

Reading Guide for *Awakening*

By Ronald L. Farmer

This reading guide is divided into four suggested sessions. Although they are conceived of as guides for group discussions, the material should also prove useful to individual readers.

Spoiler Alert: Be sure to read the entire book before reading this guide.

Session One: Near-death Experiences

1. All cultures have pondered the question, “What happens after death?” Some develop elaborate beliefs about an afterlife (e.g., ancient Egyptian culture). Others have no or virtually no belief in an afterlife (e.g., early Israelite culture). What is your current thinking on the subject?
2. A phenomenon that has added interest/importance to this reflection is the report of near-death experiences (NDEs). Similar experiences have been recorded throughout history and in every culture. Reports are more numerous today, most likely due to the advance of medical science; people who would have died in the past are now routinely “revived.” Do you know someone who has had a NDE? Have you had a NDE?
3. Although many near-death experiencers report difficulty expressing what happened, Raymond Moody, MD, a pioneer researcher in the field of NDEs, identified nine characteristics of NDEs.¹ Most people do not experience all nine, but some (like Theo in *Awakening*) do.
 - a. **Hearing the news that they are dead** (e.g., from a doctor)
 - b. **Feelings of peace and quiet**
 - c. **The noise** (can be unpleasant or pleasant)
 - d. **The dark tunnel**
 - e. **Out of body experience and seeing one’s physical body**
 - f. **Meeting others** (both deceased loved ones and others unknown to them)
 - g. **The “Being of Light” manifesting love and warmth** (sometimes this Being is described in terms of the experiencer’s religious training)
 - h. **The “Life Review”** (the point of the review is unconditional love and learning)
 - i. **Coming back** (often told they have to come back, although they don’t want to, at least initially)
4. Common effects of the NDE on their subsequent lives: they are more reflective; they are interested in broader, philosophical matters; life is viewed as more precious; they place an emphasis on love and learning; they are not afraid of death. Have these effects been true of people you know who report having a NDE? Why do you think this might be?

5. Numerous attempts have been made to explain (or to explain away) NDEs:
 - a. **Left-over memories of the experience of birth.** But most researchers do not think babies have the capacity to recall the birth experience. And even if they do, there are other problems with this explanation: Why is NDE a positive experience? The face is pressed against the vaginal wall, not toward light at the end of the “tunnel.”
 - b. **Carbon dioxide overload.** Although CO₂ overload does produce a tunnel-type experience, measurements of the blood level of NDE patients indicate an O₂ level higher than normal, not lower.
 - c. **Hallucinations brought on by stress, lack of oxygen, or drugs.** But hallucinations require brain function; NDEs can occur when people flatline (no brain function).
 - d. **Product of a highly religious life.** This is not true; even atheists report NDEs. It is true that the very religious may interpret the experience in terms of their religious experience, but most come back with a “nondenominational” or “spiritual not religious” outlook.
 - e. **But all NDEs aren’t the same.** Why would one expect every person to have the same experience or to interpret it the same way? Nothing else in life is that way; e.g., “eye-witnesses” to an event differ in their descriptions of the event.
 - f. **This is what the brain does when presented with something unavoidable; the brain slips into a pleasant “fantasy” or disassociation (by manufacturing certain chemicals, like endorphins).** But there is no evidence that endorphins can produce NDEs (e.g., distance runners do not experience NDEs in spite of high endorphin levels).
 - g. **Wish fulfillment.** But why does the same group of nine experiences recur if a NDE is simply a person’s wish fulfillment?
 - h. **Jung’s “Collective Unconsciousness.”** Contrary to some of his followers who advocate this explanation, Jung did not relate his own NDE to his theory of the Collective Unconsciousness. The Collective Unconsciousness might explain many characteristics of a NDE, but it does not explain some of the “out of body” aspects (see below).
 - i. **The ability of scientists to reproduce many of the characteristics of NDEs in the laboratory (stimulation of certain regions of the brain, or the use of certain drugs like ketamine).** This is true and might explain many characteristics, but it cannot explain some of the “out of body” aspects (see below).
 - j. **Could just be the way a dying brain functions.** This is true and might explain many characteristics, but it cannot explain some of the “out of body” aspects (see below).
6. **Totally unexplained NDE characteristics (some of the “out of body” aspects):** e.g., the ability of the person to describe in detail a medical team’s work to bring the person back; the ability to tell what was happening in other locals.
7. Like William James’ explanation of mysticism, for those who report NDEs **the experience is noetic:** self-certifying, so personal as to be beyond words, and life-changing.
8. In your conversations with people who have had a NDE(or in your own experience if you have had a NDE), how have they interpreted the experience? Do they think they glimpsed what awaits us after death?

Session Two: Mirror Neurons and Empathy

As neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran wrote, the history of ideas is punctuated by “‘revolutions,’ major upheavals of thought that have forever altered our view of ourselves and our place in the cosmos.” The past few centuries have witnessed five such revolutions. First, the **Copernican revolution**, which dethroned the earth as the center of the cosmos. Second, the **Darwinian revolution** establishing the notion of biological evolution. Third, the **Freudian** view that “even though you claim to be ‘in charge’ of your life, your behavior is in fact governed by a cauldron of drives and motives of which you are largely unconscious.” Fourth, “the **discovery of DNA and the genetic code** with its implication (to quote James Watson) that ‘There are only molecules. Everything else is sociology.’” And fifth, the **neuroscience revolution** and its corollary that “even our loftiest thoughts and aspirations are mere byproducts of neural activity.”²

1. The Discovery of Mirror Neurons

One of the most interesting aspects of the neuroscience revolution occurred in 1995 at the University of Parma, Italy, with the discovery of “mirror neurons.” Researchers found that “neurons in the ventral premotor area of macaque monkeys will fire anytime a monkey performs a complex action such as reaching for a peanut, pulling a lever, pushing a door, etc. (different neurons fire for different actions). Most of these neurons control motor skill . . . but a subset of them . . . will fire even when the monkey *watches* another monkey perform the same action. In essence, the neuron is part of a network that allows you to see the world ‘from the other person’s point of view,’ hence the name ‘mirror neuron.’”³

You see these mirror neurons working in the following common occurrences: when people get teary-eyed while watching a sad movie; when avid sports fans watch a football game and react viscerally; when your boss’s tirade upsets you; when a friend’s upbeat emotional state lifts your spirits; when babies mimics their parents in the learning process. Can you think of other examples when you have found yourself “mirroring” someone else’s actions or feelings?

2. Mirror Neurons and Evolution

Mirroring one another is at the core of how we learn. Not surprisingly, then, Ramachandran suggests that mirror neurons were the driving force behind “the great leap forward” in human evolution; that “the emergence of a sophisticated mirror neuron system set the stage for the emergence, in early hominids, of a number of uniquely human abilities such as proto-language . . . empathy, ‘theory of other minds,’ and the ability to ‘adopt another’s point of view.’” The development of this mirror neuron system “resulted in the ability to engage in goal-directed imitation, which was a crucial step in imitation learning. Once imitation learning was in place it allowed the rapid horizontal and vertical propagation of ‘accidental’ one-of-a-kind inventions, which provided the basis for culture, the most human of all traits.” Such innovations would be lost if it were not for mirror neuron-based abilities such as imitation and language. (Thus, evolution “became Lamarckian rather than purely Darwinian.”)⁴

3. Mirror Neurons and Empathy

“Researchers at UCLA found that cells in the human anterior cingulate, which normally fire when you poke the patient with a needle (‘pain neurons’), will also fire when the patient watches *another* patient being poked. The mirror neurons, it would seem, dissolve the barrier between self and others.” Consequently, Ramachandran calls them “empathy neurons.” **“Dissolving the ‘self vs. other’ barrier is the basis of many ethical systems,** especially eastern philosophical and mystical traditions. This research implies that mirror neurons can be used to provide rational rather than [merely] religious grounds for ethics (although we must be careful not to commit the is/ought fallacy).”⁵

Ramachandran and colleagues have also demonstrated that “autistic children lack the mirror neuron system and . . . pointed out that this deficit may help explain the very symptoms that are *unique* to autism: lack of empathy, theory of other minds, language skills, and imitation.”

As Ramachandran remarked, “dissolving the ‘self vs. other’ barrier is the basis of many ethical systems.” For example, in his exhortation to compassionate living the Apostle Paul wrote, “we are members one of another” (Rom. 12:5; compare 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Such metaphors abound in the Bible and other religious and ethical writings, but they have been understood as “merely metaphors.” The discovery of mirror neurons informs us that we actually do “feel the feelings of others.” We are biologically hardwired for empathy. Could it be that heeding such biblical exhortations and engaging in various spiritual practices (e.g., meditation) would lead to the development of a more finely-tuned mirror neuron system and therefore a greater capacity for empathy?

4. The Promise of Mirror Neurons

The discovery of mirror neurons may help bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities. Ramachandran pronounced that “mirror neurons will do for psychology what DNA did for biology: they will provide a unifying framework and help explain a host of mental abilities that have hitherto remained mysterious and inaccessible to experiments.”⁶ This bold prophesy is already starting to come true.

What do you think of the following ruminations by Christine in *Awakening*?

How often had she and Sarah sat around spinning hypotheses about the implications of contemporary physics for her research into the nature of human consciousness? Theoretically speaking, what Theo reported was entirely plausible—especially when one considered that his consciousness may have already been expanded by his near-death experience. Perhaps he is simply more attuned to non-sensory perception than most people. Was the same thing true of those whom the other researchers had labeled “deeply spiritual”? Perhaps through meditation and other spiritual practices, they had expanded their consciousnesses as well. Stories of the remarkable abilities and altered states of consciousness of “holy people” are found in all the world’s religions; surely at least a kernel of truth lay at the heart of religious legends. And augmenting all this were speculations coming from diverse academic camps that we may be on the cusp of an

evolutionary advance in human consciousness. Perhaps Theo's experience is one of the early ripples. (p. 222)

“Just over a century ago flight was beyond human experience. Then the Wright brothers came along and developed the knowledge and technology necessary to utilize the laws of aero-dynamics. Now we take flight for granted.” She turned to look at him. “Perhaps your paranormal experiences are analogous. Maybe one day people will take near-death and empathic experiences for granted.” (pp. 235-36)

Session Three: Factory Farming

The ethical issues associated with “Factory Farming” or “Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation” (the industry’s euphemistic name) are some of the most serious currently facing the human race. Unfortunately, most people are unaware of the role factory farming plays in these critical issues—largely because a carefully orchestrated movement attempts to keep the public ignorant. The following facts and statistics were gleaned from a variety of sources a mere mouse-click away.⁷

1. Environmental Issues

Factory farming wastes scarce natural resources

- Almost 50% of the water consumed in the U.S. is used for livestock production.
 - A typical meat-eater’s diet requires 4,200 gallons of water daily; a vegetarian’s diet only 300 gallons.
 - 2,464 gallons of water are needed to produce one pound of beef.
- The amount of fossil fuels used for livestock production is enormous:
 - One pound of steak (500 calories of food energy) requires 20,000 calories of fossil fuels.
 - The fossil fuels used to produce a single hamburger patty would enable an automobile to drive 20 miles.
- Huge swaths of tropical forest are cleared primarily to raise livestock, contributing to global warming, loss of biodiversity, and soil erosion.
- SUMMARY: A meat-and-dairy-centered diet requires 17 times as much land, 14 times as much water, and 20 times as much energy as a plant-based diet.

Factory farming is one of the major sources of pollution

- The polluted air from factory farming contributes significantly to global warming.
- Agricultural runoff from fields (chemicals and animal wastes) contaminates streams, rivers, lakes, and oceans, leading to vast “dead zones.”
- Leaking “lagoons” (open air cesspools!) filled with all sorts of toxins and pollutants contaminate fresh water supplies.
- NOTE: Livestock in the U.S. produces 130 times as much waste as people do. Yet, the law does not require factory farms to “treat” animal waste the way municipalities are required to treat human waste. For example, 10,000 cattle (a relatively small feedlot!) produce the same amount of waste as a city of 110,000 people.
- Livestock emit more greenhouse gases than all the cars, planes, ships, and other means of transportation combined (18% for livestock vs. 13.5% for the transportation sector).

2. Human Health Issues

- Given the vast differences in the amount of natural resources (water, fuel, etc.) needed to produce a pound of animal protein vs. a pound of plant protein, one of the most effective and efficient ways to deal with the world’s hunger problem is to switch from an animal-based to a plant-based diet.
 - 66% of the grain grown in the US and 37% worldwide is fed to livestock.

- Converting plants to meat wastes between 67-90% of the protein, depending on the plant source and the animal.
- Air pollution near factory farms causes a sharp rise in asthma and other respiratory difficulties among workers and neighbors.
- The air near factory farms contains antibiotic-resistant bacteria.
- Factory farms feed animals huge amounts of antibiotics (to keep them alive in under such horrible conditions) and growth hormones and other stimulants (to cause them to grow abnormally fast). Traces of these drugs remain in the meat consumed by humans posing serious health threats ranging from cancer to the evolution of antibiotic-resistant bacteria.
- Over 50% of the antibiotics produced in the United States are used in agriculture.
- Many health workers fear pandemics, like more virulent strains of avian flu and swine flu, are on the immediate horizon and stem largely from “intensive confinement farming.”
- Food contamination is becoming commonplace, resulting in recall after recall (usually prompted by outbreaks of serious illnesses and even deaths). When the sources of contamination are found, factory farms are frequently the culprit.
- A diet centered on meat and dairy is unhealthy; a plant-based diet is far healthier.

3. Social Justice Issues

- Factory farms and the meat industry are notorious for their low wages and appalling working conditions. Their workforce is comprised largely of recent immigrants, whose vulnerabilities are exploited because they will not report their ill treatment to officials for fear of being deported.
- The dangerous and appalling working conditions at slaughterhouses result in a turnover rate of nearly 100% per year. Indeed, injury and death statistics reveal that slaughterhouse jobs are the most dangerous factory jobs in the United States.

4. Animal Cruelty Issues

- Annually, over 10,000,000,000 (yes, ten billion!) farm animals are raised, transported, and slaughtered under grossly inhumane conditions in the United States alone.
- Factory farming treats farm animals (intelligent, sentient beings!) as mere mechanical units of production. They are confined in tiny cages and crates in huge warehouses from the day they are born until the day they reach market weight; then they are subjected to additional cruelty as they are transported en masse to slaughterhouses, where the most unimaginable suffering takes place.
- Farm animals are exempt from animal cruelty laws (such as apply to cats, dogs, and horses).
- Chickens, turkeys, ducks, etc. are even exempt from the so-called “humane slaughter” laws.
- Farm animals are genetically altered to grow twice as fast as normal, causing millions to die every year before reaching the slaughter house, as their hearts and lungs simply cannot support the abnormal growth rate. Their legs also have difficulty in supporting their unnaturally large bodies.

- In order to “fit” the severe constraints imposed by warehouse confinement, farm animals are regularly mutilated without the use of anesthesia or pain relief—beaks and toes cut off, tails amputated, and male animals castrated.
- Animals too sick to walk (“downers”) are literally thrown away, left to die slow deaths without any medical attention or euthanasia. And, of course, some slaughterhouses process downers anyway, posing a serious health risk to human consumers.

5. My Personal Experience

Read: Farmer, Ronald L. “A Return to The Jungle.” *Creative Transformation* 17/4 (Fall 2008): 2-5. This essay is available for free download at www.ronaldlfarmer.com/reading-guides.html.

6. Questions for Discussion/Reflection

- Were you aware of the existence of factory farming before reading *Awakening*? Have you visited one? If so, what was your reaction?
- Were you aware that factory farming is one of the leading contributors to the most serious crises facing us today: global warming; water, air, and soil pollution; the water crisis, the energy crisis?
- Were you aware of how factory farming contributes to the world hunger problem as well as various human health problems?
- Were you aware of the social injustices experienced by employees of the corporations that run the factory farms and slaughterhouses?

Session Four: Animals in the Biblical Tradition

“The Bible takes animals seriously as creatures of God and as participants in the redemption of the world.”⁸ Indeed, “Animals figure prominently in the Genesis stories of creation, and they suffer as a result of human sinfulness. They are included in several of God’s covenants with key biblical characters, and their presence is noted at pivotal moments in the life of Jesus. Animals are said to possess inherent or intrinsic value in God’s eyes and so are beneficiaries (along with humans) of God’s redemption of the world.”⁹ The following is a brief survey of animals in the biblical tradition.

Gen 1:20-25

- a. *Nefesh chaya* (“living soul”) was used of animals as well as humans.
- b. The use of the same term indicates that there is a basic relatedness between animals and humans. Animals possess sensitivity and the capacity for feeling pain; hence, they must be treated with compassion and justice.
- c. Consider the fact that God’s covenants and compassion often specifically include animals: e.g., Gen 9:9-10; Hos 2:18; Jonah 4:11.
- d. God’s concern for animals is frequently stated: e.g., Ps 145:9, 16; 147:8-9; Matt 6:26; 10:29.

Gen 1:26, 31

- a. “Dominion” does not mean tyranny and exploitation; rather, it means stewardship, guardianship – being co-workers with God in taking care of and improving the world. Human dominion should be patterned after God’s loving, compassionate dominion over the created order.
- b. Rabbi Hirsch said, “The earth and its creatures may have other relationships of which we are ignorant, in which they serve their own purposes. . . . [They thereby] serve God’s purposes and objectives, and people have no right to interfere.”¹⁰
- c. The created order (including the dietary Torah found in Gen 1:29-30) was pronounced “very good” (v. 31).
- d. The Hebrew Bible contains many passages concerning compassionate treatment of animals, even in the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:10). See also: Deut 25:4, 22:10; Prov. 12:10.

Gen 1:29-30; compare Gen 9:3-4

- a. The Garden of Eden pictures vegetarianism or veganism. Adam “tills the soil and keeps the garden” (Gen 2:15).
- b. Also of interest is Genesis 5, which tells of the very long lives of people in the generations before Noah.
- c. In the Noah story, as a *concession* to people’s weakness, permission to eat meat was given.
- d. Special Note: Many rabbis connect the numerous laws and restrictions related to the preparation and consumption of meat (*kashrut*) to the attempt to keep alive a sense of reverence for life, with the aim of eventually leading people away from their meat-eating habit.

Numbers 11

- a. Manna was God's preferred food for the Israelites during the desert wanderings.
- b. God sent quail only after the people cried for flesh; a great plague subsequently broke out among the people. The place where this occurred was named, "The Graves of Lust."

Daniel 1

Daniel and his friends were much healthier and smarter after eating their vegetable-centered diet than those who ate the king's meat-centered diet.

Isa 11:6-9

The Messianic Age is pictured as a time of vegetarianism throughout the animal and human realms.

Rom 8:18-24

Paul includes animals alongside humans in his understanding of the redemption of the created order.

Why Were There Animal Sacrifices in Ancient Judaism?

- a. Many rabbis say that sacrifices were permitted as a *concession* to the common mode of worship in ancient times. It is felt that had Moses not instituted the sacrificial system, his mission might have failed and perhaps Judaism would have disappeared.
- b. Many rabbis teach that there will only be vegetable sacrifices (thanksgiving offerings) in the Messianic Age.
- c. Regarding sacrifice, see: Hos 6:6; Jer 7:22-23; Amos 5:21-24; Prov 21:3; Rom 12:1-2.

Conclusion

All the reasons for becoming vegetarian/vegan can be connected to important Jewish and Christian values:

- taking care of our health
- showing compassion to animals
- protecting the environment
- conserving resources
- solving world hunger
- seeking and pursuing peace with justice

According to many ethicists and religious leaders, becoming a vegetarian/vegan may be the most important action that one can take for the betterment of all life on the planet—second only to efforts to prevent a nuclear war.

¹ Moody, Jr., Raymond A. *Life after Life: The Investigation of a Phenomenon—Survival of Bodily Death* (San Francisco: Harper, 1975, 2001), and *The Light Beyond: New Explorations* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988). For contemporary research in the field of NDEs, visit the website of The International Association for Near-Death Studies (<http://www.iands.org/>).

² V. S. Ramachandran, "Mirror Neurons and the Brain in the Vat," *Edge: The Third Culture* (http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/ramachandran06/ramachandran06_inde.html). Emphasis added.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., emphasis added.

⁶ David Dobbs, "A Revealing Reflection: Mirror Neurons seem to effect everything from how we learn to speak to how we build culture," in *Scientific American Mind* (May/June 2006) (<http://daviddobbs.net/page2/page4/mirrorneurons.html>).

⁷ Animal Welfare Institute (www.awionline.org), Best Friends Animal Society (www.bestfriends.org), Farm Sanctuary (www.farmsanctuary.org), Grace Factory Farm Project (www.factoryfarm.org), Humane Farming Association (www.hfa.org), Humane Society of the United States (www.hsus.org), People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (www.peta.org), Sierra Club (www.sierraclub.org), Sustainable Table (www.sustainabletable.org), and Veg Source (www.vegsource.com).

⁸ Susan Durber, "The Peaceable Kingdom," a sermon preached at St. Columbia's United Reformed Church, Oxford, England (1998). (<http://website.lineone.net/~susandurber/sermon22.html>)

⁹ Ronald L. Farmer, "The Peaceable Kingdom: Reflections on Isaiah 11:1-9," *Creative Transformation* 18/4 (Fall 2009): 24-27, 32. This essay is available for free download at www.ronaldlfarmer.com/reading-guides.html.

¹⁰ JewishVeg.com. (http://www.jewishveg.com/schwartz/faq_vegetarianism.html)