

Awakenings II

Scientific speculation - a worthwhile pursuit, even if the mainstream deems it "wild"



PETER WEBSTER
APR 15, 2024

The introduction to this series, Part I of *Awakenings* is here:

Awakenings

SALIENCE • 23 MAY



Terence McKenna's "Stoned Ape" hypothesis was presented in his book, *Food of the Gods* in 1993.

[Read full story](#) →

Andrew Weil at the first Tucson conference on consciousness:

Terence McKenna's stoned apes theory - "little more than wild speculation".

It may not at first glance seem one of the more pressing issues of our troubled times, but the theme posed in *Awakenings* is surely one that can be researched, and conclusions drawn. A demonstrated awakening, or trigger event for the proto-human species, would bring some flesh and bones to the many traditions and myths about mankind's origins and genesis. After all, mythologies are not mere trivial screenplays to ancient B-movies, but a *human universal*¹ rooted in collective human psychology.

A skeptic might say: “There can be no accurate conclusion to a seemingly random set of studies about such ancient times. There is no definitive evidence, there only is a willingness to consider an endless set of hypotheses — speculative ones, at best. Such a strategy will never supply a reliable answer.”

Another skeptic might say, “A trigger event at the origin of the human species? Maybe, maybe not. But of what importance is it to us today?”

A look through the history of scientific discovery, for example in Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, supplies a rejoinder to such skepticism. One of my favorite examples of science that was just too speculative, too “wild” for its time is also one of the most recent instances of paradigm shift and scientific revolution:

Back in the days before plate tectonics², there was general agreement that continents are in fixed positions, stationary on the surface of the globe. Yet a few intrepid fossil hunters remarked how curious it was that many ancient fossils along the South American east coast and Africa's west coast were frequently of the same species. Identical rock formations were seen as well. And geographers noted how strange it was that the South American coast had the same shape as the West African coast.

And ethologists were stumped as to why certain sea turtles accomplished the Herculean swim all the way across the Atlantic Ocean to lay their eggs on their preferred Caribbean beaches. Many of these “wild speculators” published wild ideas that it was almost as if Africa and S. America had once been joined at the hip!

For many decades the experts would have none of it, some criticizing these “wild speculators” with comments bordering on insult. Then along came satellite photography, and, as they say, the rest is history: a yearly continental drift of +2.5cm was confirmed, showing that a supercontinent, *Pangaea*, existed from the late Paleozoic to early Mesozoic eras [3](#).

Research of wildly speculative ideas, diligently pursued and arriving at plausible — and eventually provable — theories, may well lead one to the conclusion that an issue might well be much more salient and worth pursuing than it might at first seem. Plate tectonics, for example, was finally able to explain mountain-building and many other until-then geological mysteries, surely an important scientific advance.

And if somehow, perhaps with the aid of new techniques, the probability of a trigger event in human psychological/cognitive/spiritual evolution involving psychoactive plants could be justified, a plausible scenario and timeline advanced... Might not such a view provide important insights concerning the psychological and cognitive *default makeup* of human consciousness itself? Would an awakening for *H. protosapiens* imply that all subsequent generations were automatically in an “awakened state”, or need we consider the more likely possibility that the default state of consciousness of *H. sapiens* is even today much closer to that of *H. protosapiens* than we would like to believe, an essentially amoral, survival-and-reproduction, greed-is-good consciousness, at best minimally endowed with such *human* characteristics as empathy, altruism [4](#), artistic creativity, perception of fairness and justice, recognition of aesthetic standards and value, and all the rest of what we see as uniquely human? Characteristics that must be slowly learned and assimilated, characteristics that one is awakened to rather than being automatic or “hard-wired”, characteristics that are necessary for the complete *human* being, characteristics that seem tragically absent in some...

Need we consider that for each generation, a majority of its individual members might in fact profit from, perhaps even *require* an awakening, an initiation into adulthood that amounted to more than such empty rituals as first communions and bar mitzvahs, an initiation that granted recognition of

competence for collective living and mutual comprehension of the necessities of humanity? Do individuals of each generation require an awakening as part of his or her coming-of-age rituals as has been practiced by societies both small and large since time immemorial, an initiation into maturity as was suggested in Aldous Huxley's novel, *Island*?

It would be an awakening designed to *educate* by direct experience, to overcome the default evolutionary mode of consciousness that aeons of evolution designed into us for survival-and-reproduction as the primary necessity for each and every individual. Survival-and-reproduction is at root an amoral evolutionary pathway, and as an unexamined and therefore uncorrected mode of consciousness, necessarily leads to immorality of the most ignorant, uncaring and collectively destructive kind. A default survival-and-reproduction mode of consciousness could well be the root of in-group-out-group conflict, and thus racism, malignant [tribalism and xenophobia](#), intraspecies collective murder, unbridled conquest, torture and mayhem, and the primary determinant of history - unrestrained warfare. Surely the human condition has featured all of that in spades with only brief letups when most were simply too exhausted and wounded to continue. Is a lack of effective awakening for each generation the reason for:

In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first. We see one nation suddenly seized, from its highest to its lowest members, with a fierce desire of military glory; another as suddenly becoming crazed upon a religious scruple; and neither of them recovering its senses until it has shed rivers of blood and sowed a harvest of groans and tears, to be reaped by its posterity. Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one. ⁵

Such are the considerations that would become salient were a trigger event for human evolution confirmed.

Indeed, the idea that *H. sapiens* awoke from a previous innocent, naive, ignorant social and psychological state permeates many a mythology. The story in *Genesis*, actually a rehashing of prehistoric Siberian mythology, is the most well known, and the idea itself almost seems a common seed in the minds of men, reappearing frequently in tribal tradition, religious mythologies, and today even in literature and film ⁶. Included in the stories are versions of what agent or happening was responsible for the awakening.

Many themes and narratives in the Qur'an and its satellite literature bear unmistakable resemblances to parallel themes in Jewish and Christian texts... However, some glaring differences between the traditions call for a different explanation. Zohar Hadromi-A llouche homes in on a few significant points, found in Shia literature in particular, where no convincing parallels are evident. These are (1) the identification of the "forbidden fruit" as wheat... ⁷

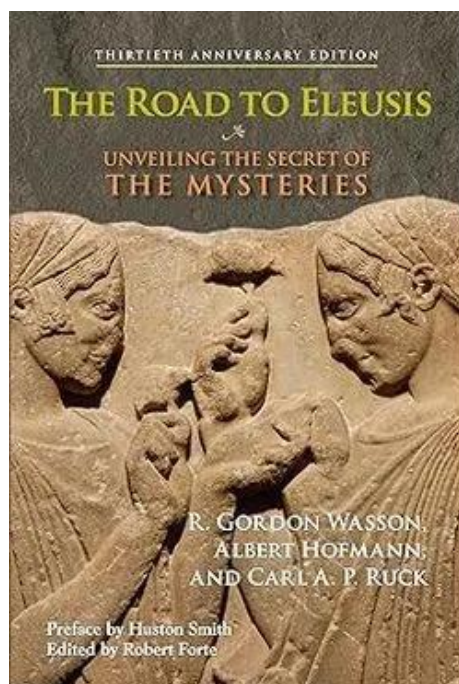
In another essay [here](#), I referenced some paleoanthropological findings that *Homo protosapiens*, our immediate socio-cognitive predecessors, hung around for a very long time, essentially unchanged. Through radically different climatic eras, in good times and bad, *H. protosapiens*, with essentially identical neurological equipment that we today possess, remained a stable species for at least 100, perhaps 300 thousand years. The question naturally arises: given such stability despite radically changing environments, why then aren't we still *protosapiens*, trapped in a survival-and-reproduction mode where the essentials of culture, invention and creativity, art, perception of the mysterious... all the characteristics of cognitively modern man, remain unfulfilled, merely potential.

A great many other species, for example, having attained such stability, went on for a million, or many millions of years unchanged. Why not *H. protosapiens*? Almost as if some cognitive switch was thrown by a secret agent...

In *African Exodus*, Chris stringer writes,

It was one of the critical events in mankind's convoluted route to evolutionary success. The nature of the trigger of this great social upheaval is still hotly debated, but remains a mystery at the heart of our 'progress' as a species. Was it a biological, mental or social event that sent our species rushing pell-mell towards world domination? Was it the advent of symbolic language, the appearance of the nuclear family as the basic element of human social structure, or a fundamental change in the workings of the brain? Whatever the nature of the change, it has a lot to answer for. It transformed us from minor bit players in a zoological soap opera into evolutionary superstars, with all the attendant dangers of vanity, hubris and indifference to the fate of others that such an analogy carries with it. ⁸

As man emerged from his brutish past, thousands of years ago, there was a stage in the evolution of his awareness when the discovery of a mushroom (or was it a higher plant?) with miraculous properties was a revelation to him, a veritable detonator to his soul, arousing in him sentiments of awe and reverence, and gentleness and love, to the highest pitch of which mankind is capable, all those sentiments and virtues that mankind has ever since regarded as the highest attribute of his kind. It made him see what this perishing mortal eye cannot see. — R. Gordon Wasson



THE ROAD TO ELEUSIS

UNVEILING THE SECRET OF
THE MYSTERIES

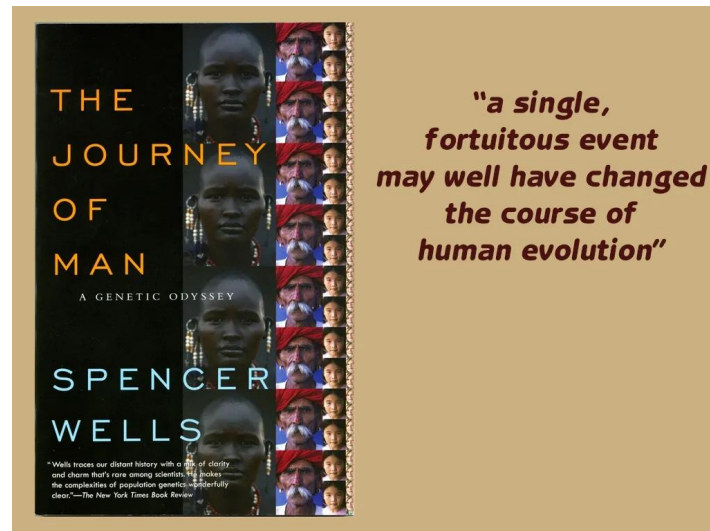
R. GORDON WASSON,
ALBERT HOFMANN,
AND CARL A. P. RUCK

THIRTIETH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

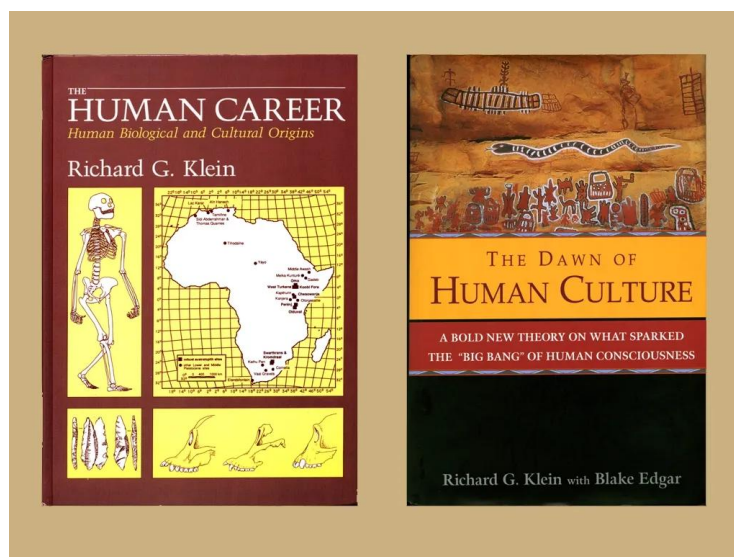
Edited by Robert Forte
Preface by Huston Smith
Homeric Hymn to Demeter
Translated by Blaise (Danny) Staples
Afterword by Albert Hofmann
Appendix by Peter Webster



Spencer Wells, in his book *The Journey of Man* speculates that “a single fortuitous event may well have changed the course of human evolution.”



Richard Klein likewise has been a strong supporter of the so-called “Great Leap Forward” or “Big Bang of Human Consciousness” theory, and believes that a genetic mutation might have sufficiently changed the way our brains are wired to provide the necessary catalyst.



As speculative as the causes and results proposed by various researchers are, there is a general agreement about the awakening event itself, based on evidence of radical shifts in technology around 50-70Ka. Whatever the cause might have been, quite suddenly, almost instantaneously in evolutionary time, archaic or proto-man became modern man, he became as a God with creative

powers denied to mere animals.

The identity of the trigger, the origin of the population bottleneck, the reason behind man's migration to the ends of the earth, the factor enabling the rapid rise of culture independently in all these regions, the factor behind the ability of the new hominids to out-compete all former races of archaic man, the secret of the birth of the human race, may all be intimately related to one and the same phenomenon: the advent of socially-relevant psychoactive plant use by a regionally isolated group of proto-humans somewhere in Africa.

The appearance of psychologically modern humans may even have occurred through a *single individual*, the first *shaman*, a sort of original tribal wise-man, an exceptional individual who discovered a plant that induced a psychedelic awakening, and who was already a social group leader so that his authority would not be rejected, a wise-man who then began to transmit his vision first to his close tribes-people, and then further afield as his wise-man status was reported. Such events would leave no obvious DNA nor fossil evidence, since his "progeny" would not have been biological but philosophical, although genetic traces of a population bottle-neck of sorts might be discovered if they are diligently searched for. The practices originally discovered by the core group might have been significant enough to spread rapidly and widely, thus the scenario does not envisage all modern peoples as the *genetic* descendants of the original core group. ⁹

Psychoactive use could then have been at once the reason for an apparent but not necessarily absolute bottleneck, and also the trigger, the key which enabled this original group to expand and prosper by virtue of the cognitive advantages provided by the cumulative effects of psychoactive use. These advantages, I remind the reader, concern a new and powerful ability to suspend a mode of existence entirely governed by habit routine. (My ideas on nested arrays of habits of perceiving and thinking, and the similarities of the theory to the 1932 schema theory of Sir Frederick Bartlett, will be a subject for a future Substack essay.) The advanced ape that was our predecessor necessarily had, as I have stated above, the most complete, one might say irrevocable dependence on habit routine of any animal yet evolved, a

dependence entirely precluding the use of the most advanced nervous system ever evolved for creative purposes except in dire circumstances. Yet through psychedelic training guided by tribal wise men, individuals and entire social groups could break through this barrier, repeatedly and at will.

In order to understand how psychoactive use might have played an essential role in human evolution, a complete revision of the theory of how psychedelics actually work is necessary. This will be the topic of the next chapters of Awakenings.

References

- 1 Brown, Donald E., *Human Universals*, Temple University Press, 1991
- 2 [Continental Drift versus Plate Tectonics](#)
- 3 [Pangaea](#)
- 4 *Unto Others: The Evolution and Psychology of Unselfish Behavior*, Elliott Sober & David Sloan Wilson, Harvard University Press, 1998.
- 5 Mackay, C. *Extraordinary Popular Delusions & the Madness of Crowds*
- 6 Many years before the recent paleoanthropological hypotheses about a trigger event in human evolution, Arthur C. Clarke and Stanley Kubrick had already suggested the idea of a trigger to sudden cognitive awakening in 2001: *A Space Odyssey*. Although presented as “entertainment”, films and novels, especially of the sci-fi variety, have often been the vanguard of scientifically researched findings in later years. In 2001 the beginnings of cognitively awakened humankind occurs as the result of the sudden appearance of the “Black Monolith”, something mysterious and unexplainable—ineffable—that ignites a bout of extremely amplified salience detection (see Awakenings III, to be published soon, or a [longer exposition here](#)) in a group of proto-humans and leads to their thinking creatively. For Kubrick & Clarke it was a physical object so unusual that the group of proto-humans present could not ignore it. How much more ineffable would be the experience of a psychedelic state of consciousness that made existence itself the subject of

wonder and awe! And sadly, in the Kubrick/Clarke story, the first thing that creative thinking leads to is an arms race! Hardly psychedelic... Part IV of this series will discuss Kubrick / Clarke vs. McKenna and other awakening scenarios.

7 [Texts in Transit in the Medieval Mediterranean- page 7](#) also see [Bread of Heaven or Wines of Light: Entheogenic Legacies and Esoteric Cosmologies](#)

8 *African Exodus*, Chris Stringer and Robin McKie, Jonathan Cape, London 1996

9 A fanciful speculation? Probably, but remember that tribes of various ape species, as well as other social animals, all have their “alpha males” (or females) who have some advantage over their tribe members in procuring necessities, keeping order,... even elephants appear to have a highly intelligent social structure (guided by the matriarch!) that enables them to survive and prosper. “The matriarch elephant is a key figure in the elephant family unit, responsible for providing stability and determining ranging patterns for the rest of the family... The social structure of elephants is complex, varying by gender and population dynamics. Adult elephants form matriarchal societies, while adult males are usually solitary. Matriarchs are responsible for defending and looking out for each family member, imparting knowledge from their long lives, and taking on the most important role of the family structure.
