

Seven Pathways to Awe  
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What is more awesome than a star filled night? Perhaps a sunrise over a lake, or over the Grand Canyon? Or a baby, especially if that baby happens to be your grandchild?

When the three Wise Men saw an extraordinary star in the sky, it filled them with awe and wonder and compelled them to follow. In the same way, awe compels us, brings us to our knees before our God.

According to Psychologist Dacher Keltner, head of the UCLA Social Interaction Lab, “Awe is the feeling of being in the presence of something vast or beyond human scale, that transcends our current understanding of things.” What is greater than our God?

Recent studies have been exploring the healing potential of awe and wonder, stating that feeling awe may be the secret to health and happiness. It’s akin to the health benefits of meditation which slows us down, quiets our heart and mind, and helps us achieve a new perspective on life. Awe helps us realize our insignificance before the immensity which is God and our connection to other human beings. Experiences of awe makes us happier and kinder, something greatly needed in our world. It can even alter our bodies, reducing levels of cytokines, markers of stress and inflammation in the body. Some even refer to awe as a seventh emotion, right up there with the big six: happy, sad, mad, fear, disgust, surprise.

Once considered the domain of mystics or reserved to special, significant life events, these goose-bump moments are now believed to be available to all of us on a daily basis. It can also strike us in the middle of a busy street corner, as it did Thomas Merton in downtown Louisville where he experienced the revelation that we “are all walking around shining like the sun.” It can strike when we least expect it, filling our hearts with wonder, sending tingles down our spine. It is not restricted to spiritual geniuses, but readily available to all who are open to it.

While it may happen spontaneously, there are paths to heighten our awareness of wonder. Following are seven such pathways. As we celebrate Epiphany, why not take a moment to seek out God and experience awe in God’s presence using one of these.

### **1. Go outside in nature.**

When I start to feel down and overwhelmed by life’s pressures, I hop on my bike and trek along Falling Waters Trail to Lime Lake. There I sit by the water until my frazzled nerves are soothed. My head clears and I see new ways to look at old problems; new ideas for writing pop into my head. I return, refreshed and renewed.

It’s helpful to put away those technical devices now and then and go out and experience the sound of birds singing, crickets chirping, and the wind whistling through trees. In my former house in the village of Concord, Michigan, I routinely got up and watched the sunrise from the porch swing. I spent hours on my swing, reading and writing, while stopping to watch the world

pass by around me. In my new home, I watch the sunset through my front windows and enjoy the quiet and privacy of my back yard. I take daily walks around the neighborhood with my dog and ride my bike along Falling Water's Trail as often as I can. And for those days I can't get outside, I stare out the windows and watch the changing scene nature provides. Each provides a break from the stress of the technical world we live in and a chance to glimpse awe.

## **2. Rock a baby.**

My grandson laughs and joy bubbles in my heart. There is nothing more important for me to do than hold this small child. Some hospitals even allow volunteers to come in and rock babies. It's good for the babies that need to be touched and good for the volunteers.

I've long been aware of the contemplative nature of rocking a baby. Since before I had kids of my own, rocking my nephews and nieces, and now rocking my new grandson inspires awe. Babies are so close to God, having so recently come from God. They are a source of wonder and thereby deserve their own category!

## **3. Be part of a community.**

There's the person who cut me off in traffic last week after church. Do I say something to them, or forgive them without having to confront? Or the person who spread unkind rumors about a loved one, or a former employer who fired you for no good reason that you are aware of. All of these people inhabit our local communities, whether our work community, the city we live in, our community of friends or our church. Try though we might, we can't get away from everyone, nor would it be good for us if we did.

Despite all of our foibles and failings, people are also sources of wonder. Our family and friends may drive us crazy, but they are also the human face of God. I've been surprised by acts of kindness, seemingly coming out of nowhere, by complete strangers as well as close friends. These leave me close to tears and remind me of God's love.

## **4. Experience the arts.**

I remember putting down Catherine Marshall's book, *Christy*, and being filled with wonder at God's presence in the life of this young woman. If only I could write like that! For days, the experience stayed with me. Even today, over forty years later, I remember that book and how I felt after reading it. There is something about a truly good book that stays with us afterwards, that arouses feelings of awe.

Go to a museum, listen to music, see a play, read a book. The books I love the most are the ones that stir awe within me, that bring me to tears or cause me to marvel at the world around me and see the world with new eyes; books that bring me closer to God. A play well done can leave me feeling inspired, a feeling that can last for days afterward. So can a beautiful symphony or musical performance.

## **5. Create something.**

I pick up pen and apply it to lined paper and it seems God is writing through me, sitting on my shoulder, whispering in my ear, as my life blood pours out onto paper and I write that which I know is not just from me. It comes from some creative source that is greater than me. This doesn't always happen, but those times when it does are worth the hours of struggle to put one line down. Not everything I write comes from God, and yet, God has to be the source of some of it for sometimes I write words that are simply better than any I could come up with on my own.

After sixty years of life, I know that anything I write that is mediocre or even terrible, are all my own. Anything I write that is good, comes from God, and that is a source of awe.

I feel close to God when I am writing. God is co-creator with me in the writing process. Others create beautiful works of art through painting, drawing, working with wood, weaving, cooking, the list goes on. All can lead us to wonder at our God who is the Master Creator. You don't have to be an accomplished writer, painter or musician to create something beautiful. You may create through the meals you prepare with love for your family, or afghans crotched, quilts lovingly pieced together or a rocking horse crafted for your children or grandchildren. Pick the medium that works for you.

## **6. Meditate and pray.**

There have been times in quiet prayer, when God has touched my heart in a way that only God can. I've felt comfort and peace amidst times of trial and struggle. Or God might give me a single word, a word that I can feast on for weeks, even years. Words that fill me with wonder and change me in ways I could never have changed on my own.

It takes time and patience to allow God to speak to us in prayer, to feel God's presence. Some give up when God doesn't speak immediately or in ways they expect. They give up too soon. The more experience we gain in prayer, these moments of awe will come more easily to us. If unable to progress in prayer, seek out a guide to help you, someone trained in spiritual guidance/direction.

Prayer is a way of opening ourselves up to wonder. Prayer changes us, helps us see the world and the people around us through different eyes. If we continue in our practice or prayer, and seek out help when we are stuck, eventually we will be able to see, as Merton said, that we "are all walking around shining like the sun."

## **7. Go to Church.**

I sit in the pew and tears are close to the surface. I feel surrounded by a cloud of witnesses, family and friends in the faith that have gone before me and wait to welcome me home. I pray for my children and their children and add my prayers to the collective prayers of the community. I feel tears, but I don't always know where they are coming from. So much pain and suffering in the world, so many needs to pray for, somehow I am part of all of this and so my eyes water. I hold back my tears, lest someone rush to comfort me. These are beautiful tears, tears of awe as well as sadness as I am part of this wider community.

I realize that sometimes churches fail at invoking a sense of awe and wonder, a common complaint. And yet that is what church is all about, connecting us to our God. I consider myself fortunate that I have a church where I find awe. But it isn't just something that happens, it is something that is nurtured and developed over time, through years of attendance and prayer. It requires effort on our part.

Throughout my life I have had my struggles with the Catholic Church, yet it is precisely through having worked through those struggles that I now find awe; awe that comes from years of attendance, rich memories that are mine when I enter the church sanctuary. I don't experience this in churches of other faiths, not because it is not possible to experience awe in these other churches, but because my roots and history in the Catholic faith predispose me to awe in Catholic Churches.

Find a church that works for you, where you can experience God's presence, where you can put down roots. It's important that you give it time. If it doesn't happen, give it more time. Be open to how God might be speaking to you amidst the challenges of parish life. Sitting in the quiet of a church, with candles lit, encourages contact with the source of all wonder, our God who made us. A prayerful church service helps us experience our God and his presence in our life, as well as the world.

These are but seven paths. There are many more available to us, many variations on the ones I mentioned. We have been made by God, for God. And so we are hard-wired to experience awe. Awe is all around us, wonder is always calling to us, speaking to us. Are you ready to listen? How will you experience wonder today?

John Muir, experience of awe that began environmental movement

