

"title": "You owe it to yourself to experience a total solar eclipse",
"text": "Before I get to bulk of what I have to say,
I feel compelled just to mention a couple of things about myself.
I am not some mystical,
spiritual sort of person.
I'm a science writer.
I studied physics in college.
I used to be a science correspondent for NPR.
OK, that said:
in the course of working on a story for NPR,
I got some advice from an astronomer
that challenged my outlook,
and frankly, changed my life.
You see, the story was about an eclipse,
a partial solar eclipse that was set to cross the country
in May of 1994.
And the astronomer -- I interviewed him,
and he explained what was going to happen and how to view it,
but he emphasized that, as interesting as a partial solar eclipse is,
a much rarer total solar eclipse is completely different.
In a total eclipse, for all of two or three minutes,
the moon completely blocks the face of the sun,
creating what he described as the most awe-inspiring spectacle
in all of nature.
And so the advice he gave me was this:
"Before you die," he said,
"you owe it to yourself to experience a total solar eclipse."
Well honestly, I felt a little uncomfortable
hearing that from someone I didn't know very well;
it felt sort of intimate.
But it got my attention, and so I did some research.
Now the thing about total eclipses is,
if you wait for one to come to you,
you're going to be waiting a long time.
Any given point on earth experiences a total eclipse
about once every 400 years.
But if you're willing to travel, you don't have to wait that long.
And so I learned that a few years later, in 1998,
a total eclipse was going to cross the Caribbean.
Now, a total eclipse is visible only along a narrow path,
about a hundred miles wide,
and that's where the moon's shadow falls.
It's called the "path of totality."
And in February 1998,

the path of totality was going to cross Aruba.
So I talked to my husband, and we thought: February? Aruba?
Sounded like a good idea anyway.
(Laughter)
So we headed south,
to enjoy the sun and to see what would happen
when the sun briefly went away.
Well, the day of the eclipse found us and many other people
out behind the Hyatt Regency,
on the beach,
waiting for the show to begin.
And we wore eclipse glasses with cardboard frames
and really dark lenses that enabled us to look at the sun safely.
A total eclipse begins as a partial eclipse,
as the moon very slowly makes its way in front of the sun.
So first it looked the sun had a little notch in its edge,
and then that notch grew larger and larger,
turning the sun into a crescent.
And it was all very interesting, but I wouldn't say it was spectacular.
I mean, the day remained bright.
If I hadn't known what was going on overhead,
I wouldn't have noticed anything unusual.
Well, about 10 minutes before the total solar eclipse was set to begin,
weird things started to happen.
A cool wind kicked up.
Daylight looked odd, and shadows became very strange;
they looked bizarrely sharp,
as if someone had turned up the contrast knob on the TV.
Then I looked offshore, and I noticed running lights on boats,
so clearly it was getting dark,
although I hadn't realized it.
Well soon, it was obvious it was getting dark.
It felt like my eyesight was failing.
And then all of a sudden,
the lights went out.
Well, at that,
a cheer erupted from the beach,
and I took off my eclipse glasses,
because at this point during the total eclipse,
it was safe to look at the sun with the naked eye.
And I glanced upward,
and I was just dumbstruck.
Now, consider that, at this point, I was in my mid-30s.
I had lived on earth long enough to know what the sky looks like.

I mean --
(Laughter)
I'd seen blue skies and grey skies
and starry skies and angry skies
and pink skies at sunrise.
But here was a sky I had never seen.
First, there were the colors.
Up above, it was a deep purple-grey,
like twilight.
But on the horizon it was orange,
like sunset,
360 degrees.
And up above, in the twilight,
bright stars and planets had come out.
So there was Jupiter
and there was Mercury
and there was Venus.
They were all in a line.
And there, along this line,
was this thing,
this glorious, bewildering thing.
It looked like a wreath woven from silvery thread,
and it just hung out there in space, shimmering.
That was the sun's outer atmosphere,
the solar corona.
And pictures just don't do it justice.
It's not just a ring or halo around the sun;
it's finely textured, like it's made out of strands of silk.
And although it looked nothing like our sun,
of course, I knew that's what it was.
So there was the sun, and there were the planets,
and I could see how the planets revolve around the sun.
It's like I had left our solar system
and was standing on some alien world,
looking back at creation.
And for the first time in my life,
I just felt viscerally connected to the universe
in all of its immensity.
Time stopped,
or it just kind of felt nonexistent,
and what I beheld with my eyes --
I didn't just see it,
it felt like a vision.
And I stood there in this nirvana

for all of 174 seconds -- less than three minutes --
when all of a sudden, it was over.

The sun burst out,
the blue sky returned,
the stars and the planets and the corona were gone.
The world returned to normal.

But I had changed.

And that's how I became an umbraphile --
an eclipse chaser.

(Laughter)

So, this is how I spend my time and hard-earned money.

Every couple of years, I head off to wherever the moon's shadow will fall
to experience another couple minutes
of cosmic bliss,

and to share the experience with others:

with friends in Australia,
with an entire city in Germany.

In 1999, in Munich, I joined hundreds of thousands
who filled the streets and the rooftops and cheered in unison
as the solar corona emerged.

And over time, I've become something else:
an eclipse evangelist.

I see it as my job

to pay forward the advice that I received all those years ago.

And so let me tell you:

before you die,

you owe it to yourself to experience a total solar eclipse.

It is the ultimate experience of awe.

Now, that word, "awesome," has grown so overused
that it's lost its original meaning.

True awe, a sense of wonder and insignificance
in the face of something enormous and grand,
is rare in our lives.

But when you experience it, it's powerful.

Awe dissolves the ego.

It makes us feel connected.

Indeed, it promotes empathy and generosity.

Well, there is nothing truly more awesome than a total solar eclipse.

Unfortunately, few Americans have seen one,
because it's been 38 years

since one last touched the continental United States

and 99 years since one last crossed the breadth of the nation.

But that is about to change.

Over the next 35 years,

five total solar eclipses will visit the continental United States,
and three of them will be especially grand.

Six weeks from now, on August 21, 2017 --

(Applause)

the moon's shadow will race from Oregon to South Carolina.

April 8, 2024, the moon's shadow heads north from Texas to Maine.

In 2045, on August 12,

the path cuts from California to Florida.

I say:

What if we made these holidays?

What if we --

(Laughter)

(Applause)

What if we all stood together,

as many people as possible,

in the shadow of the moon?

Just maybe, this shared experience of awe would help heal our divisions,
get us to treat each other just a bit more humanely.

Now, admittedly, some folks consider my evangelizing a little out there;
my obsession, eccentric.

I mean, why focus so much attention on something so brief?

Why cross the globe -- or state lines, for that matter --
for something that lasts three minutes?

As I said:

I am not a spiritual person.

I don't believe in God.

I wish I did.

But when I think of my own mortality --

and I do, a lot --

when I think of everyone I have lost,

my mother in particular,

what soothes me

is that moment of awe I had in Aruba.

I picture myself on that beach,

looking at that sky,

and I remember how I felt.

My existence may be temporary,

but that's OK because, my gosh,

look at what I'm a part of.

And so this is a lesson I've learned,

and it's one that applies to life in general:

duration of experience does not equal impact.

One weekend, one conversation -- hell, one glance --
can change everything.

Cherish those moments of deep connection with other people,
with the natural world,
and make them a priority.
Yes, I chase eclipses.
You might chase something else.
But it's not about the 174 seconds.
It's about how they change
the years that come after.
Thank you.",

// "related tags":

"speaker ":"David Baron",

"summary ":"On August 21, 2017, the moon's shadow raced from Oregon to South Carolina in what some consider to be the most awe-inspiring spectacle in all of nature: a total solar eclipse. Umbraphile David Baron chases these rare events across the globe, and in this ode to the bliss of seeing the solar corona, he explains why you owe it to yourself to witness one, too.",

"date ":"Aug 10, 2017"