

## “A Season of Awe”

Sermon by Rev. Duffy Peet

Shared with the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Bozeman on December 15, 2019

The poem Amanda just read offered us a glimpse into one person’s experience with awe and wonder. Now I would invite each of us to take some time to recall a few of our own experiences of awe. And as your awe moments come to mind, I would ask you to think about which one you would be willing to share this morning. When our time of recalling awe is done I will ask you to turn to someone near you and share your chosen awe experience with them. Let’s take a few minutes now to recall, and possibly experience again, a moment of awe from our past. (pause for a minute or more)

Now I would ask you to find someone sitting near you who you can share with. If possible, it would be best to pair up with someone other than your partner or a family member. I will give you a little time to find a sharing partner, or two if need be, before we begin sharing. (pause) If anyone needs a sharing partner please raise your hand? Now I would ask each of you to briefly share your memory of the experience that put you in a state of awe. You will each have about two minutes to share. (pause for 5 minutes)

I want to thank each of you for participating in this sharing. And I want to thank Amanda for suggesting that people share with one another. As soon as she suggested it I recognized that this would be a wonderful way to start my sermon on this season—“A Season of Awe.”

My earliest memory of feeling awe occurred about this time of year before I turned 5. I know it was prior to 5 because we hadn’t yet moved to the house the family lived in during my grade school years and beyond. That early experience of awe was in response to my father, for the first time that year, plugging in the string of lights that decorated our Christmas tree. As the lights came on, I remember standing and staring at the tree, totally enthralled. After a few minutes, some of the lights that had tubes filled with colored liquid began to bubble. As they began bubbling so did my awe. I don’t know how long I stood in front of the tree. Back then it seemed like I was there for hours. Today I realize it was probably not more than a few minutes. It couldn’t possibly been more than ten minutes. I share this with you because if you spend any time with young children during this time of year, you will likely witness them experiencing awe. Like me, young children today experience awe as they stare at the lights and decorations that are so prevalent during this holiday season. When I see a young child spellbound in a state of awe, it reminds me of my own experience and it brings joy to my heart. Maybe something similar happens for you.

Christmas was the holiday we celebrated in my childhood home. As a young child I didn’t understand the origins or the significance of the holiday. I thought of Christmas as a day that was similar to and possibly on par with my birthday. I say on par with my birthday because I got presents. But along with that there was the tree and all of the beautifully colored lights and ornaments. It wasn’t until my teen years, when I started attending church regularly, that I began to learn what and who Christmas was actually celebrating.

In one way I was correct about this day being as special as my birthday because Christmas is the celebration of a birth, the birth of Jesus. Many people in our community and around the world believe that the birth of Jesus was a miracle. In the Scriptures it is

written that his mother was a virgin and that God made it possible for her to become pregnant. And the vast majority of Christians believe that Jesus was not only the son of God but that he was also God incarnate. In the Scriptures it is written that Jesus sometimes referred to himself as the light to the world. For Christians then, Advent and Christmas are a time of awe—awe at the birth of a babe whose presence brought God, and the light of God, physically onto the earth.

But Christmas isn't the only holiday during this time of year that celebrates a miracle, a miracle which occurred long, long ago, and yet continues to inspire a sense of awe for many people today. This month, from sunset on December 22 through nightfall on December 30, people of the Jewish faith tradition will be celebrating Hanukkah. This holiday commemorates the overthrow, in 165 BCE, of the occupying forces of King Antiochus Epiphanes IV. During the time they were in control, these occupying forces had desecrated the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, thus making it unfit for the Jewish people to worship there. According to the Jewish sacred text known as the Talmud, unadulterated and undefiled pure olive oil with the seal of the high priest was needed for the menorah in the Temple. It was required that the menorah burn throughout the night every night for eight days. As the story goes, only one flask of such oil was found. One flask was enough only to keep the menorah flames burning for a single night. Yet somehow the oil lasted the full eight days—long enough to rededicate the temple and to purify more oil suitable to burn in the menorah in the future. Many people of the Jewish faith view it as a miracle that one day's worth of oil was able to keep the menorah lit for eight days. During Hanukkah lighting the menorah each night of the holiday is a way for people who are Jewish to remember this miracle and to pause, in awe, at the sacredness of this holiday.

And in less than a week there is a third holiday—one that people have been celebrating for centuries—the Winter Solstice. Some people claim that the pagan celebration of the Winter Solstice, or Yule, is one of the oldest winter celebrations in the world. A long held custom of this holiday has been the Yule log, which, by the way, was not originally a rolled chocolate cake. The original Yule logs were full trees that would be burned. The focus of this ancient holiday is the awe associated with two intertwined aspects of the Solstice. The first aspect involves the day of the year that has the shortest amount of daylight. The long period of darkness, as well as the cold temperatures that accompany it, can have a tendency to inspire a sense of awe that may be tinged with fear or trepidation. A child might wonder if the daylight and the warmth will ever return. This is a time of year when most of what was vibrant and growing not all that long ago appears at best dormant, and at worst dead. The second aspect of this holiday that inspires awe is the fact that from the Solstice onward, the daylight will be increasing with each passing day for the next 6 months. The return of the sun, and with it the rejuvenation of life, has been inspiring awe in humans for longer than we can possibly know.

Yes, this truly is a season of awe for people of various faith traditions and geographical locations. I would imagine that many of us feel or have felt awe during the holiday season. As I began this sermon I asked you to recall some of your past experiences of awe. Now I would ask you to think more particularly about awe. I would ask you to think about awe in relation to the season we are currently in, a period that is frequently referred to as the holiday season. I shared such a memory with you earlier. I

would invite you to take a moment now to think about what is, or has been, awe inspiring for you during this special time of the year. And as you recall these holiday experiences of awe, allow yourself to be immersed in both the memory and the feeling that memory contains. (pause)

Thank you for allowing me to be present as you recalled and relived times of awe. Your awe has filled more than your mind and your body. Your awe has filled this room and my heart as well. There is a glow in the room that wasn't here earlier. May we each now carry that feeling, that glow of awe, out into the world. And may the awe we feel be used to bring light, joy and peace to all those we encounter on our journey this holiday season and beyond.

So may it be.