



EXPLORATION

Awe

Readings



Awe is
my religion,
and mystery
is its church.
Charles Simic

Photo by Pixel 2013 on Pixabay

1. *Mystery and Awe*

by Cary Neepser

When I first looked into a microscope and found living creatures, I was awestruck. I felt like Alice in Wonderland, in an alien world unlike any in my everyday experience. But it was real. These were living beings, swimming with tiny flagella, going about their frenetic business and reacting to their chemical signals in an ocean contained in a tiny drop of water. I still wonder at the miracle of life—that I live and think and understand something about these tiny creatures that are an essential part of our world. Some years earlier, I had learned that existence is largely made out of intricate, nested, complex systems. I am overwhelmed by a feeling of gratitude, thankful for whatever gave birth to life's complexity. I was amazed to read that the most complex object in the universe is the sentient brain, because its cells have a super-astronomical number of interactive connections. Such information can be a source of awe and wonder as great as a golden sunset or a baby's laugh, but it cannot define our values or describe the purpose of existence. It can uncover the beauty of details and describe love between living creatures. It can assure us that nothing we do is inconsequential. But it is religion that tells us that meaning is real, that purpose includes love and beauty, that life is precious, and that creation is a gift, whatever its source.

Source: <https://www.uuchurch.org/worship/awe-mystery/>

2. *Map of the Journey in*

Progress by Rev. Victoria Safford

Here is where I found my voice and chose to be brave.

Here's a place where I forgave someone, against my better judgment, and I survived that, and unexpectedly, amazingly, I became wiser.

Here's where I was once forgiven, was ready for once in my life to receive forgiveness and to be transformed. And I survived that also. I lived to tell the tale.

This is the place where I said no, more loudly than I'd thought I ever could, and everybody stared, but I said no loudly anyway, because I knew it must be said, and those staring settled down into harmless, ineffective grumbling, and over me they had no power anymore.

Here's a time, and here's another, when I laid down my fear and walked right on into it, right up to my neck into that roiling water.

Here's where cruelty taught me something. And here's where I was first astonished by gratuitous compassion and knew it for the miracle it was, the requirement it is. It was a trembling time.

And here, much later, is where I returned the blessing, clumsily. It wasn't hard, but I was unaccustomed. It cycled round, and as best I could I sent it back on out, passed the gift along. This circular motion, around and around, has no apparent end.

Here's a place, a murky puddle, where I have stumbled more than once and fallen. I don't know yet what to learn there.

On this site I was outraged and the rage sustains me still; it clarifies my seeing.

And here's where something caught me—a warm breeze in late winter, bird-song in late summer.

Here's where I was told that something was wrong with my eyes, that I see the world strangely, and here's where I said, "Yes, I know, I walk in beauty."

Here is where I began to look with my own eyes and listen with my ears and sing my own song, shaky as it is.

Here is where, if by surgeon's knife, my heart was opened up—and here, and here, and here, and here. These are the landmarks of conversion

Source: <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/meditation/map-journey-progress>

3. *On the Brink of Everything*

by Parker Palmer

...My friend ...Courtney Martin posted a column titled *Reuniting with Awe*. ...

...I was mesmerized by its opening line — "My daughter is on the brink of everything" — because that's where I am at age 76. I'm frequently awestruck as I stand on the brink of the rest of my life, including that part of life called death, which I can sometimes see from where I stand.

I'd be a pants-on-fire liar if I claimed to be awed by all that comes with old age.

...When you suddenly become "interesting" to your physician after boring him or her for many years, it gives you pause.... Yet it's because of the diminishments of age, not in spite of them, that I often find myself in awe as I stand "on the brink of everything."

...Looking back, I'm awed by the way embracing everything, from what I got right to what I got wrong, invites the grace of wholeness.

...Wholeness does not mean perfection: It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life.

...What I know for sure is this: We come from mystery and we return to mystery. I arrived here with no bad memories of wherever I'd come from,



so I have no good reason to fear the place to which I'll return. And I know this, too: Standing closer to the reality of death awakens my awe at the gift of life.

...I'm old enough to know that the world can delight me, so my expectation is not of the world but of myself: Delight in the gift of life and be grateful.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/on-the-brink-of-everything-an-early-morning-meditation/>

4. *Soft Fascination*

by Maria Popova

In nature, we go unfettered from the world's illusory urgencies that so easily hijack the everyday mind and syphon our attention away from its best creative contribution to that very world and its needs. When we surrender to "soft fascination," we are not running from the world but ambling back to ourselves and our untrammelled multitudes, free to encounter parts of the mind we rarely access, free to acquaint different parts with one another so that entirely novel connections emerge.

Annie Murphy Paul writes, "Scientists theorize that the 'soft fascination' evoked by natural scenes engages what's known as the brain's 'default mode network.' When this network is activated, we enter a loose associative state in which we're not focused on any one particular task but are receptive to unexpected connections and insights. In nature, few decisions and choices are demanded of us, granting our minds the freedom to follow our thoughts wherever they lead. At the same time, nature is pleasantly diverting, in a fashion that lifts our mood without occupying all our mental powers; such positive emotion in turn leads us to think more expansively and open-mindedly. In the space that is thus made available, currently active thoughts can mingle with the deep stores of memories, emotions, and

ideas already present in the brain, generating inspired collisions."

... "Soft fascination" has an active counterpart in another state we experience most readily in nature: awe — that ultimate instrument of unselfing.

...Paul writes, "The experience of awe has been called 'a reset button' for the human brain. But we can't generate a feeling of awe, and its associated processes, all on our own; we have to venture out into the world, and find something bigger than ourselves, in order to experience this kind of internal change. Without this reset button, how would we ever look at a dandelion and see the meaning of life?"

Source: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2022/07/01/default-mode-network-awe-soft-fascination/>

5. *Educating for Awe*

by Matthew Fox

Awe leads to something more than mere knowledge. It leads to wisdom itself. "Awe is the beginning of wisdom," declares Rabbi Heschel. Awe is far more interesting than information. Awe opens the door in our souls, in our hearts and minds. Awe ...pulls us out of ourselves, it touches on transcendence. ...Awe awakens reverence, respect, and gratitude.

...Heschel says, "Humanity will destroy itself not from lack of information but from lack of appreciation." That is how important gratitude is: appreciation is life-saving. Its opposite, taking for granted, is life-threatening. Even species threatening. So, awe is important. It is part of our survival package.

Healthy knowledge can easily lead to awe. But knowledge that is focused almost exclusively on control is not healthy and it does not lead to awe. ... There has been very little room for awe in the classrooms of the modern age. The result is that many youth try to escape education at the earliest possible moment. Education becomes a trial and a burden rather than an occasion for expansion and wonder. Education loses its joy. It becomes less than human.

...When humans care about awe, great things can happen. The mind opens up, and the heart, and, one might

say, the soul. ...Wonder returns. The child is kept alive and eager throughout his or her life. Learning becomes a daily event.

...Indeed, our minds are made for awe. They respond all together spontaneously to awe. They remember awe. Even on our deathbeds—especially on our deathbeds—do we remember awe.

Awe is an attitude of not taking for granted. ...

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/27960>

6. *Train Your Heart to Open to Awe* by Alan Morinis

Certain situations or experiences call forth awe without any effort at all. Witness a whale breaching or an eagle soaring, hear a baby's first cry or look upon a magnificent sunset, and the heart responds and connects.

Those "free samples" of awe take no effort, but if we want to train the heart to open to awe, then we must undertake some practice. It needs to be clear, though, that cultivating the capacity to experience awe requires not that you seek out the spectacular, but rather that you endeavor to find the spectacular in everything.

Right now, fix your eye on something that is in your immediate environment. It could be a flower or a pencil, a table or a teacup. Just look at that object until you can sink your consciousness into its very essence, so that you experience how truly remarkable it is that it exists at all. See its material and color and its orderly composition that converge in the altogether miraculous fact that this discrete thing exists in the world. How remarkable! How inconceivable! How awesome!

Repeat this exercise as many times ...as you are able.

...Try this way of seeing, and let yourself be awed by the miraculousness of what we mistakenly consider to be "ordinary."

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/27448>

7. *More Like a Forest*

by Scott Russell Sanders

From the few years of my life before our move to Ohio, I can bring back only a handful of moments...., yet I was shaped, as any child is, by every hour of every day. It's often said a young child is like a sponge, but that seems to me the wrong metaphor, because a sponge can be wrung dry, while everything that goes into a child stays there. A child is more like a forest, gathering every drop of rain or flake of snow, every fallen leaf, the slant of sunlight and glint of moonlight, the fluster and song of birds, the paths worn by deer, the litter of bones and nuts and seeds, and whatever the wind delivers, taking it all in, turning everything into new growth.

...The moment we begin taking this skein of miracles for granted, we cease to live, no matter if our hearts still beat.

Knowing this, I still sleepwalk through much of my life. But I recognize it as sleepwalking, I keep struggling to wake, and when I do occasionally wake, a rush of awe dissolves the boundaries of this I, disclosing the borderless, luminous, abiding ground. Although some of my hunger for awe no doubt derives from genetic inheritance, I suspect that most of it was determined by what poured into me during those years in Tennessee. How my parents held me, spoke to me, sang to me; how my sister played with me or fussed over me; ... — all of these influences, and more, rode along inside of me to Ohio.

Source: <https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/book-reviews/excerpts/view/16107>

Wisdom Story

Sweeping My Heart

by Zenju Earthlyn Manuel

Zenju Earthlyn Manuel's training on the journey to becoming a Zen Buddhist priest including sweeping the meditation hall and scrubbing toilets. As an older black woman, she struggled with this because, recalling her ancestors in slavery, it felt demeaning. Eventually, she had the following conversation, which freed her from her resentment.

Me: "Really? I don't need this."

Ancestors: "Exactly. You feel you have become better than us."

Me: "I went to school because you said education was the best thing for black people. I got a Ph.D. so I don't need to do what black folks have always done."

Ancestors: "Your pride is no good to us. Your degree is no good to us. We need your heart to be healed. Don't let intellect take the place of love. You must love more."

I swept longer, breathing, listening, crying. This is true, I say to myself.

Me: "But I worked so hard not to be oppressed as you were. I worked for justice. I prayed. I ate well. I did good deeds most of my life."

Ancestors: "We need more than that from you. We don't need you to be a good Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, follower of African Orishas, or whatever. We need you to remember the dust from which you came. We need you to remember a time before things went crazy, when they sold Africans like us. There was something before. It is still hidden from you. Find it. Keep sweeping—not to clean but to see and hear where your heart is blocked from what we see for you. We put you in a place where you would be bothered enough to change."

Today when I clean the temple, I know it is my ancestors calling. I know that the memory within me of their existence as slaves is being understood and transformed. I know that temple cleaning is the motion arising from sitting meditation, not history repeating itself.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2509>

Snippets

"Don't think about why you question, simply don't stop questioning. Don't worry about what you can't answer, and don't try to explain what you can't know. Curiosity is its own reason. Aren't you in awe when you contemplate the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure behind reality? And this is the miracle of the human mind—to use its constructions, concepts, and formulas as tools to explain what man sees, feels and touches. Try to comprehend a little more each day. Have holy curiosity." *Albert Einstein*

"That is why awe is the most reverent of feelings. You feel, when you are in awe, that you are human, that your mind is dwarfed by what it confronts, that



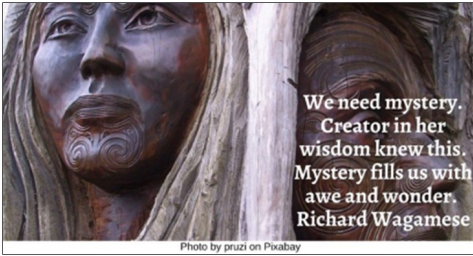
you cannot capture it in a set of beliefs, and that you had best keep your mouth closed and your mind open while awaiting further disclosure."

Paul Woodruff

"Awe changes us. We are broken open by it. It forces us to rethink things. To tweak our behaviors and choices. To move toward things that matter. Psychologist Nicholas Humphrey says that awe forces us to reconfigure our mental model so we can make sense of what we've seen and experienced. It broadens us, inspires us. Awe, then, has the ability to awaken us. It can show us the beauty that already exists and remind us who we are at our spiritual core. It brings us closer to our purpose and passion and helps us create meaning. It helps us to live with the mystery in life, to survive the uncertainty of it all." *Polly Campbell*

"Awe makes us feel rooted and slows us down. People who experience awe seek to memorize their surroundings and freeze the experience. Experiencing awe can also prompt us to act more benevolently toward others. When we are not stressed, perhaps in a moment of seeing the big picture rather than the details, we're more able to help others. ... Awe also makes us step back and find new answers. One reason awe-filled experiences can be so powerful is that they expand our thinking quickly, allowing us to bypass our normal filtering. Awe forces us to accommodate new information so rapidly that we can't filter it through preexisting [experiences or concepts] In colloquial terms, awe blows our minds." *Katherine O'zment*

"Every aspect of Nature reveals a deep mystery and touches our sense of wonder and awe. Those afraid of the universe as it really is, those who pretend to nonexistent knowledge and envision a Cosmos centered on human beings will prefer the fleeting comforts of supersti-



tion. They avoid rather than confront the world. But those with the courage to explore the weave and structure of the Cosmos, even where it differs profoundly from their wishes and prejudices, will penetrate its deepest mysteries.” *Carl Sagan*

...Awe leads us to reframe ourselves as small and our world as vast. Researchers have found that simply watching awe-inspiring nature videos created this shift and also led participants to feel like they had more time. Psychologists have nicknamed this time stretching phenomenon “extended-now” — when now feels longer than the usual fragment of a moment. Awe also led participants to be more patient and helpful. Helping increases happiness, so awe doesn’t just feel awesome but also improves our quality of life. We have to actively seek awe because it is a rare emotion. Whenever you can, surround yourself with nature, beauty, and inspiring people and ideas. *Leeann Renninger and Tania Luna*

“...It seeps into you. It doesn’t make you forget yourself, but totally the opposite. It connects you with everything and fills you with awe that you share the same space with something that glorious. Like a sunrise on a clear blue day of the most extraordinary piece of glass. And then suddenly you have this epiphany that there’s more to the world than just you and what you want or even who you are.” *Justina Chen Headley*

“Are you happy? In all honesty? No. But I am curious—I am curious in my sadness, and I am curious in my joy. I am everseeking, everfeeling. I am in awe of the beautiful moments life gives us, and I am in awe of the difficult ones. I am transfixed by grief, by growth. It is all so stunning, so rich, and I will never convince myself that I cannot be somber, cannot be hurt, cannot be over-

joyed. I want to feel it all—I don’t want to cover it up or numb it. So no, I am not happy. I am open, and I wouldn’t have it any other way.” *Bianca Sparacino*

“We all have spiritual moments throughout our lives. That first moment you see a sunset, or a flower, maybe a piece of art, and you just say, “wow!” And in that moment of true awe and wonder, that is the moment we’re all fully present, fully alert, fully appreciative, and there’s a real connection made between the experience and the experimenter. There is no interpreter between them. It is pure presence.” *Todd Perlmutter*

“I think that when you consider the beauty of the world and you wonder how it came to be what it is, you are naturally overwhelmed with a feeling of awe, a feeling of admiration and you almost feel a desire to worship something. I feel this, I recognize that other scientists such as Carl Sagan felt this, Einstein felt it. We, all of us, share a kind of religious reverence for the beauties of the universe, for the complexity of life. For the sheer magnitude of the cosmos, the sheer magnitude of geological time. And it’s tempting to translate that feeling of awe and worship into a desire to worship some particular thing, a person, an agent. You want to attribute it to a maker, to a creator. What science has now achieved is an emancipation from that impulse to attribute these things to a creator.” *Richard Dawkins*

Questions

1. In reading #1, Cary Neeper recalls with awe the “Alice in Wonderland world” that appeared to her when she used a microscope to look at a drop of water. Have you ever had an experience where a new world was revealed to you through a microscope, telescope, travel, book, film, or something else? What was the experience like? How did it make you feel? For Neeper, it is not the sentient brain with its “super-astronomical number of interactive connections” that inspires awe, but what the brain is capable of. What
2. In reading #2, Victoria Safford recounts her “journey in progress” with so many poignant and revealing landmarks of conversion like forgiveness, fear, cruelty, compassion, bravery, outrage, and more. What are some of the landmarks on your journey that taught you important things? Where have you experienced the most awe? What did/does it mean to you?
3. In reading #3, Parker Palmer writes about being “on the brink of everything” and still being awestruck at the age of 76. He writes, “I’m awed by the way embracing everything, from what I got right to what I got wrong, invites the grace of wholeness.” In terms of what you can embrace of your life, where do you experience awe? Have you known the “grace of wholeness?” If yes, what has it meant to you? If not, what could it mean for you? Palmer writes, “We come from mystery and we return to mystery.” What does his insight mean to you? Why? He concludes, “I’m old enough to know that the world can delight me, so my expectation is not of the world but of myself: Delight in the gift of life and be grateful.” How does his expectation for himself compare to your expectation for yourself?
4. In reading #4, Maria Popova focuses on the writing of Annie Murphy Paul, who explains the idea of “soft fascination” as it relates to the experience of awe when in nature and the experience of unselfing. Does this idea of soft fascination as a response to nature make sense to you? Why or why not? Paul writes that awe in nature is the “ultimate instrument of unselfing.” Does this make sense? How might unselfing in nature relate to meditation? Have you experienced what Paul calls the “reset button,” which opens us to awe in nature? If yes, what was it like?
5. In reading #5, Matthew Fox writes about the importance of educating

most inspires awe in you: your brain, beauty, love, life, creation, or something else? Why?

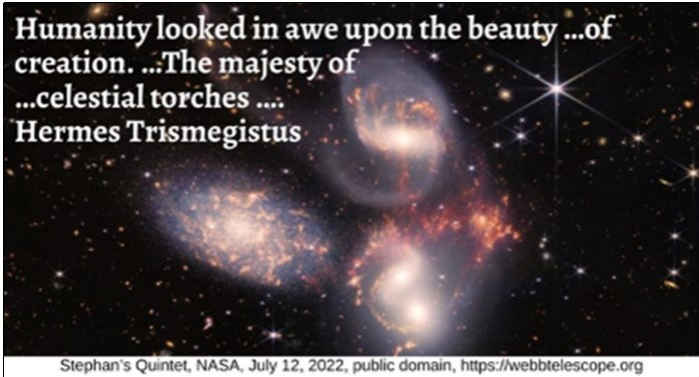


our children for awe. As a child, were you educated for awe? Why or why not? If yes, how? Are children being educated today for awe? Why or why not? Fox quotes Rabbi Heschel who said, “Awe is the beginning of wisdom.” How might this be true? Does our culture value awe? Why or not? Does our culture value wisdom? Why or not? What would really valuing we and wisdom mean?

6. In reading #6, Alan Morinis writes that certain experiences that call forth awe, like a magnificent sunset, take no effort on our part. Effort, however, is required to see the spectacular in the ordinary, like a pencil or a teacup. Has the ordinary ever evoked awe in you? What was the experience like? He suggests that the discipline required is to see into the essence of things. How might we do this? How might doing this impact our experience of life? In what ways is this like mindfulness? In what ways is the ordinary, as well as the extraordinary, in fact, a miracle?
7. In reading #7, Scott Russell Sanders recalls memories of his childhood in Tennessee before moving to Ohio. He suggests that a child is not a sponge to absorb experiences, but a forest “turning everything into new growth.” Which metaphor do you prefer? Why? What was your experience with awe as a child? How did it help form you? As an adult, Sanders writes that he sleepwalks through much of his life. Is this true for you? Why or why not? What value do you place on awe as an adult? Does it connect with your childhood? How? How can people stop sleepwalking?

The following questions are related to the Snippets.

8. Albert Einstein encouraged questioning, writing that, “Curiosity is its own reason.” Do you agree? Why or why not? He continued, “Aren’t you in awe when you contemplate the mysteries of eternity, of life, of the marvelous structure behind reality?” What evokes awe in you? He called curiosity “holy.” How could this be true? As a species, who would we be without curiosity?
9. Paul Woodruff calls awe “the most reverent of feelings.” How is awe connected to reverence? How does awe, as he suggests, make us human? Can awe, as he counsels, elude belief? Why or why not? How do you respond to awe? Does awe open your mind? Why or why not?
10. Polly Campbell writes, “Awe changes us. We are broken open by it. It forces us to rethink things. To tweak our behaviors and choices. To move toward things that matter.” With which of her assertions do you agree? Why? She concludes, that awe “helps us to live with the mystery in life, to survive the uncertainty of it all.” Can awe help heal humans? How? Why?
11. Katherine Ozment writes that, “Awe makes us feel rooted and slows us down.” Has this been true for you? Why or why not? How have you experienced awe? Intellectually? Physically? Emotionally? Spiritually? She concludes that, “In colloquial terms, awe blows our minds.” Has this ever been true for you? What was the circumstance?
12. Carl Sagan wrote that, “Every aspect of Nature reveals a deep mystery and touches our sense of wonder and awe.” In this regard, what has your experience been? He laments those whose superstition causes them to believe in “a Cosmos centered on human beings.” As you consider the Cosmos, how do you contend with mystery? Why do you think that some people are mystery averse? How might this affect their capacity for awe?
13. Leeann Renninger and Tania Luna refer to the awe-inspired experience of time seeming to stretch, which has been called the “extended now.” Have you ever experienced this in response to being awe-struck? Why might this happen? How might it relate to mindfulness? They also noted that “Awe also led participants to be more patient and helpful.” Have you ever experienced this? How might this relate to Annie Murphy Paul’s “reset button” for the mind in response to awe as it facilitates openness and connection?
14. Justina Chen Headley writes about the capacity of awe to connect you with everything? Have you ever experienced the veil of separateness collapsing? What triggered this sense? How did it make you feel? The mystics often talk about experiencing a radical unity with all that is. How might such an experience shift one’s sensibilities about what it means to be human? About what it means to be alive?
15. Bianca Sparacino writes, “Are you happy? In all honesty? No. But I am curious.” This recalls being asked by someone, “How are you?” and replying “Fine,” when nothing is fine. She then adds, “I am curious in my sadness, and I am curious in my joy.” Does her perspective make sense? Why or why not? She continues, “I am in awe of the beautiful moments life gives us, and I am in awe of the difficult ones.” While her perspective is likely rare, how might we benefit from such equanimity? Her sentiments raise the question, “Are we so preoccupied with the search for happiness, that we miss important things?” What is your response to this question? Wanting to feel it all, she writes, “I am transfixed by grief, by growth,” adding “I am not happy. I am open,” to awe, however it comes. If you had to choose, which would choice would you make: happiness or openness? Why?
16. Todd Perelmuter writes that true awe connects us with “pure presence” because of the “real connection made between the experience and the experiencer.” No interpreter, no mediator. In this regard, what does it mean to be really present?



How much do we miss because we are not present? In reading #7, Scott Russell Sanders would say that we have to quit sleepwalking. What are other dimensions of sleepwalking? Busyness? Being angry? Depression? What else? How much more awe would we experience if we decided to awake?

17. In response to the extravagant beauty of the world, Richard Dawkins suggests that our awe often compels an impulse to worship—something. Why do you think this happens? Have you ever felt this? Why or why not? Why is it so hard to be a witness to creation without a creator? In this regard, what is your view of intelligent design? Why? Dawkins concludes, “What science has now achieved is an emancipation from that impulse to attribute these things to a creator.” Do you agree? Why or why not? Has science diminished or expanded your sense of mystery and awe regarding creation? Which? Why?

