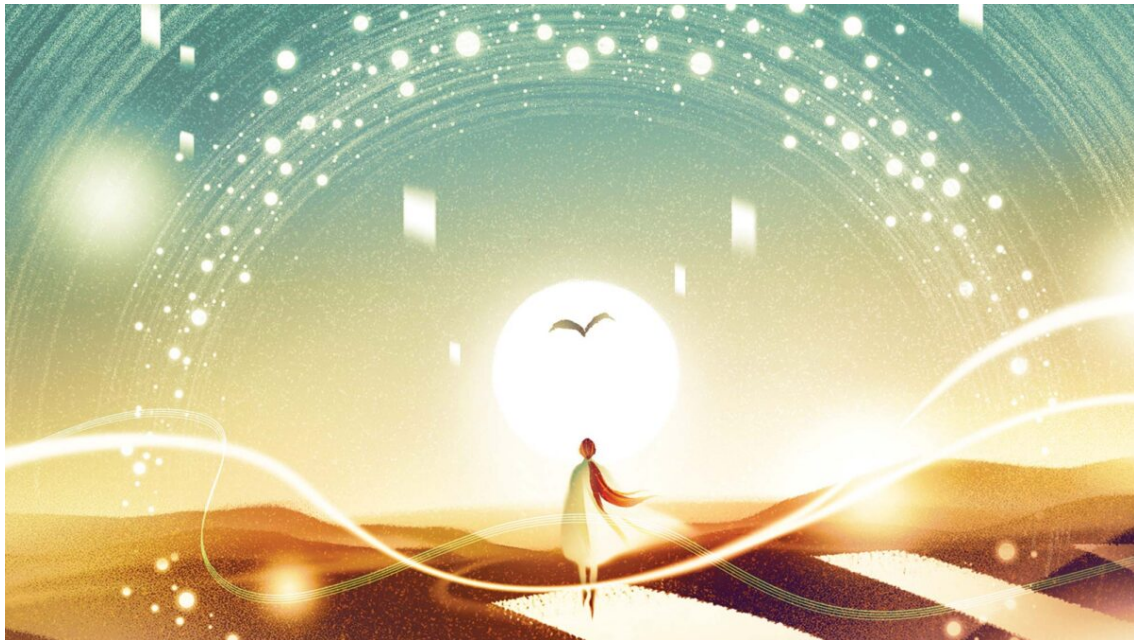


## **The Power of Everyday Awe**

by Eben Harrell

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Jasu Hu

**Summary.** In times of tumult, we need comfort, healing, and inspiration. A good way to find them is by appreciating the vast and wondrous things that transcend us, say several new books.

In April 2020 I received a phone call informing me that a close family member had died unexpectedly. I wandered outside for some fresh air and, overcome with grief, started weeping uncontrollably. Looking up at the night sky, I imagined what I would look like from the perspective of someone thousands of light-years away: a puny figure grappling clumsily with the

mysteries of existence. Far from inflaming my pain, the vision showed me a way through it. I then did something quite peculiar for me, given that I'm not religious: I took a knee. I bowed my head. Through my tears I told the universe that I did not understand its rules but that I would no longer seek to. I submitted. A line from a poem by T.S. Eliot that I had read in college popped into my head: "The rest is not our business."



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I didn't know it at the time, but I was having a textbook experience of awe—a unique emotion that Dacher Keltner, a psychologist at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of *Awe: The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life*, defines as the “feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your current understanding of the world.” In fact, the “overview effect”—envisioning yourself or the world from a great distance—is one of the most reliable ways to evoke awe.

And I'm not the only one who has found comfort from it in these past few tumultuous years. Indeed, awe seems to be having a moment in the spotlight. If the pre-Covid zeitgeist was about “grit” and “growth mindset,” many of us are now seeking to unclench our minds and find greater peace. And that, according to a raft of recent and upcoming books, is something awe and wonder can help with. Though many people predicted that the pandemic would end with a new Roaring Twenties of wild parties and reckless abandon, the reality has proved messier and more solemn. Humanity has a lot of loss to work through.

Keltner has written the perfect guidebook for this journey, interweaving discoveries that he and his disciples have made since he pioneered the scientific study of awe 20 years ago with highly personal—and at times excruciatingly tender—meditations on the death of his brother Rolf. Keltner explains that awe is different from fear or an appreciation of beauty—though both can be present when awe is experienced. The Manhattan Project scientists felt awe at the Trinity test of the first nuclear bomb, but so did the late YouTube sensation Paul “Bear” Vasquez when he became exalted at the sight of a double rainbow outside his California mountain home.

To find awe, Keltner says, we must look for “eight wonders of life.” The most common are nature, music, visual design, and moral beauty (when we witness people helping other people). Less common but often more profound are “collective effervescence” (what fans madly cheering together in a soccer stadium feel), spiritual experiences, epiphanies (when we learn something unexpected that changes our worldview), and, of course, births and deaths, life’s beginnings and endings.

Experiencing awe produces a multitude of positive effects. It makes us calmer, kinder, more creative, and less likely to cheat. It reins in the ego and makes us feel more connected to the earth and to other creatures. (Indeed, the goose bumps we get when awestruck might be an evolutionary signal to huddle together for warmth.) In one experiment conducted by Keltner, visitors to a scenic overlook at Yosemite National Park who were asked to draw artistic doodles consistently made themselves smaller in their pictures than visitors in downtown San Francisco did, suggesting a diminished sense of self-importance. In another experiment, study volunteers told to gaze at enormous eucalyptus trees asked to be paid less for their participation than those told to stare at an academic building—and were more willing to help pick up pens dropped by a study organizer in a feigned spill. But the most ringing endorsement of awe’s salutary effects is Keltner’s recounting of how he harnessed it to process his own grief—from

the raw emotion he felt witnessing Rolf's final breath to the comfort he took months later looking at a stolid yet ever-changing Alpine massif and sensing his brother's continued presence. "There are still wonders and mysteries," Keltner writes. "And...he is still part of them."

Though one can deduce how to experience awe from Keltner's book, some other resources are more prescriptive. In *The Wonder Paradox: Embracing the Weirdness of Existence and the Poetry of Our Lives*, the poet and historian Jennifer Michael Hecht selects poems appropriate for awe-inspiring life events, from weddings to births. In the fascinating, far-ranging book *The Power of Wonder: The Extraordinary Emotion That Will Change the Way You Live, Learn, and Lead*, the life and career coach Monica C. Parker recommends "wonder walks" that draw on the nature writer Rachel Carson's advice to open your eyes to "unnoticed beauty" and ask, "What if I had never seen this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?"

In *The Power of Awe: Overcome Burnout and Anxiety, Ease Chronic Pain, Find Clarity and Purpose—in Less Than 1 Minute Per Day*, the coach and mentor Jake Eagle and Michael Amster, a physician, draw on Keltner's work to introduce a technique, similar to Carson's, for "microdosing" on awe. For those looking for an even quicker fix, scientists at Google and Berkeley have created the Art Emotions Map website, featuring pictures of famous artworks that elicit certain feelings, including awe (example: *Vesuvius in Eruption*, by Joseph Mallord William Turner). At Mapping Emotion, a site created by a different former Berkeley researcher, Alan Cowen, you can watch GIFs proven to evoke the same response (such as one of skydivers falling in unison).

For most of us, encounters with awe are rare—but they don't need to be. As Keltner, the other authors, and Carson persuasively argue, we can break up the humdrum of daily life simply by adopting fresh eyes that allow us to discover awe in everyday

things—what the playwright Christopher Marlowe described as “infinite riches in a little room.” With that perspective, we can find awe not just in the stars but in the stardust that constitutes everything—even the most mundane objects—on Earth. As the science writer Carl Sagan once quipped, “If you wish to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe.” Isn’t that an awesome thought?

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