

Awe and Then Some

a talk by Rev. Dr. David Breeden

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READING

In his book *The Sense of Beauty: Being the Outline of Aesthetic Theory*, the Spanish philosopher George Santayana wrote,

Human attention inevitably flickers; we survey things in succession, and our acts of synthesis and our realization of fact are only occasional. This is the tenure of all our possessions; we are not uninterruptedly conscious of ourselves, our physical environment, our ruling passions, or our deepest conviction.

What wonder, then, that we are not constantly conscious of that perfection which is the implicit ideal of all our preferences and desires? We view it only in parts, as passion or perception successively directs our attention to its various elements.

Some of us never try to conceive it (that perfection which is the implicit ideal of all our preferences and desires) in its totality. Yet our whole life is an act of worship to this unknown divinity; every heartfelt prayer is offered before one or another of its images.

Big A Awe

–And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Now, that's awe. Beethoven-level awe. That's the Romantic Era "big A" awe.

Actually, it's British Romantic-Era awe, written by William Wordsworth in a poem he called "Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey."

A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns . . .

That's awe. And wonder. And what we call a "mystical experience."

Here's another one, reported by the apostle Paul:

. . . I will go on to visions and revelations of the Lord. I know a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows. And I know that such a person—whether in the body or out of the body I do not know; God knows—was caught up into Paradise and heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat. (2 Corinthians 12 New Revised Standard Version)

That's what I want to consider today—those experiences, those emotions—awe, wonder, the sublime, the mystical, the ineffable, transcendence—emotions and experiences that change a person's way of thinking and sends people on a new path. A path with purpose described by George Santayana in the reading this morning. Something that makes us

conscious of that perfection which is the implicit ideal of all our preferences and desires.

So. Think with me. Think about those times you've felt one with the universe; felt held by the universe,

Humanists call it one thing; Religious Naturalists perhaps call it another; various religious traditions supply various words for it—but let's think about that pan-human feeling . . . Wordsworth phrased it, "a sense sublime / Of something far more deeply interfused" Or as St. Paul called it, "the third heaven."

Awe: Where It's At

Awe. The word comes to us from Old English. It meant then "fear," "terror," "reverence." For the polytheistic Germanic peoples, it was something felt before the power of nature or before a powerful leader. Later, as Christianity came into the picture, that English word was equated with the monotheistic god.

Whatever you think causes it, the emotion is the same: "fear," "terror," "reverence."

I grew up in the mid-South where tornados are a common occurrence. When a tornado comes close, awe—fear, terror, reverence—is guaranteed.

I lived for a time on the Gulf Coast. When a hurricane comes in, awe—fear, terror, reverence—is guaranteed.

Those are the natural occurrences of awe. But we go looking for it, too.

The Maya, Inca, Aztecs, and Egyptians set about creating awe by constructing overwhelming pyramids.

European Christians set about creating awe by constructing overwhelming structures they called cathedrals. Since then, secular structures such as dams and skyscrapers have created awe.

The European Romantics of the nineteenth century went looking for it in nature. When Wordsworth felt the sensations he reports in the poem, he was hiking in an awe-inspiring area along the River Wye to see some ruins of a twelfth-century abbey.

A favorite Romantic-era spot was Mount Blanc, in the Alps.

Here in the US, Niagara Falls and the Grand Canyon have been favorites.

The first thing to keep in mind is that awe is not tied to any one religion or art. It's a human emotion . . .

As is wonder. Which is interesting because the origin of the word is Old English—wundor (noun), wundrian (verb)—but we don't know exactly what the word described . . .

Dr. Jesse Prinz, a professor of philosophy at City University of New York, researches awe and wonder. Prinz believes that art, science, and religion all have awe and wonder as a common root. These emotions encourage us to try to understand, and our attempt to understand is the source for religion, art, and science.

Dr. Prinz writes, "Atheist that I am, it took some time for me to realize that I am a spiritual person."

Well, actually, Dr. Prinz, we're all spiritual people.

The physicist Sean Carroll—who BTW hosts a brilliant podcast called "Mindscape"—writes:

We talk about 'awe and wonder,' but those are two different words. I am in awe of the universe: its scope, its complexity, its depth, its meticulous precision. But my primary feeling is wonder. Awe has connotations of reverence: 'this fills me with awe and I am not worthy.' Wonder has connotations of curiosity: 'this fills me with wonder and I am going to figure it out. I will take wonder over awe every day.

For Dr. Carroll, an atheist who calls himself a "poetic naturalist," understanding more increases awe.

Here's the thing: We are not locked in a zero-sum, either / or world in which atheists can't have mystical experiences or theists can't realize the beauty of a completely material and observable set of physical processes.

Every human being experiences awe and wonder somewhere across the artificial boundaries of science, art, and religion. As Sean Carroll and Jesse Prinz point out, awe and wonder are the driving forces behind creativity in science, art, and religion.

Which brings us to the "why?" of awe and wonder.

I think it's this: self-transcendence. Getting out of the ego and into relationship with the planet and her creatures.

Awe: How To Get There

In her poem "Nostos" the American poet Louis Gluck writes,

We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.

Now, that's a perfect description of a loss of awe and wonder. It's a description of the damage habit can do. It's the opposite of living a life filled with awe and wonder—the kind of awe and wonder that creates science, art, and religion.

Contrast that attitude with a poem by Emily Dickinson:

"Nature" is what we see—
The Hill—the Afternoon—
Squirrel—Eclipse— the Bumble bee—

Nay—Nature is Heaven—
Nature is what we hear—
The Bobolink—the Sea—
Thunder—the Cricket—

Nay—Nature is Harmony—
Nature is what we know—
Yet have no art to say—

So impotent . . . Our Wisdom is
To Her Simplicity. (#668)

Now that's not the writing of somebody in a rut! This is someone who experiences awe and wonder in the small things seen anew: seeing a squirrel, a bumble bee, a bird, a cricket. It's a poem about the ineffability of awe—the emotion escapes words.

The experience that William Wordsworth and Emily Dickinson and George Santayana and Jesse Prinz and Sean Carroll and St. Paul are talking about . . . it's an experience beyond words but one that reenforces personal, subjective, meaning and purpose—in a pre-verbal way, if you will.

Let's take a closer look at what philosopher George Santayana thought about this:

Human attention inevitably flickers; we survey things in succession, and our acts of synthesis and our realization of fact are only occasional. This is the tenure of all our possessions; we are not uninterruptedly conscious of ourselves, our physical environment, our ruling passions, or our deepest conviction.

Notice what Santayana is saying here: we live in a sort of abstract, hazy rut, not quite recognizing the things around us; not quite realizing what we ourselves are doing; and not focused on our central concerns of our meaning and purpose This is, Santayana claims, the normal mode of being alive in the world—our default auto-pilot. But that's not a good thing:

What wonder, then, that we are not constantly conscious of that perfection which is the implicit ideal of all our preferences and desires? We view it only in parts, as passion or perception successively directs our attention to its various elements. Some of us never try to conceive it in its totality. Yet our whole life is an act of

worship to this unknown divinity; every heartfelt prayer is offered before one or another of its images.

“Perfection.” That, Santayana claims, is what we long for, but it is also where we live. All the time. It’s just that habit makes us fail to see it. Art or nature or wonder can awaken us to that perfection.

And we need to access that perfection to keep aware of meaning and purpose . . . and the simple joy of living and breathing, for that matter . . .

CONCLUSION: Why Bother?

But back to that “why”

As Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote at the foundation of the Transcendental Movement:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchers of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? Why should not we have a poetry and philosophy of insight and not of tradition, and a religion by revelation to us, and not the history of theirs?

Like our liberal-religious forebears the Transcendentalists, humanists and religious naturalists find awe and wonder in that “original relation to the universe.”

Transcendence. It's all about getting over ourselves and getting past ourselves.
Getting out of our own way.

Not many of us are very adept at doing that. Getting out of your own way is about transcending the ego, the illusion of self.

That's transcendence.

Why seek it? Because, as all the authors I have mentioned today would I think agree:
awake and alive people change our world . . . for the better.

SOURCES

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