“How is your sermon going?” My husband asked me earlier this week.

“I haven’t started it yet,” I told him.

“What are you preaching about?” he asked.

“Awe.”

“Well that’s easy,” he replied, “You can talk about your husband.”

“I just might do that,” I told him.

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Awe is among the most ancient of human, if not always marital, experiences. We have depicted it, told stories, sung songs, created art, and built monuments to it for thousands and thousands of years. The word we use for it in this time and place, “awe,” is borrowed not from Greek or Latin, like so many concepts we delve into on these Sunday mornings, but from early Scandinavian.¹ It’s related to the old Icelandic word for “terror, dread, uproar, and respect.”

Did you know that? Interesting, right?

We use “awe” pretty casually sometimes. As in “I am awed by your ability to make friends” or “I am awed by how much oatmeal you can eat in one sitting” (I’m talking about my husband now. On both counts. You’re welcome, honey). But the other kind of awe, real awe is not casual. It’s a profound feeling.

The adjective awesome, which we also use casually, contains the word awe, and in its classic sense refers to something that fills someone with reverential fear, wonder, or respect. The awesome roar of an African lion—heard from a safe distance.

The word awful also contains “awe,” and refers to that which inspires or instills fear, terror, or dread; something that is terrible, dreadful, distressing. Like maybe that same roar, way too close.

The feeling of fear is the link here. Psychology researchers Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt locate awe “in the upper reaches of pleasure and on the boundary of fear.”² Awe, when it is profoundly experienced, is both pleasant, and also connected on some level with a kind of fear. In a good way, most of the time.

Last month, I had the opportunity to see an exhibit of works by the artist Judy Chicago. It was at University of New Mexico’s Harwood museum up in Taos. Judy Chicago is a famous artist and author whose career has spanned a half century now.³ Early on, she observed that there was
very, very little birth iconography in the male-dominated history of western art. Like practically none. If you look around at the famous historical artworks on display in museums, you just don’t really see birth. This seemed strange, since we all come into the world that way. Should be a rich topic, right? I mean, what’s with all that art about living and dying, and nothing about being born? (And the fruit. This week a man duct taped a banana to a canvas and made $120,000.)

So Judy Chicago started something she calls The Birth Project. For five years in the 1980’s, she designed a series of birth and creation images for needlework, and then hired women needle workers around the country to make them. The artisans stitched, knotted, and crocheted the works of art Chicago had designed. The exhibit I saw last month was made up of works from The Birth Project.

They are incredible. I recommend them, if you have the chance to experience them personally. The exhibition in Taos is over, but many of the works actually reside just a few miles from this church at the Albuquerque museum. They aren’t always on display but are available for exhibition and study.

Most of the works I saw are of a size that you could pick up and hold, or maybe you could do it with just one other person. But then around a corner there appeared one big room, probably as deep as this sanctuary, and on the back wall hung a huge piece. It is seven feet tall and eighteen feet wide. It is crocheted, in the style of lace. But instead of depicting flowers or other traditional lace patterns, this giant crocheted panel, done all in black, depicts birth. It portrays birth almost like a river coursing through a huge female form—she almost fills the whole panel—with fingers and toes that turn into rays. Creation energy moves toward, through, and from her.

It is hard to describe what it felt like to stand before this work of art. In that moment, I found it hard to speak. I was struck... by the scale of it. By its nearly mystical depiction of the inner experience of giving birth, while simultaneously being iconographic, very outward. It was about not just birth but about powerlessness and powerfulness. It was about the source of existence itself. I immediately grasped what it means that this kind of iconography was missing for so long from the western world, and what that has meant for women, and for all of us, and... for everything.

It also took me back, instantly, to my own experience of giving birth, which felt to me like balancing exactly on the edge between life and death. In the Harwood museum that day, my heart raced to stand in front of that work of art—a fear-like feeling—and at the same time I felt such pleasure in the power and transcendence of it.

I experienced awe.

It feels really radical to speak from the pulpit about having experienced childbirth. To speak of it even in these vaguest of terms feels like breaking a taboo. Even though every one of us was born. That is one of the impacts of the absence of this iconography. We think of birth as unspeakable, rather than as something universal and powerful.
In the text version of this sermon on the church website, I’ll include a link to an online image of that Judy Chicago piece for anyone who’s curious about it.\textsuperscript{v}

Some experiences of awe are transformative and others are more mundane. I think what’s true is that we experience awe on a kind of continuum. On one side is awe about something mundane that we can’t explain, like that Peloton bike commercial. (You can google it later).\textsuperscript{vi}

Moving along the spectrum we might feel a sense of awe at how beautiful a certain flower is—we feel wonder at nature’s capacity for creativity, intricacy, and beauty. And cleverness! The way goldenrod and asters grow side by side, so that their bright yellow and purple combine to look irresistibly beautiful to bees—more so than either color can do alone.\textsuperscript{vii} It works on people too, and drew plant biologist Robin Wall Kimmerer into her field of study, where she figured out their trick and wrote about it.

Next along the awe spectrum, perhaps something like witnessing a young human’s first steps or first words. Such things are familiar to us, yet they seem miraculous. We get that feeling of the heart soaring, and it is hard to describe all that it means to us. We are moving toward the ineffable now—things that leave us speechless.

And that’s where we may experience the things that really take us out of our usual mode of consciousness. These are experiences of transformative awe. We may be deeply moved, and changed a little bit or a lot, by something like a work of art, or hearing an amazing piece of music, by spending time on a mountain, or in the company of whales, or by witnessing an incredible act of generosity. Transformative awe can be prompted by new information, such as physics revealing that the universe is expanding, and it is accelerating, and its acceleration is accelerating.

I think the physicist Albert Einstein was embracing the wide possibilities for awe when he said, “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

Transformative awe quiets the ego, and awakens us to something profound. Where fear is part of awe, it is often because something is unknowable, unexplainable, or, especially, makes us realize how small we are. The Buddhist teacher Roshi Joan Halifax says that when we experience awe, it is often also an experience of threat to our egos. The ego is “deconstructed.”\textsuperscript{viii}

In recent years, researchers have been curious about the effects of awe on people’s lives and in society. The Greater Good Science Center at the University of California at Berkeley has been home to some of this work and you can find talks and articles about it on their website.

Studies show that experiences of awe increase people’s feelings of connectedness. It increases humility, and leads to increased sharing, and a willingness to help or even sacrifice for others. It leads people to feel “less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity people share with one another.”\textsuperscript{ix}
Fleeting experiences of awe, even simple ones like spending some time among tall trees, or listening to the Sandhill cranes moving through the Bosque del Apache, those fleeting experiences reset people, orienting us toward each other and our collective good.

Keltner and another researcher, Paul Piff, write:

> You could make the case that our culture today is awe-deprived. Adults spend more and more time working and commuting and less time outdoors and with other people. Camping trips, picnics and midnight skies are forgone in favor of working weekends and late at night. Attendance at arts events — live music, theater, museums and galleries — has dropped over the years. This goes for children, too: Arts and music programs in schools are being dismantled in lieu of programs better suited to standardized testing; time outdoors and for novel, unbounded exploration are sacrificed for résumé-building activities.

They draw a connection between this and the increasing individualism, materialism, disconnection in our country.

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote, “We can never sneer at the stars, mock the dawn or scoff at the totality of being. Sublime grandeur evokes unhesitating, unflinching awe. Away from the immense, cloistered in our own concepts, we may scorn and revile everything. But standing between earth and sky, we are silenced ....”

Standing between the earth and sky. Or “suspended between the sidewalk and twilight,” as Ellen Bass put it in this morning’s reading. We are silenced.

We could use more of that kind of silence, and less scorn and reviling. More connectedness, and less sneering. More willingness to help, and less mocking. “It’s a hard time to be human. We know too much and too little,” said the poem. The experience of awe contains spiritual medicine for our times.

By spiritual I don’t mean supernatural. I mean deep. The depth aspect of being. Spirituality has to do with intangible things, like love and belonging, and spirituality especially has to do with your sense of meaning in life and your relationship with your fellow humans.

It does not need to be supernatural, but because awe is a spiritual experience, and affects personal change, it is prominent in the world’s sacred religious texts. One of the oldest examples can be found in the Bhagavad-Gita, in a story about two branches of a royal family who are fighting each other for control of the kingdom.

Arjuna is the story’s protagonist. Just as he is about to lead his troops into a huge battle, he loses his nerve. The deity Krishna tries to change his mind. He lectures Arjuna about duty. He tells him about the workings of the universe. Arjuna is not persuaded. And then Krishna grants Arjuna a “cosmic eye” with which he can perceive God and all the workings of the universe for himself.

As Haidt and Keltner retell it:
[Arjuna] sees gods, suns, and infinite time and space. He is filled with amazement. His hair stands on end. Disoriented, he struggles to describe the wonders he is beholding. Arjuna is clearly in a state of awe when he says “Things never seen before have I seen, and ecstatic is my joy; yet fear-and-trembling perturb by mind” (298).

Transformed, Arjuna devotes himself to Krishna, and to honoring his commands from then on.

The Hebrew and Christian scriptures also contain many stories and references to awe. As Paul and the apostles gather converts together into the first Christian communities, the scripture says, “Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles.”

The scriptures refer to many situations that we could reasonably expect to involve awe, such as Moses ascending a mountain to converse with God. Or a group of strong, experienced soldiers watching as a scrawny young boy, David, wearing no armor (because it was all too big for him), defeats the terrifyingly large and strong Goliath, using only a slingshot.

Sometimes experiences of awe are translated in the scriptures with words like “amazed” “astonished” “reverence” “wonder” or “fear.”

Psalm 111 describes the “glorious and majestic” works and the graciousness and compassion of God. Then it says, “Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom.” The same Hebrew word that is translated as “fear” here is used elsewhere as a synonym for love.

One might also translate this psalm to say “awe (toward the source of all being) is the beginning of wisdom.”

Now... that is a beautifully liberal take on the psalm. But if you feel uncomfortable with stories about a powerful god that wins submission from someone by awing them... then you are not wrong. You are paying attention to something important. In real life, awe is sometimes used by those in power to maintain their power or manipulate others into submission. A charismatic religious or political leader who draws thousands to a service or a rally, often elicits awe, which may then be used for good... or to do harm.

The phrase “shock and awe” comes to mind, too—a military strategy in which one side deploys an extraordinary amount of force all at once, in order to leave the other side frozen in fear and awe, with no more nerve or will to fight. Awe can be used to manipulate.

What can we do about that? Can awe be trusted?

Keltner and Haidt say there are two central themes among awe experiences: one is vastness, which may be experienced as a sense of grandeur or power. The other is accommodation, meaning our mental structures—the way we think—have to adjust in order to make sense of the thing that caused us to experience awe. That second theme—changing the way we think—that’s where we have some agency. We can choose what to make of our experiences. We do not have to follow along unthinkingly.
The other day I was listening to an interview between the novelist Marilynne Robinson and the physicist Marcelo Gleiser. They had discussed many awe-inspiring things. And then, speaking of the value of religious stories, relative to the value of science, Gleiser, the physicist, said:

once you adopt that there is only one way of understanding the complexity of things you’re just emptying humanity of its value, of the plurality of visions. And so, yes, science is powerful. ... But there are other ways of knowing. And to say that there is only one way of understanding the mind... is just silly, to be honest. It’s impoverishing the richness of human culture.

He is saying that they offer complementary, and not necessarily contradictory, modes of understanding the world and our lives, if we use them well. This is also relevant to the adjusting our thinking wisely when we have experienced awe.

In being open to many sources of awe, and bringing to it diverse ways of understanding, we engage the depth aspect of being—the life of the spirit—in its fullness.

I am keenly aware in this moment of the advent candles glowing to my left. Advent: the season of waiting for the arrival of a certain baby. The nativity! The birth. We could quite naturally circle back to the image of birth at this point in the sermon. “Or you could circle back to your husband,” said my husband.

But I’ll tell you what: in the gospel stories, after Jesus was born to a humble family in the humblest of places, on a day we celebrate as Christmas, awe is already the predominant response. Shepherds in the fields are met by angels, and they tremble as they are surrounded by angelic singing.

Magi from the east, Zoroastrian priests, gazing at the night sky, follow a particular star for many miles, to arrive at his side.

In this place and time, we’ve transformed that story into a whole month—interwoven or layered culturally with other stories and traditions for maximum awe. Solstice. Hannukah. And a magical, benevolent grandfatherly figure delivering gifts to children around the globe in a single night.

And so, my parting advice to you this morning, is to make time for what leaves you silenced, what shifts your way of thinking, and fills you with wonder. Plan that visit, view, or listening time—for whatever is awe inspiring to you. And, though it may not fit in a stocking, if you share it with someone else, that might be one of the best gifts of all.

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1 Etymological notes are from the Oxford English Dictionary online. (6 December 2019)
3 https://www.judychicago.com/about/biography/

v <https://taos.org/judy-chicago-at-the-harwood/>

vi Or click here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pShKu2icEYw. Hoo boy was there a backlash to that weird ad.


ix https://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html?_r=1

x Qtd. and cited in https://dailymeditationswithmatthewfox.org/2019/08/05/rabbi-heschel-on-the-via-positiva-part-2/?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Daily+Meditations+with+Matthew+Fox%3A+August+5%2C+2019&utm_campaign=Daily+Meditations+August+5%2C+2019


xii Acts 2:43
