WE NEED A SENSE OF AWE

[Note: TTP is happy to congratulate Joel Wade as the goalie of the Santa Barbara Masters Water Polo team which just won the US National Championship on June 14. Here's the team after their victory - Joel is standing 3rd on the right.]

After my workout this morning, I stopped at the cliffs above Capitola, overlooking the Monterey Bay.

It had just rained lightly, so the air was crystal clear, and the brownish gold of the kelp beds at low tide made a vivid contrast with the blue-gray ocean. The little bit of sun that peeked through the clouds lit a meandering path across the water and through the center of the wharf.

The Monterey Bay looks very tame from the shore, but it drops off quickly, reaching a depth in some places of over two miles; like an undersea Grand Canyon. During the right time of year it's not unusual to see humpback whales, dolphins and a whole host of other cetaceans pretty close in. I didn't see any on this particular day, but I know they're out there; along with the harbor seals and sea otters providing comic relief.

Then there are the sea monsters... the great white sharks, among other dangers. Those are the things that keep me mostly swimming just a bit inland in a chlorinated pool.

I force myself to stop on these cliffs almost every morning, because I know it's important for me. I began doing this several years ago, when I noticed I was getting too caught up in day-to-day anxieties and concerns.

The five minutes or so I spend gazing out at the protected expanse of the largest ocean on Earth gives me something I need -- something we all need, a fundamental requirement for our happiness and well-being actually... and something that is all too easy to be oblivious to in these days of iPhones, Kindles and 24-hour news cycles.

A sense of awe.

Awesome is a word that's now used promiscuously. If something's good, it's *awesome*! If something's enjoyable, it's *awesome*! If something's mildly impressive, it's *awesome*!

But awe is not such a mundane experience. Webster's dictionary defines awe as "An emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime."

When we throw around a word like awe so frivolously, when everything's *awesome*... then what word do we use to express the true intensity of awe?

Totally awesome!? No, that's not it... I don't have a good answer, but I hope my point is clear -- there is a deep need in the human soul for an emotion variously combining dread, veneration and wonder. For now, we'll keep the word that bears that meaning.

What is it about awe that's so important?

In my example above, there are actually two ingredients: the sense of awe inspired by the vast wildness of the mighty Pacific Ocean and its primordial inhabitants; and a more simple connection with nature.

Studies have shown that time in nature can improve our cognitive functioning and overall well-being. Going outside and taking a walk in the woods, on the beach or at a park helps us feel better emotionally and spiritually, improves our attention and thinking abilities, and gives us a better sense of overall well-being.

When hyperactive kids spend just 20 minutes in nature, it significantly lowers their symptoms for the rest of the day. So just a short time outside in nature is worth it all by itself.

Add awe to the mix, and you have an even stronger benefit. Awe gives us a sense of vastness, a larger-than-life quality. This can challenge our ideas about ourselves and the world around us, and that can be just what we need to pop out of a rut of thinking or negativity.

Other research shows that when we feel a sense of awe, we process information more deeply, analyzing specific details more clearly, rather than just accepting a general line of thinking as a whole.

This can mean the difference between agreeing with something because you *feel* you like it; and agreeing (or disagreeing) with something because you *understand* it.

When we feel awe, our sense of time expands, so we feel more at ease about whatever time we have available. We feel that we have more time, and that can give us room to rest an anxious and overstressed mind.

It also moves our focus from inward concerns to a more outward awareness of connectedness -- with nature, with eternity, with God...

Shifting our attention to the bigger picture all around us is a huge ingredient in countering depression. Depression is often a result of helplessness, rumination and self-absorption. Turning our gaze outward with a sense of connection with something larger than ourselves is like a self-generated anti-depressant -- without the side effects of medication.

Awe can also serve to bring out more kindness and conscientiousness. We feel less impatient, more willing to help others when we see they need us.

There's also evidence that the experience of awe reduces inflammation. It actually lowers the level of cytokines in our bodies. These proteins help us to fight infection and injury in the short term, but when they stay too long at the party, they can do us long-term harm -- as a major contributor to both cardiovascular disease and depression, among other troubles.

Our gadgets can help us do some pretty incredible things (I'm writing this on a portable laptop, and will be sending it out shortly through the Internet from the comfort of my home office... I really like that I can do this) and there are plenty of practical things we must get done every day.

But if we let ourselves get too lost in these details for too long at a stretch, we can deprive ourselves of the richness of life around us, missing the forest for the checklists, emails and distractions of life.

I don't experience awe every time I stop at those cliffs. Frankly, some days I have too much on my mind, and I'm too impatient to allow myself to settle into the wonders right in front of me. But making it a habit at least gives me a glimpse -- even when I'm fighting it -- and there are days like today when it really hits me.

Where I live, I get to look at the ocean -- but from anywhere on Earth, every night there's the expanse of the universe to be seen overhead, and somewhere nearby you there's a forest or lake,

or even just a park with some trees, birds and squirrels.

Just that may be enough of a connection with nature, and a glimpse of awe, to change your life for the better... if you'll take the time to let it in.

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