

# Deep Appreciation

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## READING

The reading this morning is from Niccolo Machiavelli (1469-1527), who was a high official in Florence, Italy when it was a Republic. When the Medici family came back as dictators, they threw Machiavelli out of office, and he retired to his country estate, where he farmed. Here is Machiavelli's account of his evenings spent as a scholar immersed in ancient texts:

## QUOTE

On the coming of evening, I return to my house and enter my study; at the door I take off the day's clothing, covered with mud and dust, and put on garments regal and courtly, and reclothed appropriately, I enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where, received by them with affection, I feed on that food which is only mine and for which I was born . . . and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death; I pass indeed into their world.

## UNQUOTE

I call that Deep Appreciation.

## SERMON

His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that the purpose of life is to be happy. How much of the time *can* we be happy, really? That's the question of this sermon.

Pleasure as the goal of life is an ancient ideal, perhaps best described by Lucretius, a Roman who lived in the century before Jesus. Lucretius wrote a long Latin poem called *On the Nature of Things*. The manuscript of this poem was lost for almost a thousand years. In a recent book called *The Swerve*, Stephen Greenblatt tells the story of the rediscovery of *On the Nature of Things* in 1417.

Lucretius anticipated modern science by believing that everything, including ourselves, is made of atoms. For us this is just a scientific fact about everything we see; for Lucretius it was a liberating revelation. Lucretius concludes that since there are only atoms that come together and then disperse, therefore everything is temporary. In particular, Lucretius says that there is no life after death. He tells us to accept the fact that we and everything around us are transitory; we should embrace the beauty and pleasure of the wonderful gift of life.

Thomas Jefferson owned at least five Latin editions of *On the Nature of Things* by Lucretius, along with translations into English, French, and Italian. No wonder Jefferson wrote into the Declaration of Independence that each one of us has the inalienable right to "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Walter Pater beautifully describes the temporary nature of life depicted by Lucretius, and the search for simple pleasures:

QUOTE

[W]e are all under sentence of death but with a sort of indefinite reprieve. . . . [W]e have an interval, and then our place knows us no more. Some spend this interval in listlessness, some in high passions, the wisest [spend life] in art and song. . . . To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.

UNQUOTE

For Lucretius, understanding the nature of things generates deep wonder. Today I want to talk about a thread that connects that deep wonder to simple pleasures, a connecting thread that I call Deep Appreciation.

I live in a *constant* state of *astonishment* about the world; an astonishment that leads to this Deep Appreciation.

Astonishment can result from simply looking around. Listen to Anne Lamott:

QUOTE

Try walking around with a child who is going, "Wow, wow! Look at that dirty dog! Look at that red sky!" And the child points and you look, and you see, and you start going, "Wow! Look at that huge crazy hedge! Look at that teeny little baby! Look at the scary dark cloud!" I think this is how we are supposed to be in the world---present and in awe.

UNQUOTE

The comedian Louis CK thinks we have far too little astonished appreciation for the magic of airplane flight. He says: "Everybody on every plane should just constantly be going 'OMYGOD! WOW!' You are SITTING on a CHAIR in the SKY."

Appreciation can be simple and down to earth. My wife Carla distills the insights of architects, contractors, and building inspectors into one simple slogan: "Everything rests on something." I think of Carla's slogan when I enter this sanctuary: These arching beams overhead carry the weight of the heavy slate roof down the walls to the foundation and thence to the supporting Earth. "Everything rests on something." Carla's slogan increases my appreciation of cathedrals, skyscrapers, office buildings---even our own little house.

I have access to an online service that streams to my computer any kind of music I want, all day long as I work. The first day I listened to all the symphonies of Brahms, the second day all the symphonies of Schubert, the third day all the symphonies of Schuman. Now I am working my way systematically through the complete set of Bach Cantatas, more than two hundred Cantatas. Sometimes I am in tears as Bach's music drenches my workday with inspiration.

The danger of a sermon on appreciation is that it will be sappy: *Isn't everything just wonderful? Don't you just love it all?* Well, we know everything is not just wonderful, some things are terrible. Yet Deep Appreciation can celebrate our human response to the terrible.

The Soviet composer Dimitri Shostakovich was publicly denounced by the henchmen of dictator Joseph Stalin. During some parts of his life Shostakovich expected to be arrested at any moment, though he never was. In his most vulnerable times Shostakovich slept in the

hallway outside his apartment, next to the elevators, so that his arrest would not disturb his family. I have no words to express my admiration and appreciation for Shostakovich's integrity and his regard for the welfare of others in the teeth of an intolerable tyranny.

I consider Steve Jobs to be the Michelangelo of modern technology. His inventiveness, skill, perfectionism, and especially his *taste* and *style* illuminate all our lives, whether we belong to the Apple religion or to the PC religion. Steve Jobs challenged his coworkers to make the first Macintosh computer, "Insanely great." He reshaped our economy and our culture. Steve Jobs died at the age of 56. In contrast, Michelangelo lived for almost 89 years. When I meditate on the unfairness of this difference and, selfishly, what we all will lose in the next 33 years --- the difference in their life spans --- I just want to punch the Grim Reaper right in the nose.

Are we joyful about the life threats experienced by Shostakovich and Jobs? Not at all, but we deeply appreciate their accomplishments and their reactions to misfortune.

Now, in my experience every scientific theory and every philosophy of life has limitations. We need to be careful that our preoccupation with our own pleasure is not an invitation to selfishness. True, Deep Appreciation of others can lead us to give support to one another. Still, I do not find in Lucretius' long poem the warm regard for one another that is such a treasure in my own life, including many-sided intimacy. Margaret Wheatley says she wants her tombstone to read simply: "We were together. I forget the rest."

So we need to learn what we can from Lucretius without turning his vision into a religion.

What character traits nourish astonishment and Deep Appreciation? I can think of six: curiosity, life experience, personal skills, perspective, awareness of death, and the feeling of mystery and awe. All six of these enhance Deep Appreciation.

#### FIRST, CURIOSITY

Curiosity is the *source* of astonished appreciation. Nicholas S. Thompson writes:

"Curiosity, like coffee, is an acquired need. Just a titillation at the beginning, it becomes with training a raging passion."

Robert Louis Stevenson has a two-line children's poem:

"The world is so full of a number of things,  
I'm sure we should all be as happy as kings."

So that is the first, curiosity.

#### SECOND, LIFE EXPERIENCE

My computer screensaver is a series of outdoor nature images of the northwest United States taken by my nephew, an avid outdoorsman. One image shows a high altitude snowfield scattered with evergreen trees, with mountains in the distance. This view moves me because I have *been there*. I recall the exhaustion of the climb to such a lofty perspective point, the crisp biting air, the snow's cold leaking into my boots, the hiss of the wind in the evergreens. I relive that experience every time this image appears on my screen. Without that experience, my nephew's nature shots would be just pretty pictures.

So that is the second, life experience.

### THIRD, PERSONAL SKILLS

Our appreciation of most things is necessarily superficial, but personal skills deepen that appreciation. Whatever we do well ---weaving, cabinetmaking, programming, or supervising children in the park --- brings to us insight into a slice of our world.

For several years in the 1970s and 1980s, Niti Seth, a member of this church, and I ran an educational video operation at MIT. I came to appreciate the incredible amount of work that goes into any completed film or video. At the end of the next movie you see, take a close look at all the closing credits as they scroll past. Even the most rotten film you ever saw was labored over by a vast horde of workers. Similar enormous efforts go into putting on a play, a concert, a church service, and even publishing a book.

Speaking of books . . .

Every day I work on my gravity textbook. Among my friends the endless writing of this book is a running joke. The title of one of our chapters is a question: "Why do things fall on Earth?" The answer to this question will surprise you: Things fall because their clocks run a teeny bit faster at a higher altitude than their clocks run at a lower altitude. Isn't that weird? (Ask me about the details at coffee hour.) To me, baseballs, footballs, and basketballs are awe-inspiring projectiles. I study them constantly and as deeply as my poor intellect allows, yet I will never fully understand their motion.

So that is the third, personal skills.

### FOURTH, PERSPECTIVE

Perspective not only deepens our appreciation but also helps us to ignore minor irritations. Listen to Harry Golden:

#### QUOTE

"I have a rule against registering complaints in a restaurant; because I know that there are at least four billion suns in the Milky Way — which is only one galaxy. . . [that] revolves at the rate of about a million miles an hour, like a huge oval pinwheel. Our own sun and its planets, which includes the earth, are on the edge of this wheel. . . ."

Harry Golden goes on, in a *long* paragraph, to describe the astronomy of our entire Universe. Then he concludes:

"When you think of all this, it's silly to worry whether the waitress brought you string beans instead of lima beans."

So that is the fourth, perspective.

### FIFTH, AWARENESS OF DEATH

Freud incisively remarks, "Life loses in interest, when the highest stake in the game, life itself, may not be risked."

I often say to Carla: "If we were not going to die, we would not be having nearly so much fun." Awareness of death makes every new day infinitely precious.

So that is the fifth, awareness of death. And finally . . .

## SIXTH, THE FEELING OF MYSTERY AND AWE

Listen to Albert Einstein:

### QUOTE

The most beautiful emotion we can experience is the mysterious. It is the power of all true art and science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. . . . [T]his knowledge, this feeling, is at the center of true religiousness. In this sense, and in this sense only, I belong to the rank of devoutly religious men.

### UNQUOTE

So that is the sixth, the feeling of mystery and awe.

I myself am now 80 years old, which qualifies me as an old man. Mostly I hate it, but there are compensations, among them these six enablers of astonished appreciation. Of course a person of any age can be curious, but in addition to curiosity, old age can be rich in life experience, personal skills, perspective, awareness of death, and the feeling of mystery and awe.

Almost exactly a year ago I gave a sermon here called *The Joyful Existentialist*, which was some thoughts about how to deal with our fears that life is unfair, deeply random, drenched in loss, and hurtling toward death. That sermon got so complicated that I handed out wallet cards with the outline on them. This morning there are boxes of these year-old wallet cards at each exit. Please take all you can use: Supply is running *way* ahead of demand! Today's sermon is also posted on the website given on that wallet card.

Since that sermon I have continued to ask, "How can we overcome our fears?" I now think that Deep Appreciation is one answer. Listen again to Machiavelli's description of his evenings of scholarship, which I have shortened:

### QUOTE

"On the coming of evening, I return to my house and . . . enter the ancient courts of ancient men, where. . . I feed on that food for which . . . I was born . . . and for four hours of time I do not feel boredom, I forget every trouble, I do not dread poverty, I am not frightened by death."

When we experience Deep Appreciation, we live with Machiavelli: We are not distracted by our fears.

Is Deep Appreciation just a way to avoid thoughts about trouble, poverty, and death? I do not think so: Deep Appreciation acknowledges the power of each of these and helps us to live in their presence, while we also live in our own personal present, right now.

"To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life."

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