

## Look Around: Experience Awe

This week I have experienced times when I have lived beyond my immediate environment. Stimulated by the beauty of nature, delighted by the unusual, touched by romance, are all experiences that I have felt. They took me beyond myself to a place where time did not exist. And I did not have to look far for these experiences of awesomeness, I did not need to be in Notre Dame or the Himalayas to have that sense that we truly live in a wonderful world. All I had to do was open my eyes and look around me.

The first experience was one of glancing out of the window on my flight back from Guangzhou to Singapore. I had had closed the windows because I was watching movies, and as I opened them I was stunned by what I saw. The sky had organised itself into a panoply of beauty which would put Michelangelo to shame. Vast acres of incredible awesome cloud formations greeted me. All sorts of shapes and sizes of cloud were there. Wispy little clouds drifting horizontally across my view, vast cathedrals of clouds stretching to infinity left me wondering at the vastness of our universe. What was amazing to see was the light and loveliness of the higher clusters of clouds, while beneath them torrents of rain fell on the land below, bringing truth in a sublimely visual way to the phrase “every cloud has a silver lining.”

My second experience was in a Singapore Orchard road shopping mall while waiting for a friend in a coffee shop. As I was early I was catching up on emails when I was disturbed by the cheerful chirping of a bird. At first I thought it must be a sound coming from a shop or video clip close by. I was therefore astonished when I saw in front of me on the empty chair a black bird singing at the top of his lungs while the busy world went sailing by. For full five minutes the bird serenaded me with absolute joy and freedom. I was touched beyond measure at this impromptu concert which I felt was organised just for me. A sense I’m gratefulness and then ultimately a feeling of awesomeness spread over me as there reflected on the beauty of this experience.

Thirdly, in these last three days I have been lucky to travel in style on Singapore airlines. One of the minor difficulties of travelling a great deal in the same month is that you run out of movies to watch. So I scrolled through the older movie alternatives and came across the classic romance movie “Love Actually”. Now I have seen this movie 20 times but I had a fundamental desire to watch it again not to see the storyline but to experience again the sense of love, romance, tragedy and basic sense of connection between people that are sculpted into its crevices. Who can fail to be moved by those ordinary yet extraordinary moments when the characters in the movie connect, and although I have seen the movie so many times I’m still moved to tears by the feeling engendered by these moments. And the essence of these moments are that we are connected to each other, and that we are truly taken care of by a force beyond ourselves. As the subplots in the movie come together most of the players receive a minor miracle, and I am left with the feeling that possibility is within our reach, I am left with the feeling of awesomeness.

But why does this emotion of awesomeness mean so much to us?

Dacher Keltner, a psychologist who teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, has been studying awe for 15 years, and he has come to the conclusion that awesomeness is universal and occurs everywhere. In one study Prof. Keltner participated in, villagers in the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan who listened to a brief recording of American voices immediately recognized the sound of awe.

Prof. Keltner's earlier research has shown that awe is good for us and for society. When people experience awe they become more altruistic and cooperative. They are less preoccupied by the trials of daily life.

*Awe's most visible psychological effect is to shrink our egos, our sense of our own importance. Ego may seem very abstract, but in the new study the researchers found a simple and reliable way to measure it. The team showed their subjects seven circles of increasing size and asked them to pick the one that corresponded to their sense of themselves. Those who reported feeling more important or more entitled selected a bigger circle; they had bigger egos.*

The researchers asked 83 participants from the U.S. and 88 from China to keep a diary of their emotions. It turned out that, on days when they reported feeling awe, they selected smaller circles to describe themselves.

Awesome events also had an impact on connection and closeness to others. Participants were asked to draw circles indicating themselves and people they were close. Feelings of awe elicited more and closer circles; the awe-struck participants felt more social connection to others.

In a time when we are confronted with daily messages of large egos, division and isolation no wonder we love those moments of awesomeness. They make us feel closer to others, diminish our focus on self, and they make us feel that miracles are close at hand.

Not a bad result when you consider that these events are happening all around us all the time if we just raised our eyes to see them.

Go on, put aside your smart phone, look up – experience awesomeness.

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