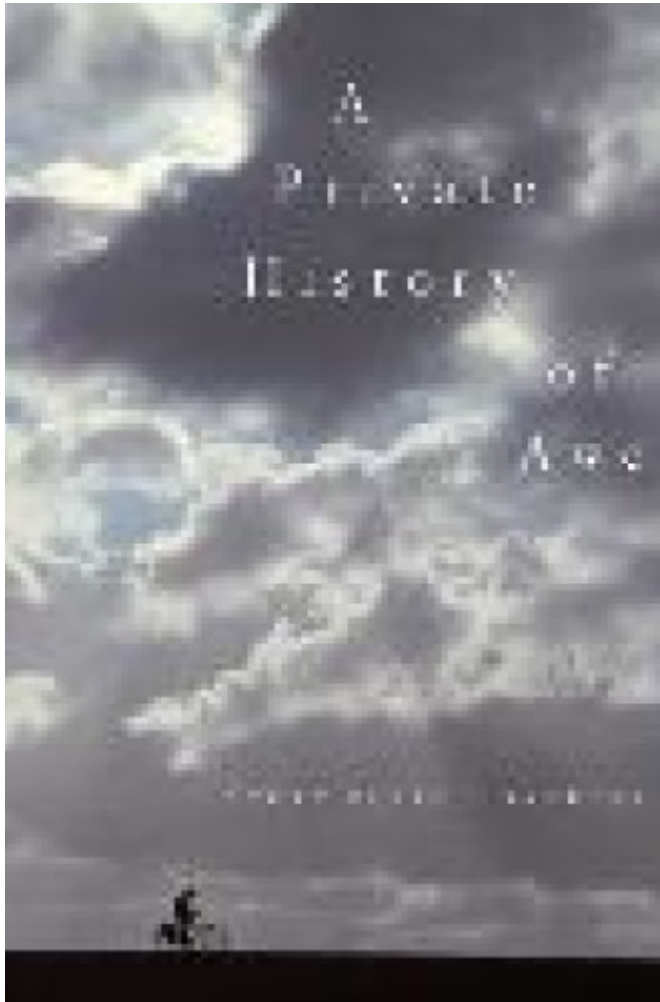


Awestruck

By [Benjamin S. Webb](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

In Review



A Private History of Awe

Scott Russell Sanders
North Point

In his previous books Scott Sanders did much to deepen the public conversation about the sources and patterns that connect broken communities, damaged

ecosystems and suffering individuals, and about what it will take to heal and renew things.

In *Staying Put* he examined what it means to commit ourselves to a place, a community and a calling, as he has done in Bloomington, Indiana, for more than 30 years. In *The Force of Spirit* he considered spiritual and cultural sources of healing.

Like the Holy Spirit, Sanders broods over this world as a mother over her children. He is sensitive to the world's sorrows, in part because he has known them in his own life and family, but also because he empathizes with the plight of the world, a plight he sees perhaps through the lens of depression, which sometimes produces the gifts of moral insight we associate with Lincoln. In the power of his cultural analysis and critique, Sanders is nearly prophetic. Such brooding has gotten Sanders into trouble in the past, both as a father and as a literature professor, as he poignantly described in *Hunting for Hope*.

In *A Private History of Awe* we see Sanders not only turning in the direction of hope but writing about awe and his endless fascination with what continues to light the world and set the mind on fire.

While writing about his whole life and its key influences, Sanders keeps tenderly returning to the death of his mother and the birth of his granddaughter. In these overlapping events he reflects on how the flame of life—the flow of energy that he understands to be operating as love—is passed from one generation to another. From the beginning to the end of the memoir, we are held in this energy's sway. A light that appears to be extinguished in one is newly lit in another, all with the help of Sanders, who as both son and grandfather holds the candle of meaning that shines over it all.

Yet this modern spiritual autobiography is not merely tender or sentimental. It is anything but that, for this is also a story of Sanders's hard-won intellectual development and of those events that "helped shape my understanding of what it means to be human, what sort of world we inhabit, and how I ought to lead my life."

It begins with stories of his childhood skillfully told from the child's point of view, especially the story of a spring day in 1950 when in his father's arms he witnessed the flash of nearby lightning and the power of thunder, and for the first time felt the tingle of a force that runs through nature and mind. Ever since, Sanders has been in search of communion with that power and awe.

Yet his childhood was filled with shame as well as wonder, whether he was acting as chaperone to his alcoholic father or as spy for his mother, who regarded drinking as a sin. His childhood was also tempered by another kind of awe that produced fear and dread: memories of a surgery from which he nearly bled to death, and nightmares of oblivion that haunted him long afterward. If Sanders is beset with a lingering fear for the death of the world, it is partly traceable to this life-threatening event, along with national events that awakened his social conscience.

Awe is most gripping and instructive when Sanders describes the influence of national events on his own growth and development. He gives us vivid images from the several years he lived with his parents inside an army arsenal “surrounded by the machinery of war,” and poignant stories of encounters during his youth in the racially segregated South of white privilege and black chain gangs, where the “racial barrier was as firm as the Arsenal’s chain-link fence, and just as militantly patrolled.”

The moral shame and sober reflection this produced later matured and came of age while Sanders was listening to Martin Luther King Jr. deliver one of his most potent and personally dangerous sermons about American materialism and violence. In the crucible of the Vietnam War, Sanders found his convictions as a conscientious objector, and while he was a Marshall scholar in England during the fateful year of 1968, he assisted the resistance efforts of Britain-based U.S. Air Force officers who were opposed to the war.

With so much intelligence, labor and wealth devoted to the cold war and the machinery of death, Sanders writes, “it was as though the fences of the Arsenal had been stretched to encircle the earth, and every place had become treacherous.” This image could just as well describe today’s stark contrast between America’s ideals and our country’s belligerence and abusiveness overseas.

I must admit that when I think about the moral grandeur and spiritual audacity of leaders like King and Kennedy and Heschel and Merton, and consider the prospect of the world’s possible annihilation as well as the possible redemption that drives exemplary folks like Sanders forward in hope, I come away wondering whether the watershed years of the late 1960s were the high point of public morality and ethics in the United States, and whether we’ve been sliding backward into moral adolescence ever since.

Yet that kind of nostalgia for an earlier era would be a denial of everything Sanders stands for. As *Awe* makes abundantly clear, Sanders still believes in a love that is larger than dysfunctional parents, a love that is larger than hatred and military arsenals with all their bombs, a love that is “large enough to hold every creature and river and stone on earth,” however much we foolishly try to live apart from it. “How else to account for the mayhem we wreak on one another and on the earth, if not the result of some broken link between us and the source of life?” he asks. There is no mending that broken link without a return to love.

Sanders’s understanding of this love that holds all things together was partly shaped by the Protestant churches where he and his siblings “absorbed our religion.” Throughout *Awe* he demonstrates that he has been drinking from the springs of scripture while asking the questions that keep him awake at night and making some of the toughest decisions he has faced in life. “I took in the Bible the way I took in air and water and food. The tales, the imagery, the sentence rhythms, and the teachings became a part of my way of speech.”

Of course, to know scripture is to know not only its forgiveness but also its blame, not only its kindness but also its cruelty and killing, not only its mercy but also its vengeance—as well as the tepid and misguided response of many Christians to the demands of the social gospel. All along, what has moved Sanders most are not religious creeds but the kind of justice, healing, peacemaking and compassion encountered in Jesus and the prophets, along with the possibility of pursuing a purpose in life larger than his own private salvation.

Sanders’s greatest encounters with love came in his long marriage, and this book sings with his adoration for his wife, Ruth. In fact, Sanders’s apprenticeship as a writer was in part constituted by his five years of writing daily love letters while courting Ruth.

Readers of *A Private History of Awe* can be thankful that Sanders found his vocation as one of America’s finest writers and essayists. For in this latest book he has produced an artful memoir rich in meaning for all of us still in search of our beloved country, our role in its renewal, and the habits of the heart that a good life and good society require.