply moved.

But what really shook me was when the priest gave the call for communion. Although I cannot say why, I knew in that moment that I had found what I had been searching for all of my life. I raced for the communion rail and knelt.

And that’s when it happened. I heard the voice of the Holy Spirit speaking to me. As the priest placed that wafer on my tongue, I felt a presence wash over me like an ocean wave, and I heard an audible voice, saying, “This is my mercy for you. You can feel it. You can taste it. It is real.” In that moment I knew that I had not only not been rejected by God, I had been *chosen* by God. I had been *called*. I had glimpsed something of God that completely reoriented my life. I had been *awakened*.

Awakening takes different forms for everyone, of course. For some it may be a half hour in which everything seems to glow with transcendent import. Or perhaps it is a brief moment in which you seem to see right into people’s souls, and feel such profound compassion for them your heart feels likely to burst. Perhaps it is an inrushing of energy that leaves you dazed and tingling. Perhaps a walk in the woods turns into a more sacred experience than any church service you’ve ever been to. Or perhaps, like me, you are actually *in* church, and the voice of the Spirit whispers to you audibly in a way you cannot ignore or deny.

Such an experience can utterly undo a person. It can be disorienting, frightening, inspiring, and dangerous. In spiritual direction, we call it a Spiritual Emergence, or even a Spiritual Emergency—and indeed people often trundle themselves off to the Emergency Room when it happens to them, because they sometimes feel like they are going crazy or are physically ill.

For some, they are glad when it passes, and they go, “Thank God *that’s* over.” And then they go back to life as usual. And of course, for some people, it is not so dramatic. But whether the experience is subtle or intense, there are many who do not go back to business-as-usual, and for these people it often spells the beginning of the end—in a good way. Because in that glimpse they realize that the way they have been living has little meaning in the grand scheme of things, that they are not who they thought they were, and more than this, they are *hooked*. They’ve had a little taste of God, and they want more.