

# Connecting

*Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship*

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## Awe and Wonder

### Chalice Lighting

Words of Albert Einstein: ““The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. He to whom the emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand wrapped in awe, is as good as dead.”

### Check In Questions

What seemingly simple thing sustains your sense of wonder? What ordinary object or relationship reminds you of life’s preciousness? What is currently helping you not take things for granted? What keeps you curious and engaged?

### Ask A.I.!

Asked how it would distinguish between wonder and awe, Meta AI replied:

“**Wonder.** (1). Curiosity-driven: Wonder is often sparked by something novel, unexpected, or intriguing, prompting a desire to learn more. (2). Focused on understanding: Wonder encourages exploration, investigation, and a quest for knowledge. (3). Can be intimate and personal: Wonder can arise from everyday experiences, such as marveling at a child's growth or appreciating a beautiful sunset.

“**Awe.** (1). Overwhelming and humbling: Awe is often characterized by a sense of being overwhelmed, humbled, or even intimidated by something much greater than oneself. (2). Transcendent and expansive: Awe-inspiring experiences can evoke feelings of connection to something larger, such as nature, the universe, or a higher power. (3). Can be transformative: Awe has the potential to profoundly impact one's perspective, values, or sense of purpose.”

## Reflections on Awe and Wonder

**Awe.** The Random House Unabridged Dictionary (at dictionary.com) gives:

“(1) an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration, fear, etc., produced by that which is grand, sublime, extremely powerful, or the like: *in awe of God; in awe of great political figures*. Synonyms: veneration, wonder. (2) *Archaic*. power to inspire fear or reverence. (3) *Obsolete*. fear or dread.”

Etymonline.com points us to those “archaic” and “obsolete” origins. “Awe” comes from words that meant “pain, grief” (Greek *akhos*); “fear, anguish” (Gothic *agis*); “fright, terror” (Old High German *agiso*); “fear” (Old English *ege*); and “fright” (Old Norse *agi*). By about 1300, reverence was in the mix, as the Middle English word *awe* meant “fear, terror, great reverence.”

Etymonline.com then adds: “The current sense of ‘dread mixed with admiration or veneration’ is due to biblical use with reference to the Supreme Being.

This mix of dread/fear with admiration/veneration/reverence: a curious thing. Or is it?

The *Tanakh*<sup>1</sup> treated awe and fear as synonyms. English versions of the Hebrew Bible translate as many as six different Hebrew words as “awe.” The most common is *yare*, which is, by turns, translated as “fear” or as “awe.” Four examples from the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version), with alternate translations noted:

1. “Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?” (Exodus 15:11).

In place of “awesome in splendor,” some other translations give “fearful in praises.”

2. “So Samuel called upon the Lord, and the Lord sent thunder and rain that day; and all the people greatly feared the Lord and Samuel” (Samuel 12:18).

In place of “greatly feared,” other translations give “stood in awe of.”

3. “My flesh trembles for fear of you, and I am afraid of your judgments” (Psalm 119).

In place of “am afraid,” other translations give “stand in awe” or “tremble in awe.”

4. “O Lord, I have heard of your renown, and I stand in awe, O Lord, of your work” (Habakkuk 3:2).

Other translations say “fear your work.”

Throughout the Hebrew Bible, there is a close connection between awe and fear. From that connection came the idea that “God-fearing” was an indicator of decency, rectitude, and virtue. For example, the movie *Reds* (1981) includes a scene of Louise Bryant (Diane Keaton)

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<sup>1</sup> a.k.a. “Hebrew Scriptures.” The *Tanakh* consists of the same 39 books as the Protestant “Old Testament” arranged in a different order and into three sections: the Torah, the Prophets, and the Writings.

testifying before a Senate Committee in 1919. Senator Overman queries: “Miss Bryant, tell me, are there no decent God-fearing Christians among the Bolsheviks?”<sup>2</sup>

During the 1960s and 70s, a sentiment arose that *fear* was not the appropriate feeling about God. Is God not a loving God? Can we not trust in God? Shouldn't the message of religion be “fear not!” (as the herald angels say to the shepherds in Luke), rather than, “fear!”

Along with the wholesome move toward a theology explicitly **not** based on fear – fear of some kind of divine punishment – but based rather on love, came a preference for Biblical translations that said “awe” in place of “fear.”

But maybe there's a nugget of truth in the old-fashioned conflation of awe and fear. When I think back on some of the most significant moments in my life – usually events that were *firsts*: my first high school debate tournament, my first date, and (almost a year later, it turned out) my first kiss, my first job interview, my wedding day, becoming a parent – one thing is clear: *I was scared*. I was trembling in fear. The body's fear response, with accompanying adrenaline, is the way one knows, “Hey, there's something really, really important here.” Fear gets your attention – and that's a good thing. The fear I felt made those events so meaningful for me. Those were moments when I understood that something was about to happen that would change my sense of who I was. Might there be an appropriate place in a person's spiritual life for that kind of fear?

**Wonder.** The noun at issue for us is defined by Random House (at dictionary.com) as: “the emotion excited by what is strange and surprising; a feeling of surprised or puzzled interest, sometimes tinged with admiration: *He felt wonder at seeing the Grand Canyon.* Synonyms: awe, bewilderment, amazement, astonishment, surprise.”

Etymonline indicates that the Old English *wundor* meant “marvelous thing, miracle, object of astonishment.” “In Middle English it also came to mean the emotion associated with such a sight (late 13c.)” It is the cultivation of that emotion that is our subject this month.

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<sup>2</sup> To which Keaton's Bryant replies: “Does one have to be God-fearing and Christian to be decent? Senator, the Bolsheviks believe that it's religion, particularly Christianity, that's kept the Russian people back for so many centuries. If any of you had ever been to Russia and seen the peasants, you might think they had a point. On the subject of decency, Senator, the Bolsheviks took power with the slogan, ‘an end to the war.’ Within six months, they made good their promise to the Russian people. Now, the present President of the United States of America went to this country in 1916, on a ‘no war’ ticket. Within six months, he'd taken us into the war, and 115,000 young Americans didn't come back. If that's how decent, God-fearing Christians behave, give me atheists anytime. By the way, Senator Overman, in Russia, women have the vote, which is more than you can say for this country.”

## Wonder as a Subversive Activity<sup>3</sup>

Neel Burton (British psychiatrist)

From Plato's *Theaetetus*:

*Theaetetus*: I want to know what on earth they mean; and there are times when my head quite swims with the contemplation of them.

*Socrates*: I see, my dear Theaetetus, that Theodorus had a true insight into your nature when he said that you were a philosopher, for wonder is the feeling of a philosopher, and philosophy begins in wonder.

Wonder is a complex emotion involving elements of surprise, curiosity, contemplation, and joy. It is a heightened state of consciousness and emotion brought about by something singularly beautiful, rare, or unexpected—that is, by a marvel.

Wonder is most similar to awe. But awe is more explicitly directed at something that is much greater or stronger than ourselves. Awe is also less detached than wonder, which allows for greater and freer contemplation of its object.

Although wonder involves significant elements of surprise and curiosity, it is other and greater than either.

Wonder can be excited by grand vistas, natural phenomena, human intellectual and physical achievement, and extraordinary facts and figures, among others. By drawing us out of ourselves, wonder reconnects us with something much greater than our daily grind. It is the ultimate homecoming, returning us to the world that we came from and were in danger of taking for granted.

Socratic wonder is not so much wonder in the sense of awe, as wonder in the sense of puzzlement and perplexity. Socratic wonder arises not from grand vistas but from contradictions in thought and language.

Francis Bacon called wonder “broken knowledge”: it breaches or exposes us. This breach requires filling or repairing – giving rise to a third and even more exalted kind of wonder, which is the wonder of insight and creation.

Wonder begets culture, which begets yet more wonder, and the end of wonder is wisdom, which is the state of perpetual wonder.

Children brim with wonder, before it is leached out of them by need and neurosis. Sadly, many people do not open themselves to wonder for fear that it may distract them or upset their equilibrium. Indeed, to wonder is also to wander, to stray from society and its norms and constructs, to be alone, to be free—which is, of course, deeply subversive.

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<sup>3</sup> Abridged, adapted from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hide-and-peek/201412/study-wonder>

## Dacher Keltner on Awe

Dacher Keltner (professor of psychology, UC Berkeley) wrote *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How it Can Transform Your Life* (Penguin Books, 2023).

**Defining awe.** For Keltner, awe is, “Being in the presence of something vast and mysterious that transcends your current understanding of the world” (11).

Keltner and his team collected hundreds of stories of experiences of awe from around the world.

**What triggers awe?** Keltner focuses on eight “wonder of life” that most often evoke awe:

1. The strength, courage, and kindness of others.

“What most commonly led people around the world to feel awe? Nature? Spiritual practice? Listening to music? In fact, it was other’s people’s courage, kindness, strength, or overcoming. Around the world, we are most likely to feel awe when moved by moral beauty” (11).

2. Collective movement in actions like dance and sports

“A second wonder of life is collective effervescence, a term introduced by French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his analysis of the emotional core of religion. His phrase speaks to the qualities of such experiences: we feel like we are buzzing and crackling with some life force that merges people into a collective self, a tribe, an oceanic ‘we’” (13).

3. Nature

“Often what inspired natural awe was a cataclysmic event – earthquakes, thunderstorms, lightning, wildfires, gale-force winds, and tsunamis, or for one participant from China, watching a flood rip through her village. Many mentioned night skies, whose patterns of stars and illumination were an inspiration of Greek, Roman and Mesoamerican imaginings of the gods” (13).

4. Music

“Music offered up a fourth wonder of life, transporting people to new dimensions of symbolic meaning in experiences at concerts, listening quietly to a piece of music, changing in a religious ceremony, or simply singing with others” (14).

5. Art and visual design

“Buildings, terra-cotta warriors in China, dams, and paintings appeared in stories of awe from around the world” (15).

6. Mystical encounters

“Stories of *spiritual* or *religious* awe were a sixth wonder of life. These weren’t as common as you might imagine, given our perennial search for nirvana, satori, bliss, or samadhi, Some experiences of mystical awe were classic conversion stories like that of Saint Paul on the road to Damascus or the Buddha under the bodhi tree” (16).

7. Encountering birth and death

“We are awestruck by how, in an instant, life comes out of the womb. And on the other end of the life-death cycle, when a person makes the transition from being a breathing physical being to some other form of existence” (16).

#### 8. Big ideas or epiphanies

Epiphanies – the sudden understanding of an essential truth of life – evoke awe. “Around the world people were awestruck by philosophical insights, scientific discoveries, metaphysical ideas, personal realizations, mathematical equations, and sudden disclosures (such as a wife leaving her husband for his best friend) that transform life in an instant. In each instance, the epiphany united facts, beliefs, values, intuitions, and images into a new system of understanding” (18).

#### 9. Other

“Our ‘other’ category encompassed 5 percent of the responses worldwide. This category included stories about incredible flavors, video games, overwhelming sensations (for example, of color or sound), and first experiences of sex” (18).

**Typical frequency of awe.** Keltner and his team gathered thousands of stories from all over the world of people describing their experiences of awe. By their own accounts, “people experience awe two to three times a week” on average (26).

**What doesn’t trigger awe.** One thing, Keltner noticed, was never mentioned: “Money didn’t figure into awe, except in a couple of instances in which people had been cheated out of life savings. No one mentioned their laptop, Facebook, Apple Watch, or smartphone. Nor did anyone mention consumer purchases, like their new Nikes, Tesla, Gucci bag, or Montblanc pen. Awe occurs in a realm separate from the mundane world of materialism, money, acquisition, and status signaling – a realm beyond the profane that many call the sacred” (18).

**Cultural differences.** “The individual self was twenty times more likely to be the source of awe in the United States than in China” (25).

**Functions of awe.** (A). Transformation. “How does awe transform us? By quieting the nagging, self-critical, overbearing status-conscious voice of our self, or ego, and empowering us to collaborate, to open our minds to wonders, and to see the deep patterns of life” (xx). Awe further transforms us by sending us in quest of new understanding: “Vastness can be challenging, unsettling, and destabilizing. In evoking awe, it reveals that our current knowledge is not up to the task of making sense of what we have encountered. And so, in awe, we go in search of new forms of understanding” (8). To this quest for new understanding, awe primes us to bring rigorous and energized thought: “A stereotype of awe is that it leaves us dumbfounded and dazed, ready to subordinate reason to dogma, disinformation, blind faith, a local guru or trendy influencer. The scientific evidence suggests otherwise. In the state of wonder that awe produces, our thought is more rigorous and energized” (39).

(B). Health and well-being. “In teaching happiness for more than twenty years, I have seen how much health and well-being we gain by being amazed at things outside ourselves – by

finding awe. From our first breath to our last, awe moves us to deepen our relations with the wonders of life and to marvel at the vast mysteries that are part of our fleeting time here.” (xxvi).

(C). Orientation to service. Awe “seems to orient us to devote ourselves to things outside of our individual selves. To sacrifice and serve. To sense that the boundaries between our individual selves and others readily dissolve, that our true nature is collective” (6). “The last pillar of the default self – striving for competitive advantage, registered in stinginess toward giving away possessions and time – crumbles during awe” (41). Facilitating this orientation toward service to others is the humility that often comes with awe. “In our study, participants enjoying an expansive view also reported a greater sense of humility, and that the direction of their lives depended on many interacting forces beyond their own agency” (36).

Keltner concludes that awe is for “finding our place in the systems of life”:

“Awe begins with our miraculous eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and skin responding to the images, sounds, scents, tastes, and touches of the eight wonders of life. Our sensory systems represent these encounters in neurochemical patterns that make their way to the prefrontal cortex, where we interpret the wonders of life with the symbolic systems that are language and culture. Being moved by awe triggers the release of oxytocin and dopamine, a calming of stress-related physiology and vagus nerve response, systems of millions of cells working to enable us to connect, be open, and explore. The complex systems of muscles in the face, body, and vocal apparatus enable us to convey to others what we find wonderful. Tears and chills, themselves end results of systems behind our eyes and under our skin, signal to our conscious minds the presence of vast forces that require we merge with others to adapt and understand. Being cultural animals, we turn to ever-evolving cultural systems, of chanting, song, and music; painting, carving, sculpture, and design; poetry, fiction, and drama; and supernatural explanation and spiritual practice – our archives of awe – to bring others into a shared understanding of the wonders of life.

“But what is the end of awe, it’s unifying purpose? Here’s my answer. Awe integrates us into the systems of life – communities, collectives, the natural environment, and forms of culture, such as music, art, religion, and our mind’s efforts to make sense of all its webs of ideas. The epiphany of awe is that its experience connects our individual selves with the vast forces of life. In awe we understand we are part of many things that are much larger than the self.

“Being part of this scientific story of awe has taught me that the evolution of our species built into our brains and bodies an emotion, our species-defining passion, that enables us to wonder together about the great questions of living: What is life? Why am I alive? Why do we all die? What is the purpose of it all? How might we find awe when someone we love leaves us? Our experiences of awe hint at faint answers to these perennial questions and move us to wander toward the mysteries and wonders of life” (248-49).

## The Sense of Wonder<sup>4</sup>

Karin Arndt (American Clinical Psychologist)

Living as we do in an almost exclusively human-centric and human-made bubble, we forget how to truly see the world outside, a world which is turned into material objects – natural “resources.” We forget that, as animals, the world of nature is our home. That forgetting has serious consequences – for the health of the non-human natural world and for human psychological health. Something feels wrong or off. We feel a “core restlessness,” a deep-seated sense of homelessness. Bill Plotkin (psychotherapist, wilderness guide) finds:

“As a psychotherapist... I believe that one of the root problems for nearly all the people I ever worked with in therapy was this core restlessness, this core sense of ‘I don't really belong here, I'm not at home,’ which we translate in our conscious minds to things like ‘I don't fit into human society, no one really loves me, I'm not worthy,’ and so on.”

Plotkin argues that this core restlessness, this homelessness, results from our disconnection from nature. Our sense of wonder is the key to reconnection, he says: “Reawakening the sense of wonder can help heal a sense of alienation and loneliness. In working toward the recovery of a sense of wonder, we are cultivating an ability to see beyond ourselves, beyond the limits of the human bubble.”

Even small steps toward reviving our sense of wonder can make a big difference. One pathway toward the revival of wonder is the practice of solitary retreat in a wilderness or semi-wilderness setting.

Practicing silence, solitude, and simplicity for days or weeks on end can help a person revive fundamental aspects of her humanity long lost to consciousness over the course of becoming an adult. One of those aspects is the sense of wonder in the face of the natural world.

At a certain point during their retreats, after the chattering of their minds quieted down, the women I studied experienced a marked opening in their perception and a greater ability to be present to the world around them and experience it as more fully alive and participative – as a community of subjects in their own right, rather than a collection of objects. The world appeared in a richer and increasingly enchanted light.

The women found themselves standing in awe as they took in the larger conversation all around them – the sound of snow melting, the deep blue of twilight, the dance of gathering storm clouds, the crying of foxes at night, the reflections in raindrops on fallen leaves. The women felt increasingly more alive, more at home in the natural world, and more comfortable in their own skin.

The sense of wonder is the ability to be present to the world and touched by that world. It's about feeling awe in the face of the Other. Sometimes we have to step aside from the human matrix, to pierce the bubble that encapsulates us, to reacquaint ourselves with all the Others and to be reminded of the larger tapestry into which we are woven.

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<sup>4</sup> Abridged, adapted from: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hut-her-own/201707/the-sense-wonder>



### **Creation: A Poem on Wonder and Awe**

Sally Boeckholt

The gingko tree's yellow leaves fall all at  
once,

A rainfall of gold.

Noticing this, I think about us,

Humans in the world

Creating:

Automobiles, flannel sheets, finger  
paintings.

This cup in my hand:

Brought forth from wet clay,

Turned on the wheel between the artist's  
hands.

Fired and glazed and fired again,

Created for my hands to cradle this cold  
morning.

Human creation going on all around me,

Meals for one another, songs on guitars

Forts built with blankets,

Plans for a revolution.

Every one of us alive in this moment,

Creating our lives, an intricate web.

Across time and space

Our strands connect and become the  
world.

### **Wonder and Awe**

Sarah Lauer

I want to notice things soul-wise,  
to witness the divinity in cathedralled  
anthills, the marvels of engineering,  
the unhurried, the unworried, the being

I want to recapture *unknowing*,  
to bathe in the glow of cosmic  
uncertainty,

be present in the miracles of this moment,  
at ease in the tiny vastness of my life

How wondrous would this life be  
if I reveled in my starstuff connectedness,  
the beauty of all that I am  
in all that will ever be?

## Questions

1. When you were young, was your sense of wonder encouraged or squashed? How is the legacy of that playing out today? How do you want to change that legacy? Or build on it?
2. Do you take the time for wonder and awe? How might you need to be more intentional about making room for wonder?
3. What takes the wonder out of your holiday season? How are you going to prevent that from happening again this year?
4. Are there objects, places, or questions that used to evoke wonder in you, and now don't? Why the change? Are you ok with that?
5. For some, a sense of awe can be so overwhelming or intense, it feels like fear. How have you experienced the connections of fear and awe in your life?
6. Are you a collector, appreciator, seeker, integrator or ignorer of moments of awe? Do you seek them out or just notice them when they come along? Do they seem to pass you by? Or when they do cross your path, do they slip through your fingers and evaporate into the air?
7. John Milton writes about "encounters and transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world." Has this been true for you?
8. What's something you know now about awe that you didn't know when you were 18 years old?
9. When was the last time you were "wholly dissolved"? Is this what awe feels like to you?
10. Does a life without awe count? Do you believe that human beings are in some sense "created for awe?" Do we have a "responsibility to awe"?
11. Do you prefer child-like wonder or adult-like wonder?
12. For you, is it really more about "aww" than "awe"?

## Spiritual Exercise

### Option A.

Photography Assignment: Capture Awe on Your Camera (or phone)

Over the next few weeks before your group meeting, try to capture a handful of pictures of awe in action. This might be:

- snapping a picture of your child's face mesmerized by a spider web in the woods or
- a frog jumping across the road. Or maybe
- your spouse's face as ze stares intently and joyfully at your 14-year-old making a save on the volleyball court or singing in zir school play.

It might also be a picture of the awe-inspiring event itself:

- that perfect sunset; or
- a clear night sky splashed with stars; or
- an intimidating wall of clouds rolling in and making way for a storm; or maybe it's a picture of
- your leg and hip, walking again--painlessly--after a hip replacement that has left you more amazed and grateful than you can say; or maybe it's just
- slipping into your 5-year-old child or grandchild's room and snapping a shot of zir face while ze sleeps.

After you've collected your 5 or 6 favorite pictures, spend some time before your group looking for commonalities. What about them reflect your unique definition of awe? Come ready to share your pics and what they've taught you.

### Option B.

Take a Walk Until the World Lights Up

You might want to start early in the morning or in the evening right after dinner. You could also set aside a Saturday afternoon. Whenever you start, your one rule is that you can't stop until awe has crossed your path. In a sense, this exercise is an act of faith – faith that awe is scattered all over the place waiting for us to notice it rather than believing that awe is this one rare thing that only shows up a precious few times in our lives. Come to your group prepared to talk not only about how long a walk you had to go on, but also about how you got yourself into a space to see and notice what was waiting for you.

Faithyna's Family Page  
Faithyna Leonard

As we step into this magical holiday season, we invite you to explore the theme of Awe & Wonder. This time of year encourages us to pause and marvel at the beauty around us—the sparkle of holiday lights, the crunch of snow underfoot, and the joy of sharing time with loved ones.

This season is an opportunity to create memories that spark curiosity and joy in our children, and to rediscover the beauty and wonder in our own lives.

As you gather around the tree, the fireplace, or a shared table, we hope you find moments of quiet awe and joyful wonder this holiday season. Whether through stories, traditions, or spontaneous adventures, may you discover the beauty of the season anew.

Warm wishes for a holiday season filled with joy, wonder, and cherished memories.

We will be reflecting on our them through these stories during service:

- Matthew Swanson, *Everywhere Wonder*. A delightful tale reminding us to find beauty and wonder in both extraordinary places and the everyday moments that surround us.
- K. A. Holt, *I Wonder*. A celebration of curiosity, encouraging children (and adults!) to embrace the questions that help us see the world in new ways.
- Laura Whiffler, *A World Wonder*. A gentle exploration of the wonders of the world, from the sky above to the earth below, reminding us of the beauty in nature.
- Claire Keane, *Little Wonder*. A whimsical tale of a young girl discovering the magic in the small moments of life, showing how wonder can be found everywhere.

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**Check Out.** What overall message stands out for you?

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**Chalice Extinguishing.** Words of Albert Einstein: “There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle.”

*Connecting* is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Text not otherwise attributed is by Rev. Meredith Garmon. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2025 Jan: Vow.