

Ostranenie – [aw-strah-nuh-nee]

It was an idea introduced by a Russian writer Victor Shklovsky in the 1920s.

It can also be referred to as “defamiliarizing” or “making strange”

The Russian literally translates “*dnumbing*”

It is an artistic and literary idea that speaks to presenting a familiar subject in an unfamiliar way.

(see: Animal Farm, a political commentary through animals)

It makes us reconsider norms and values previously unexamined.

Sometimes it gives us a fresh perspective. Sometimes it simply deepens the one we already had.

But it denumbs. It shakes us out of a numbness and apathy.

The original Christmas was ostranenie through and through.

In books, writers using ostranenie will often elevate the lowly - taking people of low social status to displace higher ones.

We should remember that those who experienced and proclaimed the birth of Jesus first weren't those within the traditional religious structure. Christmas shows the birth of Jesus being pronounced not to the king or the elite, but to blue collar shepherds working the night shift who by temple standards were too unclean to come in. Christmas shows Gentile wise men, *outsiders* by Jewish standards, among the first to recognize Jesus' divinity.

Outsiders are insiders.

The lowly are the important.

Ostranenie.

If the original Christmas WAS ostranenie.

Our modern Christmas NEEDS ostranenie.

We need a defamiliarization.

We need a denumbing.

Shklovsky also spoke of ostranenie as counteracting the “*inexorable pull of routine.*”

And challenging the “*chain of habitual associations and automatic responses.*”

Familiarity can breed numbness.

Raj- **Blue Planet II – Episode 1** - we've watched it almost nightly for months.

There's *incredible* footage of wild animal behavior.

When my old roommate visited a couple months ago his mind was blown by awe and wonder.

When Raj's granddad watched it with him for the first time he couldn't believe parts of it.

Me – at this point I've seen it 248 times.

I can quote you the stats. I know a false killer whale can swim 12 mph or that a walrus pup can weigh 175 pounds.

But I'm so familiar with the content it's mostly background noise.

I'm no longer struck with awe by scenes I've seen 47 times before.

And coincidentally in Shklovsky's thesis he compared the blindness of familiarity with “*people at the seashore who grow so accustomed to the murmur of the waves that they never hear it.*”

For us, the Christmas story is our Blue Planet II episode 1.

It's not waves and wildlife.

It's – as John 1 tells us - God *taking on flesh and blood and moving into the neighborhood.*

The question is who are you:

Me – no longer moved by the amazing?

Or Raj – who demands more and more and can't sit still due to excitement when it's on?

Does it make you say “wow?”

Or has familiarity robbed your awe and wonder?

Some of us need some Christmas ostranenie.

Some holiday defamiliarization and denumbing so we can FEEL wonder and awe again.

The word in the Greek that means “to marvel” or “to stand amazed” is used frequently in the Gospels. **32 times** in his ministry it says people marveled and were amazed by Jesus.

But twice in his ministry we are told that was Jesus amazed.

First: we get the Roman Centurion in Luke 7 who humbly asks for healing for his servant... as a Roman officer he ***represents those who believe and act in faith when you don't think they would.***

The second case is the town of Nazareth in Mark 6, Jesus' hometown that didn't show him any honor or respect because he had grown up among them.

The next Sabbath he began teaching in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed. They asked, “Where did he get all this wisdom and the power to perform such miracles?” Then they scoffed, “He's just a carpenter, the son of Mary and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas, and Simon. And his sisters live right here among us.” They were deeply offended and refused to believe in him. Then Jesus told them, “A prophet is honored everywhere except in his own hometown and among his relatives and his own family.” And because of their unbelief, he couldn't do any miracles among them except to place his hands on a few sick people and heal them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Nazareth ***represents those who disbelieve when there's every reason they should.***

Nazareth is a flashing warning to us.

Jesus has a pet peeve – it's indifference where there should be faith.

It's numbness where there should be worship.

Familiarity can be a beautiful thing.

Getting to know your spouse in a deeper and more meaningful way every year for the rest of your life is the beauty of marriage.

But familiarity can be a trap if it robs us of honoring and valuing that which we're getting to know. It's why part of the wedding vow is to love and to CHERISH (treasure, value, and prize) If we don't cherish, we'll slide into the trap of dishonoring and devaluing that Nazareth stepped into.

Every year at Christmas when I read the Christmas story I'm reminded you can be an expert on God, a wise man or woman, and still not encounter Him.
You can be called to lead and end up unmoved.

For all our familiarity with the wise men we put at the nativity scene,
We forget here's more than one group of "wise men" in the Christmas story.
There's one group of experts on the Bible that managed to miss Jesus entirely.

The "Other" Wise Men in Matthew 2:3-6

[King Herod] called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'"

It's worth noting that you can be familiar with the Bible and miss Jesus.
Yes we should know what the Bible says. Absolutely.
The experts familiarity and head knowledge did them no favors.

The age of enlightenment gave us all the desire to understand and command everything.
So our impulse in knowing God can be to put him in a boxes full of what's "doable" and "knowable."

But here's reality – we could memorize scripture and attempt to manufacture our best understanding of God, and at best we have a toenail sketch of who He is.

God is bigger than our view of Him. We need a faith that steps into awe and wonder again.
We need a faith that sees God as strange again. We need a denumbing. We need ostranenie.

Mature faith knows how to overcome the impulse to *master* everything and *marvel* again.
Mature faith knows how to stand in awe.

Rituals and routines of Christmas can awaken our hearts to the deeper meaning.
But if we aren't careful they can numb us.
They can leaving us quoting scripture but missing the Messiah like the wise men in Matthew 2.

Jesus was **divine ostranenie**.

He was fresh revelation. He was prophecy fulfilled. He was promises delivered.
He was sacrificial systems transcended. Worship elevated. Lowly elevated.

Ostranenie – denumbing – is part of why Jesus taught in parables.

That is why I use these parables, for they look, but they don't really see.

They hear, but they don't really listen or understand.

This fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah that says,

'When you hear what I say, you will not understand.

When you see what I do, you will not comprehend.

For the hearts of these people are hardened and their ears cannot hear, and they have closed their eyes— so their eyes cannot see, and their ears cannot hear, and their hearts cannot understand, and they cannot turn to me and let me heal them.'

Isaiah points to the source of their dilemma = their hearts are **hardened**
The Hebrew means calloused, dull, or *numbed*.

Jesus taught with parables about his upside down kingdom where the first would be last, the lowly are elevated, the greatest would be a servant, the persecuted and mourning would be blessed, and so on...

Parables were his de-numbing and ostranenie.

It was medicine for the numbed heart, unseeing eyes and unhearing ears.

Good medicine for marveling again...

Open your eyes...

We ask for miracles. But reality is that we walk amidst these every day.

The sunset we overlook... but is indicative of the star in the sky our planet orbits. According to Princeton's Institute for Advanced Science, the odds against our universe randomly taking a form suitable for life as one out 10,000,000,000 to the 124th power.

Look in the mirror:

'According to one estimate, there are thirty-seven sextillion chemical reactions happening in the human body at any given time. You are digesting food, regenerating cells, purifying toxins, catalyzing enzymes, producing hormones and converting stored energy from fat to blood sugar. Of course, none of this is a testament to you. It's a testament to the God who created you. But when was the last time you thanked God for any of those microscopic miracles?'

Pursue His Presence...

Familiarity and numbness with God isn't a result of knowing too much, but a lack of pursuit.

We serve a boxed in God and a God in a box robs our wonder and worship.

Ask God for a deeper picture of who He is – cry out like Moses show me your glory – but don't let it be a passive prayer... dive into the scripture and pursue his presence.

Psalm 139:6 will become your cry again...

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me – too great for me to understand!"

We may be overfamiliar with Christmas.

We aren't overfamiliar with scripture. Our pursuit has lagged.

A survey asked Christians *"How does God speak to you?"*

#1 answer? "my pastor."

The Bible? **#7!**

Most Christians admit that the Bible is God's inspired word.

GOD WROTE A BOOK. TO ME. FOR ME.

And yet largely Christians don't read it – some 80% don't open it outside of a church service.

Herod was misled by his own wise men because his knowledge was second hand.
The other wise men... the ones that pursued Jesus... they traveled an estimated 1000 miles.

1000 miles. My Bible I preach with - no commentary, straight scripture- is **1000 pages.**
Let me encourage you. Don't get familiar with Jesus through secondhand teachings. That's a false familiarity too much of the church walks in . Dig in in 2020. Go on a journey. If you've never read a Bible from cover to cover, start. You don't have to finish. But start the journey.

I think we all want to grow in 2020.
We want God to move in this area and that area.
We want to show a disciplined and active faith.

But something can cancel the above. Familiarity. Numbness.
A lack of wonder... that leads to a lack of worship.

Hebrews 12:1-3

we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed—that exhilarating finish in and with God—he could put up with anything along the way: Cross, shame, whatever. And now he's there, in the place of honor, right alongside God. When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again, item by item, that long litany of hostility he plowed through. That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!

That will shoot adrenaline into a numbed soul.
That will replace apathy with amazement.
That will replace monotony with marvel.

Which wise men are you?
The ones that were numbed?
The ones that took off in pursuit?