

Journal Entry #3: Transcendence and Awe

Transcendent (*Webster's Dictionary*): 1a: exceeding usual limits, surpassing; b: extending or lying beyond the limits of ordinary experience; c: in Kantian philosophy: being beyond the limits of all possible experience and knowledge. 2: being beyond comprehension. 3: transcending the universe or material existence. 4: universally applicable or significant "the antislavery movement ... recognized the transcendent importance of liberty" —L. H. Tribe

Awe: an emotion variously combining dread, veneration, and wonder that is inspired by authority or by the sacred or sublime; 'stood in awe of the king'; 'regard nature's wonders with awe'

I am writing from Southern Vermont, where I'm spending a lot of time this summer. I'm a Californian who moved to DC in my 20's, and married Annette, who spent her summers growing up on a Vermont lake and skied on a Vermont mountain on weekends. I, on the other hand, when I met Annette I couldn't identify Vermont on a map. When Annette told me in 1983 that she spends time every summer in Vermont, I had a hard time understanding that. Every summer? Don't you want some variety?

Annette's parents were German Jewish émigrés. They faced terrible discrimination as youths in Germany in the 1930's. Her father Gerald's family left Hanover for New York, where Gerald's father re-started his plastics recycling company. Her mother (Ursula)'s family, which owned a weaving mill in the textile-specialty town of [Bocholt](#), was forced to stay, handing ownership of his company to a Nazi party member. The family eventually emigrated to America just before the war. They were placed on a chicken farm in New Jersey by the Jewish Joint Distribution Committee. Eventually both families got on their feet financially.

Annette's parents brought with them their German (and Jewish) values including a love of the outdoors, art, music, literature. They hiked and skied, they frequented art museums, and above all they loved classical music, especially chamber music. Hundreds of prominent German artists and musicians left Germany before the war, and many found themselves in New York City. They stuck together to recreate the artists' endeavors they were pursuing in Germany, and they adapted to life in the US, forging new relationships, and finding influences from America on their art.

One prominent German émigré artist was the pianist [Rudolf Serkin](#) (1903-1991), one of the greatest musicians of our time. President Kennedy awarded Serkin the [Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1963](#); Kennedy died two weeks before the award ceremony. Serkin founded the Marlboro Music Festival in Vermont in 1951; Marlboro remains perhaps the greatest chamber music festival in the world.

Because of Serkin and Marlboro, my in-laws drove up to Vermont throughout the 1950's to hike, ski, and hear classical music. They ultimately purchased a house in 1962. Thus Annette's devotion to Vermont, and my introduction (and yes, now I can find Vermont on a map!). I am writing from that house.

Today there are hundreds of classical music festivals, but nothing like Marlboro. Marlboro isn't just a music festival. It's like a kibbutz for classical musicians. Serkin and his German émigré friends sought to found something transcendent. They sought a utopia. All musicians were equal, whether a 14-year-old prodigy, a 20-something starting a career, or a 70-year-old master musician with solo appearances and world tours. All are devoted to the music, to rehearsal, to deep study. It's in the mountains, it's beautiful

and rustic. The buildings (on the campus of [Marlboro College](#)) are converted farm buildings. All the musicians eat together communally. This is totally different from the life of a typical musician, rushing from town to town, or rushing to prepare a new piece. The musicians are not paid for their time at Marlboro, even though each could command big-time money to play. Only ¼ of the pieces under study get selected for performance. Emphasis is on being true to the composer. It strikes me as a combination of kibbutz and yeshiva. It's all about simplicity, the music, equality, fraternity, artistic freedom.

When you sit in the audience and hear the music, you can't help but be transformed. It's beyond listening to beautiful music. The musician Yo-Yo Ma [described beauty](#) as being transcendent, as encapsulating a lot of different things in a certain frame, in a certain moment. It could be music, a poem, an event, being in nature. Marlboro music is a transcendent experience, i.e., beyond the limits of ordinary experience.

The music fills me with awe, similar to what I feel when viewing an extraordinarily beautiful scene in nature (we get a lot of these in Vermont). I had this feeling of awe while hiking in the Sierra Nevada mountains of Sequoia National Park, and when viewing the Tetons and the Canadian Rockies, and when we flew over Mt. Hood in Oregon.

Awe isn't just a feeling inside; it has important practical consequences. Scientists [have found](#) that the experience of awe "helps bind us to others, motivating us to act in collaborative ways that enable strong groups and cohesive communities."

These feelings of transcendence and awe are what keep me coming back to Marlboro, and to Kol Shalom. I want to experience these feelings as part of this Kol Shalom community.

I experience feelings of transcendence and awe when I say kiddush with my family or guests on a Friday evening. I experience feelings of transcendence and awe sometimes in our services, and sometimes while stuffing boxes at Manna. We can generate these feelings and experiences by tying into our Jewish tradition, experiencing Shabbat, renewing close ties to our family and to each other as members of a community.

I can't go to Marlboro or the Tetons every week to experience these feelings. But I can make Shabbat and I can attend services. I can serve the less-fortunate. Being part of this awe-some congregation enables me to bond with others, and to collaborate as part of a *kehillah k'dosha*, a sacred community.

I want Kol Shalom to continue, expand, and thrive as a *kehillah k'dosha*. We are here, as a cohesive community, to act in collaborative ways to do acts of loving kindness and merciful justice. As a congregation, we are renewing our focus on this mission.

I want to be in dialogue with you. You can click [here](#) to send me a message, or you can email me at mplieber@ymail.com. I am thrilled to hear from you, to get to know you better, and to hear your suggestions on continuing Kol Shalom's growth and value to you.

Thank you for your help and for your part in our *kehillah k'dosha*, our sacred community!

Marc Lieber, President