

Communion with Ourselves
September 29, 2019

I was listening to an interview with the climate activist Bill McKibben earlier this week. He was talking about meeting with Greta Thunberg while she was in New York to address the UN and how they had connected not just over their passion for saving the earth, but also in the way that their fears for the future of the planet and their frustration that leaders wouldn't listen to them had deprived them in many ways of their youth. Bill McKibben was just 20 when reading the scientific literature about the earth and its future made him decide to devote his life to protecting the environment and trying to get others to join him. And Greta Thunberg has been thinking about climate change and worrying over our future since she was eight. Her worry led to depression which only lifted when she realized a year ago that she could act and make a difference. But while her school strikes may have lifted her depression, they and the celebrity which followed have pushed her into an adult role. It's no wonder she accused the world leaders at the UN this week "You have stolen my dreams and my childhood with your empty words." Action may lift sadness, but if we're not careful it can deplete us too.

So Bill McKibben stressed with her how important it is to have moments of refreshment and renewal and that led her to talk about her sail across the Atlantic. He said that as she talked about those days, her face relaxed and beamed, especially when she talked about getting up in the middle of the night and going on deck and being enveloped in a sky full of stars. The deep space of night refreshed and renewed her and gave her the joy to draw on as she continues her work.

There's a name for this feeling of renewal which can come from nature. It's called the awe effect. Of course scientists are studying it and naming the ways that feeling awe can benefit us as the feeling of awe under the dark night sky benefitted Greta Thunberg. Here are some of benefits researchers at UC Berkeley have found: Awe may improve our mood and make us more satisfied with our lives; it may be good for our health – even reducing inflammation; feeling awe may help us think more critically; it may decrease materialism, focusing us less on money and things and more on beauty and majesty. Awe makes us feel smaller and more humble. That might not sound positive, but it is. Think about standing at the top of Mount Washington, on the rim of the Grand Canyon, or in the aisle of a great Cathedral. You feel small and humble in a good way – awed by the majesty of nature or human creativity. This sense of awe can help us to see our strengths and weaknesses in a more balanced way and to see how our successes have been supported by people, structures and institutions outside our own control. Awe can also increase our

sense of the spaciousness of time. And with that sense of time, and humbleness and less focus on money, it follows that feeling awe can make us more generous and cooperative, more connected to other people and the larger sense of humanity. Rituals like our apple communion draw their power from that sense of awe.

One of my favorite descriptions of awe comes from Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay *On Nature*. Emerson was a Unitarian minister and one of the founders of the Transcendentalist movement. Imagine him in Concord on a March day...

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky, without having in my thoughts any occurrence of special good fortune, I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. I am glad to the brink of fear. Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.

One of the main contributions of our Unitarian ancestors to the Western Christian tradition was to connect this awe that one feels in nature with religion. Before the Transcendentalists, Christianity focused on the largeness of God and the smallness of humankind. Cathedrals were designed to make one feel small, and stained glass windows shut out the natural world. They embodied in their architecture the message that religion was a matter purely between human beings and the divine. And they emphasized the transcendence of God – God up there, over all in majesty, dominating puny weak human beings. With the rise of the Puritan theology with its emphasis on the power of human reason to understand God and God's ways, the theological emphasis shifted a bit to allow for more immanence, the sense of the divine within and among us. You can feel that sense in the architecture of this sanctuary which is still soaring, reminding its congregation of the grandeur of God, but also in its simplicity helping them to focus on the rituals which united them with God and with one another – the shared meal of the communion table and the hearing of the word from the pulpit, reason, community, and mystery embodied in our structure. But though the windows are clear, the divine was still only present either out there or in human beings who had been created in the image of God. There would not even have been flowers present back then, much less a basket of apples. It took the Transcendentalists to name that sense of awe one feels in nature as also part and parcel of the divine. They brought God outdoors.

The Unitarian poet William Cullen Bryant made this connection more specific in his famous poem *Thanatopsis*, which 19th century school-children used to memorize. It's a long poem and I recommend reading all of it to yourself if you're not familiar with it, but for now I'll just read you the opening:

*To him who in the love of Nature holds
Communion with her visible forms, she speaks
A various language; for his gayer hours
She has a voice of gladness, and a smile
And eloquence of beauty, and she glides
Into his darker musings, with a mild
And healing sympathy, that steals away
Their sharpness, ere he is aware. When thoughts
Of the last bitter hour come like a blight
Over thy spirit, and sad images
Of the stern agony, and shroud, and pall,
And breathless darkness, and the narrow house,
Make thee to shudder, and grow sick at heart;—
Go forth, under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings...*

Notice that the poet names the divine as Nature, not God. The theology has changed but the awe is still there, just expanded in its scope.

And people responded to that sense of awe, of the divine in nature so that now it's hard to comprehend that wasn't always part of our culture's worldview. The environmental movement grew from this sense of awe in nature. And if we can tap into it more, this sense of awe could avert the worst of the climate crisis. We must encourage people again to place themselves in nature to feel the benefits of awe – connection, compassion, humility, and generosity – so that they may act from those powerful senses, living from their best selves instead of from fear, greed, and selfishness. So even inviting someone to join you for a walk in the woods can be a step toward the health of the planet as well as to your health and the health of a relationship. That beautiful vista over the marshes can heal us and inspire us to work to heal our earth, but we have to make the time to put ourselves out there.

I hope that my words about awe have brought to mind some of your own experiences of awe. I invite you now to turn to a neighbor, but not the person you came here with, and share in groups of 3's or 4's an experience you had of awe. It doesn't have to be in nature – it could have happened in a soaring cathedral, or listening to the organ, or in the power of a moment shared with another person.

Whatever inspired you. Please share your story in your small group. After each story leave about 30 seconds of silence. Please don't comment on anyone else's story; just receive it for now – later at coffee hour, comments would be a great way to start a conversation. After all the stories have been told and that final 30 seconds of silence have passed, I invite you to walk around the sanctuary and review the commitments you made last week for actions to help to heal our planet. There are apple stickies at the back if you'd like to change a commitment that isn't working for you or to add a new one or if you weren't here last Sunday. Lin has made a new poster with additional activities suggested by some of you after last Sunday's service so we have even more ways we can channel our awe into action. Do this in silence and when you're finished, return to your seat....

It's now time for our morning's offering for the works of World Central Kitchen, feeding people following natural disasters – or ones caused by the changing climate. May our sense of awe feed our generosity and sense of universal connection as we share what we have with others. The morning's offering will now be given and received.

- Pamela M. Barz