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The Day I Learned to Fear God

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The Northwest boasts some of the most beautiful country in the world. Primeval forests form a soaring cathedral over the hills. Sheer cliffs stand hundreds of feet above the ocean. Giant black rocks form surreal towers that rise over the ocean surface, seagulls resting on the black monoliths look like specks of dandruff.

Trees, battered by wind, bent and bowed lean toward the east--away from the water as though they were paralyzed while trying to run from the twenty-foot waves that crash into the rocks and send white spray and foam fifty feet into the air.

A Seldom Used Path

About fifteen miles south of the resort town of Cannon Beach I find a viewpoint perched high above the surface of the ocean. Along the edge of the parking lot stands a two-foot high stone wall. As I examine the wall I spot a seldom used path that runs from the wall toward the cliff.

I climb over the wall and walk away from the parking lot. The path creeps along a narrow ridge that runs at a ninety-degree angle from the coastline. The trail slips between a thick growth of Oregon Grape that stand seven or eight feet high--tall enough to obscure my view in every direction.

A Giant Plank Over the Ocean

I hike a quarter of a mile and exit the vegetation and stand at the very end of a point that protrudes several hundred yards out over the ocean like a giant plank resting on steep walls. Below and to the north towering cliffs made of rock look like layered black slate. Portions of the rock cliff stick out in a perpendicular angle from the rest of the rock cliff. I see what looks like giant keyholes in the black slate. Monstrous waves crash into the rocks and send white foamy spray, like frothy shrapnel, through the keyholes.

One False Step

I stand spellbound by the beauty and mesmerized by a blending of fear and fascination. One false step and I'll plummet to my death on the jagged rocks far below. I admire the splendor of this spot yet I respect the danger of getting too near the edge. Even so, I stand as close as possible to the cliff so I can view the spectacular display of power and beauty.

Fear, Pleasure, and Respect

Overwhelmed by sensory overload, I marvel at nature's beauty and the God who created it. Fear, pleasure, and respect compete for my attention. In the book of Ecclesiastes, after a futile search for meaning in life without God, Solomon said, "Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments" (Ecc. 12:13). In a moment at that spot on the Oregon coast I feel brushed by God's presence and suddenly realize, in a fresh way, what it means to "fear" God.

I stand in awe of him. I revere him. I'm drawn in by his beauty, majesty and love and yet I respect his dangerous power. Don't misunderstand me. I don't mean God is in nature. That would be pantheism. I mean that as I stood on that cliff I felt respect for the danger and the awe for the natural beauty. To fear God is to respect his power and stand in awe of his beauty.

Shrouded in his presence, we find an identity that will imbue our lives with eternal meaning and permeate our efforts with the divine. His presence, and his presence alone, will satisfy our search for significance and fill the empty corners of our heart.