

Wonder and Awe
Address to SOL 25/8/24
By Ginna Hastings

A year ago, on September 1st, I set off from my temporary home between homes to “rediscover *wonder and awe*”. I travelled exactly 3300 km around NSW to visit country towns that I’ve always heard about and never seen. I wanted to discover them. I was curious. After a year of downsizing, tough change, & grief in my life I needed to restore my soul, and the trip was how I chose to do so.

As I travelled I posted on Fb my discoveries, observations and shared the *wonder and awe* that I sought and found as much by accident as by design. Some people ignored the posts from my trip, some read every word. It was a journey of discovery. The posts were more or less “postcards from the Universe” that I shared. There was no theme other than what I personally delighted in, things that gave me the *wonder and awe* that I sought.

I know that the wide skies, the world opening to vast fields of green, or grazing livestock, or forests, or fields of brilliant yellow canola plants opened me hour after hour to *wonder and awe*. Discovering each town’s local museum brought me *wonder and awe* to see what the settlers made of the land through grit, determination and hard work. A visit to The Dish, the observatory brought me *wonder and awe* to consider the worlds beyond Earth and how it is all organised in swirling motions caused by gravity and energy. A visit to three zoos brought me *wonder and awe* at the amazing creatures that exist away from human society. At the Canberra Zoo I was particularly touched by the story of the zoo that kept two male animals that would have never been created in nature but were created at circuses. They were ligers, born from crossing a lion and a tiger, felines who naturally live on different continents. These ligers were penned together and loved each other deeply to the witness of all the zoo personnel. They knew love together, odd as they were.
Wonder and awe.

Human beings are funny creatures. Now I know that animals can think but we don’t know how or what they think, how they draw conclusions because language separates us. But I’d like to think that humans have a unique ability to think in such a way that somehow we experience, or sense *wonder and awe* in their lives. Maybe animals do too, I don’t know.

I guess that finding *wonder and awe* comes with purposeful thinking. It’s about seeing the universe in its breadth as well in its detail and appreciating the Universe with gratitude for all the details it is. It is the **appreciation** and the **gratitude** that bring *wonder and awe*.

But to appreciate we have to be able to imagine the BIG PICTURE. We each sit here today in our own thoughts, needs, stressors, and coping with life’s demands. But we are able to go outside our own heads and realise that we are made up of cells that each do a job to maintain our very existence in an incredibly complicated physical manner. We can, through education, know that each of our cells is made up of carefully organised molecules, and each molecule is made up of atoms, and each atom is made up of particles and energy. We can imagine these things in our mind’s eye. We can understand and appreciate how our very person, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual is somehow created through a process of organising particles and energy. *Wonder and awe.*

And, indeed, each human is a speck of all of the potential of humanity. And humanity is a collection of specks of beings on a huge and beautiful planet, which looks blue from space. And our Earth is but a speck of all the planets and stars, constellations, and universes that billions of years ago evolved from.... Nothing...or something. We don’t know. Through human curiosity, study and knowledge, together we have come to realise that from the tiniest particle and blast of energy in an atom to the entirety of all that exists, we are a part of the whole as well as unique in our very existence. Just being able to **appreciate** this big picture gives me *wonder and awe*. Appreciating the uniqueness of each and every person, animal, plant, solar system etc. also brings wonder and awe.

Perhaps language is limiting in the expression of this *wonder and awe*. Is it a feeling? A thought? A knowledge? A “knowing”? It is what gives us purpose and meaning for our existence.

Some of us find nature, the natural beauty of this Earth that mothers us, to inspire *wonder and awe*. The whole Transcendental movement in MA, of such a great influence on Unitarianism, is about this ability to perceive *wonder and awe* in nature and see this as “god”. Walden Pond, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau come to mind. Stated in Thoreau’s journal he said, “My profession is to be always alert to find God in nature, to know his lurking-places, to attend all the oratorios, the operas, in nature.” Is not this “god” Thoreau speaks of also a sense of *wonder and awe* at the infinite possibilities of all creation? A sunset, a drop of rain on a leaf, a rainbow, a view - all can inspire *wonder and awe* in the mind that is open to it.

Transcendentalists experienced *wonder and awe* in nature. Emerson said in his essay *Nature*, “Standing on the bare ground-my head bathed in the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space - all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God.” **Acknowledging** we are but a speck allows us to see the divinity of all creation. **Humility** of mind allows us to see the greatness of the universe. *Wonder and awe*.

Another thing that helps us perceive *wonder and awe* is **gratitude**. It is one thing to understand and acknowledge the amazing intricacies of all of creation, but quite another to **appreciate** all of creation **with love**, and to have a deep sense of **gratitude**. Gratitude gives meaning to creation for our spirits, our souls, our person. One doesn’t have to believe in a specific god to appreciate and be grateful for all of creation. We just know we are grateful. *This is also wonder and awe*.

Human beings survive so well because we live in vast cross structured societies. We are herd animals and the herd rules us, controls us, punishes us, taunts us, loves us, educates us, feeds us, and nurtures us. Survival depends upon our herd. But herd life also strains us, threatens us, hurts us. Ask the stressed in today’s society, the whistleblower, the rule breaker. Yet somehow in our humanness there is *wonder and awe*. A mother embraces her newborn and love blossoms beyond measure. The biologist would attribute that to serotonin or oxytocin, while the evolutionary scientist would attribute that to survival of the fittest. But the human in us sees the *wonder* in that love, and we stand in *awe*.

Stories that circulate on Facebook of spontaneous gestures of love and kindness from one human to another, unasked for, circulate quickly and draw *wonder and awe* from us. Birth, the regeneration of spring, the cycles of life bring *wonder and awe* to us, if we are open to them. I also *wonder* at the **infinite possibilities of human creation** and stand in *awe* of what it could mean for the betterment of all mankind. There is never going to be an end to the art, the inventions, the discoveries or the designs of the human mind. *Wonder and awe*.

Another thing that brings me *wonder and awe* is humour. A witty remark that delights, an unexpected funny crack, a clever quip, a great punchline that kicks the funny bone, a deep belly laugh. What makes us laugh just brings delight. If we can’t laugh at life sometimes we might as well give up. Without laughter, without humour life just wouldn’t be worth it - *wonder and awe!*

Unfortunately the phenomenon of conservative backlash, the fear of change, the selfishness of vast wealth, and the ego of one presidential candidate in the US have changed our society in the last 15 years. Covid closed down our lives, upset us, and killed some of us over two years. Spitefulness, greed, selfishness, vitriol, anger and resentment have taken hold of our human society. Just being alive seems to be tougher to do. The urge to “change back to the way it was when I was happy” is the cry of MAGA Republicanism. It is fear. It is lack of hope. It denies human creativity of design and purpose. It is the opposite of what *wonder and awe* are and represent to us. These past 10 years have been tough on us all for many reasons.

Yet somehow in the human soul, individual and collective, hope always springs eternal. “Our lives mean something and together we can make a better society for all” has, in the course of human history, become the cry of evolutions and revolutions in societies. When we are open to the possibility of greatness, of creativity, of love, of hard work and of ideas for positive change good things can and do happen. It is something that emerges in the darkest of times. Churchill knew how to tap into this innate human characteristic in his addresses to the British people in WW2. Roosevelt tapped into it in his Fireside Chats. Kevin Rudd’s address to the Aboriginal peoples to say “sorry” speaks of it. **Hope**, renewal, rebirth, regeneration. *It is a wonder. I stand in awe of it. I*

But of all the things that I find *wonder and awe* in, the one that inspires me most is love. It is so much more than an oxytocin or serotonin created emotion. It is more than a concept. It is more than an understanding or a knowledge. It is almost undefinable in any human language. It is basic to human life. I stand in *wonder and awe* that we all are capable of knowing love, of giving love, and of acting out of love even if we have been treated without love by some.

Some people that worship god as the centre of their religion place all of their *wonder and awe* upon the god of their imagination and traditions. Hymns of praise to their creator god, their law-giver god, become their *wonder and awe*. Others destroy, manipulate and damage others in the name of their god. Some see the forces of nature and human society as god. Is a single divine being “god” or is “god” a collection of all the energy and forces of nature? I really don’t know.

But I do know - and *I stand in wonder and in awe* - that **humans are capable of wonder and awe**. It takes being able to see the **big picture** next to the smallest detail, it takes **knowledge**, it takes **love**, it takes **gratitude**, it takes **humility** to experience *wonder and awe*. It is what makes us truly human and perhaps divine at the same time. It is what gives our time on this beautiful Earth meaning, joy and hope.