

## Awe and Wonder

**Awe** - *n.* - A mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread, and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity, or might: *We felt awe when contemplating the works of Bach. The observers were in awe of the destructive power of the new weapon.*

**won\_der** [**wuhn**-der] – *n.* – The emotion excited by what is strange and surprising; a feeling of surprised or puzzled interest, sometimes tinged with admiration: *He felt wonder at seeing the Grand Canyon.*

-- Dictionary.com. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*, Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

Something is sorely lacking in American culture today, and has all but vanished in the church.

It is a sense of awe.

As a high school teacher, I see it every day in the glazed-over look in the eyes of teenagers. They glisten like the hair of a politician or televangelist. They sit lifeless in their chairs, living out Thoreau's quote about quiet desperation. Quiet because they either don't want to be noticed, or they don't have much to say because they don't think much of anything anymore, or because talking isn't part of the routine. Desperate because, with the utterance of a word, their teacher can ruin their afternoon, their weekend, their month by causing them to forfeit their plans of soaking in all the

distractions an information-age culture has to offer them. This is why teachers are the enemy. They might have students channel that ability to ride the waves of the oft-cited superhighway for ends other than entertainment, which is the only thing that carries their interest anymore.

These are the children that grow up never having satisfied a primal urge all humans have: to be a part of something that is bigger than their own selves. How can they? They don't even know who they are.

There is nothing anymore that seems to inspire in us a sense of this mixed emotion we call awe. Some have wondered if we're capable of any true emotion at all anymore.

I believe all of this to be one of the greatest tragedies of our time. In this we are not only losing something that is distinctly human, and, thus, a key element to our identity, but we are also losing a part of our make-up that provides a direct path to God.

Consider what one biographer of Martin Luther says. Roland Bainton, author of Here I Stand, characterizes Martin Luther's ideas on the subject this way: "The deficiency of faith is made evident by a lack of wonder, for nature is a revelation only to those to whom God has already been revealed."<sup>1</sup> He quotes Luther as saying, "If thou couldst understand a single grain of wheat, thou wouldst die for wonder." We, on the other hand, have taken to behold the truly wondrous "like a cow staring at a new door." I fear something terrible has happened.

In Acts 17, while Paul is in the Areopagus, he uses elements of Greek culture to appeal to those listening. In doing so, he presents us with a beautiful example of what it means to be in the world but not of it, as it is Paul's familiarity with, not his distance from, a pagan

---

<sup>1</sup> Bainton, Roland H. Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther. New York, NY: Meridian, 1995. 168.

culture that actually furthers the kingdom of God. But there is another lesson to be learned here. He says,

**24"The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.'**

The Message says it this way:

**“Starting from scratch, he made the entire human race and made the earth hospitable, with plenty of time and space for living so we could seek after God, and not just grope around in the dark but actually find him. He doesn't play hide-and-seek with us. He's not remote; he's near.”**

Psalms 139 contains a similar thought when it says:

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and you know me.**
- 2 You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar.**
- 3 You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways.**
- 4 Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.**
- 5 You hem me in—behind and before; you have laid your hand upon me.**
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too lofty for me to attain.**

**7 Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?**

**8 If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, <sup>l</sup>a you are there.**

**9 If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea,**

**10 even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.**

**11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will hide me and the light become night around me,"**

**12 even the darkness will not be dark to you; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you.**

The lesson is clear. God is EVERYWHERE. And I don't say this in an attempt to frighten and manipulate, as if to warn you that you cannot escape him. I say it in the sense that no matter where you are, God is able to be experienced. So, at least for the time being, let us understand, intellectually, that, if an unfathomable, endless God, who is so huge that we could never begin to wrap our feeble minds around him, is available to us anywhere we go, that there SHOULD be no limit to things that continually dumbfound us into an awe-struck condition.

I believe without this sense of awe and wonder, we begin to lose our identity. I'm convinced that at no other time in the history of our species have the words, "I'm trying to figure out who I am" been uttered with such repetition. If there is an equally alarming epidemic in our youth, this is it.

Of course, without a sense of "puzzled interest" that yields a "reverence" or a "respect", then we have little motivation to understand ourselves. Seeking to understand who you are might necessitate seeking to understand your culture, your past, the physical world around you, and, let's face it, you're not that big of a nerd. It might cause you to delve

into the realms of sociology, psychology, and, ultimately, into that most elusive and egg-heady of all topics, philosophy. The very appearance of the word makes you shudder as you conjure images of the number of angels that actually CAN dance on the head of a pin.

No, if the answer can't be obtained through a short, 150-page book or a few visits to a therapist, then it can't be done. We're busy people. Smelling flowers is not an option. Unfortunately, a sense of identity is part-and-parcel to a sense of purpose. Many a theologian has pointed this fact out. My favorite is Socrates.

Socrates, as most of you might know, was more than a character in the movie "Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure." A philosopher in ancient Athens, Socrates broke many of his society's conventions. He didn't go home often. He often appeared unkempt. He rarely bathed. He had no job. None of this was because of a lack of ability. He had been a soldier in his early days. There is reason to believe he served with distinction, and was even recognized for valor when he saved the life of his commanding officer. There was also no doubt about his mental capacities, as this is what we still know him for today.

For Socrates, it was a matter of priorities. He was much more concerned with the ESSENCE of humanity than he was with its outer shell.

It was to the end of understanding this essence that he often engaged people in dialogue. This is where we get the phrase "Socratic method". He simply asked questions of people. When they made statements, he asked more questions about the statements they made. Some found his habits amusing. He was often invited to dinner parties put on by the rich as a way of enlivening the occasion. Others were not so amused. Many an aspiring politician was publicly humiliated when, running out of answers to Socrates' questions, proved that he hadn't completely thought out the convictions he had so passionately advocated to a crowd in the Areopagus.

His reason for doing this spawned from what he believed to be his destiny or his calling. As the story goes, a friend of his had gone to visit the Oracle at Delphi. This oracle was

believed to be the mouthpiece of Apollo, who, apparently, was particularly wise on all matters related to humans. This friend asked the Oracle who the wisest man in Athens was. The Oracle, in a seemingly rare moment of clarity, responded that it was Socrates. This delighted the friend. It troubled Socrates. He never considered himself wise. He knew there was plenty he didn't know. So he figured he had the definition of the word all wrong. He went to the most likely sources of wisdom to find out what was at the core of this trait: the poets, priests, and politicians. Unfortunately, after questioning some of the most respected members of these groups, he realized that they, also, had no idea what wisdom was. The funny thing, though, was that they all thought they did. Ultimately, Socrates came to the conclusion that the only difference between him and them was that he recognized what he didn't know. He came full circle back to the Oracle at Delphi, because printed above the doorway into the temple there were the words that separated Socrates from those wise fools: "KNOW THYSELF."

Socrates made it his mission to make sure that everyone in Athens knew himself or herself the way he knew himself. If the thing that made him wise was his recognition that he did not know everything, he would make everyone in Athens wise by proving to them that they, too, did not know everything.

You can see where he got his nickname, "the gadfly."

But it shows the significance of the phrase that he is probably most known for: "The unexamined life is not worth living."

Why would a man say this? Does he not believe that people who aren't self-aware are worth every bit what a more self-conscious person is worth? Maybe he believes that those who aren't as smart as he should just end it right now.

But I don't think this is what Socrates is getting at. Rather than saying that this type of life is worthless, I think he's, instead, wondering how anyone would choose this lifestyle, given the option of living "the examined life."

This, of course, leads us to an important question: What is the examined life?

The obvious answer is that the examined life is that life which is observed and analyzed. Actions are taken note of, and the motives behind those actions are studied. “Why did I do what I did?” “What do I think about that?” “Why do I believe that way?” These are questions that lead one down the road of the examined life. It is this ability to look at ourselves critically, among other things, that separates us from animals. Then, examination of our lives should assuredly lead to change, as we find areas that we can improve on, or areas we don’t like and want to get rid of altogether, or areas that are inconsistent with other more important areas. An animal can’t do this. Why does a lion chase gazelles? Because that is what a lion does. No one accuses the lion of not having a conscience when he eats the gazelle (after picking out the weakest one of the lot, too!). The lion doesn’t feel guilty and resign himself to kicking this gazelle habit. Why? Doing so is not in the nature of the lion, and they have no choice but to act in a manner consistent with their nature.

Humans are different, though. To Socrates’ mind, humans were capable of improving upon their natures. However, it required them to know enough about themselves to recognize deficiencies and then want to change them.

But what happens when we lose the motivation to go through this process? What happens when we no longer (or ever DID) see a reason to understand what we do and why we do it? What if we never realized that such activity was expected of us?

The answer can be found in our most popular cultural format for conveying modern-day mythology: The movie theater. When we no longer see a reason to know ourselves, or, worse yet, if we never realized that knowing ourselves was part of the process of realizing our own humanity, we do the exact opposite of what Socrates saw as being the enlightened path to what Abraham Maslow would call self-actualization. We become slaves. Whether it is slavery to the larger culture around us, which, every day, is begging, pleading, and bargaining for our loyalty, or if it’s slavery to a more dominant person in our lives, who mercifully (or not so) tells us what to do, or if it’s slavery to our

own ungoverned passions, we are in the same type of bondage as Neo was before exiting the Matrix, or as Truman was before he walked out the door of his life/show.

We are hairless apes.

Without this sense of identity, and the subsequent sense of purpose, we act barely human, much less as children of the living God. This is not what Jesus meant when he said that he came to give us life and, not only that, a more abundant life.

### **The Heresy of the Gospel of “Get Saved”**

This heresy is near and dear to my heart, because it is the heresy I believed for over two decades of my life.

I believe that this heresy will be responsible for more surprises at the end of time than we will ever realize. It has entrapped so many people into a comfortable mediocrity that they see little reason to give it up. It is the heresy I hear every day from the kids in the Christian high school where I teach. They all say they are Christians. Many get very angry when they hear people say things that are seemingly opposed to their belief system, and some are even ready to argue with you extensively over the finer points of what they view as being their religion. It resembles the Christ of the gospels very little, though.

Here is what I remember of this heresy, and if I bounce around some, forgive me. It has been a while since I've engaged in this kind of scientific, systematic explanation of what I viewed to be the teachings of scripture.

It starts with a decision. At some point, a follower of Christ MUST pray the prayer. You all know it. “Father, I admit that I'm a sinner. Please forgive me of my sin. I believe that Jesus is God, that he died on the cross, and that he raised from the dead for me. I want Jesus to come into my heart and take me to heaven.” This prayer, prayed with sincerity, makes you a Christian. The sincerity part is important, because, later in life,

when some people start to realize that it won't be as easy as they hoped it would be, and either engage in some sort of extended bout with sin, or turn away from Christianity altogether, it gives God the out and releases him from his end of the bargain. "They never really meant it." It makes it easier for us to turn that former-brother-now-sinner loose, and also makes it justifiable for us to continue telling people in the flock that they'd better stick to the straight and narrow, or their sincerity might be questioned also. If all of this is sounding uncomfortable, remember, this is exactly the way it was put to me when I was younger. If you don't agree with it, then good. You shouldn't. It is what I was taught was Christianity.

So it starts with this prayer. This prayer gets you into heaven. That's the way it is presented. I remember the words, almost verbatim, from the Christian children's show I was watching before I prayed that prayer myself. "If you want to ask Jesus to come into your heart so that he'll take you to heaven, will you bow your head and pray this prayer with me?" With the faith of a child, I made a decision that I was incapable of understanding.

I don't want to downplay the importance of a moment where commitment is made. The problem is that, in this view, salvation is front-loaded. From that point on, in the mind of the newly converted, everything is taken care of. Not that you won't have tough times, but really what's expected of you is that you maintain. Maintain your "passion"... maintain your commitment... maintain your purity... I don't need to go into detail about how problematic this is. When circumstances arise that allow doubt to creep in, which you and I know is inevitable, the believer in this gospel has real trouble. "This isn't supposed to happen. I'm saved already! It's all been taken care of." On more than one

occasion, as a teenager, I had adult “youth counselors” tell me that, if you’re truly saved, you are assured. You’re certain. You have no need to doubt. What a horrible thing to say to a fifteen-year-old kid who isn’t sure he’s quite getting all this Christianity stuff. And I had good reason for “not getting it.” There is nothing fulfilling about this life. There is no redemption of the life you have, because you’re simply waiting for heaven. That, and not doing the “nine nasties.” You know, no drinking, no smoking, no dancing, no sex outside of marriage. The Christian life is defined more by what you don’t do than what Christ has done to you. Within this context, about all we expect Christ to change in us is our demeanor, which is now supposed to be pleasant and serene all the time, and that he not allow us to be tempted by sin anymore. Needless to say, the scriptures make little sense when viewed through this lens. Looking at something like the Sermon on the Mount, one cannot view it as the practical living of the values of the kingdom of God. We can’t actually be expected to DO those things. So we have to explain it away. “He’s trying to show us how impossible it is to live holy lives, and thus prove to us that we need a savior” is how I’ve oh-so-often heard it explained away. Or what to make of Luke 12? Jesus can’t be serious, can he? We’re not supposed to worry? And what’s this crap about selling what we have and giving it away? Won’t that just make us poor, too? Life lived under the gospel of “get saved” is spent vacillating between two emotions: pride and fear. Pride comes when we are doing all the things we are supposed to be doing, or “following the recipe” as I still hear people refer to it. We are to be going to church on Sunday and “spending time with God” on the days we don’t go to church. This means we spend somewhere between 5 and 15 minutes reading our Bible and praying. Not doing this means you’ve spent no time with God, and are, thus, not doing

well spiritually. When you do these things, though, you are “closer to God,” and, thus, are able to look down on those who are not doing these things.

But since the gospel of get saved really leaves the rest of the life untouched (except for telling us what we’re NOT supposed to be doing), we spend that time in a lot of fear, primarily that we’ll fall away and either shirk on our bible-reading duties, or actually fall into sin.

See, for the gospel of “get saved”, everything is divided. Since all the “heavy lifting” was done at the front end, what more could God expect from me? I prayed the prayer! I’ve done my bit. And, yes, we’re all given the nifty outline of the systematized view of salvation, telling us about justification, sanctification, and glorification, but when you’re view of drawing closer to God is relegated to not engaging in egregious sins and a daily penance, it begins to not only get very frustrating, but very dull and, eventually, very irrelevant.

So what does all of this have to do with the death of awe and wonder? When we are brought up into this false gospel, with reality so neatly divided into the sacred and the secular, the message is communicated that, for anything to truly be worthwhile, it must fall into the former category, and not the latter. Notice the use of the word “Christian” as an adjective, and it exposes a bright-line for this mindset. We should listen to Christian music, watch Christian TV, support Christian movies, and read Christian fiction. Steve Taylor, who happened to be a Christian singer, heckled this mindset when he sang, “You should only drink milk from a Christian cow.” Unfortunately, the message that is received, more often than not, is that, in order to be serving God, it can only be in the context of using the word Christian as an adjective, because one can’t be just an actress.

One has to be a Christian actress. So there is no attempt at redeeming a fallen culture. Like the lives of individual Christians, we are spent maintaining. The trenches have been dug, and we have only to keep the heathens from gaining ground. Shopping at Mardels helps (I won't even go into the mindset that purchasing Christian products seems to almost be a modern-day form of indulgence).

So with our lives neatly divided between the sacred and the secular, and no need to redeem anything in the latter category (with the possible exception of either handing out tracts or, for the truly brave, asking our neighbors and co-workers where they'd spend eternity if they died tonight), what's left to do? The emphasis is placed almost entirely on heaven. Think about that ever-popular evangelizing question. Salvation and heaven are synonymous. In the 22 years I spent clinging to this heresy, not once did I ever hear someone who was wanting to evangelize another person ask them what they needed rescuing from, or what good news would be to them. We just assume that everyone else is as scared to death of hell as we are. In working at a Christian school, filled with the most church-ed kids you'll ever meet, ask them what Christ has rescued them from, and the only answer they are capable of giving is "hell." It is impossible for them to conceptualize salvation apart from heaven. Any mention of the Kingdom of God is equated with heaven. Ask them to name something that Christ has saved them from in this life, and they can't answer the question. There is the rare exception of the person with the very dramatic conversion experience, who was on drugs and in jail when he received Jesus, and it flipped their life over. This is a wonderful occurrence. It is also pitifully rare. Most kids simply cannot understand that salvation starts now, and that

most of that process involves Christ saving us from ourselves and from the most deceptive form of wisdom known to man: common sense.

But this dualism is even more insidious, in that it leaves us with nothing to live with but fear. And that fear isn't even a healthy one, derived from knowledge of who God is and associated with all of the positive emotions that also emanate from such knowledge.

Instead, we fear the world that we're forced to live in for what it might do to us. We fear that it will seduce us away from the love of God one too many times. We fear that we will engage in that one act that will finally be the straw that breaks the camel's back, causing God to reject us. We live in fear of being contaminated and not being able to return to our previous pristine condition, which is usually an illusion in itself.

And we certainly take no refuge within the walls of the church, because inside, there is something even greater to be feared, and that is the rejection of our congregation. You all know what I'm talking about here, so I need not go into greater detail, but it's not for unfounded reasons that people have the impression that the church is filled with plastic smiles and deceitful "I'm fine" responses.

So they are left with an emotionless Christian life inside church, and allowed little excitement outside of church. It becomes very mundane. In fact, if I had to describe the Christian walks of the vast majority of these kids I come into contact with, I would immediately respond with the word "bored." They are bored out of their minds. And who could blame them. With Christianity neatly contained within the walls of their church (or Christian school), no expectations about the Christian life except that it isn't much fun, and the end or goal of their salvation a far-off dream (who thinks of their own demise when they're fifteen?), what else is there to do but be bored!

Our kids are taught to flee the world around them, and take safe harbor inside the walls of the church and the Christian bookstore. They are certainly not taught to engage the culture around them for the purpose of redeeming it. All of this leads to a lowest-common-denominator Christianity that, ultimately, expects nothing of them, as long as they've prayed that one blasted prayer and continue to tell people that they believe in Jesus.

I don't know which came first, or which is causing which, but this is an epidemic in our youth. There is little desire to put much effort into anything. You would be shocked at the crap that I get handed to me in the way of work. Recently, I attempted something rather revolutionary. I tried incorporating a portfolio system into my curriculum that actually gave students choices about the kind of work they did. It really wasn't difficult: pick from a list of assignments, each with varying point levels. If, by the end of the midquarter, you had X number of points, you got an "A". If you had "Y" number of points, you got a "B". You get the idea. The mass confusion that it caused was dumbfounding to me. Eventually, I had one student honest enough to tell me the problem. "Mr. Zedler," she said, "the problem is that you're giving us choices. I just want to be told what to do."

This describes the gospel of get saved to a "T". Tell me the rules so that I can know that I'm doing it right so that I know I'll get my heavenly, eternal "A". No desire to understand. No desire to question or dig deeper. Just tell me what to think that will keep me out of hell.

So what has happened to our sense of adventure? What happened to our curiosity? What happened to our sense of wonder that would drive us to search for answers from life, and lead us into the arms of a God that is not safe, but good?

### **What's Happened To Us?**

As I said before, I think that our young people are suffering from a tragic lack of ability to experience awe. From what I've seen, this seems to take effect sometime in middle school. I have no science to back this up, or any expert analysis to offer you. I only have my own observations that tell me that, when I see 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> graders, they still walk down the hall of their school with a certain amount of amazement in their eyes. It's not difficult to captivate kids that are that young. By the time they are in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, it's like they've seen it all. Everything is routine to them. When life becomes routine, it ceases to be real life.

I have my own opinions about why this happens. I'm sure that the causes are too numerous to catalogue, especially in a short speech. As an educator, I see how the way we educate students contributes to this condition. While I'm sure that it doesn't help that so many students in schools spend close to 8 hours a day staring at television screens and dry-erase boards underneath florescent lights that, I'm convinced, can induce depression in the most emotionally stable person, I think the problem runs much deeper than that.

For instance, I think the understood goal of education is one source of this plague. I've had this conversation in my classes before. It goes something like this:

Me: "So, if you guys hate this so much, then why are you here?"

At this point, there is usually a long, engaged discussion about personal choices. They see

themselves as being FORCED to be in school. I try to point out to them that no one FORCES them to be in school. They simply see it as being more desirable than the alternatives. If they left, and were under a certain age, they could get in trouble with the authorities. Those that are old enough to avoid this would get in trouble with their folks. But this doesn't take away from the fact that, every day, students DO choose to drop out and do something else, and that, for whatever reason, the students I'm talking with have chosen NOT to do this. Those that understand this eventually move on to the following portion of the discussion.

Student: "We're here because we need to get an education."

Me: "But why?"

Student: "Because we need to get good grades so we can get into a good college."

Me: "Why does it matter that you get into a good college?"

Student: "Because I want to eventually have a good job." (Mind you that, every response that is given is made with the tone of "Duh, you idiot... everyone knows this. Why are you asking me such obvious questions?")

Me: "Why do you need a good job?"

Student: "So we can make enough money to be comfortable."

I have this conversation about once a year. Frankly, I'm being nice by putting the word "comfortable" there at the end, because, in actuality, few students use that word. Most of them say what many think but are mature enough to not allow to escape their lips. They say they need that money to be happy. A few understand what they've just said as the words leave their mouths.

Just the other day, I heard a student parrot what I have heard many "experts" and parents

say to groups of youth. "It's stupid to not finish high school. You just won't get very far in life without a diploma." Translation: You won't be able to get a very high paying job. This is what we've trained students to believe is the goal of education: The Almighty Dollar. Parents reinforce this idea a lot. I remember my own telling me how many more thousands of dollars a year every "A" translates into once you're finally in the job market (And, given what I'm making now, you'd never know that I had higher than an A+ average in high school, a 3.98 GPA in my undergrad work, and graduated with a 4.0 when I got my master's degree. I COULD have sailed through with a "C" average).

I know I've said it before, but I firmly believe that our kids, in the dying gasps of their youthful innocence and idealism, recognize the futility and complete lack of any meaning in an existence spent chasing money and status in the eyes of people. Not only that, but I firmly believe that they fully understand the implications of this existence: If money and status are of primary importance, and you don't attain those, then YOU are not important. I'm not a fool. I know no one would ever SAY this to a young person. But there is a message in our methods. Our kids understand that message, and this is why learning about the world around us is a burden, and not a joy. This is also why it seems like everyone around us is an emotional wreck. Our society is a society of basket cases. One study commissioned by the YMCA and conducted by Dartmouth College entitled Hardwired to Connect came to the conclusion that, despite being the most affluent society in history, and despite having become even MORE affluent in the previous decade, "U.S. young people not only appear to be experiencing sharp increases in mental illness and stress and emotional problems, but also continue to suffer high rates of related behavioral problems, such as substance abuse, school dropout, interpersonal violence, premature

sexual intercourse, and teenage pregnancy.”<sup>2</sup> Time Magazine, in its April 17<sup>th</sup> cover story, found that we have a dropout rate averaging at about 30%, as opposed to the previously believed 10%, and that a large portion of those dropouts were otherwise bright students, who typically make “A”s and “B”s but who started to see their education as being not only boring, but pointless.

Lest we forget, this is all occurring at a time when the culture at large is begging for our teenagers’ attention and patronage. Today, teenagers are the most targeted group by advertisers. They have more disposable income than ever in history, and they have more say over how their parents spend THEIR disposable income, and the private sector is quite willing to do whatever it takes to make sure that they are the suppliers of whatever it is that will allow us to fill whatever voids we may have for the time being. Thomas DeZengotita, in his book Mediated, makes the point that our society’s primary motivation is the creation of more and more options for us to choose from. On the side of the consumer, we want options, because, after being told that we are the masters of our own destiny and that we can do anything we put our minds to, we don’t like the idea of being boxed into a corner or forced to accept any reality that we don’t particularly care for. Think about it. Everything from education to clothes to health care to the labor market, we strive relentlessly to keep anyone from having reality forced on them. I heard a news interview with a scientist who works in nanotechnology. He predicted that, within 100 years, we’d have the technology to prolong human life indefinitely, for a price, of course. See, on the side of the supplier of these options, it also works out nicely, because we’re always willing to pay for options. So the quid-pro-quo is evident. Everyone is happy.

---

<sup>2</sup> Hardwired to Connect: the New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities. YMCA, Dartmouth Medical School, Institute for American Values. New York, NY: Institute for American Values, 2003. 9.

Or at least everyone is pleasant.

DeZengotita makes the point this way, “The flattery of representation has a downside, as we shall see – for the flattered self is spoiled. It never gets enough. It feels unappreciated. It whines a lot. It wants attention.”<sup>3</sup>

And attention we get. And I wish I could just pin this attention on those greedy people in the business world. No, charities want our attention. Issues want our attention. The daily headlines want our attention. Teachers, parents, priests, and bosses want our attention. Notice how I slipped religion in there. Christendom has bought into the game. Do you want to know why the Church in America has clutched, with both hands, the gospel of “Bigger, Better, More”? It’s because in a world of increasingly available options, and voices shouting those options to us in louder and louder voices, if you don’t cut through the clutter, then you get drowned out! So our churches advertise. They appeal. They try to be relevant. They install coffee bars and play movie clips and have video games and “contemporary music.” But, in the end, we become just another talking head. As Douglas Rushkoff said in his documentary called “The Persuaders”, every attempt to cut through the clutter becomes, guess what, more clutter.

I promise that I’m getting back to awe and wonder, but there’s one more step in the chain. See, with all these options being lobbed at us every day, and armed with the vision that we don’t have to be bound by reality, we can literally create an identity for ourselves. Whatever seems the most appealing to us, we can choose to “be that guy.” Are you inspired by art? Here are the appropriate clothes, music, and computer hardware for you. Do you see yourself as being that sensitive, misunderstood loner? Or are you the fun

---

<sup>3</sup> De Zengotita, Thomas. Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2005. 21.

guy? Or are you one of the “beautiful people”? We’ve got the package for you as well. Not only that, but we have an endless supply of characters and scenarios courtesy of our entertainment industry and its half-crazy, only moderately contained offspring, the internet, from which to draw knowledge of how to behave in any given situation. See, part of all this optionality is that there is an increase in accessibility that goes along with it. DeZengotita calls it “Unseemly access.”<sup>4</sup> We can experience almost anything in a representational form. Do you want to go to the bottom of the sea? Or into a black hole? To George Washington’s deathbed? Do you want to “experience” someone’s death? How about their birth? Inside the womb? How about inside the bedroom of the two people engaged in “the act”? It’s all available to us. Just change the channel or type in the URL.

The most obvious impact this has on our ability to experience awe is that it causes all of these things to become ordinary. This “unseemly access” makes the most sacred of situations into the common, or profane. And no one is awe-struck at something that’s ordinary. We’re back to staring like cows at a new door.

We often hear the verse Colossians 3:23 cited in a very manipulative way, implying that we ought to go out there and “give 100%”, usually to whatever cause whoever is attempting to motivate you is touting at the time. I hear this verse used all the time to beat students over the head with. “You’re supposed to be doing all things as unto the Lord, so what the crap is up with this ‘C’?” I’d like to offer a different interpretation. We are to engage in sacred, not profane, actions. I do not mean that everything we do is supposed to be “churchy”, lest that dualism rear its ugly head again. I mean that every

---

<sup>4</sup> De Zengotita, Thomas. Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2005. 227-229.

activity we engage in is to be done with the intent of finding and experiencing God in that activity. There is no room for the mundane in the Christian life. I'm not saying it won't happen, but when it does, it should be recognized for what it is: a mark of our fallibility. It certainly shouldn't be a trademark.

A characteristic that is absolutely necessary to the experience of true awe is authenticity. Awe cannot be acted out and be true awe. Yet, with the exponentially increasing number of options available to us, and the corresponding desire to create our own identity, it seems that we as a society are becoming more and more adept at acting out emotions rather than experiencing and communicating true emotion. I see this all the time in the hallways. I'll overhear a portion of a conversation, and I'll think to myself, "Whatever that kid just said sounds like it came straight off of a television show." You know what I'm talking about. Our culture isn't just a consumer culture, but it's a consumer culture centered on entertainment. All those movies we've seen, those TV shows we've watched, and all those life situations we've seen played out in each... they have an effect. They set standards for how we should behave. This is what so floors me about the Christian response to television. Slowly but surely our children are losing the ability to distinguish real emotion from emotions brought on by watching fictional situations played out in an electronic box, and what we choose to get upset about is foul language? Our answer is to replace that television with television that "reflects our values"? Talk about hopeless capitulation.

Without the ability to feel real emotion, not emotion that we're "supposed" to feel, or emotion that fits with our choice of identity, we cannot feel awe, and if we are incapable of being awed, we simply cannot experience the God that is so close to us, because there

is no way of coming into his presence and NOT being awed.

### **Why We Have To Get It Back**

So you can see how vital it is that we strive to get this back. I truly believe that a lack of wonder in our lives breeds hopelessness. Without a sense of awe, or the ability to wonder at life, dreams aren't dreamed. Instead, we accept the reality with which we are presented. We either surrender to the darkness of banality and ordinariness, or we desperately look for it in other places. Life becomes habit. We die before we are dead. Nowhere is this more evident than in the lives of our teenagers. Gwendolyn Brooks hit the nail on the head when she wrote in her poem "Boy Breaking Glass", "I shall create! If not a note, a hole. If not an overture, a desecration."

I don't think we realize how incredible of an opportunity this is for us to spread the gospel... to deliver good news to others. It seems that for centuries, Christendom has been encouraging Christians to remove themselves from real life or to at least eschew the pleasures of it. The last thing we should be doing is enjoying life. In their book The Shaping of Things To Come, Alan Hirsch and Michael Frost argue the exact opposite: that redeeming life, and allowing yourself to be bowled over by just how incredible and beautiful and rough and inspiring and REAL it is, can be an amazing vessel for what Christ has to offer. To quote from their book:

**We have seen people silenced by astonishment in such places as the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the Grand Canyon in Arizona, and the rim of the Great Rift Valley in Kenya. It is difficult to encounter sheer majesty and beauty and not be drawn into a quest for the author of all beauty. The experience of wonder naturally draws us toward God. In fact, Paul says, "For since the creation of the world God's**

**invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made” (Rom. 1:20). Everyone from Saint Francis of Assisi to John Calvin has made this point. The sparks or traces of the glory of God can be found in every spot in the universe (to paraphrase Calvin). But, given the fury and the busyness of life in most Western cities, the capacity to stop and be overwhelmed by astonishment or wonder is increasingly rare. As G.K. Chesterton said, “The world will never starve for wonders, but only for the want of wonder.” To whisper into the souls of not-yet-Christians, we need to lie in the grass under a starry sky with them. We need to wander with them through an art gallery. We need to take them camping, hiking, or for dinner at a seaside or mountaintop restaurant. The universe is a wonderful testimony to the glory of God. It’s possible to awaken not-yet-Christians by our own wonder and appreciation of its complexity and mystery. And beyond expressing wonder at God’s magnificent creation, we should demonstrate what it is to be astonished by beautiful food, children’s laughter, film, literature, sadness, grief, weddings, picnics, parties and thunderstorms, Cezanne’s apples and Pollacks’s splatters.<sup>5</sup>**

In a generation of people that is growing increasingly more and more immune to the communication of purely propositional truth, it is necessary for Christianity to emphasize its experiential aspects. The Church, right now, is seen as just another talking head with another optional lifestyle from among the many to choose. If we really want to stand out and cut through the clutter, one place for us to start is by finding our own capacity to wonder and marvel at the life we’ve been given, then to infectiously revel in it not only in

---

<sup>5</sup> Frost, Michael, and Alan Hirsch. The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003. 102.

each others' presence, but especially in the presence of those for whom life has become a boring habit.

So pray hard about it. I believe that this is of utmost importance to the church and our continued ability to represent Christ and build his kingdom here on earth.

## Works Cited

Bainton, Roland H. Here I Stand: a Life of Martin Luther. New York, NY: Meridian, 1995.

De Zengotita, Thomas. Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. New York, NY: Bloomsbury, 2005.

Frost, Michael, and Alan Hirsch. The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21st-Century Church. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003.

Hardwired to Connect: the New Scientific Case for Authoritative Communities. YMCA, Dartmouth Medical School, Institute for American Values. New York, NY: Institute for American Values, 2003.