

Chapter 1

Awakening in the Midst of American Life

So many of us are on a spiritual path. We're cultivating presence through various spiritual practices. We're acknowledging our interconnectedness and taking our places in the web of life. We're assuming responsibility for the choices we make and the realities we create. We're dropping old patterns of behavior.

This awakening is happening in the midst of modern America where intense time pressure permeates the atmosphere. The speedy electronic devices that mediate so much of our experience leave us feeling wired, overwhelmed, and forever behind. Awash in a tidal wave of information, we're aware of everything we could (or should) do and our expectations rise with the flood.

There's no time for planning. Projects take longer than we expect. We start things but never finish them. Priorities are out of whack. People constantly interrupt us. We struggle to keep everybody happy. We're always putting out fires. How can we stem the tide and live an authentic spiritual life in such an environment?

More + Faster ≠ Better

We try staying later, working more, or moving faster. Even so, we suspect that won't solve the problem. If we want to survive (and even thrive) in this environment, we know we've got to embrace something else than More + Faster = Better. It's not quantity we seek, but quality—richness, satisfaction, simplicity, complexity, juiciness. And for that we need to break pace, step back, and change.

The New Time Management

There are plenty of magazine articles, TV shows, workshops, and books to tell us how to change. These tips, however, work much like conventional medicine's symptom-oriented prescriptions. Interrupted? Just close your door. Procrastinating? Just break it down. Trouble deciding? Just prioritize. We end up with layers of tips as thick as our To Do lists!

So, what shall we do instead? A close look at the definition of the term "management" helps. The word, manage, comes from the Latin, manus, meaning hand. Managing is, intrinsically, hands-on. The Oxford English Dictionary goes on to say, "to manage is to control the course of affairs by one's actions; to take charge; to use carefully; to operate on for a purpose; to cope with the difficulties of."¹ This is what the new time management is all about: taking charge, carefully, consciously, purposefully—not shrinking from difficulties, but engaging them.

It can be daunting to take charge in a More + Faster = Better atmosphere, but this is exactly what we must do to sustain ourselves, our relationships, and life on the planet. If we manage with respect for ourselves and all beings, "better" takes on a new meaning—contributing to our own evolution and that of the world.

Look Beneath the Surface

In this book, we dig down to the root of the troubles rather than trying to fix the myriad symptoms that crop up like stones in a New England pasture. Beneath most time management troubles are issues of Attention, Boundaries, and Choices—the ABCs of the new time management. For instance, getting distracted is an issue of Attention. When we learn how to

maintain internal focus while responding to what’s happening around us, the issue resolves. Feeling torn between several demands is a matter of Boundaries. When our boundaries are appropriately firm yet flexible, we can consider demands from both the outside and the inside. Having too much to do in too little time is an issue of Choice. When we learn how to choose what serves the greater good, we can let go of the rest.

Working at this level, change has a better chance of taking hold and many of the surface problems resolve themselves. The practice of managing time infuses our lives with spirit, moment by moment, attending to the inward and the outward, the wide perspective and the everyday details of life. We shift from doing more and doing it faster to engaging fully and appropriately with life.

This book does not espouse a particular spiritual path since many people today draw on various teachings and experiences built up over the years for their spirituality. Truth no longer has a capital T—it’s evolving as we evolve. The tools and insights presented here are in tune with this eclectic view of spirituality.

How the Book Is Set Up

Here you will find a mix of practical, hands-on techniques and new ways of thinking. You’ll learn how to become more present. You’ll experiment with working cheerfully within the limits of time, space, and the body. You’ll become more vital, more fully who you are meant to be. You’ll cultivate a sense of deep satisfaction despite the impossibility of doing it all.

You’ll start by taking a look at the context—reflecting on the particular challenges we all face today and how principles of sustainability can help us meet these challenges.

Next, you’ll encounter the ABCs—Attention, Boundaries, and Choices—exploring new ways of thinking and acting in each area.

After you work with the ABCs, you’ll turn to the change process itself. You’ll learn how challenges, mistakes, and difficulties can help us as much as our accomplishments and triumphs. Everything we do, “good” or “bad,” can move us along.

Lastly, you’ll reap the fruits. You’ll see how the new time management promotes the capacities of vitality, creativity, and discernment, and contributes to the greater good of all.

The practices explained in the text (plus many more) appear in Part IV—the Resource section. This section also expands on some concepts that the text just touches upon.

Throughout the book, concepts reappear in different guises so you see them from many points-of-view. Each encounter may touch you at a different level. Each may resonate for you in a different way. Feel free to skip around rather than read straight through. This is a book to pick up and put down, to read a little bit and then let it sink in. Use it in a way that makes sense to you.

Ready, Steady, Go!

You’re about to embark on a journey that could change your life. You won’t be alone—many bold explorers have gone before you. You’ll have help—the practices in this book are reliable supports. You’ll spark your creativity as you respond to familiar situations in new ways. You’ll learn about yourself and practice compassion as you walk this perilous, demanding, revealing, and ultimately satisfying path. Do come along!

¹ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, Volume 1* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 1711.