

“Spirituality and Awe”

In last month’s “Letter from the President,” I mentioned my definition of spirituality. I defined spirituality as “the innate ability of humans to connect – to connect to others, to our environment, to the creatures of our environment, and to the transcendent Mystery that many of us call God, Allah, Krishna, or,” I said, “we may prefer not to name the Mystery but stand in awe before the vastness of the Universe.”

The word “awe” stood out for me as I pondered anew this definition. As I thought about it, I realized that our sense of awe cannot be limited to standing before the vastness of the Universe. Indeed, awe is inherent in every aspect of the spiritual dimension of life.

Who has stood at the crest of the Grand Canyon and not felt awe? Or, when watching a beautiful sunrise dancing across the surface of a lake? Or, when holding a newborn baby in your arms? Or, attending your daughter’s graduation from college and seeing her walk across the stage to receive a diploma? Or, having been touched by the love of God?

What is awe? A dictionary defines awe as “a reverential respect mixed with fear and wonder.” A mixture of fear and wonder. We say, “He was awestruck as he watched the Redstone rocket blast into space.” We experience a measure of both fear and wonder before the awesome.

Of course, nothing is more awesome than the divine Mystery that is God.

Rudolf Otto was an important religious thinker of the last century. He wrote a book entitled, *The Idea of the Holy*, where he writes that our experience of the holy has three aspects, *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (a fearful and fascinating mystery). God is love and love can be both fearful and fascinating.

Where have you experienced awe in your life? Was it when watching a nearly superhuman performance by an athlete at the Olympics? Was it gazing in the face of someone you love and feeling the other’s love return to you? Was it when you opened your heart, mind, and soul to God for the first time?

Awe can be humbling by our insignificance before the magnificent and at the same time it can be fascinating, unforgettable. Awe is wonder before life itself - the very fact that we exist on a tiny planet,

circling a medium-sized star in the outer limb of a spiral galaxy, the Milky Way, one of 52 galaxies in our cluster, each galaxy with over a hundred billion stars and countless planets.

Awe is knowing that in spite of our smallness in a vast Universe, God knows each of us, and that we are all precious in God's sight. Experience divine love and you have touched a fearful and fascinating mystery, the spiritual dimension of life.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "John". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial "J".

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