

*Reading: Excerpt from Walden Henry David Thoreau*

We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep.

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor.

It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to care and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do.

To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.

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.

I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life.

*Sermon: "Living Awake"*

"What are your structures and rituals and disciplines which keep you awake while everyone else is walking around in their sleep, which keep you attentive to suffering, sensitive to injustice?" These words spoken by my Old Testament professor stopped me in my tracks. A Baptist Kentucky Minister he's as open hearted as they come. Let me repeat these words, and this time I'm going to read the entire quote.

"What are your structures and rituals and disciplines which keep you awake while everyone else is walking around in their sleep, which keep you attentive to suffering, sensitive to injustice? I am unconventional and am allergic to normal religious structures, but that is my problem. Maybe you are, maybe you are not. Still, what are ways that leave you in a position in which, should God appear, you would see God? Because it is possible to have eyes and not see, ears and never hear."

Maybe you believe in God, and maybe you don't. Maybe you, like my professor, are allergic to normal religious structures. Or maybe, like me, you are drawn to them. It doesn't matter. We all can stand to be more awake.

When we are awake we are authentic. We walk the talk. We take risks, we follow our passions. Being awake also requires that we know our limits, that we ask for help and that we live where most of life occurs – in the gray areas. It's ironic how living authentically means being able to live with uncertainty.

Being asleep is when we have lost touch. When we are asleep, it's like being on automatic pilot. We go through the actions, endless actions. We may be very busy, and may even appear fulfilled. But deep inside we know that we're not. Life is too short, for all of us, to be asleep.

To walk the talk, to live awake. It's about offering the world the very best you/me that we possibly can. All of us live this way to a certain extent, we wouldn't be sitting here this morning if we didn't. And all of us can do better. We deserve, and the world needs this kind of authenticity.

A yoga teacher taught me the “3 A's”. Awareness, acceptance and action. The keys to change. I find this way of looking at things very helpful. Most of us have a preferred “A”. Some of us like to be aware, to have epiphanies, to smell the roses. But we have a hard time accepting what life offers us. Others of us are quite good at being aware and accepting, but we plan, think, debate and don't take action. That's my default when I'm not awake.

Awareness can come in a moment of clarity or insight, it can emerge out of tragedy. Often it is fleeting, or quiet, the still small voice, we all have. It's our job to pay attention.

And then there is acceptance, my personal favorite. Why is it that we have to accept something before it can change? I have no idea. But it's true. Acceptance is easier said than done. Accept a boss who unreasonable? A death that is too painful? Addiction? No, acceptance is not for the faint of heart. But once we accept, then there's space for change. And when we don't accept, we suffer.

It is can be easier on the surface to deny or to blame or to hide. Kind of. But all of those habits result in our falling more asleep. When we are asleep, we have a very small world view, we are at the center of it. Life becomes interpreted through the lens of, ‘How does this impact me?’ This is a place that I think we all fall prey to. People who are asleep are under the illusion that they can wrestle control over life. That if they just get everything right, they can manage. They can keep life at bay. And maybe they can, for a little while. But someday it stops working.

The third “A” is action. We must do the work to keep ourselves awake. Have you ever seen the long lost friend in the grocery store only to turn the other way down the aisle? Or how about the inspiration that seems so powerful in the middle of the night or in your dreams? How often do we not take that next step to make something happen or to do whatever it is that will really makes us whole?

Having said all of this, no one of us is perfectly awake. Being awake is a lifetime process. It isn’t like we become awake and then just stay that way without effort. It takes ongoing, daily commitment, actions that foster this state of living. Sometimes we will fall short but always we can return, once we have experienced living this way.

When we are awake we can be present to life in ways that are incomprehensible when you are sleeping. When we are awake, we feel. We connect. We let life take our breath away. When we are present and awake, we know that we are enough. Not perfect. Enough. We can stay by someone’s bedside while they are dying and know that our presence is enough. We can love so deeply that we cry, because life is that meaningful.

So if this is so important, why do so many of us resist doing what it takes to be awake? One thing that we need to reframe pain. Pain gets a bad rap in our society. We want to shield ourselves and all of those we love from it. But, we can’t be fully awake and not have pain. We can’t change behavior without pain, even the best of changes entail loss. When we’re alive, we’re vulnerable.

If you study people who are awake and watch them you will find that these are people who are no strangers to pain. In fact they are almost always intimately familiar with it. They

don't seek it, but they don't fear it or run from it either. If we believe that pain is wrong, bad and to be avoided at all costs we will have no choice but to remain asleep.

None of us is perfectly awake all of the time. We all have ways that we keep ourselves asleep. Ways that we stay numb or veg out--- shopping, alcohol, working, worrying – the list is endless.

We need to remind ourselves why we want to live awake. For one thing we feel not only the pain but we get to fully experience the joy. We can be here for other people and for ourselves. We can finally fill that sense that ‘something is missing’ and heal the illusion that we are alone.

May we be awake. May we have the courage to be vulnerable and to take action. To have the discipline and the conviction to be true to ourselves. So that we may have the eyes to see and the ears to hear. So that we may spend our days awake, wholeheartedly awake. And that when we come to the end of our days, we can say that we lived a life that was truly our own.

Amen and blessed be.

### *Ritual*

*I'm going to invite you now to participate in a ritual. You have in your order of service a yellow piece of paper. The ushers can bring you pencils Take that piece of paper and write on it two things. First, under the section called release, write whatever it is that keeps you from being awake. What is your vice, your way of going to sleep? For some of us it is emotional, we may be afraid or angry. For others, it's a bad habit or an addiction. Are you holding on, not forgiving? Maybe you're putting things first in your life that take you away from yourself.*

*And then on the lower part of the paper, write what it is that you most hope for. What would it look like for you to fully be awake? Do you have a dream? A hope? Something you've always wanted to do or try? How would it look if you were awake?*

*We'll take a few minutes with this. When you are done, fold your paper over a few times. Fold it so that no one can see what you have written.*

*Just so you know, you will be giving this to another person. They won't read it and they won't keep it. But you will put it in their hands.*

*I'll give you a few minutes now to write.*

*Now, turn to the person behind you. (Not the person you came here with this morning) Take a moment and look into their eyes. See them for the beautiful person they are. Now give each other your papers. Don't read them, just exchange them. Hold that person's paper in your hands, and wish that person well. Wish them all that they wrote down. All that their heart desires.*

*Now I will have everyone come forward and place the paper in the basket at the front of the aisle. When you are finished return to your seat. These wishes will be held in confidence and they will be burned later today. And as they are burned, so may your wishes come true.*