

# AWAKENING QUEST

## *Reflection Paper*



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Master of Arts in Human Development  
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## The Awakening Quest Retreat

In March of 2007, I participated in an Awakening Quest retreat at Starwalkers, a new intentional learning community in rural Northfield, Minnesota that I have been privileged to have a hand in creating. In this retreat, I and the nine other participants came to explore our dreams, to gain insights into our own “allurement” through walks in nature, to share in the telling of stories, and to live intentionally with one another. Meals were prepared and eaten together. Time was spent in both quiet reflection and sharing with one another. This Awakening Quest, according to the facilitators, would be a stepping off point in our own quest to begin to answer the questions, “What is my unique role in the unfolding of the Universe?”



*Galaxy Images courtesy NASA/JPL-Caltech*

In this reflection, I will summarize my experience and insights from my own dream analysis, nature walk, and nature story. As well, I will reflect upon my experience and insights of participating in community for the weekend.

## My Dream - “The Triumphal Departure”

As we began our work with dreams, our facilitator, Mary Flatten, described the “ground rules” for dream sharing.

- I. Your dream is your own - you define the meaning. Others may ask questions for you to draw out your own insights.

2. We do not directly analyze another's dream. We use statements like "If it were my dream, I might think ....."
3. Every dream deserves a title, just like a story.

To begin, we all were to think of a dream that we remember, and hold that dream in our minds. In order to "enter the dream," Mary handed out drums and rhythm instruments, and we began our process of "creating the space" for our dreams to manifest, by drumming and sharing in a 10-15 minute "rhythm jam" exercise. After our drumming naturally came to an close, we were each given large sheets of paper, along with crayons or markers, so that we could illustrate our dream before sharing them with one another.



*"My dream is a recurring one. I am traveling down a long, unpaved, desert road in a bus. The road is in a valley, surrounded by high cliffs on both sides. Atop the cliffs are hundreds, if not thousands of people, dressed in celebratory or ceremonial clothing. Some wear brightly colored robes and head pieces. Some stand firmly, holding flags and banners that flap freely in the hot wind. They are of all races, all ages, and of multiple heritage. To me, they feel to be indigenous to this stripped, hot, and barren land. It is hot, dry, and devoid of water. These 'witnesses'*

*are dear friends that I know very deeply. They are all standing atop the cliffs as I depart alone. They wave and bid me a heart-felt farewell as I leave their land, possibly never to return."*

My interpretation of this dream is very complex, and layered. Often in my dreams, I am visited by people whom I feel a deep connection. We have a shared history. I understand them, and they understand me. Within my dream I can recall shared experiences and memories with the people who surround me. Upon waking, these people, places, and memories cannot be attributed to any "real" persons or places I may know. I often am tormented by the deep connections, memories, and longings between me and friends in this "dream world."

I often ask myself, upon awakening, "Who are these people?" , "What am I to learn from this?" , and "How can I feel this deeply connected to those near me in this 'real' world?"

The interpretation of this dream, along with others, has been slowly brewing and churning in my mind for a number of years. In my adult life, I have found myself moving (and some-

times returning) to many places. Since 1996, I have lived in Iowa, California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. For a time, I would move every two years. My path has been quite “zig-zagged” as I chase dreams and allow my own journey in life to unfold. I have moved to and from Minneapolis to other cities and states three times, and am preparing to once again leave Minneapolis to return to Northfield, MN, where I own a condo that I am currently renting. Participating in this Awakening Quest is in some ways a symptom of the deep pulling in my heart to return to Northfield, and the people there whom I feel a strong connection.

I rarely give myself time to witness “the grass growing beneath my feet.” I make deep connections with people, only to leave them, and travel swiftly to my next destination. The journey is both exciting, yet there is a longing that remains as I leave others behind. I leave possibilities behind. To me, the memories I share with others in my “dream world” may be the reflections in my subconscious of memories and experiences unrealized, had I stayed for a longer period of time.

## Nature Walk - “The Allurement of Grief and Loss”

Prior to our wandering in nature, we were given the opportunity to watch a DVD segment of a lecture by Brian Swimme on the concept of “allurement.” Swimme spoke of the nature of the cosmos to become “attracted” to other stellar objects. This attraction creates the outgrowth of galaxies, solar systems, and the complexities of planetary life forms and the deep symbiosis of nature.

Swimme explains that humans are an outgrowth of nature. They are wild creatures, meant to live among the vast symbiosis of the cosmos. Human beings are part of the ‘allurement’ and creation process that birthed the universe.

Before our nature walk, we were told to find an area in which we felt an “allurement” or an attraction. After arriving in this place of allurement, we were to stay for a time, then ask questions of the objects in nature that we see. Perhaps answers would come to our questions. Perhaps other insights would come about.

My nature walk account:

*After putting on my boots to walk in areas of freshly melted snow, I felt compelled to wander to the outside edges of the woods, beyond the property of Rose Ann and Gene Steenboek, our guests. Along my path downhill to the edges of the woods, I found myself in the thick of thorny bushes. At times they seemed to surround me, making my path to the edge quite meandering. I thought to myself, “This is quite symbolic! In my own life I am continually wanting to carry out a journey to its edges - always pushing the envelope, and ever dodging thorny obstacles.”*



*When I reached the edge of the trees, I saw in the distance what looked to be two trees. They appeared to be leaning against one another, creating the frame of a dwelling. The trees seem to frame the shape of a teepee. This was my destination, about 200 meters from the edge of the woods to my back.*

*I managed to find a path to my left, where I could walk directly to the area. The path was a small, yet dried grassy path between two very muddy fields. My walk was slow, as the area came into closer view. Ahead of*

*me were three trees. My object of "allurement" in the middle, was actually one tree, snapped at its middle. Its top branches fallen over, forming a triangle with the land, showed the snapped and broken wound at the apex.*

*As I approached the fallen tree, I placed my hand upon its trunk. My hand looked so incredibly pale and white against the bark, and I could feel that this tree was all but approaching death. Small branches that came to touch me would break off at the slightest touch. I could see the holes made by bugs and mites permeating nearly every branch. I felt a very distinct wish from this tree. Its wish was to die. Its wish was not a half death of being snapped in half, but one where it could fall into the soil, to give nourishment to the land.*

*I sat beneath the fallen branches for a time. Taking off my jacket, the air seemed incredibly warm and dry. The sun beamed upon me, and I felt that this was a new occurrence for the natural world beneath this tree. No longer would there be a shaded micro-climate for wildflowers, moss, or squirrels to find refuge. The feeling of hot, exposed land, was now prevalent.*

*As I sat, the rustling of grass, straw, and milkweed seemed to bring about a feeling of a percussive ritual to honor a deceased loved one. Nature seemed connected, and the plants and air filled with a feeling of honor and grief.*

*Walking to the tree to the north of my new fallen friend, I pondered on how trees transport and share water from one another through their root system. The "north tree" was smaller, yet had a wide spread*



*of branches. Startlingly, this tree was riddled with holds and fungus from bottom to top. It appeared to have been sick for a long period of time, as if inflicted with a cancer that had spread rapidly to all parts of its flesh. My feeling from this tree was one of slow regret. I felt a longing from it. It wished for a swift and triumphant death from lightning, or any kind of disaster. Not a death like this one - a slow and cancerous demise.*

*The final tree to the south, sat about thirty meters from the middle fallen tree. This tree was healthy. Standing underneath her, I tried to imagine seeing what she saw. She was a bystander, witnessing a tragedy, yet helpless to change the situation. Her top branches seemed to stretch up and outward to the other sick trees, as if she were wanting to grow to provide a presence of shelter.*



*Walking back to the house, I noticed a more direct and open path that led back to the road, yet decided against taking it. I wanted to honor the experience by traveling back through the wooded area. I noticed how my path back seemed more narrow, but much easier to traverse. I crunched through the snow to avoid the many thorns that lined my path originally. In small open patches in the snow, I saw the beginnings of patches of green and growing moss. Life was beginning for Spring, even under the snow. Nature's allure-*

*ment for the sun, creating photosynthesis and life was unfolding again.*

This walk, while unexpected in its outcome, showed me the realities of life and death that I had been avoiding, I fear. For as long as I can remember, I have had a desire to live to the age of 100. It has almost been more of a feeling of expectation, rather than a hope. At 38, I prize the appearance of looking and feeling younger. I'm often guessed between 8-10 years younger than my age.

In many ways, I have never come to terms with the inevitability of my own death. Controlling every factor of death, from the time and place, to my condition, is an illusion. I may indeed live to be 100, but what will that life look like? Will my life's journeys be fulfilled, or will I be constantly searching and looking? Will I be jealous of others' lives or experience (even in death), or will I embrace my journey fully, no matter when my life might end?

## Storytelling - The Art of Listening

Before going to bed our first night, we were given an assignment. The assignment was simple. Recount a story of an experience with nature. Our leader in storytelling, Don, ex-

plained to us that the art of telling a story was not in the talking, but in the listening. At the end of our second night, following our discussion of our walks in nature, we sat in a circle and told stories, and listened. Above all, we listened to one another.

The following is an excerpt of a story I told, based on something I wrote in 1997. The story is a recounting of my last days in California, before moving back to the Midwest to Minnesota. It takes place on Christmas Eve.

*I spent Christmas alone in California. I wasn't sure if it was a good or bad thing. I was looking forward to coming home, yet I was saying goodbye to a significant part of my life. Christmas Eve, I traveled out to the coast to see the ocean one last time. I decided to go at night so that I could be there at midnight, to bring in Christmas the best way I could, being by myself. The moon was full and bright, and I found a place to stop my car and walk to a flat area on top of a high cliff, to look out at the sea. I sat there, looked at the stars, looked out at the ocean, sang a few Christmas songs by myself - just me and the sea. I sat there and thought a lot about the time I'd spent in California, the people I'd met, places I'd been, and what I learned. So many emotions were coursing through me, but the ocean's waves calmed me. I thought to myself, "This ocean has seen so many places, seen life, death, and change. It's still beautiful, and it's still going. Whatever happens - I'm going to be O.K.." I stayed for about an hour, then waved goodbye to the Pacific. I then walked back to my car, and drove home for one last night in California.*

Sharing deep connections with nature, be they profound accounts of passion, tribulation, or humor, was a wonderful experience for me. While the experience was profound, I was left with a saddened feeling. We as people rarely gather in groups to tell stories of our connections to nature, or even to one another. Much of our days are spent relating to media, television, computer screens, iPods, and a consumer based culture. I believe that people are beginning to have a longing to connect with nature once again, yet there is no "platform" easily available to them, because of how media and consumerism have shaped our society.

## An Unexpected Awakening

Reflecting on the weekend as a whole, I felt transported to a very supportive community. Throughout my time at Starwalkers, I left my keys, wallet, money, and cell phone in the confines of my night bag. The time taken to cook, eat, and clean up in this community seemed to flow beautifully into our activities. Sharing food and stories was a joy, not a time-consuming afterthought. Our food was freshly prepared. We created meals instead of simply "heating" them.

After leaving, my partner and I needed to stop at the local food co-op in Northfield to buy a few groceries. Both of us had the feeling that we simply "did not want to be in a store" after

our weekend of sharing. We had stepped back into the prepared, boxed, marketed, consumer-oriented world, and it was a shock to our systems.

However, since returning, we are both remembering our dreams much more, writing them down, drawing them, and counting the days until we return to Northfield. Mary has a dream group that meets once a month on Wednesdays. We'll be saving up our dreams to share in this group!

Finally, it goes without saying, that a wonderful and sacred space was created at Starwalkers that weekend. I have worked with Rose Ann Steenhoek and Olivia Frey in formulating workshops, designing a web page and brochure, and sharing visions for a space where people could come together. In this place we could all explore those questions within us of "What is my unique role in the world? What are my gifts and what am I to do with them?" Our first retreat was a wonderful success, both for the participants, and for Starwalkers. I look forward to more gatherings.

