

Reverence: Reduced to Silence and Tears

by Donne Hayden

In his book, *Reverence: The Forgotten Virtue*, Dr. Paul Woodruff explains why he sees reverence as a virtue: “Emotions affect action; they are motivators. Fear makes you feel like running away; anger makes you feel like lashing out, grief makes you feel like crying. A virtue is a capacity, cultivated by experience and training, to have *emotions* that make *you feel like doing good things*.” He defines reverence as “the well-developed capacity to have the feelings of awe, respect, and shame when these are the appropriate feelings to have.” This definition fascinates me; I understand reverence as it is connected to *awe*, and I understand that *respect* is one aspect of reverence, but it certainly never occurred to me that *shame* could be an expression of reverence.

Contemporary American culture is a bit short on “awe, respect, and shame.” Such feelings are old-fashioned, out-of-fashion, out-dated, I know, but I would like to consider them today in reverse order, beginning with shame.

For many, the word “shame” has no real meaning any more; we rebel against the suggestion that we should feel shame, considering it a relic of religious dogma, a weapon used by the Church to control and manipulate people through the centuries. These days, we seem more inclined to *excuse* bad actions than to *respect* good actions. Then too, our widespread national interest in psychology leads us to conclude that no one is truly bad; anything can be

explained and excused by a difficult childhood. This, in spite of the fact that studies show that many, if not most, extraordinarily productive people had horrible or challenging childhoods; they accomplished good and great things in spite of such backgrounds.

As for respect, the revelation of any weakness in a human being—no matter what s/he may have accomplished—lessens our respect for the person. And we know too much about everyone these days; few, if any, manage to remain above reproach. Respect has also languished in the cult of individuality, which seems to interpret “equality” to mean “all the same.” In this country, we bristle at the suggestion that one *person* may deserve respect more than others. In general, though, we still have no trouble *respecting* power and wealth.

As for *awe*, it has suffered under the supremacy of *scientism*, the current dominant worldview of Western civilization. Here I would like to acknowledge a distinction made by the great contemporary theologian, Huston Smith, in his book *Why Religion Matters*. “Science on balance is good,” he writes, “whereas nothing good can be said for scientism.”¹ By “science” he means the accumulated body of facts about the natural world and the scientific method of testing hypotheses about the “material world.” “Scientism,” however, refers to the ways society has accepted and interpreted science, i.e., with the assumption that “the scientific method is, if not the *only* reliable method of getting at the truth, then at least the *most* reliable method” and that “the things science deals with—material entities—are the most fundamental things that exist.”

“It has come to seem self-evident in our industrialized Western civilization,” Huston writes, “that the scientific account of the world gives us its full story.” Anything that “breaks

¹ Huston Smith, *Why Religion Matters* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2001), page 59.

step” with this view of things, i.e., “hopes, dreams, intuitions, glimpses of transcendence, intimations of immortality, and mystical experiences,” is “overshadowed by the scientific account.”² He addresses this influence, saying that, “In the scientific worldview, meaning is only skin-deep, ‘skin’ here signifying biological organisms on a single speck in the sidereal universe.” A few paragraphs later, Huston quotes Ursula Goodenough, author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, who “admits that her nature has ‘no Creator, no superordinate meaning of meaning, no purpose other than life’s continuance.’ Still and all, it fills her with feelings of ‘awe and reverence.’” Huston remarks, “We can be glad it does, but how much comfort can we draw from that fact when the awe nature awakens in human beings is, like all emotions, no more than a Post-it note, so to speak, affixed to a nature that is unaware of being thus bedecked?”

Believing that whatever science can’t explain or replicate under controlled circumstances doesn’t exist, we seem unable to feel *awe* about anything science can explain. In the words of scientist Steven Weinberg, “the more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.”³ Scientism dismisses mystery, and for most of us, when the mystery is gone, so is the awe, that “most reverent of feelings.”⁴

I have discovered, however, that I am mystified less by *how* the material universe works than by *why* it works, or even exists at all. I am mystified and awed by the bark on a pine tree, by the skin on my fingertips, by the life force visible in my grandson’s eyes. Science may tell me *how* each of these phenomena works or how they are made, but science cannot tell me *why* this intricate creation we are part of works so magnificently. Science cannot explain *why* a

² Smith, page 60.

³ quoted in Huston Smith, p. 37

⁴ Woodruff, p. 147.

universe extending from the quark level to the galactic even exists; nor *why*, if human beings are the top of the heap when it comes to intelligence, every loving detail in that universe exhibits intelligence and purpose. Whether or not we understand how, we must always be humbled and awed by *why*. If we manage to live in this universe, on this planet, un-awed and disdainful of their mystery, we risk being victims of our own arrogance.

In my experience, reverence often manifests in the form of silence and/or tears.

When I am awed by something, I struggle for words, which, according to Woodruff, is entirely appropriate. He writes:

*Awe is inarticulate. A sense of awe comes over us without our being able to say exactly what it is about. Reverence at such a moment forbids any attempt to put words around it. That is why awe is the most reverent of feelings. You feel, when you are in awe, that you are human, that your mind is dwarfed by what it confronts, that you cannot capture it in a set of beliefs, and that you had best keep your mouth closed and your mind open while awaiting further disclosure.*⁵

As for tears, in an interesting study, Rosemary Anderson of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology in Palo Alto, California, describes “spontaneous and involuntary weeping” which she calls “transformative.”⁶ Such weeping, she found,

may be accompanied by a wide variety of emotions—ranging from profound grief and lament to rapture and joy—yet always the experience is intense, usually vividly remembered, and difficult to capture easily in words. Other examples include weeping in profound grief which

⁵ Woodruff, page 147.

⁶ Anderson, R. “Nine psycho-spiritual characteristics of spontaneous and involuntary weeping.” *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, 28(2), 1996, 167-173.

*reaches into the very core of Self, weeping at the sight of astonishing beauty, at the apprehension of one's essential nature and that of others, and as a gift, i.e., receiving spontaneous acts of grace.*⁷

What fills me with feelings of reverence—shame, respect or awe? Before what am I rendered speechless? What causes tears to well up spontaneously? (Not currently being in that state because I'm engrossed in my own small task here of speaking to you, I can tell you in retrospect.)

I am humbled by great suffering, by the quiet dignity of many who suffer beyond my ability to imagine. I am speechless and often reduced to tears by the shame I feel knowing the magnitude of human cruelty. In 1982 when I visited Japan, we toured the "Peace Museum" in Hiroshima. Before photographs of people with horrible injuries, before melted eyeglasses and breakfast dishes, before a human shadow blasted into the concrete of a step on which he sat at the moment the atomic bomb dropped on his city, I wept. A little Japanese boy nudged his brother to look at the crying American woman. At that moment, I realized I was not ashamed to be an American, but ashamed to be *human*. Ashamed that I was part of a species which, having indulged once in such destruction, continued to develop bigger bombs to do even greater damage. In response to the way human beings create suffering, abuse power, pollute the earth, ignore Love and focus on hatred, disdain Peace and wage endless war, deep, deep shame seems appropriate.

Some ideas—justice, truth, compassion, faith—elicit my respectful reverence, as do certain great leaders. I respect leaders without a hunger for power, leaders who do not disdain

⁷ Ibid.

those they lead; leaders like Gandhi, Martin Luther King, the Dalai Lama, Jimmy Carter and so far, God willing, Barack Obama. I respect leaders who are truly awake. I once met a woman who worked at the library in Plains, Georgia where Jimmy Carter frequently did research. *She* spoke of him with reverence; she said his eyes are so intense that it is almost difficult to meet them, and I thought of Thoreau's comment that if we were ever to meet a man who was *fully awake*, we wouldn't be able to look him in the eye.

Great works of art move me to reverent awe—paintings, sculpture, music and literature in which the creative power of the universe manifests through a human being. The Divine Creator, creative and continually creating, must delight in the dabs of divinity evident in the sculpture of Michelangelo and Maya Lin, the symphonies of Beethoven and Shostakovich, the paintings of da Vinci and Wyeth, and the words of Shakespeare and Annie Dillard.

Sunrises and sunsets humble me and fill me with awe at something so beautiful and so far beyond my control. A glorious sunrise feels like a personal gift, and I am humbled and grateful at being permitted to be in the right place at the right time to see pink and orange streak across the sky, or purple clouds outlined with brilliant gold sunlight.

I am in awe of death. Despite the American cultural suspicion that even a natural death is a violation of our rights, no matter what we do, no matter what advances medical science makes, each of us will encounter death. Death, "the great equalizer," remains mysterious, firmly beyond the control and outrage of human beings.

I am in awe of love, of the way love moves ordinary human beings to acts of self-sacrifice and kindness. Under the powerful influence of love, we humans take risks, and contrary to all instincts of self-preservation, we go places where we know we will feel pain.

Knowing we will lose what we most dearly love—sometime, through death eventually if nothing else, we love anyway. As Annie Lamott points out, everyone you love will die. Love in all its forms is powerful and beyond our control—love of place, love of pets, love of family, love of friends, love of nature. Some say God is love; turn that around and listen to how it sounds—Love is God. So when you see something you would call “Love,” you have seen God.

I am moved to awe at the different ways people find to reach for something beyond themselves. For a while, any time I visited any church, I was moved to tears. Whether it was a gothic cathedral in France, a tiny chapel in the New Mexico desert, or a small Presbyterian church in Timnath, Colorado, I wept. Why? Not because I agreed with what the people who attended that church believed, but because they believed *something*, sought *something*, reached for *something*, longed for *something* higher than themselves, that they recognized and desired a relationship with that something. I am awed by the movement of the Spirit in my own life and awed when I experience it at work among us in Quaker meetings.

In the silence this morning, I invite you to consider what renders you speechless or brings you to tears. What calls forth shame? What demands your respect? What inspires you to feel awe? Toward what are you humble and reverent?