

Prepare To Be Amazed

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Passing the threshold from the sun drenched exterior, with the summer's heat radiating off the ancient stones which pave the great square laid before it, into the dimly lit sanctuary of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice something changed. I was overcome by the sheer vastness of the space and the incomprehensible majesty of more than 86,000 square feet of shimmering multi-color and gold mosaics dating from the 11-13th century. Huge images depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments, composed of small individual pieces of glass, stone and other materials, selected and placed just right to compliment and complete the design.

The beauty was almost too much to bear and by the time I passed back out into the sunlit square I felt as though I had encountered or been touched by something more than my five senses could perceive.

It is an experience with which I have a long history.

I've felt it as a child gazing across the water toward the horizon from the bow of a boat on Long Island Sound or taking in the long, wide vista afforded from a chairlift on a ski trip, mountain hike or roadside stop. I've known it ministering to people in moments when I knew just what to do and at times when I had no idea what to say.

I experience it staring at the night sky or an autumn sunset, watching leaves or snow fall and when I smell freshly cut grass in the summer. I recognize it in acts of kindness great and small and expressions of generosity and love that disarm the cynicism and despair to which I'm tempted at times by the magnitude of the world's grief.

I'm talking, you may have guessed or recognized from your own life, about the experience of awe. Perhaps your own experience of awe has occurred in a different context or setting than those I've described, but as Rabbi Howard Cooper writes, "You have known wonder." Moments when, "Something larger than you was happening. Something you could not control." In his classic text, "The Idea of the Holy", the noted German theologian Rudolph Otto speaks of awe in terms of what he calls the "mysterium tremendum et fascinans", an encounter with Mystery before whom/which we are astonished or amazed and stand trembling, while also finding ourselves impossibly attracted, fascinated or drawn toward it in ways we cannot fully explain or articulate. According to Otto, the experience, "may at times come sweeping like a gentle tide pervading the mind with a tranquil mood of deepest worship. It may pass over into a

more set and lasting attitude of the soul, continuing, as it were, thrillingly vibrant and resonant, until at last it dies away and the soul resumes its... mood of everyday experience. . . It may become the hushed, trembling, and speechless humility of the creature in the presence of—whom or what? In the presence of that which is a Mystery inexpressible and above all creatures.”

But awe is more than just an intense emotional experience. Awe carries the potential to awaken us from apathy....to knock us off our pedestal of complacency....and liberate us from existential fear. In plainer terms, awe is good for you. Spiritual teachers have long known this, and today, science has weighed in. Studies show awe expands our sense of time; inspires creativity, and engenders hope and helps connect us to nature and to others all of which promote mental, physical and spiritual well-being. Thus awe, religion and science agree, changes our perspective and can help transform the way we see, experience, and live life.

Awe is also a universal human experience, unbound by clime or creed, though the frequency with which we experience it may differ considerably from person to person and perhaps even age to age. Indeed, the famed 20th C. Jewish scholar and teacher Abraham Heschel wrote, “The awareness of grandeur and the sublime is all but gone from the modern mind.” And Howard Cooper, recounting the evolution of humankind and all that has been achieved along with it, nonetheless notes, “our sense of wonder at it all is dulled by familiarity.”

We see the absence of the awareness of grandeur in Mrs. Arable from Charlotte’s web, “What’s miraculous about a spider’s web?”, she asks. “It’s just a web.” And we see, in Jane Rzepka’s reflection, the hazard of life where wonder is dulled by familiarity: “zip codes” mistaken for “rip cords.”: A profound loss of perspective. Lives on auto-pilot...moving forward and faster with no real appreciation... or care... of where we’ve been, where we are, or where we’re going.

In this age, in which Rabbi Samuel Dresner observed, we “know more and more about less and less”, active wonderment has been supplanted with passive egotism as the approach to life. As we seek increasingly to entertain and be entertained, we engage less with the depth of life, sacrificing our lives and our humanity on the altar of what Henry David Thoreau famously described as, “not life”.

That we are creatures easily distracted is no new revelation, its just today we have more ways than ever to be distracted or entertained, many of which we have convinced ourselves are either necessary or benign. All of which is to say that in our day and age, awe takes extra effort. And although we can’t force an experience of awe, we can ready ourselves.

We can prepare to be amazed.

That's what going on now in the Christian tradition. Today is in fact the first Sunday of Advent. Now, I admit my memory of Advent growing up Roman Catholic is rather sketchy. What I most remember, in addition to the wreath and calendar, was that Advent is a waiting period, a sort of four week pre-show before the main event on December 25th.

This is in line with the secular view of the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas. It has come to be treated as kind of an "empty space" between two widely observed holidays. And so we cram this waiting period with lots of busyness and glitz to pass the time. Then when Christmas comes and goes, we lament how commercialized it has become, that it has lost its meaning and how glad we are it is over. No awe? No wonder!

It's not that it wasn't there. We just didn't see it. While there are varied and sometimes undeniably difficult reasons why this may be, for a lot of us much of time the main reason is we're focused on the "zip codes" of the season: "replacement bulbs, sticks of butter, fruit by mail catalogs and party shoes," rather than the "ripcords", which invite us into the depth of life: "our inner quiet, the love we exchange, and our efforts to make the world more whole."

In other words we didn't prepare to experience what we often lament we are missing in our lives. And this is so often true in all the seasons of our life, not just the weeks between Thanksgiving and Christmas each year. We've conflated doing with being, reducing our lives to a routinized string of tasks, that leave us feeling disconnected or adrift.

Observances like Advent serve as a sort of anchor, purposely creating space, not merely to wait with restless activity, but to prepare with focused intentionality. To ready oneself for an experience of awe, and in the case of Christmas, the birth of a child. A child who grew into a man and taught in word and deed a way of life fundamentally different from the social, political and religious conventions of his day and indeed of our own day. Teachings, words and deeds, that continue to inspire awe, change perspectives and transform lives. What many Unitarian Universalists, many present and past, including our 19th century religious forbearer Theodore Parker refer to as, the religion of Jesus rather than the religion about Jesus.

As a time of preparation for Christmas, Advent works to mitigate the dulling effect of familiarity with the Christmas story on the potential for wonder it contains within its depths. It is a way Christians the world over prepare to be amazed. But opportunities for such preparations are not limited to one particular faith or one particular holiday. As Rabbi Howard Cooper writes, "Each of us has the capacity to experience wonder, and to develop our appreciation of the awesome nature of what life unfolds before us and within us moment by moment. The beauty of the narrative of life on earth."

So what about Unitarian Universalists? How might we prepare to be amazed, this season and every season?

Two words come to mind, words that in one form or another, are at the core of every spiritual practice or approach to life across traditions...what Dr. Dorian referred to and Jane Rzepka alluded to in our readings...

”Pay attention.”

Dr. Dorian from Charlotte’s web provides a good example of paying attention. When Mrs. Arable asks Dr. Dorian if he understands how there could be any writing in a spider’s web, he replies, “Oh no. I don’t understand it. But for that matter I don’t understand how a spider learned to spin a web in the first place. When the words appeared, everyone said they were a miracle. But nobody pointed out that the web itself is a miracle.” Dr. Dorian is able to see beyond the surface of things. More, he’s able to encounter and tolerate Mystery. “I don’t understand everything, and I don’t intend to let that worry me.”, he says.

Paying attention means to risk seeing the world anew. For this, ritualized spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, or yoga may prove helpful. Less formal practices can go a long way too. Setting aside time to pause every day. To sit or be outside. Or to look out the window and observe... and “be”... in the world without starting an internal commentary on what you see, hear, feel, smell or taste. Some people find sketching or journaling whatever enters your mind helpful and others make a point to just notice throughout the day what is happening within...stepping back to observe your thoughts, your feelings, your body. None of these are as easy as they may sound. There’s a reason they’re called practices.

William Blake’s oft quoted words, “To see a world in a grain of sand and heaven in a wild flower, hold infinity in the palm of your hand and eternity in an hour.” contain a lifetime of preparation through paying attention and a willingness to look and imagine beyond the surface of things. And as Blake’s poetry reflects this practice, as do Dr. Dorian’s words in Charlotte’s web, so too do the observations of the noted 20th C. physicist Richard Feynman...

Looking at a flower, Feynman, writes, “I can appreciate the (outer) beauty of the flower. There’s also beauty at smaller dimensions, the inner structure, also the processes. The fact that the colors in the flower evolved in order to attract insects to pollinate it is interesting; it means that insects can see the color. It adds a question: does this aesthetic sense also exist in the lower forms? Why is it aesthetic? All kinds of interesting questions which the science knowledge only adds to the excitement, the mystery and the awe of a flower.”

Feynman demonstrates knowledge, rather than dull our experience of wonder, can deepen it, if we've prepared for it.

At the heart of our Unitarian Universalist faith is our promise to engage in a free and responsible search for truth and meaning. A search that cannot be seriously undertaken without effort, if we're mindlessly shouting zip codes when it is attention to our rip cords that is needed. And we pride ourselves on being a faith where how we are together is more important than what our specific theologies may be. Which is to say, we are a faith that places a premium on relationships.

In writing or speaking about awe, Feynman, Blake, and Dr. Dorian each point to relationship. A relationship religion and science describe as beneficial, even transformative in terms of our physical, mental and spiritual wellbeing... a relationship nonetheless suffering in our age from a lack of wonder as we drown in a sea of mind numbing, soul shriveling distractions.

The testimony offered by people like Blake and Feynman and characters like Dr. Dorian, serves to remind us awe is a means by which we are confronted by, made aware of or reminded of the pulse of life that courses through our veins. An awareness that infuses this season and every season of our lives with meaning and sense of abundance.

Call it God, Goddess, Spirit, Source, Mystery...it has been given countless names throughout the ages and is fully captured by none...in awe we are invited to enter into relationship and bear witness to its presence in our lives and in the world around us.

It is an invitation available to all of us. One we accept when, as part of our search for truth and meaning, we prepare to be amazed.

May it be so.
Amen and Blessed Be