

Purveyors of Awe

A Guided Study & Journal

by Marcia McFee, PhD

Learn. Reflect. Practice.



Elements for Curating a Life
of Spiritual Depth

This journal can be used privately,
as a conversation guide for friends,
or in a small group setting.

This journal is an accompaniment to the
Worship Design Studio series,
“Purveyors of Awe”
www.worshipdesignstudio.com/awe

This is a short version of the full
Guided Study and Journal.
You may access the full version via the
QR codes found in these pages.

May your awe bucket overflow.

For additional related content
and to purchase print copies of the full version:
www.worshipdesignstudio.com/purveyors-of-awe

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Introduction

The pages of this booklet are excerpts from a guided reflection journal and small group study that I created called “Purveyors of Awe.” If you are using my fully-scripted Lent series of the same name with your church, you may find the booklet that you are looking at now to be a useful tool for sharing with your community as a more condensed version of the larger study. On the following pages, you will find page number references to the larger study. Scan the QR code at the bottom of this page to go to the full version, or simply use this document as your guide. It is not necessary to read the complete study in order to engage fully with the themes presented here.

This document contains journal prompts and spaces for reflection, weekly “Awe Practices” to guide participants on an experiential encounter with the themes, and reflections on how Jesus embodied these concepts through his life and ministry according to scripture. You could consider printing off the two double-sided pages included in each of the following sections and distributing them for church members to take home, or to share with people in your wider local community. They could also be printed and mailed or shared via email for those who cannot make it to worship in person.

The journal prompts are suggestions based on each element. But if something else is stirring within you, write about that! And if doodling or drawing or writing poetry are more reflective mediums for you, go for it!



**Scan this QR code to go to the full version of the
guided journal / small group document.**

Jesus and Beauty

Jesus surely “considered the lilies of the field” as he invited others to do. We can only imagine that he was one who paid attention to the creation with awe. After all, the Psalms were his prayer book. And if we consider the Gospel of John’s version of creation, he was “with God from the beginning,” having been part of the divine trinitarian collaboration on all things life–there at the beginning of light and darkness and sea and sky and creatures of all kinds.

But we need not go heavily into theological musing to recognize in the accounts of the Gospels that Jesus saw and experienced the beauty and the fragility of life deeply. It was this empathy with humankind that leads him to the achingly beautiful moments of self-giving that lies at end of our Lent journey. Consider the moments of beauty between birth and death—from dust to dust—that each one of us will experience. Our God came in human form to experience the dust alongside us. Imagine... as Jesus lived this human life, he smelled the food in the market stalls, he touched the water of his baptism and felt fabric of his robes, he saw the smooth faces of the young and the wrinkled faces of weather-worn hard-working people. He heard the voices of folx from near and far. All of his senses, like ours, were engaged with the world. That, in and of itself, is something awe-filled to consider. We can too often put Jesus on a pedestal where we don’t think about his actual experience of this world. But this was the point... for the Divine One to know us, to know life, to know our pain and our wonder. All of it blessed. All of it beautiful.

And which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these.

– Matthew 6: 27-29

What is your experience of being “stopped in your tracks” by beauty? Describe the scene, describe the feeling. What effect could it have on your life to get to practice “lingering longer” when you encounter beauty?



Want to go deeper? Scan the QR code and visit pp. 11-18 in the full version of the guided journal.

A series of 22 horizontal lines providing a space for writing or notes.

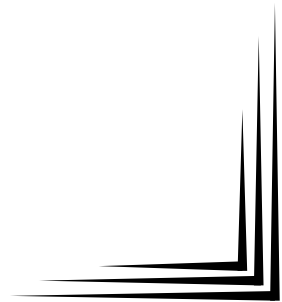
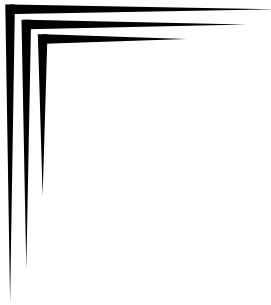
We live between the act of awakening and the act of surrender. Each morning we awaken to the light and the invitation to a new day in the world of time; each night we surrender to the dark to be taken to play in the world of dreams where time is no more. At birth we are awakened and emerged to become visible in the world. At death we will surrender again to the dark to become invisible. Awakening and surrender: they frame each day and each life; between them the journey where anything can happen, the beauty and the frailty. – John O'Donohue, Beauty, The Invisible Embrace

Awe Practice: Nine Beautiful Things

Psychologist René T. Proyer studied the effects of recalling and noticing beauty each day. His “Nine Beautiful Things” Practice goes like this:

Set about 15 minutes before going to bed to think about nine beautiful things that happened during the day, three each in the following categories:

1. Write down three beautiful things on human behavior (morally, positively valued behavior, ie good deeds).
2. Write down three things you experienced as beautiful in nature and/or the environment.
3. Write down three beautiful things in general that you noticed during the day (referring to aesthetics, like art, music, architecture, etc).
4. Note why you found each of these nine things beautiful.



When we naturally notice and appreciate the beauty around us, it can lead to all kinds of different benefits. Studies show it can make us feel more satisfied in life, have a stronger sense of meaning, and act with more kindness towards others and the environment. – Shuka Kalantari, about the research of Rene Proyer in “Why We Should Seek Beauty in the Everyday Life (The Science of Happiness Podcast),” Greater Good Magazine

Jesus and Wonder

The Bible uses the word “wonder” in many ways, but the most predominant use is as it gives testimony to the “wonders” performed by God and, in the Second Testament, by Jesus. “Wonders,” then are often thought of as miracles,. Certainly as people encountered Jesus, they were interested in the “signs and wonders” that he performed and the word got out that he certainly was not just another prophet. But in this series, in its relationship to awe, “wonder” is more a state of being, not an anomaly. Consider that living in a “state of wonder” helps us actually to see the ordinary as extraordinary. Just because we can explain something doesn’t mean that it isn’t “full of wonder.”

I think the mystic, Rabbi Heschel, has it right: “To be spiritual is to be amazed.” Do you think anything amazed Jesus? We actually know it does from the account in Matthew 8 of the centurion who came to Jesus with great faith that he could heal his daughter. Jesus was amazed to find that a non-Jew showed such faith, but also perhaps that a soldier of Rome exhibited such humility and love. This man was a surprise “wonderbringer” for Jesus. I think this story helps us wake up to the fact that even Jesus could be surprised and if that is so, how much more could we be amazed if we only came at life with wonder rather than cynicism as a “first response.” Is it possible to have so much wonder about the endless possibilities available that we could look for amazing abundance, amazing grace, amazing transformation in the most unlikely of people and places? Even perhaps wonder at our own ability to transform?

“When Jesus heard him, he was amazed and said to those who followed him, 'Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.'”

– Matthew 8: 10

What is something or that was once a “wonderbringer” for you and now seems quite ordinary? Reflect on ordinary elements of your life starting with “Isn’t it amazing that...”



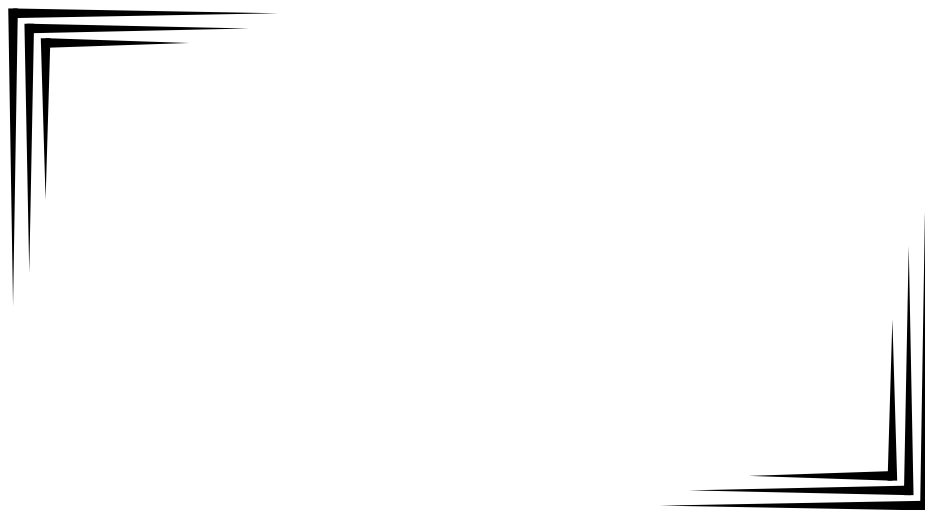
Want to go deeper? Scan the QR code and visit pp. 19-26 in the full version of the guided journal.

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. – Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel

Awe Practice: Wonderbringers

Dacher Keltner writes in his book, *Awe*, that in order to deal with the grief and “awelessness” he felt after the death of his brother, he “went in search of awe.” He says, “I immersed myself as a newcomer in various wonders of life.” As he did so, he became convicted that “awe is almost always nearby, and is a pathway to healing and growing in the face of the losses and traumas that are part of life.”

The awe practice on this page is about naming, claiming, and experiencing a wonderbringer that is “nearby.” In other words, what can you experience anew, as if a newcomer, that can pique your senses and elevate you for just a bit of time from things that are perhaps distressing or grieving you at this time. Think about your own multiple intelligences. Will it be related to words, music, visuals, spaces, movement? The mountains where I used to live are no longer nearby so I went back to videos I made while skiing to reclaim that kinesthetic rush that I just don’t get in the Midwest. Even that brought me a piece of that wonder.



Gently peeking its head around mental corners or bombastically announcing its arrival into our trembling psyches, wonder changes our perspective, our bodies, our souls, and our lives. Art, music, religion, politics, science, nature, love, fear, birth, death; each of the myriad experiences that compress to form the bedrock of human life has a golden vein of wonder running through it. – Monica C. Parker, The Power of Wonder: The Extraordinary Emotion That Will Change the Way You Live, Learn, and Lead

Jesus and Meaning

Words sometimes are not enough to describe the ineffable, the indescribable. Sometimes knowing more about God only happens when we are transfixed in utter amazement, speechless, “stopped in our tracks.” We sense with awe the grandeur and consequence of a moment or an encounter. We tend to call these “meaningful and memorable moments.” Scientists now know that repetition aids in memory, but also that unusual and “tremendous” moments cause our synapses to fuse mightily and the memory is “seared” into our brains, quite literally. Often it is a ritualized moments that do this. Once-in-a-lifetime happenings with family and friends or thresholds of life such as first day of college or your wedding or the moment you learn that someone you love has passed. Jesus had such moments. The Gospels speak of Jesus baptism as a time when “the heavens were opened to him and he saw God’s Spirit descending like a dove and alighted on him. And a voice from the heavens said, ‘This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.’” *Mysterium tremendum!*

Jesus also knew that sometimes you can’t describe God’s reign directly because meaning is difficult to grasp when the experience of something is not readily available. His sayings, “the kingdom of heaven is like a...” are many—like a mustard seed, like yeast, like treasure, like a merchant, like a net, like a landowner. These stories are the way he tried to help make meaning—he used metaphors from everyday, ordinary life experience. I believe it serves two purposes, that of teaching about what God desires for us as God’s “realm,” but also that we can find this meaning and purpose, knowledge and understanding all around us. We have only to keep our senses open to what God has placed right in front of us.

“The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

– Matthew 13: 31-32

Is there a story of something that serves as a symbol of a deeper meaning for you? What is the role of meaning-making in your life? Do you think you spend a lot of time thinking about the “meaning of things” or just a little?

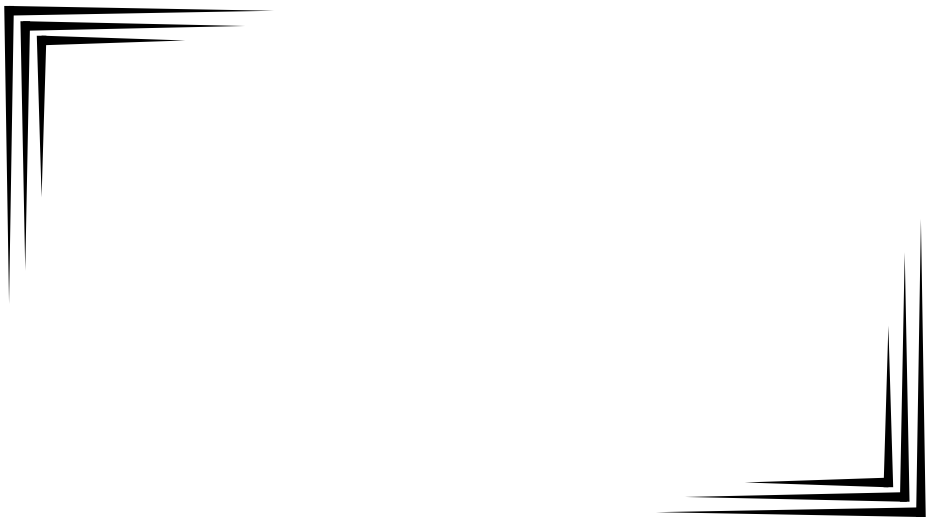


Want to go deeper? Scan the QR code and visit pp. 27-34 in the full version of the guided journal.

Awe Practice: The Camera Lens

The camera lens used in this worship series and the longer Guided Study is itself a metaphor. We are looking through the lens of awe to see the world and others; looking deeply to receive anew with wide-eyed wonder the precious nature of the world and our existence in it. When we create a photograph, we spend time “framing” the shot—we focus in on it in order to represent its essence and communicate a particular perspective. We are refining our gaze to glean a sense of meaning in it.

In this awe exercise, I invite you to be a “metaphorager” (someone who “forages for metaphors” and deeper meaning showing up in ordinary life) by utilizing an actual camera. Don’t wait for something extraordinary to cross your path because there are ordinary things around us constantly that can reveal awe if we only tune into them. Just keep your spirit attuned and your camera at hand. When something “captures” your eye, frame it, zoom in on it, find the essence of what drew you to it. Snap a shot, or a few. Don’t walk away before noticing how you feel. Then spend time later looking at your photos, imagining and playing with what meaning may be presenting itself.



Without the meaning committee [in my brain], there would be no Bach or the Beatles, no Galileo or Einstein, nor Moses or Mary or Jesus or the Buddha or Mohammed. It is the most recently evolved part of me, and frankly, it still has a lot of bugs and glitches that haven't been worked out yet. – Brian McLaren, Life After Doom: Wisdom and Courage for a World Falling Apart

Jesus and Curiosity

Jesus says three things are needed in order to fulfill our relationship with God as it concerns our needs: ask, seek, knock. These three stem from curiosity—knowing how to ask a question, taking a “seeking” posture, and being courageous enough to make it known that you want entry into new places. Humans, he says, do this for one another. How much more does our All-Loving-Parent desire for us to come with curiosity to this thing called life and this relationship with the Divine?

Jesus himself shows curiosity. I see this when I read accounts of his conversations with unlikely partners. He sees a man in a tree and gets curious... “What are you doing up there?” He wants to know more and so he invites himself to this man’s house! He sees a woman at a well at midday. Strange. What is she doing here? What is her story? Why is she now not married? And he isn’t just being nosy, he desires to know more because he knows that interaction equals transformation. When Jesus inquires about you, something is about to happen for you!

Perhaps it is time to consider that curiosity about others—to really find out more about what “makes them tick,” is a part of being a Jesus follower. I can only imagine what it would have been like to have Jesus strike up a conversation with you. And his interactions continued until his last human breath as a criminal’s question on the cross beside Jesus’ own cross ended in the declaration that this man would be with him in paradise. Curiosity is indeed a door to the Holy.

**“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find;
knock, and the door will be opened for you.
For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds,
and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.**

– Matthew 7: 7-8

What can you get deeply curious about that would help transform a fear into an inquiry, a dread into an investigation, or a bias into an exploration? What are you curious about in your inner life, outer focus, and about the mysteries of the beyond?

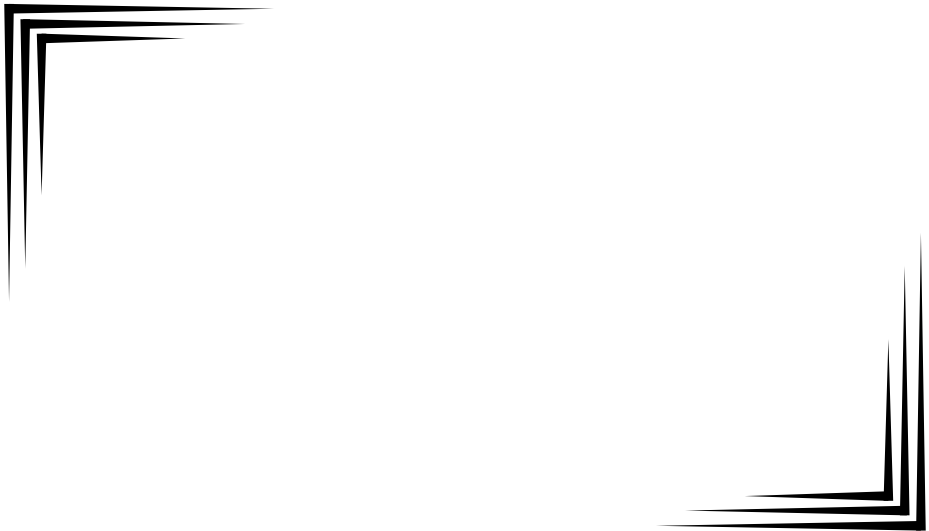


Want to go deeper? Scan the QR code and visit pp. 35-42 in the full version of the guided journal.

Awe Practice: Curious Conversations

I love to travel. One of the things I love about it is meeting new people because every encounter is an opportunity to learn a different perspective and to be changed by the encounter. Travel expert Rick Steves says that strangers are simply friends we have not yet met. Yes! I am in awe, to use a phrase, of the deep sharing I've had in encounters with so-called "strangers." Whether on a bar stool in Ireland or a seat on a plane, there are conversations that have "blown my mind" with their poignancy.

We can't really predict when a conversation will dive into the deeps but we can put conditions into place that support deeper sharing. Offering our own vulnerability as well as our deep curiosity and openness to listen and learn are the practices for this section. Instead of asking "what do you do?" ask an "into the deep" question such as "what gives you joy these days?" Just see what happens.



The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair...

*I have discovered that most people have no one to talk to, no one, that is, who really wants to listen. When it does at last dawn on a man [sic] that you really want to hear about his business, the look that comes over his face is something to see. – Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer**

Jesus and Delight

When I contemplate the passages about Jesus' going "up to the mountain to pray," I totally get it. The mountains are a place where I (and apparently Jesus), choose to go to feel the delight of creation—the awe-inspiring vastness of vistas and valleys from above. Jesus often went at night, it is written. He would pray all night long. Can we imagine this scene? Climbing up and up, he turns around to see the land stretched out in front of him, the evening falling, the sea perhaps glistening in the sunset, and finally the stars appearing. We can imagine he delighted in the solitude, the quiet, the ability to simply "be." Perhaps it was on the mountaintop that he could sense most deeply that intimate Oneness to all things holy and human.

We also know that he went to the mountain, or to a garden, when he had some decisions to make. Luke's Gospel describes him spending the night on the mountain in prayer before he chose twelve disciples, deeming them apostles. I am a "steeper" when it comes to decision-making. All of us use our guts and our brains to make decisions and I find that I need to let things "sit" a bit before landing on next steps (my version of "sleep on it"). I need to "feel" my gut instinct just as much as weigh the pros and cons. Jesus likely needed to get away from the "candidates" so-to-speak, in order to hear himself think or more to the point, sense the Divine One within him stirring and luring him to his next steps. Big deal decisions like these happen in our lives with regularity. Searching out a place of delight for us helps us connect with awe—connect with the Creator of Awe—so that we can envision the path before us.

"Now during those days he went out to the mountain to pray, and he spent the night in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose twelve of them, whom he also named apostles..."

– Luke 6: 12-13

Who taught you to delight in the world? What are your earliest memories of “drinking from streams of delight?”

How could you pre-design contexts for the “unspooling” of the film of your life experiences now?



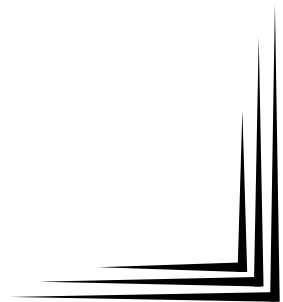
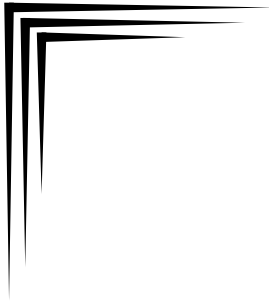
Want to go deeper? Scan the QR code and visit pp. 43-50 in the full version of the guided journal.

Our tears register our awareness of vast things that unite us with others. Our goose bumps accompany notions of joining with others and facing mysteries and unknowns together. Today we may sense these laws of bodily awe when moved by a favorite musical group, or in calling out in protest with others in the streets, or in bowing our heads together in contemplation. And in such rushes of tears and chills... we may glean a sense of what our souls might be. – Dacher Keltner, Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder...

Awe Practice: Delightful Spaces

This awe practice has to do with noticing, evaluating, and sprucing up our living and working spaces for optimum *hygge* (what the Danes call “cozy”). Think about the rooms or nooks in your home or at work that you spend the most time in. Do they that give you a sense of vitality or offer a bit of respite? What would improve them? For instance, I started using small lamps at my desk instead of overhead lighting because it helps me feel held when I’m needing to deal with the anxiety of finances or deadlines.

Then think about creating some *hyggelige* moments of community. If cooking is your jam, when is the last time you cooked for an intimate gathering of friends? Or is there a restaurant that is particularly cozy where you could “hole up” with friends or family? How would you make the conversation more *hyggelige*? Perhaps creating boundaries about current events and instead having a round of recalling a moment of delight in your lives could be a good start.



We are slowed down sound and light waves, a walking bundle of frequencies tuned into the cosmos. We are souls dressed up in sacred biochemical garments and our bodies are the instruments through which our souls play their music. – Albert Einstein

Jesus and Connection

The crowds gathered to hear Jesus. They likely are telling each other stories of what they've heard about this teacher—the things he has said, the wonders he has performed. There is a buzz. Jesus begins to walk among them. They reach out to touch his clothes because they feel or perceive a kind of power coming from him. They clamor to speak with him. At times he has to get in a boat in order to teach, so large are their numbers. And they stayed with him so long at times, that he had to find a way to feed thousands physically as well as spiritually. All of this means that Jesus created connection on a large scale—perhaps even the thrill that is called “collective effervescence” when people have a heightened experience together. And we know from the research about this phenomenon that the bond created in shared experience of this kind lasts for a good long while. He gave them a gift of feeling part of something bigger even after they returned to their homes, their labor, and whatever circumstances they faced in their lives. And this is why we gather in his name as well.

But he didn't just make crowd connections. He sought out connection with people around personal tables. Again, allow your imagination to describe the scene. At table. Your table. With Jesus. Wow. What would that have been like? I can only imagine that he wasn't just at the table with you, but he paid attention to you. Saw you. Knew you. We are called to make connections. To slow down, to “spend” time, to give our attention. Whether it is feeding those who are hungry physically or using table fellowship to draw people together who are hungry spiritually, socially, or emotionally, Jesus said “do this.”


“...when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

– Luke 14: 10-11

Awe Practice: Synch Up

For almost twenty years, I held retreats at Lake Tahoe for spiritual leaders. The place itself created a container of awe. We ate, talked, sang, laughed, learned and ritualized together resulting in a palpable collective effervescence. But my favorite evening about mid-week was when I would lead a “drum circle” experience with a variety of percussion instruments. At the beginning many, if not most, were leaning back with skepticism about their ability to join in the rhythm (“I don’t have any”). But when everyone started playing together, you could see even the most tentative ones start to jam when they realized they would never be left alone to keep the rhythm on their own.

We can be more confident when given the opportunity to “synch up.” It doesn’t have to involve a drum circle or a mass singing event. Simply the basic rhythm and dance of passing the deviled eggs at a dinner party helps even the most introverted get in touch with our innate ability (and need) to connect. This awe practice is the curation of connection. What will it be? Who can you collaborate with to make it happen?



Do not feel lonely, the entire universe is inside you. Stop acting so small. You are the universe in ecstatic motion. Set your life on fire. Seek those who fan your flames. – Rumi

Jesus and Self-Giving

We are “in awe” of people whose instinct is to move toward danger in order to assist those in peril. We are “in awe” of people who overcome incredible hardship and “rise above” their circumstances. We are “in awe” of those who make the world a better place because of their advocacy and unrelenting belief in goodness. All of those could describe the life and ministry, the death and resurrection of Jesus. We are entering a story whose “awe-ripples” have resonated through the millennia, inspired devotion, and established an entire religion.

Jesus enters Jerusalem in a “parade” of subversive praise. This song (psalm) has not been composed as a protest song specifically for this march. This is a song that has been chanted in the temple, in the exile, and in the prayers of the faithful for a very long time. It is in the “hymn book.” We can be in awe of the people as they dare to sing this in the context of praising a “King” on a donkey. It is interesting to me that the definition of “self-giving” includes the idea of the “small self” as opposed to the “default-self” that needs largess to the exclusion of others. Even his riding in on a donkey is a statement through sheer scale. He is not high on a horse, he is eye-level with the people. This is the kind of “kin(g)dom” he espouses. One in which the wellbeing of all the people are necessary for the good of the whole.

Let us pray that the effects of witnessing “moral beauty” in the Jesus story, and as we see that continued in the stories of self-giving we witness today, will inspire our own self-giving. Because when we give of ourselves in acts of advocacy, kindness, generosity, praise, and lifting up of others, we get that “shot of awe” as well and it perpetuates a sense of purpose that tingles in our bodies just as much as a beautiful sunset or the touch of a loved one. What a wonderful thing that God has given us this impetus for the good.

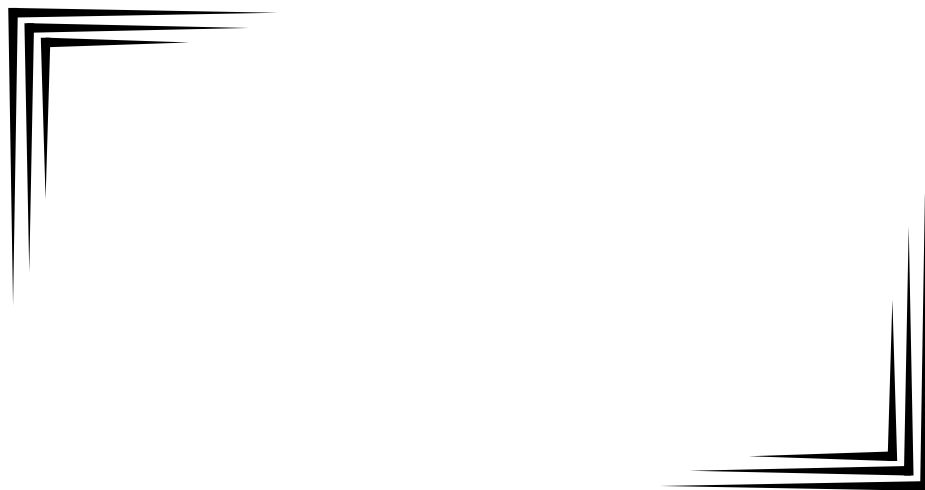
“Some of the Pharisees in the crowd said to Jesus, ‘Teacher, rebuke your disciples!’ Jesus replied, ‘I tell you, if they were to keep silent, the very stones would cry out!’”

– Luke 19: 28-40

Awe Practice: Light the Candle for Awe

I have an obsession about candles. Part of it has to do with the moving light they create that induces instant awe for me, but also because various sources of light have been used not only practically, but symbolically, by humans throughout our history and across places and spiritual traditions. The Sunday after September 11, 2001, the church I was attending sought to offer some way to respond in a time when words felt wholly inadequate. So we filled a table with candles and invited people to come light them during an extended time accompanied by meditative music. This action was so simple and yet so profound because it was a ritual action that could contain whatever people needed to express at the moment—grief for those lost and experiencing loss, outrage, concern for those who would be wrongly targeted by hate, and prayers for peace. It was so powerful that it became a weekly ritual long after people forgot its origin. So...

Find a candle that can be a reminder for you about whatever aspects of awe-seeking have become resonant for you. Light it at whatever intervals is possible for you. Set it somewhere in your living space where you will see it and be reminded that we need your light, your aliveness, in this world.



Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive. – Howard Thurman

Further Study

The following resources can be used for further study:

All scripture references from *The Inclusive Bible: The First Egalitarian Translation*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2007.

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