

# It's a Wonder-Filled Life

*Was something “awesome” today? Did it make your heart surge, or your knees go weak? Maybe you shed a little tear of joy. Or perhaps you just meant, “Thank you.” True feelings of awe, on the other hand, can improve our health, make us more patient and lift our spirits.*

WORDS BY DR EMILY O'LEARY

**T**here are many words that are overused to the point of being meaningless – awesome is one of them.

Over the past two days, I've said it to describe a sale at a local boutique and a new haircut, both of which were great, but perhaps not awesome in the true sense of the word.

In a TED talk in 2014, comedian Jill Shargaa encouraged the audience to put the “awe” back in “awesome”. At the beginning of her talk she describes a conversation with a co-worker, who asked if she could save a file as a PDF, to which she said, “Well, of course.” The colleague replied, “Awesome.” How can the birth of your child or the fall of the Berlin Wall evoke the same response as saving a computer file in a different format?

A true definition of awe relates to

an overwhelming feeling of reverence, admiration or fear – an emotional response produced by something that is grand, sublime and extremely powerful. But over time, its meaning or use has evolved to describe the mundane, and because of this, the power of the word has diminished. You may ask why all this matters? Simple: we need awe, real awe, in our lives as it increases our happiness and overall sense of wellbeing. Have we lost our ability to be inspired?

## SELF-ABSORPTION vs MINDFULNESS

A recent study led by Dr Paul Piff from the University of California found that real awe causes people to become more interested in pro-social behaviours, such as investing in the greater good, giving more to charity, volunteering to help others, or doing more to lessen their impact on the environment. Piff proposes that when we experience awe, whether a landscape that takes our breath away or looking up at

the stars, it serves an important collective function by focusing the attention away from ourselves to others.

Piff and colleagues found that awe shifts people away from being the centre of their own individual worlds and instead, toward a focus on the broader social context and their place within it. In a time where self-interest and self-promotion is seen as standard practice, this redirection toward thinking about others' welfare can only be encouraged.

You may ask, how can watching a sunset help you or others? Imagine, after the end of a busy day full of meetings, emails and clients, you slow down and park the car and look out the window at the light changing. You witness the orange, pinks and lavenders of the sun fading into the horizon, and it reminds you that there is more to this day than the

email you didn't send. It grounds you in the splendour of nature and the moment, and perhaps you realise that there are things out there greater than yourself.

This increasing need to calm our busy minds has led to a growth in mindfulness, which is essentially a state of being present and focused on what is happening in the here and now. It means reducing the “busyness” of the mind by calmly acknowledging and accepting one's feelings, thoughts and bodily sensations. Research has found that, in our fast-paced world, the practice of mindfulness has huge mental and physical benefits. But how does awe play a role in this practice?

Dr Robert Leahy, clinical psychologist and author of *The Worry Cure*, links awe to calmness, saying that inspiring experiences lift people outside of themselves. Leahy suggests that awe reduces the amount of focus on one's thoughts and improves our sense of wellbeing.

## NATURAL ANTIDOTE

Some of the most awe-inspiring scenes are found in our natural environment, in wide-open plains, amid sand dunes, on beaches. Despite this, we often get caught up in our lives and forget to enjoy nature. Stanford researcher Gregory Bratman found in one study that college students who walked through green, leafy parts of their campus were happier and more attentive afterward than those assigned to spend time near heavy traffic.

Another study in 2015 by David Pearson and Tony Craig from the University of Aberdeen and The James Hutton Institute, respectively, found that after people watched films or viewed pictures of natural scenes they were more likely to describe a sense of peace and serenity, in so doing escaping from daily demands and reducing mental fatigue.

In addition to making us feel happier, awe can improve our physical health. Researchers from the University of California-Berkeley conducted two experiments assessing the mind-body connection. In a clever study published in 2015, they administered a series of tests to evoke positive and negative emotions in a group of college students. Students who reported more frequent positive emotions had lower signs of inflammation (as measured by saliva samples). At the same time, they found that the most powerful

## How Awestruck Are You?

*Rate the following items on a scale of 1-5 to see how open you are to feeling awe. If you reach a total score of 30, then you are pretty enchanted by the world and its wonders.*

- I often feel awe.
- I see beauty all around me.
- I feel wonder almost every day.
- I often look for patterns in the objects around me.
- I have many opportunities to see the beauty of nature.
- I seek out experiences that challenge my understanding of the world.

## You may ask, how can watching a sunset help you or others?

emotion linked to fighting inflammation was awe. While several factors often contribute to physical and mental wellbeing, the authors of the study concluded that increasing awe-inspiring experiences is good for our health.

## SLOW MOTION

Five weeks ago I gave birth to my second daughter. Time froze when I saw her – the miracle of her perfect features melted away anything that was important prior to that momentous event.

It's true that before long you get caught up in the hustle and bustle of caring for a newborn, but the first moment you see your child, it is as though the world is in slow motion and the image of your child is the only thing that is crystal clear – and that image stays with you for years, even decades, after.

Like nature, moments in time that are awe-inspiring have the effect of slowing us down and making us focus on what is truly important. Interestingly, a 2012 study by Stanford researchers Rudd, Voles and Aaker showed how awe expands people's perception of time. In a series of


three experiments, the researchers found that college students who experienced awe felt they had more time available, were less impatient and were more willing to volunteer their time to help others, affirming awe's ability to change the way people think about time and make them feel like life is more satisfying.

## ARE WE AWE-DEPRIVED?

Assistant professor Paul Piff has argued we are awe-deprived: we have less time on our hands because our priorities have changed and are often dominated by materialism. He suggests that in the pursuit of our five-year financial plans, for example, we miss those sunsets and subsequent moments of awe.

I also wonder whether our increased need for instant gratification reduces our opportunity to experience the joy that comes from waiting and working towards something that is truly awe-inspiring. For example, as a young 18-year-old I worked a series of ridiculous jobs saving to go on my first overseas trip to Egypt. Twenty years later, I still remember the smells, sights and feelings I had when I first saw the pyramids. And it was made all the more memorable because it had been hard work to get there. The act of delaying, planning, working and making time for wonder makes you truly appreciate the gift and depth of the experience or event.

To increase our happiness, we need to make small, meaningful changes each day to open ourselves up to awe. When the day gets stressful, take the time to reflect on a moment that gave you great joy or, if it is an inescapably negative situation, take a moment to focus on the one positive aspect of that situation.

Take the time to savour pleasurable memories, and be aware of building awe-inspiring moments into your life by slowing things down and focusing on things that bring meaning and value, whether that be a beautiful sunrise or simply the smile of a loved one. 

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**KEYWORDS:** Awe, Nature 