

“Awe from the Inside Out”
Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on December 8, 2019

In preparation for writing my sermon for this morning, I spent a considerable amount of time contemplating awe. Initially I thought about what I perceive awe to be. I quickly discovered that I had considerable difficulty coming up with a specific description or definition of awe. In an attempt to get clarity about my perception of awe I recalled my personal experiences of feeling it. A few of those experiences stood out for me—by a few I am talking about less than the number of fingers on one hand. Those experiences were powerful to the point that even many decades later I still remember them so clearly and powerfully that it is as if they happened just yesterday. Even after recalling these experiences I still found it difficult to define what awe is, so I began looking at how others define it. I turned first to the dictionary, which gave definitions that seemed inadequate and at times contradictory. I then turned to researchers on the topic. Here is how a group led by Paul Piff, PhD, from University of California, Irvine, defined awe for research that was published in 2015—“that sense of wonder we feel in the presence of something vast that transcends our understanding of the world.”

As I sat with that definition I found that it described reasonably well almost all of the awe experiences I could vividly recall. Each of my experiences that this definition was appropriate for had a very particular element in common. All of them related to something I experienced that was beyond or outside of me—typically something in nature that was much larger and grander than myself. I imagine many of you have had such experiences. Possibly it was in a particularly beautiful expanse of nature, or maybe it was as you witnessed a powerful natural event like a dramatic lightening storm. Nature, however, isn't the only thing that can trigger a sense of awe. Great art can, and often does, produce a feeling of awe. Momentous moments, such as the first human walking on the moon, can create a sense of awe as well.

I want to invite you now to think about your own experiences of feeling awe. As you recall these experiences, notice how many of them relate to something that is beyond or outside of yourself. Take a few moments to recall when you have experienced awe and what led to that feeling. If you are willing to do so, I would ask for a show of hands from those of you whose experiences of awe were mostly in response to events or situations that were beyond or outside of yourself. Thank you for participating in this poll. It appears that my own experiences with awe, like a good number of you, are related to something that we perceive to be outside of ourselves.

But awe isn't limited to just what is beyond or outside of us. Some great thinkers and teachers encourage turning inward as a way of discovering and experiencing a sense of awe that is accessible at any moment. Let me share a few quotes that I believe relate to what I am saying here. Carl Jung wrote; “Your vision will become clear only when you look into your heart. Who looks outside, dreams. Who looks inside, awakens.” In the book *Walden*, Henry David Thoreau, states; “Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find a thousand regions in your mind yet undiscovered. Travel them and be expert in home-cosmography.” In the Hindu sacred text, the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is written, “He who experiences the unity of life sees his own Self in all beings, and all beings in his own Self, and looks on everything with an impartial eye.” And a Zen question asks, “Ears hear and eyes see. What then does mind do?” These quotes invite each of us to turn our attention inward. And they also seem to suggest that doing so could offer us opportunities to experience awe from the inside out.

Several years ago I had a very memorable experience of awe as I turned my attention inward. The experience didn't initially seem to involve the natural world beyond my body. This lone experience of awe was and is the seed from which this sermon emerges.

Before I go into my own experience of awe from the inside out, I would like to say that I have heard a significant number of women talk about an experience of awe they had in this inside out manner. I am referring here to the experience of being the host of new life—the experience of being pregnant, carrying a fetus within one's body, and then having that fetus emerge as a radiant living, breathing, crying, newborn babe. Only some of us, those of us who have the proper body parts, can have this specific type of inside out awe experience. But there are other possible inside out awe

options that any and all of us can engage in. Such experiences may not be as common as carrying life within oneself and giving birth, but they are present nonetheless. Such experiences of awe are possible for anyone who is willing to go deep within themselves with curiosity, with wonder, and with a commitment to internal exploration even when pain, uncertainty or boredom strain our patience and erode our perseverance.

I would offer Siddhartha Gautama, better known to many as the Buddha, as an example. According to stories of his life, Siddhartha Gautama was born in the part of the world that is currently known as Nepal. The specific year and even the century of his birth are uncertain. Various experts give ranges from the 6th to the 4th century B.C. His father was the ruler of the Shakya clan and, as a boy, Siddhartha grew up living the extravagant life of a young prince—a young prince who was secluded from the world beyond his family residence. He left this extravagant and secluded life to seek truth. After leaving his home he sought the council of numerous spiritual teachers and, for a time, became a wandering ascetic. At one point he was eating so little that he could touch his backbone by putting his hand on his stomach and pressing inward. The spiritual teachers and the asceticism however, didn't provide him with the truth he was seeking. As the story is told he found the truth he was seeking only after sitting at the base of a tree, making a commitment not to rise until he found what he was seeking, and then turning his attention inward. It was in this way that he achieved enlightenment. Today it is estimated that over 5 million people are adherents of Buddhist religious teachings and practices. And in just under a month, on January 2nd, which is Bodhi Day, many Buddhists will celebrate the Buddha's enlightenment.

I don't consider myself to be a Buddhist but I have done considerable reading and exploration about this religious tradition. And I find it more than interesting that one of my most prominent memories of awe came from my studies and what the Buddha taught. My awe experience came about after reading a portion of a Buddhist sacred text titled, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha*. As you can see, this sacred text is not a small book. You won't find it on any best selling books list. And I wouldn't recommend it for casual reading. But if you want to turn your attention intensely inward, this text will assist you in that journey. I am well aware that reciting from sacred texts isn't a regular practice here at UUFB. Today, however, I want to share a short section of one "Sutta," or teaching of the Buddha, from this book that took me inward and began to transform my understanding of the world, the world of me. In this Sutta, the Buddha is talking to a "bhikkhu," which means disciple, and he states:

Here bhikkhu, a well-taught noble disciple, who has regard for noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma (which means the teachings of the Buddha),...who is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard material form as self, or self as in material form. He does not regard feeling as self...perception as self...formations as self...consciousness as self, or self as possessed of consciousness, or consciousness as in self, or self as in consciousness.

In the "Introduction" to this book the two people who translated this sacred text from Pali, the original language it was written in, write that "The Buddha teaches, contrary to our most cherished beliefs, that our individual being...cannot be identified as self, as an enduring and substantial ground of personal identity."

Initially this teaching of "no self" was extremely confusing to me. When I first read this portion of the Sutta I noticed that I felt quite defensive. It seemed like the very essence of who I perceived myself to be was under attack. As I lowered my defensiveness and began to allow myself to think deeply about my own sense of self in light of this teaching, my feelings changed significantly. I began wondering about my idea of self. I began asking, if "self" exists, where in me does it reside. The more I asked the question the less certain I became about what I had believed all of my life. I was very surprised when, in less than 20 minutes, my sense of wonder and my questioning led me into state of awe.

I can't say that I came up with an answer to my question. And I definitely didn't achieve enlightenment. I can say though that the sense of awe I felt then is something I can return to again

and again. All that is required is that I go inward and consider or even challenge what I often take for granted, such as my breath, my thoughts, what I perceive as my consciousness, and my very life itself. I now know, as the title of our reading this morning asserts, that gratitude and awe are choices. Today I know that I can make a conscious decision to be in a state of awe by turning my attention inward, by being curious, by wondering about what I believe or perceive, and by being open to new levels of awareness. As I stated earlier, this kind of experience is possible for any of us. It is my hope that each of us will make time in our busy lives to discover and explore how we might find more opportunities to be immersed in awe. I believe doing so would be beneficial for each of us individually, and all of us collectively.

In closing, I share this quote by an eminent scientist of the 20th century, Albert Einstein. "One cannot but be in awe when one contemplates the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure of reality. It is enough if one tries merely to comprehend a little of this mystery each day. Never lose a holy curiosity."

So may it be.