

## The Importance of Awe



Luke 9:28 "Jesus took with him Peter and John and James, and went up on the mountain to pray. And while he was praying, the appearance of his face changed, and his clothes became dazzling white. Suddenly they saw two men, Moses and Elijah, talking to him."

It was described to me as the one place on Earth, that when you actually see it, it is always even more impressive than you could have imagined. And that was true. I first saw the Grand Canyon when I was an Explorer Scout in High School. I saw it again when I camped there with my youngest son and Lisa one Spring break during his High School years. And then Lisa and my two sons and I saw it up close, when ten years ago we hiked from the South Rim of the Grand Canyon down to Phantom Ranch at the bottom, and then up the North Rim the next day, an awesome and

unforgettable experience. The Grand Canyon is so much larger and so much grander than we can imagine. I was overwhelmed when I first saw it. At the time, I could not name exactly what it was that I was feeling --- a catching of the breath, a repeated muttering of oh my God, there was a certain giddiness and lightheadedness --- but looking back now, I know that what I was feeling is what neuroscientists call "awe."

And we humans have a distinctive ability to feel 'awe.' Awe, say researchers who study the emotion, has two fundamental components. First, it is simply a response to encountering something more vast, more complex, or more mind-blowing than we had conceived of either physically or conceptually, like my experience of the Grand Canyon or the experience of the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration in today's Gospel. The experience of awe produces what one scientist called "little earthquakes in the mind." Awe literally alters the structure of our brains each time we experience it. Awe thus changes the way we perceive the world --- which is why it matters so much in our everyday lives that we can and do feel awe. One might even call the feeling of awe, a religious experience.

To understand the concept of awe, it helps to know how the brain usually responds to what we perceive in our ever day 'mundane' existence. Over the course of our lives, our brains learn and encode what "normal" is for us and then predict what

we think should happen next, based on our internal understanding of the world. That prediction of what happens next guides our behavior. "It is crucial for our being able to function in this incredibly complicated world," said an associate professor of social psychology at Arizona State University. "But (the regular functioning of our brain) does (also) narrow our perspective, it limits our vision. And it simply doesn't account for everything we experience and see," she writes. Awe, then, might be our most undervalued emotion, as it can change our underlying understanding of the real world, as we shockingly perceive more and more of what is really out there. Awe then thus changes our perception of ourselves and of the world, again and again as we feel it, as all true religious experiences do.

Positive experiences of awe have also been found to increase our feeling of well-being, life satisfaction, and sense of meaning. By becoming less attuned to ourselves and more attuned to the rest of the world, awe helps us re-contextualize ourselves, says an associate professor of psychological science at the University of California at Irvine. "It helps make you feel like there's more going on in the world than just you. And it gives you that sense of being a part of something much larger than yourself," he said. "Awe leads people to feel more connected with others and to identify with more universal categories," as opposed to our more individualistic, limited

ones, which focus more on self and the mundane world of our everyday living.

We know that by adulthood, we move through the world pretty immersed in our own concerns, in our own minutiae of the day-to-day life, our own responsibilities, and it can be hard to keep a sense of perspective about how that fits into the grander scheme of things. Experiencing more awe is associated with living healthier and more meaningful lives. A 2021 study reported that feeling more awe is correlated with lowered levels of daily stress and lower levels of inflammation. In different studies, when researchers induced awe in participants in laboratories, people behaved more pro-socially, being more likely to help out others, to donate more money than before, and to volunteer more time for strangers.

Emerging research shows that experiencing awe may make us more curious, more creative, and more compassionate as people. And in turn, recent studies have found, awe-prone people may be more inquisitive about life. But alas, the experience of 'awe' is also disquieting, and unsettling of our normal mundane living, and so it is scary for us at times. Thus, there are people who consciously or unconsciously avoid the experiences of awe, and live in the safety of their everyday mundane existence. --- ---- So then, are we awe-prone people or not, I ask? Are we open to experience more than we imagine, or do we prefer the

safety and security of everyday living and seek the avoidance of awe?

For in the end, we don't need to visit the Grand Canyon, or to witness the birth of our child, or to hold a dying person in our arms, or float adrift in the middle of the Pacific Ocean to feel awe. We just have to be open to the experience of awe, again and again in our lives. For awe-inspiring reality is all around us, if we are willing to perceive it. One neuroscientist said, "I think you can have your mind blown in more minuscule ways in even everyday settings." While more research needs to be done on what best elicits awe, many paths lead to awe, with one scientist offers these suggestions:

- Viewing something giant, such as a mountain range or the vastness of the night sky.
- Discovering something tiny, such as the worlds seen through a microscope.
- Contemplating a piece of music or (re)discovering a piece of art.
- Taking "awe walks" through your neighborhood or in nature, nature which is a never-ending source of awe.

His favorite suggestion, though, is to just take a walk out the door. Once you step outside, pick a random number between 1 and 100. Take that number of steps, and then look around you. Awe is

everywhere. If you look around to find something inspiring and majestic, odds are you will, he said. For the awe-inspiring, in the end, is within us, in our openness to the experience, or not, again and again in our lives.

Your brain – 80 billion-some neurons relaying electrical and chemical signals across approximately 100 trillion connections – is sensing, feeling, deciding, evaluating, planning, adjusting, and keeping you alive. And simply considering all these concurrent acts and duties at this very moment, we may even experience a twinge of awe right now, an important feeling that our brain allows us to experience if we are but open to it – and it is also a source of the mystery and magic of life. And that is pretty awesome.

Religions through the centuries have recorded a variety of extraordinary experiences, like the Mount of Transfiguration, or Moses' facing shining after his encounter with the burning bush, stories of halos or auras, or miraculous healings, or reincarnation, or the stilling of storms, or raising the dead, with spirits and ghosts, or simply strange revelations or visions of the future. On this Feast of the Transfiguration, I wonder what part our openness to 'awe' plays in our ability to experience and understand these happenings, or do we limit ourselves, and miss out on the magic all around us. AMEN.