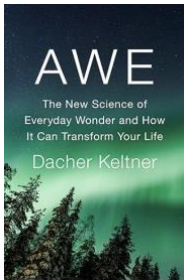


'CliffsNotes' Book Club Recap

DO YOU LOVE BOOKS ON LEADERSHIP, NEUROSCIENCE, AND BUSINESS, BUT NOT HAVE TIME TO READ ALL THE BOOKS?

Join the '**CliffsNotes' club**—where there's no pressure to pre-read the book, no membership required, no cost, and lots of discussion in just 90 minutes. Each month, you will hear a **summary of highlights** from a recently-published business book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. We'll keep you "in the know" on the latest and greatest concepts and models. **Register here** for upcoming events.



February 2025

Awe

The New Science of Everyday Wonder and How It Can Transform Your Life

By Dacher Keltner

Discussion Highlights

Presented by Susan Connolly

About Dacher Keltner: Professor of Psychology at UC, Berkeley, and a renowned expert in the science of human emotion. Dr. Keltner studies compassion and awe, how we express emotion, and how emotions guide our moral identities and search for meaning.

"From wonder into wonder, existence opens." Lao Tzu

"Awe: the emotion we experience when we encounter vast mysteries we don't understand."

Key Takeaways: We can find awe anywhere. Keltner's research suggests that a couple of minutes a day will do.

- Basic need for awe wired into our brains and bodies
- All of us, regardless of our background, can find our own meaningful path to awe.
- Brief moments of awe are as good for your mind and body as anything you might do.

New science of awe: About 15 years ago, Keltner and his PhD students as well as other scientists around the world began to find awe in the lab. They charted this human emotion with new measures of the brain and body, physical responses like tears, sensations like chills, and demos of how awe transforms the ways we think and act.

Where do we find awe? In the **Eight Wonders of Life!**

1. Moral Beauty
2. Collective Effervescence
3. Nature
4. Music
5. Art and Visual Design
6. Mystical Encounters
7. Encountering Life and Death
8. Epiphanies or Big ideas

These wonders are all around us, if we only pause for a moment and open our minds. So many opportunities for everyday awe!

Personal story Keltner recounted of the passing of his brother Rolf. FIND AWE.

Four stories of awe to consider: scientific, personal, cultural, and living a life of awe.

Keltner concludes his intro with upbeat call to action: "In teaching happiness for more than 20 years, I've seen how much health and well-being we gain by *being amazed at things outside ourselves*. By finding awe. From our first breath to our last, awe moves us to deepen our relations with the wonders of life and to marvel at the vast mysteries that are part of our fleeting time here, guided by this most human of emotions."

Chapter One: Eight Wonders of Life

Science of emotion (Late 1980s through early 2000's did not include awe)

In 2003, Keltner and his longtime collaborator Jonathan Haidt at NYU defined awe.

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

Awe is about our relation to the vast mysteries of life. The content of what is vast varies dramatically across cultures and the context of our lives.

Methodology: Keltner and a longtime colleague Prof. Yang Bai gathered stories of awe from people in 26 countries, cast their net broadly beyond WEIRD (Western, Educated, Individualist, Rich, and Democratic), included adherents of all major religions and secular cultures, varied wealth and education, political systems, gender views.

– Surprised to learn that these rich narratives from around the world could be classified into a taxonomy of awe, the eight wonders of life.

What most commonly led people around the world to feel awe?

- First wonder, **Moral Beauty** Other people's courage, kindness, strength, or overcoming; marked by a purity and goodness of intention and action.
- Second wonder, **Collective Effervescence** Term French sociologist Emile Durkheim introduced in analyzing emotional core of religion. Across the 26 cultures, people told stories of collective effervescence at a variety of events, such as weddings, sports celebrations, graduations, funerals
- Third wonder, **Nature** Cataclysmic events, natural disasters, night skies
- Fourth wonder, **Music** Transporting people to new dimensions of symbolic meaning.
- Fifth wonder, **Visual Design** Buildings, dams, grand boulevards, a Mayan pyramid.
- Sixth wonder, **Spiritual and Religious** Not as common as you might imagine.
- Seventh wonder, **Life and Death** Keltner's experience watching his brother Rolf die.
- Eight wonder, **Epiphanies** When we suddenly understand essential truths about life.

"Awe occurs in a realm separate from the mundane world – a realm many call sacred."

Everyday Awe: In search of everyday awe, Keltner, Yang Bai and Univ of Michigan Professor Amie Gordon conducted several studies in different countries with a method known as the daily diary approach.

– Results similar to what they had learned from their 26-culture study.

– Culture shaped awe.

People experience awe 2 to 3 times a week, finding the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Chapter Two: Awe inside Out—How Awe Transforms Our Relation to the World

"The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious. It is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and science." – Albert Einstein

Something Larger Than the Self: Our individual self gives way to the sense of being part of something much larger.

– Nature writing of Wordsworth, Emerson, Thoreau, Rachel Carson portray the self as dissolving during experiences of natural awe.

– Our default self vanishes during awe. Many social ills arise from an overactive default self, which digital technologies augment.

"We can quiet that nagging voice... simply by locating ourselves in contexts of more awe." The "small self" effect of awe arises in all 8 wonders, not only vast nature.

Brain/Neuroscience application/Application to our work/coaching: Awe's vanishing self has been charted in our brains, namely in the default mode network (DMN), regions of the cortex engaged when we process info from an egocentric viewpoint. [Studies suggest that when we experience awe, brain regions associated with ego excesses quiet down.]

"Wonder: the mental state of openness, curiosity, and embracing mystery, arises out of experiences of awe." In Keltner's studies, people who find more everyday awe show evidence of living with wonder, are more open to new ideas, to the unknown, to what language can't describe.

"People who feel even 5 minutes a day of everyday awe are more curious about art, music, poetry, new scientific discoveries, questions about life and death; feel more comfortable with mysteries, with that which cannot be explained."

"Scientific evidence suggests that in the state of wonder that awe produces, our thought is more rigorous and energized.

Lab studies have captured how awe leads to more rigorous thought.

"In awe, our minds open in wonder to the systems of life and our small part in them."

"Awe awakens the better angels of our nature."

Jane Goodall's video "Waterfall Display"—a solitary chimpanzee approaches a roaring waterfall, moves in swaying, rhythmic motions as though he is dancing. At end of this "dance" he sits quietly, absorbed in the flow of water.

Chapter 3: Evolution of the Soul—What Our Tears, Chills, and Whoas Tell Us About Awe

New science of the emotional body explains why tears, chills and whoas accompany awe. [Charles Darwin and William James: Transcendent emotions such as awe—the subjective life of the soul—are grounded in bodily responses.]

Tears: The Vagus Nerve (VN) is part of the nervous system that activates tears of emotion. –The VN slows heart rate, calms the body, and can create a sense of connection/belonging.

"Tears of awe signal an awareness of vast things that unite us with others."

Chills: James – Our conscious experience of emotions—in awe, that we're part of something larger than the self—originates in bodily sensations.

– "New science of embodiment with roots in James' thinking reveals that many of your most significant thoughts have correlates in bodily responses." We experience chills in the arts, music, literature, in encounters with the Divine.

"Awe and culture are always evolving...Awe allows us to get outside ourselves and integrates us into... community, nature, ideas, cultural forms that enable our survival. "

Chapter Four: Moral Beauty—How Others' Kindness, Courage, and Overcoming Inspire Awe

San Quentin Prison – Keltner gave a talk as part of inmate-led Restorative Justice program. Most of the prisoners had multiple ACEs. He asked the men: What give you guys awe?

The Wonders of Others: "Everyday awe is a basic human need." Over 95% of moral beauty that stirred awe worldwide was in actions people took on behalf of others. [Acts of courage; kindness; overcoming obstacles; parents' stories about their children]

Chapter Five: Collective Effervescence – How Moving in Unison Stirs Awe of Ritual, Sport

- We're quick to move in unison with others. [Dancing at weddings, cheering sports fans]
 - Our biological rhythms synchronize with others. Sports fans' heart rhythms synchronize when they watch games together.
- "Deep instinct to move in unison, transformative power of CE."

Walking: simplest form of moving in unison. [Application: walking mtgs, coaching while walking outside, in nature. Different ideas come to us when we walk/move.]

Games: NBA Coach Steve Kerr, Golden State Warriors, movement of coordinating five big, fast bodies into patterns of synchronized collaboration. "Basketball is like music...The question is how five players all fit together."
– When Keltner asks Steve Kerr what his life in sports means to him, he says, "It is a civic duty to give people joy." [Watching beloved teams brings us awe.]

Grooving – Dance is a physical, symbolic language of awe in Indigenous cultures worldwide.
– Dance symbolized experiences of being in the presence of the Divine.
– When moving in unison through dance, we communicate with others about the sublime.

Chapter Six: Wild Awe – How Nature Becomes Spiritual and Heals Bodies and Minds

Awe may be an antidote to our hectic times/lives. It may reduce inflammation that our immune system produces in response to chronic threat, rejection, and loneliness.
– Everyday awe can be a pathway for avoiding chronic inflammation and diseases associated with it, including depression, heart disease, etc.

GET OUTDOORS – A Need for Wild Awe: We experience it in most any kind of nature, from viewing the changing colors of leaves to the phases of the moon. **More everyday awe!**

Neurophysiology of wild awe: the sights, sounds, scents, and tastes of nature lead to awe-related vagus nerve (VN) activation and reduce blood pressure, cortisol, inflammation.
– Our bodies are like an antenna when out in nature. Sounds of water activate the VN.
– Forest bathing: Satisfying our need for wild awe is good for our minds; concentrate better, handle stresses with more resilience, and perform better on cognitive tests.

Key takeaway: "Finding awe outdoors: the single best thing you can do for your body and mind. Our need for wild awe is strong. We feel nourished, strengthened, empowered, and alive."

Wild Awe on a River: Teens from under-resourced urban high schools and veterans.

– A week after the rafting trip, both teens and veterans felt less stress and reported greater well-being. Awe brought about mind-body benefits of being outdoors.

– "Experiences of awe lead us to a greater awareness of the gaps in our knowledge and to consider arguments and evidence more rigorously."

Natural Divine—Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge (TEK): Indigenous science of our relationship to the natural world. "Awe promotes the reverential treatment of nature."

Chapter Seven: Musical Awe: How Musical Awe Embraces Us in Community

– Lullabies create somnolent awe; when combined with gentle touch and soothing words, they shift a child's physiology to feel a sense of belonging and connection.

Cashmere Blanket of Sound [Cellist Yumi Kendall, Philadelphia Orchestra, p 149-151]

– Sounds of music shift our bodies to a shared experience of awe.
– Recent neuroscience suggests that when we hear music, embodied images and memories from our lives arise in our minds.

Chapter Eight: Sacred Geometries: How Our Awe for Visual Design Helps Us Understand the Wonders and Horrors of Life

– Keltner's way of seeing the world changed when, as a teenager, he saw Dutch master artist Pieter de Hooch's paintings of ordinary people. Seeing de Hooch's art opened Keltner's eyes to the possibility of experiencing everyday awe.

– Visual art allows us to see the deep structures, or sacred geometries, of the natural world.
– Visual design that encourages more everyday awe also promotes collective health and well-being.

Chapter Nine: Fundamental IT – How Spiritual Life Grows Out of Awe

Relating to the Divine is a deep human universal: what we feel to be good, omnipresent.

– Emerson believed mystical awe is intertwined with nature – feeling integrated into something larger than self.

– William James began a lifelong search for the "fundamental cosmical IT, or mystical awe."

– Culture, history, place, and ideas of the times shape experience of mystical awe.

Chapter Ten: Life and Death – How Awe Helps Us Understand the Cycle

Childhoods rich with awe are good for the child.

– Disappearance of awe is an alarming trend in lives of children today. (Free-form play)

– Young people who are awe-deprived see increased rates of anxiety, eating disorders.

Rachel Carson (in 1950s) knew the importance of awe. Her essay, "Help Your Child to Wonder," lays out an awe-based approach to raising children...true instinct for what is beautiful and awe-inspiring is dimmed and even lost before adulthood."

– Find awe and wonder in our senses – slowing down, looking at clouds, up at sky, listening to the natural world, the wind.

– **Approach the natural world and life with this question: What if I had never seen this before?**

Death – Buddhist monk Roshi Joan Halifax's stories of awe.

– Trains people in contemplative approaches to death. In her book, "Being with Dying," she shares what she learned from decades, esp. with young men dying of AIDS.

– Her life's work is to return us to the wonders of watching others die.

New science of Near-death experiences (NDEs). NDEs sound like stories of awe and surfaced in the 26-culture study. In experiences of awe across the 8 wonders of life, Keltner learned there's more to our existence than what ends with the body's last breath.

Chapter Eleven: Epiphany—The Big Idea of Awe: We are Part of Systems Larger than Self

Might awe have shaped Darwin's thinking about evolution? Darwin experienced chills when listening to the organ in King's College at Cambridge. And in the Amazon forest when he spoke of the "temple of nature." Keltner sees this moment in Darwin's life and writing to be a story of awe.

Awe is about knowing, sensing, seeing, and understanding fundamental truths and leads to epiphanies across the 8 wonders of life – transforming how we see the essential nature of the world.

About the Book Club In this monthly club, a presenter shares highlights from a book related to leadership, business, neuroscience, or coaching. Membership is not required, and there's no obligation to pre-read the book. This discussion summary is intended to provide a recap of the conversation at Book Club, rather than serve as a thorough book summary. [Register here](#) for upcoming events. For the full set of discussion summaries, [click here](#).