

I. My first truly religious experience happened to me when I was quite young, back in elementary school. I was out late in our back yard one night in the summer on my swing set. It was back when from our back yard you could still see the Milky Way and just billions of stars. In that moment I felt God inside me and all around me and I knew God must be way big.

A. Barbara Taylor Brown, in her book, *An Altar in the World*, describes what I experienced exactly.

She writes:

“I remember lying there...looking into a sky I had never really looked into before, or at least never for so long.

When I breathed in, I seemed huge to myself.

I felt as much a part of the sky as a feather on a bird's belly.

When I breathed out, I became so small that I feared I might vanish.

What was a seven-year-old ..., under that

great weight of stars?”

[Barbara Taylor Brown, *An Altar in the World*, p. 24]

- B. Recalling the Cosmic Christ of the Gospel of John who created all that is, we see that **all the cosmos is an incarnation**, an embodiment, of God; what the ancient Greeks **called Gaia**. And as I looked up at all those stars and galaxies I had a reverence that at that young age I was totally unable to explain.
- C. Explaining that reverence is something that I hope to do now; with a little more help from Barbara and from the philosopher Paul Woodruff.

[Paul woodruff, *Reverence3: Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*].

II. So what is reverence?

- A. “**Reverence** is the virtue that keeps people from trying to act like gods. To forget that you are only human [and] to think you can act like a god – this is the opposite of reverence.” [Woodruff via Brown]
- B. “**Reverence** is the recognition of something greater than the self – something that is beyond human creation or control, that transcends full human understanding.” [Brown]
- C. “**Reverence** stands in awe of something – something that dwarfs the self, that allows

human beings to sense the full extent of our limits – so that we can begin to see one another more reverently as well.

An irreverent soul who is unable to feel awe in the presence of things higher than the self is also unable to feel respect in the presence of things it sees as lower than the self.” [Woodruff via Brown]

- D. For example “ Properly attended to, even a mosquito is capable of evoking reverence. See those white and black striped stockings on legs thinner than a needle? Where in those legs is there room for knees? And yet see how they bend, as the bug lowers herself to your flesh. Soon you and she will be blood kin. Your itch is the price of her life. Swat her if you must, but not without telling her she is beautiful first.”
- E. Barbara Brown offers this simple practice to invoke reverence.
She says,...
- “Simply...sit down somewhere outside, preferably near a body of water, and pay attention for at least twenty minutes. It is not necessary to take on the whole world at first.
Just take a three square feet of earth on

which you are sitting, paying close attention to everything that lives within that small estate.

You might even decide not to kill anything for twenty minutes, including the mosquito that lands on your arm.

Just [softly] blow her away and ask her please to go find someone else to eat.

With any luck, you will soon begin to see the souls in pebbles, ants, small mounds of moss...

You may feel some tenderness for the struggling mayfly the ants are carrying away. If you can see the water, you may take time to wonder where it comes from and where it is going.

You may even feel the beating of your own heart, that miracle of ingenuity that does its work with no thought or instruction from you.

You did not make your heart, any more than you made a tree.

You are a guest here.

You have been given a free pass to this modest domain and everything in it.” [Brown]

- F. Reverence, Brown tells us, comes from taking time and – turning aside.

1. Reverence, she says, requires a certain pace. It requires a willingness to take detours, even side trips, which are not part of the original plan.

For instance:

Early in the Bible there is a story about Moses, who would turn out to be God's great partner in the liberation of the people Israel from bondage in Egypt.

He was not that, yet.

He was still a fugitive from justice, hiding out in the Arabian Desert to beat a murder rap back in Egypt.

Moses's life changed on day while he was tending his father-in-laws's sheep. According to the storyteller, he had led the flock beyond the wilderness to Horeb, the mountain of God, when an angel of God appeared to in a burning bush.

The bush was not right in front of Moses, however.

It must have been over to the side somewhere, because when Moses saw it, he said,

"I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up."

The bush required Moses to take a time-

out, at least if he wanted to do more than glance at it.

He could have done that.

He could have seen the flash of red out of the corner of his eye, said,

“Oh, how pretty,”

and kept right on driving the sheep.

He did not know that it was an angel in the bush after all.

Only the storyteller knew that.

Moses could have decided that he would come back tomorrow to see if the bush was still burning, when he had a little more time, only then he would not have been Moses.

He would just have been a guy who got away with murder, without ever discovering what else his life might have been about.

What made him Moses was his willingness to turn aside.

Wherever else he was supposed to be going and whatever else he was supposed to be doing, he decided it could wait a minute.

He parked the sheep and left the narrow path in order to take a closer look at a marvelous sight.

When he did, the story teller says, God noticed.

God dismissed the angel and took over the bush.

When the LORD saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, ‘Moses, Moses!’

“Here I am,”

Moses said, and the rest is history.

Before God asked Moses to do anything else, however, God asked Moses to take off his shoes.

“Come no closer!”

God warned him, not because the ground was hot but because it was holy.

“Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.”

G. As we leave the insights of Barbara Brown Taylor, there was one more bit of insight she shared or reminds us of ---

“Reverence for creation comes fairly easily for most people.

Reverence for other people presents more of a challenge, especially if those people’s lives happen to impinge upon your own.

III. So **reverence** is what we feel when we stand in awe, when we realize that we are standing on Holy Ground and in the presence of the Holy;

but **gratitude** is the necessary and required response.

- A. To be grateful for this gift of life, for this priceless opportunity to be; that is the most basic and required response.
- B. Although I'm not especially good at it, science for me is a religious experience; that for me invokes awe and reverence.
 - 1. It is the investigation and discovery of this incredible and awe inspiring creation; where every question that is answered only leads to a greater mystery.
 - 2. The more I learn about this creation, the more I stand in awe and experience a reverence that makes me feel at the same time so small and humble and at the same time so special and blessed.
- C. What more can one offer than to say thanks?
 - 1. What gift could a poor man give to a Trillionaire, a Quadrillionaire, a Zillionaire, that would be of any significance?
 - 2. What offering or sacrifice can you really give to the creator of all of this that would make any difference or even be noticed?

IV. Well, with guidance from Jesus there are two things we do to express our gratitude.

A. **The first one is to be grateful.**

1. The greatest gift of love we could be given; a gift God has given us -- is the gift of life.
2. Now I can't tell you what God is, but I can tell you that I am grateful to God just for this opportunity **to be**; to experience life and love – there is no greater gift.
3. Yet, there are so many people who live their lives totally blind to this gift and thus show no gratitude.
And oddly, it is sometimes those who have the most, that are the most ungrateful; blindly unaware of the greatest gift they have and living in the illusion that they themselves have earned all they possess.
4. So, the first thing we must do is to be grateful.

B. **The second thing Jesus guides us to do is motivated by the first one, and that is to love one another.**

1. A few weeks back we looked at the question of why be good if there is ultimately no punishment or reward and we found one profound answer in - - love.

2. But for those who are grateful, there is another answer.

We love one another out of gratitude to God for the love that God has already showed us; the greatest love possible in giving us life.

3. For such people they have already received their reward;

they are already in heaven;

for them the Realm of God is at hand.

C. For those who are truly grateful, they cannot help but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with God – which is all that God requires.

V. For those who have opened their eyes and felt reverence for Gaia, gratitude and love are sure to follow and they shall live in the house of God forever.
AMEN.