

Truth Demands To Be Lived by Richard Whittaker

A few years ago Americ Azevedo sat in a college classroom with about 15 students. It was a meditation class and he was the instructor. This past fall, that same class enrolled 603 students and took place in one of the largest lecture halls on the UC Berkeley campus. A philosopher, author and lecturer of peace studies, Americ slips through all of these categories. Serendipitously he became the acting CEO of a company in a field for which he had no formal training. He's taught an unlikely mix of university classes (philosophy, religion, leadership, finance, business and information systems), developed several virtual companies, directed the Innovation Center at Golden Gate University, and held the first podcast at UC Berkeley in 2005. Today, he co-teaches a class on inner-to-outer social change and focuses on building a more human world in this age of technology.

Azevedo was born in the Azores and his family moved to the U.S. before he entered school. His journey is an inspiring one. I spoke with Americ at his office at the University of California, Berkeley.

Richard Whittaker: What's the language in the Azores?

Americ Azevedo: It's a dialect of Portuguese. I came to the U.S. when I was two years old with my mother. My father came and worked on a dairy farm until he had enough money to send for us.

RW: And you told me your early experiences in school were difficult.

AA: It wasn't until I hit first grade that I was exposed to English—and to other children. Kids punched me. I threw up all the time. I felt like I lost the light. I mean, looking back, I see it changed my world to such an extent there's a before and after.

RW: It sounds terrible.

AA: It was a terrible experience and yet it was a formative thing. I see it now as a gift. One of my students asked me, when did your spiritual path begin? I said I think it began when I went to first grade and lost my light.

RW: It's interesting that you describe as losing something.

AA: I lost something. I feel that most people lose it at some point in their lives. But losing at that stage is so dramatic. I think school knocks it out of us. School is so artificial, so industrial. All of the sudden it's a totally difference experience from that matrix of love and all the things that make a human being comfortable. And it takes a long time to recover that feeling.

RW: In school you couldn't speak English and you were called...

AA: Stupid. I thought my name was "Stupid." Then I found out what it meant. That began a journey of working with that and realizing later on that I'm not stupid. But even still, it surprises me. I was at a meeting some years ago. I'd become a Mellon Fellow. One of the people with me was from Harvard and she said something like, "You're one of the brightest people I ever met." I'm always surprised if somebody who is certified says something like that. But in my case, what makes me feel better, is the experience of learning, of knowing that I can learn. The experience of learning is the proof that the stupid part is not a problem. Then the other problem, of course, is how to deal with society and people.

That may have triggered a tremendous interest in dialogue and communication, solving communication problems. There were bullies. There was one boy who beat me up and somewhere along the way I was able to communicate with him and he became my friend. Then he protected me from the other bullies. Later on I realized that the biggest protection we have as human beings is communication. Now I understand it's a form of love—even for the bully, but it's become twisted.

But that's how it is for so many people. Somehow the psyche has become twisted and the good has become bad and the bad has become good. This is hard to describe. I'm reminded of a show I used to watch when I was a kid. It was called "Insight" and was run by Jesuits, I think. They had programs on Gandhi and other things. A priest came on at the end of one program—it might have been on Nietzsche, who was going crazy, and the priest said something I never forgot: hell is the injury that keeps us from receiving the love we're being given. He defused the whole idea of hell for me and put it in a perspective I've never forgotten.

RW: So you were struggling with the stigma of being called stupid. You were praying. And, at some point, you put together a presentation to your class that was a turning point. Would you tell that story?

AA: Yes. It must have been in third or fourth grade. Knowing that I was stupid had become a very concrete reality for me because I'd been put at the table with the ones who were at the lowest level of the class. I could see that the people around me fit that category, and I was one of them. Then there were others who were the brighter and smarter ones. I would go to bed being very upset about this, I guess, because I prayed: God make me smart. Help me find a way to become smart.

I think prayer gives us an alignment and also maybe opens the subconscious to some kind of different view of the world. During that period of time we were assigned to do a science report. I found myself picking the seasons of the year. I wondered how they worked. So I started reading about them and eventually I conceived of making a presentation. I don't know now how I came up with the flip chart idea [laughs]. The teacher just loved it! And I was put on a "lecture circuit" through elementary school about this. So then I became a science kid.

RW: That was a moment of transition from stupid to smart.

AA: Yes. And the social identification with being smart comes with its own baggage, I learned. By the time I started high school, I was really a nerd. I mean I was soaking up knowledge about everything! I was in the grocery store and found Scientific American and persuaded my parents to subscribe. I watched science shows on TV, Mr. Wizard; I listened to shows on cosmology, anything I could get my hands on.

RW: What a dramatic change from being a social outcast to becoming a little bit of a

star, in a way. And each one had its pluses and its minuses, I guess.

AA: Exactly, like every perspective we take in life. And I think that gave me some understanding that I could transform myself. Later on I thought, I want to become a computer programmer. I just put my mind on that and somehow I learned more about it and found a place.

That in itself was a miraculous transformation. I'd gone to San Francisco State and got a Master's degree in philosophy. But that doesn't help get any work other than a little teaching here and there. So I was getting temporary work. I got a job stuffing envelopes one day. Then the next job was doing address changes for a publishing company. They were going through a computer conversion from manual to ADP, automated data processing. So I was given the task of filling out coding forms, key punch. I filled out three or four hundred a day. Incredibly boring!

RW: Did you already know something about computers?

AA: I did have some mathematical logic in philosophy. That was my only qualification. But circumstances are changing all the time and sometimes if you look at the circumstances, things open up. So there I was changing these computer forms. Then I realize, well, I'm a philosophy student. Philosophers like to know how it all works. I want to know how it all works. And there's the assistant director next door, so I knock on his door. I said, "I want to know how this place works."

He said, "Nobody ever asks. Come in!" [laughs] So we began to talk. A dialogue opened up. I start asking for the big picture and I learn there's going to be an entire conversion from manual to automated. So I said, "I want to get involved in that." And I got a book about how to code PL/1 programs. I soon learned that I could submit jobs directly to the mainframe. So I practiced doing that. I fixed my first little problem, a little address-coding problem. It went in and it actually worked! Then I figured out that the customer could put in the address changes if we just redesigned the order form. And sure enough they did that. That changed everybody's jobs and pretty soon I had my own private office, all in a matter of two years.

RW: You're just filling in numbers, numbers, numbers all day long. But because of an attitude of investigation and some creativity you find your way into this new job with your own office.

AA: There's a connection with meditation here, too. I think that helped. I was already meditating a little back when I was in San Francisco State. And later I read Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind and started getting deeper into meditation. Doing the forms was a meditation, a repetitive mantra. I tried to do it as mindfully as possible.

RW: That's beautiful. The same job for one person could be nothing but suffering and for another person it could be something very different.

AA: Suzuki talked about boredom, something that stops us from going on. So I really started looking at boredom. When I was filling out those forms, I had a sidekick at a desk next to me. We started making jokes. I said, "We're bored, aren't we? This is so boring." And I put up a sign on my desk, "Chairman of the Bored." [laughs]

But I found that boredom was really interesting. I really dug in and examined it. Why was I bored? Boredom was a useless barrier. I found that if I let go of the boredom, my mind became creative instead of being resentful. It was ready to receive something and that's what happened, that opening up. That was part of it.

RW: That's beautiful. I want to make a leap here. At some point later you're in front of a bunch of people giving a presentation, and suddenly, right there, you quit. I don't know if this was at the same company.

AA: No. I'd found a job at Chevron and had become a programmer there. It was a totally different environment. It was terrible. The people had been fun where I was working before, here in Berkeley. At Chevron, I was making two or three times more money. Everybody was dressed up and looked good. But they weren't feeling that good. So there was a disconnect. I tried to figure out what was going on.

There were two or three layers of management above me and I said, you know nobody down there knows what it's all about. You're 4 million dollars over budget and two years behind schedule. And there's a lot of duplication and waste.

I was just talking that way and being presumptuous [laughs]. But it precipitated a meeting of the entire department. Hundreds of people got together in a hotel. But eventually it just didn't go anywhere.

So I thought maybe I'll go back to teaching. I'd done a little bit of that and I thought I could do it there. So I got myself transferred to the training department. I started teaching database. I brought in a new database product. It was very user-friendly and they bought it! And again, that altered the company because not so many database programmers were needed. It was during one of these training sessions that I quit.

But before that my manager—who knew I was meditating—came to me and said, "We need you to do a stress management meditation group during lunchtime." I was willing to do that. We got together in a room with no windows because it was so radical, the idea of people getting together and doing nothing. We did it for a while, but my manager was having a hard time. He was freaking out. I mean, the feelings were really lousy.

So one day I'm up on stage and I start scribbling some lines of simple code. There were employees from different parts of the company there. And as I'm doing this I feel something in the pit of my stomach. It's coming up [gestures towards his chest]. And I just turned around and said, "You know, I just can't work here anymore. There's not enough love here. We're not connecting as people. I quit." It's even hard for me to say it again now.

RW: And you didn't know you were going to do that, right?

AA: No. It was amazing. It just came up. Money and the cleanliness and all that can look good, but maybe it's hiding something.

RW: Yes. And I wanted you to talk about what happened after you quit that job.

AA: That year. Really the period without money extends more than a year. When you lose your paycheck—and it was such a big paycheck and so solid—now what happens next? I didn't know.

Money, in our world, usually represents certainty and stability. But if your supply is wobbly, what's your choice? Without money there's uncertainty. It amplified my spiritual life tremendously because, if you're going to keep your sanity, the only choice is spirit. That's kind of where I kept focusing.

RW: How did you do that? I mean, what did that amplification entail?

AA: It entailed living in a room meditating every day. My landlord, Glenn, became a good friend and we're still very good friends. One day he found me meditating in my room and he came in and meditated with me.

RW: That's unusual.

AA: I know! So he helped sustain me for a while. When I had no money, he didn't collect rent. Then he got an inheritance and we had some adventures.

RW: Oh, that's interesting. Without money you can have adventures.

AA: Real adventures. Because with money situations are contained and controlled. But adventures have a wild and unpredictable quality. There's a very unusual person named Benjamin Creme. He acts like a prophet and talks about a spiritual teacher who is supposed to arrive and bring peace on earth. He was in town and Glenn said, "Let's go listen to this guy." I'm not sure I ever bought into this idea, but he did say something about a conference of northern rich countries and poor southern countries. It was going to be in Cancun, Mexico. Glenn said, "We should go!" It's an unbelievable story.

We knew it was going to be heavily secured so how were we going to get there? I thought, let's call Ron Dellums' office, our local congressman. I got his personal assistant who said they could prepare a letter declaring us citizen-emissaries from Oakland—on an official letterhead. Okay. And we actually go, not knowing whether we'll be able to get in. [laughs].

RW: [laughs] Yes, that's an adventure.

AA: My friend rents a little Volkswagon bug and we drive there, but they stop us at a checkpoint. We try to look nice and polite, which we are, but they wouldn't let us in. So we say, "We're citizen emissaries from Oakland!" They look at our letter and aren't convinced.

It's starting to take the wind out of my sails. But then Glenn says, "Hey, can you guys stand beside my friend and I'll take your pictures?" They had their bayonets and all that. There were helicopters flying overhead—the whole thing. And now Glenn is taking pictures.

Then I got my sense of presence back and asked, "Can we talk with somebody in there?" They said, "Maybe the press secretary will talk with you." That works and the military guys let us head for the press secretary's building, but we can't get in. Then another strange thing happens. It was a media circus. There must have been a thousand reporters there. No wonder the press secretary was such an important person there! So I notice a woman selling Cancun t-shirts and I strike up a conversation. She's right near the door. My memory is sort of hazy, but I thought she said, "Oh, yeah. I know the press secretary. I'm his wife! You can mention my name."

RW: [laughs]. Wow.

AA: Anyway, somehow we got in there. He comes out and looks us over and he says, "Well, we ran out of badges, but you know what? You can be my personal guests."

We get into a press conference with the Secretary of State, Alexander Haig. I'm just right next to him. Ronald Reagan is flying in and Indira Gandhi, and I'm feeling the vibration of this thing.

That was as far as we got. We couldn't get to the actual conference table, but we got close enough. What I learned from that is—again, it's the same thing I learned as a kid—you put your attention on something and just keep your mind open, and you just might get there—or get pretty close.

RW: Amazing! And there's something about the context of the conference. What was it like being in the energy there?

AA: Very powerful. It was a mind-altering experience. Years have been spent discharging it. It altered the path of my life. When I came back, I became very interested in the relationship between the rich and poor, and the global situation.

Part of me, I guess, is living out the mythological journey of coming from a very poor family and traveling to places where people are more powerful. Again, it's a journey to the University of California. In my wildest dreams, I couldn't have imagined I'd end up here. I used to fantasize moving to Berkeley to be in the shadow of the cyclotron. But I never thought I could actually be working at the university itself and have an office here, even for a year.

I've been here thirteen years somehow. Many people don't realize that you can come here as a lecturer. Lecturers don't have to have a PhD. I got called because one of the faculty quit suddenly and they needed someone for a computer class. So I was here teaching computers for years.

Then, again, I had to break out. I couldn't stand just teaching computers. So I altered the course to include the impact of computers in our lives and on society. Out of that I spun off the "Time, Money and Love" concept when I realized I could put together a freshman seminar.

That was another thing. The seminars can only be taught by real faculty, not lecturers, so they can get a stipend. So I thought, well, what happens if I offer it for free? They said, well, if you want to work for nothing I guess it wouldn't be a problem. But the union is going to sue us. So if I could get a deal with the union I could do this. And the steward wrote me a letter of waiver. That gave me the course. Giving me that course is what opened the door to the Peace and Conflict Studies department and a course on meditation.

RW: And are you the only one there? What's your position?

AA: Peace and Conflict studies has about three or four professors, but I'm the only one who teaches meditation and non-violence.

RW: All right. So your year without money, I'll call it, that was an extraordinary year.

AA: Yes. I focused on the religions of the world. What probably made me quit the oil company was the fact I was already doing so much spiritual practice. There was just this disconnect between how one feels inside in the spirit and how we act in society, especially in these realms where I was. That became extremely painful.

RW: The incongruity.

AA: Yes. The incongruity. We're doing all this work, but we're devastating the planet. We're doing all this work and people are impoverished. We're doing all this work and we can't communicate with each other, even inside our organization. All that stuff became so obvious and the drive for wholeness became like a life and death thing for me. That became my focus, and it changed my whole life.

So after I left the oil company I'm sitting in this rented room and pretty soon people are visiting. For a while I'd have full-on gatherings. A hundred people would show up. I was mystified. I was just being myself. I was examining Hinduism, Muktananda, Trungpa, Shambhala meditation—and more. I was exploring psychic phenomena. I was examining everything possible.

If I just told four or five people I was going to have a potluck dinner, they would tell friends and pretty soon we had all these people. Some people would even bring music so we would have music. It would become a gathering and then I'd give a little dharma

talk—because, I mean, that’s what I do. This thing with wisdom has been happening ever since I opened up Ecclesiastes.

RW: Say again what that story is. You were how old?

AA: I must have been in the sixth or seventh grade. I could barely read the Bible, but this Bible had paintings and footnotes. I opened it up and ran into Ecclesiastes where there’s this exposition on vanity and the impermanence of things, the grim reality that no matter how much money you make or how many wives you have or how much power you have, it’s still going to go away. The passage is so powerful and somehow it struck me as really important. The rest of my life it has continued to be unpacked. Later I saw that lots of spiritual literature really deals with the existential crisis of impermanence.

RW: Here’s another question. In the last several years, there are people who really believe that we’re evolving towards a silicon life form. There’s almost a religious fervor around the idea of a coming “singularity” in which digital consciousness will appear on the earth. I imagine you’ve thought about all this?

AA: Oh, yes. There are many people who have the suspicion that technology is changing how we are as human beings. There’s even a movement referred to as “transhumanism” where it’s thought that we’re evolving very rapidly now into some kind of new creature. Our genes will be re-engineered and our bodies may be fused with various technological implements. We’ll become “enhanced” in various ways and will be connected to a larger intelligence that’s growing spontaneously and, in many ways, out of our control.

And in some sense, that’s true. For many people memory is now Wikipedia. The Internet changes our behavior and our perspective and how we relate to the world. Education is already rapidly changing. These are things we could talk about for hours. But personally, I don’t think the singularity is going to work out very well.

What I do think is going to happen is actually far more amazing, maybe closer to what Chardin calls the noosphere. Or like what Peter Russell wrote about in *Global Brain* many years ago. He felt that we would reach a real crisis point as we approached 10 billion in population. He had the idea that the network and the development of systems would enhance human intelligence, but it’s not a view of machines taking over, it’s a view of a change in how human beings are in the world. Up until now, human beings have been makers of things and sellers of stuff, but the world cannot sustain that kind of thing.

What is needed is an expansion of our consciousness and taking the things we have and using them wisely—actually doing what the machines were supposed to be about—freeing us from labor.

RW: If we were freed from labor, then what would we do with our time?

AA: Grow consciousness.

RW: And what we’re doing now is watching TV and YouTube, and so on.

AA: Exactly. This is the unfortunate thing. It’s a fulfillment of the old Protestant saying that idle hands are the Devil’s workshop. We haven’t used education for raising the human spirit. We’ve been using education as training to prepare individuals for businesses and careers, even as teachers and philosophers.

RW: In other words, we’re not going to automatically be given a door into heaven.

AA: No. We have work to do.

RW: And it's a special kind of work, isn't it?

AA: A very special kind of work. This is like taking the idea of the enlightened kingdom of Shambhala and making Shambhala universal, by creating a good society. We have work to do in terms of having a very broad dialogue all over the world. I think that dialogue is possible now. I see students moving toward dialogue about consciousness with each other. There's a dissatisfaction with education as it has been. So we have to rethink this.

RW: Would you say that a basic part of the work we need is towards what Socrates said: know thyself? You could even say that meditation would be a fundamental part of this.

AA: Yes, yes. In fact, that's my work. My work is to try to find a way to alter the path of education. I didn't really realize it until the years had passed by. Now I've finally reached the stage here at Cal where all my work now is about altering the path. Somehow all the elements, beyond my own control, have come into existence. My meditation classes have gotten huge. And it's not just meditation. It means allowing consciousness, which grows out of meditation, to grow into the rest of life and to change how people work and the choices we make.

That's what the "Leadership, Dialogue, and Actualization" program has turned into. It's a transformational workshop for students who come in to change their orientation toward consciousness and the world. It's an approach to relationship. Now there are alumni from the classes who keep meeting. Many students keep meeting after the class is over. They're meeting across classes.

One student came to my class last week and led us in a fortuitous circle exercise, which I'd never imagined before. We all stood up, about 35 of us. She said, "Okay, everybody who has ever felt embarrassed, step into the circle." So everybody stepped forward. And then I said, "Anyone who has ever lost a person close to you, step into the center." About a quarter of the students stepped in with me. Part of the exercise is to look at each other. We realized we all had these same experiences, but we didn't know that. It breaks barriers. Some students who go through UC Berkeley don't make friends. They just study and study. They're not involved in any community or in developing connections. That's so powerful: connections.

RW: Seen from the outside, the university is an idyllic place, a sanctuary outside of the pressures of society. There is some of that, but it's also a place of suffering, of struggling, of isolation. The same ills we have in the larger society are here, too; there's both heaven and hell.

AA: That's where we are. We're living in hell, but heaven is breaking in; it's knocking at the door.

You can learn more about Americ Azevedo at: <http://www.well.com/~americ/>