



Awe and Reverence as Ways of Seeing: Implications for a Future Public Square

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As many of us may agree, the modern world has thrown out the baby with the bathwater in its flight from so-called “traditional” ways of seeing which derived moral and cultural imperatives by reference to something beyond empirical verification and logical analysis, traditional ways of seeing that counted as relevant (with respect to how to organize and orient our lives) such things as intuitions of divine purpose and a sense of calling that may be unrelated to our mundane needs and activities, and may even be at odds with them at times. Whether understood in Jungian or similar terms, the wholesale and rash flight from the “traditional” has created a myopic condition, ways of seeing and being in the world whereby “meaning” has gone missing (and I will define meaning as a *deep intuition* of human and personal belonging and purpose

which, for those who are religious and who have gone Teleological with a capital “T” (such as myself), is connected to a larger meaning and purpose beyond self and society that gets played out in communal ritual, mytho-poetic wisdom literature, symbols, and the like).

Religious thinkers and theologians today, of the Right as well as the Left, see an urgent need to get the baby back into the basin, to reclaim the best of the so-called traditional *Grand Visions* (my term for ultimate world views) that have been jettisoned in favor of modern and postmodern insights. These modern and postmodern insights which have come to supplant and presume to take the place of the Grand Visions that once suffused our various human cultures – which, because of the powerful interests that propel them, try to reduce us to some sort of manageable essence, to press us down into instrumentalist, quotidian and economic molds, to biologize us as the “mere” and momentary end results of a pointless life process, or alternatively, in the case of postmodernism, to limit that which we may hope - have had anything but salutary consequences for the human spirit, although they have produced rich rewards for a good

many people in terms of material wealth and in addressing humanity's physical needs as well as many of its physical wants.

Thinking that we have overcome the main impediments to human flourishing through, on the one hand, the adoption of a method to manipulate and predict nature (science) and, on the other hand, the relegation of all *Grand Visions* to the dustbin, modernity and postmodernity, in two massive waves of thought, have planted the seeds that would produce the weeds that would in turn crush the human spirit (the sense of ourselves as connected to something vast and toward which we stand in awe and with reverence) and require us to deny our strongest sense that we are no mere cosmic flotsam, *even if we aren't the center of the physical universe.* These decidedly unsalutary flora of modernity and postmodernity rest on conclusions that any attempts to hold a *Grand Vision* about the cosmos as intertwined with the meaning of our lives are pretty much quaint and pathetic, a "failure of existential nerve." The need for the *Grand Vision* persists, nevertheless, even among many of us who know and *appreciate* the domains of science and the history of postmodern philosophical thought. And we have warrant to, I believe, suspect that it persists among the many who lead even

crassly pragmatic lives, but who feel a deep void in those lives, a sense that something is terribly wrong. Something in fact is terribly wrong, because so many people in our culture have mistaken certain moves in the game of life (markets, technological innovation, reason) as the game itself, and have imbued certain societal interests with such energy as to make them idols. This aspect of our culture keeps us looking down, rather than up, keeps us engaged in analysis, rather than synthesis, keeps us engaged in dualisms and operating within an either/or mentality, rather than a both/and mentality. The soul dis-integrates under the pressure, even as it yearns to be whole: affective *and* rational, analytical *and* creative, logical *and* imaginative, pragmatic *and* speculative, instrumental *and* contemplative, quotidian *and* reverential.

But what is the way back to the Grand Vision, to wholeness, to a reclamation of the baby without taking back in the dirty bath water of dogmatism, simplemindedness, exegetical literalism, superstition, and blocked inquiry that can no longer be tolerated in the contemporary world other than in closed societies and communities?

There, of course, are ways. Religious and spiritual progressives are finding them. We believe that the rehabilitation of the notion of the Grand Vision and its reestablishment as the touchstone of our lives, as the mortar that binds together our choices, ruminations, decisions, games, vocabularies and relationships into a **LIFE** (capital “L”) rather than mere living is not only possible but highly desirable, *healthful*, critical. For many in our culture (overcome by nihilism, anxiety and depression) exhibit the symptoms of the diseases that modernity and post-modernity, *with the best of intentions*, have introduced into the order of things (I scorn neither modernity, nor postmodern thought *en toto*, I would add). Figuring out how to do all this on a personal level is hard enough. But our job as spiritual and religious progressives, as thinkers and collaborators, is to enter the political fray and dialogical space in which our conservative counterparts are already hard at work, and to both carefully and vigorously construct a critical theory of how we got where we are, determine what is wrong with both reactionary and many new wave solutions to the problem, and provide cogent, useful, and feasible prescriptions.

As I stated to Rabbi Lerner, we have a daunting task, what I call the task of becoming neotraditionalists: to overcome the worst of paleo-traditionalism with its literalisms and closed systems of theological thought, to overcome the limiting rationalist and instrumentalist values of modernity, and to overcome the life-deflating skepticism and narrowing of vision that have come with postmodern thought. Put another way, we must critique each of reactionism, the disconnect between a shallow notion of reason and our affective selves, and that which would deprive us of our imaginations, so critical to moral, communal and spiritual growth.

This daunting task has additional complications. It will not be performed in the theologian's or philosopher's quiet study, but in the progressive fray. We must realize that being a part of a progressive movement intent on accomplishing all or some of what I laid out, whether political, cultural, spiritual or religious, is to be a part of a good many competing views, and even rancor. People who think are people who clash. As a Unitarian Universalist (one of the hats I wear), a very progressive movement often torn between those who favor God-talk and those who have no use for it; between those who like traditional languages of awe and reverence and

those who would seek other vocabularies, I am not unaware of how these things can play out. As we do the work that we must do, we must be willing to engage in active translation of concepts and ideas into our own preferred vocabularies, and trust one another, understanding that all of us who would associate at a place like this and for a cause like this enjoy a substantial overlapping consensus in our views and feelings. So as we wrestle with the complicated issues and diverse sensibilities that we bring, we must proceed with restraint, big spiritedness, humility, a sense of humor, a good deal of patience, and large doses of active listening, and of course, love. We may fail, at times, to do so, but we must try.

One last thing before I proceed with the core of my remarks. The remainder of my discussion today will lack some of the nuance and qualification that I would prefer, due to the need to get your voices into what is being discussed before our time is up. I say this not to deflect objections or have some of my claims go unchallenged, but to alert those of you who are well versed in literatures of the Enlightenment and later literature by people like Max Weber, Francois Lyotard, John Dewey, Richard Rorty, Richard Bernstein and many others, that I myself am indebted to many of the things

that I will now criticize. I have been enriched by modern philosophy and post-modern thought and I do not scorn them, any more than I scorn the hammer and file in my toolbox. In many ways it was only by wrestling with them that I have been able to return to the religious life. The strains of American philosophy that are pragmatism and neo-pragmatism, for example, have enriched our cultural discussion and I believe that we should value the analytical tools they have given us. Had I time to talk about some of those tools, I would – but instead I will be talking today about the limitations of those tools, and some of the errors of the toolmakers as I see them. Hammers and files are useful but they have limitations.

So much for preambles.

As we know, this conference is a forum in which we search for answers to some important questions, including:

* First, How do we reestablish respect for the spiritual and the religious among contemporary political progressives who have become policy rationalists, so immersed in policy plumbing that

they forget the higher commitments, fears and yearnings of real life people in the public square, as George Lakoff (who is here at this conference) has warned us about repeatedly?

* Second, How do we reclaim spaces in the public square in which we may assert the value and power of progressive religious and spiritual ideas and commitments in the making of public policy and, also, in simply discoursing with fellow citizens about political and moral issues, and about the religious life?

It would be hard to get to either question, however, if spiritual and religious progressives are not first, well, spiritual and religious, or both. That is, to be a “progressive” is to occupy a certain perspective on the structures that make up what we like to call the mainline, the orthodox, the *status quo*. That perspective, though informed by our thought and life experience, follows later in the game after wrestling with the decision to claim, in some form that is specific to each of us individually, *the spiritual and the religious life as highly valuable and the background condition for how we plan-out and live the rest of life*. Our progressive sensibilities, like the conservative sensibilities of others, link up with but do not

follow from logically our sense of awe and our comportment of reverence when considering the fact that there is a world and that we are in it. This is important to keep in mind, because it binds us to others we may view as enemies, those on the religious Right of this and other civilizations or cultures, for example. God and Spirit are not progressives or conservatives, Democrats or Republicans, Jews or Christians. To put this another way, our sense of awe and dependence in the face of existence itself does not necessarily translate into any particular policy position. When we call ourselves religious and spiritual progressives, what we are doing, or so it seems to me, is linking up the inferences we draw from the very fact of existence with the conclusions we reach regarding how to live a life, how to organize a society, etc.

In the current American public square, the struggle that religious and spiritual progressives must engage in is the struggle for a greater public voice, acknowledged by the *political* right and the *political* left, and by the *religious* right and the misinformed *secular* left – misinformed because, in its rationalist triumphalism and preening, it has too narrowly construed religion and the religious impulse and take them to be represented by those iterations that

are an affront to the contemporary sense of reasonableness and tolerance that have been so hard to achieve in human history.

We will continue to earn this greater public voice by being clear that our objective is to meet the needs of people, *and not just supplant in the public square what may be taken as political or religious “enemies.”* At the same time, we must have something *coherent* to say and be prepared to say it boldly, and indeed to insist our way into ongoing and polarizing discussions bringing alternative points of view that have not yet been considered in any significant way. But we must *insist* our way into them out of love, and with respect, just as many of us have been doing. In entering, or rather in continuing to enter, the fray, we must be prepared to do the patient *pastoral* work that needs to be done to gain trust, to demonstrate our loving concern for the state of the culture, the potential of the nation for greatness, and for people who suffer the nihilism, on the one hand, and dogmatism on the other, that the culture, voided of serious Grand Visions and locked-into crass quotidian affairs, breeds. We must teach, and we must proclaim in the public square with nothing less than evangelical fervor that:

1. Religion and spirituality need not be about epistemic certainty or truth claims that compete with the sciences or managerial processes, but rather are about the way we choose to engage the world with our full intellectual, affective and spiritual selves.

Saddling religion with discussions about certainty and truth has been its Achilles' Heel in the modern age, as Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty discuss in a recent work, making it prey to vicious onslaughts from the instrumentalist classes. If we view religion and faith as more about a Decision, about a Choice, made by one's whole being rather than just one's head, to see the world in a particular way, and less about scientific, procedural and managerial truth, we change the nature of the discussion about how it may have a place in policy discussions and interpersonal engagements in the public square;

2. As conservative and mainline clerics assert, there is no need to strip religious and faith "propositions" from the setting of public policy provided that, unlike many of those same clerics, we employ those "propositions" in a way that does not impede inquiry and truncate discourse, or cover them with a coward's shield of inviolability, a vale of "holiness" that puts them beyond the robust democratic

discourse. **There is nothing wrong with quoting Paul or Isaiah if it drives home a public policy view to which one is deeply committed, but we must take the rhetorical push-back like adults, rather than as neophytes ready to cry foul as do many on the religious Right;**

3. Seeing public policy initiatives, issues and debates through religious and spiritual eyes is not necessarily filtering them through scriptural or creedal litmus tests, but rather through our personal or group metaphysics or theologies which we are entitled to have in a free and democratic society, and which may be every bit as reasonable and sophisticated (even more so) as any put forward by secularists, technocrats, or by what is taken to be mainline religious thought;
4. Rationalistic, technocratic approaches to public policy, stripped of the affective, sublime and religious serve a commonwealth of automatons, but cannot well serve a commonwealth of real people who are wrestling with the meaning of their lives and the existential questions that loom large as they face struggle, tragedy and death, as Kirk Schneider so well explicates in his book *Rediscovery of*

Awe. It is the existential question, the possibility of great loss and of the overturning of one's world, the tragic sense of life as Cornel West so often reminds us, that are what must be understood and addressed, not as mere strategy but out of love and empathy for our fellows.

For many progressives and liberals in our culture (whether spiritual or religious), giving form to what the singer James Taylor calls the "hunger in the center of the chest" has been difficult. Huston Smith, in his wonderful book *Why Religion Matters* helped us to understand why, and I think he was correct. Smith tells us that two things have happened that have created a powerful centrifugal force carrying us away from the life of spirit and religion. Without belaboring what you already know and what has already been said, the rise of science has created a *decision procedure* and, what is often overlooked, a **background condition** and **epistemological touchstone** in which and by which we live our lives. **Often, we are not even aware of their operation.** The allure of this decision procedure of science has led to its jumping the fence of its applicability and has become the litmus test for any and all significant claims about the world, even when many scientists

themselves did not and do not intend this outcome. The mundane super-utility of modern science in addressing the *physical world* has bedazzled us, bamboozled us, and has made itself the oracular voice of the age, and so it has become consulted on far more than it should be. The real is reduced to what is observable, testable, verifiable or falsifiable according to its decision procedure and method. Since the field of science is limited, areas outside of the natural sciences have tried to wear its clothes by limiting their field of considerations. This has happened in economics, philosophy and even in psychology and theology. Traditionalist or pre-modern epistemological assertions, often mytho-poetic in form, not being able to rise to meet the scientific test of what is real have been under assault in advanced Western cultures that are the most direct heirs of the European Enlightenment. Science having proven itself time and again in its proper field of play, we give it the nod as we move farther in the direction of what we have thought to be happier and more productive lives, lives of cured diseases and better medicines, lives of better creature comforts, lives of hope that we may continue to transform and predict the physical world so that our lives will be made more pleasant and secure. Isn't that, after all, what it is all about?

At the same time, those to whom the culture entrusts *thought* about such problems as those just described seem to have lost their ability to actually *think*. For example, much of contemporary philosophy has become sterile and the very etymology of the word, translated as the love of wisdom, has been misconstrued as the love of the rational, the love of logic, the love of the academy, the love of hermeneutics. Wisdom has become lost in the meantime, has become beside the point. So university presses spill out tomes of dull and narrow expositions and dissertations that have their place but to me are anything but philosophy, the love of *wisdom*, the love of *self-discovery*, the love of deepening and widening the *imagination*, a word equated in modern times with fairy tales rather than our greatest hope for becoming who we are. [This is a grand indictment, and there are some philosophers who do not warrant it, and whom I admire – people like Martha Nussbaum, Cornel West, Judith Green and Alain Locke, to name a few.]

Hand in hand with the decentering of traditional Grand Visions by the sciences and many philosophers, those Grand Visions in which our very bodies and beings are caught up in an enchanted world, to

ironically use the language of Weber, the decision procedure of science – or its insistence on objective, rigorous examination and quantification, on simplification and control, based on a materialist cosmology – has also helped to fuel the present *market culture* we now have and which grew more or less hand in hand with the Enlightenment's turn away from traditional ways of seeing. Our on-the-ground economic theory, with its craze for what it calls *productivity and efficiency* measured in “quanta,” is based upon analyses of trade-offs between one monetarizable good over another. It both *assumes and creates* an *essential human type* who seeks to maximize utility as understood, in gross and vulgar terms (in terms of what critics of early British Utilitarianism called, the “pleasure of the pig”) as the balance of monetarizable goods or services that make us the happiest, according to the economist's indifference curve. I want to reiterate that it both *assumes and creates this essential human type*. This essential human type is a *decision* about what being a human being is – no more and no less than a *decision*. It is therefore susceptible to *different decisions*. My Marxian or Marxist friends might say that the decision to define the human in crass and vulgar terms is based upon a present and dominant ideology that essentializes human beings into *homo*

economicus or *homo faber* – an ideology begging for critique and unmasking. In any case, this expedient *decision* has to do with our larger cultural acceptance of the trade-offs that seem to be required to have the ability to transform and predict the physical world – to manipulate it to do our bidding or to at least do us no harm.

Obtaining greater security from what appears so often to be a hostile world, and gaining greater comfort and natural pleasures as we walk through life from cradle to grave are both reasonable and worthy goals – goals that should certainly not be jettisoned in the pursuit of some fuzzy-headed spirituality or watery religiosity. *Let me be quite clear on this point.* The dangers of the world are real, and they affect us profoundly at times. They are not to be taken lightly. That is why modern and secular thinkers think that such “fuzzy-headed” things as spirituality and religiosity should be relegated (re-read, re-conceived) to the *private sphere* in which our pursuits of such quirky things as Spirit and God belong. In the public square, at least that part of it concerned with public policy – road and hospital construction, farm subsidies and the like – we should seek consensus by appeals to things that we will have a much easier time agreeing about.

Now, there is something to be said for the last point. While this does not necessarily mean ceding ground to scientific or logical tests alone to determine how we set policy, it does mean that we want to at least remove from the conversations that we have about public policy those things that one thinker calls “*conversation stoppers.*”

A conversation stopper is the inclusion into the conversation such things that are taken to be relevant but are unlikely to convince other citizens who do not share the same collections of premises, such as literalist religious ones, since they are not derived by consensus but by decision procedures that are generally corrosive to *pluralistic democratic deliberation* – authoritarian edicts, Papal bulls, revealed prophetic pronouncements and the like; things that work well in closed societies cordoned off by creeds and proclamations that begin “It is written.” A decision procedure that does not close the door to inquiry and newer and better evidence is best in a society that values the hard-won gains of the so-called Enlightenment and of the political, scientific and technological breakthroughs we have achieved. We will want to be careful with

our conversation stoppers, but that becomes easier when we recall that God and Spirit are not partisans and not limited by our perspectives on books or scripture or anything else. But conversation stoppers aside, *plenty of language is left for us spiritual and religious progressives to use in our attempts to have the public square rediscover awe, reverence and the value of spiritual and religious commitments that do not necessarily resemble those of mainline thought.*

Suppose we give secular thinkers their due, then, and as well reject certain of the claims of persons like Professor Stephen Carter who, [in his more recent writings (though not necessarily his earlier ones)] seem to lament the relegation of deep literalist religious commitments to the *private* sphere, to the sphere of *hobbies*, to use his language?

We do not need to insist our way into cultural transformation or public policy by quoting our favorite prophets or spiritual teachers *at inappropriate times and in inappropriate ways*, as Carter and others seem to want to do, but rather, understanding the pluralistic nature of our society, by bringing the *general vision* out into the

open, while unapologetically holding to our traditional roots and spiritual practices. But we must insist on articulating our Grand Visions *translated into language that is useful to policy discussions and debates*. We can agree with Carter, however, that the blocking of Grand Vision talk and religious language in the public square, *en toto*, is precisely what helps rob us of our sense of awe and reverence, our sense of wholeness. Huston Smith tells us that science has given us a cosmology, a theory of the physical universe, but can only give us an impoverished metaphysics, or no metaphysics. Simply, a metaphysics, on Smith's account, is a theory about the meaning of our being and of our human experience and includes as ontological realities such things as care, love, friendship and sublimity; it is not a cosmology that limits the things that are real to the matter and energy that are the subjects of science, or economy, or markets. A metaphysics is a view about what there is, about all there is as experienced by human beings, and how it all hangs together.

It is no wonder that both religious progressives and conservatives seem to have realized that there is something very wrong with the common era, which has translated into there being something very

wrong with out souls, our psychology. Let me be clear – neither science, nor the market is to blame for this, and we should scorn neither. What is to blame for this is what we have done, mostly unwittingly, *with* science and the market, what we have allowed them to become. We have allowed science and the market to create a condition in which writing books about becoming highly effective in the business world are on a fast track to publication, but in which writing collections of poems, or books of philosophy or theology is a fool’s game. We have devalued a liberal education, in which human imagination and human possibility are expanded, in favor of an education aimed at securing a job or that would help Americans to better compete with other nations. We have created a culture in which the labor movement’s hard fought battles to obtain more leisure time are eroded by the powerful animus to “get ahead,” and so in many workplaces vacation time is cut back, as is time with family, as is contemplative time used to just sit and be with one’s thoughts or one’s God, which is the essence of the notion of the Sabbath. Out of a fifty-two week year market forces grant two or maybe three of those weeks to exclusively private time, and even those two or three weeks are taken back by intrusions that modern technology avails the worker, manager, executive. Vacation time is

seen as merely a time to recharge the batteries for continued participation in the economic game. Cell phones find us in the woods and on the beach with out families and friends, and e-mails are available at any port. The predominant cultural forces want us wrapped up entirely in the mundane and the quotidian, and in the pleasures of the pig, and so it is no wonder that we have lost our taste for the sublime and holy. We are actually dissuaded from them, and those who yearn for lives filled with them are called idlers, dreamers, or worse. Children are discouraged from becoming artists, writers, philosophers, clerics. J.S. Mill warned us that it is possible to lose even the *ability* to engage in higher things, that such a culture as ours kills off such aspirations early in the process of development. Says Mill:

*Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance; and in the majority of young persons it speedily dies away if the occupation to which their position in life has devoted them, and the society into which it has thrown them, are not favorable to keeping that higher capacity in exercise. Men lose their **high aspirations** as they lose their*

intellectual tastes, because they have not time or opportunity for indulging them; and they addict themselves to inferior pleasures, not because they deliberately prefer them, but because they are either the only ones to which they have access, or the only ones which they are any longer capable of enjoying.

Where we religious and spiritual progressives have common ground with our more conservative friends in faith is that we agree that the human soul cannot endure, without a terrible psychological and spiritual cost, a near complete disconnect from the pursuit of the sublime, from the pursuit of the holy, from philosophical reflection, from mindfulness, from meditation and prayer, from mytho-poetic literature. Many of us agree, as well, with our more conservative religious friends that we must begin to rotate the pole of cultural values on its axis and bring into a more prominent position those things that make life worth living, the higher things – even as we disagree with them on how this is to be done. As a friend of mine recently summed-up, “I don’t think I want the inscription on my head stone to read ‘Here lies Susan, She Beat the S&P 500 for 6 Consecutive Quarters.’” No, both Susan and most other people have a sense of what is really important in their

lives, and they know that the time comes when one has to ask oneself what one is doing with the life one has, or rather, with the life that one is or is in the process of becoming, because the answer to that question overpowers the mere fact that we will all one day die.

Death, for the person who has arrived at this place, becomes beside the point. The ideology of the time has too many of us convinced that creature comforts and the cures for disease and even increased longevity are what life is about. But travel or read enough and you get wildly different views on these things. Western science tells us, in its own leap of faith, that we are destined, if we keep plugging along, to clear the human path of all mundane obstacles between our present life spans and doubled or tripled life spans, fewer or no diseases, rapid cures for bodily traumas, and genetically engineered physiques and mental acuties.

But that is not what the game is about.

I say again, that is not what the game is about. This claim, then, must stand our present ideology on its head. To that statement of

faith, I say dying well, departing a life of rich meaning and depth, is as good as, if not better, than continued existence in our present forms. I know of no one who gets out of life alive in the biologized way that we commonly think of life, and some of the native peoples of this land remind us that death is not the ultimate evil; that death and a reverence for life are not mutually exclusive. And so a common slogan among them is “It is a good day to die.” It is a slogan horrifying to Western ears, for we think that no day is a good day to die. When Dr. King gave that famous public sermon in which he told us that longevity has its rewards, but that he was not here to necessarily seek a long life, he went on to say what it was he was here for. To do God’s will. But the culture says, live long. Live long in and surrounded by as many creature comforts as you can be. What is the benediction of the age? It is not that of the fictional character Mr. Spock, “Live Long and Prosper,” (where prosperity means living a self-actualized life) but rather the benediction of our present materialist cosmology and market-mad culture is, “Live Long and Consume” or perhaps even more precise, and more frightening, “Live Long to Consume” and pass that ability to consume to future generations.

My own spiritual growth and religious journey have led me to conclude things that are as powerful as anything the age's scientism, consumerism, and nihilism can throw at me. I am exceedingly grateful that *I am*, that I exist at all, and in this gratefulness I shed or am shedding (for I am not there yet) the very aims and objectives of our culture as second or third rate goods, even trifles. Although I prefer that my body not be diseased, my learning to be grateful allows me to hear the language of a dying Pope who speaks of *redemptive suffering* as a powerful human possibility, but a possibility that must be grounded in faith in something more than self. And so even pain and death, or the fear of them, can be overcome *through a transformation of our ways of seeing*, through a reclamation of the best in traditional thought, the our ability to experience awe and reverence each day.

The language that I prefer to use is the traditional language of prayer, holiness, sacredness, divinity and God, *but liberated from the Sorcerer's Stone of scriptural literalism and dogmatism*. One need not return to the land-locked theologies of our youth when employing such words. My personal faith does not fight with the faith of the Church or the Synagogue or the Mosque. But my heroes

have gone beyond Abraham, Timothy and Paul, and include Rumi and Emerson and Rilke; and no longer merely the Jesus of the canonical Gospels, but the Jesus of the non-canonical ones who informs us that *the Kingdom of God is found in the opened eye, the eye that has been shut by fear, hatred, and focus on the merely mundane.* I have a faith that is powerful and beautiful, no less than our brothers and sisters on the Right who cling to their literalism and fundamentalism. And it informs my life no less than the mainline strains of religion informs the lives of their adherents.

The road to the spiritual and the religious life is open to all of us. God has no final name, sealed for all time in a scroll, Emerson reminds us; and the word 'God' itself has its alternatives, but the varied monikers make God no less real. This beautiful understanding may be found even among the more spiritually mature thinkers of the major traditions. A poem by Rumi concerns God's rebuke of Moses for insinuating a special path to the Divine. Krishna, likewise, rebukes Arjuna for the same mistake. The Jesus of the Gospel of Thomas is not the narrow god-man of orthodoxy, but invites all to open their eyes. The Buddha repeatedly counsels his students to think their own thoughts, to find their own paths,

within the basic framework of his teaching which is itself expansive and inclusive.

If we yearn for awe and reverence as ways of seeing our lives and of seeing the world, it is available to us through the more mature and enlightened viewpoints that we threw away when modernity burst onto the world stage and post-modernism blinded us to *depth and distance and the magnitude and the glory* of the lived human experience. Within the many faith traditions, of course, awe and reverence are there. In the mystical encounter, they are there. They are, also, in Alan Ball's character Ricky, in the splendid film *American Beauty*, who discovers in a plastic bag caught in a vortex of wind, that the bag was not just a bag and not just caught but was dancing with him, and that it was only then that he knew that there was, as he puts it, 'this entire life behind everything,' and that 'there was no reason to be afraid, ever.' This was Ball's own experience set in film. That there was so much beauty in the world, beauty visible with new eyes even in the presence of dead birds half decayed on the ground, or in the dead of our own fellows frozen on the grates of city streets, as Ricky filmed them. Awe is sometimes deep and disturbing, and should be. Through it we touch the divine,

as did Ricky when, as he says, he looked into the eyes of the dead and could see, if he were careful, God looking right back. Awe may be encountered in the world when you open to the possibility of it, when you throw off the shackles of reductionism and myopia and hear the voice inside of you that tells you that you are far more than the worker, the wife, the husband, the citizen; far more than the result of random happenings, even if that is the best story that science can offer us given its vocabulary. Look closer. They are in color – the color purple, as Shug tells Celie in the Alice Walker novel of the same title. It is knowing that the color purple in a field, in wildflowers, is not merely the interplay between the rods and cones of the eye and a thing in the world, but is Something calling for our attention, that, in Shug’s theological language, a Something that gets pissed-off when you don’t hear that call, when you don’t notice. How pissed-off that Something must be in the present age, and we find it telling us so when we consider the amount of generalized anxiety, depression and nihilism that exists in our culture – Jung’s warning of the revenge of our psyches for not living the lives that we were meant to live. We are beings who were made to *notice*. Noticing is part of what we need for nourishment and healthfulness.

Awe and Reverence, the life of spirituality and of religion, are not reducible to pretty words, whether prose or poetry. They are about the serious business of forming the answers to our most profound existential questions – questions that our culture would relegate to the realm of the private, to one day a week in which it is deemed OK and not fanatical to actually pray and reflect on our existence; to be mindful, in the sense of the various Buddhist traditions. It is about the risk that comes with saying Yes to life, and No to those trifles or mundane basics for living that are not life but merely its various processes, but which have been elevated to the point that they have led us into idolatry. It is about staying focused on the important connection one has with everything else, including and especially one another. And a mature life of awe and reverence means connection with the scat of life as well as with its sweetness, and embracing both and dissolving both into our selves.

So in joining the fray, in living out our religious and spiritual visions in the realm of policy, what must spiritual and religious progressives do to make our voices heard, in earnest and without

violating our core commitment to openness, to the value of ongoing inquiry, to meliorism and change as we gather new insights?

First, one thing we can do is to stop picking fights with the religious Right without making attempts to understand its fears, its concerns, and its needs, which all derive from the same existential conditions in which we on the left find ourselves. George Lakoff's insights on this point are, I believe, of use to us in our attempts to do just that, and I recommend his book *Moral Politics* to you if you have not yet read it. We must stop debating a single Jesus with them and claim *our own Jesus (one salutary postmodern move!)*, one just as good as theirs; we must instead accede to them the right to their Jesus as we insist upon the right to have our own. (I use "Jesus" here both literally and figuratively.) Theological and hermeneutical debates such as these are counterproductive. Our strength of conviction, our own evident commitment demonstrated in the public square will, we hope, eventually persuade, through constant conversation and dialogue. While we may find the Right maddening at times, and not only the Right but often even the majority of Americans, on such issues as Gay Marriage, the right to choose, on the use of our military – our rhetoric and elocution must

be strong, patient and loving, *rather than elitist, snobbish and condescending*. We must do our best to refrain from vitriol with our brothers and sisters who are driven to the same Mt. Horeb that we are driven to, the place of the presence of the Great God, the Great Spirit, the *Spirit of Life* that gives us being.

Second, we must put flesh on the bones of our entreaty to return to reverence and awe in our culture, to the development of a Grand Vision, in our youth and in adults. It cannot remain at the level of desiderata and wispy talk. I agree with Kirk Schneider that we need what he calls ‘awe based curricula,’ and both in our schools and elsewhere. It might start with something as simple as trying to find common ground with the religious Right which wants prayer in the public schools, by expanding on that idea of prayer to be, instead, a period of daily, quiet reflection made available to students before classes and in which students will be encouraged to read their bibles, their Korans, and their prayer books to themselves, but also their copies of *Love Sonnets of the Portuguese*, poems by Ezra Pound or e.e. cummings or Billy Collins, essays by Thoreau or Emerson, or to write in their journals or, if they choose, to look out the window and daydream. We progressives must give up this

dualism between the public and the private at the same time that we fight to protect the antiestablishment clause of the Constitution. Nowhere in the Constitution does it say that citizens ought not to live out a sense of the sublime on public property but must only be tutored in the sublimity of others in the form of assignments in English class, and the view of religion that informed the Constitution is not the only view that obtains. While we must be careful with such an initiative, I would argue that we have common ground with people like Richard John Neuhaus who wrote regarding what he called “the naked public square,” which has become a place of technical execution, of money getting and the mundane, and little else. Such a thing may appear risky, but I think such risks can produce salutary results. Most people in this country have some spiritual and religious commitment. Telling children and parents to strangle off their Grand Visions when they go off in the morning, whether to school or the workplace, is the last thing we want to do. So in that regard, Professor Carter and Rev. Neuhaus are correct. The naked public square is one reason for the coarsening of our culture, one reason why so many scandals take place, one reason why young African-American men believe that living to 30 is unlikely (and, being a sublime insight, they actually

seem to revel in it in the absence of more positive experiences of the sublime!).

We spiritual and religious progressives must be careful in all this. Careful that we not buy into the game of multiple identities, multiple masks that we don and ditch for the sake of expediency – one private mask, one public mask. If we send signals that our so-called progressive religiosity and spirituality ought to be exercised only at university conferences, or in writing and reading one another’s books and articles, we will risk being unpersuasive as an alternative to that which the religious Right offers in ways with which we happen to disagree.

Third, we must pay attention to the civic religion and to the meaning and role of citizenship, not just as the opposition or from the perspective of the margins, but as purveyors and defenders of an open society, which means as defenders of the walls that create the open spaces where we carry-on the affairs of life. That is the necessary conservative element in our movement. In the words of the philosopher Richard Rorty, we must help achieve our country, the operative word being “our.” Kirk’s insights regarding an awe

based science curriculum are apt here. He says in *Rediscovery of Awe* that “*If a science curriculum were to begin with the marvels [the wonderful, the big, the cosmic mystery, etc.], if films, books and inspiring stories were used as stimuli, if field trips were the norm, think how much more exuberance children would bring to their studies and to their lives.*” Indeed, Kirk. And think how fewer scandals there would be in corporate America if managers and executives saw their work as connected to something larger than themselves – to the structures and organs of society (the walls); to community, to neighbor, to nation and commonwealth. Think of a corporate America and a business community in which the felt connections to the common endeavor, to one another as employees, to fairness, permeated the workplace and business conduct. Awe and reverence, in the words of James Taylor again, mean “looking up from your life” and at bigger things of which you are a part and to which you contribute and surrender joyfully. Awe and reverence entail seeing the Big Picture.

Think of an age when we break down the functional dualism, and in which we take the moral step of thinking beyond our own interests, in which NIMBYism has waned and sacrifice is the new chic.

Think of an age in which people have their Grand Visions restored, and we do not see service as a fool's game in a world of free riders, but rather as the personal choice to grasp an awe-based, reverence filled, grateful life, a life in which our fears of financial ruin, of bad health, even of death subside out of genuine concern for the Other.

That is the transformative power of a shift in our way of seeing.

The public policy implications and goals start to become clearer, now. It ends in movement, real movement, toward the *Beloved Community*, just as on the personal level, it ends in the healing of the soul.

Thank you.