

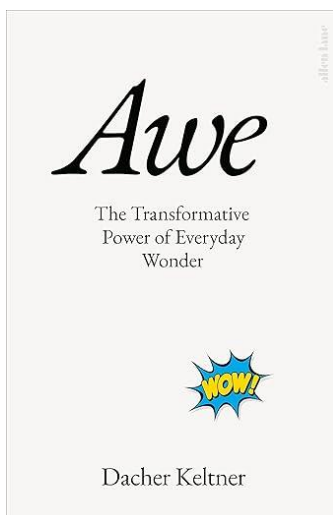


## 'Awe' by Dacher Keltner - the transformative power of wonder

A psychology professor's investigation into the mysterious feeling that could be the key to a more fulfilling life

Reading time 7 minutes

What better topic for a BrainCandy at Christmas time than wonder? A few years ago, I wrote a book about the importance of wow for marketing. At the time, I had to gather the scientific background from many sources. Now, with the book [Awe - The Transformative Power of Everyday Wonder](#), there is a kind of foundational work. You can tell that it is a matter close to Keltner's heart. The psychology professor is regarded as one of the leading scientists in happiness research and has now arrived at the powerful emotion of awe. "I've been teaching happiness for twenty years," he writes, "and I have an answer: FIND WONDER."



### Find wonder:

To begin, Keltner defines awe as "the feeling of being in the presence of something great beyond our current understanding of the world".

There's a lot in this definition: our experience of awe is tied to cultural notions of grandeur, our place in the cosmos, and context (whether we find a mountain awe-inspiring or simply terrifying may depend on the local rockfall hazard). Keltner says that the experience of awe varies across cultures, but that it is a universal emotion that comes with its own set of signals, including goosebumps, chills, tears and vocal outbursts of "oohs" and "aahs".

Keltner acknowledges that awe has a dark history, but insists that today it is largely liberated from fear, and that it is now closer to emotions such as joy and admiration. For Keltner, awe is an ennobling experience that can foster wonder, creativity and collaboration. He realized this in 2019 when he lost his brother Rolf to colon cancer, and he writes movingly about the transformative feelings that followed. "The boundaries that separated me from the outside world disappeared," he writes. "I felt surrounded by something big and warm. My mind was open, curious, aware, amazed".

### Awe - an experience that goes beyond our understanding

All of this, as Keltner sees it today, led him deeper and deeper into exploring the primary experience of awe in human life - moments when we have a sense of wonder, an experience of mystery beyond our understanding. It is brilliant that these moments are as common in human life worldwide as they are measurably health-promoting and immunity-boosting.



They bring us together with others, over and over again. They bring our nervous system, our heartbeat and our breathing into harmony - and even into harmony with the other bodies around us. Those who enjoy attending concerts feel this connection with the surrounding 'bodies'. When awe-filled amazement at the moving music translates into automatic physical movement, the heartbeats of those around us actually align. The perceived connection to something greater can therefore also be proven in fact.

### **The antidote to information overload**

It is worth enjoying Keltner's book a few pages at one time. Because he provides examples in quick succession that remind us of what is worthy of our awe and wonder. We should let the many short stories sink in and consciously enjoy them. This book is an antidote to our troubling times, our hyperactive clickbait media and our social media bubbles that flood our habits of thought with the negative and threatening.

Keltner contrasts this with the wonderful things in life. From the beauty of movement in sport, to the emotion-inducing symmetry of impressive designs, to examples of civil courage in our personal environment. The result is a guide to how we can see and experience the wonder that always surrounds us.



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At the beginning of the book, I still had the feeling that he only considers the really big moments of wonder in life to be important enough.

In other words, those unique experiences, such as standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon for the first time.

### **The everyday miracle**

But then it lives up to the title of the book and becomes more and more every day, in which we can marvel, experience wonder and feel awe. If we pay attention. In other words, if we take off our detached adult glasses as often as possible and adopt a curious, childlike perspective. And only then can we perceive the wonders. Incidentally, this works particularly well in nature ('wild awe'). Preferably, of course, in a place that is unknown to us. He calls this the awe walk. You can also practise this on an everyday dog walk. By focusing your attention on experiencing the new and great or the richness of detail in nature that is already too familiar. It sometimes sounds almost esoteric when he talks about experiencing something bigger.

But it is not meant to be religious, even if this wonderful awe can also appear in religious contexts. He is a scientist and takes us on an exciting journey in which we can measure many effects, but do not yet have a neuronal explanation for everything.

### **At the end**

One more note from my involvement with awe in brands. Only rarely will brands be able to trigger such a powerful awe effect as Keltner describes.



But all our data shows that if brands manage to amaze their target group at least a little, i.e. trigger a **wow effect**, then this is the most promising way to anchor the brand in our memory - and thus efficiently increase the likelihood of purchase.

The lavishly produced Christmas films of some major brands try to create this amazement in us, but it also works with much less effort. What is needed is a new idea that makes us marvel a little.

And now I hope that we all take the opportunity around Christmas to experience the powerful emotion of awe. The chances are good.

### Book recommendation

By Ralph Ohnemus, Uwe H. Lebok, Florian Klaus:

### Context marketing

The key to consumer behaviour to [order](#).



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