

Why Is Awe So Awesome?  
a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden  
at First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis  
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## INTRODUCTION

Our theme for December is "Mystery: The practice of embracing life with humility and awe."

Last week I considered humility and attempted to demonstrate that we darn well better be humble because it's so difficult to know anything. We casually throw around the word "truth," but last Sunday I took a shot at demonstrating that it's tough even figuring out what the word means.

I drew a distinction between facts, which are measurable; truths, which occur in social groups, and meaning, which is an entirely subjective experience.

I was reminded after Assembly last Sunday that the motto for the CIA is the bible verse I talked about, "And you shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free."

I suspect that many CIA operatives through the years have not reflected a great deal on the difference between "truth" and facts. Facts simply are—they are quantifiable anywhere, anytime by anybody. "Truth" on the other hand is a social construct. A construct that can set some people free but it can oppress others.

The "truths" that CIA operatives find are necessarily run through the baffles and filters—and perhaps even the smoke and mirrors—of patriotism and often nationalism. Not a bad thing in certain situations, but not a way of finding objectivity, if that's what we value.

## ONE

This week I want to consider the awe part of the month's theme.

First, it's good to remember that awe is an emotion—and therefore, like meaning, completely subjective. One person's awe is another person's ho-hum.

Definitionally, "awe" is a reverential respect, mixed with terror, dread, fear or wonder.

We can be awed by nature—a waterfall; a volcano; a grand sort of canyon. We can be awed by the forces of nature—a thunderstorm; a tornado; a hurricane. We can be awed by powerful people such as monarchs and presidents—a dread sovereign or the Dread Pirate Roberts. Or famous people—if Lady Gaga came in this morning . . . some of us would be . . . awe-filled.

(BTW, next week I intend to talk about art—both in creation and consumption—as a contributor to awe.)

We can be "overawed" by something—we just stop and freeze before awesome power or personality.

For many people, their concept of divinity creates awe. Both the concept of a deity that punishes and rewards; and a deity that is nature itself may create awe. That's even the title of a gospel song that begins like this:

Our God is an awesome God he reigns  
From heaven above with wisdom, power and love  
Our God is an awesome God

One thing I want to consider today is how each of us has a personal theology based on the many labels we choose and are given to us and how that personal, subjective theology affects our experience of awe. And ultimately, our worldview.

And one way to think about that is to consider how Christianity took to the North American soil. The Christian God brought to this hemisphere was a mighty, vengeful monarch. The great Puritan preacher Johnathan Edwards preached this:

The God that holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.

...

Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell. O sinner! consider the fearful danger you are in! ("Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God")

That's the god I grew up with. It's the Pentecostal god. If you think Jonathan Edwards is correct and God "holds you over the pit of hell, much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire," you're going to have some awful terror and dread!

Fact is, the fire and brimstone preachers achieve a sense of awe in their audiences, and evangelical movements continue preaching that kind of God around the world.

But for mainline Christianity, both Protestant and Roman Catholic, hellfire and brimstone have gone away for the most part. So . . . how else are they going to produce awe?

Good question.

Consider those immense cathedrals of Europe. They are mountains of stone and glass. They took the entire resources of the surrounding communities over generations to build. They soar hundreds of feet into the air and incredible art is everywhere. The rich and famous dead are buried in the floors. The powerful are commemorated on the walls. Anyone walking in can't help feeling very, very small.

But here in the US, well, we have a basilica across the street over there; by medieval standards, it's not very big and it's not very old. We have to admit that here in the US, even the great church buildings are kind of . . . meh.

Not much awe.

Then consider the little white wooden boxes with steeples on top that dot the rural United States. They were lovingly built. Many of them are still meticulously cared for. But . . . no awe.

Here in the United States, the awe of religion has never been in the structures and institutions of power. The awe has been in the minds of the people. It has been subjective. Sometimes that awe has been in the fear of hell or death or violence. Sometimes it resides in an amazement at the cosmos and natural world.

How did that happen?

There is fascinating work going on just now in the field of religious studies on what's being called the "nice Jesus."

Consider this: In those grand European cathedrals, Jesus is a monarch. Truly a "lord" of the old European type.

When I think back to the beliefs of my parents and grandparents, I think that the European monarch was still their model: they got on their knees in supplication and begged the Lord for what they needed—food, rain, enough health to work another day. And that arbitrary and un-understandable lord would or would not grant those requests.

One of my grandmothers often quoted Matthew 6:34: "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." Now that's a dark vision. But it's how she experienced life—we've got to somehow make it through each day. And the Lord handed out bounty or suffering, sometimes justly, and sometimes arbitrarily, because that's how monarchs are.

Awe-full!

But my parents and grandparents were poor people. Among the rising middle class in the late nineteenth century, in denominations such as the Congregationalists and Episcopalians and the Universalists, Unitarians, and Presbyterians and Lutherans, there began to be this nice Jesus. Among Unitarians, Jesus became just a guy with some good ideas; for the Presbyterians Jesus remained the Son of God. But for all those groups, Jesus became a nice guy.

The best example of this is the paintings of a German, Bernhard Plockhorst. He's virtually unknown in Germany today—in Europe the nice Jesus was another victim of the trenches of the First World War. In Europe, as the implications of Darwinism sunk in, theologians began to talk about the bible as metaphorical. Which is where most liberal Christians are today. In the United States as well. The "nice Jesus" movement is an earlier form.

Anyway, lithographs of Plockhorst's paintings are all over the United States. The Plockhorst Jesus is Arian. With auburn hair. He always has a little glow around his head. One of his paintings is "The Good Shepard," showing Jesus with a shepherd's hook looking kindly at a little lamb that he's carrying. Another painting is "Christ Blessing the Children" in which we see these blonde, middle class children flocking to Jesus in his pure white robe.

Plockhorst also painted guardian angels looking after children. You can find these in just about any antique store in the US in big, heavy gold frames. They were treasured parts of Victorian era American homes.

The Plockhorst Jesus definitely has a dental plan. And a personal trainer. And a superb barber for his immaculate beard. And an excellent tailor who makes him bespoke robes.

The Plockhorst Jesus is solidly upper-middle class. And nice.

The middle class and the aspiring middle class in the United States ate that stuff up. In mainline denominations, preachers stopped talking about hell. They began talking about love.

But you see, there's a particular demographic for the nice Jesus—he's only nice for those who see existence as nice. The upper crust and those striving toward the upper crust.

For the rest, life isn't nice, and neither is Jesus.

You see how the perceptions diverged. It was a race thing. It was a class thing. It was an urban / rural thing.

For the fortunate, Jesus is nice. And, as the twentieth century went along and the standard of living rose for many Americans, soon God got nice as well. We don't have to sacrifice and bow and scrape—God loves us and wants us to be happy—I don't have to think about it all that much, but if I have a flat tire, all I have to do is pray and everything is gonna be OK.

Another aspect of the nice Jesus is that he wants his people to help the poor and the oppressed. That's where the focus on social justice in mainline churches comes from.

But for poor folks, a flat tire means your car's going to be sitting by the highway for a week and it's likely to get towed. Or you have to call the cousin you don't like . . .

A loving God doesn't make sense to the oppressed. A mighty and awful God makes sense, but not a loving one. Evangelicals may have a personal Jesus as lord and savior, but if you sin, he's ready to smack you upside the head . . . so watch your ps and qs.

THREE

So, there are at least two Jesuses walking around in America. One will slap you upside the head if you get out of line; the other is a nice guy who listens and understands. If you get your awe from a loving, compassionate God, you want to spread the love and compassion around.

You see how the idea of a nice Jesus and a loving God feeds into political liberalism. Part of it is about social class. Some of it is about a social safety net. Part of it is about education.

If you smack your kids around, we know what kind of God you think there is. If not . . .

Humanism comes out of the Nice Jesus movement.

So even as mainline Christianity has precipitously dropped in terms of numbers—for example, did you know that there are now more Wiccans in the US today than there are Presbyterians?—even as mainline Christianity has declined, the effects of mainline Christianity have exploded: there are nonprofits for everything these days!

And, yes, I think that personal theology has a lot to do with political orientation. Humanism and freethought in its Unitarian form is a product of the nice Jesus. We are joined in this tradition by secular and liberal Jews who also get their ideas of love and compassion from the prophets, such as Micah that I talked about last week: “what is required by your humanity but to do justice, love compassion, and walk humbly with your ideas.”

## CONCLUSION

I love the Spanish philosopher George Santayana’s take on lived experience. His words are in your order of service this morning: “I am not a spectator watching this cataract, but a part of the water precipitated over the edge.”

That’s what Camile Paglia is getting at in the reading this morning when she says, “Belief systems are intrinsic to human intelligence and survival. They ‘frame’ the flux of primary experience, which would otherwise flood the mind.” (Parenthetically, notice that both Santayana and Paglia describe lived experience as a rush of water.)

We need frames to work with in order to comprehend the rush of lived experience. And we need something in life to produce that feeling of awe.

Which brings me to my final point:

You may have read about the Rat Park Experiments in the late 1970s that began to change the way we look at addiction.

The received wisdom going into the Rat Park Experiments was that rats would always get themselves addicted to opioids if they got the chance: You put rats in a cage with opioids and food, the rats choose the opioids until they eventually starve to death.

In the Rat Park experiments, the researchers began with a question: What if it isn't the weakness of the rat but the character of the cage?

The experimenters put rats into large cages with companion rats. Access to sunshine and nature and things to do.

In those changed circumstances, the rats did not get addicted to opioids and starve to death.

The difference is worldview. In one, the rat sees the world as a cruel cage.

In the other, the rat sees the world as a playground.

Think about it: How do you see the world?

I was born into a family that definitely viewed the world as a cage: We're born into sin; we do or don't save ourselves from eternal damnation from a punishing god; we struggle to pay taxes and bills and always there's "too much month at the end of the money," as the Country song puts it. "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof." We're in a stark cage and our awe is invested in a powerful, punishing god.

Fortunately for me, I happened to be born at a time when the United States was rich and powerful and the rising tide was lifting even the leakiest boats. I got lucky and broke out of the cage.

I was one lucky rat! I started hangin' out with Nice Jesus.

But remember that rock anthem from Smashing Pumpkins: "Despite all my rage . . . I am still just a rat in a cage."

That summarizes the worldview of a lot of frightened, angry people. Fear and rage create theology, and theology creates your politics. And it creates your life.

The rapper Naz talks about getting out of the cage. He knows that there is the cage, then there's your attitude about the cage. He puts it this way:

They home, doing nothing, might as well be in a cage  
Hating on young brothers, one foot in the grave  
They used to love us till  
we found our own way through the maze

## SOURCES

George Santayana, *Skepticism and Animal Faith: Introduction to a System of Philosophy* <https://read.amazon.com/?asin=B00LB7AURE>

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Bernhard Plockhorst. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernhard\\_Plockhorst](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bernhard_Plockhorst)

Smashing Pumpkins <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ET3w3vzQW6g>

Naz "Let There Be Light" <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpVaTd5rnWY>

OOS: "I am not a spectator watching this cataract, but a part of the water precipitated over the edge." George Santayana, *Skepticism and Animal Faith* (p 134)

Reading, from feminist and social critic Camile Paglia:

"As an atheist, I have argued that if religion is erased, something must be put in its place. Belief systems are intrinsic to human intelligence and survival. They "frame" the flux of primary experience, which would otherwise flood the mind.

But politics cannot fill the gap. Society, with which Marxism is obsessed, is only a fragment of the totality of life. As I have written, Marxism has no metaphysics: it cannot even detect, much less comprehend, the enormity of the universe and the operations of nature. Those who invest all of their spiritual energies in politics will reap the whirlwind. The evidence is all around us—the paroxysms of inchoate, infantile rage suffered by those who have turned fallible politicians into saviors and devils, godlike avatars of Good versus Evil.

My substitute for religion is art, which I have expanded to include all of popular culture. . . A society that respects neither religion nor art cannot be called a civilization.