



## Flawed to Flawless

(Continued from page 1) **Scratched Diamond** pieces.

Finally, the last gemcutter looked at the diamond closely, gazing at it from every angle.

The king watched breathlessly as the gemcutter turned the diamond over and over, pursing his lips, squinting, and shaking his head.

Suddenly the gemcutter's face broke into a big smile. "I know how to fix this, your majesty!" he exclaimed. "Leave it to me. In two-weeks' time, I will return your diamond to you, better than ever. However, you may not visit me during this time or check on my progress. You must wait until it is finished."

The king was very excited. Soon his flawless diamond would be back with his other lovely things, perfect again, the scratch removed. It took all the king's willpower to resist the temptation to visit the gemcutter to watch him work.

As for the gemcutter, day after day, night after night, he brought out his tools to fix that diamond. Bit by bit, he worked on that scratch. It was slow, tedious work. He knew he had to work carefully or the diamond could crack into pieces.

Finally, the gemcutter was finished. Carefully, he wrapped the diamond in cloth to protect it, and he brought it before the king.

"Here it is, your majesty," he said. With a flourish he opened the cloth and presented the diamond.

The king gasped in awe at what he saw. Where there had once been a deep scratch, a horrible flaw in his precious diamond, there was now an exquisitely beautiful flower carved into the diamond. Unable to remove the scratch from the diamond, the gemcutter had, instead, turned the flaw into something beautiful.

The king loved his diamond more than ever. Now when he went to hold it in his hands and gaze upon it, he was reminded that even something imperfect or ugly or flawed can become something exquisitely beautiful.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveguide/session5/168619.shtml>

## Let Us Believe

### Mysticism, but...

Conrad Aiken (1889-1973)

*Conrad Aiken was a Unitarian, and his maternal grandfather, William James Potter, was a Unitarian minister in New Bedford, MA. "Time in the Rock: Preludes to Definition" was a serial poem written between 1932 and 1936, and consisted of 96 parts expressing themes like transformation.*

"Mysticism, but let us have no words, / angels, but let us have no fantasies, / churches, but let us have no creeds, / no dead gods hung in crosses in shop, / nor beads nor prayers nor faith nor sin nor penance: / and yet, let us believe, let us believe.

Let it be the flower / seen by the child for the first time, plucked without / thought / broken for love and as soon forgotten:

And the angels, let them be our friends, / used for our needs with selfish simplicity, / broken for love and as soon forgotten;

And let the churches be our houses / defiled daily, loud with discord, — / where the dead gods that were ourselves may hang, / our outgrown gods on every wall; / Christ on the mantelpiece, with downcast eyes; / Buddha above the stove; / the Holy Ghost by the hat rack, and God himself / staring like Narcissus from the mirror, / clad in a raincoat, and with hat and gloves.

Mysticism, but let it be a flower, / let



it be the hand that reaches for the flower, / let it be the flower that imagined the first hand, / let it be the space that removed itself to give place / for the hand that reaches, the flower to be reached — / let it be self displacing self / as quietly as a child lifts a pebble, / as softly as a flower decides to fall, — / self replacing self / as seed follows flower to earth."

Source: <http://poetshouse.blogspot.com/2006/07/conrad-aiken.html>

## Moral Beauty

### Eight Ways to Awe

Psychologist Dacher Keltner has identified 8 ways to experience awe.

**Witness other people's moral beauty:** Moral beauty consists of humanitarian acts, virtue, and/or talent that people find awe-inspiring. Consider Anne Herbert's admonition to "practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty." Moral beauty refers to virtues like courage and compassion, the power of social movements, the charisma of movement leaders, and the skills exhibited in venues like the Olympics, symphonies, etc.

**Move in unison with others:** This can be as simple as running or dancing with others and getting lost in the experience. Look at the faces of people singing in a flash mob or of those watching a hard-fought soccer match when their team scores and wins in the last minute to appreciate such communal experiences.

**Get out in nature:** It is not just getting out in nature, but attending to the experience. It is easy to be awed by walking among redwoods, but awe also awaits us in a walk in a park, along a stream, or in foothills if, as ee cummings wrote, "the ears of my ears awake" and "the eyes of my eyes are open...."

**Listen to or create music:** Attending a symphony or rock concert, singing in a choir, or playing an instrument, alone or with others can result in feeling awe, especially if the music is moving.

**Take in visual art or film:** Visits to art galleries or museums, public art exhibits, and movies, especially those with stunning visual elements, can all elicit awe.

**Seek out a spiritual or religious experience:** Moving worship and rituals can result in awe, as can spiritual practices, especially meditation and mindfulness, as they are deepened over time.

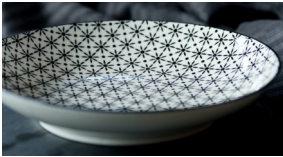
**Consider a big idea:** Big ideas in politics, philosophy, science, etc. can elicit awe as they disrupt one's current understandings. The same can be true of great poetry that eludes easy interpretation.

**Witness birth and death:** The reality of birth and death can lead to feelings of awe when witnessed directly, or indirectly, through art and literature.

Source: Touchstones

# Readings from the Common Bowl

**Day 1:** "He who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed." Albert Einstein



**Day 2:** "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, ...the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me." Immanuel Kant

**Day 3:** "I'd take the awe of understanding over the awe of ignorance any day." Douglas Adams

**Day 4:** "Here is what we seek: a compassion that can stand in awe at what the poor have to carry rather than stand in judgment at how they carry it." Gregory Boyle

**Day 5:** "People are just as wonderful as sunsets.... When I look at a sunset, I don't find myself saying, 'Soften the orange a bit on the right-hand corner.' I don't try to control a sunset. I watch with awe as it unfolds." Carl Rogers

**Day 6:** "The feeling of awed wonder that science can give us is one of the highest experiences of which the human psyche is capable." Richard Dawkins

**Day 7:** "I need a world filled with wonder, with awe, with awful things. I couldn't exist in a world devoid of marvels, even if the marvels are terrible marvels." Caitlin R. Kiernan

**Day 8:** "I have never been especially impressed by the heroics of people convinced they are about to change the world. I am more awed by those who struggle to make one small difference." Ellen Goodman

**Day 9:** "People who've had any genuine spiritual experience always know that they don't know. They are utterly humbled before mystery. They are in awe before the abyss of it all...." Richard Rohr

**Day 10:** "I don't try to imagine a personal God; it suffices to stand in awe at the structure of the world, insofar as it allows our inadequate senses to appreciate it." Albert Einstein

**Day 11:** "Cosmos is a Greek word for the order of the universe. It is, in a way, the opposite of Chaos. It implies the deep in-

terconnectedness of all things. It conveys awe for the intricate and subtle way in which the universe is put together." Carl Sagan

**Day 12:** "One cannot be awed who has no soul. Just as one cannot be brave who has no fear." Marissa Meyer

**Day 13:** "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." Bianca Sparacino

**Day 14:** "The creative act is not hanging on, but yielding to ...creative movement. Awe is what moves us forward." Joseph Campbell

**Day 15:** "I need for there to be something bigger than me. I need someone to put awe inside me...." Donald Miller

**Day 16:** "Anything that generates a sense of awe may be a source of spirituality. Science does this in spades." Michael Shermer



**Day 17:** "Respectful communication under conflict or opposition is an essential and truly awe-inspiring ability." Bryant McGill

**Day 18:** "Maybe love was some combination of friendship and infatuation. A deeply felt affection accompanied by a certain sort of awe." Chinelo Okparanta

**Day 19:** "...you find yourself studying the fine colors on the river, you feel wonder and awe at the setting of the sun, and you are filled with a hard, aching love for how the world could be and always should be, but now is not." Tim O'Brien

**Day 20:** "Wonder and awe have gone out of your religions. You are prepared to accept the irrational, but not the transcendent." G. Willow Wilson

**Day 21:** "A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe

as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths." Carl Sagan

**Day 22:** "Gratitude bestows reverence, allowing us to encounter everyday epiphanies, those transcendent moments of awe that change forever how we experience life and the world." Sarah Ban Breathnach

**Day 23:** "Give me belonging, give me identity, give me continuity, but give me transcendence and mystery and awe all in one." Esther Perel

**Day 24:** "Art is an expression of joy and awe. It is not an attempt to share one's virtues and accomplishments with the audience, but an act of selfless spirit." David Mamet

**Day 25:** "At heart, science is the quest for awesome—the literal awe that you feel when you understand something profound for the first time." Sean Carroll

**Day 26:** "Does a wolf know how beautiful she is when she sleeps? Does a feline know what beautiful shapes she makes when she sits? Is a bird awed by the sound it hears when it snaps open its wings?" Clarissa Pinkola Estés

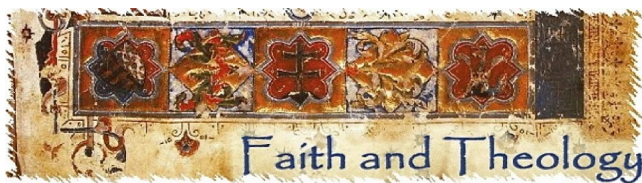
**Day 27:** "We prematurely write off people as failures. We are too much in awe of those who succeed and far too dismissive of those who fail." Malcolm Gladwell

**Day 28:** "See the world through the eyes of your inner child. The eyes that sparkle in awe and amazement as they see love, magic, and mystery in the most ordinary things." Henna Sohail

**Day 29:** "Science makes people reach selflessly for truth and objectivity; it teaches people to accept reality, with wonder and admiration, not to mention the deep awe and joy that the natural order of things brings to the true scientist." Lise Meitner

**Day 30:** "...now I know my capacity for awe is infinite: this thirst is permanent, the well bottomless, my good fortune vast." Elizabeth Alexander

**Day 31:** "All men owe honor to the poets—honor and awe; for they are dearest to the Muse who puts upon their lips the ways of life." Homer



## Faith and Theology

### An Awe-Full Faith

Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) wrote, "The meaning of awe is to realize that life takes place under wide horizons, horizons that range beyond the span of an individual life or even the life of a nation, a generation, or an era. Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine, to sense in small things the beginning of infinite significance, to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal."

One wonders if Heschel felt awe when he marched with Martin Luther King, Jr. in Selma in March 1965. Likely, yes. When Heschel returned from Selma he was asked, "Did you find much time to pray when you were in Selma?" He responded, "I felt my legs were praying."

For Heschel, there were two ways of being in the world: expediency and awe. In the way of expediency, "we accumulate information in order to dominate." Expediency is about taking what we can from the world and from others. In the way of awe, "we deepen our appreciation in order to respond." Through awe, we focus on how we can serve, like praying with one's legs while marching in Selma.

Heschel taught that, "Awe precedes faith; it is at the root of faith. We must grow in awe in order to reach faith. We must be guided by awe to be worthy of faith. Awe rather than faith is the cardinal attitude..." Experiences prompting awe in ancient Judaism include Abraham and Sarah being visited by three men near the trees of Mamre who Abraham later learned were angels; Jacob wrestling all night with an angel to secure a blessing; Moses encountering Yaweh in the burning bush on Mount Horeb, and the plagues visited against the Egyptians; Elijah being transported to heaven in a whirlwind; God speaking twice to Job out of a whirlwind; and more.

There are also awe-inspiring examples in the life of Jesus: feeding 5,000 with five loaves of bread and two fish; raising Lazarus from the dead and instances of healing; calming the storm on the water

by rebuking the wind; walking on water; and more.

Saul, on the road to Damascus, was overcome by a bright light and a voice commanding him to convert, leaving him blind for three days until he was baptized by Ananias and took the name Paul.

While not obvious, it is possible that Siddhartha, the Buddha to be, experienced awe as dread as he encountered suffering represented by sickness, old age, and death on trips outside the palace with his charioteer Channa. We also have Muhammad who was visited by the angel Gabriel in a cave on Mount Hira.



Beyond these "awesome" encounters, we have the mystics who experience awe intimately as they seek union with the divine; those who use spiritual practice to touch life more deeply, especially through mindfulness; those whose cathedral is nature and leave us breadcrumbs to follow through their writing, photographs, and art like Thoreau, Ansel Adams, Annie Dillard, Georgia O'Keefe, Terry Tempest Williams, Wendell Berry, Mary Oliver, etc.; those scientists like Galileo, Einstein, Rachel Carson, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins, and so many more, who have experienced profound awe as a part of their work; and all those whose powerful self-transcendent experiences have resulted in experiencing awe, and being changed in the process.

Our own faith is grounded in seven principles and six sources. Though the sources receive less attention, they merit our thoughtful attention. Our first source aligns with Heschel's assertion that awe precedes faith: *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder, affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.* Instructive in this is

(Continued on page 8)

## The Need for Awe

### Awe & Scientific Imagination

Helen De Cruz

*In awe, we hold fast to nature's strangeness and open up to the unknown. No wonder it's central to the scientific imagination.*

When a scientific paradigm breaks down, scientists need to make a leap into the unknown. These are moments of revolution ...when the scientists' worldview becomes untenable and the agreed-upon and accepted truths of a particular discipline are radically called into question. Beloved theories are revealed to have been built upon sand. Explanations that held up for hundreds of years are now dismissed. A particular and productive way of looking at the world turns out to be erroneous in its essentials. The great scientific revolutions ...are times of great uncertainty, when cool, disinterested reason alone doesn't help scientists move forward because so many of their usual assumptions about how their scientific discipline is done turn out to be flawed. So, they need to make a leap, not knowing where they will land.

...As for which emotion most helps



scientists, I have a particular one in mind: awe. ...Awe ...focuses attention away from yourself and makes you think outside of your usual thought patterns.

...Many scientists have noted in their autobiographical writings how their sense of awe drove their scientific work.

...Awe is required not only for the day-to-day working of science, but is also crucial to help reorient scientists' thinking in times of paradigm change. It provides constant emotional motivation for scientists to continue their work, and it instills openness to scientific ideas.... While precision and rigor are important, the emotional drive of awe is what matters—it might be ...our only path to knowledge and wisdom.

Source: <https://aeon.co/essays/how-awe-drives-scientists-to-make-a-leap-into-the-unknown>

## Children Need Awe

Deborah Farmer Kris

Psychologist Dacher Keltner ...has spent years studying the beneficial effects of awe on our physical, mental, and emotional well-being. ...With pediatric health experts raising the alarm about children's mental health, helping kids experience a little more awe ... could become part of our collective response. ...Children and adolescents need regular PDF—playtime, downtime, and family time....

... "How do you find awe? You allow unstructured time. How do you find awe? You wander. You drift through. You take a walk with no aim," Keltner says. "How do you find awe? You slow things down. You allow for mystery and open questions rather than test-driven answers. You allow children to engage in the humanities of dance and visual art and music." Unfortunately, today's highly structured, competition-oriented child-rearing culture is largely a "failure in awe," Keltner says. If every hour is filled..., then children ...have less time to wonder, wander, or tune in to their emotions and surroundings.

...You don't have to take your kids to the Grand Canyon or stand in the Sistine Chapel to experience awe, Keltner says. People commonly feel awe when they spend time in nature, listen to or make music, view or create art, contemplate big ideas, engage in meaningful rituals or enjoy community experiences that make them feel as if they're a part of something larger than themselves.

...Slightly reframing something can turn an everyday activity into a more healing one.... "How do I go find awe right around me, perhaps just by going on a walk?" Keltner says. "Get outside, pause, reflect, slow down."

Source: [https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/on-parenting/children-awe-emotion/2021/11/29/0f78a4b0-4c8e-11ec-b0b0-766bbe79347\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/on-parenting/children-awe-emotion/2021/11/29/0f78a4b0-4c8e-11ec-b0b0-766bbe79347_story.html)

## Mind-Expanding Magic

Jenny Friedman

It's worth putting aside your schedule and unplugging your devices to search out some mind-expanding magic with your child.

**Get out in nature. It is the ultimate in awe.** Take a hike to see a waterfall, view the night sky away from city lights, or find the best fall color.

**Awe-inspiring experiences aren't always supersized.** Take time to notice the beauty of small things—exquisite wildflowers, delicately patterned insects, intricate lichen formations.

**Focus on the world differently.** Look through a camera or binoculars as you walk through the woods (or even a paper towel roll!). Use a simple hand lens to focus on the small and inconspicuous by day; use a flashlight to see what lurks in the darkness by night.

**Whether indoors or out, follow your children's lead, pursuing what intrigues them at the moment.** Marvel at their curiosity and let it guide you.

**Slow down.** Lie on your back and listen to a great song. Stare at one piece of art for as long as possible, then talk about what you see.

Source: <https://www.doinggoodtogether.org/dgt-newsletter/cultivating-wonder-and-awe-in-our-children>

## Family Activity: Awe Talk

Model a sense of amazement for even the smallest wonders. Comment out loud to your children about the astonishing things you see, hear and feel in nature—and in your everyday life.

At dinner or when riding in the car, share your inspiring moments and ask family members to do the same. Ask your children what they wonder about.



Wonder out loud yourself: "I wonder ...how far away those stars are. I wonder how deep this lake is. I wonder why zebras have stripes."

Ask open-ended, thought-provoking questions to stimulate your child's sense of discovery and wonder: "Why do you think people want to travel to space? What do you think it would be like?"

Source: <https://www.doinggoodtogether.org/dgt-newsletter/cultivating-wonder-and-awe-in-our-children>

## Thirsty For Wonder

Mirabai Starr

Contemplative life flows in a circular pattern: awe provokes introspection, which invokes awe.

Maybe you're making dinner and you step outside to snip chives from the kitchen garden just as the harvest moon is rising over the eastern-slopes. She is full and golden,

like one of those pregnant women who radiate



from within. Suddenly you cannot bear the beauty. Scissors suspended in your hand, tears pooling at the corners of your eyes, you nearly quit breathing. Your gaze softens, and the edges of your individual identity fade. You are absorbed into the heart of the moon. It feels natural, and there is no other place you'd rather be. But the onions are burning, and so you turn away and cut your herbs and go back inside. You resume stirring the sauce and setting the table.

This is not the first time you have disappeared into something beautiful. You have experienced ...holding your daughter's hand as she labored to give birth to your grandson; when you curled up in bed with your dying friend.... You welcome unknowingness.

Which is why seemingly ordinary moments like moonrises undo you. The veil has been pulled back. Everything feels inexhaustibly holy.

...So, sit down to meditate not only because it helps you to find rest in the arms of the formless Beloved, but also because it increases your chance of being stunned by beauty when you get back up. Encounters with the sacred that radiate from the core of the ordinary embolden you to cultivate stillness and simple awareness. In the midst of a world that is begging you to distract yourself, this is no easy practice. ...You are thirsty for wonder.

Source: <https://www.awakin.org/v2/read/view.php?tid=2421>

# Direct Experience of Transcending Mystery

## (Continued from page 1) Introduction

reality outside the self that is overwhelming. Otto described this experience using a Latin term *Mysterium* (a “mystery”) *tremendum* (that is “terrifying”) *et fascinans* (and “fascinating”).

Otto’s work informed the emerging field of the phenomenology of religion, which explores the experiential aspect of religion, including considerations of awe. This relates to our first source: *Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder [i.e., awe], affirmed in all cultures, which moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life.* While awe and wonder are often used as synonyms, they are distinct, though related. Awe is our emotional response to a powerful or moving experience, while wonder involves reflecting about that experience.

Two notable figures in the field of the phenomenology of religion were Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890-1950) and Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), a professor at the University of Chicago (1956-1983). (Eliade had an office at Meadville-Lombard Theological School and taught many Unitarian Universalist theological students.) The focus for van der Leeuw was three-fold: the subjective experience in response to an encounter with an overpowering “wholly-other;” how it was expressed, that is as dreadful awe and/or wonderful fascination; and, then, the understanding of the experience of transcendence.

Eliade’s focus was the significance of religious experience as awe-inspiring and/or terrifying encounters with the wholly-other in natural objects, life processes, sacred space (i.e., religious sites), and sacred time (i.e., religious rituals).

The emotion of awe is experienced on a continuum from ordinary to extraordinary, from mild to overwhelming, and from fascinating to terrifying.

Awe also became a focus in psychology. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (1902), William James (1842-1910) focused on narratives of conversion experiences and mysticism.

The book was based on the *Gifford Lectures* that he delivered at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902.

James, the “Father of American psychology,” taught the first psychology course in the United States.

The background to the lectures is illuminating. James undertook a hiking odyssey through the high peaks of the Adirondacks in the summer of 1898 to seek awe-filled experiences to inform his work on the lectures. As Charles Bergland writes, “He was in search of a first-hand experience to reaffirm his belief that the psychological and philosophical study of religion should focus on the direct personal experience of ‘numinousness,’ or union with something ‘beyond,’ rather than on ...biblical texts...”



The experience he sought came after his nearly 10-mile hike on July 7, 1898 up Mount Marcy (5,344 feet), followed by the steep descent to Panther Gorge (2,100 feet below the summit). This is among the most remote destinations in the *High Peaks Wilderness* in the Adirondacks. That night, as James wrote in a letter to his wife, Alice, two days later, he got up and walked out to the brook that drains the gorge: “The moon rose and hung above the scene, leaving a few of the larger stars visible, and I entered into a state of spiritual alertness of the most vital description. The influences of Nature, ... the problem of the Edinburgh lectures, ... fermented within me till it became a regular *Walpurgis nacht*,” which, in German lore, is the night before May Day when spirits walk the earth. As often happens, James could not adequately describe his awe-filled experience that night at Panther Gorge, but it resulted in an understanding of the numinous, not as an academic concept or as something unique and privileged, but as a common aspect of human consciousness and a reality of life.

Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) devel-

oped a *Hierarchy of Needs* that placed self-actualization at the top of his pyramid, with esteem below it, then love/belonging, then safety, and, finally, physical needs at the bottom. For Maslow, self-actualization is often facilitated by peak experiences. He documented 16 aspects of peak experiences including a sense of unity of the self, oneness with the environment, timelessness, and the merging of I and other. Near the end of his life, Maslow added self-transcendence above self-actualization. As Maslow wrote, “Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive or holistic levels of human consciousness, behaving, and relating...” Self-

transcendence is more congruent with peak experiences than self-actualization. Maslow noted that, “The emotional reaction in the peak experience has a special flavor of wonder, of awe, of reverence, of humility and surrender....”

Awe is categorized as a self-transcendent emotion along with compassion and gratitude. These three are self-transcendent because they move us beyond the self, beyond being self-absorbed or preoccupied. We notice the “other,” whether as a commanding aspect of nature, a compelling personality, or a moving event and respond with awe.

In a 2003 paper, psychologists Dacher Keltner and Jonathan Haidt presented a conceptual approach to awe that involved “perceived vastness,” whether spatially, perceptually, or conceptually vast that evokes a diminished sense of self, as well as a “need for cognitive accommodation,” the need to make sense of the experience. They proposed the five categories of awe: threat, beauty, ability, virtue, and the supernatural. Often, awe involves moral beauty (see *Eight Ways to Awe* on page 2). Their work, along with that of other psychologists, is summarized in the 2018 publication, *The Science of Awe* by Summer Allen, Ph.D. (See [https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-ITF\\_White\\_Paper-Awe\\_FINAL.pdf](https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/GGSC-ITF_White_Paper-Awe_FINAL.pdf)) Awe, involving direct experience of mystery, may be the emotion that makes us uniquely human, while inviting us to touch the divine.

### Ordinary Awe

Omid Safi

It is easy to love the extraordinary. ... to pursue a spiritual path that is about the sensory overload of the extraordinary. ...to fall in love with spiritual practices that lead one to transcendence and ecstasy. ...to soar. ...to seek the "high."

...But what does that say about the ordinary? Where does that leave the everyday? How do we experience ...the far less dramatic, ...the "boring" words like discipline, ritual, community—these are where the ideals of our spiritual path meet the reality of our daily lives.

Let us love the ordinary. ...Let us cherish the everyday, the every-breath, the where we are.

...Awe is such a quintessentially marvelous quality of living an enchanted life. Awe, like love, is ...above all, a way of being in the world. It is a way of being ...soulfully.

...This model of spirituality of the ordinary begins by not taking things for granted. ...The "ordinary" is already luminous.

...May we get back to the ordinary, the breath by breath, and the living in each moment fully. Inhabiting each moment and seeking the wonder therein. The refusal to let life descend down to a cycle of the mundane, the insistence of seeking awe in the ordinary....



...This is the wisdom that the Muslim sages point us to.... Farīd al-Dīn 'Attār stated: "Every breath / each breath / of your life / is a precious jewel."

...Let us seek the beauty in the every-breath moments. Let us live an "awesome" life in each breath. May we have an "awful" life, a life filled awe, in the most ordinary of moments.

Source: <https://onbeing.org/blog/omid-safi-the-spirituality-of-the-ordinary-is-luminous/>

### In Awe of a World Beyond Ourselves

The U.S. National Park System encompasses 423 sites, including 63 national parks. Parks Canada manages 224 sites, including 47 national parks. Yellowstone National Park was the first national park (1872) in the U.S. In Canada, Banff National Park was created in 1885. Both Yellowstone and Banff are UNESCO World Heritage sites. While the pandemic caused a decline, the highest recent annual number of visitors in the U.S. reached 331 million, and 25 million in Canada.



John Muir, often called Father of the United States National Park System, and co-founder of the Sierra Club, was involved in establishing Yosemite (1890), Sequoia (1890), Mount Rainier (1899), and Grand Canyon (1908) National Parks.

Terry Tempest Williams' 2016 book, *The Hour of Land: A Personal Topography of America's National Parks*, is based on her visits to 12 national parks. Of this, Williams writes, "Perhaps it is not so much what we learn that matters in these moments of awe and wonder, but what we feel in relationship to a world beyond ourselves, even beyond our own species."

Considering this world beyond ourselves, William continues, "I see our national parks as our ongoing struggle as a diverse people to create circles of reverence in a time of collective cynicism where we are wary of being moved by anything but our own clever perspective.... The nature of our national parks is bound to the nature of our own humility, our capacity to stay open and curious in a world that, instead, beckons closure through fear. She adds, "Our national parks are blood. They are more than scenery, they are portals and thresholds of wonder, an open door that swings

back and forth from our past to our future."

In turning toward awe, William notes, "No matter how much we try to manage and manipulate, orchestrate, or regulate our national parks, they will remain as the edge-scapes they are, existing on the boundaries between culture and wildness—improvisational spaces immune to the scripts of anyone. Wildlife in wildlands appear without notice. Awakened is what we become in their presence. Curiosity leads us forward on an unknown path.... For a precious moment we touch and taste life uninterrupted. Awe sneaks up on us like love. We surrender to the ecstatic outpouring of life before us." As she observes, awe can often lead to ecstasy, as well as to awakening and transcendence.

The "boundaries between culture and wildness," take us, fatefully, to issues of justice, at least in America, as we consider our national parks and more. Persistent racism continues to be identified. As an example, the Sierra Club has struggled with co-founder John Muir's racist attitudes toward Black and Indigenous people, as well as the sense that the Sierra Club is an organization created by and for whites, thus marginalizing people of color in environmental justice. Emma Gosalvez writes that Muir believed that, "Indigenous people 'seemed to have no right place in the landscape' despite the fact that they had lived there for thousands of years. He also believed that Indigenous peoples' villages and their ways of life should be destroyed in order to have 'unblighted, unredeemed wilderness.'"

David Treuer is an historian, English professor, and author. He is also *Ojibwe* from the Leech Lake Reservation in northern Minnesota. In a May 2021 article in *The Atlantic*, "Return the National Parks to the Tribes," Treuer writes, "The American West began with war [against Native Americans] but concluded with parks." As he observes, "The national parks are sometimes called 'America's best idea,' and there is much to recommend them. ...But all of them were founded on land

(Continued on page 8)

# Small Group Discussion Guide

## Theme for Discussion

### Awe

**Preparation prior to Gathering:** (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** "How is it that hardly any major religion has looked at science and concluded, "This is better than we thought! The Universe is much bigger than our prophets said, grander, more subtle, more elegant?" Instead, they say, "No, no, no! My god is a little god, and I want him to stay that way." A religion, old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the Universe as revealed by modern science might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths." *Carl Sagan*

**Chalice Lighting:** (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

**Read the Wisdom Story:** Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page one.

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

**Sitting In Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions*).

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**Reading:** "The redwoods, once seen, leave a mark or create a vision that stays with you always. No one has

ever successfully painted or photographed a redwood tree. The feeling they produce is not transferable. From them comes silence and awe. It's not only their unbelievable stature, nor the color which seems to shift and vary under your eyes, no, they are not like any trees we know, they are ambassadors from another time." *John Steinbeck*

**Living the Questions:** Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. As a child, do you remember experiencing awe that was fearful? Fascinating? What notable awe-experiences do you recall? What meaning, if any, did you associate with these experiences?
2. How have you accommodated to or made sense of your most powerful experiences of awe?
3. What sources of awe have been most meaningful to you? Nature? Science? Religion? Films? Music? Sports? Spiritual Practices? Architecture? Art? People? Something Else? Why? How?
4. Awe is often associated with the extraordinary. Has that been true for you? Why? Have you sought awe in the ordinary? Why or why not? If yes, how did you do it?
5. As you have gotten older, how has your capacity for awe evolved? Why?
6. What does awe do for you? Comfort? Make connections? Increase commitment? Live more deeply? Something else? What value do you place on awe?
7. What gets in the way of experiencing awe? Why? Can you overcome this?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

**Closing Words:** Rev. Philip R. Giles (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*

# Reverence for Life

(Continued from page 4) **Faith and Theology**

Albert Schweitzer's experience on his 1915 trip on the Ogoone River. He wrote, "Late on the third day, at the very moment when at sunset we were making our way through a herd of hippopotamuses, there flashed upon my mind, unforeseen and unsought: *Reverence for Life*. The iron door had yielded: The path in the thicket had become visible. Now I had found my way to the idea in which life-affirmation and ethics are contained side by side! Thus, to me, ethics is nothing else than reverence for life." As reverence is "a feeling or attitude of deep respect tinged with awe," Schweitzer's credo aligns with our 7<sup>th</sup> principle: *Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part*. Our 1<sup>st</sup> source and 7<sup>th</sup> principles place awe and its power for transformation at the center of our faith. Source: Touchstones

(Continued from page 7) **National Parks**

that was once ours, and many were created ...after we were removed, ...sometimes by an invading army ...[or] following a treaty we'd signed under duress." He laments that, "National parks are withering as a result of overcrowding, habitat loss, and a ...'science deficit.' Even as attendance has increased, park staff has been shrinking.... Because of this, and to redress past wrongs, Treuer concludes, "The national parks are the closest thing America has to sacred lands.... More than just America's "best idea," the parks are the best of America, the jewels of its landscape. It's time they were returned to America's original peoples."

Source: Touchstones



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