

The Seekers Forum Transcript

Light From a Thousand Stars: The Proper Emotion is Wonder

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Mark Matousek: Hello everybody and welcome to this month's edition of The Seekers Forum, "Light From a Thousand Stars: The Proper Emotion is Wonder." We're going to be looking this month at the importance of wonder and awe to human survival and spiritual development. Before we begin, let's just have a moment of silence to bring our thoughts together into the room for the next hour. Whenever you're ready, just gently close your eyes, take a couple of deep breaths in and out through the nostrils and we'll just sit for one minute together, please.

[pause 00:00:57]

After your next exhalation, gently open your eyes and come into the room and soft focus and let's say hello to our co-host, Jay Koebele. How are you, Jay?

Jay Koebele: It's great to be here and nice to be here with everyone. Thank you.

Mark: Thank you, Jay. Now science tells us that we are actually wired for wonder. Evolution has prepared us for awe, elevation, wonder, epiphany revelation, and second sight as part of our survival repertoire. Indeed, the body is primed for awe on a cellular level. For example, did you know that every morning when you open your eyes, the previous day's top layer of vision receptor cells are literally scorched away by the entering light, exposing new cells that have never before seen the light of day, thus giving you new eyes? Or that the first sound that you hear on waking actually vibrates away the prior day's auditory cells? Meaning that when the rooster crows you hear it with physiologically fresh ears. We exist in a state of awe waiting to happen.

Science is finally catching up to what mystics have known forever, that the mind is a vast domain we have barely begun to discover. In fact, we learned that we live on the cusp of the fifth great leap in human evolution, the neuroscience revolution. The first was Copernicus. The fact that the earth is not the center of the universe. The second was Darwin's discovery of natural selection. Number three was Freud and the existence of the subconscious and the fourth was Crick and the discovery of DNA.

Now we're on the verge of expanding dramatically. Our sense of what reality is and how the higher emotions that enable us to perceive it can be opened and cultivated. Now, without these self-transcending emotions, human life would be impossible. Our animal journey is far too brutal. It's just too easy to get lost in the material world and forget our potential for transcendence.

Without wonder and awe, spirituality, art, love, philosophy, education, social justice would cease to have meaning. Without the uniquely human gift to step outside our own skins and feel empathy and transcendence, no one would ever fall hopelessly in love again, or take the proverbial dive down the well to save the child. Awe and wonder are integral to who we are and what makes life beautiful.

Even the most curmudgeonly skeptics concur that it's simply crazy not to be wonderstruck by our human condition. Take Richard Dawkins, the famous atheist, and author of *The Selfish Gene*. He says, "We have won the combinatorial lottery of DNA and been given the stunningly rare opportunity to be alive at all." Isn't that beautiful. We've won the combinatorial lottery of DNA and been given the stunningly rare opportunity to be alive at all.

That is coming from a man who is a diehard atheist. The sense of wonder, the sense of gratitude for the existence that we have. Cosmologist Brian Swimme puts it this way, “The magnificence of where we find ourselves is more than enough to uplift us most days.”

Now, we ought to be elevated by our mysterious existence most of the time, talking in real-time around the planet on Zoom, watching the earth from satellites, having the world at the tip of our fingers without smartphones. You would think that our generation would be the most awe-struck in history and yet studies show that we are actually less filled with wonder than our grandparents and their grandparents.

Hooked up to our gadgets with all of our technological brilliance, our offspring are actually more likely to have psychological problems than the average child under psychiatric care in the 1950s. Just think about that, and how shocking it is and what a preview about where we are going in this culture. Lots of feel-good distraction, but not so much joy; lots of information, but not so much wisdom; a lot of overwhelm, but not much awe.

The great Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel put it this way, “People today are shocked by the weakness of our awe but also by the weakness of our shock.” Let me repeat that. “People today are shocked by the weakness of our awe but also by the weakness of our shock.” This is something that a lot of us have been looking at lately in our political culture and what’s happening on this planet. You’re wondering how it is that nobody’s standing up like Jesus in the temple, turning over the table of the money lenders and saying this cannot happen. Why is this allowed to happen? Why aren’t people more shocked at the injustices and the obvious immorality in our midst?

The answer is the absence of wonder. The absence of wonder and awe lead to cynicism and it’s cynicism that reduces reality to fragments. In the cynical worldview, there is no unity, just separate objects crashing into one another trying to get ahead. To the cynic, life is a purely transactional enterprise in which the guy who ends up with the most marbles at the end wins the game.

Of course, public cynicism is at an all-time high today. What makes this so heartbreaking is if we saw the world through the eyes of wonder, through a perspective of awe and spirituality, none of these abuses would be possible. We couldn’t possibly treat one another or the planet this way. When we forget the miraculousness of creation, we forget about the inherent worth of others.

We stop taking care of the planet. We oppress each other racially, sexually, religiously and we resort to fundamentalism and violence. It’s lack of awe that feeds addiction, that makes antidepressant manufacturers rich, and it keeps 10 different wars raging around this beleaguered planet as we speak. Without awe there can be no adoration, without adoration there could be no reverence, without reverence life shrinks to a flattened husk, a diminished shell of shrunken dreams, a cosmic room without a view.

Now, it’s worth looking at how wonder and awe happened if we are to cultivate more of it in our own lives. Scientists tell us that awe occurs when two conditions are met. First, a person perceives something vast, either physically vast like the Milky Way, conceptually vast like some grand theory, or socially vast as in great fame or power. Second, this vast new thing cannot be accommodated by the person’s existing mental structures and that’s really the key.

That this vast thing that we perceive doesn't fit into our boxes or our stories about what's possible and that is the key to how awe affects the brain. Stopping to wonder our minds are actually changed cognitively. In this awe open space, new meanings, perceptions, capacities, dreams, powers, and insights are born in us. We discover that we're able to draw new mental maps of the world and imagine new ways forward in our lives. The most ordinary moments become qualitatively different. That's why James Joyce defines epiphany in his novel *Stephen Hero* as the sudden recognition of the significance of trivial things. The sudden recognition of the significance of trivial things.

When our perception is changed so is our world. You could say that awe is like the alarm clock that nature has installed in us to awaken us to wonder. This leads to what psychologist, Abraham Maslow called peak experience. Peak experience is defined as a momentary awareness of joy or fulfillment that unites us with our deepest self, renders life meaningful, and connects us not only to our surroundings but also to a higher truth.

Let me repeat that. Peak experience is, "A momentary awareness of joy or fulfillment that unites us with our deepest self, renders life meaningful, and connects us not only to our surroundings but also to a higher truth." Isn't that beautiful? A mountain climber, who was one of the first teams to scale Mount Everest describes such a life-changing moment in his own life. When he was returning from the peak, he turned around on a high pass to admire the stupendous panorama.

As he turned around, he saw a small, blue flower in the snow. This is what he said, "I don't know how to describe what happened. Everything opened up and flowed together and made some strange kind of sense and I was at complete peace. I have no idea how long I stood there. It could have been minutes or hours. Time melted, but when I came down, my life was different." That is the key. When we perceive awe, when we're moved by wonder, it changes us.

These blue flower moments are happening every day of our lives, but we rarely pause to pay attention. We fail to notice and that's because the work a day mind needs a slap or a climax, some kind of an epiphany or overwhelm to stop it in its habituated tracks. When this happens, a fascinating shift in our perspective occurs. The brain actually changes from one form of cognition to another. In our ordinary condition, which is known as D-cognition, the mind concerns itself with gains, with losses, pushing, measuring, judging, and separateness.

In our other awe-filled condition, known as B-cognition, it causes us to feel whole, expansive, unified, compassionate, and open, and to savor the lives that we have rather than focus on what we are missing. Now, of course, we need both forms of cognition if we want the trains to run on time, but in a culture that values materialistic traits over spiritual ones, things like ambition and status and competition, the awe connected virtues need equal representation. Things like honor and truth, sacredness, beauty, compassion, intimacy, authenticity – these are the B-values, the awe, and wonder-related values.

When we returned to wonder, it reminds us of the ancient philosophical distinction between having any being. We live, of course, in a having society. Driven by egotism and fear, we suffer from feelings of inadequacy based on fluctuations of material value and goods and social standing. Awe and wonder balance out the drive to have, and to be something in the world in a comparative sense. The Greeks counseled long ago, that Zeus endowed humans with two primary faculties: longing for fairness and justice and the capacity for reverence and awe.

These faculties correspond to two different modes of thought, which the ancients called mythos and logos. Logos represent our work a day of seeing the world, the deductive logical thinking that makes systems work and creates organization. There are many, many things that logic can't do. Logic can't assuage human grief. It can't find ultimate meaning in life struggles. Logic can't move the heart to love nor can it lay the ground for sacred things. Logic can't open the mind to mystery or feed the imagination or provide a vision of ourselves beyond what we have known before.

For that, the ancients turned to mythos, which is associated with awe. Most often, in the form of archetypal stories that made no pretensions to historical accuracy, but should rather be seen as an early form of psychology in the words of Karen Armstrong. Mythic thinking allows us to ponder life's deepest questions through a larger aperture, to reinterpret our struggles against a bigger backdrop. We learn to maintain an attitude of wonder even in the crush of life's difficulties.

What's more, the potential for peak experience is heightened in times of great challenge like we're going through today because when peak experience happens so does transformation. As many have learned from this awe-inspiring year, necessity actually re-invents us both collectively and individually. That's why heroes and leaders are most likely to appear when they are most needed. In times of crisis, our brains are riper for what psychologists call elevation.

Elevation is a fascinating byproduct of awe. It has always existed, but only in the last 25 years or so has it been recognized as a distinct emotional state that was worth psychological study. Elevation is the uplifting emotion that we feel in the presence of greatness, virtue, or beauty. As the wonderful moral psychologist, Jonathan Haidt puts it, "Powerful moments of elevation seem to push a mental reset button, wiping out feelings of cynicism and replacing them with feelings of hope, love, and optimism, and a sense of moral inspiration."

During moments of elevation, the vagus nerve alerts the body to produce oxytocin, known as the hormone of love, which then prompts the emotional need for connection. That is why inspiring people such as Oprah Winfrey, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela, Barack Obama are known in the neuroscience world as vagal superstars, for their ability to uplift the masses. In fact, there's a nickname for this phenomenon in scientific circles, neurObama, the spiritual charge that wheezes us up biologically.

This contagiousness of elevation is our key to survival. It is absolutely essential to the re-enchantment of the world. Unless we're able to rediscover the extraordinary in the ordinary and see through the eyes of God, our lives will not find their true meaning. We won't be able to stop, to look, to feel, to see, to hear, and to be present in the eternal now, which is where our spiritual existence begins. When we stop and pay attention, that is what elevates our existence, that's what makes us truly human beings. It's also how we can save our planet and make it through this very, very difficult time without losing heart or hope or soul.

I'd like us now to do a little writing together. Jay, could you pull up the card, please? Great. I'd like you to take 15 minutes now to write about what fills you with the greatest awe, what truly lifts you up, makes you feel whole, reminds you of unity, gives you a sense of the divine. Take 15 minutes to describe this as thoroughly and specifically as you can please and then we'll come back together as a group.

Let's come back together as a group. Welcome back, everybody. Put your writing aside for the moment. How was this for you writing about awe and wonder in your life today? What is it that fills you with that sense of the magnificence of creation, that magnificence of your own existence? The interconnection that you share with all beings, the sense of an unseen dimension or resonance beyond the visible? What are those things that truly move you?

It's essential to know, particularly, as I was saying in times of striving and feeling beaten down. When we're beaten down, we need to elevate ourselves by whatever means possible. Of course, that's what our spiritual practice is all about. It's about creating and remembering, in fact, that sense of unity that is there all the time.