

Awe

A Sermon preached at the First Unitarian Church, Albuquerque, New Mexico

By Christine Robinson November 29, 2015

I had my groceries, and the young checker...who looked like she was more than ready to quit for the day, said “Did you find everything you needed?” in that well-trained, perfunctory way that people can get. “I did,” I said, with what I hoped was an encouraging smile, but she’d turned back to her task. “awesome.” She responded, tiredly, and she kept on checking.

Don’t you just hate it when really good words get co-oped by pop culture and ruined?

That’s why I changed the title of this sermon from “Awesome” to “Goosebumps”.

Goosebumps, that contraction of the tiny muscles in the hair follicles that cause our skin to dimple and whatever hair we happen to have to stand up, goosebumps are what we humans get when we feel awe.

Also...some of us...when we feel cold. Now what is interesting to me about goosebumps is that they are more or less useless to us. In furry mammals, like our dogs and cats, that reaction happens when the animal is threatened or angry, and raises the hair around their neck, shoulders, and back, puffing them up to look more intimidating. It also keeps them warmer in the cold. So, goosebumps, which happen to humans when we feel awe, comes to us through the evolutionary ladder from fear.

It happens that the same day I came across this little fact of science, I also came across a biblical commentary that said told me that in Hebrew, the word “yira” means both “fear” and “Awe.” Which means that all that “fear of the Lord” stuff you might have heard about through the years, which you probably imagined meant that you should feel scared even if you were not inclined to....could as soon be translated, “Awe of the Lord”. And while we’re at it, that the Lord bit, with its masculine, royalist overtones, could be better translated as “the All.” So the whole phrase, which I don’t know about you, but I always thought was really strange, “Fear of the Lord” might be “Awe of Reality.”¹ Like that? I do, too.

But it does seem that the ancient Hebrews, who knew nothing of evolution, were on to something about a crossover between fear and awe which is just not coming across in the popular usage of “awesome”.

Awe is in a family of emotions which are mostly positive, including wonder and joy. These are often thought of as the spiritual emotions; the emotions we feel when we observe or feel linked to something greater than ourselves, be it a newborn baby, a starry sky, or God. Joy is an abundance of meaningful pleasure; way beyond mere happiness. Wonder is the pleasurable expansive feelings we have when we confront something especially beautiful, mysterious, or rare. Awe is the reverence we feel when we come upon or contemplate something grand, powerful, or sublime.

Many who saw the fall of the Twin Towers on 9/11 on TV, experienced awe. Horrible as that scene was, the sheer magnitude of the forces at work was awesome, and we stayed fascinated with the videos. The people who

¹ Ecclesiastes: Annotated & Explained (SkyLight Illuminations) by Shapiro, Rami

experienced it on the ground almost certainly did not feel awe. Although awe is related to fear, you don't feel awe if you are actually in danger. Evolution primes us to fight or flight when in danger, whereas our response to awe is to slow down, open up, gape like an idiot and be unconcerned for our safety. Therefore some self-protective part of our mind shuts down the awe if there really is danger.

So...what's the fear about? Why the goosebumps? (I hasten to say that not everybody gets goosebumps, so if you don't, don't worry, you can still feel awe. Awe can also bring tears, the lump in the throat, the catch in the voice.) Fear is not a bad thing, either. A person without fear is a dead person. Our fear keeps us safe. Still, it is odd, isn't it, that if something is so wonderful it edges over into awesome, it also takes on an overtone of fear? And oddities often teach us something.

One of the dividing lines between wonder and awe, is that we feel wonder over any amazing or beautiful thing, but we feel awe when we see something so amazing or beautiful or powerful that we can't quite take in the experience, and it requires some mental accommodation from us. If something is so awesome... like the collapse of a building just because it was hit by an airplane... we have to re-think our world. Let me give you an example.

Some years ago, I drove from here to a cousin's wedding at Zion National Park. Now, I have to tell you that the scenery between here and there is the world's biggest scenery. From the outskirts of Albuquerque all the way to Zion, the landscapes are beautiful and vast and colorful. The Red Rocks around Gallup, the Petrified Forest, The Painted Desert, The Grand Canyon. Escalante National Monument, and Zion Canyon itself. It put me in a mood of awe, driving hour after

hour, through those landscapes that day. After the wedding, we went on a ranger walk at Zion, and the ranger pointed out water leaking out from a high cliff wall and dripping onto the ground around us. "That water," he said, "that water was trapped in those rocks a billion years ago and is just now seeing the light of day."

A day of being a tiny little driver in a world of large vistas, and now water a billion years old.... Suddenly, I guess, I had to take something I'd known for a long time...that the universe was big and old, and actually take it in. It blew my mind, as we used to say. It changed my ideas about God, because once you really start coming to terms with how big the cosmos is, it's a lot harder to imagine anybody holding it all in his hands. That trip to Zion was my last flirtation with Yahweh, ironically. After that, God had to emerge out of the world rather than create it from outside.

So that's what awe will do for you, make you adjust your thinking, widen your horizons, consider what is really true... and a little fear of where this new path is going is probably appropriate.

The second thing that happens when you come up against something big and powerful and beautiful is that you feel small. We may feel so thrilled in our awe that we feel oneness, the merging of self and this other. And the ego, that part of ourselves which is a self and wants, thank you very much, to stay a self, feels threatened at feeling small, or being absorbed, or in any other way disappearing. A stab of fear is its self-protective reaction. This stab of fear disturbs many meditators, and is sometimes what wakes us from wonderful dreams. It's a well-

known phenomena of the spiritual life, and it is a part of the emotional color of Awe.

Psychologists and Biologists want to understand why humans experience awe. If everything the species does has some kind of advantage for survival and thriving, what part does awe play?

One theory is that awe is healing, and the best story I can tell you about this is an old, old story...the story of Job.

Job, you will remember, is a good and prosperous man, who is afflicted with horrible things. In a short space of time, he loses his fortune, his wife and children all die, he become afflicted with sores all over his body. His friends come by to comfort him with a variety of stupid theologies and he is afflicted with them, too. He shakes his fist at God for all this entirely unmerited suffering, and God answers from the infamous whirlwind.

But god doesn't explain why all these bad things happened to Job. Instead, God goes on and on and on about how big the universe is and how little humans know about it. He compares Job's sense that he ought to be able to understand why things happen to thinking that he ought to be able to pull a sea monster out of the sea with a fishhook. This most famous speech God ever made evokes the sweeping expanse of the intricacies of creation about as well as anything in literature, and the effect it has on Job is healing... it invokes in Job a healing sense of awe...a sense of smallness but also of belonging to the Immensity of things.

You don't have to believe in the guy in the sky to experience this same feeling. You don't have to believe in a creator to lose yourself in the immense intricacy of

things. The spirituality of the naturalist, the cosmologist, the person who watches the falling stars or the falling snow...is the same. It is curiously centering to feel one's smallness in the storm or the vistas, or the symphony or the museum, and curiously healing.

Alain de Botton, the writer on the spirituality of atheism, says ,

Nightly – perhaps after the main news bulletin and before the celebrity quiz – we might observe a moment of silence in order to contemplate the 200 to 400 billion stars in our galaxy, the 100 billion galaxies and the 3 septillion stars in the universe. Whatever their value may be to science, the stars are in the end no less valuable to mankind, as solutions to our megalomania, self-pity and anxiety.ⁱ

There is also a theory that humans experience awe...and as far as we can tell, we are the only creatures to do so, because our awe causes us to bond in the groups we need to thrive. Awe makes us better, more social people.

The experience of awe appears to make us more generous people. Some researchers asked groups of people a bunch of questions to see how often and how strongly they reported experiencing awe, and then, apparently as an afterthought, gave each of them a little gift of 10 lottery tickets which would be entered in their name for a cash drawing. They could keep all the lottery tickets themselves, of course, or they could donate some of their tickets to someone who had not been eligible to receive any tickets. The persons who reported the most awe in their lives gave 40% more tickets than others.

To further check out this finding, the same researchers, who were from UC Berkeley, took individuals out to a rather awe inspiring part of the campus, where the trees...Tasmanian Eucalyptus trees... grow 200 feet tall. If you've ever been there, it is indeed a most inspiring sight and you probably remember it. Anyway, some people were taken to this grove and instructed to gaze up at the trees for a minute. Others were taken to the same grove but they were invited to gaze at one of the campus buildings on the edge of the grove. After a few minutes, someone..actually an accomplice of the researchers, came walking hurriedly near the gazer and then apparently tripped and scattered a bunch of pens across the pathway. The participants who had been gazing at the trees were significantly more likely to help the hapless walker pick up more pens than those who had been assigned to gaze at the building.

These researchers² think that awe is “the collective emotion”, motivating us to do things that benefit others and the greater good, and if you think about the activities that give YOU goosebumps...or bring a tear to your eye or a catch to your voice, you will probably notice things like collective singing, ritual, the pledge to the flag...things that remind us, as awe reminds us, that we are small beings in a larger collective and that being a part of that collective feels very good.

So... How do you get to feel more of this great and beneficial and healing emotion?

Because Awe is an emotion, it is not entirely in our control. It comes upon us by surprise. You can't just wake up and say, “I am going to experience awe today,” the way you can say you are going to have a bagel for breakfast.

² Jonathan Haidt and others

But you can prime the pump, create a fertile field, put yourself in the way of experiencing awe. You don't even have to go to Alaska, or Zion! We live in a land of beautiful vistas and tall mountains, but you don't even have to go outside. Museums and Concerts also intend to evoke awe by immersing people in beauty, in community, in vastness. You have to take the time to do it, though, to buy those tickets, take a walk in the foothills, or watch the change of light from your window. Our busy lives don't lend themselves to awe, and we should resist.

We can't cultivate awe itself, but we CAN cultivate gratitude and reverence. They are precursors to Awe, and they are cultivated by attention and by intention. Reverence is the capacity to notice and appreciate things that are bigger than you. Gratitude is the capacity to notice that you are the recipient of many gifts of life which you didn't earn. Both Reverence and Gratitude are spiritual practices, things we remind ourselves to do, and they remind us of our smallness and our connections, and pave the way for us to be surprised by experiences of awe and joy.

Thirdly, after taking time and cultivating gratitude and reverence, we are more likely to experience awe if we cultivate a sense of the holiness of the world. This is a sense we are born with and sometimes remember having had as children and it is often lost as we struggle to master our world, or because some clueless adult intimated that we should just grow up. As our last foray into awe this morning, we're going to listen to, and sing along with a song about the holiness of the world. The composer and singer is somebody who lost his sense of the holiness of the world as a result of a ham handed religiousness, but somehow got it back and

sings about it. You can lose it because of ham handed science teachers, too, or just by inattention, but this is another precursor to awe that we can cultivate.

Holy can mean connected with God and the Sacred and things that not all UU's believe in, but Holy can also mean "sublime" or...well... awesome. And when we keep that in the front of our minds, we are more likely to be visited by awe.

Lots of us know this song by UU composer Peter Mayer, so if you do, or as you catch on, feel free to sing along. It's going to be our closing song, so go ahead and stand as you are able....

¹ De Botton, Alain (2012-03-06). Religion for Atheists: A Non-believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion (Kindle Locations 1542-1548). Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.