

“Awe-filled & Awe-full”

Rev. Danielle Webber

Kelowna Unitarians

08 December 2019

Reflection

Rev. Danielle Webber

I tell you all fairly regularly that I do not believe in God, in any of the popular ways of describing the word. Father of Jesus, Supreme Being, Allah, Higher Power, Yahweh, Love, multiple beings or one. For me this is all a disconnect, a possible connection to that which is more than all of us combined, but still the descriptions that have been used to describe God for me don't work. So I have created my own. God as relationship. God as connection, with other people, with the natural world, with yourself, your own inner being, connection with life. When I use God-language, but mean relationship or connection, I tend to confuse people. It doesn't always make sense to those around me when I say that I am an atheist and yet I am willing to find connection to spiritual texts, or hymns or poetry that explicitly speaks about God. And yet when I rephrase the sentences in my head, or when I restructure the music to focus on relationships instead of GOD – then I see the synchronicity.

Definitions of God that I have replaces relationship or connection with include:

- The object of faith – my relationships
- The greatest conceivable existence – the many connections between us all
- My moral obligation – my relationship
- Omnipotent, and omnipresent – connections and relationships

Or like our centering reading spoke of

- Beautifully moving, ceaselessly forming, growing, emerging with delight
- Spinner of chaos, pulling and twisting, freeing the fibres of pattern and form
- Nudging discomfort, prodding and shaking Waking our lives to creative unease
- Straight-talking Lover, checking and humbling, Jargon and grumbling, Speaking the truth that refreshes and frees
- **Midwife of changes** skillfully guiding, Drawing us out through the shock of the new
- **Daredevil gambler**, risking and loving, Giving us freedom to shatter your dreams,
- Lifegiving loser, wounded and weeping, Dancing and leaping, Sharing the caring that heals and redeems.

Or how about the relationship between the atoms that create both me, and the stars. The undeniable connection between me and the universe. The sameness between us and the universe. The incredibly awe-some relationship between the death of a star, and the birth of a human child.

It is interesting, because so often witnessing or experiencing Awe has been directly connected to a religious moment, or a connection to or observation of God. A witnessing of that which transcends us. A fragment of feeling, an inkling of a sensation that connects us to something that is more powerful than we are. An overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, or fear produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful, or the like. And there have even been arguments about whether or not Atheists are capable of experiencing awe. Oprah got into this debate with a few of her Super Soul Sunday guests.

In this same vein, even Albert Einstein proclaims the connection between awe and the religious, he wrote the following for a collection called Living Philosophies –

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: his eyes are closed. This insight into the mystery of life, coupled though it be with fear, has also given rise to religion. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms— this knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong in the ranks of devoutly religious men... It is enough for me to contemplate the mystery of conscious life perpetuating itself through all eternity, to reflect upon the marvelous structure of the universe which we can dimly perceive, and to try humbly to comprehend even an infinitesimal part of the intelligence manifested in nature.

So even though he was not overtly a religious man, he makes the connection between awe and religion. The mystery of life, the source of true art and science. Einstein indeed was an awe-filled man. His studies, and discoveries of the universe suggest this search.

One definition that I really love is from Neuropsychologist Paul Pearsall “ he defines awe as an ‘overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection with a startling universe that is usually far beyond the narrow band of our consciousness’.”

‘A sense of connection with a universe that is usually beyond our consciousness.’ And while it is most often a connection with the positive aspects of the universe, awe can be a connection to the fearful, dreadful, and negative sides as well.

This reminds me of the scene in Phantom of the Opera where Christine first meets the Phantom, and is simultaneously in raptured and horrified by him. A sense of awful dread. Or those moments when watching scary movies, when we peep between our fingers. There is something about the mysterious that can be so overwhelming that we want to hide, but can't peel our eyes away.

There is this same sense of fear when witnessing the extreme power of our own mental health. I feel a strange sense of awe by the mysterious power with which my depression, or my anxiety can root me to the spot. And perhaps I only call it a strange sense of awe, because so often I

associate awe with joy. But when I struggle with anxiety, or my bi-polar I am experiencing an overwhelming and bewildering sense of connection to a startling universe. A universe that I so often only witness one narrow band. That overwhelming realization that my consciousness has gained more understanding of a situation that is healthy for me to hold onto in this moment. Oscillating back and forth, along the pendulum of awe, through the best of times and the worst of times, being witness to all that is around us, and within us, and connected to us, that we are in relationship with, might be the object of faith. Our *raisonne d'être*.

Unitarian Universalist Minister and Theologian, Reverend Forrest Church has written about this very concept, moving back and forth through the pendulum of awe. He titled his book *The Cathedral of the World* where he describes Universalism, the theology of god being one and all, and that we will all return to that one. Here is an excerpt of his text.

Imagine awaking one morning from a deep and dreamless sleep to find yourself in the nave of a vast cathedral. Like a child newborn, untutored save to moisture, nurture, rhythm, and the profound comforts at the heart of darkness, you open your eyes upon a world unseen, indeed unimaginable, before. It is a world of light and dancing shadow, stone and glass, life and death. This second birth, at once miraculous and natural, is in some ways not unlike the first. A new awakening, it consecrates your life with sacraments of pain you do not understand and promised joy you will never fully call your own. Such awakenings may happen only once in a lifetime, or many times. But when they do, what you took for granted before is presented as a gift: difficult, yet precious and good...

look about you; contemplate the mystery and contemplate with awe. This cathedral is as ancient as humankind, its cornerstone the first altar, marked with the tincture of blood and stained with tears. Search for a lifetime (which is all you are surely given) and you shall not know its limits, visit all its transepts, worship at its myriad shrines, nor span its celestial ceiling with your gaze. The builders have worked from time immemorial, destroying and creating, confounding and perfecting, tearing down and raising up arches in this cathedral, buttresses and chapels, organs and theaters, chancels and transepts, gargoyles, idols, and icons

Welcome to the Cathedral of the World.

Above all else, contemplate the windows. In the Cathedral of the World there are windows without number, some long forgotten, covered with many veneers of grime, others revered by millions, the most sacred of shrines. Each in its own way is beautiful. Some are abstract, others representational; some dark and meditative, others bright and dazzling. Each window tells a story about the creation of the world, the meaning of history, the purpose of life, the nature of humankind, the mystery of death. The windows of the cathedral are where the light shines through.

Because the cathedral is so vast, our time so short, and our vision so dim, over the course of our pilgrimage we are able to contemplate only a tiny part of the cathedral. Yet, by pondering and acting on our ruminations, we discover insights that will invest our days with meaning...

We shall never see the light directly, only as refracted through the windows of the cathedral. Prompting humility, life's mystery lies hidden. The light is veiled. Yet, being halfway in size between the creation itself and our body's smallest constituent part, that we can encompass with our minds the universe that encompasses us is a cause for great wonder. Awakened by the light, we stand in the cathedral, trembling with awe.

Trembling with awe. A weird, profound, awkward and overwhelming emotion, that can rear its head in so many different scenarios. Listening to the communication of killer whales in the pacific ocean. Witnessing the receding distances of mountain glaciers. Sitting in the middle of a field in the dead of night, staring up at the milky way. Imagining the catastrophe of an active volcano. Waiting in silence, listening to wanderings of your own mind. Beholding the intricacy of a new born's toes. Experiencing the jolting shock of an earthquake.

Although so much of our lives are held within the smallest arch of the pendulum, with small vacillations from our center, short wavers from our pathway, at the edges of our being, there is awe. As we weave our way down the path of our lives, and move through the moments of awe, both the struggle and the power, both the awe-inspiring and the awe-full, let us remember that connection and relationships are at the heart of all of these experiences. Let us remember that these moments are made possible by the connections that we sustain, or the relationships that we let fray. As we continue to move into a world where we are going to be pushed farther and farther from our center; a world where leaders are disingenuous and hypocritical; where people are shut out, moved along, or torn apart from those they love; a world where environmental collapse is being met with meager responses; where houses are seen as commodities and not necessities let us remember that Awe will speak to our connections, and allow us to strengthen our relationships.

Let us make it so.