A sense of what is Great

You can be sure that every one of all earth's 6,000 languages has expressions functioning as do our English words "beyond," "above," "more than," "great"--all pointing to what transcends self & the quotidian, dailiness, ordinary experience. Numerous booktitles reflect this reality--e.g., Margurite Harmon Bro's MORE THAN WE ARE and my FLOW OF FLESH, REACH OF SPIRIT.

As are "God" & "home" & many another short English word, these four **transcendence expressions** are, in base, Anglo-Saxon, which, when married to French (1066 & all that) gave birth to our English language. As one might guess, almost all of "basic English" is A-S in base.

This Thinksheet looks at the first three words only in passing:
BEYOND? Here's Robt.Browning on "reach" of spirit: "For a man's reach is beyond his grasp / or what's a heaven for?"
ABOVE? The Bible's very first verse bespeaks the priority of what's above: "...God created the heavens and the earth [i.e., the universe]."
MORE THAN? Unlike the first two, this expression is not spatial. Rather, it is quantitative. A gallon is more than a quart.

What now of GREAT? We human beings have a sense of what is great, but what is it? Both what is the sense (is it, let's say, a sixth sense?) and what is great (is it so because of its size or importance or what?). That is what this Thinksheets tries to give some clues to.

1 Let's begin with physical **size**, "all creatures *great* and small" (1848, in a Sunday school song, for children, on the Apostles' Creed's first line, "Maker of heaven and earth"). "Great" before "small" because small children--maybe all of us?--are more impressed by **large** than by small....

2 ....say, a whale. First visitors to Cape Cod, when our house-guests, almost always say soon after arriving "Where do we go to see the whales?" While whale-watching is popular in some 40 countries, Cape Cod is near the top for sightings. Our guests return wide-eyed with awe, which is a primordial religious emotion.

We human beings have the capacity to make some awe-inspiring things. Space launches, e.g., with all their fire, smoke, noise. But to see a whale noiselessly surface near your boat, flip its tail, and disappear--the awe of it reaches deeper into our own creaturely being than can any awe from any technological wonder.

3 But how wonderful it is to see a child come wide-eyed also to a small creature! "Teensy weensy spider...." Or how about a creature now plentiful on our beach, the sandpiper? It's astonishing how fast it dashes around on the wet sand, it's head bobbing to feed, with an eye out for any incoming wave too big for safety. But two further facts about this feathered wonder astonish even more as we let them stimulate our imagination: (1) The sandpiper weights less than 1 oz. (& so would require no more than 33¢ postage!), & (2) While with us now on Cape Cod, they'll soon be gone, & we'll not see them again till they've taken care of business in Brazil and in the high Artic.

4 Of course our hymnist, Cecil Frances Alexander was teaching the children a **continuity of wonder**, of awe sweeping up from the creatures to the Creator, the Source of the sense of what is great & thus of awe. Our sense of what is great should lead us to the sense of who is great. Thus the hymn's refrain: "All things bright and beautiful, / All creatures great and small, / All things wise and wonderful, / The Lord God made them all."

The animal-rights folk have a point when they speak of the chain of love among the creatures. And a veterinarian, a professional animal-lover/healer, James Alfred Wight, wrote four novels, one on each of the successive lines of Hymnist Alexander's hymn's refrain. His pen-name was James Herriot.

5 In extending our powers of perception & lengthening the invisible cantilevers of our inferring & imagining, **science** (the scientific method in action) increases

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our sense of what is great in nature. When we clothe our "naked" eye with the appropriate machines, we can see the otherwise invisible--galaxies, black holes, subatomic particles (as trails), atoms, molecules, cells, moving fetuses, our beating hearts; &, by those cantilevers, genes & their sequences (DNA, the genome). "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me" is what the Psalmist (139.6) said about God's knowing us, but the scientists--& through them, we--experience a like wonder, awe, when they discover-infer-imagine-intuit marvels never before "seen" by humanity. And one could say the same about science's expansion of our other senses, especially hearing.

6 As science is both passive (discovery) & active (manipulation), so is **ethics.** The "increase of appreciable awareness" (Henry Nelson Wieman's definition of God) is both passive (a gift) & active (a task, the duty to use new awarenesses, as old, for truly human ends). Myths like "The Sorcerer's Apprentice," Frankenstein, & scifi horror flicks warn us against runaway science unbridled by ethics. For me the image is powerful. In the inner city where our family lived till I was five, my mother was never without fear of runaway delivery-wagon & fire-wagon horses. I remember her fear, & her calls of fright. And I do remember at least one runaway snorting & thundering past our narrow house.

Here two things are great: new knowledge, new duties it brings to bridle & use its power. As another hymnist said, "New occasions teach new duties."

7 But suppose someone senses what is objectively ("out there") great but, by negligence or choice, treats it subjectively ("in here") & existentially (i.e., in outer life) as small. This someone is everyone: we're all sinners against greatness. Because we have the power, & therefore the duty, to **make** great--in ourselves, our relationships, our world, the world--what **is** great, our failures to exercise this power are not small.

8 "Make great." The Romans had a word for it: "magni-fy." To a solemn extent, things--even deities--are the size we make them (not objectively, of course; but subjectively & societally). By its first word in Latin, we call Jesus' mother's song making God great the "Magnificat" (Luke 1.46).

Since the point of pubic worship is to magnify what's great (with the side-benefit of minimizing everything in life that's not great, including oneself), we should be astonished at the ignorance of anyone who says "Why go? I don't get anything out of it."

Mary's Magnificat is, in the Hebrew behind the Latin, a **Yigdal.*** This open making-great is a telling forth, an extolling, as in the (Jewish) TANAKH translation of Psalm 35.27: "Extolled be [yigdal] the LORD, who desires the well-being [shalom] of His servant."....Each of the Bible's languages has a number of words for "great," & all of them get used to bespeak the greatness of God.

9 The opposite of "make great"? Make small! In judging size, ask "In comparison with what?" In comparison with God, everything's small. This downsizing of idols (i.e., whatever's been excessingly upsized) permeates Scripture & comes to straightforward statement in Romans 1.25: Idolaters "worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator."

That's the wisdom in the saying common among us, "Don't sweat the small stuff." Easy when you've decided this stuff is small (relatively unimportant) in comparison with that stuff. And if what's important is yourself, everything & everybody else is relatively unimportant--the developmental stage called infantilism, the spiritual condition called narcissism.

Deciding what's small & what's big is--personally & societally--big stuff. My sense of what is great/small will, in the absence of daily exposure to what is truly great (& as a Christian I must add "to Him who is the Source of all true greatness"), curve in on me (Luther's description of sin as incurvature), leaving one & the world & God in the category of less-than-great.

An insidious social form of this mislocation of what's truly great is partisan fanaticism. Incurved greatness curves outward to encircle a cause with which henceforth the fanatic's identity is inescapably enmeshed: the ego has expanded to the boundaries of the cause--& we have a Hitler or an abortion-clinic bomber.

* Both this verb (in Qal future) & Hebrew's most-used noun/adjective for "great" are from the same root, GDL. here