

“And God saw that it was good – Awe, Wonder and Healing”

The reflection today is a little experimental – that’s a word we are hearing a lot at the moment as the congregations of the Parramatta City Uniting Church experiment with new ways of being the people of God.

In thinking about the theme for Season of Creation – “Renewing the household of God” – and the creation story of the earth in the reading from Genesis Chapter 1- the word “healing” came to mind. “Heal Country” was also the theme for NAIDOC week in July this year.

The healing I am thinking of has two parts...

There is the healing of the country, the earth. Humankind has often caused damage to the world that God created. God created the earth and it saw that it was good. God created the earth to sustain humankind and gave humans responsibility to care for the earth and that sacred responsibility has not always been honoured. How can what was “good” that has been lost be healed and recovered?

Secondly, that humankind is often in need of healing and the earth has the power to heal us. Part of that healing comes from encountering God’s creation with an attitude of awe and wonder.

The first peoples of this land now called Australia understand their health and wellbeing and spirituality as intimately connected to country. Those who have arrived in more recent times have much to learn from them - both about caring for the country and the country’s ability nurture the people who dwell upon it.

The first type of healing is something that we have prayed for in the other parts of the service. It’s the second type of healing that I most want to explore in this reflection...by taking you on a walk in which I hope that we might discover a sense of church in the natural world. Seeking to experience awe and wonder – to sit in silence, to allow God’s creation to speak to us and to seek to recognise God’s presence with us – and to allow that to heal us, bringing us into a renewed relationship with the earth, with our creator, with the first people of this country and with one another.

Julia Baird writes in her book “Phosphorescence”:

“The sun’s rise and the sun’s retreat bookend our days with awe. We often take awe for granted, and yet it’s something both modern scientists and ancient philosophers have told us to hunt. Awe makes us stop and stare. Being awestruck dwarfs us, humbles us, makes us aware we are part of a universe unfathomably larger than ourselves; it even, social scientists say, makes us kinder and more aware of the needs of the community around us.

Wonder is a similar sensation, and the two feelings are often entwined. Wonder makes us stop and ask questions about the world, while marveling over something we have not seen before, whether spectacular or mundane.”

So, lets go “hunting” for awe and wonder...

For those unable to join the service via Zoom or online the next part of the reflection is a recorded message that was unscripted and so can’t be replicated here.

Instead, I’ve provided some other resources below for you to read and engage with.

Rev Suzanne

An extract from the book “Phosphorescence – On awe, wonder and the things that sustain you when the world goes dark” by Julia Baird¹

“Awe Wonder and Silence - In the company of arsonists”

One day recently, while swimming at sunrise, I began thinking about how Oscar Wilde described the dawn as like a ‘frightened girl’ who crept along the ‘long and silent street . . . with silver sandalled feet’. It suddenly struck me as so timid and British (although Wilde was an Irishman, he lived many years in London). In Australia, the dawn is an arsonist who pours petrol along the horizon, throws a match on it and watches it burn.

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Wonder is a similar sensation, and the two feelings are often entwined. Wonder makes us stop and ask questions about the world, while marvelling over something we have not seen before, whether spectacular or mundane. The eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith — the man who became known as the ‘Father of Capitalism’ after writing his influential book on economics, *The Wealth of Nations* — put this perfectly. He thought wonder occurred ‘when something quite new and singular is presented . . .

[and] memory cannot, from all its stores, cast up any image that nearly resembles this strange appearance . . . It stands alone and by itself in the imagination.’ Smith believed that sometimes we could physically feel this wonder: ‘that staring, and sometimes that rolling of the eyes, that suspension of the breath, and that swelling of the heart’.

Great thinkers, philosophers and eccentrics have all been inspired by the unfathomable. ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience,’ wrote Albert Einstein, ‘is the mysterious; it is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed.’

In my own quest to become phosphorescent — in which I lost myself many times in dark holes and swamps — it was awe and wonder that I kept returning to, and the quiet healing properties of nature: the forest, the sea and the creatures they contain. So many of us have our quiet places of escape and refuge — nearby beaches, a park bench, a magnificent tree.

A small mountain of studies in the field of nature science has repeatedly confirmed that the sheer sight of green — plants, leaves, trees, views from windows — can make us happier and healthier. This evidence and these experiences have given rise to the burgeoning Japanese-pioneered practice of forest bathing, or *shinrin yoku*, whereby participants are walked slowly through tracts of trees to touch them, listen to their sounds, and reconnect with nature.

All over the world, people increasingly want to understand how residents of an urbanised environment can tune out the cities, the traffic and the jackhammers and listen, once again, to the birds singing and the leaves whispering in the breeze. They want to settle the stirring, or restlessness, and remember who they are. Often, they seek silence, an increasingly valuable and rare commodity. Real silence is not about muffling all sounds, though, but about muffling all artificial, or human-made, sounds. As I learned on a visit to Arnhem Land, a connection to country is a fundamental part of the identity of our Indigenous people, and the call to quiet, to listen and to respect the world we live in is an ancient one. While so much of our self-exploration today is hash-tagged #wellness and displayed, it became obvious to me in the far reach of sacred lands, encircled by campfires and eucalypts, that sometimes the best way to pay attention to country is to keep your mouth shut, open your eyes and just listen.

**“Awe Inspiring – a suggestion for “doing awe” shared by Uniting Church Minister, Rev Jon Humphries
(Extract from a Facebook post – 4 October 2021)**

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"Awe refers to an intense emotional response people may have when they encounter an object, event, or person that is extraordinary."
(<http://psychology.iresearchnet.com/social-psychology/emotions/awe/>)

Awe is one of the ten big positive emotions which can bolster and increase our wellbeing according to research by Barbara Fredrickson². But Awe is not just an emotion to be experienced and felt, but is a practice we can engage in. Of course, awe is a key element to faith and spirituality. Awe increases our esteem of God and helps grow faith because faith is a form of trust, and we are likely to better trust those we hold in high regard.

How do we "do awe"?

Here is a strategy which...draws on Christian contemplative and mindfulness practices... It also seeks to help us find awe in the ordinary rather than just locking us into the normal expectation of awe being only that which is associated with the expansive and numinous.

1. Choose something you wish to use to practice awe. It can be something wondrous or a simple mundane object. This strategy should work for almost anything.
2. Consider the complexities of the thing you are seeking to hold in awe. Think of its composition and how it works or functions. Consider what makes it what it is. Go deeper, even down to the molecular and atomic levels.
3. Contemplate its journey or story to how it came to be the thing that you are holding in awe. This might be its evolution or metamorphosis - all the processes which have contributed it to being what it is before you.
4. Expand to contemplating the bigger picture. How is this connected to all things and to yourself? How is God at work in and through this thing?

Hopefully, this opens you to wonder about not just the thing you are holding in awe, and this wonder opens you to awe. Holding yourself in that awe and in the hopeful sense of inspiration it awakens in you, enter into prayer. Share your sense of awe with God. Contemplate the awesome nature of God in prayer. Journal or write down what emerges for you.

Perhaps you could find someone to share your feeling with?

Also consider watching the recent series "Back to Nature" on ABC iView:

https://iview.abc.net.au/show/back-to-nature?fbclid=IwAR0kJKxwD8794Jh6GqIOkib6uM0d_OVkmsOI8Z06SWarDTChCkPJUYAY8h0&qclid=EA1aIQobChMI_N_o6eax8wIVWA4rCh04Nw7kEAAAYASAAEqLxuvD_BwE&qclsrc=aw.ds

² <https://www.pursuit-of-happiness.org/history-of-happiness/barb-fredrickson/>

