

Awe-Based Learning

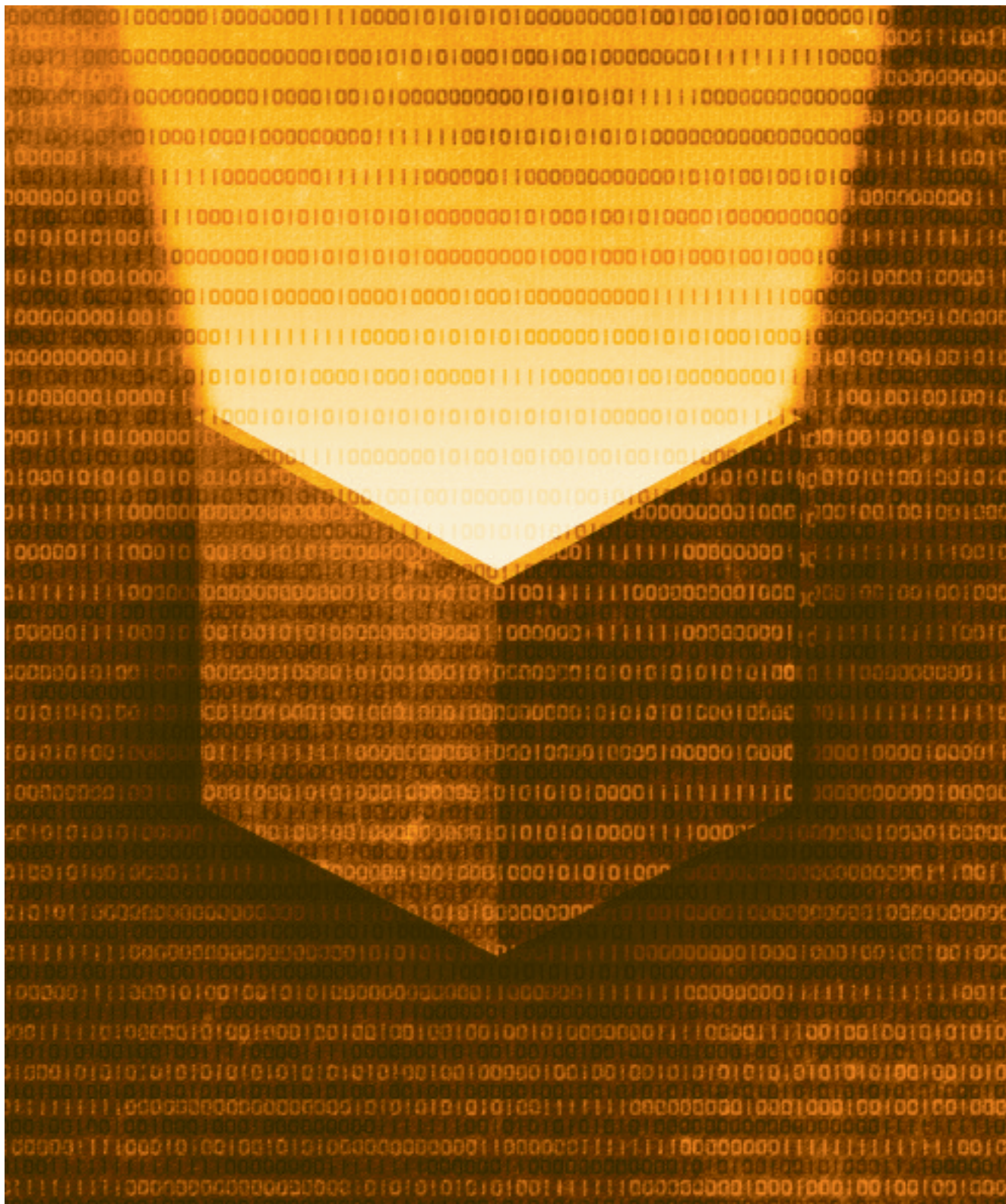
BY KIRK SCHNEIDER

The starting point of consciousness is awe. From the moment we become aware, we become aware of our meagerness. Yet close on the heels of this shuddering sense of despair is a riveting sense of possibility about our lot. As much as we are apart from that which surrounds, we are also a part of it, partners to it. We are thrilled, enthralled, and exalted by our condition as much as it perplexes and overpowers us.

WHAT IS EDUCATIONAL FREEDOM but accessibility for students? It is accessibility at all major levels—from the physiological to the cognitive, and from the interpersonal to the psychospiritual. And what is accessibility ultimately but the back-and-forth tussle between doubt and faith, mystery and passion, and the resultant strengths, resiliencies, and purposes that ensue? Because of our capacity for awe and because it is as much a component of early childhood as of later youth, an awe-based curriculum should be integral from the start of schooling. There would still be a necessity for “nuts and bolts” education, and students would need to acquire the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, but the whole thinking about education would need to transform.

It would move from an emphasis on technical competence to an accent on values, personal meaning and inquiry, and hands-on discovery.

A student interested in becoming a medical doctor, for example, would draw on a bountiful range of awareness. She will have reflected profoundly on history and culture, healing and suffering, and will bring these to bear on her studies. This knowledge will not just be about others but also about her own hard-won realizations and discoveries. It would be rigorously informed by books and dialogues, but also by field trips, forays into museums, drawings, sculptings, and dramatizations. The student’s medical specialty, therefore, is not likely to be a mere skill or tool for external ends, but an integral part of her



© THOMAS FRANCISCO/VEER

interest and calling in the world. The result would be an awe-informed capacity to identify and minister to ill people, not merely to illness.

This is the background for an awe-inspired curriculum. It is a background steeped in “The Great Conversation”—the humility and grandeur of our existence—and it is a background that can both engage and vocationally prepare young inquirers. The net effect of this curriculum would be to challenge students to prioritize not in empty or mechanized routines, but to prioritize richly, roundly, and energetically—with intentionality. By intentionality, I mean a prioritization that evolves from struggle, play, and discovery, and that aligns with one’s innermost core, one’s maximal embodiment, one’s entire spirit. This is the kind of prioritization that animates the hours. This is an ideal, of course, but we could come a lot closer to it if awe were cultivated as we now cultivate conventional “competency” in reading, writing, math, the arts and sciences.

THE AWE OF SCIENCE

In an article published in 1999, educator Wyn Wachhorst asked, “Why...are schools almost bereft of students who sense the larger dimensions of science?... In a universe immense and mysterious beyond imagining, why do so many of our youth wallow in world-weary ignorance?” Wachhorst tells his own story about growing up in the 1940s and 1950s. He cites his “old Uncle George” as the catalyst to measureless moments of joy as his uncle waxed rhapsodically about the fantastic. “One night,” he says, “he told me about the canals on Mars. They might have been built, he said, by an older, wiser civilization heroically trying to delay extinction. It was a wondrous image, a fire in a small boy’s mind.”

One morning under his family’s Christmas tree, Wachhorst recalls, “I found a book of astronomical paintings. . . . In it were silver ships poised needle-nosed on the craggy wastes of other worlds, alien moonscapes bathed in the stark light of some monster planet, and of

course, the rocky green hills of Mars, rolling like the coast of Maine along the great canals, looking over a far desert where ruins stood half in sand. I cut out the pages and communed with the pictures, enshrined on my walls.”

Wachhorst goes on to describe how as a teenager he “drank in” a low-budget, science-fiction thriller and concludes, “From my first real encounter with the cosmos, waking one night at summer camp under a soul-searching canopy of stars, to the day a half-century later when Pathfinder put its rover on the red desert of the real

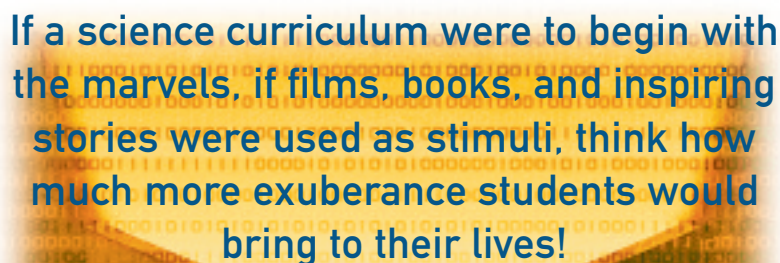
Mars, my deep sense of wonder has owed a great debt to a cracker-barrel story, a mistaken book, and a bad movie.”

Thus we would offer awe-based curricula not only in science but also in math, literature, social studies, physical

education, the arts, and socialization. As Wachhorst suggests, the key is the seedbed, the immersion in “the great mysteries—things strange beyond comprehension—immensities beyond imagination,” and later specialization in that which practically applies or narrows one’s field. If a science curriculum, for example, were to begin with the marvels, if films, books, and inspiring stories were used as stimuli, think how much more exuberance students would bring to their lives!

Take a student of astronomy. Not only would he know the locations, movements, and conditions of planets, he would also know something of how planets have been perceived throughout history in religious treatises and in fictional, classic narratives. He would have access to a spirit of discovery, mystery, and possibility, as well as to formulae, instruments, and tests.

What would these dimensions add? A wealth of affective, intuitive, and philosophical appreciation that standard competency-based programs just could not muster. While such programs help students to perceive fine numerical distinctions and overt occurrences, the awe-based background would supply something radically different—the experience of astronomical phenomena, which includes the gleeful reminiscence of sky-watching; the detection of chills or thrills during routine



If a science curriculum were to begin with the marvels, if films, books, and inspiring stories were used as stimuli, think how much more exuberance students would bring to their lives!

telescopic surveys; the yen for adventure, innovation, and the extraordinary; the resonance with fellow sky-watchers of both scientific and poetic inclination; and the passion for hunches, hypotheses, and imaginative visions.

EXPANDING OUTWARD

Consider further what awe would bring to the careers of geneticists and mental health providers. Consider how humility and boldness, reverence and wonder would color their work. In all likelihood, the awe-informed geneticist would be deeply reflective about the use of his data. He would treat the implications of his data with foresight and sensitivity, not merely dispassion. In all likelihood, he would view genes and behavior as complex, integrative systems, and he would resist efforts to downplay or deny that intricacy. Dogma, puritanism, and political manipulation would also be of great concern to this astute individual, as would extremes of any kind. In as much as he would be ethically attuned, he is likely to welcome others—such as philosophers, psychologists, concerned laypersons—into dialogue about issues of concern. In short, the awe-informed geneticist is likely to neither deny nor zealously promote problematic research, but to act with both wonder and discernment.

Mental health providers would also occupy a much more central role in an awe-based culture. The reason for this—notwithstanding my own biases as a practicing therapist—is that the cultivation of aliveness, depth, and maximal access to experience would be crucial grist for the mill in every major human endeavor in the contexts of marriage, romantic relationships, families, religious affiliations, and professional and recreational organizations. These new providers would be schooled not merely in the vogueish techniques of cognitive and biological science, but also in the holistic, philosophical, and humanitarian modalities of anthropological science. These new service providers, in other words, would be more like doctors of souls than doctors of isolated minds, or bodies, or behaviors. They would be facilitators of the thoughts, feelings, and intuitions that underlie the overt words or mannerisms, and they would help bring underlying potentialities into practical realization. These facilitators would draw upon subtly nuanced, rigorously performed qualitative investigations of life to arbitrate and help guide their practices.

These examples are but a few of the literally millions that could be considered. Consider, for example, the

impact of such an education for the atmosphere of the workplace. Think of all the subtle aspects of an awe-based background—the elevations of mood, energy, physical and mental health, motivation for the job, sense of freedom to imagine and create and to collaborate with co-workers. And what of the freedom to simply “be,” if that is what is needed? Or what of the opportunity to grapple with conflicts with co-workers in the relative safety of professionally led groups or therapeutic settings? All of these possibilities and more would be available in the revolutionary new workspace of humility and boldness, respect and autonomy.

As for the new domestic and social spaces affected by the awe-based frame, these, too, would transform. Consider the working mom who has time for her children or the stay-at-home dad who feels nourished by both work and family. Consider the enrichment of the children who are impacted by such dispositions—the love, guidance, and validation they would receive. Consider the enrichment of relationships generally when relatively fulfilled and aware people interact with one another—the spirit that is shared, the substantive issues that are explored, and the accessibility that is offered.

These new service providers would be more like doctors of souls than doctors of isolated minds.

At a time when educators are being pressed to “teach to the test,” and students are being harangued to “learn for the grade” (or for the corporation or the military), an awe-based educational curriculum would seem timely. It is only through contact with the bigger picture that individuals—as well as societies—will open to the adventure of life. 🌍

KIRK SCHNEIDER, PhD, is a psychologist, president of the Existential-Humanistic Institute, and a faculty member of Saybrook Graduate School. In late 2005, he will become editor of the *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*. This article was adapted from his book, *Rediscovery of Awe* (Paragon House, 2004). For more about Kirk's work on awe and spirituality, go to www.spiritual-progressives.org.

