

## The Dignity of All Things

I prayed for wonders instead of happiness, and You gave them to me.

—Abraham Joshua Heschel, *The Ineffable Name of God: Man*

*Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907–1972) is known for his prophetic action and commitment to “radical amazement.” Theologian Bruce Epperly explains:*

Heschel lived out a holistic balance of delight and awe, radical amazement, and prophetic challenge.

At the heart of Heschel’s mystical vision is the experience of radical amazement....

Wonder is essential to both spirituality and theology: “Awe is a sense for the transcendence.... It enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine.” [1]

Wonder leads to the experience of radical amazement at God’s world. Created in the image of God, each of us is amazing. Wonder leads to spirituality and ethics. As Heschel noted, “*Just to be is a blessing, just to live is holy. The moment is the marvel.*” [2]

*Heschel considers the significance of a worldview of radical amazement:*

The world presents itself in two ways to me. The world as a thing I own, the world as a mystery I face. What I own is a trifle, what I face is sublime. I am careful not to waste what I own; I must learn not to miss what I face.

We manipulate what is available on the surface of the world; we must also stand in awe before the mystery of the world. We objectify Being but we also are present at Being in wonder, in radical amazement.

All we have is a sense of awe and radical amazement in the face of a mystery that staggers our ability to sense it....

Awe is more than an emotion; it is a way of understanding, insight into a meaning greater than ourselves. The beginning of awe is wonder, and the beginning of wisdom is awe.

Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme. Awe is a sense for the ... mystery beyond all things. It enables us ... to sense in small things the

beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.

Faith is not belief, an assent to a proposition; faith is attachment to transcendence, to the meaning beyond the mystery.

Knowledge is fostered by curiosity; wisdom is fostered by awe. *Awe precedes faith; it is the root of faith.* We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith.

Forfeit your sense of awe, let your conceit diminish your ability to revere, and the universe becomes a market place for you. The loss of awe is the avoidance of insight. A return to reverence is the first prerequisite for a revival of wisdom, for the discovery of the world as an allusion to God. [3]

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[1] Bruce G. Epperly, *Mystics in Action: Twelve Saints for Today* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 81; Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*, ed. Samuel H. Dresner (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1983, 2022), 21.

[2] Epperly, *Mystics in Action*, 81; Abraham Joshua Heschel, “To Grow in Wisdom,” in *The Insecurity of Freedom* (New York: Schocken Books, 1972), 82.

[3] Abraham J. Heschel, *Who Is Man?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1965), 88–89.

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*When we are in awe, there are no deeds to be done or words to be said; a simple, ecstatic surrender.*