

EXPLORATIONS

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Gratitude

**Joe Gill, Trustee
 Severna Park, MD**

So much of the news and information today is about the struggles of the world—the economy, wars, death, disasters. Yet continually seeing the world through the lens of struggles—especially when accompanied by a feeling that there is little I can do about it—seems overwhelming. The acronym for this type of tunnel vision, coined by one behavioral economist, is WYSIATI: “what you see is all there is.” WYSIATI is a *focusing illusion*: that “nothing in life is as important as you think it is when you are thinking about it.” I see and think about the struggles of the world, and that is all I see, and that is all I think about.

What I am missing in this way of seeing and thinking is the larger picture. The writer E.B. White offered a wider frame: “Every morning,” he said, “I awaken torn between a desire to save the world and an inclination to savor it. This makes it hard to plan the day.” White continued, “But if we forget to savor the world, what possible reason do we have for saving it? In a way, the savoring must come first.”

The savoring must come first. The word “savor” comes from the Latin, *sapor*, meaning to taste. To savor is to enjoy what we have in order to appreciate it as much as possible. In the savoring, we inevitably arrive at a feeling of gratitude. Gratitude . . . for? Stop and think. The blessings of this life are many—beginning with life itself, that we are *here*. Beauty is a blessing. Art. Music. Friendship. Walking, simply walking, from one place to another. Breathing in and breathing out. Trees. Butter—extra butter, I always say—on a toasted bagel. My family, as they are, and not as I would have them be. Water, anywhere. Love, in its manifold forms.

My former colleague Monica keeps a gratitude journal. She adds at least five things each day, at times repeating entries (“grateful mom and dad are still here”). In an e-mail my college friend Mike wrote, “Gratitude is my superpower.” My good buddy Mark reminds me, “Every day, just once, look up.” *Look up, and appreciate*. Monica leads with a smile and surrounding warmth; Mike is even-keeled, thoughtful, and reflective; Mark is soft-spoken, with a first-rate sense of humor. All three are grateful people—and it shows.

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Quietly say these words aloud, taken from *The Book of Common Prayer*, Form VI, Prayers of the People: “We thank you, Lord, for all the blessings of this life.” Then, count yours. The savoring must come first.

Joe Gill is President of the Board of Trustees of Listening Hearts Ministries and a coauthor of Listening Hearts: Discerning Call in Community.

Wonder and Awe

**The Rev. Timothy Grayson, Trustee
Baltimore, MD**

I vividly remember my visit to the Grand Canyon some 25 years ago. Like many other visitors, I was in Phoenix on business and decided on a whim to rent a car and travel to the canyon while I was nearby. I parked my car and walked over to the guardrail to take in the view of the canyon from the south rim. As those of you who have visited the Grand Canyon can attest, the sight that greets your eyes is other-worldly. There is nothing else like it, and nothing can prepare you for your response to that first look.

I stood in awe as I tried to take in the extraordinary depth, colors, and contours of this massive hole in the ground that looked as though it had been carelessly scooped out by a giant hand. The colors—various shades of ochre, red, orange, and brown—were startlingly vivid, as if backlit on a movie set, and the other-worldly nature of the scene was enhanced by the thin layer of mist that blanketed the canyon halfway down. Sunlight played on the mist, which periodically separated and then came together again, as if someone were opening and closing a theater curtain.

All of us have known those moments in our lives—moments when the veil separating what we casually call the real world and the hidden world of mystery was suddenly lifted, and we gazed at or heard or felt something that transported us to another place, if only for a fraction of a second. Such moments are called “peak experiences” or “mountaintop experiences,” which connects with what Jesus’ disciples experienced when they saw him transfigured in front of their eyes on an unnamed mountain.

To be in wonder or in awe is a transcendent moment. It’s no wonder that artists, writers, and musicians have used their talent to try to “save time in a bottle,” as songwriter Jim Croce put it, so that they can revisit that transcendent moment whenever they’re in need of refreshment. To look back on those experiences, to replay them in one’s mind, can be both reinvigorating and deeply comforting. It might cause a person to wonder why they were given such a gift at this time in their life, and that reflection might then lead to pondering whether the experience was just a coincidence, or was it a purposeful intervention when they needed it? If so, who or what was behind the intervention?

You can call them sacred or spiritual or use some other word to try and describe them, but these experiences are imbued with a quality that almost always reinforces our smallness as human beings in the face of an immense mystery. Such experiences may send us off to the mountains, or to the desert, or even to church to try to make sense of what we have seen or heard. Once imprinted on our minds, these experiences will never leave us, but will forever reemerge as reminders of how mystery briefly engaged our consciousness and then left as rapidly as it had arrived. But they leave their mark on us.

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Albert Einstein wrote, “The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. Those to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, are as good as dead: their eyes are closed.”

Einstein’s words invite us to reflect on how rarely we take the time to look at the world around us, to revel in its beauty and draw strength from the amazing variety of landscapes, flora, and fauna we find outside our doors. Unfortunately, our children are similarly held captive by their mobile phones and video games that leave little or no time for internal stillness and a reinvigorating immersion in the natural world. These days, do you ever see a child lying on their back on a beautiful summer’s day, staring up into the sky and imagining who knows what as the clouds pass by? Being gloriously free to indulge in such an activity, or should I say non-activity, is a forgotten art. Our inability to embrace mystery and experience wonder and awe is a sad casualty of our maniacal busyness.

But, as the Irish writer John O’Donohue observes in *Beauty: The Invisible Embrace*, “When our eyes are graced with wonder, the world reveals its wonders to us. There are people who see only dullness in the world and that is because their eyes have already been dulled. So much depends on how we look at things. The quality of our looking determines what we come to see.” O’Donohue expands on the point Einstein was making, that our accustomed way of viewing the world determines what we see, and what kind of experience will follow from that seeing.

To look back on those experiences, to replay them in one’s mind, can be both reinvigorating and deeply comforting. It might cause a person to wonder why they were given such a gift at this time in their life, and that reflection might then lead to pondering whether the experience was just a coincidence, or was it a purposeful intervention just when they needed it? If so, who or what was behind the intervention?

O’Donohue continues: “When we approach life with reverence, great things decide to approach us. Our real life comes to the surface and its light awakens the concealed beauty in things. When we walk on the earth with reverence, beauty will decide to trust us. The rushed heart and arrogant mind lack the gentleness and patience to enter that embrace.”

O’Donohue’s observations are important because they imply that moments of wonder and awe are not arbitrary intrusions in our lives over which we have no control. Instead, we can prepare for these moments—perhaps even initiate them—by training ourselves to view the world in a different way.

Jesuit priest Walter Burghardt succinctly described contemplation as “a long, loving look at the real.” If we can learn to view reality in this lingering, loving way—whether we are looking at the Grand Canyon or at a perfectly made cup of latte—our minds might gradually be transformed, inclining us more and more to seek out the glory of creation in the everyday world.

I wish you all happy gazing at reality, and I hope you enjoy those moments of awe and wonder when they break into your life. But also know that you can prepare your mind and soul to be ever more receptive to the beauty that surrounds you, and through that preparation, moments of awe and wonder might become the norm, not the exception, in your life.

The Rev. Tim Grayson, a member of the board of trustees of Listening Hearts, is currently Priest-in-Charge of St. Barnabas Episcopal Church in Sykesville, MD.

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Listening Hearts Ministries provides a range of programs, publications, and services that teach people the practice of spiritual discernment through prayerful listening in supportive communities.

Your daily life is your temple and your religion. . . look about you and you shall see Him playing with your children. . . You shall see Him smiling in the flowers, then waving and rising His hands in the trees. — Kahlil Gibran

Noon Prayers Meg Kimble, Listening Hearts Executive Director, 2007-2010

As we listen to God in prayer and through one another, we grow in Christian community and in our sense of God's path for us" (*Listening Hearts*, p. 61). In the Listening Hearts office it is our daily practice to stop at noon for prayers. We spend time in silence, centering ourselves. We sing a hymn from the Listening Hearts' Songbook and then we pray for the staff and trustees, our contributors and volunteers, upcoming programs and projects, for the sick, and for the departed of the Listening Hearts community. This network of prayer extends far beyond the walls of our office in Baltimore. An array of people reaching across the country pray for the ministry on a regular basis. In an informed and focused way, a small band of intercessors hold each program in prayer as it approaches and while it is in session. As in the image on the cover of *Listening Hearts*, our noon prayers radiate outward with power and energy and flow back to us, sustaining the ministry of Listening Hearts. Carried forth by the steady flow of the Spirit, our entire ministry becomes prayer in action.

This article is republished In Memoriam of The Rev. Marjorie C. "Meg" Kimble, who recently passed away. It was originally published in the Fall 2007 issue of Listening Hearts Ministries Explorations.