

Joan Tollifson's new book *Awake in the Heartland - The Ecstasy of What Is*

Is it possible to be a mindless, swooning bhakti devoted to the rain, the traffic, the wind in the leaves, the utter simplicity of bare awareness? (p113)

This autobiographical account of her life is presented to us as an exploration into the possibility of happiness. It opens with the author's move to a noisy, polluted midwestern city, Chicago, a choice made against the alternative of retiring to a peaceful retreat centre in the country. As she points out, this is a perfect metaphor for her message – finding truth – and discovering it here in the middle of our daily activities, not as the result of escaping to some idealized environment or via some elaborate process.

Joan's story takes the reader through her life in relationship with friends, neighbours, teachers and her struggle with addictions of various kinds. She points out that the 'search for truth' can also be understood as a form of addiction. These sub-stories are interspersed with descriptions of the natural world, gently reminding the reader that 'this is it'. She is so frank about her own struggles and so perceptive in identifying the temptations and self-delusion of the search that I found her speaking for me many times as I read her book. It is, in a way, a contemporary Pilgrim's Progress, not progress towards some transcendent otherness but a progressive uncovering of what is ever the case.

She bravely exposes her uncertainties as well as her certainty and thereby reveals them both as part of the flow.

Before attempting this personal response I asked myself four questions: what is the aim of the book? what distinguishes it from other books in the present outpouring? does it deal with the 'How' of what it proposes? And does the book achieve its aim?

What is the aim of the book? In the author's words: *It's not about finding an answer. It's about that aliveness that can't be objectified or grasped..... We hear about transcendental experiences, Kundalini explosions, ultimate attainments and final breakthroughs, and we long to have what we have heard described. We get lost in the complexity, the promises, the search. I'm not opposed to any of those things if you enjoy them. But they aren't any more spiritual than a seat on a city bus at rush hour. What I'm talking about is fully present right now, right here in Chicago, or wherever you happen to be at this very moment.*

I am very sympathetic to that approach and the above words could be used to summarize the collection of material I've assembled on the Capacitie website to which I'm now happy to add some of Joan's work. It's about awakening to being, a recovery of the life we tend to lose in living.

What distinguishes it from others in the present outpouring of books of this genre?

It is intensely personal and the ordinariness of this very personal story provides the emphasis which enables Joan to unveil the extraordinary in her life which is the life of every person; the extraordinary which is simply the ordinary veiled by habitual ignorance or overlooking what is here. To put it another way, the personal is experienced to the point where the impersonal is no longer excluded. As Andrew Cohen pointed out to us a few years ago in Rishikesh, when we finally come upon the impersonal, we find it to be the most truly personal. By which I assume he meant that we discover what we really are.

Does it deal with the 'How' of what is proposed? It's all very well to talk about liberation, happiness and so forth but the libraries are full to overflowing with descriptions and explanations, not to mention the religions of the world, which provide us with belief systems as an alternative to actually experiencing what they claim to be on about.

In her opening remarks Joan says: This book is about stepping into the unknown. As far as I'm concerned, real spirituality is about having no answers at all. It is about living without formulas,

without conclusions, without beliefs, without comforting ideas, without saviours. It has nothing to do with being a perfect person or having everything neatly resolved. It isn't about arriving anywhere, other than where you are now.

So how do you arrive at exactly where you already are? An absurd question but many of us have set out on such crazy journeys and Joan, interpreting her own journey, shows that our persistence in such folly merely emphasizes that we are in love with our journey rather than content to be – to be in love. The how of it is clearly presented throughout the book. There is a danger that what Joan is asking us to share is so obvious and accessible that we might not recognize it as a 'how' at all and dismiss it with, "so what, there's nothing here I don't know about already". Which, if I understand her, is the point. It is not about knowing but about seeing and being. My explanations, descriptions, interpretations and beliefs are what prevent me from 'enjoying the world aright' – from awakening.

It is a pity that a book as rich in content as this doesn't run to a couple of extra pages of index to help readers return to issues of particular interest to us. I suppose the argument is that the book must be taken as a whole, but the whole from the reader's perspective is at one level the sum of its parts. I would like to return to such 'parts' as the illusion of enlightenment as a personal acquisition, choice, nothing, the key to transformation, simplicity, guru dependency, meaning, perfection and belief just to mention a few of the subjects she covers, without endless page-turning. There are references to and quotations by many people whose work has appeared in the Nowletter and it would be helpful to pin-point Joan's connections to these people as well as their wise words, through index entries.

The book opens with an anecdote which, for me, captures both the essence of the book and what I believe to be at the heart of things.

One day at the post office in Oakland, I saw a little girl, who was maybe four or five years old, in line with her mother. The little girl was totally alive, looking at everything with amazement. She ran to the wastebasket in the corner and gazed down into it as if into a sea of jewels. She was ecstatic. The mother kept pulling the girl back, telling her to stop this and stop that. Every other word the mother said was "stop" or "don't."

Finally they are up at the window, and at the next window there is another mother who has a little baby in a basket sitting on the floor beside her. The first little girl stands beside the basket, and the baby and the girl gaze unabashedly into one another's eyes with total absorption. The mother of the little girl again pulls her back. As they leave, the little girl waves goodbye to the baby as if to her dearest friend.

It was such a clear display of the unobstructed love, wonder, and awareness that is naturally here, and the process of human socialization which trains us to pull back from this aliveness, to stop looking, to stop being ecstatic, to close down. We learn to shut down and to live more and more in a mental world of ideas, so that by the time we are adults we are uncomfortable looking for too long into a stranger's eyes. And it would never occur to us to run up to a wastebasket and actually see what's inside it as something we'd never seen before, with curiosity and interest. Because by the time we're adults, we think we know what's in there. We've got a word for it. It's garbage. We don't see it any more. And we don't see one another, or the love between us, because we're afraid of it. We've learned that a person who would look with wonder into a public wastebasket, or too long into a stranger's eyes, is a crazy person, a mad person. We're afraid to be in love, except in the allowable, relatively safe confines of romantic relationships, or perhaps in rare moments of communion with babies and very young children. For the most part, we're cool, detached, afraid of the natural ecstasy of being.

Our lives feel empty. We long for the spontaneity, joy, and wonder that we seem to have lost. We take workshops and consume mind-altering substances to regain it. We undertake rigorous meditation practices and throw ourselves at the feet of exotic gurus. We run up enormous visa bills, looking for what is simplest and most ordinary, for what is always already here.

When we finally “get it,” we get nothing at all. We have not arrived at some fascinating foreign place. We’re exactly where we always have been - right here. Here is all there is. But when we’re looking for something else, we don’t see how extraordinary here actually is. We’re preoccupied.

Here and now is alive. It’s the only thing that actually is. In the clear light of present awareness, whatever appears is vibrant, beautiful, sacred. The vibrancy, the beauty is in the awareness, in the presence, not in the object.

Yes, and the joy of it is that if I am awake to what is going on, the wonder in the situation Joan describes also encompasses me as beholder. We all have such experiences on a daily basis, it is endless, it is called life. I was wakened this morning by the liquid notes of a Shrike Thrush and the rat-tat-tatting of its beak on the window as it tried to drive its reflection off its territory. First the beautiful bird call and the tapping, just sounds and listening, but followed almost

immediately by switch-off into explanation of what is happening as I have now written it here. A mini-dismissal of life which sets the scene for the day.

In answer to my final question, Joan has obviously achieved her aims. This is the book I would offer to the people who wonder what I am on about, especially those who see the spiritual as confined to its expression in formal religious systems and recoil accordingly. As I put her book down after reading it for the second time I felt as though I’d had a great conversation with myself. Interesting, well-written, a good read with a permanent place on my shelf for future reference. I’ll end with her concluding sentences:

This awakening is absolutely simple. There is literally nothing to it. It is what is, just as it is.

Alan Mann

P.S. from Margot

I like this book. It’s one of the few books of its kind that I have ever finished, mostly because I was interested in Joan’s story, which she uses to illustrate her philosophy. And she writes well - a big plus and a nice change from some of the rubbish penned by would-be gurus I’ve dipped into.

She doesn’t tell me how to live my life, so much as show me how she has lived her’s: her very personal account is endearingly honest and reveals a real person, unlike some others of the genre, who offer nothing of themselves as people, but seem to think they know what I need to do.

Besides, her philosophy is so attractively simple – this is it, enjoy it (or not.)

Margot Mann

Where do you get it?

Ordering Information

Because Joan Tollifson’s book *Awake in the Heartland* is a self-published, print-on-demand book, it will not have the distribution and publicity afforded by a traditional publisher. Most bookstores will not stock it, so it will not be on display everywhere. All review and promotional copies are sent out at the author’s expense. This book will depend largely on word of mouth to make itself known to prospective readers.

[Awake in the Heartland](#) is a 252 page paperback and costs \$19 (US)

You will probably get the quickest service and the lowest price by ordering directly from Trafford, the publisher. You can order on-line through the website (www.trafford.com), or call toll-free (US

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