

HUNTING AWE

Where will I find beauty today? What will take my breath away?

“In this magical place, the sun rises over the pristine bay and lowers over the craggy mountains.”

by Nancy Gertz

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My inbox is ravenous. Like a hungry tiger, it is continually opening its mouth and getting fed, no matter how full it is already. It scans the virtual terrain all night and day, never stopping. Even when the power is turned off, it keeps hunting and gorging itself. It's overwhelming to be its trainer and partner, and some days I'm not sure who is in control anymore, the tiger or me.

Despite how much progress I make on reducing the stack of emails by shifting, prioritizing and deleting, I rarely get a satisfying sense of completion anymore. And I'll admit, there is a certain boost of excitement when I open it up to see what's landed there. Maybe something wonderful has happened! It reminds me of when I was a kid and my parents would excitedly await the mailman's arrival, as if they'd get news of winning the lottery.

I worry that I'm becoming like the inbox, never truly sated, always on alert, looking for the next morsel to arrive with a ping.

Somewhere along the way of envisioning my next winter getaway, the seed got planted that what I needed most, more than escaping Boston's new bombogenesis storms, was to abandon the tiger and, well, declutter the inbox of my mind. Tame the frenzy. Experience more ease overall. Stop thinking about all the things I have to do, get off the busy acceleration highway, and indulge in some stillness, beauty and simplicity; maybe even read a few good novels. I knew that my email inbox would be virtually vomiting by the time I returned to normal life, but it would all be worth it.

Fast forward, I found myself flying off for three whole weeks to one of the most beautiful places I've ever been, a small town on a bay along the Sea of Cortez. I had been there a few times in the past, so traveling alone, renting a house and car, and knowing where to buy groceries felt pretty manageable, even without the benefit of speaking Spanish. The casa was a long way from Boston, symbolic of how far afield it was from my "normal" life — the one with the insatiable inbox and its partner in crime, my cell phone.

I arrived and was surprised by how

exhausted I suddenly felt. What was this — my body's resounding plea for rest? It made sense of course after all the travel, but I'm not sure I would have heard it so clearly had I not turned my attention away from my digital dictators. I listened up and slid into total relaxation and rest.

It took two days for a sense of peace to settle in. At first I felt like it was wrong to tune out so completely. Guilt and fear, the brain's way of staying vigilant about our own behavior, flashed here and there. What was I thinking that I could just turn away from everyone and everything like this? Was I being irresponsible? What would happen if Mom or the kids needed me and I was so far away? What about my clients?

I chose to let the worrisome messages glide by like bad-tasting bait, noticing but not allowing myself to get hooked on them. It wasn't easy, but I stuck with it. Eventually, those messages seemed to disappear, replaced by a tentative sense of peace that took some time getting used to. When was the last time I just let myself be?

In this magical place, the sun rises over the pristine bay and lowers over the craggy mountains. Both directions, the soft fluidity of the sea and the solidity of the mountains, seemed to be within my arm's reach. My days had a smoothness and certainty as I moved with ease between sunrise and sunset.

Each morning began with an early sunrise walk on the beach to the cliffs where I absorbed the majesty of Earth's awakening. The sunsets, like bookends, were viewed from the rooftop every evening before dinner. I inhaled the colors of the sky above the mountains. They filled me with their glory. I was overflowing with gratitude and appreciation. It was a restorative kind of overwhelm, as if I couldn't contain all that was alive within me, but at the same time I yearned for more.

The sky, sea and mountains colluded to keep me awake — in wonder — of the glory of nature's beauty and simplicity and my own delight in being part of the Universe.

Scientists are now seeing there are changes in the brain and the body that

suggest that nature is good medicine. We are physically and mentally healthier when we are in nature. We tend to be more relaxed in natural spaces, anxiety and rumination are lessened, and positive emotions are increased. The cursed attention bombardment of ubiquitous technology can be soothed by nature's power to restore the brain's attention circuits, which can boost our creativity and problem-solving skills.

Any physical activity can reduce stress and anxiety — my walks were an important part of my un-gym fitness routine — but there's something more about being in awe. The beauty of nature's gifts inspires awe — a feeling like wonder, when we sense both our own smallness and the vastness of the Universe at the same time. This experience of awe, beyond feeding the soul, makes us feel more generous and better connected to others, which kindles even more positive feelings. So much was happening for me even though I really wasn't doing anything more than staying in tune with nature.

Inbox? It can wait.

I came home and brought the peace with me, though I'm sure I'll need a booster. It's not easy to hold on to when my scheduled and busy life has a much faster rhythm. I'm making some different choices though. I'm an awe-hunter now.

Where will I find beauty today? What will take my breath away? I'm catching more and more moments when I stop and feel the wow of wonder. One thing I know for sure — they don't happen as much when I'm lost in the digital world. I prefer nature's bounty. ♦

Read more:

For more about the science of awe and nature and how it affects our bodies and brains, go to www.fulfillmentdaily.com and www.greatergood.berkeley.edu. Experience it yourself by taking some time in nature, by reminiscing about a beautiful place you've been, or looking at photographs. Awe can be found in ordinary life in even the most mundane things. In addition to nature, sources include art, impressive people or feats, music, watching a child laugh, and noticing excellence of any kind.