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## Awakening

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# Awakening

*Wendy Reynolds*





W e had met before when seed met egg, when one life had burst forth from another. He was there through early tears, fevers, and tantrums. He stayed long enough to leave me with an impression of a strong-nosed face, the muddled sound of a thick Boston accent, and the warmth of a paternal embrace. I took those memories with me, reliving them as I traveled through moist, green mountains and small, lifeless towns to the modest home of Bob Boyd, my estranged parent. It would be our first meeting as cognizant beings, an opportunity to soak up his absent essence and mold it into the cracks and crevices of my broken soul. With watery eyes, my mother left me in his care, relinquishing her only child for a week to a man she had once loved but had never trusted. It was on this day that I learned about the serpent; its quiescent coil and the violent release that forever altered my father's psyche. After I was settled in, my father sat down with me and explained that he was different from other people, something of a mystic or holy man. He had experienced a Kundalini awakening—the release of a life force that resides at the base of the spine in the form of a coiled serpent. My father described this experience as a “powerful white light” that illuminates a being “like the sun,” and thereafter allows “an energy to flow up the spine

*“I sit in  
ecstasy, every  
prick of  
the needle  
sending a  
white light  
of energy  
flowing up  
my spine  
to my mind,  
exploding.”*

nonstop.” Once the serpent had been awakened and the energy released, my father was “tuned in to the frequencies of the ruler of time and space” and he held a connection with a higher power—not a direct line, but more of an open awareness. Like how the man with a metal plate in his skull picks up the local news, my father picked up the humming and throbbing of the universe, the connectedness of his existence and the mirror maze of lives reaching forward and backwards, blurring into inextricable oneness. His open heart poured compassion and loving kindness on all who crossed his path. He was one of the enlightened.

Feeling frightened by the energy surge and believing certain side effects were making him uncomfortable, my father sought help from various yoga instructors, shamans, and holistic healers. However, none of them could guide him, and a majority had said he just needed rest, that this was an abnormal Kundalini experience—a crisis. They told him the Kundalini awakening sometimes causes symptoms such as sleeplessness, irritability, swirling thoughts, changes in lifestyle, an increase or decrease in sexual energy, difficulty maintaining a job, relationship troubles, excessive energy, and shifts in mood. Nobody suggested counseling or medical attention. The yoga community celebrated his awakening and encouraged him to embrace his newly acquired sensitivity, hoping the associated negative side effects would pass. They ignored his pain and fear, never mentioning that “religious and spiritual experiences usually are not distressing to the individual and do not require treatment of any kind” as a Western therapist might have advised (Lukoff 41).

Following the awakening, my father’s academic life crumbled, stating “after a year or two, it became difficult for me to focus on



studying without feeling like my mind would come unhinged,” and as a result, he was unable to finish college. He experienced severe headaches and impulse control problems during his high-energy phases, moving residences frequently and marrying four times. The rest of his life was spent alternating between periods of high energy and low, tormented energy until he figured out how to modify his moods and maintain a moderate amount of control over his body. Starting a forum for those who had also experienced Kundalini, my father provided a safe place where people could share their awakening stories without judgment and he could warn them of the associated dangers.

When I returned home and shared my father’s story with my stepfather, a psychiatric nurse schooled in Western medicine, he shouted, “That’s ridiculous! Is he out of his mind? You’re not going back there, the man is insane! Psychotic!” To convince my mother of the potential danger of allowing me to visit my father, my stepfather pulled out the *DSM-IV—The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*—and looked up the definition of psychosis. Reading from the book with authority, he listed the symptoms as “grandiose delusions, hallucinations, and social dysfunction.” He then exclaimed, “That’s him! It’s all right there. He’s probably manic-depressive, schizoid, or delusional. He’s not normal!”

In spite of my stepfather’s concern and medical “proof,” I was not convinced. I had spent a week with my father and he seemed otherwise normal, having been nothing but kind. He was intelligent, interesting, quirky, held a full-time job, and had neighborhood friends. I knew he was not insane. What was wrong with him believing he had connected with a higher power? Would he benefit from

a label of mental illness? Or would it hurt him, further damaging his quality of life? At that time, I preferred the story of a Kundalini awakened father to that of a mentally ill father.

My own doubts about my father’s experience and his mental health did not arise until my twenty-fifth year, when I had an awakening of my own during a seedy tattoo session.

A mangy man with a weeping wound rests a breath away from me, leaning his dandruff ridden and grease-decorated body against my pristine black t-shirt. He is missing several teeth, has sores on his hands, and twin fetuses tattooed on his stomach—blue and red blobs. They’re watching me from his bloated belly, distended, diseased, dangling dangerously over his worn-out jeans. I sit in ecstasy, every prick of the needle sending a white light of energy flowing up my spine to my mind, exploding. My filthy companion suddenly develops a yellow haze around his body; is he glowing or am I? Maybe my light energy is reflecting off his red, splotchy skin. It might be my last real moment or my first. I leave the chair and hug my amazing artist. Everything is blurry, foggy. I’m glowing, floating, and full of bliss. Suggestive, seductive, sedative.

Months later, I am getting a physical and being tested for every condition imaginable. I’m horrified, convinced I have a disease from the irrational, possibly illegal, and filthy ink exchange. I question why I did those things and what the white-light energy experience was. Could it be related to Kundalini? Am I crazy? It takes a few years for me to realize that therapy might help, but I finally muster the courage and make an appointment.

I sit on a wicker couch and look at my therapist perched on her chair, looking down her beak at me with compassionate but judgmental

Layout by Madison Firkey. Photograph by Kyra Lucas Semien.

eyes. I tell her about my experiences and she asks about my parents. I disclose I do not know much about my father because we had limited visitation. I tell her that he is an interesting character—he used to wear a suit to the beach and unabashedly entertain strange women in our home. He is spiritual and mystical, having experienced a Kundalini awakening. She arches her eyebrow in obvious disbelief. She believes I have bipolar disorder and mentions my father has classic symptoms of this disorder as well.

I didn't accept her diagnosis and asked for some explanation. We had previously agreed that I met the criteria for depression, but bipolar disorder had a frightening sound to it.

The idea I was unstable did not sit well with me. She told me bipolar mania, or hypomania, involves behaving impulsively and engaging in pleasurable, high-risk behaviors. When a person is in a manic state, they can become psychotic and that often involves believing they have special powers. In all of its forms, bipolar disorder is characterized by unusual shifts in mood, energy, and behavior, from the high of mania or hypomania to low, depressed states and everything in-between. If left untreated, it can result in damaged relationships, poor job or school performance, and even suicide (NIMH RSS).

I think back to my periods of multiple affairs followed by many months of anorgasmia and disinterest in sex leading to damaged relationships, as well as my uncharacteristic tattoo experience, extreme high energy in which I talked all night, the weeks when I could barely get out of bed, the fluctuations in my weight from unhealthily thin to obese, and excessive spending. None of these experiences stood out to me as being particularly dangerous or outside the realm of sanity. Maybe some were a little weird,

others a bit risky, but now that I am labeled as crazy, can I trust my judgment? Could my father be trusted as the narrator of his story?

My therapist then revealed bipolar disorder tends to run in families and has links to schizophrenia. It occurs to me that my father's family is saturated with mental illness. Both his parents were admitted to mental institutions for severe depression. His grandparents were crippled by drug and alcohol addictions, as well as undefined mental health problems. His brother suffers from schizophrenia, his sister is an alcoholic depressive, and his other daughter is medicated for major depressive disorder. My therapist told me it is not unusual for a person with bipolar disorder, or other disorders where psychosis can be involved, to believe their mental illness is a spiritual awakening.

I went home feeling confused and frightened by her diagnosis, questioning everything. I began to research the topic and found the journal article "Physio Kundalini Syndrome and Mental Health" by A. Valanciute & L.A. Thampy, which acknowledges confusion surrounding the understanding of Kundalini and whether or not it is a psychosis. The research suggests the boundary between spiritual awakening and mental illness lies in the realm of the individual's behavior post-awakening. Valanciute and Thampy state, "A majority of the Eastern-centred spiritual practices are based on the attainment of a state of spiritual sublimation, inner peace and tranquillity whilst at the same time maintaining normal social integration and functioning" (Valanciute & Thampy 81). The article proposes that in order for an awakening to be considered pathological, it must have a negative impact on an individual's ability to hold down a job, fulfill obliga-

tions, and lead to strange behavior or cause problems with thinking clearly. I reflected upon my father's situation, remembered his suffering and inability to conform to society's expectations, losing the ability to acquire an education and living a disorganized life. I was still not convinced he was suffering from a mental illness, but it was starting to become hard to fight the diagnosis.

Ellen Forney, an artist diagnosed with bipolar disorder, chooses to embrace her diagnosis and celebrate the unique abilities associated with it in her graphic memoir *Marbles: Mania, Depression, Michelangelo + Me*. I found striking parallels between her life, my father's, and my own, and discovered she had a similar tattoo experience to mine, including white-light energy. Although she does not mention Kundalini specifically, she depicts a bright white-light electrical charge traveling through her body in the illustrations (Forney 3). In *Marbles*, Forney celebrates the positive aspects of her bipolar disorder, while acknowledging the dangers associated with it and the satisfaction and balance she found in life after her experience with therapy and medicine (Forney 195). This approach could be a step in the right direction for therapeutic care, allowing the patient to maintain a strong sense of self-esteem, while helping to reduce suffering through guided reflection and possibly medication.

Despite my resistance to a diagnosis, I admit therapy has helped me find stability and meaning in my life; however, at first the label of mental illness made me feel like I was less than normal. It seems as though the tendency to use language that excludes individuals from normalcy could be a barrier to those who are seeking help. My father should not be stripped

of his Kundalini experience, which brought him a sense of personal satisfaction and self-worth, but rather offered a treatment plan allowing for flexibility and freedom to maintain his spiritual identity and creative self-expression while simultaneously receiving treatment. Would my father's life have been different if he had explored the possibility that his situation was beyond spiritual? Who would we both be today if we did not have the story of Kundalini? In my opinion we would be more aware human beings, but we would be deprived of a fascinating story and a sense of uniqueness that has propelled both of us through troubling times. With education and appropriate open-minded shifts in the process of therapy, we could retain our spirituality and develop the ability to function normally within our culture, which seems like a perfect balance.

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