

Fear and Forgetting  
Based on 2 Kings 2:1-12 and Mark 9:2-9  
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This Lent we are contemplating awe, with photos and walks and sermons and music. The theme of awe immediately brought to my mind the scene from the *Wind in the Willows* that is quoted on your bulletins. If you have read the book, it has probably been a while. I think it must have been one of the first chapter books I ever read—my librarian sister bought it for me, as I recall, when I was probably in second grade—maybe it's because of that that parts of the book always stay with me. In this chapter, a baby otter has gone missing, his otter parents worried sick, and the main characters, the Mole and the River Rat, go searching the river for the otter at night, hoping the moon will give enough light. Then just as dawn is beginning, they hear mesmerizing music, a sort of flute tune, and the music calls them, so they follow. On an island in the river, they find the demi-god Pan, who has been playing his pipes to bring them to him. The god is seated, smiling kindly at them, and in his lap, fast asleep, is the missing baby otter. And so we hear this:

“In that utter clearness of the imminent dawn, while Nature, flushed with fulness of incredible colour, seemed to hold her breath for the event, he looked in the very eyes of the Friend and Helper;...All this he saw, for one moment breathless and intense, vivid on the morning sky; and still, as he looked, he lived; and still, as he lived, he wondered.”

After a moment of standing there trembling, Mole turns to his friend:

'Rat!' he found breath to whisper, shaking. 'Are you afraid?'

'Afraid?' murmured the Rat, his eyes shining with unutterable love. 'Afraid! Of *Him*? O, never, never! And yet— and yet— O, Mole, I am afraid!'

The part of this chapter I struggled with as a child--and still do, I suppose—is that when the vision disappears, and only the missing baby otter is left, Pan sends a breeze to erase the memory of the experience from the animals' minds. The animals are made to forget, we're told,

“Lest the awful remembrance should remain and grow, and overshadow mirth and pleasure, and the great haunting memory should spoil all the after-lives of little animals helped out of difficulties, in order that they should be happy and lighthearted as before.”

They have this moment of revelation, of complete and joyous awe, but it's too much for them to carry with them. So they are made to forget and go back to their simple lives, with their simple joys, returning the lost baby to his parents.

I wonder, is that how awe works? Have we had moments of near union with God, that were so powerful that we forgot them, just in order to live our lives again? I'm not sure. I'm not sure that we are meant to forget.

Awe, it turns out, is a complex thing. We may feel it in any number of places and times, from the appearance of a rainbow to an all too bizarre coincidence, from childbirth to the moment of death, from contemplation of a single seed to contemplation of the worldwide web.

Awe is the feeling first that the world, reality, is much more complicated, multidimensional, and above all vast than we had thought. And then the understanding that we ourselves are part of that vastness, that this vast, amazing reality is our home, it is us. The Mole and the Rat are meant to feel that the god Pan is *always* there, playing music of heart-breaking beauty and caring for the lost. In their moment of awe they know that though they have never seen him before and may never do so again, he has always been there, always been a part of their reality, and this moment lifts the veil on that truth.

Often, but not always, when we feel awe, there is at least a little breath of fear. Like the Rat and the Mole, a fear that may not feel exactly like fear. I know that dolphins are not generally scary creatures; they're not great white sharks. But when I saw several dolphins swimming so close to my kayak in the bay, I had a little shiver of fear, amidst my wonder and delight. Awe, with its sudden sense of another dimension to reality, usually involves a temporary shattering of our illusion of control, the pretense we walk around with that we are in charge. When the dolphins appeared next to my kayak, I was pretty sure they knew what they were doing a lot better than I did. They were entirely at home, after all—I was the visitor, privileged for a moment to be allowed into their company, and a little nervous as to how to behave. The bay I had been taking for granted as a backdrop to my morning walks, was suddenly something else, peopled, alive, unpredictable, home to real live dolphins.

When in 2 Kings, a chariot and horses of fire separate Elijah from Elisha and when Elijah disappears into heaven in a whirlwind, Elisha stand in awe. He seems at least a little bit scared. And he is absolutely at a loss for words. “Father, the chariots of Israel and their horsemen!” he keeps shouting. What? There is the man he calls father, there is something *like* a chariot and horsemen, but it really makes no sense for Elisha to be saying this over and over. It’s as though he feels compelled to say something, but really has no idea what. He reaches for something grand—all of Israel’s chariots and horsemen—but it doesn’t quite address the situation.

Because another thing about awe is, it is in the end inexpressible. We try to express it, for sure. Endlessly. In *Wind in the Willows*, in hymns, in music, in poetry, in photographs and films and paintings. In the process of trying to express our awe, humanity has produced some awe-inspiring art. Words and images and music that remind us that awe is out there. But awe is the awareness of what is beyond our consciousness, if that makes sense. The awareness of what’s beyond our awareness. The momentary breathtaking awareness that our understanding of reality has been too small, and precisely that the words we have been using to express our reality are inadequate. Words fail us.

You can see the same thing in the story of the transfiguration—we actually are told that Peter doesn’t know what he’s saying; something very unusual for the Bible to tell us. What he says, as he sees Jesus standing between Moses and Elijah, both figures remembered for their own shining moments of awe, what Peter says is “this is good, that we’re here. We should build each of you guys a house?” Well, unlike Elisha, at least Peter is speaking in full sentences.

And there’s a little bit of sense in what Peter says, in that he seems to want to set up shop here on the mountaintop. “it’s good that we’re here,” he says, and he seems to want to stake that good to the ground, to give it a home up there. But they can’t. We have moments of awe, moments of clarity that lift us right up out of our doubts and despair, out of our mental hamster’s wheel of thought about ourselves. We have moments of awe when we know ourselves to be part of a vast and beautiful creation. And then those moments pass. Jesus and the disciples have to go back down the mountain again, and there is a difficult demon-possession waiting there for them to deal with it. The world with all its problems has not ceased to turn; it has not even stopped to take a breath.

But Jesus seems to rely on the disciples’ experience of the transfiguration to get them through until the resurrection. It’s kind of a preview. They get this moment

of certainty, that Jesus communes with Elijah and Moses, that like them he is somehow beyond the reaches of death, and that he shines with a divine light. Then it goes away and they begin their journey to Jerusalem. And the next time we see someone glowing white it will be the young man sitting in the empty tomb on Easter morning.

The fact that moments of awe are *moments*, elusive, sometimes makes us feel that they are not important, that they are irrelevant to the way we live our daily lives. What does the transfiguration have to do with the rest of the story, after all?

All respect to Kenneth Grahame, author of *Wind in the Willows*, but I don't think we have to forget in order to survive. We can all call to mind even now some moment when we were overwhelmed by wonder, stilled by beautiful mystery. Those moments orient us. Like the sunrise and the sunset—awe-inspiring experiences in themselves—they show us which way is east and which way is west. Which way is up and which way is down. The Delaware Bay will never quite be the same solid object it was to me before the moment when I was in it, surrounded by dolphins. We are changed by awe, sensitized, uplifted, and encouraged.

And we are not just made happier people, so we're clear. We are not just made more faithful people, though that's true as well. We are made better people, kinder, more compassionate and generous people, by our experiences of awe. Being lifted out of our narrow little concerns broadens our hearts, diminishes our anxieties, helps us to see our kinship with all God's creatures, with all God's creation. Moments of awe renew our understanding that we are creatures and not the creator, and so they connect us to all God's creatures. Awe, whether scary or lovely, makes us keenly aware that we are not in charge, and that that is good news.