

An Awe Walk in Muir Woods

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We are all naturally endowed with a set of passions that enable us to find our purpose, increase our well-being, and navigate our place in the social world. These passions include gratitude, compassion, mirth, and our focus here, awe.

Awe is the experience we have when we encounter things that are vast and large and that transcend our current understanding of the world. The Greek philosopher [Protagoras](#) believed that our capacity for awe is our defining strength, it is the engine of creativity, discovery, purpose and health. And the science could not agree more: [brief experiences of awe](#), for example in standing amidst tall trees, lead people to be [more altruistic](#), less entitled, more humble and aware of the strengths of others, and less stressed by the challenges of daily living. These brief experiences give people a better sense of how they are part of larger social collectives, they stir scientific thought, and are good for the [immune system](#).

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We can find awe in many places, in listening to music, thinking about inspiring people, in contemplation and mindfulness. My favorite approach to cultivating awe is the awe walk.

What is an awe walk?

An awe walk is a walk within a place of meaning and beauty, where your sole task is to encounter something that amazes and transcends, be it big or small. I look for awe walks during my work day, with my family at night, and in rural and urban settings. And on very fortunate days I get to do awe walks, in a places like Muir Woods National Monument.

Amidst the tall Redwood trees, I make sure to direct my attention upward, and take in their scale, their relations to one another, the sense of community they create, recognizing that in the case of the coastal redwoods, very often nearby trees sprout from the same root system; they are family. Their height, the sense of peace they create high in the air above, evokes a first feeling of awe. It is this experience in nature that [Emerson described](#):

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that

nothing can befall me in life—no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God. The name of the nearest friend sounds then foreign and accidental; to be brothers, to be acquaintances, master or servant, is then a trifle and a disturbance. I am the lover of uncontained and immortal beauty. ("Nature"(1836/1982), p.39).

As I look up into the trees, a second kind of vastness astonishes and delights. Temporal vastness. These coastal redwoods, which are [some of the largest living organisms to ever live](#), are also some of the oldest living organisms, and can live over 2000 years. This transient moment in time, and really the span of my life, is but a brief chapter in the lives of these trees. Their age inspires awe. It's good to stand near the trees, feel their size, sense how far they go into the sky.

I like to rest my hand on trees, and rely on the ancient language of social contact—touch—to take in the feel of their bark. Soaked in rain it will feel damp and cold. Warmed by the sun dry. Its solidity feels like the back of a good friend. Making tactile contact with trees triggers yet another kind of awe—what you might call semantic awe, when what

at first blush seem like disparate concepts are revealed to share a common substance. In this case, two species—humans and trees—share some vital force, we have both been shaped by evolution, we share this moment in time.

[John Muir](#), whom we can thank for Muir Woods, wrote often about [such experiences](#):

We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us. Our flesh-and-bone tabernacle seems transparent as glass to the beauty about us, as if truly an inseparable part of it, thrilling with the air and trees, streams, and rocks, in the waves of the sun – a part of all nature, neither old nor young, sick nor well, but immortal... How glorious a conversion, so complete and wholesome it is, scarce a memory enough of the old bondage days left as a standpoint to view it from.

We are now in the mountains and they are in us, kindling enthusiasm, making every nerve quiver, filling every pore and cell of us.

—John Muir

Coming out of experiences of awe, I feel to be in a state of

wonder, often the aftermath of awe. Wonder is what you might call a cognitive passion, it is an intellectual stance to the world, as is the sense of the absurd, or horror. Wonder is when we are delighted by that which surprises, and we are moved to find explanations and deep causes. Awe makes me want to search for truths and purpose and scientific discovery.

I take two kinds of awe walks. The first is to seek out the new, for there one is likely to find awe. And the second is to return to a familiar place, where the past is linked to the present, yet another kind of vastness—how brief experiences are tied together in the sweep of time. Muir woods offers this for me. Some 18 years ago, near the stream that winds through the center of the forest, my wife Mollie and I watched our 1 year old daughter Natalie take her very first steps, near galloping in a little red jacket. We had rested to hear the water, to listen to the sounds of the moving water—its ever-changing pattern and promise reminding us of the patterns in our lives. And our little daughter galloped off, in her own burst of awe, to the amazement of her tired parents, witness to another unfolding moment of their first born.

A Guided Awe Walk Mindfulness Practice

We begin an awe walk as we do all contemplative exercises,

with the breath.

1) Take a deep breath in. Count to six as you inhale and six as you exhale. Feel the air move through your nasal passages and hear the sound of your breath. We'll come back to this breath throughout the walk.

2) Feel your feet on the ground and listen to the surrounding sounds. Return to your breath. Count to six while you inhale and six as you exhale.

3) Shift your awareness now so that you are open to what is around you, to things that are vast, unexpected, things that surprise, and delight. Take a deep breath in. Count to six as you inhale and six as you exhale.

4) Let your attention be open in exploration for what inspires awe. Your attention might appreciate vast spaces, and the sounds and sights within them. You might shift to small patterns, for example of the sorrel on the ground, or the veins on leaves, or a cluster of tiny mushrooms.

5) Bring your attention back to the breath. Count to six as you inhale and six as you exhale. Coming out of these experiences of awe, we often feel a sense of wonder. Wonder happens when we are delighted by that which surprises us, and we are moved to find explanations and deep meaning.

The striking thing, once you really start to think about awe and try to practice it in your life, is how omnipresent it is. As you move through your day, take note of the moments that bring you wonder, that give you goosebumps: these are your opportunities for awe.

Go out and find your awe moments and listen to them carefully, see where they guide you. What you'll find, in how they stir humility and wonder, is that they will point you towards what you're supposed to do while you're here on Earth.

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The Guided Awe Walk Meditation was made in collaboration with:



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