

## Preparation for Awe (Theme for December)

Have you ever gazed up at the night sky and been struck by a sense of awe? Or stood on a mountaintop and felt your being almost merge with the world's immensity? Perhaps you have experienced awe at a baby's toes, or a hawk flying through the air, or passage of music. Or awe and wonder may have overcome your emotions as you contemplated a repeating geometric pattern or the mysteries of quantum mechanics.

Awe is different for different people, and it is hard to describe. It can involve a sense of infinitesimal smallness or vast space, or both; indescribable beauty or indescribable terror, or both. Often we can describe the circumstances in which we felt a sense of awe, but the actual experience may leave us without words. Psychologist Dacher Keltner describes it this way, "Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world."

Many religions describe a sense of awe before a deity. The Old Testament is filled with a sense of awe that includes fear and trembling: "Be in awe and know that I am God" (Psalms 46:10). Spiritual traditions that don't emphasize an awe-inspiring God often look to the natural world for this feeling. In the Unitarian tradition, nature as a source of awe was a central idea in the Transcendentalist movement, as Ralph Waldo Emerson described: "Every particular in nature, a leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time is related to the whole, and partakes of the perfection of the whole."

Some of us remember a child's sense of wonder as we discovered our world, while others may need distance from an unhappy childhood to experience such emotions. Sometimes as adults we get so busy with our everyday lives that we are not receptive to those amazing moments of wonderment. Yet in adulthood a deeper understanding of the world and our varied experiences may heighten our feelings of awe. We can engage in spiritual practices that give rise to feelings of wonder and awe.

People feel awe in different ways. Some are overcome by awe and feel shaken to the core of their inner selves. Others experience awe more as a sense of wonder, a feeling of surprise at the beauty or vastness or intricacy of being. For some people, the feeling of awe arrives with a deep sense of meaning in the universe or a profound feeling of connection to the world. For others, experiences of awe remain as memories of unique and wondrous moments, transcendent experiences that take us beyond ourselves.

Here are some quotations to think about as you explore the topic of awe.

Serve the Lord with reverential awe and rejoice with trembling. *Psalms 2:11*

For me, the reason why people go to a mountaintop or go to the edge of the ocean is to look at something larger than themselves. That feeling of awe, of going to a cathedral, it's all about feeling lost in something bigger than oneself. *Diane Paulus*

People usually consider walking on water or in thin air a miracle. But I think the real miracle is not to walk either on water or in thin air, but to walk on earth. Every day we are engaged in a miracle which we don't even recognize: a blue sky, white clouds, green leaves, the black, curious eyes of a child – our own two eyes. All is a miracle. *Thich Nhat Hanh*

Music is a higher revelation than all wisdom and philosophy. *Ludwig van Beethoven*

I don't think that faith, whatever you're being faithful about, really can be scientifically explained. And I don't want to explain this whole life business through truth, science. There's so much mystery. There's so much awe. *Jane Goodall*

Awe imbues people with a different sense of themselves, one that is smaller, more humble and part of something larger ... Even brief experiences of awe, such as being amid beautiful tall trees, lead people to feel less narcissistic and entitled and more attuned to the common humanity people share with one another. *Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner*

Don't you realize that sitting around here in this room with our ordinary everyday faces and clothes, we are sitting smack in the middle of the beatific vision and that this is infinity and eternity precisely. This is God. *Alan Watts*

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. *Lisa Meitner*

We gazed dreamily at the Milky Way and once in a while caught some shooting stars. Times like those gave me the opportunity to wonder and ask all those very basic questions. That sense of awe for the heavens started there. *Kalpana Chawla*

## Questions to Ponder

1. Have you ever experienced awe? Recall the circumstances. What did it feel like?
2. Some people experience awe in nature, in music, in science, or in their connection to living creatures. What are some sources of awe or wonder for you?
3. Is awe important to you? Reflect on its role in your life.
4. What can get in the way of experiencing awe? What might you do to encourage awe or wonder to enter into your life more often?
5. Has your experience of wonder and awe changed over your life? If it has changed, in what way?
6. When you have experienced awe, was there also a sense of meaning or connection? Or was that sense not present for you?
7. Consider one of the Spiritual Exercises in the Awe issue of *Soul Matters* this month, like "Collect Awe Stories," "Take a Daily Dose of Online Awe," "Remember the Awe of All You Are," or "An Hour of Stillness." If you find one of them valuable, what was that experience like for you?

## Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, reflect on a situation where you have felt a sense of awe or wonder. The prompt for the Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence:  
"I have felt a sense of awe when ..."

Some quotations are taken from the *Soul Matters* December 2019 issue. Also see that issue for Spiritual Exercises and additional resources.