

“Eight Wonders of Life: Collective Effervescence & Spiritual and Religious Awe”

Luke 24:13-35

I want to invite you to imagine a scene from daily life. There are two people who were walking together after they had just lost a dear friend. They are feeling dejected and hopeless. Someone joins them on their walk. They hardly look at him, but the stranger is persistent. He wanted to know why they were feeling so down. As they started telling him about their loss, their walk started to synchronize. Their bodies were attuned to each other's rhythms but also their souls started to connect. The topic was heavy, but the stranger had much to share with them about life and death. When they arrived at their destination, they wanted to continue the conversation and so they invited the stranger in for a bite to eat. As they shared in the meal, he started doing a ritual that was eerily familiar to what their friend who had died used to do with them. The ritual of breaking bread and drinking wine as symbols of God's self-giving love finally got through to them and their eyes were opened to see what was right in front of them all along. It was their friend!!! But just as they wanted to hold onto him and to the whole experience of awe, their intellectual minds took over and their mystical experience ended.

This is a retelling of the story of Jesus' walk with two of his disciples on the way to Emmaus after he was crucified by the Roman government. It was a powerful experience of awe for the two disciples. As we look at it today from the perspective of the sources of awe, we are invited to see with fresh eyes how collective effervescence and religious ritual merged together to help the two disciples to experience awe.

In his book *Awe*, scientist Dacher Keltner reflects on the power of effervescence this way, “Moving in unison stirs the awe of ritual, sport, dance, religion and public life...We are quick to move in unison with others. In doing so, we feel what others feel, through empathic processes in the brain...As we become aware of folding into collective movement and feeling, we invoke symbols, images, and ideas to explain what unites us...We feel awe as our default self gives way to a sense of being part of an interdependent collective.”

When we experience something together, especially movement or other gatherings with others, we are transformed from our small selves to see ourselves as part of a larger whole. When we go to a concert, a sporting event, a wedding, a funeral, or other events, we feel moved together and our small selves give way to a larger whole.

In this story of Jesus and the two followers on the way to Emmaus, the walk for about seven miles was essential to their connection to the world of the Spirit. The walk moved them from seeing with the eyes of their intellect to seeing with the eyes of the soul. A powerful connection was made on the path.

Another important part of the story was the religious ritual of the table which was so significant to the Jewish people reminding them of the story of Exodus from Egypt and then Jesus using it to include outcasts and to renew faith. Because of their religious background, they were primed to experience the sacred in the meal. If they were not steeped in that religious tradition, they might have missed the presence of Christ completely. Their religious background helped them to see the sacred in this meal. It is

like when we hear a church bell ring, we know that it is a call to worship. Think of other rituals and symbols from the faith that help us to go deeper.

Keltner discovered in his research that the rituals, movements, stories, and other expressions of faith often lead people to go deeper into their sense of awe in life.

Keltner writes, “How spiritual life grows out of awe...mystical awe follows a pattern of decay, distilling and growth...the decay of the default self’s preconceptions about the world, which results in the distilling of some essential feeling that gives rise to the growth of our own spiritual beliefs and practices. Perhaps the 4,200 religions active today are doing much the same, transforming in a process of decaying, distilling, and growing as cultures and humans evolve...Mystical awe often originates in inexplicable experiences that transcend the expectations of the default self...In survey research, most people report having had such inexplicable and extraordinary experiences: they have sensed the presence of God or spirits, or heard the voice of God, or felt that remarkable turns of fate are guided by Divine forces.”

Let’s listen to the story again from Luke 24 as presented through this Bible Project video: <https://youtu.be/Vb24Lk1Oh5M>. This time I invite you to pay attention to the movement and the rituals.

These experiences are so needed in our world today. According to scientific research, “Americans today enjoy half as many picnics as we did two decades ago. We have one fewer dear friend in our circle of care than thirty years ago. Thirty-five to 40 percent of people report suffering from loneliness. This dissolving of our sense of community gets our brain’s social rejection center humming...which kicks into gear our inflammation response, heating up our bodies in that agitation of being alone.”

The solution to our sense of isolation, anxiety, anger, hate, and even violence is to put ourselves in context of awe by being with others where we collaborate to produce something positive.

Take time to be involved in community activities. Invite your friends and neighbors to church and other community events. Be intentional to build community around you. Even though we need times of solitude, we also need times of moving, praying, and working with others. Covid has impacted us to isolate ourselves and the impact on our health both physically and mentally has been really hard. We are slowly emerging out of that bubble. But more work needs to be done. At the heart of a vibrant society is our deep sense of community.

For first service: We will prepare for communion with the song “Every Move I Make, I Make in You Jesus” with Ben teaching us at first some of the movements. We will dim the lights so you don’t have to worry about looking silly. We will let the Holy Spirit move us through this song.

For second service: We will end with words from the Christian scriptures, the New Testament that urge us to focus on the power of togetherness:

- Outdo one another in showing honor ([Rom. 12:10](#))

- Live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16)
- Speak straight to one another (Rom. 15:14)
- Have the same care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25)
- Serve one another (Gal. 5:13)
- Carry one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
- Comfort one another (1 Thess. 5:11)
- Bear with one another in love (Eph. 4:2)
- Submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- Forgive one another (Col. 3:13)
- Confess your sins to one another (James 5:16)
- Pray for one another (James 5:16)
- Be hospitable to one another (1 Pet. 4:9)

Amen.