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Undergraduate

# The Underappreciated Value of Awe

BY LEIGHTON PU

*Figure 1: View of a sunset, which is a known source of awe.*

An integral part of the human condition is the constant experience of emotions.<sup>1</sup> Eating with friends induces happiness, while sadness ensues loss. A student's anxiety is maintained at a baseline throughout a semester and spikes during midterm and finals season. Emotions like happiness, sadness, and anxiety are commonly recognized and discussed. Yet awe is not afforded the same attention, and research on its experiential impact only began in the last two decades.<sup>2</sup> Even with its powerful ability to cause acute emotional responses, awe receives less attention than more familiar emotions.<sup>3</sup>

Psychologists still hold different opinions on if awe is an emotion. UCSF professor emeritus Paul Ekman thinks of awe as an emotion like any other, whereas the pioneering emotional psychologist Richard Lazarus described awe as a psychological state consisting of emotional qualities.<sup>3</sup> Though both ideas have their merits, a definition of awe proposed by UC Berkeley's professor of psychology Dacher Keltner and American social psychologist Jonathan Haidt aligns more with Ekman's idea. They define awe as an emotion felt when

one experiences vastness and the need for accommodation.<sup>4</sup> Vastness can occur in the presence of colorful sunsets, physically impressive mountains, and looming skyscrapers. It can result from considering the accomplishments of figures like Gandhi or Einstein, or from pondering profound concepts like the golden ratio.<sup>3</sup> In other words, vastness is a "stimulus that challenges one's accustomed frame of reference in some dimension."<sup>4</sup>

The challenge vastness brings to an individual's frame of reference necessitates accommodation—the other condition of awe.<sup>4</sup> Accommodation occurs when one changes their mental structures to assimilate a new experience of vastness.<sup>4</sup> For instance, accommodation follows observing an incredible shade of green for the first time, in a forest rich in color, or taking in the powerful force of air on a windy day. Awe must meet the conditions of vastness and accommodation, but can nonetheless be induced by simple experiences.<sup>5</sup> So long as an individual experiences vastness and the need for accommodation, one experiences awe.<sup>4</sup> Simply put, awe is the experience of being struck by something unfamiliar.

On average, people experience awe twice a week.<sup>5</sup> The high frequency of awe may be due in part to the many sources of awe. Taking in the height of towering trees, discovering mutual connections with a stranger, or a nice arrangement of clouds can elicit awe. Feats big and small, from a friend facing adversity, but earning high marks, to looking at the Egyptian pyramids, can produce a collective of intense emotions connected to awe. Oftentimes,

"They define awe as an emotion felt when one experiences vastness and the need for accommodation."

researchers studying awe show participants striking images of nature or ask them to recall moments in which they experienced a deep sense of awe. Other elicitors



**Figure 2: Art is a common elicitor of awe. Pictured above is van Gogh's *The Starry Night*.**

of awe include other people, music, art, and beauty.<sup>3</sup> Deriving a sense of awe from these or other sources can be nice, but beyond simple pleasure, awe confers many benefits such as increased prosocial values.<sup>4</sup>

One study that established correlation between awe and stimulated prosociality induced awe in an experimental group by instructing participants to view tall trees. Afterwards, a researcher approached participants with a questionnaire and a box of pens. Each time the researcher approached, they intentionally dropped the box and recorded picking up pens as a prosocial act of helping. Significantly more participants in the experimental group helped pick up the pens than did those in a control group who were instructed to gaze at a large building and did not experience awe. This behavioral difference correlates awe with prosocial behavior. Feelings of a “small self” leading to diminished self focus, caused by awe, are thought to be responsible for the observed increase in prosociality.<sup>6</sup> Awe-prone individuals are less concerned about personal costs incurred when engaging in helping behavior. Whether it be bending down to pick up objects or going out of their way to help a senior citizen cross the street, those that more frequently experience awe seem to possess greater bandwidth to help others, due largely to decreased concern for

themselves.

The link between awe and feelings of a small self were later solidified in a study that collected daily measurements of those feelings. Collective engagement was also observed and found to be the result of the small self. Unsurprisingly, the same feelings that increase prosociality also increase engagement with groups.<sup>7</sup> Put another way, individuals more willing to help and more inclined to engage with a collective are more likely to be integrated into a social group. Belonging to a collective is important for its ability to act as a support network and source of social stimulation. A feeling of belonging is so important that it was found to be related to enhanced physical health.<sup>8</sup> Like physical health, general well being increased in participants of a study that provided them an experience conducive to causing awe.

One study brought military veterans and at risk youth white water rafting as a medium to induce awe. Participants were asked to rate certain emotions and social experiences in diary entries before and after rafting. Researchers observed an increase in general well-being after individuals had gone rafting, indicating that nature-induced awe was responsible for the reported increase. This was further established in an experiment studying col-

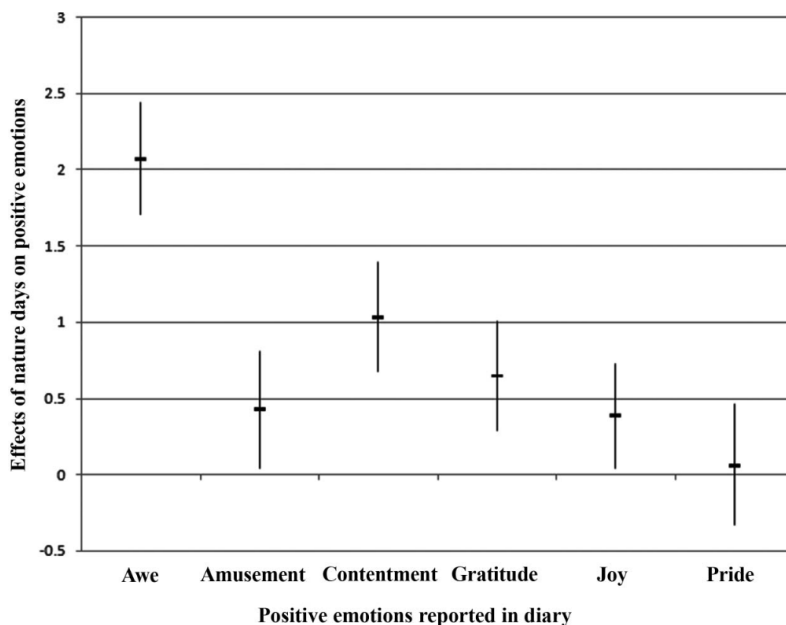
lege students that reported how often they experienced nature in their everyday life, how often they experienced positive emotion, and daily life satisfaction. Just as with those that went white water rafting, college students experienced greater well-being on days during which they were more immersed in nature.<sup>9</sup> All together, awe is responsible for a wide range of benefits. This singular emotion is so powerful that it has been suggested as a therapeutic tool to address mental health issues.<sup>10</sup> As such, cultivating awe is a powerful strategy to live an improved life.

But how exactly does one increase encounters with awe? Common methods of induction in the literature on awe suggest nature as a common source of awe. Nonetheless, anything from music and art, to the achievements of other people, or learning about a profound concept in class can all lead to feelings of vastness necessitating accommodation. It is first important to subject oneself to a wealth of experiences that have the potential to induce awe, whether it be looking to the sky on nature walks or attending orchestral concerts. Some awe inspiring experiences can be extraordinary, but many are quite ordinary, such as witnessing someone giving food to the homeless or noticing the changing colors of leaves in autumn.<sup>1</sup> Equally as important is to be mindful of the emotions an awe-inspiring experience causes, such as admira-

“By practicing mindfulness and actively putting oneself in situations conducive to facilitating awe, one opens doors to boosting quality of life in multiple facets, from cultivating feelings of belonging to boosting general well-being.”



**Figure 3:** Scenes at which experimental and control groups looked at in a study linking prosociality and awe. On the left are a grove of towering trees intended to elicit awe. On the right is a building that the control group was instructed to look at.



**Figure 4:** Visualization of positive emotions reported in diary entries of participants that went white water rafting. Awe exhibited a strong association with white water rafting, indicating a link between awe and nature.

tion, respect, wonder, curiosity, confusion, and love. By practicing mindfulness and actively putting oneself in situations conducive to facilitating awe, one opens doors to boosting quality of life in multiple facets, from cultivating feelings of belonging to boosting general well-being.

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