



The Unitarian Church in Westport

SERMON TRANSCRIPT:

The Antidote is Awe

By Rev. Dr. John T. Morehouse, Senior Minister

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How many times have you met someone who used the word awesome? “You drove here? That’s awesome. You would like the salad with the dressing on the side? Awesome!” Awesome is used so much now that it has lost its meaning. To say something is awesome is to say that it is awe inspiring. And the word awe is reserved for that occurrence that is so much out of the ordinary as to be beyond words, awe is a mixture of fear and wonder to the point approaching the sublime, that experience of the world, nature, humanity that sets us apart from the everyday.

Let’s face it; we are bombarded with images and emotions that assault not only our senses but the very sense that we even matter in the world. Am I right here? Especially now at the holidays, there is a constant buzz of senses that makes us yearn for a moment like this, a moment when we can sit down here in this beautiful space and be soothed by an experience that might even border on, dare I say it? Awesome. We know only all too well that we can easily fall prey to the beasts of the market, our political world, not to mention kids, parents and friends who all want a bit of our attention. Getting our attention is the name of the marketplace game. On Instagram feeds, marketers know that we have 1.4 seconds to decide whether we are going to stop and look at the video. 1.4 seconds. Think about that. When Barack Obama built his first digital candidacy for President in 2008, that number was 7.3 seconds. Is it any wonder then, that even the word awesome has lost its ring, in a world where we can’t even wait for the bell to strike? Do you hear me?

The good news is that awe remains the antidote for our cynicism and happiness deficit disorder. Paul Piff who studies awe at UC Irvine believes that even one minute of slowing down to truly see the world around us as awe-some can reduce our feelings self-loathing and general cynicism.

As he put it:

“When people experience awe they really want to share that experience with other people, suggesting that it has this particularly viral component to it.....Participants consistently reported that awe produced “a reduced sense of self-importance relative to something larger and more powerful that they felt connected to,” says Piff. And subsequent analysis confirmed that this feeling of the “small self” was responsible for their ethical behavior. This seems to suggest that experiencing awe prompts people to help others.”

So, what is awe? And where can I get me some of that. Turns out its all around you. I am going to put up on our website a slow-motion photography of a rain drop hit the milk in a cereal bowl. Here it is now:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNI-LIVs-to>

And you can see it in the dance of a leaf, the beating wings of a bird, the smile of a baby, the voice of our children. Anything that stops us to consider what is amazing and wonderful about this world.

Turn to your neighbor now and share an awesome experience. Go.

The social psychologist Dacher Kiltner calls awe our most underused emotion. We are so much better at anger, sadness and laughter, but rarely our sense of awe. Kiltner said “Awe is mysterious. How do we begin to quantify the goose bumps we feel when we see the Grand Canyon, or the utter amazement when we watch a child walk for the first time? How do you put into words the collective effervescence of standing in a crowd and singing in unison, or the wonder you feel while gazing at centuries-old works of art? Up until fifteen years ago, there was no science of awe, the feeling we experience when we encounter vast mysteries that transcend our understanding of the world. Scientists were studying emotions like fear and disgust, emotions that seemed essential to human survival. Revolutionary thinking, though, has brought into focus how, through the span of evolution, we’ve met our most basic needs socially. We’ve survived thanks to our capacities to cooperate, form communities, and create culture that strengthens our sense of shared identity—actions that are sparked and spurred by awe.” (Kiltner in his forthcoming book: Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Change Your Life, January 2023)

Rabbi Abraham Herschel said “Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a marketplace for you.” How many of us see the world as a marketplace now?

“And during a moment in which our world feels more divided than ever before, and more imperiled by crises of different kinds, we are greatly in need of awe. If we open our minds, it is awe that sharpens our reasoning and orients us toward big ideas and new insights, that cools

our immune system's inflammation response and strengthens our bodies. It is awe that activates our inclination to share and create strong networks, to take actions that are good for the natural and social world around us. It is awe that transforms who we are, that inspires the creation of art, music, and religion. At turns radical and profound, brimming with enlightening and practical insights, Awe is our field guide, from not only one of the leading voices on the subject but a fellow seeker of awe in his own right, for how to place awe as a vital force within our lives." (ibid Kiltner)

Two weeks ago, I implored you to walk through your neighborhood to look at the lights, not in comparison to yours, but as gifts to the world. Beyond the marketplace and on in your own souls as a reminder of the real reason for the season.

I still remember the Christmas of 1983. I was a twenty something, recently divorced and living in New York City with a new-found partner. I had lost my way; my marriage, my business, my health and almost all of my self-worth. Atop that mound of misery was the cherry of cynicism dripping its sugary red sauce over my cold heart. I was walking in mid-town Manhattan just before Christmas, on a cold night. I remember having been in a fight with my girlfriend. Across the street was a houseless person huddled over a steaming grate. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a business man walking briskly down the street passing the man on the grate. He was in a hurry and he was rich, in that way that only the rich can be, confident and in a hurry. Well, you know the type. Five paces past the man on the grate he stopped. Turned around and knelled down next to the man on the grate. Some words were said and I saw the man take off his camel hair overcoat and draped it over the grate man's shoulders. He then reached into his pocket and pulled out a wad of money and pressed it in the grate man's hand. Then the rich man picked up his briefcase and started walking again, even faster now to make up for lost time.

I stared at this scene as if in slow motion. Leave aside that the rich man's wealth was the indirect cause of the grate man's house lessness, the real miracle was that this encounter had happened at all. In NYC. In the 80s. I was, as I have preached before, touched by an angel, awestruck at a most ordinary expression of our humanity in a world that is far from ordinary. My cheery red shell of cynicism cracked with that awe-some moment.

It would take me years to finish cracking the shell, not to mention, meeting Francis, five kids and a lot of therapy, but the antidote to this cynicism is all around us. As Heschel said "Our goal should be to live life in radical amazement... get up in the morning and look at the world in a way that takes nothing for granted. Everything is phenomenal; everything is incredible; never treat life casually. To be spiritual is to be amazed."

It was soon after this encounter that I joined a Zen sangha in the West Village. There I learned that awe rests not just in the world around us, but within each of us as well. I learned sitting

meditation. I learned to breathe. I learned to be quiet and embrace the silence. Silence is what Christian Contemplatives call “God’s first language”.

Thict Naht Hahn in his seminal work, “Peace is in Every Step”, talks about the awe that rests in between our breaths. Always there. If we can see it. He tells a story of a river, born of the mountains dancing down into the plains, and there becoming a lake enamored with the clouds dancing in the sky. The river was obsessed with the beautiful clouds. Then the clouds rained onto the river. And after the rain blew away leaving only the sky. The river was sad. Where were the clouds? They were not my friends anyway she pouted. Until she realized that the clouds were water that rained upon her, the clouds and the river and the rain were all the same. Now she saw the sky for what it really was: all that held her, the clouds the rain and land. And with that she followed the clouds to the sea, becoming one with that mother as well.

Thict uses the sounding of a bell to remind us to pause. At lo’ there are bells all around us. Bells rung outside stores. Church bells. Clock bells. Our phones can ring, with a call or the ping of a text message. The bell of mindfulness is in the sound of the seat belt warning. What if we were to stop and breath in and out at the sound of every bell. Imagine that. Ding, I have a text, before I read it, let me pause, and breath in and out and remember the awe of being alive in such an age. Then read it. What if you let the phone ring twice before answering using the moment to consider the awe of breathing and someone trying to reach you. Or before you drive, stop when the seat belt bell rings and remember where it is you are going. Really going. How does that song go? “A bell is not a bell 'til you ring it; A song is not a song 'til you sing it. Love in your heart is not put there to stay; Love is not love 'til you give it away.” Notice the sky that follows us everywhere. The antidote is awe, beloveds. Especially now at Christmas tide.

Let me close with a poem by Denise Levotrov

Primary Wonder

Days pass when I forget the mystery.
 Problems insoluble and problems offering
 their own ignored solutions
 jostle for my attention, they crowd its antechamber
 along with a host of diversions, my courtiers, wearing
 their colored clothes; cap and bells.

And then

once more the quiet mystery
 is present to me, the throng's clamor
 recedes: the mystery
 that there is anything, anything at all,
 let alone cosmos, joy, memory, everything,

rather than void: and that, O Lord,
Creator, Hallowed One, You still,
hour by hour sustain it.
Ring Bell. Amen.