

The Path

Introduction from Soul Matters

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 feeling 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 awefull 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 ones

What Does It Mean to Be a People of Awe?



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up there on the stage. It's in this way that looking up into the cosmos allows us to look across at each other. And it's a huge gift, because while being center stage and center of the universe can feel powerful, it's also 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.

2019/2020 Themes

October – Belonging
November – Attention
December – Awe
January – Integrity
February – Resilience
March – Wisdom
April – Liberation
May – Thresholds
June – Play

Self-Care for the Spiritual Journey

When we go deeper into spiritual exploration together and individually, we may encounter tender spots in our own spirits and stories. It is important, in doing spiritual work, to have trusted companions and adequate support on your journey. We hope you will care for yourself and your spirit along the way, engaging in the theme to the level that's comfortable for you.

Likewise, please know that your congregation is here to offer support if you find yourself struggling with something surfaced by the monthly theme. If you would like to be in touch with the trained caring volunteers on the Pastoral Care Associates team, feel free to email Rev. Patricia Hart, Developmental Senior Minister, at revtricia@uusociety.org.

[New research](#) is clear: Awe heals us!

It's like taking all of our pharmaceutical supplements, diets, daily gym visits, spiritual practices and life coaches and packaging them up in a single, perfect, cure-all pill. That's right, a daily dose of awe increases health, happiness, humility, creativity and a sense of connection! It does it [all](#)!

But here's the catch: Not all of us can take a daily trip to the Grand Canyon. Stunning sunrises don't happen every morning. Clouds and city lights cut us off from nightly views of the stars.

So we need to find other ways to get our daily dose of awe. And that's what this month's spiritual exercise options are all about. Each of our options offer an easy and accessible way to connect to awe.

So, get to it. Find the ones that fit you. And remember, while we all commit to doing at least one of our monthly exercises each month, in this case, it doesn't hurt to double your dose!

Option A: Collect Awe Stories

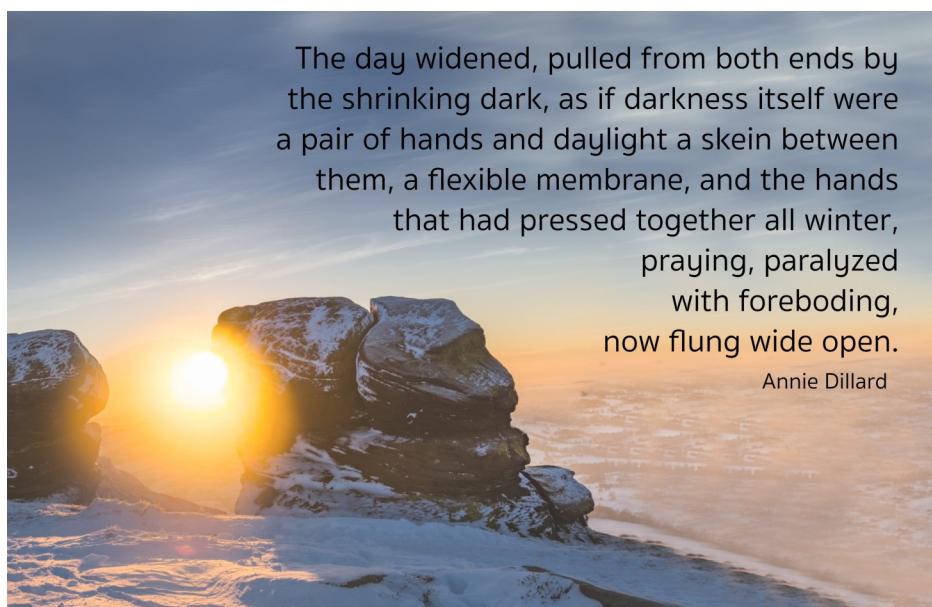
One way to get more awe into our lives is to borrow it from others. That's right, turns out we can feel awe when we listen to others [share](#) their awe stories.

So this month, dive into some vicarious awe. Here's your assignment:

Collect Five Stories of Awe

Anyone is fair game. Life partners. Parents. Siblings. Neighbors. Co-workers. Even strangers! Take them out for coffee or just ask if they have five 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?



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Spiritual Exercises

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.

Here's the link to the YouTube playlist that contains all 31 videos:

<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLvXOKgOQVYP7ZpFA1YKzco1SkOZHkkn7v>

If you're having a particularly hard day, feel free to cheat and watch a couple of them. The goal is to see if these daily doses really change your days. We bet they do!

Option C: Remember the Awe of All You Are

It's not easy to look at ourselves with awe. Awe is reserved for majestic objects *outside* us. But, as poet Joy Harjo reminds us, the most breathtaking and life-transforming experiences come from remembering that there isn't really a separation between that which is "out there" and us. We are connected to the awesome world around us. Those relationships make up our "larger self." And noticing that larger self is one of the most humbling and awe-filled experiences we can have.

So this month, let Joy Harjo lead you through the awe of your larger self, through the awe of all you are. Here's how:

- Read over Harjo's poem, *Remember*, numerous times: <https://poets.org/poem/remember-0> (Another creative version here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vE4yRvaW17o>)
- Notice how each line represents a different part of your larger self.
- Then, following each line, one by one, find a way to engage and honor each of those various parts of yourself.

Spiritual Exercises

Option D: An Hour of Stillness

Often the easiest way to encounter awe is just to sit still. And December offers so many perfect moments to sit back and soak in awe. Put on a jacket and sit on your stoop and watch the snow fall for an hour. Go to the park and sit on a bench watching the neighborhood kids sled down the giant hill, like you used to decades ago. Take an hour to look up at the stars while your favorite classical album plays in your earphones. Take a seat in the corner of the family holiday gathering and just watch the joy and love ping pong back and forth.

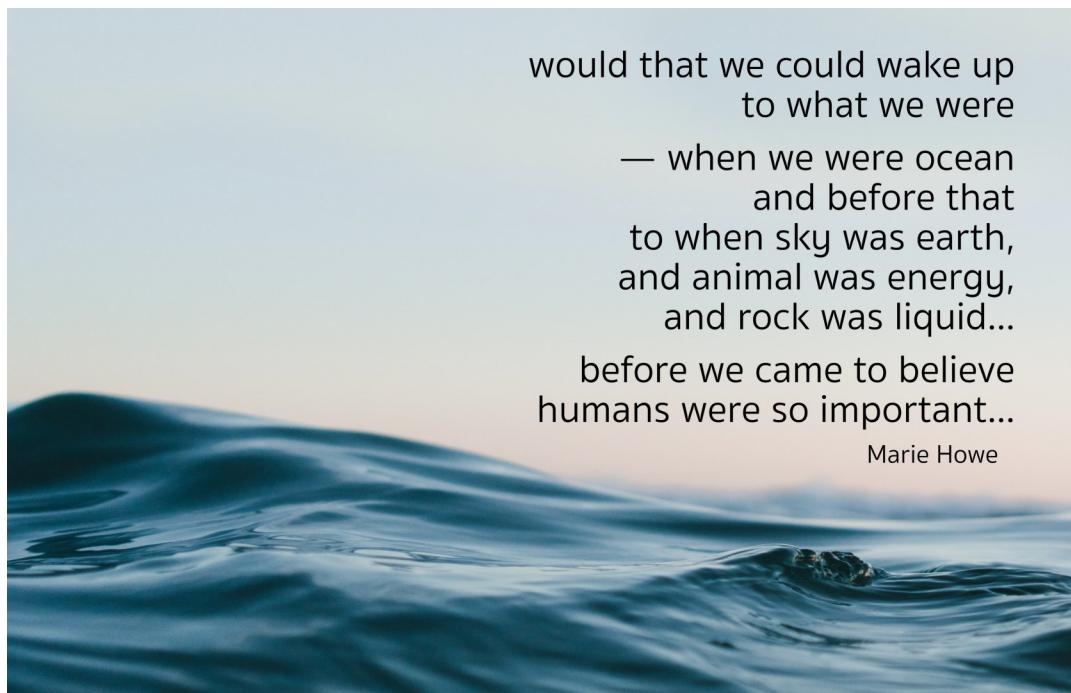
The aim is to sit back and still long enough to watch some piece of life unfold before you. In its unfolding, awe inevitably shows its face.

Option E: Find Awe in Our Recommended Resources

Our recommended resources are full of wisdom about what it means to be a people of and a person of awe. Engaging these resources and finding the one that especially speaks to you is a spiritual practice in and of itself.

So, if none of the above exercises call to you, engage the recommended resources section of this packet as your spiritual exercise for the month.

Set aside some regular time throughout a week to go through them and meditate on them until you find the one that most expands or deepens your understanding of awe. After you've found it, consider printing it out and carrying it with you or pinning it up so you can continue to reflect on it throughout the weeks leading up to your group meeting. Come to your group ready to share where the journey led you.



As always, don't treat these questions like "homework" or try to answer every single one. Instead, 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? Often it helps to read the list to a friend or loved one and ask them which one they think is the question you need to wrestle with!

1. Who taught you the most about "living in awe"?
2. Has age impeded or assisted awe for you?
3. How has 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. What if we need awe to be good?
7. Have you ever sat in the middle of nature and it suddenly came to life? What gift did that experience leave you with?
8. Is it possible that awe is where God is found?
9. Do you most often complain about your body or stand in awe of it?
10. When was the last time you stood in awe of your life partner?
11. When was the last time you stood in awe of your child?
12. Can you imagine someone standing in awe of you?

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!



Word Roots & Definitions

Our expression “awe” is rooted in the Greek word *áchos* which also gives us the word ache. That vastness we experience in awe opens an ache in the heart, and by doing so, expands it.

“Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast that transcends your understanding of the world.”

- [Dacher Keltner](#)

“Awe: An experience of such perceptual vastness you literally have to reconfigure your mental models of the world to assimilate it.” - [Nicholas Humphrey](#)

Wise Words

On the way to the play, we stopped to look at the stars. I felt in awe.

And then I felt even deeper in awe at this capacity we have to be in awe about something.

Then I became even more awestruck at the thought that I was, in some small way, a part of that which I was in awe about.

- [Lily Tomlin](#)

“Seven to eleven is a huge chunk of life, full of dulling and forgetting. It is fabled that we slowly lose the gift of speech with animals, that birds no longer visit our windowsills to converse. As our eyes grow accustomed to sight they armor themselves against wonder.” - [Leonard Cohen](#)

“Were the sun to rise but once a year, we would all cry out...How glorious! Our hymns would rise up, our thanks would ascend. O God,...Give us new eyes... and vision to see the world anew.” - [A Jewish Prayer Book](#)

“The other world is this world rightly seen.”

- [Nisargadatta Maharaj](#)

“You see, I have never felt the need to invent a world beyond this world, for this world has always seemed large and beautiful enough for me. I have wondered why it is not large and beautiful enough for others — why they must dream up new and marvelous spheres, or long to live elsewhere, beyond this dominion ... but that is not my business. We are all different, I suppose.”

- [Alma Whittaker, in Elizabeth Gilbert's The Signature of All Things](#)

“...everything glowing with heaven's unquenchable enthusiasm... I tremble with excitement in the dawn of these glorious mountain sublimities, but I can only gaze and wonder.... ...our camp grove fills and thrills with the glorious light. Everything awakening alert and joyful... ...every pulse beats high, every life cell rejoices, the very rocks seem to thrill with life. The whole landscape glows like a human face in a glory of enthusiasm... The rocks, the air, everything...joyful, wonderful, enchanting, banishing weariness and sense of time.”

- [John Muir, writing about his first visit to Yosemite](#)

“The sense of awe and mystery, for some reason, has gotten greater as I've got older. I'm not sure why. Maybe because many of us, as we get older, we start thinking more about the fact our life is going to come to an end, and we become a bit more religious and philosophical. If you don't have conventional religious belief, as I don't, I think in a way thinking about the mystery of one's own consciousness and the universe is a sort of compensation for that in some ways.” - [Henry Marsh](#)

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](#)

“One way to open your eyes is to ask yourself, ‘What if I knew I would never see it again?’” - [Rachel Carson](#)

“Awe is an intuition for the dignity of all things, a realization that things not only are what they are but also stand, however remotely, for something supreme... Awe enables us to perceive in the world intimations of the divine... to sense the ultimate in the common and the simple; to feel in the rush of the passing the stillness of the eternal. What we cannot comprehend by analysis, we become aware of in awe.” - [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

“What is it that breathes fire into the equations and makes a universe for them to describe? Why does the universe go to all the bother of existing?” - [Stephen Hawking](#)

Away from the immense,
cloistered in our own concepts,
we may scorn and revile everything...
But we can never sneer at the stars,
mock the dawn or
scoff at the totality of being.

- [Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel](#)

“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. In the great balancing act of our social lives, between the gratification of self-interest and a concern for others, fleeting experiences of awe redefine the self in terms of the collective.”

- [Paul Piff and Dacher Keltner](#)

“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](#)

“Wonder takes our breath away, and makes room for new breath. That's why they call it breathtaking.” - [Anne Lamott](#)

“Awe makes things new again. And that makes it the best drug in the world.” - [Jason Silva](#)

“Singularity” by Marie Howe
Full poem: <https://www.brainpickings.org/2018/05/22/singularity-marie-howe-stephen-hawking/>

“would that we could wake up to what we were
— when we were ocean and before that
to when sky was earth, and animal was energy, and rock

was liquid...
before we came to believe humans were so important...”

“People go abroad to wonder at the heights of mountains, at the huge waves of the sea, at the long courses of the rivers, at the vast compass of the ocean, at the circular motions of the stars, and they pass by themselves without wondering.” - [Saint Augustine](#)

“You sing your song in your own key, in your own beautiful voice, and the cosmos listens, reverently.”

- [Rev. Victoria Safford](#)

Here dies another day
During which I have had eyes, ears, hands
And the great world round me;
And with tomorrow begins another.
Why am I allowed two?
- [G.K. Chesterton](#)

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

- [Mary Oliver](#)

Songs and Music

Find songs that celebrate and put you in touch with awe on our December Soul Matters Spotify playlist. Click [here](#) to check them out! You can explore all of our Spotify playlists from other months [here](#). And the same playlists are also on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCL_fSD0_Ps01lGauCVL_mKQ/playlists

Online

A History of Everything, Including You

Jenny Hollowell

Video meditation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=17bU94OYyxQ>

Audio: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XK tcbZ4qVBY>

Text: <http://www.bluephoto.biz/blog/2012/08/a-history-of-everything-including-you-by-jenny-hollowell/>

In awe of the very grand and the very particular sweeping story of which we are a part... “Can you believe it?!”

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.

The Night the Sky Fell Down Upon Us - *Maya Rogers*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFDNESYxMcA&fbclid=IwAR1yDImwppUoqQD-i1EVjGQF00zRcsexDkTIz-m37OMGxs0Fd6TP2AnPKMzs>

Finding connection, feeling awe and slipping into self-transcendence... all put to music!

Beethoven - spoken poetry - *Shane Koyczan*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ppwowTJg0mI&t=142s>

The awesome story and gift of Beethoven. “For a moment it was like joy was a tangible thing...”

Reality is Gorgeous - *Alan Watts*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9nsjAOchF7M>
“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.”

An Awe-Inspiring Expression of Awe!
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=37&v=uRhgERhMcGg

If You Want to Be Awe-Inspired... - *Christopher Hitchens*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JXEiKPxCsdA>

Articles

Why Do We Feel Awe? by *Dacher Keltner*
https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_do_we_feel_awe
On the power of awe to increase our caring, creativity and health... just to name a few!

How Awe-Inspiring Experiences Can Make You Happier, Less Stressed and More Creative
Carolyn Gregoire
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/the-psychology-of-awe_n_5799850 “Here are 5 things you should know about awe, and how the emotion can boost your well-being and quality of life...”

Books

A Private History of Awe by Scott R. Sanders

Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder by [Richard Dawkins](#)

The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World by [David Abram](#)

A call not just to be in awe of the world around us, but to see it as “alive.”

Soul Dust: The Magic of Consciousness
[Nicholas Humphrey](#)

Will leave you in awe at your own consciousness.

Movies

[Hubble 3D](#)

[Gravity](#)

[Tree of Life](#)

[It's a Wonderful Life](#)