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## Awe

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*  
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,  
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On July 24, 2012, I was gazing at clouds in utter awe. I was not on top of a mountain or at a beach, certainly glorious places where one can absorb the majesty of God's handiwork in the sky. But I was in an open space. I was out on a lake, where the horizon was distant, and where I was small. Other places would have suited well, I am sure, maybe the prairies or the deserts.

But the point was: awe. These days, most of humanity spends our time in close quarters, within the walls of office spaces or dens or apartment confines. When we do go outside, we are often driving a car alongside other cars, and so always glancing to our right, to our left, in the rearview mirror. Or, when we go outside, it is to walk down a street with tall buildings beside us, as if we were in a gray canyon.

There are lots of ways to define "awe;" but I would say that awe is what happens to us when the horizon is far away, when we feel small, and when some expanse opens incredible possibility to us. We visit mountains, and oceans, and even deserts in order to re-discover awe.

Also on July 24, 2012, a brief article appeared in *The Week* magazine, which reviewed a psychological study by Melanie Rudd of Stanford. She has tried to determine, apparently, what happens to the human mind when we encounter "awe."

*[She] conducted multiple experiments to see if there was a correlation between awe and happiness. Two kinds of videos were shown to participants: The "awe video" showed ordinary people encountering "vast, mentally overwhelming, and seemingly realistic images" like waterfalls, whales, and astronauts in outer space; the "happiness video" showed things like rainbow confetti falling from the air and parades of smiling, joyful people.*

*By fixating on the moment, time seemed to slow down, making participants feel like they had more of it to spare. This led them to feel more patient, less materialistic, and more willing to help others. "People increasingly report feeling time-starved, which exacts a toll on health and well-being," says study author Melanie Rudd. The study shows that "being in the present moment elongates time perception," and makes people want to "partake in experiential goods over material ones." In short: Feeling like they had more time seemed to make them better people.*

*"Awe can be elicited by a walk down memory lane, a brief story, or even a 60-second commercial," says the Independent, so you needn't necessarily book a trip to experience a Hawaiian sunset to reap the benefits. The lesson, researchers add, "underscore[s] the importance and promise of cultivating awe in everyday life." ([The Week Magazine, 24 July 2012](#))*

Thus, Rudd showed that happiness and joy are not exactly the same as awe. The awe-inspired people reported greater freedom, and, in fact, nicer feelings!

Community is important for all of us these days. But I believe that Christian community provides a distinctive form of community to the world. Christian community, at its best, inspires awe in our lives. Of course, I hope we are happy and

joyful, too; don't get me wrong! But awe is different. The vast space of a cathedral, of a grand worship space, can inspire awe, as it represents the vastness of God. An imaginative sermon, delivered with power and precision, can transport us to a place without time. And, of course, the music of a tremendous choir can make our souls soar beyond limits.

We are called to community in church, to be sure. We are called to love, to joy, and to peace"three of the great fruits of the Spirit. But, even more than those fine states, we are called to awe. Other elements of our culture can provide happy community and joy; local bars are good at that, as are clubs and even schools.

But genuine "awe" comes from something beyond our human capacity. The Christian Church is called not just to lead people to joyful community with one another, but to lead people to awe-inspiring community with God. It is only God who can inspire amazing awe. Only God can show us who is God and who is humanity. And we are all the better for it.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Reverend Sam Candler