

## **Touching Transcendence, Touching God**

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It happened while driving to work. I did not plan it. It just swept over me, like a rogue ocean wave, a wave of exceptional size and strength that without warning overcomes people who, a moment earlier, had felt sure-footed on shore.

I was driving County Highway H west of Marshfield to my teaching job at University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire. To offset the tedium of my daily commute I listened to courses on philosophy. The lecture that day was on St. Thomas Aquinas and his five arguments for the existence of God. What a compelling and engrossing lecture! Not only was Aquinas' logic clear, it could be felt. It had emotional weight. I had the sensation of spiraling towards what Aquinas calls the ultimate cause, the source of the universe. It was transcendent. I lost myself. I could even see lights, red and blue ones, they were flashing. Shoot! The police were on my rear bumper.

The officer said I was going 75 mph in a 55 mph zone. While he wrote the ticket he asked why I was speeding. Perhaps he meant well, wanting to give me a face-saving exit. I deflected the question. He insisted. So, I began explaining Aquinas' arguments for the existence of God and how it led me to a sensation of transcendence. The look on his face suggested philosophy was not his off-duty hobby. As he handed me the ticket, repeating the script he had probably said a thousand times before, he altered his words slightly. Instead of the standard, "Don't drink and drive" his face became stern and he warned me, "Don't make the same mistake. Don't transcend and drive".

We all have had these moments of transcendence to one degree or another. They occur across cultures and faiths. Common to the transcendent experience is the loss of self; the ego dissolves. People report feeling part of something larger than their self, something universal and whole. Beauty is spellbinding and there is an overwhelming emotion of awe. There are intense, nearly tangible sensations of connection and belonging, with other people and with nature.

Think back to your transcendent moments. Perhaps it was at the edge of the Grand Canyon, experiencing vast space and time. Perhaps it was in a massive cathedral, spellbound by the architectural wonder. Or at deer camp, as you stood over the deer you shot, made eye contact with its fading eyes, and recognized that your life and the deer's were interwoven in an ecological web greater than yourself. Or surprisingly, at a Packer game or Taylor Swift concert. Dacher Keltner, Professor of Psychology at UC-Berkeley, calls these large crowd experiences, filled with joy, unity, and single-focus the wonder of collective effervescence. Or perhaps you experienced transcendence here today at First Presbyterian when the music of the hand bells and bassoon against the illumination of the dove gave you goosebumps and you felt belonging and love for this church.

These experiences when we can touch transcendence open us to the greatest mysteries of our world, the mysteries of our lives, the mystery of our God. Across major faiths, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, believers interpret the transcendent experience as touching the Divine, a brief but intense sensation of God's presence.

William James, the Father of American Psychology, in his book "The Variety of Religious Experience" catalogs some of these experiences. James describes this story from a Christian clergyman of his profound life-changing experience: "I remember the night, and almost the very spot on the hilltop, where my soul opened out, as it were, into the Infinite, and there was a rushing together of two worlds, the inner and the outer. It was deep calling unto deep – the deep that my own struggle had opened up within, being answered by the unfathomable deep without, reaching beyond the stars. I stood alone with Him who had made me, and all the beauty of the world, and love, and sorrow, and even temptation. I did not seek Him, but felt the perfect unison of my spirit with His."

Building upon James work, Rudolph Otto, the Lutheran theologian and seminal scholar of comparative religions, wrote the book "The Idea of the Holy". From his studies, Otto concludes nearly all people have experienced to some degree the transcendent. According to Otto, we are capable of having an interior sense of God, that experiencing the Divine is internal to us. And when this happens we are overwhelmed with a sense of incomprehensible mystery.

In our Western Christian tradition, the linkage between transcendent experiences and sensing God's presence goes back centuries. St. Augustine, the 5<sup>th</sup> century philosopher, argued that the reason we humans can perceive beauty, morality, goodness with such emotional rigor, with transcendence, is that God is the source.

In our Gospel lesson today I think Paul touches upon the importance of these experiences. Verse 2 is the most salient: I quote "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will."

Paul is saying that to feel God's presence, we must step away from the usual pattern of the world, renew our minds, and become transformed. Paul wrote the Romans letter in Greek and the word translated to mean transformed was metamorphoo. Metamorphoo is the root of the word metamorphosis, like when a caterpillar changes to a butterfly. Paul is suggesting such mind renewal results in significant change, changing the spirit from a lowly caterpillar to a soaring butterfly.

I have a personal confession to make, one that I probably should not say in church. When I read Paul's words, they strike me as practical instructions, as a solid Christian lesson, as a good reminder, but they don't evoke my sense of God's presence. I don't feel the seed of transcendence geminating inside me. That may not be true for you. We all likely differ in the conditions that make that seed grow.

For many people, daily prayer and meditation are very successful practices for touching transcendence, for experiencing the Divine.

Our Presbyterian sacraments, communion and baptism, attest to our belief that God is present in our lives. Several weeks ago, Pastor Laurie baptized a child with four generations of family standing here. Watching the sacrament, I have no doubt that many in the congregation felt God's presence in the large sweep of life carrying this child to her future.

Lately, my personal pursuit of transcendence and the Divine presence has been analytical in the form of reading. Dacher Keltner is Co-Director of the Greater Good Science Center at UC-Berkeley. He recently published a book on the science of awe. In

the book, he breaks down transcendence to five fundamental emotions of which just one is awe. The others are joy, ecstasy, fun, and gratitude.

How about joy? That sounds like a good route to pursue. A recent study on happiness followed many people for many years. What made the study novel and credible was its data collection method. Researchers would periodically send an alert to the cell phones of the study participants. Participants had to answer two questions immediately, how happy were they at that moment, and what activity were they engaged? This approach gave the researchers 3 million data points to analyze. Five activities were associated with the greatest happiness: sunny days, exercise, being near water like at a lake, being with your romantic partner, and gardening. Some have extrapolated these robust scientific findings to conclude that for maximum happiness, to achieve joy, all five activities should be combined. A person should pick a sunny day, jog to the beach, view the water, and have a little romantic tête-à-tête while weeding the shoreline. I can barely find time to weed my garden let alone the other activities.

Dacher Keltner in his book focuses on the emotion of awe and its role in transcendence. From his years of research he cataloged the eight wonders of life, wonders that encourage transcendental moments. I find it helpful to be conscious of these. They are:

1. Moral beauty, for example experiencing the kindness or courage of others
2. Collective effervescence, which I mentioned earlier such as the crowd's bursting joy at a concert
3. Music
4. Art and visual design
5. Religious and spiritual experiences, like the sacraments
6. Life and death, for example, the profundity of holding a person's hand at their time of death
7. Epiphanies, for example, spiritual or personal insights, Keltner even includes scientific discovery in this category.
8. And lastly, Nature Experiences, this is my personal preferred method. This week, the New York Times interviewed Dacher Keltner on how to take an outdoor "awe walk". He suggests picking an unfamiliar spot, like a new park. Turn off your phone, take

several deep breaths to remove your To-Do list from your mind, and start walking. Be open and be conscious of the sights, sounds, and smells around you. When you notice something “stop and pause and feel,” Dr. Keltner says. Focus on a detail, like the shape of a leaf, and slowly expand your field of view. The shift in focus from small to vast can sometimes create awe.

People are diverse. My guess is that just like some people have different senses of taste (some people love others hate pickled herring) we all differ in our preferred method for our interior sense of God. The eight wonders of life give multiple paths to touch transcendence, to touch God.

When you follow your path be open to the unknowable. The writer of Psalm 139, which Jill read earlier, clearly understood this.

Verse 6: “Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.”

Verse 7: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?”

Verse 17: How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.”

Our transcendent moments, our interior sense of God, is brief and fleeting. But it is there. It opens our senses to the mysteries of God’s presence. We need to accept it.

As the American leader of the 19<sup>th</sup> century American Transcendental movement, Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “Belief consists in accepting the affirmations of the soul; unbelief in denying them.”

In a few moments we are going to sing these words:

God is calling through the whisper of the Spirit’s deepest sighs,

Through the thrill of sudden beauties that can catch us by surprise.

Flash of lightning, crash of thunder, hush of stillness, rush of wonder:

God is calling – can you hear?

God is calling – can you hear?

AMEN