

Awe

A Message for All Faiths Unitarian Congregation

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Delivered on July 26, 2020

I've told you many times that I was raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school, and a Catholic College. I've also told you that I was also labelled a troublemaker by the Grey Nun Sisterhood, my teachers. To be fair to them I was the class clown, but what really irritated them to the core was the fact that I wasn't buying what they were selling. From an early age I questioned everything-God, miracles, creation, virgin birth (my older brother had spilled the birds and the bees beans to me when I was in second grade), heaven, transfiguration (body of Christ in a wafer), and on and on. I just didn't share the level of certitude of my teachers, fellow students, and my church. Yes, there is awe in Catholicism, but it needs to be the right awe, awe with boundaries, exclusive awe.

One of the growing edges of Unitarian Universalism is certitude. Our faith is built on a foundation of heresy which means that we honor many choices. We honor diversity and inclusiveness. We welcome people not by handing them dogma, but by asking them what they believe and help them go deeper in it. We claim we don't own or have the truth, but sometimes we think we really do. It is certitude that holds us back from our foundational claim. As Unitarian Universalists we sometimes think that reason is the only truth. This isn't inclusive, is it? We have been accused of thinking only with our head and not our heart. We sometimes spend our time exclaiming what isn't truth that we forget to exclaim the beauty of the openness and inclusiveness of Unitarian Universalism. This certitude, the idea that we really know what isn't, gets in the way of living the Unitarian Universalist life and the delights of awe.

Awe may not cause us to come to believe in something, but it can cause us to believe that there is something more beyond the grasp of our limited human consciousness. I'm always saying be open to the mystery. I remember serving a congregation in the Palm Beaches and presenting an adult education program about mystery and awe. One of the participants, a member of the congregation, jumped up wagging his finger at me and shouting, "This is un-Unitarian." His certitude and limited capacity to be open to the mystery was showing. I reminded him who we Unitarians are at our core. We were built on acceptance, wonder, and awe. Unitarians, or centuries ago antitrinitarians, were burned with their writings because they expressed awe, being open to the mystery, being open to thinking beyond the certitude of dogma handed to them.

Awe is within us, it is our tradition. So why do so many Unitarian Universalists struggle with different beliefs, especially Christian beliefs, when we are so open and inclusive? This is the problem I started with. We believe we don't have the truth and are searching but think we really do have the truth and write off other truths. That my friends is un-Unitarian. We need to become translators to be true to our faith. When someone of any faith expresses joy or lament invoking something or someone we don't believe in we need to translate into an expression of our UU faith. For example, when a Christian approaches me and says, "I'm thanking Jesus this morning. He has helped me in so many ways" I don't criticize or think that they are foolish for believing that. As a translator I think, "What in my UU faith brings me that much joy and holds

me in that way.” You see being Unitarian Universalist is not about calling people out. It’s about calling people in. Being inclusive, not exclusive, wanting people who share our values, not necessarily our theology, to join us and walk with us.

Author Rudolf Otto asks, “What is so difficult about living a life filled with awe? The kind of awe, as experienced by people who describe their experiences with this most unique of human responses, is much more than appreciating beauty found in nature, having a temporarily reverent religious experience, or experiencing what is being described by the increasingly ubiquitous word 'awesome.' It is a mystical feeling that seems to be capable of incorporating almost all of our other emotions. It's as 'real' as our experience of life ever gets—so real, in fact, that it overwhelms you like no other emotion and can leave you feeling drained as much as inspired.”

Although intense contemplation of its meaning can end up deepening it, awe often shakes our faith and disturbs the solace of our spiritual certitude. When we're in awe, life ceases to make sense, or at least to comply with the sense we've made of it so far. It doesn't make the kind of sense we thought it made before we were awed by something that seems beyond our understanding of what makes (or can make) sense. Awe results in a sense of fear and submission to things, events, people, and ideas that are experienced as being much greater than the self, and that can make us feel wonderful or terrible, or even both ways at the same time.

Choosing a life full of awe means that we are frequently anxious and uncertain and are never self-confident, because awe is the ultimate 'ism' breaker. Awe upsets any firm conviction we may hold—that our personal version of monotheism, polytheism, pantheism, agnosticism, or atheism is the one and only right belief. Because it so suddenly puts an end to our sense of self—and offers only mystery rather than answers, and a need to know more rather than a sense that we finally know it all—awe is more like feeling repeatedly 'dead again' than the experience of being 'born again' (comfortably and safely converted to the certainty of having finally found the answer).

If you choose a life of awe, you will surrender the solace of certitude. You will live with more openness than closure and, unless you can learn to find a strange, exciting comfort in being presented with and grappling with the tremendous mysteries life offers, you will seldom feel calm or at ease for very long. Awe offers far more stress and aggravation than comfort or relief, more self-doubt and agitation than assured self-confidence, and often more contemplative sadness than relieved joy. You might not end up having faith in anything other than the fact that life and the universe are not only beyond what you even imagined, but also transcend what anyone can or will ever be able to imagine. One woman from a Study of the Awe Inspired (SAI) described her awe response by saying, 'When I was in awe, I felt like I had suddenly discovered the secret of life, but I didn't know what it was. I just suddenly felt that there was this immense, scary, wonderfully overwhelming secret that made me feel afraid, sad, and strangely invigorated all at the same time. I don't think I've ever felt more messed up or more alive in my whole life.'

Albert Einstein once said that a person who has lost a sense of awe and mystery “is as good as dead, a snuffed out candle.” Einstein appreciated mystery. Even though there may be no ultimate answers that apply in all cultures, times, and places, to the “why?” questions that we ask, we go on asking. Why are we here? What does it all mean? Our answers are always provisional, never complete. That is why it is mystery.

Mature faith and religious practice never give final answers, but they lean toward the mystery. We begin with awe and wonder, and move forward with faith and practice.

May it be so.