

Last weekend I was filled with awe. Having the opportunity to walk my daughter down the aisle to her fiancé, and then turn around and perform the wedding ceremony was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Rebekah and I almost made it through the ceremony without tears until the very end, and then waters of joy filled both of eyes. The setting was beautiful: outside with a canopy of trees overhead and birds filling the air with song. The father/daughter dance was another awe-filled event as we reminisced about the daddy/daughter dance we attended many years ago when she was in elementary school. Each time I think about the experience of last weekend, I remain filled with awe, wishing I could have stayed in that moment.

Maybe you've had a similar awe-filled experience—walking along a trail in the wilderness and becoming overwhelmed at the magnitude of creation, looking into the nighttime sky while sensing the vastness of the universe, gazing at a colorful sunset, experiencing the birth of your first child and the miracle of her life, witnessing an unexpected act of generosity, or holding someone's hand as he passes from this life to the next. When we encounter experiences beyond ourselves, when our lives are deeply touched, we become open to the mystery and sacredness of life.

Environmentalist Rachel Carson noted in the late 1950s the importance of helping children experience awe as a way of coping with difficulties:

What is the value of preserving and strengthening this sense of awe and wonder, this recognition of something beyond the boundaries of human existence? Is the exploration of the natural world just a pleasant way to pass the golden hours of childhood or is there something deeper? I am sure there is something much deeper, something lasting and significant. Those who dwell...among the beauties and mysteries of the Earth are never alone or weary of life. Whatever the vexations or concerns of their personal lives, their thoughts can find paths that lead to inner contentment and to renewed excitement in living.<sup>1</sup>

There's something about looking beyond ourselves that can give us comfort, to know the universe will continue to thrive in the midst of our worries or anxieties. I think that's something the writer of Psalm 29 recognized while writing about God's voice rumbling over the waters of the oceans or moving the branches of the trees of the forest. In addition to this sense of powerful grandeur, the psalmist also sensed God's presence in the skipping of a calf or wild ox. Powerful and gentle, all mixed together. Extraordinary and ordinary. Magnificent and common. The

awesome presence of God fills all these spaces in our lives, but sometimes we may miss the awe of a moment.

Contemplation is an intentional time one sets aside each day, maybe even just 20 minutes, to quietly reflect on God's presence, to open oneself to awe. Writer Thomas Merton spoke about this spiritual practice of contemplation as a way of sensing this mystery of God:

Contemplation is life itself, fully awake, fully active, fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source.<sup>2</sup>

During the pandemic I found myself experiencing this sense of awe more often during times of contemplation, noticing things that I hadn't taken time to experience when life was rushing from one event to another. The more I practiced contemplation, the more I became aware of God's presence, sometimes sensing the mystery and awe of what God is doing in the world.

Six years ago, an article in the *New York Times* described how our busy lives may prevent us from experiencing awe. The authors wrote:

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...has dropped over the years...

We believe that awe deprivation has had a hand in a broad societal shift that has been widely observed over the past 50 years: People have become more individualistic, more self-focused, more materialistic and less connected to others. To reverse this trend, we suggest that people insist on experiencing more everyday awe, to actively seek out what gives them goose bumps, be it in looking at trees, night skies, patterns of wind on water.<sup>3</sup>

When is the last time you took time to experience awe? Have you ever felt too busy to experience awe-inspired moments, to look around at the wonders of creation? One of the things I enjoy doing, often during spring thunderstorms, is watching lightning flashing across the sky. Although I know that lightning is the result of the oppositely charged particles between the earth and the sky, it's amazing to watch. Lightning can be up to 90 miles long yet only several inches wide, heating the surrounding air to 50,000 degrees, which is three times hotter than the surface of the sun. Even with all these facts

and figures, I'm still in awe as I watch lightning streak across the sky, as was one

little girl who was looking out the window during a lightning storm. She was clearly in awe. Her father walked over to her and asked her if everything was all right. The little girl looked up at her father with concern and asked, "Daddy, do you think God has lost somebody out there?"<sup>4</sup>

Isn't that a wonderful way of viewing lightning, as God's light to find someone who is lost?

I wonder if that's what the sense of awe is all about—about us sensing God searching for us when we've lost our way: When we've become too busy. When we've become overwhelmed with fear. When anxiety and worry stop us from experiencing joy. When our religion has become a duty rather than a celebration. In these times when we may feel lost, experiencing awe can remind us of the bigger picture than our own troubles.

Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote of his encounter with awe in a forest:

I remember seeing a forest of giant redwoods for the first time. There were some small children nearby, giggling and chattering and pushing each other around. Nobody had to tell them to quiet down as we entered. They quieted down all by themselves. Everybody did. You couldn't hear a sound of any kind. It was like coming into a vast, empty room.

Two or three hundred feet high the redwoods stood. You had to crane your neck back as far as it would go to see the leaves at the top. The trees made their own twilight out of the bright California day. There was a stillness and stateliness about them that seemed to become part of you as you stood there stunned by the sight of them. They had been growing in that place for going on two thousand years. With infinite care they were growing even now. You could feel them doing it.<sup>5</sup>

If you find yourself overwhelmed, too busy, or filled with worries, find a tree, some stars, a sunset, or a flower. Sense the awe of the moment, and know that God is there with you, delighted that you noticed the beauty within God's world.

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<sup>1</sup> Helen De Cruz, "The necessity of awe," <https://aeon.co/essays/how-awe-drives-scientists-to-make-a-leap-into-the-unknown>

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Merton, *Essential Writings* (Orbis, 2000), 58.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner, "Why Do We Experience Awe?" *The New York Times*, May 22, 2015,

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[www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/24/opinion/sunday/why-do-we-experience-awe.html).

<sup>4</sup> Michael Hodgin, *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers*. Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #563.

<sup>5</sup> [www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/12/15/awe](http://www.frederickbuechner.com/quote-of-the-day/2016/12/15/awe)