Rediscover the Wonder and Awe in Everyday Living

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Life could change for the better, when it is lived on a higher plane. Visualize yourself at the bottom of a grimy pit. If you look down, all you can see is muddy ground. But the moment you lift up your eyes towards the sky, your world suddenly opens up and brightens with new possibilities. A perspective shift can dramatically transform your view of life.

At the earthly level, life is almost totally consumed by mundane concerns and endless struggles to stay alive. A single mom is torn between a crying babe and a pile of dirty dishes. A waitress tries to survive her shift without collapsing. A wife cares for her husband with Alzheimer's disease 7/24. An office worker tries to get his work done while coping with the vicious office politics. So many hardworking, decent people are being harassed and oppressed by forces beyond their control. For most people, life is a daily battle with no end in sight.

In a broken world, things have a way of falling apart in spite of our best intentions and efforts. How can one stuck in a tar pit enjoy the thrills of peak experiences? Is it possible to discover wonder and awe, when drowning in a raging sea of anxiety and depression?

But in a higher realm, far above the wreckage of human strife, even a life filled with suffering, shame and guilt can take on a mystical glow. Consider life at the God-forsaken Nazi death camps—the barren and bleak camp ground, the blackened chimneys from hell, the menacing presence of SS soldiers, and the stench of death. Eve in the midst of such unimaginable horrors and degradation, Viktor Frankl (1984) was able to catch a glimpse of Heaven. Here is how he described his experience:

Standing outside we saw sinister clouds glowing in the west and the whole sky alive with clouds of ever-changing shapes and colours, from steel blue to blood red. The desolate grey mud huts provided a sharp contrast, while the puddles on the muddy ground reflecting the glowing sky. Then, after minutes of moving silence, one prisoner said to another, "How beautiful the world could be!" (p.60)

Yes, life could be beautiful, only if we learn how to capture and multiply the magic moments of awe and wonder. What is fleeting and transitory can be stored in an everlasting river. We may never step into the same river twice, but we can relive the same joy over and over again.
Pathways to the mountain top

Even the thought of awe sends a gentle shiver down my spine. You know the feeling when you stand before Grand Canyon, witness the tidal waves of Tsunami, behold Michelangelo’s paintings on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel, or listen to Handel’s Messiah.

Awe is always a mixture of emotions, encompassing reverence, fear and a sublime sense of marvel and amazement. You may experience a tingling on your skin or a weakening of your knees. You may feel the stirring deep in your soul. As long as the spell lasts, you are transported from your mundane existence to a different realm filled with surprises and possibilities.

The power of music

Let’s begin with music, the invisible bridge to Heaven. After George Frederic Handel had completed the "Hallelujah Chorus", he exclaimed to his servant with tears in his eyes: "I did think I did see all Heaven before me, and the great God Himself!" Music had opened his inner eyes for God’s glory in spite of his blindness. Since 1742, whenever Handel's Messiah is performed, the audiences automatically rise to their feet as they hear the majestic, awe-inspiring “Hallelujah Chorus”.

When you listen to Beethoven’s The Fifth Symphony, the opening motif of four single notes, like the knocking of fate at your door, arouses you from your apathy and invites you to plunge into the heroic struggle through the dark valleys to the mountain tops. Likewise, in his Ninth symphony, the opening movement is full of horror and hope, and the last movement climaxes with the powerful, moving chorale singing based on Schiller's poem “Ode to Joy”.

In its essence and purest form, music is spiritual and sacred. It can move your innermost soul and sweep you away from your worldly cares into the divine presence. In such a transcendental encounter, you cannot help but stand in awe, transfixed and transformed. Viktor Frankl is correct, when he says that we can experience the meaning of life and its many splendors simply by immersing ourselves in great music.

The awe-inspiring creation

Nature represents the most common source of awe, readily available to people everywhere. Humanity has a long history of love-fear relationship with
nature. Remember the recent Tsunami? Confronting nature inspires fear, reminding us of our own insignificance and mortality. However, nature’s majestic beauty also instills in us an unspeakable joy. When fear is wedded to adoration, it gives birth to awe.

Kirk Schneider (2004), a humanistic psychologist, emphasizes the importance of cultivating the human capacity for humility and boldness, reverence and wonder before creation. In his popular book Contact, Carl Sagan (1985), a renowned astronomer, underscores the innate human thirst for wonder and our need to listen to nature’s stories: “There’s wonder and awe enough in the real world. Nature’s a lot better at inventing wonders than we are” (p.178).

Philosophers, who explore the deeper meanings of things, often exult in their discoveries of wonder. Immanuel Kant (1997), in his landmark publication Critique of Practical Reason, writes: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me” (p.160). Alfred North Whitehead concludes: “Philosophy begins in wonder. And, at the end, when philosophic thought has done its best, the wonder remains” (p. 46).

Personally, I think the poets are at their best when they expose the naked soul of nature. From the pen of William Blake come these memorable lines:

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

To Emily Dickinson, even the tiny stone on the muddy road can ignite sparks of amazement and delight:

How happy is the little stone  
That rambles in the road alone  
And doesn’t care about careers,  
And exigencies never fears;  
Whose coat of elemental brown  
A passing universe put on;  
And independent as the sun,  
Associates or glows alone,  
Fulfilling absolute decree  
In casual simplicity.

Who can forget the magic words of William Wordsworth, the self-proclaimed lover of Mother Nature? He spied on “a violet by a mossy stone, half hidden from the eye” and spread the secret that “every flower enjoys the air it breathes!” He can still infect us with joy with the following lines:
My heart leaps up when I behold
A rainbow in the sky:
So was it when my life began,
So is it now I am a man,
So be it when I shall grow old
Or let me die!
The Child is father of the Man:
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety.

(http://www.online-literature.com/wordsworth/522/)

We need to ask ourselves: Why are we so blind to the dazzling beauty all
around us? How can our hearts remain unmoved by nature’s awesome display?
From the galaxies of stars to the tiny snowflakes, and from the thunderous Niagara
Falls to the whispering streams, the cosmos is pulsing with creative energies. How
can we live as if the world is just a concrete box?

Wordsworth got it exactly right when he wrote: “The Child is Father of the
Man.”

I remember those carefree days of childhood – chasing a dragonfly through
the tall grass, trying to capture a butterfly perching on a flower, flying a kite against
the soft, blue sky, or listening to tap-dancing of raindrops on treetops. There are a
thousand memories of a child’s play in nature’s playground; even one such memory
is sufficient to revive a wounded soul. Oh that we can restore a child’s sense of
wonder and become fully attuned to nature’s caprice.

Fearfully and wonderfully made

Perhaps of all creation, there is nothing more incredible and awe-inspiring
than the human being. Psalmist declares: “I praise you because I
am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full
well” (Psalm 139:14). Dr. Paul Brand and Philip Yancey (1997) have put
together a little book documenting the marvels of the human body, and it is
fittingly entitled Fearfully and wonderfully made.

Even the most powerful supercomputer cannot be compared with the human
brain in terms of adaptive and creative abilities. Consider the miracle of birth. A
single fertilized cell can develop into different kinds of organs and tissues with their
unique functions. It staggers our imagination that the millions of information needed
for reproducing the structure of the entire human body are stored in the double-
helix DNA strand.

But what is most amazing quality of human beings? Are we a biological
marvel and the crowning achievement of evolution? What set us apart from all the
other animal species, all with their own unique, amazing abilities? Are poetry and
music the sublime expressions of the human mind? Or are science and technology the best measures of human ingenuity?

As I look into the mirror, all I can see is a reflection of my physical self with its defects and signs of aging. Where is the child in me? Where is my everlasting dream? But behind the surface, I see God’s image. The real me resides in the innermost spiritual core, the center of my existence.

We are fearfully and wonderfully made, because the clay has been blessed with a divine kiss. The spirit of God has defined our special place in His vast cosmos. He has endowed us with the capacity to do what only human beings can -- to worship what is invisible, to search what is unknowable, and to realize what is impossible. The greatest achievement of the human spirit is that we can endure the pain, overcome the fear of death, and sing the most beautiful music in the midst of suffering, because our home is beyond the stars.

The hazardous and yet inspiring human journey is beautifully captured by the following meditation from Gates of Prayer:

*We are like mountain climbers on a perilous ascent. Often we stumble; sometimes it seems we may dash ourselves on the rocks below. But there is hope, for dimly we have seen a vision, and felt a presence, and faintly heard a voice not ours. The blazing stars, particles too small to see, the smile of children, the eyes of lovers, melody filling the soul, a flood of joy surprising the heart, mystery at the core of the plainest things - all tell us that we are not alone. They open our eyes to the vision that steadies and sustains us.* (p. 217).

**A Return to the Divine source**

The ultimate source of wonder and awe belongs to the ineffable, unexplainable, incomprehensible, mysterious, and sublime Holy One -- Creator of all things, the unshakable foundation of moral laws, and the fountain of all lives.

I often wonder whether it is possible for anyone to marvel at the creation without acknowledging the Creator. Could we humble ourselves before Nature without bowing before its Author? Hymns of praise naturally rose in his soul, as the Psalmist observed the wonders of creation:

*Oh Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what are mortals that you are mindful of them, the children of mortals that you care for them?* (Psalm 8, verses 1, 3-4)
The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2)

Once we learn to see things with our spiritual eyes, we begin to see the world anew. What is commonplace becomes sacred, what is mundane takes on new meaning and significance, and what is unattractive reveals its hidden beauty.

When I go astray, God’s invisible hand will steer me to the right way. When I am at the end of the rope, He will gently tap my shoulder and whisper: Fear not, for I am with you. How different the world looks, when our inner eyes are opened to the sacred encounters. Elizabeth Browning’s poem illustrates such a dramatic transformation:

Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes,  
The rest sit around it and pluck blackberries.

But awe is much more than a feeling of reverence. It is also the source of wisdom and understanding. According to Abraham Joshua Heschel, the renowned scholar of Judaism, “Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple.”

We can truly celebrate life regardless of our circumstances, when we answer His trumpet call and respond to His glory as we ought. As we cast our eyes heavenward, his wonders will fill every space and thrill our hearts.

How do we cultivate a sense of awe and wonder?

How do we restore a sense of awe and wonder?

To begin with, we need to keep our eyes and minds open to new possibilities. By adopting a posture of humility and curiosity, we are ready to be surprised by moments of awe and wonder.

When we confine human existence to the five senses, and reduce life into something which we can predict and control, we diminish our capacity for wonder and awe. Our lives are impoverished to the extent we ignore the transcendent reality and higher levels of consciousness.
Secondly, we need to avoid the trap of taking things for granted. By assuming that we already know all the answers, we automatically tune out new discoveries and understandings.

Thirdly, our lives should not be consumed by demands and desires. Remember that one does not live by bread alone. Make time to listen to God’s still, small voice and appreciate Nature’s artistry. Even in the dark alleys strewn with garbage and sandwiched between dilapidated buildings, a glimpse of the glorious sunset can take our breath away.

Finally, we need to remember those moments, when we were touched by a profound sense of wonder. For John Izzoe (2004), “these mystical moments in touch with nature are the things I remember most about being alive.” For others, these may be moments of their first love.

It will yield many happy returns to cultivate the capacity for awe. When the rubber meets the road and the going gets tough, you need a sense of awe to see you through. When you hit rock bottom, and the burden is more than you can bear, a sense of wonder can make your spirit soar. You may be surprised that nothing can transform the gloomy reality faster than viewing life atop a sunny peak.
References


