

# AWARENESS

*A de Mello Spirituality Conference  
in His Own Words*

ANTHONY DE MELLO, S.J.  
Edited by J. Francis Stroud, S. J.

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## ***FOREWORD***

Tony de Mello on an occasion among friends was asked to say a few words about the nature of his work. He stood up, told a story which he repeated later in conferences, and which you will recognize from his book *Song of the Bird*. To my astonishment, he said this story applied to me.

A man found an eagle's egg and put it in a nest of a barnyard hen. The eaglet hatched with the brood of chicks and grew up with them.

All his life the eagle did what the barnyard chicks did, thinking he was a barnyard chicken. He scratched the earth for worms and insects. He clucked and cackled. And he would thrash his wings and fly a few feet into the air.

Years passed and the eagle grew very old. One day he saw a magnificent bird above him in the cloudless sky. It glided in graceful majesty among the powerful wind currents, with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings.

The old eagle looked up in awe. "Who's that?" he asked.

"That's the eagle, the king of the birds," said his neighbor. "He belongs to the sky. We belong to the earth—we're chickens." So the eagle lived and died a chicken, for that's what he thought he was.

Astonished? At first I felt downright insulted! Was he publicly likening me to a barnyard chicken? In a sense, yes, and also, no. Insulting? Never. That wasn't Tony's way. But he was telling me and these people that in his eyes I was a "golden eagle," unaware of the heights to which I could soar. This story made me understand the measure of the man, his genuine love and respect for people while always telling the truth. That was what his work was all about, waking people up to the reality of their greatness. This was Tony de Mello at his best, proclaiming the message of "awareness," seeing the light we are to ourselves and to others, recognizing we are better than we know.

This book captures Tony in flight, doing just that—in live dialogue and interaction—touching on all the themes that enliven the hearts of those who listen.

Maintaining the spirit of his live words, and sustaining his spontaneity with a responsive audience on the printed page was the task I faced after his death. Thanks to the wonderful support I enjoyed from George McCauley, S.J., Joan Brady, John Culkin, and others too numerous to single out, the exciting, entertaining, provocative hours Tony spent communicating with real people have been wonderfully captured in the pages that follow.

Enjoy the book. Let the words slip into your soul and listen, as Tony would suggest, with your heart. Hear his stories, and you'll hear your own. Let me leave you alone with Tony—a spiritual guide—a friend you will have for life.

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## ***ON WAKING UP***

Spirituality means waking up. Most people, even though they don't know it, are asleep. They're born asleep, they live asleep, they marry in their sleep, they breed children in their sleep, they die in their sleep without ever waking up. They never understand the loveliness and the beauty of this thing that we call human existence. You know, all mystics—Catholic, Christian, non-Christian, no matter what their theology, no matter what their religion—are unanimous on one thing: that all is well, all is well. Though everything is a mess, all is well. Strange paradox, to be sure. But, tragically, most people never get to see that all is well because they are asleep. They are having a nightmare.

Last year on Spanish television I heard a story about this gentleman who knocks on his son's door. "Jaime," he says, "wake up!" Jaime answers, "I don't want to get up, Papa." The father shouts, "Get up, you have to go to school." Jaime says, "I don't want to go to school." "Why not?" asks the father. "Three reasons," says Jaime. "First, because it's so dull; second, the kids tease me; and third, I hate school." And the father says, "Well, I am going to give you three reasons why you must go to school. First, because it is your duty; second, because you are forty-five years old, and third, because you are the headmaster." Wake up, wake up! You've grown up. You're too big to be asleep. Wake up! Stop playing with your toys.

Most people tell you they want to get out of kindergarten, but don't believe them. Don't believe them! All they want you to do is to mend their broken toys. "Give me back my wife. Give me back my job. Give me back my money. Give me back my reputation, my success." This is what they want; they want their toys replaced. That's all. Even the best psychologist will tell you that, that people don't really want to be cured. What they want is relief; a cure is painful.

Waking up is unpleasant, you know. You are nice and comfortable in bed. It's irritating to be woken up. That's the reason the wise guru will not attempt to wake people up. I hope I'm going to be wise here and make no attempt whatsoever to wake you up if you are asleep. It is really none of my business, even though I say to you at times, "Wake up!" My business is to do my thing, to dance my dance. If you profit from it, fine; if you don't, too bad! As the Arabs say, "The nature of rain is the same, but it makes thorns grow in the marshes and flowers in the gardens."

## ***WILL I BE OF HELP TO YOU IN THIS RETREAT?***

Do you think I am going to help anybody? No! Oh, no, no, no, no, no! Don't expect me to be of help to anyone. Nor do I expect to damage anyone. If you are damaged, you did it; and if you are helped, you did it. You really did! You think people help you? They don't. You think people support you? They don't.

There was a woman in a therapy group I was conducting once. She was a religious sister. She said to me, "I don't feel supported by my superior." So I said, "What do you

mean by that?” And she said, “Well, my superior, the provincial superior, never shows up at the novitiate where I am in charge, never. She never says a word of appreciation.” I said to her, “All right, let’s do a little role playing. Pretend I know your provincial superior. In fact, pretend I know exactly what she thinks about you. So I say to you (acting the part of the provincial superior), ‘You know, Mary, the reason I don’t come to that place you’re in is because it is the one place in the province that is trouble-free—no problems. I know you’re in charge, so all is well.’ How do you feel now?” She said, “I feel great.” Then I said to her, “All right, would you mind leaving the room for a minute or two. This is part of the exercise.” So she did. While she was away, I said to the others in the therapy group, “I am still the provincial superior, O.K.? Mary out there is the worst novice director I have ever had in the whole history of the province. In fact, the reason I don’t go to the novitiate is because I can’t bear to see what she is up to. It’s simply awful. But if I tell her the truth, it’s only going to make those novices suffer all the more. We are getting somebody to take her place in a year or two; we are training someone. In the meantime I thought I would say those nice things to her to keep her going. What do you think of that?” They answered, “Well, it was really the only thing you could do under the circumstances.” Then I brought Mary back into the group and asked her if she still felt great. “Oh yes,” she said. Poor Mary! She thought she was being supported when she wasn’t. The point is that most of what we feel and think we conjure up for ourselves in our heads, including this business of being helped by people.

Do you think you help people because you are in love with them? Well, I’ve got news for you. You are never in love with anyone. You’re only in love with your prejudiced and hopeful idea of that person. Take a minute to think about that: You are never in love with anyone, you’re in love with your prejudiced idea of that person. Isn’t that how you fall out of love? Your idea changes, doesn’t it? “How could you let me down when I trusted you so much?” you say to someone. Did you really trust them? You never trusted anyone. Come off it! That’s part of society’s brainwashing. You never trust anyone. You only trust your judgment about that person. So what are you complaining about? The fact is that you don’t like to say, “My judgment was lousy.” That’s not very flattering to you, is it? So you prefer to say, “How could you have let me down?”

So there it is: People don’t really want to grow up, people don’t really want to change, people don’t really want to be happy. As someone so wisely said to me, “Don’t try to make them happy, you’ll only get in trouble. Don’t try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and it irritates the pig.” Like the businessman who goes into a bar, sits down, and sees this fellow with a banana in his ear—a banana in his ear! And he thinks, “I wonder if I should mention that to him. No, it’s none of my business.” But the thought nags at him. So after having a drink or two, he says to the fellow, “Excuse me, ah, you’ve got a banana in your ear.” The fellow says, “What?” The businessman repeats, “You’ve got a banana in your ear.” Again the fellow says, “What was that?” “You’ve got a banana in your ear!” the businessman shouts. “Talk louder,” the fellow says, “I’ve got a banana in my ear!”

So it’s useless. “Give up, give up, give up,” I say to myself. Say your thing and get out of here. And if they profit, that’s fine, and if they don’t, too bad!

## ***ON THE PROPER KIND OF SELFISHNESS***

The first thing I want you to understand, if you really want to wake up, is that you don't want to wake up. The first step to waking up is to be honest enough to admit to yourself that you don't like it. You don't want to be happy. Want a little test? Let's try it. It will take you exactly one minute. You could close your eyes while you're doing it or you could keep them open. It doesn't really matter. Think of someone you love very much, someone you're close to, someone who is precious to you, and say to that person in your mind, "I'd rather have happiness than have you." See what happens. "I'd rather be happy than have you. If I had a choice, no question about it, I'd choose happiness." How many of you felt selfish when you said this? Many, it seems. See how we've been brainwashed? See how we've been brainwashed into thinking, "How could I be so selfish?" But look at who's being selfish. Imagine somebody saying to *you*, "How could you be so selfish that you'd choose happiness over me?" Would you not feel like responding, "Pardon me, but how could *you* be so selfish that *you* would demand I choose you above my own happiness?!"

A woman once told me that when she was a child her Jesuit cousin gave a retreat in the Jesuit church in Milwaukee. He opened each conference with the words: "The test of love is sacrifice, and the gauge of love is unselfishness." That's marvelous! I asked her, "Would you want me to love you at the cost of my happiness?" "Yes," she answered. Isn't that delightful? Wouldn't that be wonderful? *She* would love me at the cost of *her* happiness and *I* would love her at the cost of *my* happiness, and so you've got *two* unhappy people, but *long live love!*

## ***ON WANTING HAPPINESS***

I was saying that we don't want to be happy. We want other things. Or let's put it more accurately: We don't want to be unconditionally happy. I'm ready to be happy *provided* I have this and that and the other thing. But this is really to say to our friend or to our God or to anyone, "You are my happiness. *If I don't get you*, I refuse to be happy." It's so important to understand that. We cannot imagine being happy without those conditions. That's pretty accurate. We cannot conceive of being happy without them. We've been taught to place our happiness in them.

So that's the first thing we need to do if we want to come awake, which is the same thing as saying: if we want to love, if we want freedom, if we want joy and peace and spirituality. In that sense, spirituality is the most practical thing in the whole wide world. I challenge anyone to think of anything more practical than spirituality as I have defined it—not piety, not devotion, not religion, not worship, but spirituality—waking up, waking up! Look at the heartache everywhere, look at the loneliness, look at the fear, the confusion, the conflict in the hearts of people, inner conflict, outer conflict. Suppose somebody gave you a way of getting rid of all of that? Suppose somebody gave you a way to stop that tremendous drainage of energy, of health, of emotion that comes from



these conflicts and confusion. Would you want that? Suppose somebody showed us a way whereby we would truly love one another, and be at peace, be at love. Can you think of anything more practical than that? But, instead, you have people thinking that big business is more practical, that politics is more practical, that science is more practical. What's the earthly use of putting a man on the moon when *we* cannot live on the earth?

## ***ARE WE TALKING ABOUT PSYCHOLOGY IN THIS SPIRITUALITY COURSE?***

Is psychology more practical than spirituality? Nothing is more practical than spirituality. What can the poor psychologist do? He can only relieve the pressure. I'm a psychologist myself, and I practice psychotherapy, and I have this great conflict within me when I have to choose sometimes between psychology and spirituality. I wonder if that makes sense to anybody here. It didn't make sense to me for many years.

I'll explain. It didn't make sense to me for many years until I suddenly discovered that people have to suffer *enough* in a relationship so that they get disillusioned with *all* relationships. Isn't that a terrible thing to think? They've got to suffer *enough* in a relationship before they wake up and say, "I'm sick of it! There must be a better way of living than depending on another human being." And what was I doing as a psychotherapist? People were coming to me with their relationship problems, with their communication problems, etc., and sometimes what I did was a help. But sometimes, I'm sorry to say, it wasn't, because it kept people asleep. Maybe they should have suffered a little *more*. Maybe they ought to touch rock bottom and say, "I'm sick of it *all*." It's only when you're sick of your sickness that you'll get out of it. Most people go to a psychiatrist or a psychologist to get relief. I repeat: to get relief. Not to get out of it.

There's the story of little Johnny who, they say, was mentally retarded. But evidently he wasn't, as you'll learn from this story. Johnny goes to modeling class in his school for special children and he gets his piece of putty and he's modeling it. He takes a little lump of putty and goes to a corner of the room and he's playing with it. The teacher comes up to him and says, "Hi, Johnny." And Johnny says, "Hi." And the teacher says, "What's that you've got in your hand?" And Johnny says, "This is a lump of cow dung." The teacher asks, "What are you making out of it?" He says, "I'm making a teacher."

The teacher thought, "Little Johnny has regressed." So she calls out to the principal, who was passing by the door at that moment, and says, "Johnny has regressed."

So the principal goes up to Johnny and says, "Hi, son." And Johnny says, "Hi." And the principal says, "What do you, have in your hand?" And he says, "A lump of cow dung." "What are you making out of it?" And he says, "A principal."

The principal thinks that this is a case for the school psychologist. "Send for the psychologist!"

The psychologist is a clever guy. He goes up and says, "Hi." And Johnny says, "Hi." And the psychologist says, "I know what you've got in your hand." "What?" "A lump of cow dung." Johnny says, "Right." "And I know what you're making out of it." "What?"

“You’re making a psychologist.” “Wrong. Not enough cow dung!” And they called him mentally retarded!

The poor psychologists, they’re doing a good job. They really are. There are times when psychotherapy is a tremendous help, because when you’re on the verge of going insane, raving mad, you’re about to become either a psychotic or a mystic. That’s what the mystic is, the opposite of the lunatic. Do you know one sign that you’ve woken up? It’s when you are asking yourself, “Am I crazy, or are all of them crazy?” It really is. Because we are crazy. The whole world is crazy. Certifiable lunatics! The only reason we’re not locked up in an institution is that there are so many of us. So we’re crazy. We’re living on crazy ideas about love, about relationships, about happiness, about joy, about everything. We’re crazy to the point, I’ve come to believe, that if everybody agrees on something, you can be sure it’s wrong! Every new idea, every great idea, when it first began was in a minority of one. That man called Jesus Christ—minority of one. Everybody was saying something different from what he was saying. The Buddha—minority of one. Everybody was saying something different from what he was saying. I think it was Bertrand Russell who said, “Every great idea starts out as a blasphemy.” That’s well and accurately put. You’re going to hear lots of blasphemies during these days. “He hath blasphemed!” Because people are crazy, they’re lunatics, and the sooner you see this, the better for your mental and spiritual health. Don’t trust them. Don’t trust your best friends. Get disillusioned with your best friends. They’re very clever. As *you* are in your dealings with everybody else, though you probably don’t know it. Ah, you’re so wily, and subtle, and clever. You’re putting on a great act.

I’m not being very complimentary here, am I? But I repeat: You want to wake up. You’re putting on a great act. And you don’t even know it. You think you’re being so loving. Ha! Whom are you loving? Even your self-sacrifice gives you a good feeling, doesn’t it? “I’m sacrificing myself! I’m living up to my ideal.” But you’re getting something out of it, aren’t you? You’re always getting something out of everything you do, until you wake up.

So there it is: step one. Realize that you don’t want to wake up. It’s pretty difficult to wake up when you have been hypnotized into thinking that a scrap of old newspaper is a check for a million dollars. How difficult it is to tear yourself away from that scrap of old newspaper.

## ***NEITHER IS RENUNCIATION THE SOLUTION***

Anytime you’re practicing renunciation, you’re deluded. How about *that!* You’re deluded. What are you renouncing? Anytime you renounce something, you are tied forever to the thing you renounce. There’s a guru in India who says, “Every time a prostitute comes to me, she’s talking about nothing but God. She says I’m sick of this life that I’m living. I want God. But every time a priest comes to me he’s talking about nothing but sex.” Very well, when you renounce something, you’re stuck to it forever. When you fight something, you’re tied to it forever. As long as you’re fighting it, you are giving it power. You give it as much power as you are using to fight it.