

Soul Matters

A kaleidoscope of thoughts, images, stories, poetry, podcasts, and videos to engage hands, hearts, and minds.

December 2019

What Does it Mean to be a People of Awe?



This at least seems to me the main problem... How can we contrive to be at once astonished at the world and yet at home in it? ...How can this world give us at once the fascination of a strange town and the comfort and honor of being our own town? - G.K. Chesterton

The path of awe seems well worn. It's a journey intended to bring us down to size. Pictures of our galaxy with a note that there are 100 billion more just like it. Videos of deep-sea creatures with bioluminescent bodies. Images of the northern lights that are utterly otherworldly. All of them remind us that the universe is more vast than we can imagine. All of them leave us with a sense of wonder that overwhelms. We are brought to the edge of what we can wrap our minds around. It's like staring into an incomprehensible abyss. One can't help but feel humbled and small.

But religion has never wanted us to stop there. Hold tight it says. I know it's hard but trust us: the path doesn't end with a deep darkness that doesn't care. Just stand at the abyss a bit longer. Lean in just a little bit more. And when you do so, suddenly an invitation emerges from that awe-full abyss. You look into the vast mystery and surprisingly, it stares back, as if to say, "Welcome home."

As physicists tell us, contemplation of the vast universe doesn't make them feel smaller, it makes them realize the larger story of which they are a part. We are stardust, as they say. From the vastness we came and to it we will return again. In other words, to be a people of awe is not so much about feeling small; it's about feeling connected.

And not just connected to the stars, but also to each other. Awe reduces our size in order to make room for something more than our personal needs, wants and worries. With our narcissism shrunk down to a reasonable proportion, it becomes possible to notice that we are not the only a very lonely place to stand.

So friends, don't just look up at the stars this month. Let that looking up also lead to you looking across. And in doing so, may you - like our friend G.K. Chesterton - not simply be astonished at the universe but also feel at home in it. of which they are a part. We are stardust, as they say. From the vastness we came and to it we will return again. In other words, to be a people of awe is not so much about feeling small; it's about feeling connected.



This Soul Matters packet was prepared by Rev. Carie Johnsen at Unitarian Universalist Community Church of Augusta, ME. To receive an electronic copy, please email info@augustauu.org. To learn more about Unitarian Universalist Community Church, please visit our website www.augustauu.org.



QUESTIONS TO WALK WITH

Make time to meditate on the list and then pick the one question that speaks to you most. The goal is to figure out which question is “yours.” Which question captures the call of your inner voice? Which one contains “your work”? And what is that question trying to get you to notice or acknowledge?



1. Who taught you the most about “living in awe”?
2. Has age impeded or assisted awe for you?
3. How as the *location* of awe changed for you over time? Has it shifted from the stars to the woods? From the birth of planets to the birth of your child? From the physical feats your body allows to the storied wrinkles of your hand? What now leaves you most in awe when you look at it?
4. Have you ever turned to the stars for support? Comfort? Escape? Connection?
5. Is awe calling you to feel smaller or bigger?
6. Have you ever sat in the middle of nature and it suddenly came to life? What gift did that experience leave you with?
7. Is it possible that awe is where God is found?
8. Do you most often complain about your body or stand in awe of it?
9. When was the last time you stood in awe of your life partner? Your child? Yourself?

What's your question? Your question may not be listed above. As always, if the above questions don't include what life is asking from you, spend the month listening to your days to hear it. Or maybe the question or call you need to hear is waiting in one of the quotes listed below. Consider looking there!

OPENING WORDS

One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, “What if I knew I would never see again?”

Rachel Carson

CLOSING WORDS

The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and science. They to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead: Their eyes are closed.

Albert Einstein

Spiritual Practice ~ Deepening Experiences

Option A: Collect Five Stories of Awe

One way to get more awe into our lives is to borrow it from others. That's right, turns out we can feel awe when we listen to others [share](#) their awe stories. Anyone is fair game. Life Partners. Parents. Siblings. Neighbors. Co-workers. Even strangers! Take them out for coffee or just ask if they have 5 minutes. Sure, you'll be nervous. It's a peculiar thing to ask people about. But trust us, everybody's got a great awe story, and everybody is secretly dying to share it!

Before you come to your group, spend a bit of time comparing and contrasting the stories. Which of those similarities or key differences spoke to you. Where was the gift (or challenge) in that for you?

Option B: Take A Daily Dose of Online Awe

We most often talk about the giant spiritual transformations that awe causes in us. For instance, that moment standing before a solar eclipse after which our entire view of God and ourselves was transformed.

These once-in-a-lifetime infusions of awe are great, but most of us wouldn't mind a little daily support. Every single day we get stuck in our heads. Every afternoon we feel more numb than we'd like by day-to-day drudgery. And every evening it's hard to put our petty, self-centered worries into wider perspective. Who of us wouldn't benefit from a bit of awe every 24 hours?!

So this month, let's all give ourselves the gift of a *daily* dose of awe. Think of it as taking a regular "Awe Break." Put everything down for just a few minutes and let awe soak in.

To make it easy for you, we've put together 31 online doses of awe. One awe-filled YouTube video for each day of the 31 days of December. It's a lot like those advent calendars some of us had as kids. We'd peel back the cardboard door, discover some magical new gift and our entire day would be transformed.



Other Wise Words...

Don't let the world become familiar —don't forget the sheer strangeness of being alive.

"Don't forget the sheer strangeness of being here on the surface of this spinning globe.

Don't forget the sheer strangeness of being this body that breathes and blinks and heals and grows a miracle of precision and complexity.

Don't forget the strangeness of seeming to be a ghostly self that lives inside your body, that has attached itself to your form, that seems to stare out from your eyes and can spin webs of logic, create alternate abstract worlds.

Don't forget the sheer strangeness of this world of form where matter pulses with consciousness.

It's a strangeness even stranger because it's not hostile or indifferent but right and reassuring, somehow warm and welcoming,

like a chaos that was always planned a riddle that makes perfect sense a cacophony of meaning, full of hidden harmony.

~ Steve Taylor

Wonder takes our breath away, and makes room for new breath. That's why they call it breathtaking. ~

Anne Lamott

Let me keep my mind on what matters, which is my work, which is mostly standing still and learning to be astonished.

~ Mary Oliver

A BOOK:

Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness by Nicholas Humphrey
Will leave you in awe at your own consciousness.

AN ARTICLE:

[How Awe-Inspiring Experiences Can Make You Happier, Less Stressed And More Creative](#) by Carolyn Gregoire

"Here are 5 things you should know about awe, and how the emotion can boost your well-being and quality of life..."

A PODCAST:

The Trouble with Everything - Radiolab Podcast

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2MGAEKFFdY> (Starts at minute 13:30)

On the awesome and infinite universe(s), humility and the ability to ask better questions, with a bit of an argument about faith and science in the face of awe.

A YOUTUBE LINK:

[IMAX: Hubble](#)

A MOVIE:

[A Tree of Life](#)

From acclaimed director Terrence Malick, THE TREE OF LIFE is the impressionistic story of a Midwestern family in the 1950's. The film follows the life journey of the eldest son, Jack, through the innocence of childhood to his disillusioned adult years as he tries to reconcile a complicated relationship with his father (Brad Pitt). Jack (played as an adult by Sean Penn) finds himself a lost soul in the modern world, seeking answers to the origins and meaning of life while questioning the existence of faith. Through Malick's signature imagery, we see how both brute nature and spiritual grace shape not only our lives as individuals and families, but all life.