

SCIENCE

Awesomeness Is Everything

Why encountering vastness makes us more spiritual, generous, and content

By Matthew Hutson



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IN OCTOBER, Jeff Bezos's space-flight company, Blue Origin, passed a crucial safety test when it successfully detached a crew capsule from a rocket. In the process, would-be space tourists came one giant leap closer to suborbital selfies. A joyride to 330,000 feet would be, quite literally, awesome.

Research on awe (an emotion related to Edmund Burke's notion of the sublime,

Sigmund Freud's oceanic feelings, and Abraham Maslow's peak experiences) reveals both its triggers and its far-out effects. and may even adjust our worldview to accommodate it. Psychologists have described awe as the experience of encountering something so vast—in size, skill, beauty, intensity, etc.—that we struggle to comprehend it. A waterfall might inspire awe; so could childbirth, or a scene of devastation. [\[1\]](#)



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Even if awe's source is terrestrial, its outcome can be spiritual. In one set of studies, watching nature videos induced awe, which in turn reduced tolerance for uncertainty, which led to stronger belief in God or the supernatural. [\[2\]](#) People have different ways of making sense of vastness. In another study, awe reduced belief in science among religious people. For the nonreligious, awe increased belief in evolution as an orderly versus random process.[\[3\]](#)

As vastness expands our worldview, it shrinks our ego. Awe makes spiritual and religious people feel a greater sense of oneness with others. [\[4\]](#) And this oneness can make us nicer: Researchers found that inducing awe—say, by having people stand in a grove of tall trees—increased generosity, in part by stoking “feelings of a small self.” [\[5\]](#) Awe also shapes our sense of time. One series of studies found that awe made time feel more plentiful, which increased life satisfaction, willingness to donate time to charity, and preferences for experiences over material products. [\[6\]](#)

We react physically to awe. When people logged their goose bumps, awe was the

second-most-common cause. (The first was being cold.) [7]. Nonetheless, people from different countries seem to have different predispositions to the sensation. Those in the U.S. reported feeling awe more frequently than did those in Iran. [8].

Which is too bad, because awe just might be a prescription for world peace. In an analysis of 56 astronauts' memoirs, interviews, and oral histories, the astronauts appeared to experience increases in spirituality and universalism—that is, the belief in an interconnected humanity. [9]. This doesn't mean we should encourage Iranian rockets, though—we can send links instead. Researchers found that the more awe-inspiring a *New York Times* article was—"Now in Sight: Far-Off Planets" got high marks—the more likely it was to go viral. [10].

Of course, far-off planets don't have a monopoly on awe. If you can't afford a trip to space, try a walk in the woods.

The Studies:

[1] Keltner and Haidt, "Approaching Awe, a Moral, Spiritual, and Aesthetic Emotion" (*Cognition and Emotion*, March 2003)

[2] Valdesolo and Graham, "Awe, Uncertainty, and Agency Detection" (*Psychological Science*, Jan. 2014)

[3] Valdesolo et al., "Awe and Scientific Explanation" (*Emotion*, Oct. 2016)

[4] Van Cappellen and Saroglou, "Awe Activates Religious and Spiritual Feelings and Behavioral Intentions" (*Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, Aug. 2012)

[5] Piff et al., "Awe, the Small Self, and Prosocial Behavior" (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, June 2015)

[6] Rudd et al., "Awe Expands People's Perception of Time, Alters Decision Making, and Enhances Well-Being" (*Psychological Science*, Oct. 2012)

[7] Schurtz et al., "Exploring the Social Aspects of Goose Bumps and Their Role in Awe and

Envy” (*Motivation and Emotion*, June 2012)

[8] Razavi et al., “Cross-Cultural Similarities and Differences in the Experience of Awe” (*Emotion*, forthcoming)

[9] Suedfeld et al., “Changes in the Hierarchy of Value References Associated With Flying in Space” (*Journal of Personality*, Oct. 2010)

[10] Berger and Milkman, “What Makes Online Content Viral?” (*Journal of Marketing Research*, April 2012)

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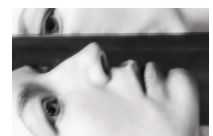
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