

I think that perhaps the most overwhelmingly breathtaking vista I've ever encountered was my first view of the Yosemite Valley in California. I've seen some beautiful vistas, but the Yosemite Valley is "jaw-dropping gorgeous."

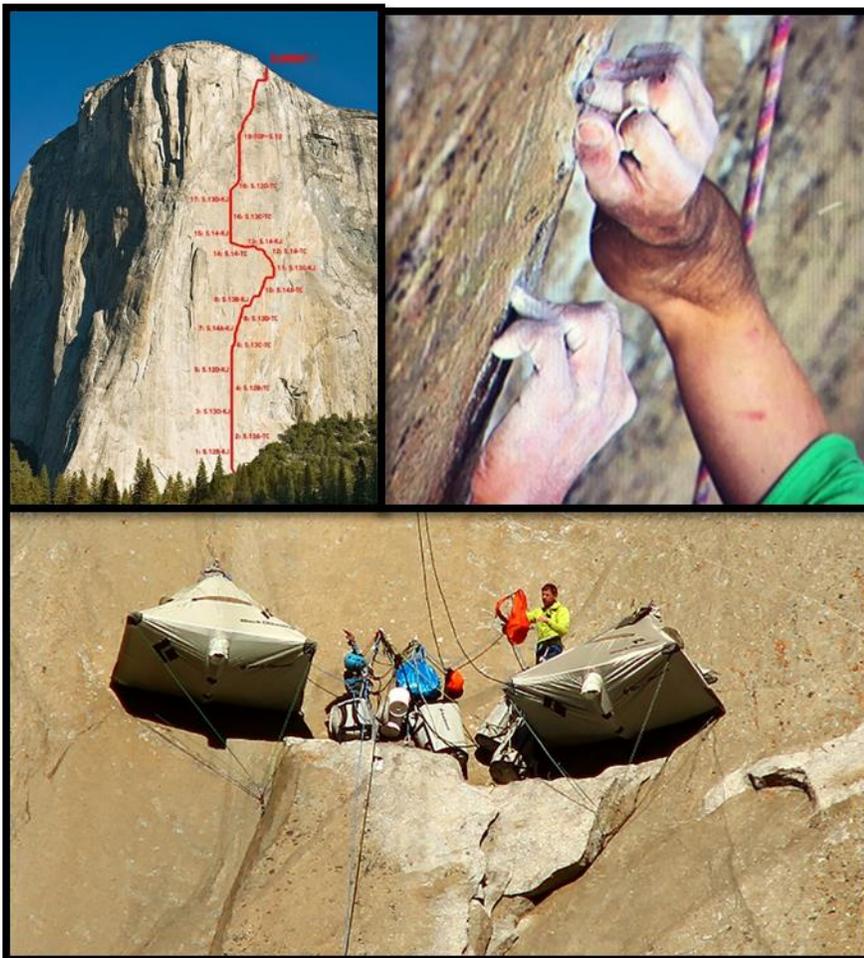
Although God's heart feels the entire and combined pain of humanity every single moment, including the horrible ISIS terrorist killing just a few hours ago, God also sees and experiences all the jaw-dropping vistas of Creation every single moment. And when God looks at Yosemite, the verdict has to be, "That's GOOD!"



Yosemite has been in the news rather a lot during the past several weeks. Have you noticed?

From December 27 – January 14, Tommy Caldwell and Kevin Jorgeson climbed Yosemite's "Dawn Wall"—the 3,000 foot sheer cliff at the left of this photo—using only their hands and feet to pull themselves up. They had ropes to break the occasional fall, but the climb was made entirely without rope or other help. Climbing the Dawn Wall in such a way

during a single expedition, long considered impossible, has now become one of the most difficult climbs ever accomplished.



Why would someone do such a thing? This is the question we consider this week.

While I was reading up on this climb, I came across another amazing enterprise that is attracting quite a stir these days. It's called B.A.S.E. Jumping.

B.A.S.E. stands for "building, antennas, spans (bridges), and earth (cliffs)," and involves jumping from such places with the intent of breaking the fall with a parachute at the last possible moment. B.A.S.E. Jumping is one of the most dangerous recreational activities in the

world, with an injury and fatality rate forty-three times higher than parachuting from an aircraft.

I ask again, **“Why would someone do such a thing?”**

To tell the truth, I’m not sure I know, but I suspect that part of the answer lies in the idea behind a quote from journalist Hunter Stockton Thompson: “Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, ‘WOW! What a Ride!’”



Although Mr. Thompson’s own life ended in suicide, and although I certainly don’t recommend either B.A.S.E. Jumping or Free Climbing, **the idea of living life fully and completely is worth contemplating, don’t you think?**

Why do people do these things? Why do people go to scary movies? Part of the answer, I think, lies in the fact that **there is something about fear that attracts us**. This is true in our relationship with God, as well.

Mark Galli noted that “When people witness the power and glory of almighty God, they are terrified. They think they are going to die. When we blithely sing to God to ‘show us your glory, Lord,’ we might as well be making a death wish. Or maybe we just want to get close to something that scares us to death.”

“Notice what the people of Israel do when they encounter God almighty. They don’t run. They keep hanging around the mountain. Isaiah doesn’t bolt from the temple. The result of Jesus’ terrorizing miracles is that more people than ever flock to him. . . . Perhaps evangelism is not so much one hungry person telling another hungry person where to find bread, as one terrified person telling others where they can go to experience this beautiful fear.”¹

And all of this causes me to think of Rudolf Otto’s description of the Holy as the ***mysterium tremendum et fascinans***.² Although it may stretch your mind a bit, I invite you to consider this idea for a few minutes.

The *mysterium* is that which Otto referred to as *das ganz Andere*, ‘the wholly Other.’ The *mysterium* is super-natural, being “that which is quite beyond the sphere of the usual, the intelligible, and the familiar, which therefore falls quite outside the limits of the ‘canny,’ and is contrasted with it, filling the mind with blank wonder and astonishment.”³

The *mysterium* has two aspects, the *tremendum* and the *fascinans*, the first being repellent and horrific, the other being attractive and intoxicating. The *tremendum* is

¹ Mark Galli, “The Fear that Draws Us: What Happens When We Really Grasp that God is Almighty,” *Christianity Today*, November, 2013, 46-49.

² Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational*, 2nd ed., trans. J. W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).

³Otto, p. 26.

characterized by the three-fold qualities of awefulness, overpoweringness, and energy or urgency.⁴ The *tremendum* has to do with absolute unapproachability, with a shudder that penetrates to the very core of one's being. To experience the *tremendum* is to experience "the terrifying and repelling fear of standing before an abyss of annihilation, the desperate feeling of unbridgeable distance between one's finitude and the infinite, and the consuming sense of judgment by an unconditional claim for justice."⁵

The *tremendum* represents the experience of being in the presence of the *living* God (Hebrews 10:31). The very construction of the tabernacle in the wilderness and of the Temple in Jerusalem were such that the people were separated from and protected from the divine glory. There was good reason for this, because when the apostle John later met the risen Christ in His glory, he "*fell at his feet as though dead*" (Revelation 1:17).

The awe-fullness of God is only half the story, however. Standing in tension with the *tremendum* is the *fascinans*, the attraction that balances the terror. Truly to see God, to experience the holy, the *mysterium*, is to taste "a reality so magnificent that the human self longs for the Holy to be all in all, totally transforming existence in the fullness of its light and being."⁶

The *fascinans* involves awareness of finitude resting in the Infinite, of being in the presence of the Source of all creativity, of experiencing the resolution to the human quest for ultimate meaning.⁷ The *fascinans* is costly, presenting one with ultimate demand (therefore being very dissimilar to "wish fulfillment"), yet it is such that when a person found it, "*he went away and sold everything he had and bought it*" (Matthew 13:46).

The Christian gospel makes the audacious claim that the *tremendum* and the *fascinans* were (are) united in the person of Jesus Christ. John exclaimed that "*the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory [tremendum], the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth [fascinans]*" (John 1:14).

Entering into relationship with God through Christ—entering into relationship with the Holy One, is truly an experience of transformation (2 Corinthians 5:17). Indeed, the discovery of life in the realm of the Holy evokes such radical change that it is referred to as being "*born again*" (John 3:7). Once experienced, life in the Holy becomes the supreme value. Nothing can compare to it.⁸

Though the experience of the holy is potential in every event, no matter how "ordinary" or "mundane," this experience often remains merely potential, in that access to the Holy cannot be had on command. And Otto emphasized that conceptual understanding of or **belief in a reality beyond the senses is a very different thing from the actual experience of the *mysterium***, noting that "it is one thing to have ideas of 'the holy' and another to

⁴Otto, pp. 13-24.

⁵Stephen Beasley-Murray, *Towards a Metaphysics of the Sacred*, National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion Special Studies Series, no. 8 (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1982), p. 46.

⁶James E. Loder, *The Transforming Moment: Understanding Convictional Experiences* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), p. 90.

⁷Beasley-Murray, p. 46.

⁸In Otto's view, experiencing atonement or personal salvation means to receive a covering shield against the *tremendum*, such that one dares approach the *fascinans*, and so that one will not be consumed when standing before God on the last day (Beasley-Murray, p. 17).

become consciously aware of it as an operative reality, intervening actively in the phenomenal world.”⁹

While awareness of the Holy may be cultivated—one’s perception may become more finely tuned—the experience of the Presence is chiefly a gift. The consciousness of the Holy must be “awakened” by the Spirit of God.¹⁰ There is certainly a place for searching after God’s presence (see Jeremiah 29:13), but the experience of the holy is not so much finding as being found.

The Bible tells us that “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom*” (Proverbs 9:10). Mark Galli noted that “**To free fall into the hands of almighty God is a dreadful thing** (Hebrews 10:31). **It is also the most wonderful thing in all creation.**”

Shall we jump?

Dave



P.S. **Thanks for the many ways in which you expressed cared for Jill and me last week.** I’m nearly back to normal after a bout with the flu, and Jill’s post-op visit with the surgeon this morning showed that her ankle bones are healing as they should at this point. Still no weight-bearing for about six more weeks

⁹Otto, p. 143.

¹⁰Otto, p. 60.